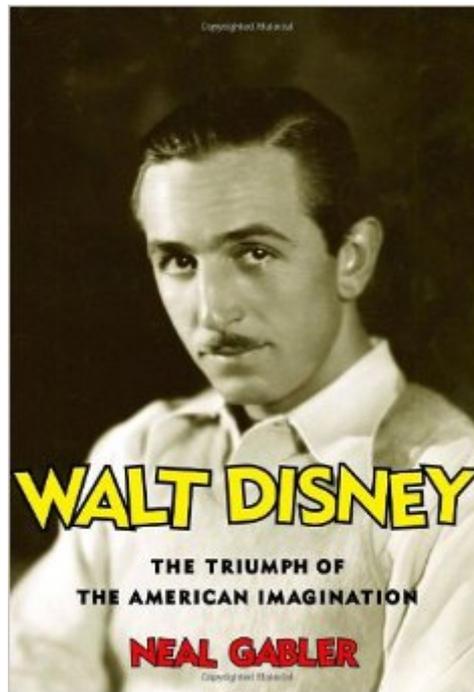


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Walt Disney: The Triumph Of The American Imagination



Synopsis

From Neal Gabler, the definitive portrait of one of the most important figures in twentieth-century American entertainment and cultural history. Seven years in the making and meticulously researched—Gabler is the first writer to be given complete access to the Disney archives—this is the full story of a man whose work left an ineradicable brand on our culture but whose life has largely been enshrouded in myth. Gabler shows us the young Walt Disney breaking free of a heartland childhood of discipline and deprivation and making his way to Hollywood. We see the visionary, whose desire for escape honed an innate sense of what people wanted to see on the screen and, when combined with iron determination and obsessive perfectionism, led him to the reinvention of animation. It was Disney, first with Mickey Mouse and then with his feature films—most notably *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Dumbo*, and *Bambi*—who transformed animation from a novelty based on movement to an art form that presented an illusion of life. We see him reimagine the amusement park with Disneyland, prompting critics to coin the word Disneyfication to describe the process by which reality can be modified to fit one's personal desires. At the same time, he provided a new way to connect with American history through his live-action films and purveyed a view of the country so coherent that even today one can speak meaningfully of "Walt Disney's America." We see how the True-Life Adventure nature documentaries he produced helped create the environmental movement by sensitizing the general public to issues of conservation. And we see how he reshaped the entertainment industry by building a synergistic empire that combined film, television, theme parks, music, book publishing, and merchandise in a way that was unprecedented and was later widely imitated. Gabler also reveals a wounded, lonely, and often disappointed man, who, despite worldwide success, was plagued with financial problems much of his life, suffered a nervous breakdown, and at times retreated into pitiable seclusion in his workshop making model trains. Gabler explores accusations that Disney was a red-baiter, an anti-Semite, an embittered alcoholic. But whatever the characterizations of Disney's personal life, he appealed to the nation by demonstrating the power of wish fulfillment and the triumph of the American imagination. Walt Disney showed how one could impose one's will on the world. This is a masterly biography, a revelation of both the work and the man—of both the remarkable accomplishment and the hidden life.

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Customer Reviews

Walt Disney has become a legendary character of the twentieth century. So much was written about him, and so much was inaccurate, that the legends often attained a currency that was not deserved. How many times have we heard that he was frozen? Gabler (who was the first of Walt's biographers to work with rare Disney family records) opens the book with this statement (it's not true.) The truth is much more interesting than that. Disney was an optimistic, hardworking go-getter with an astounding capacity for concentration who fell in love with the early twentieth century's high technology--motion pictures. Motion pictures drawn by hand. He had the perseverance to start over again every time he failed artistically and financially. And fail he did. This is one of the most unlikely success stories ever told, since the Disney Brothers studio was working in a marginal field (animation) in a minor city (Kansas, then Hollywood, when the animation studios were all in New York), and attempting to make it as an independent producer just as the big studios were forming, eliminating independent competition in all but a few areas by 1928. He made it because he had the unfashionable idea that quality would out, he had a tremendous amount of luck and he knew how to make appealing entertainment (Mickey Mouse was NOT the first successful character he created). Disney also had a real genius for hiring talented people. A surprising number of remarkable artists started with him in Kansas City, others were trained right on the studio lot. Mr. Gabler's book is readable and contains much new information. Who would have thought that Charlie Chaplin was, at one time, Snow White's Prince?

...well, almost never. Walt Disney was always more interested in "the next thing," and making money on a venture was usually just a way to finance his projects. Initially drawn to drawing and

animation but burned by dishonest partners, he created his own studio to produce animated "shorts" - short Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphony cartoons shown before regular feature movies. But he was always pushing for better animation and better quality, eventually creating "Snow White," the first feature-length animated movie, with the best quality animation for the time. But even then, he wasn't breaking even and eventually had to cut corners just to pay the bills, and some movies were made purely to generate income ("Dumbo" and some of the live-action movies). As Walt became bogged down in the studio and trying to make too many movies at once and always striving to create something bigger or better (realism in "Bambi" and high-class art in "Fantasia"), plus with WWII forcing him to rely on government work just to keep going, he became discouraged and turned his attentions elsewhere. As a result, the animation that was once the top in the industry lost it's edge, and Walt became more interested in trains and eventually television and Disneyland. In the end though, Walt left a legacy of memorable characters and family-friendly entertainment. A very enjoyable biography about one of the most influential people of the 20th century and our present-day culture, although it often bogs down in too much detail about finances. I was surprised that he was always financially strapped and borrowing wherever he could until after Disneyland.

Other reviewers have already covered most of the key points to be made. The remarks that follow are somewhat more personal than theirs. Throughout my childhood, films were "magic carpets" which transported me to distant lands, past centuries, and human experiences almost (not quite) too good or too bad to be true. However, I knew that the murders, plane crashes, train wrecks, buildings ablaze, earthquakes, and attacks by Apaches - albeit exciting -- were not "real." One exception: Disney's animated feature films: they touched my young heart in ways and to an extent no other films did. Decades later, I still vividly recall how upset I was by separations of "children" from their parents (e.g. Dumbo from his mother, Pinocchio from Gepetto) and especially upset when Bambi eagerly awaited the return of his mother from the meadow, and when the seven dwarfs incorrectly assumed (as did I) that Snow White was dead. With all due respect to brilliant musical scores (I saved up from what my paper routes earned to purchase most of the sound track albums) and to the delightful and wholesome humor of characters such as Thumper and the chorus of crows reacting to a flying elephant, there were always darker themes and ominous elements at work in a series of animated feature films. Now having read Neal Gabler's book which will probably be the definitive biography of Walt Disney, at least for a while, I have a much better understanding of the creative genius who deserves and has received primary credit for the "magic" to be found in so many of the films and to be experienced while visiting the theme parks. I also have a much better

understanding of the tormented man whose emotional complexity and ambiguity are reflected in so many of his animated feature films.

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