



# It's Only a Movie: A Personal Biography of Alfred Hitchcock

*Charlotte Chandler*

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## **It's Only a Movie: A Personal Biography of Alfred Hitchcock** Charlotte Chandler

Applause Books" It's Only a Movie is the best book ever written about my father. It really is amazing." Patricia Hitchcock North by Northwest. Psycho. Rear Window. The Birds. Vertigo. When it comes to murder and mayhem, shock and suspense, the films of Alfred Hitchcock can not be surpassed. For this book, Charlotte Chandler interviewed Hitchcock, his wife, daughter, film crew members, and many of the stars who appeared in his films, including Kim Novak, Janet Leigh, Cary Grant, Tippi Hedren and James Stewart. Throughout the book, Chandler shares Hitchcock's wit and wisdom. When actors took themselves too seriously, he would remind them, "it's only a movie." Chandler introduces us to the real Hitchcock, a devoted family man and notorious practical joker, who made suspenseful thrillers mixed with subtle humor and tacit eroticism.

## **It's Only a Movie: A Personal Biography of Alfred Hitchcock Details**

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Charlotte Chandler**

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# From Reader Review It's Only a Movie: A Personal Biography of Alfred Hitchcock for online ebook

## Douglas says

Alfred Hitchcock's career in movies started when pictures first started moving. He was an incredible entertaining innovator.

Reading this book was like visiting the gentleman, and he turns out to be a very decent, cultured man.

The author has created a great combination of personal recollections, plot synopsis and history.

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## Francesca says

I recently took a film scoring class and we studied the relationship between Bernard Herrmann and Alfred Hitchcock a lot and I got super interested in learning about the pair. I was studying Herrmann in depth for a project so I wanted to learn a little bit more about Hitchcock afterward.

Because this book is marketed as a biography I thought it would be super informative about the director.

However, this book is more of just a glorified companion to his movies.

This book gives a lot of behind the scenes information, almost more about the actor's experiences rather than explaining the filmmaker's life.

The book was especially hard to read for two reasons:

- 1) The book is written mostly in quotes and so it became difficult to distinguish who was talking and what their relationship to Hitchcock was. As well, a lot of the quote felt as if they were just jammed in there and a lot of them had no relation to the subject that was being discussed. The writing style then became very dry to read after the first 70 pages.
- 2) If you hadn't seen the movie being discussed, a lot of the little details were hard to understand because you had no background knowledge.

As usual, the photographs included in the novel were jammed in the middle. I think a lot of the pictures would have been more effective they were put into the novel in relevant places instead of being thrown into the middle. I also felt like the book could have benefitted from the use of more pictures, after all, they are trying to describe a movie which is 50% visual, to begin with.

Honestly, while I appreciate what this book was trying to do. I probably could have learned just as much if not more from reading Hitchcock's Wikipedia page. (And would have taken me like a fraction of the time).

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## Gerry says

I re-read the paperback edition of this book, forgetting that I had already read it three years earlier - it must be an age thing! Anyway I enjoyed it more this time and improved on my original assessment to rate it four stars this time around.

The title is one of Hitchcock's - 'call me Hitch, without the cock' he would tell his actors - favourite phrases

as he would use it when his actors were querying something or felt that they were doing something out of character. 'It's only a MOO-vie' (emphasis on the MOO) he would tell them as he insisted that they carry on as he had suggested ... and they always did! Another of his favourite bits of advice to his actors was 'Fake it' (often adding after that 'It's only a MOO-vie') and that would be given in any circumstances whatsoever, passionate or otherwise!

Having spoken to dozens of the great stars that featured in Hitchcock's films, Charlotte Chandler presents an intimate and expansive portrait of a unique artist who, rising from a junior assistant in silent movies, created many of history's most memorable films from the 1920s through to the 1970s. Along the way, she also reveals a devoted family man, a great practical joker, and always an Englishman of Edwardian sensibilities who became one of the great masters of cinematic art.

Interestingly very nearly all the actors that the author interviewed spoke well of Hitchcock, all of them stating that he saw scenes as though through a camera lens, that his technical skills were supreme and that his storyboard preparations was legendary. The only actor who did not eulogise over him was Melanie Griffiths, and she did not work with him but she obviously did not like him as her quote, unquotable in this review, clearly states. Her dislike of him arose from the way Hitchcock allegedly treated her mother 'Tippi' Hedren when she was filming 'The Birds' and later 'Marnie' for him. Hedren herself said, 'I can't say I'm sorry I worked with Hitchcock, but I can't say I'm glad. I certainly wasn't happy about the way it all turned out.' However, despite the troubled relationship, she was there for Hitchcock when the American Film Institute honoured him in 1979.

'It's Only A Movie' is an enthralling read and gives an all-round picture of the man who could be exceedingly witty but who never lost his professional touch whatever the circumstances.

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## **Katie/Doing Dewey says**

It's Only a Movie is a very comprehensive biography, covering Hitchcock's career from his beginnings as a title designer through the final movie he was never able to complete. Even the plots of his movies are included. Mostly though, this was an intimate portrait of the man, told through quotes from him and those who knew him.

At first I was afraid the prevalence of quotes in this book would mean an absence of facts. Instead, there were enough facts and stories outside the quotes that I felt like I got a full picture of the Hitchcocks' lives. The quotes also provided a broad, unbiased view of a man whose character seems to be somewhat controversial. The movie descriptions, on the other hand, should either have been done better or left out. They often sounded silly and I felt that crucial plot points were missing from many.

Fortunately, the many quotes were well-integrated into the rest of the book (or it might be more accurate to say that the rest of the book was well-integrated into the quotes!). I can't know if it captured Hitchcock's character accurately, but he certainly came across as an interesting and eccentric person. Although I can't point to what might be missing, this felt like a lighter read than what I was looking for. It was, however, very

enjoyable and I liked how much the book conveyed Hitchcock's unique personality.

*This review first published on Doing Dewey.*

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## **Mala says**

Review of 'It's Only A Movie: Alfred Hitchcock a personal biography'

By Charlotte Chandler

Recommended for: Hitchcock fans, film buffs in general.

Hitchcock was nominated five times as best director, but never won an Oscar. He tried to make light of it: "(it's because) I don't look like an artist. I don't look like I've starved in a garret. But the real reason is that the suspense genre is not highly esteemed."

However, to his fans worldwide, he remains the undisputed king of suspense genre & his movies continue to delight young & old alike.

Charlotte Chandler presents this extraordinary life through direct quotes & interviews with innumerable Hitchcock collaborators so we get multiple points-of-view.

The hitch is, his personal life tends to get bogged down by the professional one: instead of Hitchcock's catch phrase "It's only a movie!", it looks like it's all about movies!

I recently read Marlon Brando's 'Songs My Mother Taught Me' where the subject's personal life is beautifully meshed with the professional side & that's an achievement considering Brando doggedly refused to discuss his controversial marriages & his children.

In Hitchcock's case there isn't really much of a personal life: "To interview me, you would have to interview my films."

His worldview remained specially that of a child: "Hitch liked people intuitively, the way a child does. When he liked you, he really liked you."

This is how Hilton Green, his friend of thirty-eight years, describes him: "I believe he never let his guard down. Only with Alma (his wife). But it wasn't understood even by Hitch's closest friends how extremely sensitive he was or how personally he took everything. And for him everything was personal."

To be fair, we do get the requisite family background, details of early years. We learn about Hitch's love of reading, interest in travel, desire for order & control, his love for drawing & visiting art museums. Still, his was an intensely personal world: "I wasn't a popular type, so I was forced to live in my imagination, & I believe that helped me to develop my creative resources. I don't need much stimulation from the outside world... It was an advantage that the homely, less popular child has. I was forced to develop my interior self, not to be dependent on the others... My private person, the real me, is a very shy person, not at all the public impression. The man is not different from the boy... When you start out that way as a child, it's rare that you lose it."

The chapter 'Early Years' is more of an academic interest as it charts Hitch's entry into the world of cinema as a writer & designer of titles for silent films, the coming of Talkies & Hitch's meeting with Alma, his creative partner & future wife. The thing that stands out in this segment is his passionate involvement in

various aspects of cinema: as assistant director, screenplay writer & art designer, often unpaid & uncredited for all this extra work!

Hitch's devotion to his wife & his solid reputation as a family man further rules out any gossip or scandal, so no spicy stuff on the personal front!

Still his attachment to the screen personas of his famous "Hitchcockian Blondes" esp. Ingrid Bergman & Grace Kelly is amusing. There is hint of a Vertigo-type obsession in his desire to turn all his subsequent leading ladies into another Grace Kelly, with the case of Tippi Hedren, heroine of 'The Birds' & 'Marnie', taking a particularly sour & unpleasant turn. But cut the guy some slack, which director doesn't fall for his muse?

The two main threads that run throughout the book are: Hitchcock's reported aloofness as a director & his propensity for practical jokes.

Actors & technicians are divided on both these issues: while actors like Lawrence Olivier, John Gielgud, Paul Newman & Julie Andrews were taken aback by his hands off approach, others like Cary Grant, Anthony Perkins & Sean Connery were cool abt it.

This is what James Mason had to say: "Hitchcock's efforts & genius went into preplanning & rapport with his technicians. We actors were typecast & chosen because of our track records that had shown him we could carry off the part he wanted delineated. He preferred that we not be overly creative, which meant anything that interfered with his camera & what he had in mind for it."

Hitchcock's view: "You don't have time to massage actors' egos. If you do, it has been my experience that the appetite grows with the eating."

People were appalled by Hitch's "Actors are cattle" remark!

I wonder what such actors would do if they had to deal with the likes of Herzog, Lars von Trier & Haneke! Compared to them, Hitch was a cuddly teddy bear!

We learn that movies & food are Hitch's passionate interests (as if we needed to be told that!).

And then comes this gem: "I believe that there is a perfect relationship between love of food & a healthy libido... I think that repressed sex is more constructive for the creative person. It must get out, & so it goes into the work. I think it helped create a sense of sex in my work."

We also learn abt Hitch's unique ability to visualise an entire film completely in his mind & his expertise with camera angles. The maestro holds forth on his various theories of cinema & movie making: such pearls of wisdom!

The biography really moves into top gear once the analysis of his movies starts: from his first film as a director: "The Pleasure Garden" to his last "The Family Plot", each film is examined & presented, with a synopsis, anecdotes from actors & technicians & interesting trivia. This is the kind of material that you won't get on IMDB & for that alone, this book is worth reading.

My favourite chapters here are Rebecca, Suspicion, Lifeboat, Spellbound, Rope (Hitch's first movie under his own production as well as his first colour film), Rear Window & of course Psycho (which gets two chapters). We all have our favourite Hitchcock movies: mine are:

Vertigo

Rear Window

North by Northwest

Spellbound

Psycho  
Notorious  
Suspicion  
Frenzy  
Lifeboat  
The Birds  
Rope

Can you guess which one is Hitchcock's fav?

It's(view spoiler)

Hitchcock, the quintessential British gentleman always dressed in suits. This is how actor Norman Lloyd describes him: "He left an indelible mark on me of what it means to be a director & how to conduct oneself on the set... He projected a very special world. He had about him an international aura of the Orient Express, St. Moritz, the best foods, cigars & vintage wines--all of the fantasies one saw on screen."

And how can I finish this without mentioning one of the most integral & anticipated part of a Hitchcock movie experience: the cameo!

The Lodger was the first film in which Hitchcock had a cameo appearance: "Two actors didn't show up. In those days you used to be able to hop in & do a bit if necessary." He says: "My cameo appearances, were a deliberate move away from realism, reminding the audience, 'it's only a movie'."

Enjoy the book & then go see the movies!

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### **Kelly Millspaugh says**

I really enjoyed this biography of the legendary director. It gave insight into his personality from the actors and filmmakers who worked with him throughout his long career. The most interesting moments were about his techniques and tricks used in his films. I feel like most people who are called a "genius" in their field are also called strange, aloof, or unapproachable. Not everyone who worked with him adored him and their opinions were not censored. Tippi Hedren's famous conflict with Hitch was only discussed briefly but the opinion of Hedren's daughter, actress Melanie Griffith, said all that really needed to be said. You're better left reading her opinion for yourself if you plan on delving into this biography for yourself.

It is an easy read and let's you journey through his career in chronological order. I am excited to revisit his films that I have seen and watch many for the first time. If you consider yourself to be a movie buff then definitely give this one a shot.

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### **Ladiibbug says**

Biography - 3.5 stars

"This is the best book ever written about my father. It really is amazing." - Patricia Hitchcock

These words on the cover were the deciding factor to read this book. As a long-time Hitchcock fan, particularly of his TV shows, it was a bit disappointing that the reader doesn't learn more about the man.

Based on this book, it may be that he was exactly as described -- a quiet, routine-loving, introvert. Hitchcock's most important collaborator and companion was his wife Alma. I was surprised to learn of her intense behind the scenes involvement and the importance of her opinions to "Hitch". Their decades-long love affair and friendship was refreshing.

Hitchcock's meticulous movie making is explored in great detail. He was involved in virtually every small detail of his films and TV shows.

The author interviewed and quoted Hitchcock's family, actors in his films, and film crew members. It seemed like many of the quoted comments, especially by actors who worked with him, were rather vague - or maybe there just isn't much to say about the person. Hitchcock's life was movies.

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### **Cherryl Northcutt Valdez says**

I was somewhat disappointed. I felt this was written more by Hitchcock than an impartial writer.

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### **Belinda says**

This is a pretty good account of Alfred Hitchcock's career from the point of view of those who worked with him. It's definitely not a critical book in either sense of the word - I think the author is coming from a place of adoration and respect, so there's very little discussion of his relationships with his female stars. The really great thing about this book was the interviews the author did with the people who worked on Hitchcock's films from camera men to the actors in the film. It was fascinating to read how time had changed people's opinions of the work they and Hitchcock had done.

One thing I found interesting was when Hitchcock described starting out working in silent movies in Britain. He said there were lots of female screenwriters because screenwriting was seen as something ladies could do sitting down, like sewing. It was only when the motion pictures became really big that men took over the industry. Fascinating.

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### **Cassandra says**

Seine Filme sind zu Klassikern der Filmgeschichte geworden, er selber machte sich zur Kultfigur, zur unverwechselbaren Marke, doch wer war der Mann hinter den Filmen? An Hitchcock scheiden sich die Geister. Sympathisch oder doch eher ein unsensibler Egozentriker?

Mich hat das Phänomen Hitchcock angefangen zu interessieren, als ich ‚Die Suche nach dem Glück‘ von Charlotte Chandler gelesen habe und dort über den umstrittenen ‚Master of Suspense‘ gestolpert bin. Hitchcocks Sinn für Humor war sehr makaber und häufig überschritt er damit die Grenze des Zumutbaren. Seine Schauspieler bezeichnete er auch gerne mal als Rindviecher und seine Vorliebe für die eisigen Blondinen ist legendär. Alfred Hitchcock war Kunst- und Weinsammler und träumte davon, einmal im Leben einen Anzug von der Stange tragen zu können. Er stellte sich gerne als Hitchcock ohne ‚cock‘ vor, aber nur wenn Hitch keine Damen in der Nähe vermutete.

Die Biografie zeigt schön seine vielen Facetten, gewährt Einblicke in sein Privatleben, seinen beruflichen



Werdegang und seine Art Filme zu machen. Sicherlich gehört Charlotte Chandler eher zu der Pro-Hitchcock-Fraktion und konzentriert sich eher auf seine Vorzüge, als mit den Vorwürfen, die z.B. eine Tippi Hedren gegen ihn erhoben hat. Die Autorin war, so scheint es, sehr gut bekannt mit ihm und hat häufig auch zu seiner Frau Alma Kontakt gehabt. Das Buch stützt sich auf Gespräche und Äußerungen seiner Mitarbeiter und Schauspieler und ist dabei keineswegs langweilig oder trocken.

Nach einer Einleitung, die den Leser mit der Person Hitchcock vertraut macht, beginnt die Autorin mit seiner Kindheit und führt chronologisch durch sein Leben, wobei sie auf seine filmischen Stationen eingeht. So bekommt man zu diesen Filmen immer eine Kurzbeschreibung der Handlung, Besonderheiten beim Dreh, Erinnerungen der Crew und was sich in Hitchcocks Privatleben tat zu lesen. Wer das Buch gelesen hat, wird die Filme bestimmt mit anderen Augen sehen. Abgerundet wird das Buch durch Alfred Hitchcocks Filmografie und ein praktisches Namensregister zum schnellen Auffinden der im Buch erwähnten Personen. Ob dieser Mann irgendjemand anderen als Alma, Pat und später auch seinen Enkeln, Einblicke in sein Privatleben gewährte, wage ich zu bezweifeln. Er hatte sich ein Image zugelegt und sich zur Kunstfigur stilisiert und das war ihm heilig.

Die Bio ist sehr angenehm zu lesen und hat mich mit dem Gefühl entlassen, Hitchcock und seine Werke besser zu verstehen und mich noch mehr für ‚The Magic of Filmmaking‘ zu faszinieren.

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### **Christine Sinclair says**

I finally feel like I know Alfred Hitchcock, the man. Yes, he was a genius film director and we will always study his body of work, but he was also a person, and this book gives a great insight into what he was like, both at home and at work. Many great quotes here, plus a complete filmography which even includes the silent films for which he wrote the title cards at the start of his career. Definitely a must-read for his legion of admirers.

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### **Lincoln says**

If this biography is to be believed, Alfred Hitchcock was quite harsh with his writers. If their work didn't capture the singular vision he had for his movies he had no hesitation in sending them on their way and handing the job on to another.

Well, I fear if he'd ever had the opportunity to read this version of his life, he would barely have made it through the first chapter before Ms Chandler was sent packing.

It's not that she doesn't have good material to impart - she clearly had great access to the man himself and most of the central characters in his life. The underlying love story of Hitchcock and his wife. A bit of fun and the obligatory feud (Tippi Hedren) never forgave him those pecking crows)

It's just that the way the author arranges her material makes it completely incomprehensible. I can't say I've read enough biographies to name a great one. But this one is undoubtedly a very very bad one. Aside from following Hitch's life and career in the chronological order of his movies, it's as if Ms Chandler has compiled the rest in whatever order her notes fell out of her handbag.

She leaps haphazardly between interviews with technical crew and anecdotes from the stars. Many many times I had to turn back to check who was speaking. She doesn't mind repeating a quote or remaking a point. Over and over and over. But most bizarrely she will drop a snippet of something in the middle of a page for

apparently no reason other than it had to go in the book somewhere!!

Hence in the midst of Tippi Hedren describing her daily hell on *The Birds* you get...well read for yourself.

“Hedren had to endure days of having live birds thrown at her. She had never anticipated this, and the ordeal took its toll on her, and on her relationship with Hitchcock . “Hitchcock was more careful about how the birds were treated than he was about me” she said. “I was just there to be pecked”

Ethel Griffies, the actress who played an ornithologist in the film began her stage career in 1881 when she was three years old Hitchcock had seen her on the London stage when he was a young man.

Some of the birds in the film were trained, some were mechanical, some were animated.

I mean I'm sure Ethel made a valuable contribution but what did it have to do with tensions between Hitch and his new Grace Kelly. This sort of random leaping about is constant throughout the book and made reading it a laborious, wholly unpleasant experience.

Aside from the Hitchcock quotes Chandler doesn't even attempt to infuse the thing with the spirit of the man. There's no lightness of touch or knowing humour here. It's like the dead hand of a lumbering corpse is leading you by on this journey. And all you want to do is let go and run away.

Given the whole thing is like a long tedious magazine article - one were the writer feels the need to let you know: I spoke to Cary Grant over (insert expensive entre) at the front table of (insert fashionable eatery) - it's odd that she has also chosen to include a synopsis of every single Hitchcock's film, as if this is to be the definitive Hitchcock film guide - um, it's so not. And she shouldn't have bothered.

Honestly, she manages to make the simplest plot indecipherable. Some are hardly recognisable even if you've seen the film three times. It says a lot about her writing skills in general, that she can take Alfred Hitchcock's clean and clever murder-mystery stories and turn them into a summary of Crime and Punishment.

I can't claim to be an expert on the perfect biography, but I think you're supposed to arrange the facts and quotations so they address a central theme of the subject's life. Then combine it all as a clear, concise and above all entertaining story.

I thought thats kinda what you had to do. But what would I know?

Alfred Hitchcock's daughter says it's the best book she's ever read about her father!

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## **Gerry says**

From this biography it is difficult to assess what kind of person Alfred Hitchcock really was. Opinions of him, from those who knew him well and worked with him, vary so much; some state that he was 'an actor's director' while others assert that he always referred to actors as 'cattle'.

He was undoubtedly talented once he had gravitated to films from his humble beginnings in Leytonstone, east London and his legion of films, made in Britain, Germany and America, bare testimony to his capabilities.

One thing that is distracting from the story is that every time a film is mentioned a synopsis of the story, is interspersed into the text. It does tend to break up the flow and the synopses would perhaps have been better

placed at the end along with the extensive, and useful, filmography.

Hitchcock could undoubtedly be a paradox as he would be charming one minute and dismissive the next. Writers suffered as much as actors for when one who had worked for him a number of times was asked to consider a new script, he stated that he thought it not for him. He was dismissed and never used again, something that also happened to a more famous writer when working on 'Marnie'. Evan Hunter (aka Ed McBain) disagreed with something that was planned, he, too, was dismissed, never used again and given no writing credit on the film.

The myth of Hitchcock appearing in all his films is dismissed and an interesting story emerges from his appearance in 'Lifeboat'. His colleagues suggested that he float by as a dead body but he did not care for that and he cared even less when they suggested he float by as a dead body on his stomach because the audience would know it was him by his shape! In the end he came up with the image on a piece of newspaper floating by with the other debris from the wreck.

Perhaps the most interesting factor from the book, however, is the difference in opinion of those stars who worked with him. One is left to think that the truth is somewhere in between but Tipi Hedren's daughter, Melanie Griffiths, would not have the reader believe that as she offers the most forthright opinion and even stresses, 'And you can quote me on that.'

One slightly disappointing thing is that Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh were nowhere near when the shower scene in 'Psycho' was filmed. Perkins was on stage in New York and it was Janet Leigh's body double that was in the shower. And considering that same film, Hitchcock once told an inquisitive seven-year-old that the blood in the shower was chocolate sauce (he particularly wanted to film 'Psycho' in black and white), adding, a la title of the book, 'It's only a movie.'

And that little maxim is something that is worth remembering when minor things go wrong ... just think of Hitchcock and relate 'It's only a movie' to the situation in hand!

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## **Mike says**

This is more like an anecdotal biography. There are some facts and figures, and each film is given a synopsis and some background information, but the bulk of the book is made up of interviews' and table-discussions, which have so much detail in them that in some cases you suspect the author has dramatised them. This isn't a bad thing, necessarily, though she seems to forget that she's included a story in more than one place. And the interviewees too often repeat stuff that we've heard another actor/technician talk about.

Worst of all is the endless quoting of Hitch's 'It's only a movie' saying. He may well have said this; whether he said it over and over, as appears here, is another matter. You suspect he was rather more imaginative than that. And that he also brought more integrity to his movies.

Some of what the actors have to say is of interest, and throws new light on the subject. However, the book is not a patch on Patrick McGilligan's book on Hitchcock, where not only is there far more detail, there is also far less gossip-column-type material.

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## **Octavio Villalpando says**

Desdeluego que Alfred Hitchcock es una figura legendaria, cuya leyenda por otro lado, está plenamente justificada. Supongo que con tan amplio acervo como nos legó, siempre es un poco ocioso tratar de aprender otras cosas acerca de él que no sean las que sus películas nos dejan, sin embargo, éste libro no deja de ser un viaje fascinante. Está plagado de anécdotas, nada despreciables porque nos acercan al humano detrás de la leyenda. Nos da un testimonio de su personalidad tan subyugante y misteriosa a la vez y nos deja atisbar un poco en el proceso creativo que lo elevó a las alturas de las que hoy sigue gozando.

Éste libro será del interés de aquellos fanáticos de su obra, pero para el público en general constituye un testimonio de la genialidad encarnada (muy encarnada, hay que decirlo, je). Es maravilloso seguir el camino que él siguió, siempre a lado de su entrañable Alma, de la cual pocas veces se habla, pero que tan importante fue para su obra.

¡Ampliamente recomendable!

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