

Val Lewton Papers

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress



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Manuscript Division, Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.

2003

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Contact information:

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.contact>

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<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms004005>

LC Online Catalog record:

<http://lccn.loc.gov/mm92081531>

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Revised by Mary A. Lacy with the assistance of Michael W. Giese

Collection Summary

Title: Val Lewton Papers

Span Dates: 1924-1982

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1926-1951)

ID No.: MSS81531

Creator: Lewton, Val

Extent: 90 items ; 3 containers plus 4 oversize ; 6.2 linear feet ; 5 microfilm reels

Language: Collection material in English

Location: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Summary: Motion picture producer, screenwriter, and novelist. Correspondence, film scripts, scrapbooks, and other papers pertaining chiefly to Lewton's career as a publicity writer and as a story editor for David O. Selznick at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1928-1942); as scriptwriter and producer of *Cat People* and other horror films for RKO Radio Pictures (1942-1947); and as novelist, especially as author of *No Bed of Her Own* (1932).

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

People

Lewton, Val.

Lewton, Val. *No bed of her own*. 1932.

Selznick, David O., 1902-1965.

Organizations

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

RKO Radio Pictures, inc.

Subjects

Horror films.

Motion picture industry--United States.

Publicity.

Titles

Cat people (Motion picture)

Occupations

Motion picture producers.

Novelists.

Screenwriters.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The papers of Val Lewton, motion picture producer, screenwriter, and novelist, were given to the Library of Congress by his son, Val Edwin Lewton, in 1992.

Processing History

The papers of Val Lewton were arranged and described in 1995. The finding aid was revised in 2003.

Transfers

Some photographs have been transferred to the Library's Prints and Photographs Division where they are identified as part of these papers.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Val Lewton is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Val Lewton are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Microfilm

A microfilm edition of these papers is available on five reels. Consult reference staff in the Manuscript Division concerning availability for purchase or interlibrary loan. To promote preservation of the originals, researchers are required to consult the microfilm edition as available.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container or reel number, Val Lewton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1904, May 7	Born Vladimir Ivan Leventon, Yalta, Russia
1909	Mother, Nina Leventon, and children (Val and Lucy) emigrated to America and took anglicized name of Lewton; Nina Lewton employed by her sister, actress Nazimova
circa 1922	Columbia School of Journalism, New York, N.Y.
1923	Privately published first book of poetry, <i>Panther Skin and Grapes</i> . Poynton Press
1928	Married Ruth Knapp
1928-1932	Publicity writer, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, under the supervision of Howard Dietz
1932	Published <i>No Bed of Her Own</i> . New York: Vanguard Press Contracted with Vanguard Press for five novels per year
1933	Wrote script for <i>Taras Bulba</i> for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Story editor, David O. Selznick unit at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
1942-1946	Head of horror unit, RKO Radio Pictures
1942	Produced <i>Cat People</i> (motion picture)
1946	Produced <i>Bedlam</i> (motion picture)
1947	Contract with Paramount Pictures
1948	Hired by Louis B. Mayer, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
1951	Produced <i>Apache Drums</i> (motion picture), Universal-International

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Val Lewton (1904-1951) span the years 1924-1982, with the bulk of the items concentrated in the period 1926-1951. The collection contains film scripts, scrapbooks, and other material documenting Lewton's career as a novelist, screenwriter, and motion picture producer, and is arranged into family papers, writings, miscellany, and oversize materials.

Family papers, 1927-1982, include letters received by Lewton's wife Ruth, his sister Lucy Olga, his mother Nina, and his aunt, silent film actress Nazimova. His mother and aunt both influenced his choice of career and early contacts. In 1928 Nina Lewton, as head of the story department at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, got her son a job writing publicity for M-G-M, training him in story analysis and synopsis writing. In 1933 she was approached by David O. Selznick to discover a Russian-born writer who could do a script of *Taras Bulba*. Lewton was hired to do the treatment (never filmed) and moved to California, working as Selznick's story editor and assistant until 1942, when he was offered a position as head of the new horror unit at RKO Radio Pictures. Letters include Selznick's condolences on Lewton's death and a copy of a telegram of congratulations he sent on the success of *Cat People*. Also contained among the family papers are a family history and eulogies written for Lewton, his mother Nina, and aunt Nazimova, whose papers the Manuscript Division also holds. Nazimova, a silent film actress, employed her sister Nina during their passage to America and upon their arrival.

Writings, 1924-1946, and scrapbooks, 1927-1934, document the publicity practices of Hollywood studios of the era. The writings include scripts of three of Lewton's dramatized radio reviews and a serialization in the *Daily Mirror* of his best-known novel, *No Bed of Her Own* (1932), which told the story of a girl victimized by Depression poverty. Paramount Pictures bought the rights and produced the film *No Man of Her Own*, starring Clark Gable and Carole Lombard; related material is found in the scrapbooks.

Lewton left M-G-M in 1932 and Vanguard Press signed him to a contract producing five novels per year, several of which he wrote under the pseudonym Carlos Keith. Lewton's journals for 1933-1934 document his writing and domestic activities. Brief entries for 1937 record frustration with his "despised role of story editor-censor" and with his inability to return to his own writing. Lewton's writings are also found in the scrapbooks in the form of printed articles; news features, including several on Greta Garbo, some published under pseudonyms; and fiction, including novelizations and serializations of M-G-M feature films, most of which he wrote in various capacities during his years at M-G-M. A sampling of press releases, all dated 14 January 1929, are found with the scrapbooks. The scrapbooks also contain dust jackets, reviews, and other material relating to books written by Lewton.

Lewton's output as head of the horror unit of RKO is represented primarily in the writings by a bound set of final scripts of the eleven films he produced at that studio with directors Jacques Tourneur, Robert Wise, and Mark Robson, beginning with *Cat People* in 1942. These scripts were presented to him when his production unit was disbanded on his departure from RKO. Lewton contributed to the screenplays from the original story-lines through the various drafts and revisions. He wrote the final shooting scripts himself, although he took screen credit for writing only on *The Body Snatcher* and *Bedlam*, using his old pseudonym Carlos Keith. The writings also include journal entries for January-February 1946 touching on the reception of *Bedlam*; work on *Blackbeard*, an abandoned RKO project; and exploration of leaving that studio. An undated screenplay written with Mark Robson, "The Fact of Murder," probably dates from these years as well.

Miscellaneous and oversize material in the collection, 1926-1973, includes a scrapbook largely containing reviews for the years 1942-1950, a cast photograph of *My Own True Love*, produced at Paramount Studios in 1947, and clippings related to *Apache Drums*, produced at Universal-International in 1950. Other material includes a typescript of the opening pages of Joel E. Siegel's biography, *Val Lewton: The Reality of Terror*, printed matter, such as film program books from 1926 and 1927, a four-page spread in *Life* magazine on Lewton's final RKO film, *Bedlam*, 1946, as "movie of the week," other clippings and reviews, a poster promoting *No Bed of Her Own*, and the scrapbooks for the years 1927-1934. A group of forty-five photographs transferred to the Prints and Photographs Division include portraits of Lewton, family pictures with Nazimova and Nina and Ruth Lewton, a photograph of his mother's family, the Leventons, circa 1881, and of Lewton with associates Mark Robson, Robert Wise, and Verna de Mots.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged alphabetically by type of material.

Container List

Available on microfilm. Shelf no. 21,993

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 1 REEL 1	Family papers Lewton, Lucy Olga (sister), 1982, undated Lewton, Nina (mother), 1938, 1967, undated Lewton, Ruth (wife), 1927-1931, undated Lewton, Val, death of, 1951 Miscellaneous correspondence, including David O. Selznick, 1942-1951, undated Nazimova (aunt), 1944-1945 Writings Dramatized radio reviews, 1928 “The Big City” “Bringing Up Father” “The Patsy” Film scripts (RKO) 1942 <i>The Cat People</i> <i>I Walked with a Zombie</i> 1943 <i>The Leopard Man</i> <i>The Seventh Victim</i> 1944 <i>The Ghost Ship</i> <i>The Curse of the Cat People</i> <i>Youth Runs Wild</i> 1945 <i>Mademoiselle Fifi</i> <i>The Isle of the Dead</i> 1946 <i>The Body Snatcher</i> Journals, 1933-1937, 1946 (3 folders) Newspaper serialization, <i>No Bed of Her Own</i> , 1932 Parody, circa 1930 Poems, 1924-1928, undated Screenplay, with Mark Robson, “The Fact of Murder,” undated Miscellany Printed matter Film program books, 1926-1927, undated <i>See also Oversize</i> (2 folders)
BOX 2 REEL 2	
BOX 3 REEL 3	

Container List

Container

Contents

	Newspaper and magazine clippings, 1932-1933, 1967, undated
	Poster, 1932 See Oversize
	Scrapbooks, 1927-1950 See Oversize
	(5 vols.)
	Siegel, Joel E., <i>Val Lewton</i> , manuscript of opening pages, 1973
BOX OV 1	Oversize
REEL 4	
	Printed matter
	Film program book, undated (Container 3)
	Poster, <i>No Bed of Her Own</i> serialization, 1932 (Container 3)
	Scrapbooks (Container 3)
	1927-1929
BOX OV 2	1929-1931
REEL 4	
BOX OV 3	1930-1931, 1942-1950
REEL 5	
BOX OV 4	1931-1934
REEL 5	