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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marion Meade. *Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. viii + 440 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-017337-1.

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With the recent availability of Buster Keaton's film opus on video, inevitably there will be another resurgence of public interest in the life and works of this comic master. In the past thirty years, many critics and historians have paid homage to his genius, mainly in critical assessments.

Marion Meade's *Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase* is, however, not just another critical compendium. Instead, Meade has adopted a biographical study of the comedian/director as her milieu, rightly asserting that another film study would be "plow[ing] the same field." (She prefers to limn a more detailed portrait of Keaton as man and as artist, hence illuminating his cinematic virtuosity.) Although the biographical field is one that has been plowed before, Meade's treatment furnishes new insight based on four years of research and over two hundred interviews.

Overall, this is a solidly researched book. The filmography compiled by Jack Dracca and the extensive bibliography proffer a fine point of reference for those initiating studies on Keaton.

Notable is Meade's obvious attempt to present a balanced, unbiased view of Keaton's life. Issues heretofore either glossed over (his alcoholism and abuse as a child) or tacitly omitted (his near illiteracy) are discussed in great detail. Often Meade addresses omissions and falsifications of events in the autobiography and the spurious Hollywood rewriting of his life, *The Buster Keaton Story* (1957).

The end result is a portrait of a troubled artist, the child who stoically endured his father's physical abuse in his family's vaudeville act and who grew to be a man whose "great stone face" and physical endurance became

an integral part of his art. Featured in the book are Keaton's tenuous relationship with Hollywood, his dislike and contempt of Chaplin, his disastrous marriage to Natalie Talmadge, and his sexual and drinking antics both on and off the set.

The book creates a montage effect of an artist in absolute control of his creative life (for the most part, Keaton was writer/performer/director/editor of his silent masterpieces) and at the mercy of others in his personal life, often with disastrous results.

Such a portrait does illuminate the work of this comic master. A life characterized by physical and mental abuse resulted in the formation of the comic persona of Buster, the little man with the beautiful, frozen face and kinetic body, ever resourceful and inventive.

There is a significant flaw to this study. The overdrawn introductions of various personages—lengthy description designed to create a dramatic effect when the identity is finally revealed (often paragraphs later)—is irritating. One begins to wish that Meade would emulate her subject's cinematic principle and "cut to the chase."

But this is a minor imperfection in a work that elucidates Keaton's film legacy, a substantial representation of the life and art of one of the greatest film comedians/directors—thus a worthy addition to Keaton scholarship.

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