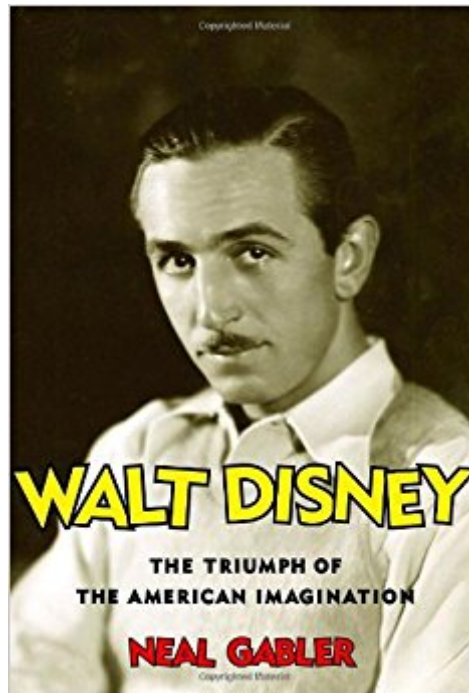




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Walt Disney: The Triumph Of The American Imagination



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

Neal Gabler's meticulously researched biography, *Walt Disney* offers the full story (Gabler is the first writer to gain complete access to the Disney archives) of the American icon. Readers will discover the whole story, witnessing Disney's invention of a "synergistic empire that combined film, television, theme parks, music, book publishing, and merchandise." What fans don't know could fill a book (this book in fact), and we asked Gabler to point out a few of the juicy bits. Read our interview with him, and his "10 Things That May Surprise You" list below. --Daphne Durham

10 Second Interview: A Few Words with Neal Gabler

Q: Why Walt Disney? A: When you write about someone as grandiose as Walt Disney, you may tend to get a little grandiose yourself, so forgive me. But I had always set the task for myself to examine the forces that helped define American culture in the twentieth century and those individuals who might be regarded as the architects of the American consciousness. Walt Disney was certainly one of those forces and one of those architects. His visual sensibility is arguably one of the two most important in the last century, along with Picasso's, yet Picasso has received dozens of biographies and Walt Disney had, when I began, not received a single full-scale, fully-annotated biography. I wanted to fill that gap in our cultural studies. I thought that if one could understand Walt Disney, one could go a long way to understanding American popular culture.

Q: One thing that strikes you when reading the book is that Walt Disney never had any money. With all his success how is that possible? A: It is astonishing that Walt Disney was always--and I do mean always--in dire financial straits until the opening of Disneyland. The primary reason wasn't that his cartoons weren't making money, because they were--at least until the war in Europe when the loss of that market meant disaster for the features. But even as they were making

money, the studio was losing money because Walt was constitutionally incapable of cutting corners, enforcing economies, laying off staff. The only thing about which Walt Disney cared was quality. He thought that quality was the way to maintain his preeminence, though quality also had the psychological advantage of letting him perfect his world. The problem was that quality was expensive. To cite just one example, Walt spent more than a hundred thousand dollars setting up a training program for would-be animators, though even then the return was small because Walt was so picky that very few of the candidates actually qualified to work at the studio. Money meant very little to Walt Disney. It was only a means to an end, never an end in itself. Q: When did Walt first conceive of the idea for Disneyland and what were the initial reactions to the idea? A: It is very difficult to determine exactly when Walt hatched the idea for Disneyland, though he seems to have been thinking about it for a long time, at least since the early 1930s. Certainly by the time he was taking his daughters, Diane and Sharon, to amusement parks on Sunday afternoons in the late 1940s, he had formulated the idea to establish a park that was clean and wholesome and where parents wouldn't be afraid to take their children. The original plan was to build the park on a plot adjacent to the studio in Burbank, where there would be a train, a town square, an Indian village and kiddieland rides, but as Walt's ideas expanded, so did the need for a bigger plot. As for the reactions to his idea, Roy was initially reluctant, as usual, and Walt's wife, Lillian, was firmly opposed, though she had also been opposed to his making *Snow White*. Still, Walt exaggerated the opposition as a way, I think of elevating his own foresight and determination. In fact, as the plan grew closer to realization, corporations sought to be included as lessees, and even banks, that had been skeptical, became more receptive. When the park opened, it was an instant success. Q: What do you think has been Walt's most lasting impact/legacy on American culture? A: One could answer this question in a dozen different ways depending on one's priorities, but I think his largest bequest is a matter of the American mind. Walt Disney helped change the national consciousness. He got people to believe in the power of wish fulfillment--in their own ability to impose their wills on a recalcitrant reality. That's what Walt Disney did all his life. He managed to replace reality with his illusions--what some people now refer to disparagingly as Disneyfication. He sold us on the idea of control because Walt Disney was himself a master of control. We see the results everywhere--from film to theme parks to virtual reality to virtual politics.

Starred Review. Few men could be said to have as pervasive an influence on American culture as Walt Disney, and Gabler (Winchell) scours the historical record for as thorough an explanation of that influence as any biographer could muster. Every period of Disney's life is depicted in exacting

detail, from the suffering endured on a childhood paper route to the making of Mary Poppins. The core of Gabler's story, though, is clearly in the early years of Disney's studio, from the creation of Mickey Mouse to the hands-on management of early hits like Fantasia and Pinocchio. "Even though Walt could neither animate, nor write, nor direct," Gabler notes, "he was the undisputed power at the studio." Yet there was significant disgruntlement within the ranks of Disney's employees, and Gabler traces the day-to-day resentments that eventually led to a bitter strike against the studio in 1941. That dispute helped harden Disney's anticommunism, which led to rumors of anti-Semitism, which are effectively debunked here. At times, Gabler lays on a bit thick the psychological interpretation of Disney as control freak, but his portrait is so engrossing that it's hard to picture the entertainment mogul playing with his toy trains and not imagine him building Disneyland in his head. 32 pages of photos. 100,000 first printing. (Nov. 6) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

This is a deep dive on one of America's icons. The flow of the book is seamless it's rich content and perspective. This book could have been several volumes given Walt Disney's amazing life and accomplishments and the author does an exceptional job of pulling this together. Wonderful.

The definitive biography of one of America's giants. Rather than sheer adulation, Gabler looks deeper into a complex man who was driven to create something wonderful, something that touched the hearts of hundreds of millions of people across the globe. Even Walt's defects (and he did have some) are illustrative of a man who used every ounce of his energy and creativity to advance his art.

I enjoyed reading about Walt Disney's life, and appreciated Neil Gabler's attention to detail in writing this biography. It is meticulously researched! However, I felt that the author failed in really capturing Walt's spirit -- at times it seemed that he lacked admiration for Walt -- and all of the information from his unprecedented access to the Disney Archives could not make up for this, and left me feeling somewhat disappointed and still wanting. For those who feel similarly, I would recommend reading the biography written by Bob Thomas in addition to this version, for a more complete sense of Walt Disney.

This biography portrays Disney's immense drive, imagination and perfectionism. As with any creative business, he seems to have struggled with making animated features profitable and artistic at the same time and he could be tyrannical at times. Daughter Diane Disney may not have felt this

book was altogether fair, but what emerges is a fitting tribute to the man who was "Uncle Walt" to many of us children growing up in the 1950s and '60s.

After reading this book, there will be NOTHING you will need to know about Walt Disney. What an imagination and inspiration he was and continues to be. (the Steve jobs of his generation) You will not find this book @ this price ANYWHERE except . LOVE THIS BOOK

Mr. Gabler is an excellent writer and I highly recommend this read. To this day, I continue to be in awe at the genius and perseverance of Walt Disney. It was fascinating to read the machinations that went into the development and design of Disneyworld in Orlando. The book covers in great detail the story of Walt's life and I did not know many of the facts revealed in this outstanding work. Just as with Steve Jobs, it is sometimes hard to believe that all of this brilliance and vision came from one single entity!

As a baby boomer I grew up with millions of other children enamored of the Wonderful World of Disney and the Mickey Mouse Club. Now Neal Gabler, the brilliant biographer of Walter Winchell and the Jewish men who made Hollywood what it is, has turned his considerable biographical skills to the subject of Walt Disney (1901-1966) This book is valuable because Gabler is adept of showing us the real Walter Elias Disney warts and all. Walter E. Disney was born in Chicago but grew up in the small town of Marceline Missouri. He also lived for long periods in Kansas City and Chicago. Disney's father ran a Kansas City paper route which kept Walt busy delivering copies of the Kansas City Star. The lad had a variety of jobs but his love was cartooning., Walt had three brothers and a sister named Ruth. He was closest to Roy Disney who would be the money man while Walt handled artistic matters in the Disney Studios. Walt dropped out of high school and set up as a cartoonist. He moved to Hollywood where he was able to set up a small cartooning studio. His biggest problem was always money. Disney was a perfectionist who finally achieved fame with the creation of Mickey Mouse in "Steamboat Willy" in 1928. Other major hits followed including "Snow White" the first feature cartoon; "Pinocchio" "Sleeping Beauty" "Peter Pan "Lady and the Tramp" "101 Dalmatians"" and many shorts. During World War II the Disney studios filmed educational and propaganda films for the Defense Department. Following the war Disney saw his dreams of Disneyland realized and was deep in the planning of Disney World in Orlando Florida and EPCOT Center when he died. Disney was a complicated folk genius. He was faithful to his wife Lilly. The couple had two children Diane and Sharon (who the couple had adopted). Disney could be very

harsh and judgmental on his stable of cartoonists. He was a virtual dictator at the Disney studios whose word was law. Disney was also a right wing conservative. When his studio employees struck in 1941 he accused them of being Communists. Disney also spoke in derogatory ways towards African-Americans and Jewish persons. Disney made stars of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy as well as making living action films such as the big hit "Mary Poppins" which netted a Best Actress Oscar for its star Julie Andrews. Disney won 34 Oscars which is an all time record. He was cremated not frozen as an urban myth has it. Much of the book deals with the business aspects of Disney's Studio. Some readers may enjoy this less than the chapters showing how such classics as "Snow White" would produce. There are, for us non-business types, many dull pages. But, overall I give Gabler a star for this wonderful biography. Walt Disney was a Horatio Alger story in the flesh. He rose from poverty to being one of the most honored (and criticized) artist in the United States. This book is one of the best biographies I have ever read. Anyone interested in the movies, cartoons, American business or the life of a genius will be enlightened by it. Highly recommended!

He built an entertainment empire that not only pioneered a new field of animation and theme parks, but did it without support from the banking industry and movie moguls. Mr. Disney had a dream and he found a way to spoon feed the American public until they finally saw the light and transformed the Disney Studios into a success story of all times. It was truly magical and it all began on the back of a mouse. Who would have thought? It's a big volume but it is worth every minute you spend reading it. Let Walt's story work its magic on your mind.

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