

Roger Ebert: The Essential Man [Excerpts]

By Chris Jones

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- 1 **For the 281st time** in the last ten months Roger Ebert is sitting down to watch a movie in the Lake Street Screening Room, on the sixteenth floor of what used to pass for a skyscraper in the Loop. Ebert's been coming to it for nearly thirty years, along with the rest of Chicago's increasingly venerable collection of movie critics. More than a dozen of them are here this afternoon, sitting together in the dark. Some of them look as though they plan on camping out, with their coats, blankets, lunches, and laptops spread out on the seats around them.
- 2 The critics might watch three or four movies in a single day, and they have rules and rituals along with their lunches to make it through. The small, fabric-walled room has forty-nine purple seats in it; Ebert always occupies the aisle seat in the last row, closest to the door. His wife, Chaz, in her capacity as vice-president of the Ebert Company, sits two seats over, closer to the middle, next to a little table. She's sitting there now, drinking from a tall paper cup. Michael Phillips, Ebert's bearded, bespectacled replacement on *At the Movies*, is on the other side of the room, one row down. Steve Prokopy, the guy who writes under the name Capone for *Ain't It Cool News*, leans against the far wall. Jonathan Rosenbaum and Peter Sobczynski, dressed in black, are down front.
- 3 "Too close for me," Ebert writes in his small spiral notebook.
- 4 Today, Ebert's decided he has the time and energy to watch only one film, Pedro Almodóvar's new Spanish-language movie, *Broken Embraces*. It stars Penélope Cruz. Steve Kraus, the house projectionist, is busy pulling seven reels out of a cardboard box and threading them through twin Simplex projectors.
- 5 Unlike the others, Ebert, sixty-seven, hasn't brought much survival gear with him: a small bottle of Evian moisturizing spray with a pink cap; some Kleenex; his spiral notebook and a blue fine-tip pen. He's wearing jeans that are falling off him at the waist, a pair of New Balance sneakers, and a blue cardigan zipped up over the bandages around his neck. His seat is worn soft and reclines a little, which he likes. He likes, too, for the seat in front of him to remain empty, so that he can prop his left foot onto its armrest; otherwise his back and shoulders can't take the strain of a feature-length sitting anymore.
- 6 The lights go down. Kraus starts the movie. Subtitles run along the bottom of the screen. The movie is about a film director, Harry Caine, who has lost his sight. Caine reads and makes love by touch, and he writes and edits his films by sound. "Films have to be finished, even if you do it blindly," someone in the movie says. It's a quirky, complex, beautiful little film, and Ebert loves it. He radiates kid joy. Throughout the screening, he takes excited notes — references to other movies, snatches of dialogue, meditations on Almodóvar's symbolism and his use of the color red. Ebert scribbles constantly, his pen digging into page after page, and then he tears the pages out of his notebook and drops them to the floor around him. Maybe twenty or thirty times, the sound of paper being torn from a spiral rises from the aisle seat in the last row.

- 7 The lights come back on. Ebert stays in his chair, savoring, surrounded by his notes. It looks as though he's sitting on top of a cloud of paper. He watches the credits, lifts himself up, and kicks his notes into a small pile with his feet. He slowly bends down to pick them up and walks with Chaz back out to the elevators. They hold hands, but they don't say anything to each other. They spend a lot of time like that.
- 8 **Roger Ebert can't remember** the last thing he ate. He can't remember the last thing he drank, either, or the last thing he said. Of course, those things existed; those lasts happened. They just didn't happen with enough warning for him to have bothered committing them to memory — it wasn't as though he sat down, knowingly, to his last supper or last cup of coffee or to whisper a last word into Chaz's ear. The doctors told him they were going to give him back his ability to eat, drink, and talk. But the doctors were wrong, weren't they? On some morning or afternoon or evening, sometime in 2006, Ebert took his last bite and sip, and he spoke his last word.
- 9 Ebert's lasts almost certainly took place in a hospital. That much he can guess. His last food was probably nothing special, except that it was: hot soup in a brown plastic bowl; maybe some oatmeal; perhaps a saltine or some canned peaches. His last drink? Water, most likely, but maybe juice, again slurped out of plastic with the tinfoil lid peeled back. The last thing he said? Ebert thinks about it for a few moments, and then his eyes go wide behind his glasses, and he looks out into space in case the answer is floating in the air somewhere. It isn't. He looks surprised that he can't remember. He knows the last words Studs Terkel's wife, Ida, muttered when she was wheeled into the operating room ("Louis, what have you gotten me into now?"), but Ebert doesn't know what his own last words were. He thinks he probably said goodbye to Chaz before one of his own trips into the operating room, perhaps when he had parts of his salivary glands taken out — but that can't be right. He was back on TV after that operation. Whenever it was, the moment wasn't cinematic. His last words weren't recorded. There was just his voice, and then there wasn't.
- 10 Now his hands do the talking. They are delicate, long-fingered, wrapped in skin as thin and translucent as silk. He wears his wedding ring on the middle finger of his left hand; he's lost so much weight since he and Chaz were married in 1992 that it won't stay where it belongs, especially now that his hands are so busy. There is almost always a pen in one and a spiral notebook or a pad of Post-it notes in the other — unless he's at home, in which case his fingers are feverishly banging the keys of his MacBook Pro.
- 11 He's also developed a kind of rudimentary sign language. If he passes a written note to someone and then opens and closes his fingers like a bird's beak, that means he would like them to read the note aloud for the other people in the room. If he touches his hand to his blue cardigan over his heart, that means he's either talking about something of great importance to him or he wants to make it clear that he's telling the truth. If he needs to get someone's attention and they're looking away from him or sitting with him in the dark, he'll clack on a hard surface with his nails, like he's tapping out Morse code. Sometimes — when he's outside wearing gloves, for instance — he'll be forced to draw letters with his finger on his palm. That's his last resort.

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- 12 **Seven years ago**, he recovered quickly from the surgery to cut out his cancerous thyroid and was soon back writing reviews for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and appearing with Richard Roeper on *At the Movies*. A year later, in 2003, he returned to work after his salivary glands were partially removed, too, although that and a series of aggressive radiation treatments opened the first cracks in his voice. In 2006, the cancer surfaced yet again, this time in his jaw. A section of his lower jaw was removed; Ebert listened to Leonard Cohen. Two weeks later, he was in his hospital room packing his bags, the doctors and nurses paying one last visit, listening to a few last songs. That's when his carotid artery, invisibly damaged by the earlier radiation and the most recent jaw surgery, burst. Blood began pouring out of Ebert's mouth and formed a great pool on the polished floor. The doctors and nurses leapt up to stop the bleeding and barely saved his life. Had he made it out of his hospital room and been on his way home — had his artery waited just a few more songs to burst — Ebert would have bled to death on Lake Shore Drive. Instead, following more surgery to stop a relentless bloodletting, he was left without much of his mandible, his chin hanging loosely like a drawn curtain, and behind his chin there was a hole the size of a plum. He also underwent a tracheostomy, because there was still a risk that he could drown in his own blood. When Ebert woke up and looked in the mirror in his hospital room, he could see through his open mouth and the hole clear to the bandages that had been wrapped around his neck to protect his exposed windpipe and his new breathing tube. He could no longer eat or drink, and he had lost his voice entirely. That was more than three years ago.
- 13 Ebert spent more than half of a thirty-month stretch in hospitals. His breathing tube has been removed, but the hole in his throat remains open. He eats through a G- tube — he's fed with a liquid paste, suspended in a bag from an IV pole, through a tube in his stomach. He usually eats in what used to be the library, on the brownstone's second floor. (It has five stories, including a gym on the top floor and a theater — with a neon marquee — in the basement.) A single bed with white sheets has been set up among the books, down a hallway filled with Ebert's collection of Edward Lear watercolors. He shuffles across the wooden floor between the library and his living room, where he spends most of his time in a big black leather recliner, tipped back with his feet up and his laptop on a wooden tray. There is a record player within reach. The walls are white, to show off the art, which includes massive abstracts, movie posters (*Casablanca*, *The Stranger*), and aboriginal burial poles. Directly in front of his chair is a black-and-white photograph of the Steak 'n Shake in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, one of his hometown hangouts.

- 14 He believes he's had three more surgeries since the removal of his lower jaw; Chaz remembers four. Each time, however many times, surgeons carved bone and tissue and skin from his back, arm, and legs and transplanted them in an attempt to reconstruct his jaw and throat. Each time, he had one or two weeks of hope and relief when he could eat a little and drink a little and talk a little. Once, the surgery looked nearly perfect. ("Like a movie star," Chaz remembers.) But each time, the reconstructive work fell apart and had to be stripped out, the hole opened up again. It was as though the cancer were continuing to eat away at him, even those parts of him that had been spared. His right shoulder is visibly smaller than his left shoulder; his legs have been weakened and riddled with scars. After each attempt at reconstruction, he went to rehabilitation and physical therapy to fix the increasing damage done. (During one of those rehabilitation sessions, he fell and broke his hip.) He still can't sit upright for long or climb stairs. He's still figuring out how to use his legs.
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- 15 **There are places where Ebert** exists as the Ebert he remembers. In 2008, when he was in the middle of his worst battles and wouldn't be able to make the trip to Champaign-Urbana for Ebertfest — really, his annual spring festival of films he just plain likes — he began writing an online journal. Reading it from its beginning is like watching an Aztec pyramid being built. At first, it's just a vessel for him to apologize to his fans for not being downstate. The original entries are short updates about his life and health and a few of his heart's wishes. Postcards and pebbles. They're followed by a smattering of Welcomes to Cyberspace. But slowly the journal picks up steam, as Ebert's strength and confidence and audience grow. *You are the readers I have dreamed of*, he writes. He is emboldened. He begins to write about more than movies; in fact, it sometimes seems as though he'd rather write about anything other than movies. The existence of an afterlife, the beauty of a full bookshelf, his liberalism and atheism and alcoholism, the health-care debate, Darwin, memories of departed friends and fights won and lost— more than five hundred thousand words of inner monologue have poured out of him, five hundred thousand words that probably wouldn't exist had he kept his other voice. Now some of his entries have thousands of comments, each of which he vets personally and to which he will often respond. It has become his life's work, building and maintaining this massive monument to written debate — argument is encouraged, so long as it's civil — and he spends several hours each night reclined in his chair, tending to his online oasis by lamplight. Out there, his voice is still his voice — not a reasonable facsimile of it, but his.
- 16 "It is saving me," he says through his speakers.
- 17 He calls up a journal entry to elaborate, because it's more efficient and time is precious:
- 18 *When I am writing my problems become invisible and I am the same person I always was. All is well. I am as I should be.*

- 19 He is a wonderful writer, and today he is producing the best work of his life. In 1975 he became the first film critic to win the Pulitzer prize, but his TV fame saw most of his fans, at least those outside Chicago, forget that he was a writer if they ever did know. (His Pulitzer still hangs in a frame in his book-lined office down the hall, behind a glass door that has THE EBERT COMPANY, LTD.: FINE FILM CRITICISM SINCE 1967 written on it in gold leaf.) Even for Ebert, a prolific author — he wrote long features on Paul Newman, Groucho Marx, and Hugh Hefner’s daughter, among others, for this magazine in the late 1960s and early ’70s and published dozens of books in addition to his reviews for the Sun-Times — the written word was eclipsed by the spoken word. He spent an entire day each week arguing with Gene Siskel and then Richard Roeper, and he became a regular on talk shows, and he shouted to crowds from red carpets. He lived his life through microphones.
- 20 But now everything he says must be written, either first on his laptop and funneled through speakers or, as he usually prefers, on some kind of paper. His new life is lived through Times New Roman and chicken scratch. So many words, so much writing — it’s like a kind of explosion is taking place on the second floor of his brownstone. It’s not the food or the drink he worries about anymore — *I went thru a period when I obsessed about root beer + Steak + Shake malts*, he writes on a blue Post-it note — but how many more words he can get out in the time he has left. In this living room, lined with thousands more books, words are the single most valuable thing in the world. They are gold bricks. Here idle chatter doesn’t exist; that would be like lighting cigars with hundred-dollar bills. Here there are only sentences and paragraphs divided by section breaks. Every word has meaning.
- 21 Even the simplest expressions take on higher power here. Now his thumbs have become more than a trademark; they’re an essential means for Ebert to communicate. He falls into a coughing fit, but he gives his thumbs-up, meaning he’s okay. Thumbs-down would have meant he needed someone to call his full-time nurse, Millie, a spectral presence in the house.
- 22 Millie has premonitions. She sees ghosts. Sometimes she wakes in the night screaming — so vivid are her dreams.
- 23 Ebert’s dreams are happier. *Never yet a dream where I can’t talk*, he writes on another Post-it note, peeling it off the top of the blue stack. *Sometimes I discover — oh, I see! I CAN talk! I just forget to do it.*
- 24 In his dreams, his voice has never left. In his dreams, he can get out everything he didn’t get out during his waking hours: the thoughts that get trapped in paperless corners, the jokes he wanted to tell, the nuanced stories he can’t quite relate. In his dreams, he yells and chatters and whispers and exclaims. In his dreams, he’s never had cancer. In his dreams, he is whole.
- 25 *These things come to us, they don’t come from us*, he writes about his cancer, about sickness, on another Post-it note. *Dreams come from us.*

- 26 We have a habit of turning sentimental about celebrities who are struck down — Muhammad Ali, Christopher Reeve — transforming them into mystics; still, it's almost impossible to sit beside Roger Ebert, lifting blue Post-it notes from his silk fingertips, and not feel as though he's become something more than he was. He has those hands. And his wide and expressive eyes, despite everything, are almost always smiling.
- 27 *There is no need to pity me*, he writes on a scrap of paper one afternoon after someone parting looks at him a little sadly. *Look how happy I am*.
- 28 In fact, because he's missing sections of his jaw, and because he's lost some of the engineering behind his face, Ebert can't really do anything but smile. It really does take more muscles to frown, and he doesn't have those muscles anymore. His eyes will water and his face will go red — but if he opens his mouth, his bottom lip will sink most deeply in the middle, pulled down by the weight of his empty chin, and the corners of his upper lip will stay raised, frozen in place. Even when he's really angry, his open smile mutes it: The top half of his face won't match the bottom half, but his smile is what most people will see first, and by instinct they will smile back. The only way Ebert can show someone he's mad is by writing in all caps on a Post-it note or turning up the volume on his speakers. Anger isn't as easy for him as it used to be. Now his anger rarely lasts long enough for him to write it down....
- 29 **His doctors would like to try** one more operation, would like one more chance to reclaim what cancer took from him, to restore his voice. Chaz would like him to try once more, too. But Ebert has refused. Even if the cancer comes back, he will probably decline significant intervention. The last surgery was his worst, and it did him more harm than good. Asked about the possibility of more surgery, he shakes his head and types before pressing the button.
- 30 "Over and out," the voice says.
- 31 Ebert is dying in increments, and he is aware of it.
- 32 *I know it is coming, and I do not fear it, because I believe there is nothing on the other side of death to fear, he writes in a journal entry titled "Go Gently into That Good Night." I hope to be spared as much pain as possible on the approach path. I was perfectly content before I was born, and I think of death as the same state. What I am grateful for is the gift of intelligence, and for life, love, wonder, and laughter. You can't say it wasn't interesting. My lifetime's memories are what I have brought home from the trip. I will require them for eternity no more than that little souvenir of the Eiffel Tower I brought home from Paris.*
- 33 There has been no death-row conversion. He has not found God. He has been beaten in some ways. But his other senses have picked up since he lost his sense of taste. He has tuned better into life. Some things aren't as important as they once were; some things are more important than ever. He has built for himself a new kind of universe. Roger Ebert is no mystic, but he knows things we don't know.

- 34 *I believe that if, at the end of it all, according to our abilities, we have done something to make others a little happier, and something to make ourselves a little happier, that is about the best we can do. To make others less happy is a crime. To make ourselves unhappy is where all crime starts. We must try to contribute joy to the world. That is true no matter what our problems, our health, our circumstances. We must try. I didn't always know this, and am happy I lived long enough to find it out.*
- 35 Ebert takes joy from the world in nearly all the ways he once did. He has had to find a new way to laugh — by closing his eyes and slapping both hands on his knees — but he still laughs. He and Chaz continue to travel. (They spent Thanksgiving in Barbados.) And he still finds joy in books, and in art, and in movies — a greater joy than he ever has. He gives more movies more stars.
- 36 But now it's getting late, which means he has his own work to do. Chaz heads off to bed. Millie, for the moment, hasn't been seized by night terrors, and the brownstone is quiet and nearly dark. Just the lamp is lit beside his chair. He leans back. He streams Radio Caroline — the formerly pirate radio station — and he begins to write. Everything fades out but the words. They appear quickly. Perfect sentences, artful sentences, illuminating sentences come out of him at a ridiculous, enviable pace, his fingers sometimes struggling to keep up.
- 37 Earlier today, his publisher sent him two copies of his newest book, the silver-jacketed *Great Movies III*, wrapped in plastic. Ebert turned them over in his hands, smiling with satisfaction — he wrote most of it in hospital beds — before he put them on a shelf in his office, by the desk he can no longer sit behind. They filled the last hole on the third shelf of his own published work; later this year, another book — *The Pot and How to Use It*, a collection of Ebert's rice-cooker recipes — will occupy the first space on a fourth shelf. Ebert's readers have asked him to write his autobiography next, but he looks up from his laptop and shrugs at the thought. He's already written a lot about himself on his journal, about his little childhood home in Champaign-Urbana and the days he spent on TV and in hospitals, and he would rather not say the same thing twice.
- 38 Besides, he has a review to finish. He returns his attention to his laptop, its glow making white squares in his glasses. Music plays. Words come.
- 39 *Pedro Almodóvar loves the movies with lust and abandon and the skill of an experienced lover. "Broken Embraces" is a voluptuary of a film, drunk on primary colors, caressing Penélope Cruz, using the devices of a Hitchcock to distract us with surfaces while the sinister uncoils beneath. As it ravished me, I longed for a freeze-frame to allow me to savor a shot.*
- 40 Ebert gives it four stars.

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