

WALT DISNEY

THE TRIUMPH OF
THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

NEAL GABLER

Resumo de Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination

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. You Don't Know Disney: 10 Things That May Surprise You 1. He is not frozen.

His body was cremated, and his ashes are interred at the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, near his studio. 2. Mickey Mouse's original name allegedly was Mortimer but Disney's wife Lillian objected because she thought it too "sissified." 3.

Some of the names originally considered for the dwarfs in Snow White were: Deafy, Dirty, Awful, Blabby, Burpy, Gabby, Puffy, Stuffy, Nifty, Tubby, Biggo Ego, Flabby, Jaunty, Baldy, Lazy, Dizzy, Cranky and Chesty.

4. Walt Disney suffered a nervous breakdown in 1931 and descended into depression after the war, concentrating his attention on model trains rather than on motion pictures. 5. Fantasia was the result of a chance meeting between Walt Disney and symphony conductor Leopold Stokowski at Chasen's restaurant.

6. During World War II the Disney studio became a war factory with well over 90% of its production in the service of government training, education and propaganda films. 7.

The studio stopped production for six months on Pinocchio because Walt felt the title character wasn't likable enough. During this time he devised the idea of introducing Jiminy Cricket as Pinocchio's conscience.

8. Walt Disney received more Academy Awards than any other individual--32. 9. Disney modeled Mickey Mouse on Charlie Chaplin and that Chaplin later assisted the Disneys by loaning them his financial books so they could determine what kind of proceeds they should be getting from their distributor on Snow White.

10. MGM head Louis B. Mayer once rejected the opportunity to distribute Mickey Mouse cartoons shortly after Walt had invented the character because Mayer said that pregnant women would be frightened by a giant mouse on screen.

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