

Legendary Gossip: A conversation with Karina Longworth of *You Must Remember This*



You Must Remember This Logo Designed by Teddy Blanks

As podcasts continue to enjoy a Renaissance, one of the most consistently excellent by far is “**You Must Remember This.**” With writing and narration by the show’s creator, Karina Longworth, the series that takes a look at Hollywood’s last century has become a must-listen for any film fanatic. Seasons focusing on everything from the Manson murders to **Hollywood Babylon** are addictive deep dives that feature meticulous research and a wry sense of humor that helps cut through the sometimes sordid underbelly of the place where movie magic occurs.

The podcast has been voted as one of the Best of the Year by *Rolling Stone*, *Vulture*, *Teen Vogue*, and Time Magazine. It also won the 2021 Best TV & Film Podcast from I Heart Radio.

Longworth received rave reviews for her book ***Seduction: Sex, Lies, and Stardom in Howard Hughes’s Hollywood*** and she recently co-hosted the “**It’s the Pictures That Got Small**” podcast with Nate DiMeo.

Her latest foray into Hollywood’s Golden Age is called **Gossip Girls**. It examines the lives of columnists and original influencers Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper.

Longworth spoke to *Motif* contributor Kevin Broccoli about the success of “You Must Remember This,” her acclaimed season dedicated to the life of Polly Platt, and her process for creating one of the most celebrated podcasts of the past decade.

Kevin Broccoli (Motif): It’s been great to see the podcast evolve over the years from these singular

stories to seasons that take a deeper look at some of these periods in Hollywood. When you're thinking of what to cover in a season, are you going back to previous episodes with an eye on finding a story that could be further examined?

Karina Longworth: It's kind of the opposite. I really try not to do anything that's too much like things I've done before, but then, sometimes when you're in the middle of researching something, you discover that something might touch on *Citizen Kane*, which was talked about in previous episodes, but I think I can tell the story in a different way, but that's it. I don't look to the back catalogue for inspiration for new episodes. I just try to figure out what I can commit six-to-nine months of my life to without getting bored.

KB: One of the things I've always talked about when I would tell friends about the show early on was the incredible amount of research that you do. When you're doing that research, are you keeping tangible notes that you can refer back to? Are there moments when you go back to a certain book or reference point that's proved useful?

KL: Yeah, I buy books so I can reference books I already have, but it's not like I have a master notes document or anything. If I'm writing something and it touches on something I've covered before, I kind of have to do the research again.

KB: You've said on Twitter that after this current season, you already know what the next season is going to look like. Do you ever work on two ideas at the same time, or do you have to focus on one thing before you can move on to something new?

KL: I would love to work on one thing at a time, but it doesn't always work out that way. Over the past few months, in addition to trying to finish the "Gossip Girls" season, I've also been working on a different podcast project that is not "You Must Remember This," and that has been very onerous in terms of the research and the labor involved. I'm trying to finish my work on that soon so I can go back and make a second season of "YMRT" this year. It's very difficult to go back and forth between two different topics, because every time you switch, you have to re-immense yourself.

KB: I was grateful for the podcast you did with Nate DiMeo from "The Memory Palace (It's the Pictures That Got Small)" at the height of the pandemic, because even though everything was shut down, I know how much you have going on. It was really lovely. The very first episode, the movie theater Nate chose to donate to — The Avon Cinema — is my local movie theater.

KL: Thank you. I think that podcast was fun to do as sort of a social thing that we could do one night a week. Then it got to be so that we couldn't always schedule it at the same time. It just got to be a little too much. But it was nice, as time went on, when we weren't able to see friends or go to the movies, to try and replicate that one evening a week.

KB: As the podcast has gotten bigger and bigger in its popularity, one of the things I love about listening to it is that it still feels like this wonderful secret. Has the popularity of it affected how you create it, or do you try to zone that out as you're working on it?

KL: I don't know what there would be to zone out. It's been about the same level of popularity since maybe late 2017? It sort of plateaued there. I don't really make enough money off of it to turn it into a corporation or anything. It's still very handmade in a lot of ways. I don't think about the popularity when I'm making it, and then it's finished. Then it becomes, *Oh god, now I have to try and get people to*

listen to it. Every time that feels daunting, and every time I'm surprised people want to listen. The third episode came out this week, and I didn't want to look at the download numbers from the past three weeks. I thought, *Nobody's going to be listening. It's just going to make me sad.* I finally looked at the download numbers this week, and it's doing great. It's doing better than the last season. I could never get in the mindset of working from a position of success.

KB: Last season you were working on a story from a totally different time period. Are those time jumps from season-to-season intentional? Do you find yourself thinking about exploring a different era after spending so much time in another one?

KL: I do think about it. I get so much feedback from listeners on that. I don't know that I'd ever *want* to do two seasons that were about the same span of years, but I had an idea that I wanted to pursue that would have been more '70s, '80s, '90s and the feedback I got from listeners was that — well, there is definitely a segment of the listenership that is what I call the *Old TCM Audience* — who believe that anything that happens in Hollywood after 1965 doesn't count. I think that segment of the audience was like, *"Okay, you had your fun, but let's bring it back to the core of classic Hollywood."* And so, you know, I'm very interested in that era as well. The decades of Hollywood history that I'm most interested in are in the 1930s and 1950s, so I'm happy to do it, but I will probably — eventually — do that idea that's more '70s, '80s, '90s as well.

KB: What I love about listening is that even when I think I have a handle on the topic, I learn so much from how you structure the podcast. I know when you did the *Bogie/Bacall* episodes, the structure of the way you set up covering them was so interesting. It wasn't so much about the story you were telling, but the way you told it. Have you ever had filmmakers or writers or playwrights reach out to you about adaptations?

KL: There's been a lot of interest. The way deals work, for every hundred people who are interested, maybe one deal actually goes through. I did sell the rights to the Manson season. There was a writers room. Two scripts were produced. A showrunner was hired, and the take that they settled on was very different from the podcast season. The network that bought it passed on it. When the rights revert back to me, maybe I'll try to find somebody else to work with on it and make it more faithful to the podcast. Nothing else has gotten as far as that. I am working right now with Polly's daughters, a showrunner, and my producing partner to try and sell a show based on the [*Polly Platt: The Invisible Woman*] season.

KB: That was such an incredible season. I'll admit that when you started it, I didn't know that much about her. I felt embarrassed as someone listening to it, and as someone who loves movies, because I felt like I should have known more about her.

KL: Don't be too hard on yourself. The thing about the way that film studies — or even celebrity studies — works is that it's really easy to appreciate a performer, it's *slightly* less easy to appreciate a director or writer, and then from there, it goes down to producer, studio executive... With Polly, she did so many things, she never stayed in one lane, but the thing that she did the most was production design. There aren't any celebrity production designers. Most people with a general knowledge of movies don't even know what that is. Even people with a deeper knowledge of cinema usually don't get around to appreciating a production designer, because there are so many actors and directors and writers to talk about. I think that's one reason Polly's story has never been sold. Certainly when I was trying to sell a book on her unpublished memoir the feedback I got was, *"Nobody's ever heard of this lady and nobody's going to care."* I think part of that is misogyny, but part of it is because it's very difficult to

explain why she's important in one sentence.

KB: It was also interesting to hear about a woman in Hollywood who was not a perfect mother, but a beloved mother. Someone who had problems and struggles, but when you look back, their children have nice things to say about them. I thought you painted this beautiful portrait of her as being very complex, but ultimately somebody that deserved a lot better in terms of their legacy and how they're remembered.

KL: That's something that people who have no connection to Hollywood can connect to. A lot of us have parents who maybe failed us in ways or traumatized us in ways, but that doesn't mean we don't love them and celebrate what was good about them.

KB: When you first approach a topic, is there a moment when you say, "*I need to make sure there's enough here for me to dig into?*"

KL: For the Polly season, I wasn't worried about it, because I knew I had the unpublished memoir, so that was material that I was lucky enough to be able to share with people for the first time. Then it was a question of finding people who knew her to ask the questions that the memoir didn't answer. For every season, the questions are — *What are the published materials? What can I get access to? What can I bring to the story? And will it sustain itself over multiple episodes? Will it sustain my interest over multiple months?* There are certainly ideas that I've had for seasons that didn't come together, because it didn't hit that combination of things.

KB: There's something about you reading certain quotes from Hollywood celebrities that I really enjoy. When you bring in other actors to do voices, how do you decide when that will enhance the storytelling?

KL: I think it's just fun to change it up and to have a varied array of voices on the show. I knew it was really important in the Polly season to have her memoir read by someone other than me, because it was going to be so much of the show, and I wanted to make a clear differentiation between what I was writing and saying and what she was writing and saying. In this current season, I just thought that these were two juicy parts, and it would be fun to get comedians to do it. The way that came together was that Julie Klausner and I are friends and have been friends for years. When I was writing it I thought she would be so funny as Hedda Hopper, but then when I talked to her about it, I showed her the scripts, and she chose to play Louella instead. So I thought, *Who am I going to get for Hedda?* I talked to [Klausner] about it, and she suggested Cole Escola, who [Klausner] had worked with on "Difficult People." I thought, *What a get that would be.* And they wanted to do it. I was very happy.

KB: When I saw what the season was going to be about, I was thrilled, because this topic has a certain amount of inherent fun in it, but I also — while knowing who these two columnists are — always thought of them as interchangeable. As the season has gone on, I'm struck by just how different they were. Do you think that's a misconception as we move further away from their era? This idea that they were one and the same?

KL: Yeah, I think that they're often spoken of in the same breath. Even I, with a deep knowledge of most of this, would sometimes get confused as to which was which. In *Hail Caesar!*, they play on that idea by making the only two gossip columnists twins played by Tilda Swinton. It reinforces this idea that they were identical. Discovering just how different they were played a big role in how I structured the season. In the past, when I've done things like *Bela and Boris* or *Jean and Jane*, I've either tried to combine the stories into one episode — half Jean, half Jane — or alternating a Jean episode and a Jane

episode. I realized I wasn't going to be able to do something like that on this season because Louella had a 20-year head-start on Hedda. Even though it gets more fun when Hedda enters the story, I thought it was more important to give Louella time for those 20 years, and help people understand how established she was, and how she really didn't see this challenge to her supremacy coming.

KB: I'm struck by how different their motivations were. I think a lot about people who pursue work they want to do and become famous as a result versus the TikTok culture of pursuing fame and trying to determine what kind of work will get you there. That's something that was on my mind as I was listening to the last episode, because it almost seems as though you had that playing out in these two people as well.

KL: Certainly Louella thought of herself as a real journalist. She covered trials. She covered human interest stories. She wrote about things other than Hollywood gossip. Whereas Hedda couldn't have cared less about being a journalist. She was just looking for a way to stay in the inner circle of Hollywood. To continue to be a celebrity or be a bigger celebrity than she was. As much as I think both of these women are, to some extent, evil, there is something that I find empathetic about Louella's struggle to just hold onto this position that she had carved out for herself. It really is much more difficult for me to be empathetic about Hedda, because I think she was so much worse as a person, but there is something about the way she reinvented herself.

KB: For me, as a listener, there's something more fun about Hedda. Maybe it's because she's so aware of her shortcomings. I love hearing that she felt every year she didn't have to go skulking back to her hometown was a victory for her. The way I perceived it, she wasn't this cocky person who came in with all this bravado, it was more, *"I'm going to do what I have to do to survive."*

KL: That's true. Her writing is also funnier, because it's bitchier. But she really is, on balance, more evil. And maybe that'll become clearer as the season goes on. With Louella, her conservatism is grounded in her Catholicism. With Hedda, it's more grounded in racism.

KB: In the most recent episode, there was a moment that jumped out at me, where you compared the dynamic between Louella and Hedda to that of the candidates in the 2016 election. I found that interesting, because as someone who's listened to the podcast from the beginning, it's not often that you point out something like that so overtly. Is that parallel something that stood out to you when you began working on this current season?

KL: I don't remember to be honest. I don't remember when I stumbled onto that metaphor.

KB: Do you think that any of these celebrities they were intersecting with had any real friendships with the two of them or was it all transactionary?

KL: I think Louella was friends with some of these people. I don't know about Marion Davies. I think Marion Davies was manipulating her to a large extent. But I think she had some real relationships, whereas with Hedda, it seemed like she never had a real relationship with anyone in her life, including her son. Later in the season, I'm going to talk about some of the people who came after them like Sheila Graham and Rona Barrett. Both of whom had to deal with this question of, *"How close do you get to the stars?"* Is it worth sacrificing personal relationships to go further in your career? And how do you deal with this idea of conflict of interest? I think we have a much stricter idea of conflict of interest today than anybody had then. Back then it was considered to be good journalism to go out to drinks with your subjects in any field. Whereas now, you go out for too many drinks and you end up feeling

compromised, because you don't want to report the truth about somebody anymore.

KB: It just seems exhausting with all of these people trying to manipulate each other, but with everybody ultimately wanting the same result — which was coverage.

KL: It's also a little bit of. "*Look at me, don't look at me.*" Sometimes I don't fully understand something until I get to the end of the research, and I'll read something that colors something unexpectedly. In this case, in the last episode of this season, Louella and Hedda die, and I talk about what happened in gossip from the 1960s until today. I was writing about the founding of *People Magazine*. What *People* realized was that celebrities didn't have anyone to confess things to at that point in history. If *People* gave them a place to confess things on the star's own terms, they would get all these big stars for the covers of their magazines, but they would also have to stop the stars from revealing *too much*, because the stars were *desperate* to talk, and they sometimes didn't understand how things would look in print. So a lot of what *People* did was not about killing stories based on what a publicist wanted, but having a certain kind of clairvoyance as to how a celebrity really wanted to see themselves. When I learned about that, I was able to go back to the story about Mary Pickford's divorce and the lunch with Louella, and see that even if Mary Pickford was feeding her that story, somebody who was savvier about this situation than Louella, who wanted to *keep* that relationship with Mary, would have thought, *How is Mary going to feel when this is in print? How can I shape this so she feels the best?*

KB: Yeah, I was wondering what would be that era's version of a Notes App apology? All the versions I could think of would be in the middle of a murder trial. There wasn't a direct channel to your fans. Those opportunities didn't exist.

KL: The closest people had was feeding a story to Louella.

KB: Before I let you go, is there a particular movie you've seen recently that you really enjoyed?

KL: I haven't really been watching movies so much lately, because I've been so busy with work. At the end of the day, I just don't have much of an attention span. This season, there is an episode about Harriet Parsons, who was Louella's daughter. She was a film producer, one of the few female producers of the '40s and '50s in Hollywood. I watched all of her movies, and for me, the big discovery was this movie *Night Song*, where Merle Oberon falls in love with a blind pianist, and then *she* has to pretend that she's blind. It's incredible. It was a real shock, not just how good it was, and how satisfying it was as kind of a romance about false identities, but also, the whole thing is built around this musical performance at the end, which is really kind of stunning and beautiful. It's readily available. I definitely suggest you check that out.

*To listen to all episodes of **You Must Remember This** or to learn more about the podcast, go to youmustrememberthispodcast.com*