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Michael Caine

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For more than 25 years, Michael Caine has remained one of the few enduring stars of international stage and cinema--a rare and remarkable achievement. Now, with easy charm and humor, the Academy Award-winning actor brings to life his lean years and his triumphs, his treasured friendships and his passionate love affair with his wife, Shakira. Illustrated.

What's It All About Details

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From Reader Review What's It All About for online ebook

Michael Pryor says

Breezy, entertaining, charming.

Cathy (cathepsut) says

Biographies are not really my genre, but this was entertaining book. The most vividly remembered parts of this book are his early years, for example London during WWII and his early excursions with Peter O'Toole.

Nice, nothing deep, but with a good sense of humour and it does sound like him...

Anita Hargreaves says

Read a while ago from library but discovered it again on YouTube. You can hear him in his narration. Seeing his future wife on an advert, he gave Chase

Brigham says

I wanted something light and fast to listen to over the weekend. When I saw that this was read by Michael Caine himself, I couldn't resist. Caine has always been one of my most admired actors and to have a few hours where he speaks softly in that wizened yet working class voice would be a treat, no matter what he said.

The content of this book is like any autobiography, rise from poverty, spoils of success, introspective middle-years etc etc. I usually don't like autobiographies, especially read while the person is still alive. However, Caine reads this one as if he's in a pub sharing stories. He interjects a few funny lines about while recording the book he's getting hungry and talks in a casual tone that makes the audience feel like they're sharing a pint and having a conversation with him.

While the book was written back in the mid-nineties, it's a shame to miss out on the past decade, arguably Caine's best years as an actor. Still, of all of the actors out there, I can't think of one I'd rather listen to.

Craigb says

Every so often I like to read an autobiography of someone I like. This is a good read of Michael's life and career up to 1992 (I think - I read this about 4 years ago and it was published back in the 1990s; he has written more since). I loved the bit about the filming of Zulu and Caine's naivety of the film industry at that time. It got me thinking, is Caine a talented actor even if you make it in Hollywood. The answer is yes, and

although he's made some bad films he will always be remembered for starring in some of the greatest British movies of all time, such as the Italian Job, Alfie and my personal favourite To Be The King (all of which he writes about). Written in the style we've come to know about Michael this is still worth a read.

Steve Cann says

I received this book as a Christmas present and, although I've always been a fan of Michael Caine & loved many of his films, I wasn't quite sure if I actually wanted to read his autobiography.

But once I'd started reading, I soon changed my mind!

Michael has done such a wonderful job here of charting his life, & his remarkable rise from an unspectacular childhood living in poverty in South London, to becoming one of the world's most famous & well-loved actors - and a living legend.

But it wasn't always like this, & Michael spent many years struggling with his unlikely ambition to become a professional actor - let alone a Hollywood star. The best thing about this book is its amazing honesty - he tells it as it is, & has a wonderful self-deprecating wit that has clearly served him well during his life.

This book spans his life - from his wonderfully-documented childhood in wartime London right up until the period after Dirty Rotten Scoundrels. Michael was clearly a little premature if he thought retirement was looming at this time - and has since written a sequel 'The Elephant to Hollywood' that summarizes the main points in this book, & then continues his story.

It's a fascinating insight into the life of one of this country's most recognizable actors, & Michael clearly has a talent for writing too. There are so many interesting tidbits & anecdotes along the way, & Michael sets his film career against the backdrop of what's going on in his personal life at any given time, as he moves along chronologically.

I've read a great deal of autobiogs in my time, but this really is one of the very best. I salute you Michael, & after reading this, I feel I know him in a whole new way & will never think of him in quite the same way again.

Robin Zebley says

I just loved this book. I like memoirs from non-celebs that describe a place or way of life experienced, and this is all that and could have stood on its own just describing a life in the poor side of town during a horrible period in history to grow up in, in a place where class definitely matters.

But add to that his life with his fellow celeb friends who were struggling to make it at the same time, interesting tidbits about the films, and all in his voice put this over the top.

You really feel you're sitting around a table after a great dinner with friends telling and listening to great stories, and he's one of them. I especially enjoyed the stories about The Man Who Would Be King, one of my favorites.

I also learned a bit about the tricks of the trade that were interesting.

Daniel says

'I was once asked in an interview: "How would you sum up your life in one line?" and I answered, "All my dreams came true. "'

I don't read many celebrity autobiographies. Of the countless books I've read there's been maybe 3? Or 4, if John Stuart Mill counts as a celebrity. (Perhaps he did, but not since he broke up with Kim Kardashian.)

Michael Caine is one of my favourite actors. I even enjoy some of his bad movies, or at least his movies that other people consider bad, like *Blue Ice*. And for some reason I just love the way he talks. So if I was ever going to read another celebrity autobiography, it was his.

I knew almost nothing about Michael Caine's life outside movies before I read this, so I was able to be suitably surprised at the places he's been and the things he's done. He's had a great life and an interesting one, and I'm sure he's still having a great life right now. If you've ever seen him being interviewed, you may have an idea of how he speaks: he writes just like that. It's always easy to hear his voice while reading his book. It's a good voice. If you have the idea that all celebrity autobiographies are ghostwritten, you can rest assured that this is written by the real Michael Caine. My hyperactive bullshit detectors decided this on the first page.

(As an aside, I'm not against ghostwritten autobiographies. In many cases, it's no doubt for the best. A good writer who's spoken with the subject, or seen some interviews, is probably better able to express that person's life, in their authentic voice, than the person who lived it.)

This is the story of Maurice (pronounced 'Morris') Micklewhite, a poor kid from the south of London who dreamed of becoming a movie star and made it, after years of struggle. He survived the Blitz, and poverty, and the Korean war, and years of being a struggling actor constantly in danger of going to jail for failing to pay child support, all the while sticking to his improbable dream. As time wore on, some of his like-minded friends found fame and fortune, making Michael think he'd missed the boat; and some, stricken by poverty and hopelessness, thought it would never happen and killed themselves.

The first few hundred pages of *What's It All About?*, recounting those years of struggle, are quite different to the rest of the book. I think this is largely because they're an excellent version of the 'rags to riches' story, one of those archetypal narratives, the 'seven basic plots'. These pages are also much better-written than most of the rest of the book. More care seems to have been taken with them, either by the author or an editor or proofreader. In a few passages Michael really brings to life London in the swinging sixties, communicating the spirit of that place and time as well as anyone ever has, in just a few paragraphs. These passages led me to lengthy contemplations of why the city I live in could never be home to a cultural revolution like 1960s London. (In summary: 1- the basic necessities of life are so expensive that few creative people can pursue a dream for the time it takes to learn a craft and get lucky, because they must either get a regular energy- and soul-sucking job or become homeless; 2- There's nowhere for fun creative people to hang out and meet, as all the night clubs are run by and for awful people.) The occasional foreshadowings of Michael's future life as a celebrity movie star, which are injected into his poverty-stricken youth, show that he knows exactly how to leaven the potentially depressing content with hints that it all turned out all right in the end. Also, these flashforwards to the celebrity life could be seen as bones thrown to those movie fans who want to know why this book about movies is all about poor people being bombed by Nazis.

Perhaps it's easier to write well when you're writing a story that fits one of those 'seven basic plots'. Perhaps the terrible deadline that oppressed Michael as he wrote the book (he mentions it several times) led to some haste. After Michael becomes rich and famous, the book seems less artfully constructed, more prone to clichéd expressions, more inclined to include dinners and meetings and trips and films that don't seem 'book-worthy'. In anyone else's book I'd wince at some of those clichés, but because they sound perfectly natural in Michael Caine's conversational voice, I was able to accept them in his book. A couple of times I thought, after several attempts at an incomprehensibly ungrammatical sentence, 'If you or anyone else had re-read that before sending this book to the printer, it would be a very different sentence now.'

After fame strikes, the book stops being a great story and becomes a series of anecdotes, many of them great, and some only OK. A lot of them are about movies, and your enjoyment may depend on whether you have seen those movies. The quality of the writing often seems proportional to the author's emotional investment in the story he's telling, making me wonder if the most important stories, the personal ones, were all written first, and finessed, and proofread, and the rest of the book was written quickly to meet a deadline.

I've seen a lot of Michael Caine's movies, more than half I guess, and I largely read this because I like a lot of them, so it was interesting that I liked the book best when Michael wasn't talking about movies. After he becomes famous, the best stories are about his beautiful wife Shakira. I loved the story of how they met. He's also very good at expressing his love of the great homes he's lived in, and I can't think of any book that has expressed this aspect of life, the joy of living in a really great house, so well as this one.

Lesley says

This was an enjoyable read, the kind of book you pack in your beachbag for a summertime read. Caine writes almost the same way he speaks, so there is constant humor and a love of life. His start in life was tough and he doesn't hide his own failings regarding his first marriage and child, so the honesty is appreciated by the reader.

Sometimes he seems to aim for the heights conquered by David Niven in his enjoyable memoirs and doesn't quite get there. I'm not sure all of it is truly happening as he states or whether he's using hindsight to his advantage. But, not for me to decipher, just for me to read and enjoy.

Todd says

The first half of Michael Caine's 1992 memoir, "What's It All About?", is enthralling. His life is one struggle after another: poverty, escaping the Blitz, unhappy times at school, military service in Korea, one dead-end job after another in hopes of making it as an actor despite his Cockney background and accent.

And then, success. First comes "Zulu," the 1964 film that earned him his first major notice; then "The Ipcress File," the first of the Harry Palmer films; and then, of course, "Alfie," which gives the book its title (courtesy of one of his lines, made the title of Burt Bacharach and Hal David's theme song). Caine revels in Swinging London and his friendships with Terence Stamp, Sean Connery and British Invasion rock stars, then he leaves for Los Angeles and meets the cream of Old Hollywood, including Cary Grant and John Wayne.

He also gets dull.

Well, not dull. I don't think it's possible for Michael Caine to be dull. I once interviewed him and he was gracious and funny, and his self-deprecating sense of humor continually pops up throughout "What's It All About?" Early in the book, he mentions looking back on an incident "when I was living on a Beverly Hill," and he mentions how "remarkably inefficient" the neighborhood trucks were in his downtrodden London neighborhood, given that "the amount and variety of stuff that fell off the back of them and found its way into our house was amazing." Later, referring to the Oscars, he remarks, "The security is heavy and so is the insecurity."

The book also contains perhaps his most famous witticism, referring to the making of "Jaws: The Revenge": "I have never seen the film but by all accounts it was terrible. However I HAVE seen the house that it built, and it is terrific."

But post-"*Alfie*" Michael Caine just isn't as interesting as the struggling version. There are times his stories of childhood and young adulthood give Frank McCourt and "*Angela's Ashes*" a run for their money, though in place of McCourt's deadpan, dour narration – which seems to cloak 1930s Ireland in the gray murk of, perhaps, the 1830s – Caine is always hopeful, if often desperate, which allows a bit of sunshine to break through.

Indeed, he was a lucky man, and he doesn't take his good fortune for granted, even when it looked like it was running out.

In his late teens, having survived poverty and the Blitz, he's sent off to Korea. He offers no illusions of military service. His first memory of the Korean peninsula is the smell of human manure that came wafting over to his troop ship; the second is the incredible hardship of the Korean people. He slept with rats and dodged mortar fire. He also made sure to avoid sex, given that the country's prostitutes were rife with venereal disease. And yet he almost died upon returning, having developed a rare form of malaria. He was saved by an enterprising American doctor with an experimental cure that required him and his colleagues to remain motionless for 10 days. Fortunately, the cure worked, and if he's been restless since – Caine has often been criticized for taking roles indiscriminately – you can't blame him.

Still, I wish he'd been more discriminating with his stories of movie success. He's not a man who criticizes publicly, so except for complaints about high British tax rates and what he saw as an unfair story by Gloria Steinem, everybody he's worked with is wonderful or talented or both. His marriage to his second wife, Shakira, is made-for-Hollywood fantastical: He saw her on a TV commercial, pursued her, and their marriage has been nothing but happiness. (They'd been married close to 20 years when the book came out; he's now been with her for 45.) He calls out bigots and refrains from gossip. And except for certain movies – "*Sleuth*," "*The Man Who Would Be King*," a bit of "*Hannah and Her Sisters*" – his filmography zips by, a career he sometimes seems to maintain so he has enough money to invest in his homes.

However, he's such an ingratiating writer it's hard to complain. I read the original edition, so I do hope his publisher has fixed a number of errors I caught: the great set designer Ken Adam, allegedly a close friend, is routinely called Ken ADAMS; he attends the premiere of "*Alfie*" with "all four Beatles and all four Rolling Stones" (I wonder which one didn't count – probably Bill Wyman); and in one paragraph he misspells the names of both the 19th-century British actor Edmund Kean and the 20th-century British actor Paul Scofield. There are also some issues with chronology – I think he mentions the Profumo scandal as happening either a year before or after it actually did, in 1963 – but I'll forgive those as lapses (or conflations) of memory.

So "What's It All About?" About 520 pages, of which the first half is rich and savory and the rest ... well, consider it a breezy dessert. And Michael Caine, of all people, deserves a nice dessert.

Sadiqa van der does de bije says

Well written but a bit long to read. Love all of your films!

Well written but a bit long to read. Love all your movies! X x x x x x x

E.d. says

I learned that Maurice Micklewhite would be an excellent subject for an autobiography even if he never became famous. Caine writes the rare star autobiography that is just as interesting in telling of life before fame as after. He writes just like he talks. You get a sense of his personality. I loved his descriptions of his childhood in the English countryside during the war and of his ridiculous idea to enlist in the military to go to Korea. I was moved by his solitary get away to Paris. Reading this is like going out to dinner with your wittiest, most exciting friend.

CF says

Michael Caine has had a fascinating life. He tells his life story with charm, wit and minute detail. From his start in the South London area of Elephant and Castle, right up to 1992.

Caine has seen a multitude of amazing things, and remembers them with a clarity that is only rarely experienced. He name drops quite liberally, but always in a context that is relevant to the story. He chronicles his experience of World War II, his time in amateur theatre, his horrific time in the Korean War, and finally, his break into show business with 'The Ipcress File'.

His stories are absolutely riveting, I could not put this book down. Caine also shows the bad side of the glitz and glamour of Hollywood. Including the AIDS outbreak of the 80's, which took a few of his friends, who he always describes so dearly.

This book is highly, highly recommended. Even though I know 'The Elephant to Hollywood' is a lot of re-used material from this book, I would still like to read the last 18 years of his fantastic life.

KOMET says

Ever since I saw Michael Caine in "THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING" and "THE EAGLE HAS LANDED" back in the 1970s, he has been one of my favorite actors. Now that I have finished this delightful

and wonderful memoir (one of the best that I've ever read), I like him even more as a human being.

Born into poverty in London in 1933, Caine had a childhood ambition to be an actor. Up until he was almost 30, he struggled, largely unrecognized, to develop his talent. With the success of "ZULU", Caine became a star and further solidified his career in movies such as "THE IPCRESS FILE", "THE ITALIAN JOB", "GET CARTER", and "SLEUTH" (starring with Sir Lawrence Olivier).

Caine is a very engaging storyteller and this book is replete with his varied experiences of working on various movie sets around the world, making friendships with some of the most remarkable people in his profession (as well as the arts, royalty, and politics), and his love and devotion to his family and friends great and small.

I'll sum up my review of "What's It All About" with 2 observations made by Mr. Caine himself in it - "I was once asked the difference for me between theatre, film and television. They were like three women, I said. The theatre was a woman whom I loved but who didn't love me back and treated me like shit. The cinema was a woman whom I loved who loved me back so deeply she didn't care when I treated her like shit. And television was a one-night stand."

"So what was it all about? In my case it was about ambition and anger and despair and determination, the everyday driving force of the poor who wish to find a ladder out of the well of hopelessness. It was also about my companions on my journey through show business. We are not, of course, without our faults. For the most part we are spoiled if we are successful, and bitter if we are not. We can be conceited and arrogant, and we are all, without exception, insecure. Finally, we are all slightly mad, or we would not be in this business in the first place, and only cling on to some sanity by a thin thread of incurable optimism."

Bebc says

I just recently finished reading this Michael Caine autobiography. I enjoyed it for several reasons. First of all I've always considered English acting as the very best and that coupled with the fact that Caine and I are the same age gave me the chance to compare his life long experiences to those of mine at the various stages of our lives. We both grew up in grade school during World War II. Obviously the effect on him much more severe than on me. He served in the trenches of North Korea as a teenager and I flew over Viet Nam as a 30 year old. Again, not the same, but we both participated in ugly wars. His professional life obligated him to travel to numerous places throughout the world as did mine. I guess the one big difference is the fact that I retired 30 years ago and I see he is now again in another new movie. Good for him! Tom(B.E.B.C.)
