The Animator's Bookshelf
by Jim Middleton

A collection of books have been earning dog-eared pages on these bookshelves lately. Each one qualifies as essential reading for the animator and represent a variety of approaches to understanding the various theories and personalities that have developed the craft and art of animation.


I love this book. In fact, I love this book in ways that are probably being investigated by the Bush administration. For years it was considered fashionable to toss a copy of the first edition my way at any gift exchange (pharmacist-animateurs being so hard to buy for); after a dozen copies piled up, I saved a pair for personal use and gradually dispersed the remainder. Now a new edition has been made available, considerably expanded and updated, and it is just as wonderful for the 21st century as its first pressing was for the late 1970s. A preface by George Griffin (whose video everyone needs), an introduction by John Canemaker (whose biography on McCay remains the ultimate coffee table book) just add to the aura that emanates from this 426 page work (and holy cow, it has a flip book on the even pages, too— is there no end to this tome's entertainment value?!) When The Animation Book's first edition appeared in 1979, the craft was largely self-taught. And for one growing up in the suburbs of a town populated by beings more bovine than human, it offered comfort in demonstrating techniques that seemed inherently correct, but never completely discussed in a single published source—just what super 8mm camera was the best? How many frames-to-image delay could you deal with and maintain synchronization? What kind of exposure sheet is the best—or in my case, just what does an exposure sheet look like in the first place?

The 2000 edition discusses the digital challenges with just the same approach, offering case studies that duplicate the general challenges every new animator faces when confronted with a computer, a belligerent scanner, and several types of software that don't necessarily speak the same language. Photoshop is dissected, pixels are explored, everything is explained in a calm, soothing fashion as if to say, "yes, you're actually doing it right, and yes, it's normal for everything to crash and burn, and no, it isn't happening only to you."

Traditional film techniques are also discussed, if for nothing more than to impress upon the new student how
Greetings from the President

by Jim Middleton

Well, it's just Jim. Middleton. That guy from Battle Creek. As I type these words, our President prepares for his State of the Union address.

Our State of the Animation is looking very interesting. After many years of quietly producing our own bits of invention, the Midwest has suddenly become a hotbed of seething, percolating, exciting attention.

Animation classes are popping up like so many Stuckeys all along the I-94 corridor...the retreat in Chicago is going to be a blast in a new venue...Kalamazoo is playing host to a springtime festival...and Deanna Morse has gone DVD. It's a great time for cartoons in this palindromic 2002, and we're all here to see it happen.

As I sit back, swilling my instant cappuccino, I remember the days before electricity when animation was all flip books and zoetropes. The smell of Crayolas. The sharp point of a Gilliot 210. Now a solitary soul can create a masterwork on a laptop with more computer memory than existed when TRON was bombing at the box office. It's enough to make me go for seconds on the cappuccino.

One of the more intriguing changes I've experienced as your prez has been the email. And the virus (thank you, evil doers, I needed to format my hard-drive anyway). Upcoming columns will address some of the mail that has come in (that I haven't already forwarded you)–and if nobody else contributes, well, I'll just have to add more pontifications on my favorite topic of silent German abstract animation. You don't want to put Jennifer (our ever patient, ever suffering Jennifer) through the proofread of that now, do you?

Be well my dear friends: hug a loved one--and love a hugged one.

Animation Scholarship Available

Each year, the Haynes Storyboard & Animation Scholarship program awards a $1,000 grant to one qualified student attending an accredited college or university by sponsoring a Storyboard Competition.

The money, contributed by the family & friends of the late Helen Victoria Haynes - former bilingual teacher, musician and church activist - defrays the cost of producing an animated PSA based on the theme 'How We Can Achieve World Peace'. College students anywhere in the world are eligible. The deadline for applying with a Storyboard is March 15, 2002.

The winner will be announced in April. The winner is required to complete the PSA for screening at the 11th Annual Midwest Animators Conference in April 2003.

For an application with rules, send an email containing your postal address to: Program Director, HVH World Peace Storyboard & Animation Scholarship Competition morgpk@aol.com

ASIFA/Central Mission Statement

ASIFA: Association Internationale du Film d'Animation

The purpose of ASIFA/Central is to promote the art of animation locally and internationally and to promote communication among animators and between animators and devotees. – adopted 3/92
The prodigious output of Winsor McCay was matched only by its astonishing quality. Of his nearly million estimated illustrations created, many have reappeared in the six-volume set of Fantagraphics's Complete Little Nemo in Slumberland, and Daydreams and Nightmares, edited by Richard Marschall. This Michigan-raised wonder child wound up in New York, initially creating his magical wonderlands for the Hearst newspapers. By the 1920s, however, he was assigned an even more daunting task—making the editorial comments of Arthur Brisbane appear interesting. Taken out of context, these same illustrations were made available to other newspapers in the Hearst syndicate. As such, they made a twice weekly appearance in the Battle Creek Enquirer in 1925 and were discovered during research on the Kellogg family. They exist only in microfilm format.

It is frustrating to see this gifted pen being used for these mostly mundane assignments. At times their message is more akin to a "good citizenship" lecture for third graders than to the surreal dreams McCay conjured a decade before. Yet, occasionally, the old playfulness still emerges. A few rare specimens of these illustrations have seen print in Daydreams and Nightmares; perhaps more originals will emerge to breathe freshness into these rapidly fading, poorly preserved artifacts from one of the world's first true animators.
easy a computer has made many functions of animation, not the least of which is the budgetary disparity between the two media. And speaking of budgets, it even offers a discussion on how to create one for a particular project.

The Animation Book is great. Whenever I am asked to direct someone for a book on the subject, this is the first one I pull from the shelf. But it never leaves the house. I make people buy their own. And then buy a backup. I want Kit Laybourne to grow rich from selling this book. He’s put a quarter century of his life into it and deserves every nickel.

Understanding Animation, by Paul Wells, Routledge Press, 1998

Written in the style of a textbook, Mr. Wells provides an incredible service with this volume. First, it is actually useful as a textbook, and as such offers a level of scholarship not generally associated with animation. Secondly, it is invaluable for those social gatherings where one’s livelihood emerges as a topic and, surrounded by the likes of dentists, lawyers, and (gasp) pharmacists, you state you’re an animator.

First of all, what you’d be doing with such a collection of dullards eludes the author of this piece, but for the sake of argument, you’re in the midst of this difficult milieu...you merely whip out your cribbed notes, and Mr. Wells offers such statements as "the animator is at liberty to completely manipulate the image and create impossible and dynamic relations which need not have any connection with orthodox and anticipated relations." And while the dentists are reeling from that, you can toss in, "reality is necessarily subjective...since...the completely real becomes identified with the 'completely fake.'" And to finish off any pharmacists left standing, you dash off that animated film "will demonstrate diegetic appropriateness and correspond directly to the context from which it emerges." The gathering about you stands in slack-jawed amazement as you walk away toward the buffet and stuff yourself with cocktail weenies. You have to love the sort of ammo this book provides.

In addition to elevating your social standing far above such unworthy non-initiates, Understanding Animation poses theoretical discussions for each form of animation, then just as it appears to be getting a bit heavy on philosophy, tosses in a chapter entitled, "25 Ways to Start Laughing." While nearly parsimonious in its illustrations, the book does offer ways to develop a narrative strategy as well as determine your style in the context of the expected audience.

Once a general mastery of animation techniques has been obtained, and once the study of animation is more for relaxation than examination, then it is time for Understanding Animation. It isn’t on my bathroom reading shelf at this point, but it is on the bedside nightstand.

Hollywood Cartoons, "American Animation in its Golden Age," by Michael Barrier, Oxford University Press, 1999, hardcover, $39.95 (much less at outlet stores or on the internet)

For years, if someone wanted to refer to an overview of the American animation industry, the primary source was Leonard Maltin’s enthusiastic celebration of the genre in Of Mice and Magic (second edition 1987). Michael Barrier, publisher and editor of Funnyworld, has tackled the same subject with his 650 pages of Hollywood Cartoons, covering the industry from 1911 to 1966, the year of Walt Disney’s death. Massive, detailed, comparatively Spartan in its graphics, it is the culmination of three decades’
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work and over 200 interviews with the great, near great, and day to day soldiers in the field. Barrier does a good job in keeping the players straight as they migrated from studio to studio, forming short-lived companies, struggling to survive during the fiscal and resource challenges of the Depression and WWII; how allies (Disney and nearly everyone else) became adversaries (again Disney and nearly everyone else), and how the industry gradually unraveled with the 1960s.

What sets the book apart from others on this shelf is its tone. Barrier takes the role of critical historian here, taking directors to task for apparently not doing enough for their craft. He seems especially unforgiving to Tex Avery for not abandoning the Disney influence, especially during his MGM years, and then for not maintaining the pace of his successful films once he began a style more his own. I watch Avery's MGM output with the astonishment that he was able to get drawing one past the limited grasp of producer Fred Quimby (who preferred the violence of Tom and Jerry to the introspection of Fischinger's Optical Poem). With painfully few exceptions, animators during the "golden age" were merely adequately paid artists with little resource (or encouragement) for self-expression. That they were able to create anything in the assembly line world of Hollywood's film industry is nothing short of phenomenal. I believe this book could go further in acknowledging that fact.

That minor criticism aside, there are a lot of interesting anecdotes and stories here, all nicely collated into a single volume, that until this publication had to be uncovered in a scattering of articles and books. Also, the near-forty dollar price tag is misleading. In this day of outlet malls and internet sales, it's going for less than a quarter of that price.

Serious Business, Stefan Kanfer, Scribner publishers, 1997, paperback $16.00

Stefan Kanfer is described by Chuck Jones as a "whimsical historian" in the foreword to this book, a reminder to us that nothing, not even the Golden Age of animation, exists in a vacuum. He explores the competitive nature of the industry, of the Fleischers' poor business sense, and the easily wounded sensibilities of Walt Disney, who was willing to pack it in and retire when the army took over his studio space at the start of WWII. Kanfer also reminds us that the world of animation is as much a business as an art, and that both are required for a studio to survive.

McCay had genius, but limited output. The Bray studios created assembly line mediocrity. Messmer designed and animated Felix, but his alcoholic boss Sullivan smashed the potential for giving the silent-era's cat a voice. Disney succeed with his well-timed appearance of Mickey just as the markets crashed in the 1920s. As for art, Disney's initial goals were to be merely as good as the latest Aesop's Fable. Those were animation's beginnings. Much of the book deals with the industry's struggles during the second world war and how Disney began to lose his magic "touch" after Bambi (in fact, Disney began to lose interest in expanding animation as an expressive art form after the expensive failure of Fantasia). World War II also serves as a reminder of the business aspect of the industry in Serious Business, as the European market represented a huge loss of revenue to the studios. Fred Quimby, that bastion of understanding, wanted his animators to go light on Hitler just in case he won. Similar tales were told of Leon Schlesinger, and even the Office of War Information pulled in the reins so as not to offend newly overrun nations with unpleasant caricatures.

This book is not all "ancient history," however. While it discusses the effect of McCarthy-era politics on the original Finian's Rainbow and the evolution of the Children's Television Workshop, it puts even the present resurgence of animation into perspective, perspective that seems even more prescient in the atmosphere of the most recent recession.

- Jim Middleton