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Ahead of Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, Dave Karger talks writing '50 Oscar Nights'

Emma Sasic Palm Springs Desert Sun

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Turner Classic Movies host and Coachella Valley resident Dave Karger is, not surprisingly, a huge fan of the Oscars, and he owns several books on the coveted gold statue.

Most of those books dive into the history of the Academy Awards, examine the highs and lows of the entertainment industry through the ceremony's 90-plus-years and, of course, highlight winners. But when Karger, also an entertainment journalist, was given an opportunity to write a book, he decided it was time to tackle his favorite subject from a different angle.

Thus, "50 Oscar Nights: Iconic Stars and Filmmakers on Their Career-Defining Wins" was born. Karger's first book, released Jan. 23 (which coincided with the 96th Academy Awards nominations announcement), features intimate interviews with 50 Oscar winners, including A-listers Meryl Streep, Jane Fonda, Elton John, Halle Berry and Martin Scorsese. The filmmakers take Karger through their big day — how they got ready, how they were feeling throughout the ceremony and what they did to celebrate.



Ben Mankiewicz, right, speaks with Dave Karger during a discussion at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 1, 2023. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

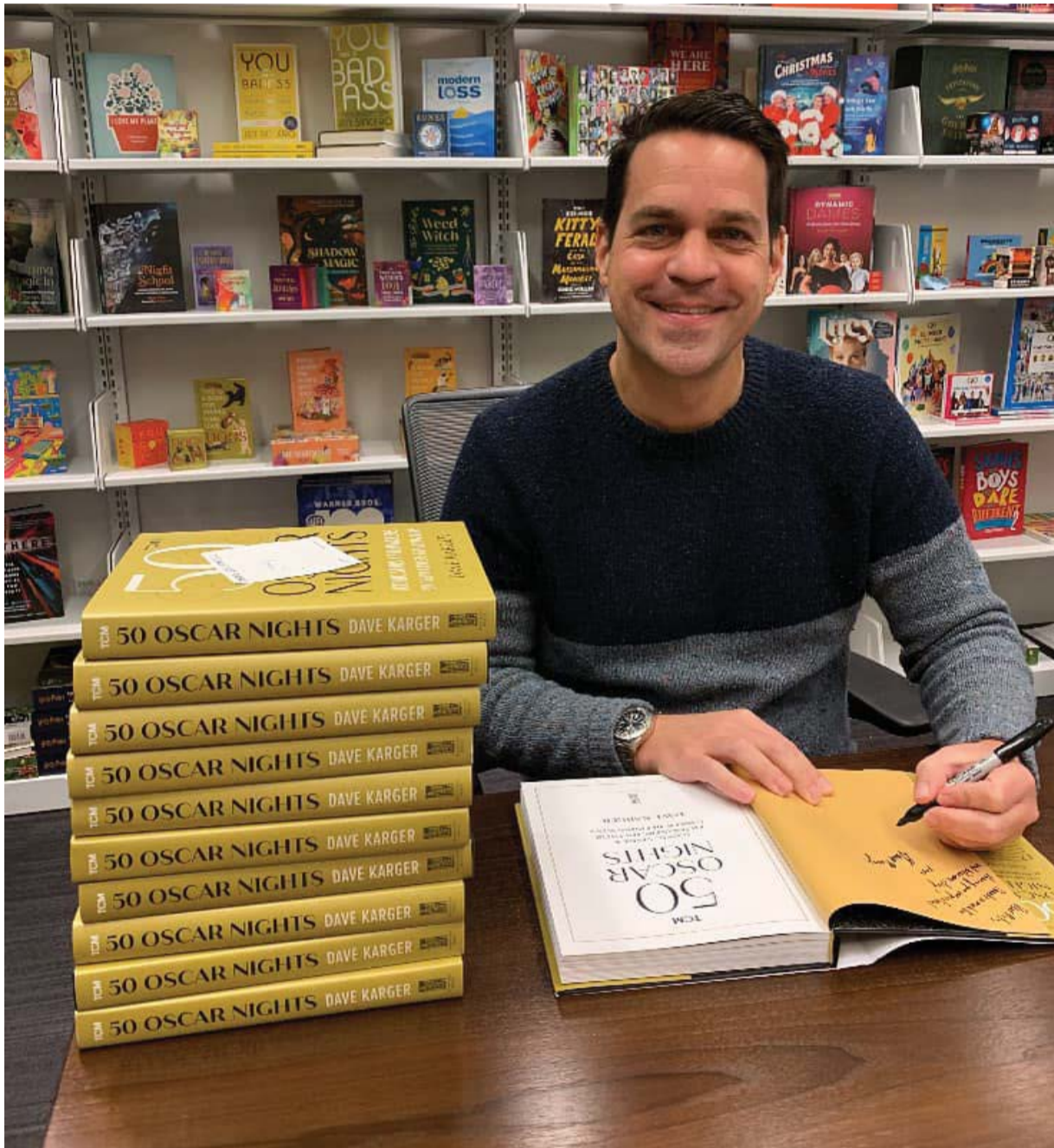
Some also disclose how their big moment came with complex emotions.

"I came up with this concept of '50 Oscar Nights' because I thought it would be a different type of Academy Awards book, and also because I thought it would be fun to do," Karger said in a recent interview with The Desert Sun. "It was definitely a lot of work, it was a lot of wrangling, but it was a real pleasure to put together, and I enjoyed reaching out to all of these different Oscar winners from the past 60-plus-years and hearing their stories."

Local readers who were lucky enough to grab a ticket to the now sold-out event will be able to learn more about "50 Oscar Nights" from Karger at his Rancho Mirage Writers Festival talk scheduled for Jan. 31 in the John Steinbeck Room at the Rancho Mirage Library. The 10th annual festival is slated for Jan. 31 through Feb. 2.

Meeting with new and old friends

Karger had several priorities when putting together his book.



He wanted to speak with as many classic film era stars as possible, and "50 Oscar Nights" includes six interviews with those who are at least 90 years old. He also wanted to have as diverse of a list as possible, and about 25% of the chapters feature filmmakers of color and LGBTQ winners.

Because he has been writing about the Academy Awards for more than 25 years, Karger already knew there were several winners with historic and interesting stories to tell. He pointed to "Whiplash" best supporting actor winner J.K. Simmons, who, in his acceptance speech, encouraged everyone to call their parents; "Precious" screenwriter Geoffrey Fletcher, who became the first African American to win a screenplay Oscar; and sound mixer Kevin O'Connell, who finally won an Oscar with his 21st nomination for "Hacksaw Ridge."

Karger also had a chance to reunite with stars whose Oscar campaigns he covered during his time at Entertainment Weekly. At the time, he wrote a feature story on Hilary Swank for "Boys Don't Cry," for which she won her first best actress win, and the two have remained good friends since. He also spent a few days on the set of "Monster's Ball" and interviewed Berry. In 2002, she won the best actress Oscar and became the first woman of color to win the award.

"Halle Berry, I had not seen or spoken to her in 23 years, so my interview with her was our reunion, if you will, after going through this experience together where we really got to know each other. I'll never forget she sent me flowers, which no one ever does, after the cover story came out," Karger said. "The book was a special opportunity to have new moments with these two actresses."



Dave Karger interviews "Poor Things" director Yorgos Lanthimos and actors Emma Stone, Mark Ruffalo and Willem Dafoe at a Talking Pictures event during the Palm Springs International Film Festival on Friday, Jan. 5, 2024, at the Annenberg Theater in Palm Springs, Calif. *Getty Images For The Palm Springs International Film Festival*

In total, Karger said he had previously met 35 of the interviewees included in his book. Some of the big names he was excited to speak with for the first time included Mel Brooks, Rita Moreno and John Legend.

One of Karger's favorite questions he asked each winner was where they keep their Oscar, and the answers are "fascinating."

"Some people keep it hidden away in a closet or in their bedroom, other people keep it out for everyone to see as soon as they walk in their house," he said. "It's also interesting to get a sense of how everyone feels about winning. Estelle Parsons, who won best supporting actress for 'Bonnie and Clyde,' said to me in the interview, 'Well, why shouldn't I have won? I gave the best performance that year.' I love that. I love the sense of pride that a lot of these people feel in what they were able to achieve."

As much as Karger loves many Oscar wins, he did share some of his biggest snubs: Bradley Cooper in "A Star is Born," who lost the best actor award to Rami Malek in "Bohemian Rhapsody," and both Ian McKellen of "Gods and Monsters" and Nick Nolte of "Affliction" who lost the best actor race to Roberto Benigni of "Life is Beautiful." Even though it's been 25 years since that win, it "still stings," Karger admitted.



Actress Rita Moreno poses on the red carpet before the world premiere for "80 For Brady" during the Palm Springs International Film Festival in Palm Springs, Calif., Friday, Jan. 6, 2023. *Andy Abeyta/The Desert Sun*

'A source of conflicting feelings'

Most people likely associate winning an Oscar as a huge career highlight, but for some, the moment was a bit more complicated. That was one of the more fascinating aspects to learn as he completed interviews.

"I was really surprised by how different everybody's story was. For some people, the Oscar win is the Cinderella moment of their lives where everything went great. And then for other people, the Oscar win carries with it very conflicting and conflicted feelings and responses and emotions," Karger said. "I'm very grateful to people like Jane Fonda or Barry Jenkins or Mira Sorvino who were very open in sharing with me the reasons why the Oscar win either was or is today a source of conflicting feelings."

Fonda received her first best actress Oscar for "Klute" in 1972. Karger said it was a "confusing time" for the actress because of the hostility she felt from the movie industry due to her political activism. She also felt guilty that she won an Oscar before her father, classic era actor Henry Fonda. Ten years later, he won the best actor Oscar for "On Golden Pond," which he starred alongside his daughter.

At the 2017 Oscars, "La La Land" was announced as the best picture winner, but there was a mix-up with the envelopes. Once the correct envelope was found, "Moonlight," co-written and directed by Jenkins, was crowned the winner. Jenkins won an Oscar for best adapted screenplay earlier in the night, which he felt was "the only true pure celebratory moment," and the snafu at the end of the clouded the elation he should have felt, Karger said.



Actress Jane Fonda takes interviews on the red carpet before the world premiere for "80 For Brady" during the Palm Springs International Film Festival in Palm Springs, Calif., Friday, Jan. 6, 2023. Andy Abeyta/The Desert Sun

Finally, Sorvino won the best supporting actress Oscar for her role in "Mighty Aphrodite." The film was distributed by Harvey Weinstein's company, Miramax, and years later, she was one of the first actresses to speak out against the producer, alleging he had sexually harassed her. Sorvino has also said in interviews that she "should have denounced" the film's director, Woody Allen, over allegations that he sexually abused his adopted daughter, Dylan Farrow.

After taking in all of the winners' experiences, Karger said it hasn't changed his opinion of the award or its prestige.

"Even though there's a lot of diversity in the stories, I think the one thing that is the consistent factor is that all of these winners really do seem to appreciate the importance of it," Karger reflected. "For some of them, like Jennifer Hudson, music was so much her priority that she wasn't very knowledgeable about the Oscars, or Marlee Matlin, who was so new to acting that she didn't know what an Oscar campaign was, but all those people learned pretty quickly."

Keeping film history alive

Last year, Turner Classic Movies' leadership team faced devastating layoffs, leaving many wondering what would happen to the channel that is dedicated to showing and preserving classic Hollywood films. Then, famed directors Steven Spielberg, Scorsese and Paul Thomas Anderson stepped up to help curate programming and keep the film resource alive.

Similarly, Karger is invested in the fight to keep cinema, both new and old, alive — "It makes sense that this book that I've written is a TCM-branded book," he said. While he admits that much of the luster around the Academy Awards has faded over the years — "I do feel like when a lot of people think about the Oscars, they think about 'La La Land' and 'Moonlight' or they think about Will Smith and Chris Rock," Karger said.



Ben Mankiewicz, right, speaks with Dave Karger during a discussion at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 1, 2023. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

The author hopes "50 Oscar Nights" will inspire young people to dive into classic films and remember why the Oscar is so important in Hollywood.

He's excited to get started on that journey with the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. Karger called it a true honor to be part of the lineup, and considers his talk to be "the dessert of the menu."

Last year, he led a discussion with his TCM colleague Ben Mankiewicz, and Karger will be doing more at this year's festival. Aside from his book talk on Jan. 31, Karger will speak with Scott McGee about his book "Danger on the Silver Screen: 50 Films Celebrating Cinema's Greatest Stunts" at 9:30 a.m. Feb. 1 in the Joan Didion Room; discuss courtroom dramas with former district attorney Linda Fairstein and Justice Douglas Miller at 10:30 a.m. Feb. 1 in the Walt Disney Room; and predict this year's Oscar winners with former Variety editor-in-chief Peter Bart, film producer Albert Berger and McGee at 11:30 a.m. Feb. 2 in the John Steinbeck Room.