

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph McBride. *Steven Spielberg*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997. 528 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-81167-3.

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As Joseph McBride observes near the end of his critical biography of the world's most famous film director, "it takes a village to raise a book." His acknowledgments section takes four dense pages of explanation, worth reading by itself, about the labor and intensity of a four-year press to create this unauthorized biography of Steven Spielberg, a filmmaker, "as boy and man," for more than forty years. A sign of his maturity is this, the fourteenth book about him and his work, not counting the five children's biographies or the four books including him with other writers of the "film school generation." But McBride's work exceeds the virtues of all the others.

McBride, already author of respected books on Orson Welles, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Kirk Douglas, and Frank Capra, began the Spielberg opus with excellent credentials and connections to Hollywood insiders. From over 325 sources, McBride has created an unparalleled account of fact and insight into Spielberg's memories, motives, methods, and shifting preoccupations in his films, with significant discussions of Spielberg's major films, from the early *Duel* (1971) through *Shindler's List* (1996). What makes explaining Spielberg difficult is his participation in so many film projects as producer and, one may say, godfather. Sorting those which are pure Spielberg from those which are works of his proteges and his company—and those which lack his spiritual involvement clarifies the apparent contradictions of his personality and his work for those, meaning most, people who experienced his work.

Spielberg intimates, relatives, and friends, including Spielberg's father, Arnold, and his cousins as well as other formidably knowledgeable critics, Holocaust survivors, Spielberg collaborators, and childhood friends helped McBride lay a deep and broad resource for insight

and information for this book. And while Spielberg and his office did not help McBride directly, he was declared "kosher." As a result, many friends and coworkers did not feel reluctant about talking with him. If we aren't getting the complete truth, we may be getting all the truth that's available—triumphs, neuroses, and all.

Even so, a few important sources declined to help; these include John Williams, Spielberg's ongoing composer partner, and actors Sam Neill, Liam Neeson, and Richard Dreyfuss, Spielberg's film alter ego, who did not respond to McBride's letters. Maybe they will be helpful when Spielberg produces his promised autobiography, but one must wonder, when could he find the time? Luckily, McBride was not deterred by Spielberg's declining to meet with him and his declaring to all who would listen that he would be writing a full account himself—a predictable expression of Spielberg's biographical management and total-control personality. While this declaration no doubt silenced a few sources, McBride's book is the best all-around book to deal with both the man and his films in a fair but critically persciant way.

Because the book is so persuasive, readers, whether Spielberg fans or cognoscenti, come to accept the connections McBride draws between Spielberg's private life and thematic preoccupations in his films. One repeated story pictures the young Steven as forlorn because, as a Jew, he could not share in friends' Christmas celebrations. As the story goes, his response was to dress like Christ and pose on his parents' front porch, accompanied by a light show, an event regarded as "a precursor of the arrival of the extraterrestrial creatures" in *E.T.* His father denied this story but also said, "I can visualize him doing that." McBride reasons that, true or not, Spielberg

transferred his pain from “being different [Jewish] and learned to transform them into art.” Spielberg himself, in interviews, has encouraged this kind of explanation of his preoccupation with fathers and sons and their troubled relations. And certainly, the mythic culture savers, from E.T. to Indiana Jones to Schindler to Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), who dominate many of his directed films, must arise from psychological resources within himself.

Spielberg helped make his own luck, often, but he attracted surprising helpers. McBride’s identification and discussion of these important guides, and sometimes self-sacrificers, distinguishes this book’s contribution to understanding a world mythmaker’s journey. In addition, his films refer to himself in many ways, including Richard Dreyfuss as his alter ego in *Jaws*, *Close Encounters*, and *Always*. If one can name the most important wonder in Spielberg’s films, it may well be the way he sees his

subjects and stories through the eyes of a child-or, as he has put it, through the eyes of the audience he imagines. McBride demonstrates the truth of this insight repeatedly as he discusses camera angles, selected scenes, or story lines in Spielberg’s directed and produced films. His book will stand as the wisest account of Steven Spielberg and his connection to his films until, perhaps, Spielberg himself finally allows an authorized biography, which his assistant, in the mid-1990s, said he is “in the throes of planning.” Until such a book happens, McBride’s book is the one to use for the most balanced and credible account and interpretation of Spielberg as man and director.

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