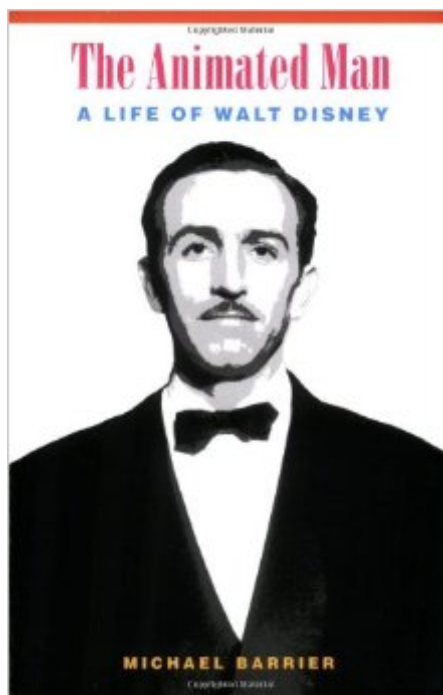


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The Animated Man: A Life Of Walt Disney



Synopsis

Walt Disney (1901-1966) was one of the most significant creative forces of the twentieth century, a man who made a lasting impact on the art of the animated film, the history of American business, and the evolution of twentieth-century American culture. He was both a creative visionary and a dynamic entrepreneur, roles whose demands he often could not reconcile. In his compelling new biography, noted animation historian Michael Barrier avoids the well-traveled paths of previous biographers, who have tended to portray a blemish-free Disney or to indulge in lurid speculation. Instead, he takes the full measure of the man in his many aspects. A consummate storyteller, Barrier describes how Disney transformed himself from Midwestern farm boy to scrambling young businessman to pioneering artist and, finally, to entrepreneur on a grand scale. Barrier describes in absorbing detail how Disney synchronized sound with animation in *Steamboat Willie*; created in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* sympathetic cartoon characters whose appeal rivaled that of the best live-action performers; grasped television's true potential as an unparalleled promotional device; and—most importantly—parlayed a backyard railroad into the Disneyland juggernaut. Based on decades of painstaking research in the Disney studio's archives and dozens of public and private archives in the United States and Europe, *The Animated Man* offers freshly documented and illuminating accounts of Disney's childhood and young adulthood in rural Missouri and Kansas City. It sheds new light on such crucial episodes in Disney's life as the devastating 1941 strike at his studio, when his ambitions as artist and entrepreneur first came into serious conflict. Beginning in 1969, two and a half years after Disney's death, Barrier recorded long interviews with more than 150 people who worked alongside Disney, some as early as 1922. Now almost all deceased, only a few were ever interviewed for other books. Barrier juxtaposes Disney's own recollections against the memories of those other players to great effect. What emerges is a portrait of Walt Disney as a flawed but fascinating artist, one whose imaginative leaps allowed him to vault ahead of the competition and produce work that even today commands the attention of audiences worldwide.

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Customer Reviews

If you were thinking of passing by *The Animated Man* in favor of Neal Gabler's biography of Walt Disney, think again. "...Complete access to the Disney archives..." notwithstanding, Gabler couldn't in many, many cases, figure out just what exactly to do with all the information he was supposedly buried in for five+ years. And as such, the reader comes away at times with more questions than answers about just who Walt Disney was. This is not the case in Michael Barrier's fine biography of Walt Disney, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney*. Although he may not have had the unfettered access to the Disney archives accorded Neal Gabler, one would hardly be aware of that particular handicap. He was able to utilize a great deal of information housed there, which along with interview after interview makes for a mighty informative read. And since many of the interviews utilized throughout the book date back over 30 years, Barrier was able to talk with many Disney employees who "were there" at or near the start of Walt Disney's impact on the world. So many of the interviews captured by Barrier provide an insight into what made Walt Disney 'tick' that simply don't exist from the materials Gabler was able to unearth. More than once while reading through *The Animated Man* did I stop to re-read a paragraph as a particular tidbit of information provided an "a-ha" moment, helping to fill in some blanks pertaining to either Walt Disney himself or the legacy he left behind. Also, Michael Barrier was able to weave his knowledge of animation throughout the text, providing additional insights not available to authors with less refined skills in that area. In spite of it being half the length of Gabler's tome, I feel most readers will come away feeling more than fulfilled with few asking for more as Barrier's *raison d'être* of the book is his pinpoint focus on Walt Disney and what really made him tick. As has been stated many times, and is still true today: the definitive Disney biography has yet (if ever) to be written, but Barrier comes as close as anyone has to date. There are plenty of books about Walt Disney and the Walt Disney Company to keep most of us glued to our reading glasses for some time to come. And one could round out one's knowledge by continuing on to Gabler's bio or even Bob Thomas' and certainly *The "E" Ticket* fanzine for very insightful and unique interviews with those who worked with Walt (primarily on the

parks) - to name but a few. But I strongly feel the best starting point would be to grab a copy of Michael Barrier's biography and be prepared to be wowed.

I'm in full agreement with other reviewers that this is one of if not the best Biography of Walt Disney ever written. The recent Neil Gabler biography has received more publicity (and it not bad) and is the most obvious book to compare to, I found Michael Barrier's "The Animated Man" much better in terms of the insight into the life of Walt Disney. I read Barrier's biography about 2 months after Gable's and found Mr. Gabler delved way to much into speculation where Barrier seemed to give insight into Walt. I don't often write a review, but I thought this book was worth giving the positive review. Mr. Barrier tells the life of Walt Disney, warts and all. Walt comes off a real person with real problems while doing great things. I have over 100 books on Walt Disney and the things he helped to create including many books and articles by those that knew Walt first hand, and Barrier's book seems to give the most accurate and unbiased view of Walt of any biography I have ever read. It seems to give an accurate picture of Walt behind the scenes.

This is an extraordinarily good book. After giving up on the Neal Gabler book (too many words and not enough understanding, really, of who the man was), I love the approach of this book. Barrier knows animation inside and out, and he uses his knowledge to give us a picture of a real man and boss who tried to make animation great. The nitty gritty of those details make a real life comprehensible. The immense research is felt even though Barrier doesn't try to impress us with it; the book is a captivating read that propels you along. Highly recommended.

Walt Disney is, in my view, about the most interesting a figure to work in film in the twentieth century, for all sorts of reasons. Nobody did as much for their particular corner of the film medium as Disney did for animation: proper character animation, as we now think of it, was basically a Disney invention, created during the studio's great creative period between the late twenties and the early forties. Disney took animation from a primitive form to its maturity; it seems likely that cartoons would have remained a very peripheral novelty had there not been Disney's vision of something grander on the horizon. Yet Disney is also fascinating because of the way in which he lost interest and branched off from cartoons, leading to an incredible variation in the quality of the works prepared by the studio within his lifetime (Disney deservedly went from being a seriously regarded artist in the thirties to something of a critical pariah by the sixties). His devotion to amusement parks and other non-film corners of his business also foreshadowed the economic models that would

define Hollywood in the last quarter of the century, with films increasingly becoming just one element in a wider suite of cultural products sold to audiences (so, for example, we don't just get sold Spiderman the movie; we are sold Spiderman computer games, comic books, clothing, CDs, theme park rides, and the like). As a person, too, Disney is fascinating for his mix of visionary artistic ambition and staunch conservatism. So he's a particularly rewarding subject for a biography. Michael Barrier's *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* is one of two recent biographies released on Disney, the other being Neal Gabler's *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. Gabler's book is - as Barrier frets on his website - the more high profile release, backed by a bigger publisher. Yet I think most animation buffs will go straight to Barrier's book. Barrier has been researching animation for decades: he started interviewing important figures in the industry in the late sixties, and was publishing serious scholarly writing on the subject from around the same time in his magazine *Funnyworld*. Barrier's research in the field therefore started decades ahead of most writers who now write on the subject, and there is certainly nobody who can match the breadth of research and longevity of serious writing in the field. The first book-length result of Barrier's years of work was *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation In Its Golden Age*, which quickly staked a serious claim as the definitive book on the subject. Yet in many ways *The Animated Man* is the superior book. *Hollywood Cartoons* suffered from its breadth; by necessity Barrier had to switch his attention from studio to studio, and that meant some areas had to be glossed over very quickly or not at all. In *The Animated Man* his focus is squarely on Disney, which makes for a much neater, more linear structure. And of course, the focus on one man, rather than an industry, gives the book more of a human focus. Barrier declares his hand early, noting in the Preface that his chief focus is Disney's work, and particularly animation. This latter point would perhaps be an obvious conclusion, but there are a lot of Disney cultists who see things like Disneyland as his chief achievement. Barrier, rightly, takes the view that it was in animation that Disney was a first rate artist, and while he doesn't neglect Disneyland and the live action films, the book is strongest when focussing on cartoons. The early chapters are particularly interesting. It's easy to forget how long Disney struggled to find his feet in the industry (he started literally from nothing) and there's something comical about a small animated film ad company in 1920 unwittingly having the man who would revolutionise animation as an entry-level employee. But Barrier makes it clear how uncertain Disney's early years were. Other accounts tend to imply that Disney had high ambitions for the medium from very early days, and that the various setbacks he had in the 1920s were roadblocks on a journey towards inevitable greatness. Yet one thing that struck me in Barrier's account was that in the mid twenties Disney was more entrepreneur than artist; his interest in these years was in

making his business a success, but that didn't seem to involve grand ambitions for the cartoons themselves. Hugh Harman, one of Disney's employees from the twenties who later made cartoons for MGM and Warner Bros., tends to come off in other books as a pale imitator of Disney. Here, though, Barrier suggests that in mid-twenties he was briefly ahead of Disney in his vision for where the medium could go. Yet it was Disney who would soon make the great strides ahead. This is partly a result of changes in Disney's thinking that occurred in the latter part of the decade, but it is also instructive about the blend of personality traits that made Disney the figure he was. Harman might have harboured similar aspirations, but it was Disney who had the ability to make it happen. Barrier writes with a critical eye, and in *Hollywood Cartoons* that occasionally got frustrating, because if your idea of what was interesting varied from his, the things you wanted to read about sometimes dropped from view. The narrower focus of *The Animated Man* means that's less of a problem, but it might still occasionally bother readers. I had no problem with Barrier's dislike of Mary Poppins, for example, but found it a little off-putting that his narrative of the early animated features is so shaped by his relatively low opinions of Pinocchio and Fantasia. There are also a few areas where I was left wanting to know more, such as the fascinating relationship between Disney and Ub Iwerks. Iwerks started as the studio's key talent and Walt's closest collaborator, and finished doing technical work for the studio; in *The Animated Man* the latter period of his career isn't mentioned. Usually, however, these omissions are pretty defensible. Iwerks' significance to Disney in his later years was pretty marginal, for instance, and to include all such little asides would have brought its own hazards of length and focus. There is such a large gap between the time Disney was doing his best work (between 1928 and 1941), and the period in which he became an avuncular public figure on his television show (in the late fifties and sixties), that the picture of Disney is often clouded by preconceptions and urban myths. These get further magnified by those wishing to push an agenda: for example, I have often seen left-wing critiques of Disney tie up their arguments with a grab-bag of ridiculous claims, such as those in Marc Eliot's execrable biography *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince*. Barrier combats this with a methodical attention to detail and a rigid determination to rely on primary sources wherever possible. This can occasionally seem dogmatic or argumentative - Barrier is keeping a running list of errors in Gabler's biography on his website - but it is exactly the kind of attitude needed in a biography of a figure so surrounded by mythology. That Barrier is also so lucid and perceptive is the icing on the cake.

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