

Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dún Laoghaire  
Faculty of Creative Technologies

**“Sometimes I Believe that Some People are Better at Love Than  
Others, and Sometimes I Believe that Everyone is Faking It.”**

**Nora Ephron’s Contribution to the Neo-Traditional Romantic Comedy.**

By

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## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Film and Television Production. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: *Victoria Moonan*

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In the midst of a pandemic, the last four years have not been easy, but it has been immensely rewardable.

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates how director and screenwriter, Nora Ephron contemporised the romantic comedy, and her lasting legacy on the neo-traditional romantic comedy. Ephron's use of language, and use of naturalistic obstacles standing in the couples' way, further reinforces the themes present in neo-traditional romantic comedies, and also works motifs from original screwball and sex comedys into her films, so that they remain timeless in their design.

Romance films are one of the main sub-genres in drama, and Nora Ephron became the most prominent voice in that world throughout the active years in her life. I will explore all of the films that inspired her - leading up to her break-out years, her 'romantic comedy trilogy' of *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*, and I will discuss the works in which she has inspired in the decades since.

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## Introduction

In its most basic sense, romance films are those which centre around two protagonists exploring love-like relationships through various different scenarios. Over the last century, we have seen the romance film find its greatest success through the romantic comedy sub-genre - films that are significantly more based around how the two characters interact with each other outside of a purely romantic moment.

In this thesis, I will look at the beginnings of the romantic comedy and the lasting legacy director and screenwriter, Nora Ephron, had on the genre and how she contemporised it into what we see most commonly in romantic comedies today. We will achieve this by deeply looking into her - unofficial - romantic comedy trilogy of *When Harry Met Sally* (US, 1989), *Sleepless in Seattle* (US, 1993) and *You've Got Mail* (US, 1998).

**Chapter One** studies the various romantic comedies that came before the ones of Nora Ephron. Through this, I will look at the conventional motifs present in these films, and how they developed over the coming decades, most prevalently starting from the 1930s. Following on from this, I will dive into some background on Nora Ephron and how she came to be involved in the film industry. Finally, we will look at her first major commercial success, and the film that changed the romantic comedy genre, *When Harry Met Sally*, in partnership with director Rob Reiner. Here, I will discuss the different approaches this film took that subverted traditional expectations of romantic comedies. I will also begin to touch on the theme of inevitability in this chapter, and start the dialogue about this which becomes very apparent in Ephron's later work.

**Chapter Two** is centred around the 1993 film, *Sleepless in Seattle* - Nora's romantic comedy directorial debut. Here, I will investigate how Nora's touch on the piece was incredibly

necessary, as she was introduced to the project secondarily. I will look at how Nora was able to successfully maintain strong viewership and secure a space as one of the most romantic films of all time, when the two leads spend the entire run-time - save the final scene - apart from one another. I will look at how the physical distance made the love grow stronger. There will also be heavy insight into how 1957's *An Affair to Remember* was a massive influence for the making of the film, and for the characters within the world themselves.

**Chapter Three** dives into the last film in Ephron's romantic comedy trilogy, *You've Got Mail*. Since it is a modern remake, I will also discuss the 1940 film *The Shop Around the Corner*, directed by Ernest Lubitsch. I will talk about how Nora Ephron contemporised the piece, and also discuss the ways in which her work, and romantic comedies in general, developed over the span of the 10 years, from when she made *When Harry Met Sally*. I will touch on conventions that she learned, and other common themes that are ever present throughout all of her work.

All three of the above chapters will assist in showing just how important Nora Ephron's work was to the romantic comedy genre. She created complex characters, with complex issues and proved to everyone watching her work that we all deserve love, whether it be romantic or through friendships. All humans are in deep need of connection from one another. Her work was incredibly multi-faceted and ultimately shaped the neo-traditional romantic comedy that still follows all of the same conventions to this day.

“I regard romantic comedies as a  
sub-genre of sci-fi, in which the  
operates according to different rules  
than my regular human world.”

- Mindy Kaling

## **“Friends without benefits”**

### **The beginning of the Romantic Comedy, Nora Ephron's contribution and *When Harry Met Sally... (1989)***

Though its beginnings can be traced back to the Shakespearian era, the first true romantic comedy can be found in Frank Capra's, *It Happened One Night* (1934).

In its earliest form, romantic comedies were called “comedies of manners”<sup>1</sup>. This often meant when a rich person would fall in love with a non-wealthy person. It gave viewers hope that even without financial status - love and happiness could still be found. This was a crucial notion for the industry during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Audiences needed to see themselves as heroic to maintain viewership.

In 1934, the *Motion Picture Production Code*<sup>2</sup> (The Hays Code) was fully brought into practice. This was a set of guidelines for the censorship of any media content. There were numerous rules stated for what could not be shown in film. In regards to sex/relationships:

- Overt portrayals and references to sexual relations.
- Adultery.
- Nudity.
- Interracial relationships.
- Homosexuality.
- Scenes of ‘passion’ could only be shown where necessary and were not to be explicit.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/comedy-of-manners>

<sup>2</sup>

[https://www.gale.com/binaries/content/assets/gale-us-en/primary-sources/archives-unbound/primary-sources\\_archives-unbound\\_hollywood-censorship-and-the-motion-picture-production-code-1927-1968.pdf](https://www.gale.com/binaries/content/assets/gale-us-en/primary-sources/archives-unbound/primary-sources_archives-unbound_hollywood-censorship-and-the-motion-picture-production-code-1927-1968.pdf)

This led to the introduction of The Screwball Comedy.<sup>3</sup> This subgenre brought in many of the tropes that we still see today in romantic comedies. Namely, the way the dialogue is presented to us. The fast paced and quick witted dialogue kept us on our toes and invested in the character dynamic we're witnessing. The female is very often the one with more power in the scene - something we very rarely got to see in any other genre. Some of the most notable rom-coms of this time, which employ these ideals, are *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), and *His Girl Friday* (1940).

Due to the Hays Code, films had to rely heavily on conversation to convey desire. We more often saw the two characters bickering than in love. It was the birth of the 'friends-to-lovers' or 'enemies-to-lovers' trope. Language kept the audience intrigued and had them at the edge of their seat in triumph when the two leads finally had their cookie-cutter first kiss.

Following on, we have the 'sex comedy'. Movies utilising these tropes were often 'battle of the sexes' comedies. Examples include *Desk Set* (1957) and *Lover Come Back* (1961) - The former written by Nora Ephron's parents. After the release of *Some Like it Hot* (1959), it became clear that the code was dying a fast approaching death and Hollywood was becoming more radicalised like in its 'pre-Code'<sup>4</sup> days. From the late 60s onwards, due to the sex revolution in America,<sup>5</sup> films were allowed to speak more freely about relationships. Couples could be shown having sex on screen and talking about their own desires. More realistic depictions about true relationships were shown. We saw all sides of a burgeoning love -- the witty retorts in the early stages of a crush, to the full fledged sexual encounters when they're finally fully realised. Romantic comedies tell us everything we need to know about people and what they want. It's a genre that is so immensely reliant on its understanding of how humans work and how we

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<sup>3</sup> <http://cinecollage.net/screwball-comedy.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://pre-code.com/what-is-pre-code-hollywood/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-and-sexual-revolution/>

interact with each other. Some of the most successful filmmakers in the genre have been Ernst Lubitsch, Nancy Meyers, Richard Curtis and Nora Ephron.

Born May 19th, 1941 to screenwriter parents, Henry Ephron and Phoebe Wolkind, Nora Ephron was bound to follow in their footsteps.

Ephron began her career as an essayist and reporter at the *New York Post* in the last 60s. Her most popular piece titled 'A Few Words About Breasts'<sup>6</sup>. Prior to this, she was employed at *Newsweek* as a mailgirl after being told that they did not hire female writers. Ephron later quit the position and took part in the class action lawsuit against the magazine for discrimination. This is described in the book '*The Good Girls Revolt: How the Women of Newsweek Sued Their Bosses and Changed the Workplace*'<sup>7</sup> by Lynn Povich.

After earning herself much acclaim as a reporter, she teamed up with then-husband, Carl Bernstein, to rewrite the script for *All The President's Men* in the mid-70s. Though the script was never used, it remained her first screenwriting job which catapulted her film career.

Ephron was later hired to co-write the script for Mike Nichol's *Silkwood* with Alice Arlen. When Nora divorced Bernstein, she penned the novel *Heartburn* in 1983, based upon the downfall of her marriage from him, which was adapted into a film directed by Nichols and starring Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson in 1986. This fully cemented her in the world of major motion pictures.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://genius.com/Nora-ephron-a-few-words-about-breasts-annotated>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/titles/lynn-povich/the-good-girls-revolt/9781610391740/>

Nora Ephron's next project would be her most important, for so many reasons. In 1985, Nora met with director Rob Reiner (*Stand By Me*, *The Princess Bride*) where he pitched the idea for *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). This film entirely changed Ephron's career, and the framework for romantic comedies overall. It led to Nora directing eight of her own films, including the incredibly successful Meg Ryan and Tom Hank's vehicles, *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You've Got Mail* (1998).

Reiner's pitch to Nora for *When Harry Met Sally* was as follows, "Two people become friends at the end of the first major relationship in each of their lives and they make a decision not to have sex because it will ruin the friendship. And then they have sex and it ruins the friendship."<sup>8</sup> Once they began working together, the characters became clear to Nora, and Reiner became the blueprint for Harry. On the subject, she says "So I started with Harry, based on Rob. And because Harry was bleak and depressed, it followed absolutely that Sally would be cheerful and...idiotically optimistic. Which is, it turns out, very much like me".<sup>9</sup>

As the script and story evolved, it was clear that it was going to be different from any other romantic comedy we had seen. It doesn't follow the standard formula of "boy meets girl - boy loses girl - boy and girl fall in love." *When Harry Met Sally* is more like "boy meets girl - life happens - boy meets girl again? - life happens - boy meets girl again! - boy and girl fall in love - more life growth - boy and girl are together.". It is also a prime example of the neo-traditional romantic comedy.<sup>10</sup> Where in the past, two leads would be consistently building towards an ever-consuming love, *When Harry Met Sally*, and other romantic comedies from the late-70s onwards, often showed the many obstacles that would get in the way of love - and also how

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<sup>8</sup> Erin Carlson, 'I'll Have What She's Having: How Nora Ephron's Three Iconic Films Saved the Romantic Comedy' (2018, pub. Hachette Books)

<sup>9</sup> Leger Grindon, 'The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, Histories, Controversies' (2011, pub. Wiley-Blackwell)

<sup>10</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald 'Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre' (2007, Wallflower Press)

deeply humans were grasping for that sort of connection. John Alberti, professor of English at Northern Kentucky University says "Romantic comedies are dealing with the fundamental aspects of human existence: Desire, love, loneliness, Unlike (for example), 'Fast and Furious,' most of us are not going to become world class street racers, but most people do aspire to being in relationships, and take that very seriously."<sup>11</sup>

It's messy, convoluted, and still, one of the most realistic depictions of what falling in love with your best friend is like. Differing from other films, we get to bear witness to how these characters are separate from each other. In most other romantic comedies, our only interactions with the characters is how they are with each other as we follow their relationship in a coherent linear narrative. *When Harry Met Sally* spans over 12 years, and in that time, both Harry and Sally grow a considerable amount. Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal do an exceptional job of playing believable 21 and 31 year olds. We also get to see a heroine who is as intricate and messy as our male counterpart. In previous films in the genre, the woman is merely there to be wooed by the man - this is not the case in works of Nora Ephron. "The movie provided a heroine who was not an unapproachable, frosty shiksa goddess but a mass of tics, foibles, and issues of her own — an interesting mess rather than a dull ideal."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/29/entertainment/romantic-comedy-evolution-trnd/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://blog.laemmle.com/2014/07/25-years-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-when-harry-met-sally/>



Fig. 01 Harry and Sally at 21 vs 31

In the film, both Harry and Sally are so unaware that they're in love with each other. They deny it to themselves and to their peers in a way that doesn't feel like they're lying. We begin to see their real feelings creep out in very subtle ways. These include the joke voice they have with each other at the Met, how Sally lets her guard down during the fake orgasm at Katz Deli, when Harry tells Sally that she should wear skirts more often, and in the next scene she's in a skirt. Or most obviously when Harry comments on the incessant way Sally orders, and then when they're on a double date with each other's respective best friends, Harry mentions it in a way that's truly so endearing and complimentary - going so far as to then talk about it being one of the things he loves about her in his final declaration at the end of the film.

A massive theme that can be found in Nora Ephron's work is that of inevitability. *When Harry Met Sally* explores the way in which people inevitably get better at relationships as they get older. When the two meet just out of college, Harry is very cynical about love, and through their discussion of Casablanca on the road-trip from Chicago to New York, Sally believes that Ilsa makes the right decision to leave with Victor, where Harry believes she actually wants to remain with Rick because she had the best sex of her life with him. Later in the car, Harry begins a discussion about how men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way - how the man always wants to have sex with the woman. Cut to ten years later, and Harry is the one to initiate a friendship with Sally when they reconnect in New York City, stating "You know, you may be the first attractive woman I have not wanted to sleep with in my entire life"<sup>13</sup>. Sally also shows growth when they return to Casablanca. While they both lay in their respective beds, watching the film together over the phone, Sally denies that Ilsa ever would have been happy with Victor over Rick. This shows how Sally has changed, and her ideas of love have changed over the years. Harry comments on the line "Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship," with such high regard, because that is all he and Sally have left to turn to when left by their partners.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9CKhEZN8> (Timestamp: 1:58)



Fig. 02 Harry and Sally watching Casablanca

Harry and Sally are based on a lot of aspects and characteristics that can be found in both Rob Reiner and Nora Ephron, respectively. Many of the moments in the film can also be attributed to Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal - When Reiner was going through his divorce, himself and Crystal used to phone each other and watch movies together. Meg Ryan gave the idea of the fake orgasm being in a public space, Crystal came up with the infamous "I'll have what she's having" line (delivered by Rob Reiner's mother). And, the mexican wave scene was from a failed SNL skit idea that Crystal had during his stint in the All Stars season. This is a film that is only as good as it's makers.



Fig. 03 Rob Reiner's mother

In the way most romance films are plagued by being a product of its time, *When Harry Met Sally* has continued to stand the test of time because it doesn't have an external impeding factor tied to a certain era that's stopping Harry and Sally from being together. The only thing stopping them is their own fear. And whether you believe in the notion or not, no single generation has ever not questioned whether or not men and women can be friends without the possibility of sex getting in the way. The film is generally unlike anything before it because it is one that is entirely rooted in the friendships presented. Though past attempts show a friendly dynamic, this is the first of its kind that doesn't show a friendship so immediately dripping in sexual tension and long gazes at each other. We instead see two adults who deeply respect and understand each other, and only later realise that there's no one else who can match them like they can. Harry is even able to reassure Sally when telling her he loves her at the end of the film - having to say that it's not just because he's lonely on New Year's Eve.<sup>14</sup> The emotional climax of the film comes in this push-back, not in the final kiss. They haven built such a strong relationship that they can

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovkiChacf8> (Timestamp: 0:35)

anticipate these ideals. Ephron and Reiner ensured that they are incredibly believable friends, above all else. Throughout the entire run of the film, they both have the same amount of agency given to them. "This isn't so much a romantic comedy in a woman's voice, as it is a romantic comedy in which a woman is allowed to have a voice, which may be even rarer."<sup>15</sup>

Nora Ephron's writing, and *When Harry Met Sally*, forever changed a genre for the better. She re-worked the genre in a way that meant the story wasn't about this all encompassing love that trumped all, which we had seen in romantic films from the 50s/60s, but rather about the people experiencing the love. She hit home in the notion surrounding how everyone desires to give love and to be loved. We were presented with people who were deeply flawed and complex. Audiences were becoming significantly more intelligent. People wanted an escape less, and they wanted to see themselves represented in these stories. The collaborative work caused an invaluable resurgence in the genre and led to the romantic comedy renaissance in the 1990s, and beyond.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://blog.laemmle.com/2014/07/25-years-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-when-harry-met-sally/>

## Can once in a lifetime happen twice?

### How *Sleepless in Seattle* made destiny happen

Originally written by Jeff Arch, *Sleepless in Seattle* almost had a very different tone, until Nora Ephron came on board to do re-writes while her directorial debut, *This is My Life*, was in post-production. She later also directed *Sleepless*. In reflection, Nora Ephron stated “It was not a comedy at all. There were about two jokes in it -- the kid had the jokes.”<sup>16</sup> The only scene that she felt was strong across every draft was the final scene atop the Empire State Building, but felt the film could mess around with the themes from *An Affair to Remember*, the film’s inspiration, a tad more.

*An Affair to Remember* was released in 1957. Directed by Leo McCarey and starring Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr. Since its release, it has been helmed as one of the most romantic films of all time<sup>17</sup>, and so makes perfect sense that the women in the film base their ideas of love off of the film - note: Becky’s line, “You don’t want to be in love, you want to be in love in a movie”<sup>18</sup>. The main moments borrowed from the film are the two romantic leads meeting on top of the Empire State Building to declare their love, and the line “All I could say was hello”<sup>19</sup>. Though it may not seem like much actually came from the film to have such heavy comparisons made in media, the twin idea of destiny runs throughout it. When all is said and done, *An Affair to Remember* is about two people finding their inevitable way to each other.

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<sup>16</sup> Erin Carlson, ‘I’ll Have What She’s Having: How Nora Ephron’s Three Iconic Films Saved the Romantic Comedy’ (2018, pub. Hachette Books)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.timeout.com/film/the-100-best-romantic-movies>, number 49.

<sup>18</sup> Movie: *Sleepless in Seattle*, dir. Nora Ephron, 1993 - Timestamp: 45:15

<sup>19</sup> Movie: *Sleepless in Seattle*, dir. Nora Ephron, 1993 - Timestamp: 01:12:30

*Sleepless in Seattle*, released in 1993, tells two tales. One of Sam Baldwin, played by Tom Hanks, and his son Jonah dealing with the recent passing of his wife, and his son is attempting to cure his father's loneliness. And two, Annie Reed, played by Meg Ryan who is in a dissatisfactory relationship with Walter Jackson, played by Bill Pullman.

Tom Hanks' character is heard on the radio around the country talking about how much he misses his wife, and speaks incredibly endearingly about her, capturing the hearts of every woman listening. Women begin to send him letters in abundance with proposals of love, to which he dismisses all of them.

Obsessed with the film '*An Affair to Remember*', Annie writes Sam a letter asking him to meet her at the top of the Empire State Building, a reference to the film, on Valentine's Day<sup>20</sup>. Unbeknownst to Annie, her friend Becky, played by Rosie O'Donnell, posts the letter and Jonah reads it. Following much attempted persuasion of his father, Jonah hops on a plane to New York City, knowing his father will follow suit and orchestrates the meeting of Annie and Sam atop the Empire State Building. These two characters are major perpetrators in making fate happen.

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<sup>20</sup> Movie: *Sleepless in Seattle*, dir. Nora Ephron, 1993 - Timestamp: 45:25.



Fig. 04 Empire State Building scenes in An Affair to Remember & Sleepless in Seattle

Though the two romantic leads never meet until the final moments of the film, you can't help but consistently root for their successful relationship. I believe the reason for this is due to independently being able to see why they should be together. Unlike many other romantic comedies, we have dual protagonists. The film gives equal screen time to both characters' stories. Where other films in the genre will only show who the characters are through the relationships they enter, in *Sleepless*, we see the type of people they are with their friends, family, and most importantly - themselves. Only then do we understand how Annie and Sam would make each other's lives richer, despite not knowing each other.

The two most prominent symbols of this are towards the start of the film when both Annie and Sam give the same response to the radio host, saying “Oh, sure you do”<sup>21</sup>, when she insists that she doesn’t mean to pry into his personal life. The next, and more pointed symbol, comes in the form of a small skill - at an early point in the film, we see Annie unable to fall asleep and so she goes down to the kitchen and listens to a rerun of Sam’s call on the radio. While listening, she begins to peel an apple in one continuous strip. Cut to 20 minutes later, and Sam begins to tell Jonah a story about his mother and how she used to be able to peel an apple the same way, to ease his nightmare<sup>22</sup>. This moment alone reinforces the idea of her becoming a new maternal figure for Jonah, as well as a partner for Sam.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the central themes that runs throughout Nora’s romcom trilogy is that of inevitability<sup>23</sup>. In *Sleepless in Seattle*, we see this most dream-like sense of inevitability, through fate. Though there were some external factors helping the two leads on their way - Annie fell in love with Sam the moment she heard his voice on the radio, and Sam fell in love with her the moment he saw her in the airport. After those two incidents, it simply just becomes a matter of time until they truly find each other.

For Sam, his arc throughout the entire film is about losing the destiny-like love that he had, and trying to find that ‘one great love again’, and for Annie, it’s the opposite. She’s never had that sort of love before. On the subject, Tom Hanks says, “one person’s second chance can be the other person’s first.”<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Movie: *Sleepless in Seattle*, dir. Nora Ephron, 1993 - Timestamp: 16:58.

<sup>22</sup> Movie: *Sleepless in Seattle*, dir. Nora Ephron, 1993 - Timestamp: 49:12.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2012/06/26/155810045/what-nora-ephron-taught-me-about-love-in-the-movies>

<sup>24</sup> Erin Carlson, ‘I’ll Have What She’s Having: How Nora Ephron’s Three Iconic Films Saved the Romantic Comedy’ (2018, pub. Hachette Books)

Desperate for connection, Sam is willing to settle for Victoria and learn to love and understand her quirks, much to Jonah's disapproval of her. However, Annie is unable to settle for Walter. Until the final act of the film, she is consistently seen trying to prove to herself and those around her that Walter is worth loving and marrying - how there is no one more perfect for her. Unlike Sam, she has not had her great love, and her fear of taking the leap at destiny is very apparent throughout. Even when she gets to Sam's house in Seattle, all she is able to say is 'Hello', before fleeing the scene and returning to Boston. She tries to rationalise with herself that how she is acting is not necessary, and yet she is still constantly drawn back to Sam, through many different signs - the most clear one being the Empire State Building illuminated in a giant, red heart.

Another common theme across Nora Ephron's work is how the two leads are unaware of the fact that they are in love with one another. Admittedly, Sam doesn't know that Annie exists - but what he does know is that he immediately wants to take the leap of getting to know her when he sees her getting off the plane. He is drawn to her again when he sees her across the street. The audience are the only ones privy to the fact that Sam and Annie are made for each other because we get to see their love failings in their private life. Everyone else, besides Jonah and Becky, are blissfully unaware.

A massive achievement in this film is in how satisfactory an ending it is for the viewer, when the two romantic leads do nothing more but hold hands. After *When Harry Met Sally*, Nora's work became much more conservative in its portrayal of sexual relationships. This is perhaps a nod to 1957's *An Affair to Remember*, when the first kiss between Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr is staged on a staggered staircase, and the audience can only see the legs of the couple. Or, very early on in the film, Annie's mother is describing how she fell in love with her father, describing it more as 'love at first touch' and how you 'just know'. Simply put, when two people have been

separated by the grand scope of being on opposite sides of the country, a mere touch is enough to satisfy the eyes of anyone watching. Though we don't know what happens after the elevator door closes, we know that Annie and Sam are destined to be together as they continue to hold onto each other.

Aside from the Empire State Building, another similarity to *An Affair to Remember* that we see are the other partners that are present throughout much of both films. In *Affair*, they are Lois Clark (Neva Patterson) and Kenneth Bradley (Richard Denning) and in *Sleepless*, they are Walter Jackson (Bill Pullman) and Victoria (Barabara Garrick). Both of these films do a seemingly good job at not portraying these partners as bad people, but rather just the wrong fit. The partners of Kerr and Ryan in their respective films, take the news of infidelity very well, going so far as being supportive of potential new relationships. It would have been so much easier for Walter to blow up at Annie, but he is solid in his belief of not wanting to be the person one settles for. These little quirks in the characters reinforce Nora's great understanding of people. The directing choices during the scene between Annie and Walter help you to continue empathising with both characters, and assists in the ending feeling much more triumphant.

Where the film has its downfalls - that would perhaps not hold up well in modern romantic comedies lies in the following: Ultimately, Annie has a heavy hand in forcing a lot of the aspects of love to happen. Though Sam has a love at first sight moment in the airport when she arrives in Seattle, the reason she is there is to meet him after hiring a private investigator to find his address and personal information. Another personal gripe in the film is how Annie is portrayed as a replacement maternal figure for Jonah, as opposed to an additional one - and also the forcing in which Sam is to move on and find someone new very soon after the passing of his wife. Jonah has many women in his life to assist in caring for him, (Suzy, Jessica's mother, etc), and so appearing that she immediately is inserted as being very similar to his mother and fitting

that bill does not work as well for the film - considering how capable of a father Sam is shown to be, as other aspects do, and dates the film overall.

Nora Ephron's contribution to this film proved to be invaluable. She has such a strong understanding of people. The message of love that she is attempting to convey is how people are just desperate for that deep connection with someone - their one (or second), true love. And also, the lengths someone will go to get that. The use of *An Affair to Remember* to inform the audience of what the characters think about love was a great move, but also updating the contents in order to give the female protagonist much more agency, and then male protagonist be emotionally vulnerable, is something that was long overdue. Changes that Ephron and Arch made to the original script for Sam's character found him also having more agency outside of being a father. Initially, he was to call the Seattle hotline himself, declaring his worries about Jonah and that he "oughta have a mom"<sup>25</sup>. Later, David S. Ward (writer), thought "What woman is going to fall in love with a man so full of self pity?". This is crucial as it shows Sam as a successful father, but also someone who is deserving of a personal life separate from that. Had this not been done, we would have been given another trite film where the woman exists only to be wooed by the dominant playboy, and failing father, of the time.

This film allows you to connect with the characters on an incredibly deep level, because you get such a rich insight into their life. We see a man so enmeshed in grief, and trying to figure out the right way to be a single parent, and who still gets a second chance at love, because he allows himself to feel. Sam is very in touch with his emotions, which is something rarely seen from a male protagonist, especially in the romantic genre. The furthest vulnerability up until this point is

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<sup>25</sup> Erin Carlson, 'I'll Have What She's Having: How Nora Ephron's Three Iconic Films Saved the Romantic Comedy' (2018, pub. Hachette Books)

usually their admission of love, and that's it. Nora made these characters significantly more human than in previous works in the genre.

When comparing this film to her first romantic comedy, *When Harry Met Sally*, we see that she has placed an almost impossible obstacle in the way of Sam and Annie's happy ending. Where Harry and Sally are almost suffocating to each other how prevalent they are in each other's lives, Sam and Annie couldn't be (literally) further apart. This also feeds into the neo-traditional sense of the picture. Subverting all expectations originally in place for a romance film - it seems as though these two are never going to overcome the American sized obstacle in their way. Regardless of the fact that we get the happy ending, Nora never allows the audience to forget how much they must overcome, letting the ending become much more satisfactory. "The neo-traditional romantic comedy elects to ignore the films that have ended with the lovers apart, or together but possibly only temporarily"<sup>26</sup> Between *The Graduate* and *Annie Hall* ending on somewhat sour notes, films from Ephron and beyond inherit many of the romance genre's motifs, but rather give a more basic human-longing element to them.

No matter the reservations I have with the film, and the suspension of disbelief put in place around Annie's search for Sam, or just how okay Jonah is with a potential new-mother figure, there is no doubt in my mind that these two characters were meant to be together. The distance is paid off, and absence certainly made the heart grow fonder, even if they didn't know it.

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<sup>26</sup>Tamar Jeffers McDonald 'Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre' (2007, Wallflower Press)

**“I wanted it to be you so badly”**

## **How Nora Ephron re-made 1940s *The Shop Around The Corner***

Adaptation can be defined as “the process of adapting or being adapted”<sup>27</sup>. Adaptations of books, plays and real-life events, are some of the most prominent works in film and television. Such as, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, and so on. According to the statistics shown in the book, *The Art of Adaptation*:

- 85 percent of All Academy Award-winning Best Pictures are adaptations.
- 45 percent of all television movies-of-the-week are adaptations, yet 70 percent of all Emmy Award winners come from these films.
- 85 percent of all miniseries are adaptations, but 95 percent of Emmy Award winners are drawn from these films.<sup>28</sup>

Though the most traditional filmic adaptations come in the form of book or play to film - over time, these stories will begin to evolve further as the world begins to shift. When this happens, the adapted films then get re-made themselves to often fit the current cultural context of the world. However, in these adaptations, there are usually significant changes to the story to reflect the world's current state of affairs.

We have seen this happen an innumerable amount of times, most notably in William Shakespeare's work. Over the last century, much of his written work has been adapted into movies, and then later re-imagined over the next decades. We see this in the likes of *10 Things I Hate About You*, *My Own Private Idaho*, and *West Side Story*. This same thing happened when 1998s *You've Got Mail* (directed by Nora Ephron), based on the 1940 film *The Shop*

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptation>

<sup>28</sup> ‘The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film’ (2000, pub. Henry Holt & Company Inc.)

*Around The Corner* (directed by Ernst Lubitsch) - which was based on the 1937 play, *Parfumerie* - was released.

*The Shop Around the Corner* tells the story of shopkeepers, Alfred Kralik (James Stewart) and Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan), working at a leather goods shop in Budapest. They spend the majority of the film quarrelling, without realising they have been falling in love through anonymous letter correspondence.<sup>29</sup> From the moment the two characters meet, they enter into competition about who is the better seller with each other. Through all of this, we can see the absolute undeniable chemistry between the two of them, especially considering they are none the wiser.



Fig. 05 Klara Novak and Alfred Kralick

<sup>29</sup>

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/dec/02/the-shop-around-the-corner-review-1940-lubitsch-romcom-still-a-christmas-delight>

In most other iterations of media containing this trope, the two characters remain unaware of their hidden identities until it's revealed to both of them in the final moments before they embrace. However, in *The Shop Around the Corner*, Kralik is aware of Mr. Novak's identity from about the half-way point in the film. This is discovered when he goes to meet his anonymous lover, and co-worker, Pirovich, tells him the truth about who is sitting in the cafe. When Kralik enters, Klara Novack is nothing short of horrible to him and insults him repeatedly.<sup>30</sup> This hinders Kralik revealing who he is until the final moments of the film. However, after this point, we see a great change in how he treats Ms. Novack, going so far as to visit her whilst sick in bed. He seeks her approval and confuses her with his kindness, all the while Klara has been falling for him anyway. This all builds to a comical exchange from the two where Klara asks Kralik to prove he isn't bow-legged once he tells her he's been on the other end of the letters this whole time, and then they embrace.

Prior to *You've Got Mail*, the film went through three other adaptations. The first being dramatised into two-half hour broadcasts in 1940, starring Sullavan and Stewart. The next being the musical remake, *In the Good Old Summertime*<sup>31</sup> in 1949, starring Judy Garland and Van Johnson. And finally, the 1963 Broadway musical, *She Loves Me*<sup>32</sup>, which is based on both the film and the original 1937 play. It is said by A.O. Scott that "most romantic comedies obey the logic set down in The Shop Around The Corner: the path to true love must pass through conflict, hostility, and misunderstanding."<sup>33</sup>

In 1994, writer-producer Julie Durk, who was working for Lauren Shuler Donner's production company had the idea to remake Lubitsch's *The Shop Around The Corner*. Considering the fifty

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIPRltvR89c&t=23s>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041507/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.mtishows.com/she-loves-me>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.wideopencountry.com/the-shop-around-the-corner/>

years it had been since the original film, Durk wondered how exactly the film should be made in the current climate. To this, her boss recommended that instead of letters, the two romantic leads correspond through email. The two went to Turner Pictures, run by Amy Pascal at the time, with the idea. Here, Pascal decided that Nora Ephron was best fit to write and direct the project. This was the most ideal partnership, considering Turner Pictures owned the rights to *The Shop Around The Corner* at this time.

Nora wrote the script with her sister, Delia. Ephron once recalled telling Delia that she has no idea how they are supposed to adapt the film, to which Delia responded, "Oh, it's very simple. The Upper West Side, bookstores, and they live with other people."<sup>34</sup> While most romantic comedies pose the idea of 'the perfect person made just for you', *You've Got Mail* challenges that notion by falling in love with someone who isn't made for you. Is it possible to fall out of love with them despite all odds?

*You've Got Mail* tells the story of Kathleen Kelly (played by Meg Ryan), the owner of a local children's bookstore aptly named 'The Shop Around The Corner', and Joe Fox (played by Tom Hanks), owner of massive chain, Fox Books, which has moved in just around the corner from Kathleen's store. When the two meet in person, the initial chemistry between them is very clear. However, once Kathleen realises that Joe is the owner of Fox Books, the business putting her store in jeopardy, the two become rivals. Little do they know, they have both been corresponding over AOL, under the pen names 'Shopgirl' and 'NY152', all the while distracting themselves from their unfulfilling current relationships and falling in love with each other.

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<sup>34</sup> Erin Carlson, 'I'll Have What She's Having: How Nora Ephron's Three Iconic Films Saved the Romantic Comedy' (2018, pub. Hachette Books)

The decision to use emails and online messaging was down to the popularity of the AOL form in the 90s. In 1993, AOL released its chatroom function, and then in 1997, their Instant Messenger, alongside their yellow 'running man' mascot. People using the browser could enter almost 20,000 chat rooms, and then break off into their own private messenger. It is a great set-up for two people to anonymously fall in love, despite the stigma and uncertainty attached to online dating at the time.

The next change to the original film came in the form of both Kathleen and Joe being in relationships with other people for over three quarters of the film. Kathleen's boyfriend, Frank Navasky (played by Greg Kinnear), is an anti-capitalist columnist who is very easily wooed by other women around him. And, Joe's partner, Patricia Eden (played by Parker Posey) is described as 'making coffee nervous'. From the initial introduction, it is very clear that both couples have very little chemistry between them - so much so that Patricia and Frank's chemistry is bouncing off the walls when they meet - so while it is an apparent obstacle, it is not one that the audience is ever too concerned about.

In light of the changes made in the film, the one scene which remains the same, almost word for word, is the cafe scene where Joe finds out Kathleen is 'Shopgirl'. It was believed between Nora and Delia that they shouldn't mess with a good thing and it was "...just so perfect in design". In both iterations of the scene, the identity of the woman on the other end of the letters is revealed by a friend and also in both, neither men seem at all disappointed by the woman they've been falling in love with being their so-called enemy. Joe approaches Kathleen with hesitancy, which on her end turns into embarrassment and then anger and frustration. Though Kathleen's words are more cutting, they both enter into a passionate rage towards each other. All of their feelings kept bottled up, which directly reflects the same scene in Lubitsch's film 58 years prior.



Fig. 05 The Shop Around the Corner vs You've Got Mail cafe scenes

When looking at the two characters of Alfred Kralik and Joe Fox, they are probably the ones who differ the least across adaptations. In *The Shop Around The Corner*, Kralik is Klara's boss - higher ranking and ultimately assuming he knows more than her. In *You've Got Mail*, Joe Fox too wields more power than his counterpart of Kathleen. They are both harsh in their criticisms of Kathleen and are deeply believing in their correctness. However, both of them get the chance to re-fall in love once they realise who they've been talking to anonymously. We see their walls begin to come down and for them to soften - especially when they both visit Kathleen and Klara in their homes when sick - even if both are still being truly mean to them. They accept the way they are being treated because they know it's warranted and need to allow both Kathleen and Klara to fall for them also, respectively.

Comparatively, Kathleen and Klara differ incredibly. Part of this is due to the lack of total liberty that women had in the 1940s. We see this through what both of them value throughout the duration of both films. Klara's main goals in life are to have a job and a husband, which ultimately reflects the ideals of a woman in the 1940s. She has a timid crush on the man in her letters and so she believes she is going to marry him, which we can assume she does. Kathleen is a bit more layered than that. Though she does inevitably close her bookstore, she had been a business owner and much more of a modern woman than her 1940s counterpart. Even down to her value in relationships, she feels unfulfilled by Frank, and so begins to dabble in an online relationship. Infidelity is never explicitly addressed, but if you read between the lines, it's clear 'Shopgirl' and 'NYC152' are falling in love with each other. Changes to the general demeanour of both characters is also very clear. While Klara Novack is very heavy in how she talks to Alfred Kralik, and puts him down, she never really begins to show any recognition of how hurtful she was until a small admission at the end of the film. This directly contrasts just how much Kathleen Kelly feels remorse about how she treats Joe Fox at numerous points throughout the film. Ephron's version greatly reflects a woman of the 1990s age, and shows a much more multifaceted character.

In the 1998 version, Nora and Delia also update the relationship Joe and Kathleen have with each other from half-way through the film. Audience's in the 90s need a lot more to go off between two romantic leads, and a proclamation of love is not enough to be satisfied. Once Joe knows Kathleen is 'Shopgirl', he begins to attempt to win her approval and so the two become genuine friends. Though perhaps a little manipulative, we see her go to Joe for his opinion on 'NY152', which he is an expert on. The two begin to really trust each other and we get to see their real in-person chemistry. This makes the reveal and the two characters getting together at the end feel so much more earned.

When discussing the inevitability motif present in this film, it's clear that while it might seem like it's telling the melancholic tale of bigger corporations inevitably taking over all of the small and local landmark stores in the area, it's actually much more nuanced than that. Kathleen eventually comes back from the store closing and is still able to find her happiness, even through so much struggle. She is still able to understand the layers and complexities that come with people and love. She sees Joe as a human worth loving, and not the capitalist monster she once thought of him. In an NPR article, it is written that "This is inevitability for grownups. You will get your heart broken and you will feel lost – inevitably. But you will get up – inevitably."<sup>35</sup>

In the neo-traditional sense, *You've Got Mail* displays many of these characteristics. Though a significantly more grounded and contemporary romantic comedy, it still employs many references to films in its past. Out of all of her work, Nora is equally most influenced by screwball comedies and sex comedies. There is much physical comedy at the beginning of the movie "Meg Ryan's performance underlines the clandestine nature of the correspondence by the surreptitious manner in which she tiptoes around her apartment, checking Frank has really left before logging on"<sup>36</sup>. These ideals are later reinforced through the slapstick manner in which Joe falls off the treadmill when Kathleen insults him on the television. The sex comedy then referenced through how Joe and Kathleen insult each other throughout the film. The film is entirely based around language and the courtship phase, rather than delving into attempted relationships. Besides the kiss at the end of the film, it remains very conservative in design - furthering this point, both characters are very sexless in their current relationships. The most erotic moment in the film occurring when he actually touches her by placing his hand on her

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2012/06/26/155810045/what-nora-ephron-taught-me-about-love-in-the-movies>

<sup>36</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald 'Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre' (2007, Wallflower Press)

mouth to stop her insulting him, because he knows she'll feel terrible about it later - saving her the trouble.

Nora Ephron greatly understands characters and men and women's relationships to each other. She knows how to utilise the spaces around her and have New York City be the third wheel in the relationship between Joe and Kathleen. The film proved a massive success for the genre, and saved Ephron from a stint of badly received films since *Sleepless in Seattle*. *You've Got Mail* is one of the great examples of a remake that entirely works in the timeframe in which it is being made. Nora and Delia were able to create a world that still remains very relevant and its ideals are timeless to today, though the technology has been relatively updated, which is what remakes should be attempting to do at all times.

Nora's work in *You've Got Mail* teaches us how love is ultimately about acceptance and embracing change. Kathleen and Joe would still be unhappy in relationships had they not taken the leap to message each other, and pursue each other offline. As two people grow older, they are more willing to see past the walls that the other puts up. Both parties spend so much of the film with their emotions at an all time high because they are afraid of what it means if they admit they have feelings for each other. Nora once again shows how deeply human all of her work is - how two people want nothing more than to feel love. Change plays such a central role in this film, but the sentiment stays the same. Kathleen picks herself back up when she loses her business and adapts to the change, all the while never actually giving up her career by choice in order to be with a man - a trope we have seen too often, and Joe embraces the chance of being emotionally vulnerable.

Comparatively to her previous work, *You've Got Mail* strikes itself as the perfect balance between the themes present in *When Harry Met Sally* and *Sleepless in Seattle*. Where we have

the obstacle of the two leads standing in the way of their own happiness in When Harry Met Sally, and the physical distance between Sam and Annie in Sleepless in Seattle - You've Got Mail attempts to have elements from both. Joe and Kathleen are separated by the online space they have gotten to know each other in, and also stand in the way of human connection and chemistry due to being business rivals. You've Got Mail is also the film of hers that is perhaps most grounded in reality and the world it's set in. Though never showing New York City in an un-whimsical light, we still get the contemporary cultural context that was reflecting how overwrought major cities were to capitalism.<sup>37</sup> During filming, Nora Ephron said "The city changes and life changes, and you're gonna get used to that one day."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/movies/youve-got-mail.html>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/12/219768/youve-got-mail-movie-about-change-time>

## Conclusion

Nora Ephron passed away from pneumonia, as a complication from lung cancer on the 26th of June 2012 at the age of 71. In her lifetime, it is very clear that her work and contribution to the romantic comedy genre is of great importance to cinema.

Nora's work created a lasting legacy out of films that were heavily inspired and influenced from those in the past. Placing characters that are ultimately influenced by the screwball and sex comedies from the 1930s onwards in a contemporary setting created longevity for the stories. Borrowing from the past allows a piece of work to become timeless, and Ephron's motifs are recycled constantly.

An example of a contemporary film which is heavily influenced by Nora Ephron is Netflix's 2018 release, *Set It Up*. It tells the story of assistants Charlie and Harper attempting to get more time away from their work-a-holic bosses, and so they begin to scheme and make their bosses fall in love. The kicker of course, is that Harper and Charlie begin to fall in love during all of this. The lyrical way the two of them speak is incredibly reminiscent of Nora's work and her references to screwball comedies. Similarly, we see an incredibly tame sexual relationship between the two. Besides a longing look, all we see is one final kiss at the end of the film. References to *When Harry Met Sally* can be seen when Charlie runs through the street to right a wrong, and the final speech he gives to Harper where he talks about all of the 'undesirable' things that he loves about her. There is a whole motif running throughout the film about how you like someone because of all of their qualities, and love someone despite some of their qualities. This is a very clear take on Harry's final speech at the New Year's party in *When Harry Met Sally*. The success of this film, though very simple in its design, shows how well audiences respond to simplicity in

their stories. It is a romance grounded, once again, in human connection, which is something that Nora really set the tone for. David Sims, a writer for The Atlantic wrote “*Set It Up* might just feel like a fluffy rom-com, but it could also be the start of a genuine realignment within the industry.”<sup>39</sup>

It is said that we are currently in a romantic comedy renaissance. After almost a decade of little box-office success, we are seeing a return of the booming romantic comedy on streaming services, and also through some wide-cinema releases. Major studios became more reluctant to fund smaller scaled movies, as the return on investment didn’t seem worth the hassle. In the 1990s, films such as *Pretty Woman* were making \$463 million against a \$14 million budget. However, later releases like *Fool’s Gold* only made \$111 million against a \$70 million budget.

The romantic comedy began to go into decline because it wasn’t reflecting the world that people were seeing around them. This is beginning to change, as we return to Nora Ephron’s standard romance conventions, but through the guise of the world we see today. We can see this through the massive successes of films like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *To All The Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2018), and the Hulu remake of *High Fidelity* (2020). Romantic comedies are most successful when they are grounded in the current contemporary landscape in which they are set. This is what Nora did best, and ultimately contributed to her massive success, because they were human stories.

Nora Ephron’s most successful films were found in her romantic comedies due to her clear understanding of people, and the human obstacles that often come in our way. I spoke with indie director, Jonah Feingold - heavily inspired by Nora Ephron - who believes massive success can come in this genre due to the fact that there is massive freedom in the genre. Your

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/06/set-it-up-netflix-review/563237/>

film can be centred around any single event, because ultimately human connection is everywhere. Nora is a massive pioneer in this ideal because all three of her romantic comedies all have such wildly different settings, but all come down to how the two leads interact with each other, and the bond they create.

She set the foundations for many decades of romantic comedies that followed. Films with a rhythmic speaking tone are entirely accredited to how she contemporised the screwball and sex comedies. She gave women a voice, and men deep emotions. Her lasting impact on the neo-traditional romantic comedy will continue to be seen for the rest of time in this genre.

“In retrospect, it appears that  
Ephron was, in her brief lifetime,  
an influence greater than perhaps  
any of us knew.”

- The Los Angeles Times<sup>40</sup>

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