A Simple Story About A Complicated Artist

Amazon Significant Seven, October 2007: Theres no book this year that made peoples eyes light up when I told them about it more than Schulz and Peanuts, David Michaeliss new biography of cartoonist Charles Schulz. (And when they saw the obvious-but-brilliant Chip Kidd-designed cover, their eyes got even brighter.) Everyone, it seems, feels a personal connection to Peanuts (a name, by the way, that Schulz always hated), but few have a sense of the artist whose small troupe of big-headed characters still lives at the center of our imagination. If some mystery about the man still remains after reading Michaeliss sharp, engaging, and level-headed biography thats no fault of the biographer--in fact, its to his credit. Michaelis parses Schulzs particular combination of Midwestern reserve and steely determination and the strips still-surprising balance of exuberance and misery, and he reminds us what a colossal cultural force it became, especially in the 1960s. But even as he ingeniously finds sources for Schulzs four-panel vignettes in the events of his biography, he
recognizes that the true, sometimes inexplicable drama of his life took place when he sat down every day for 50 years to trace Linuss wobbly strands of hair, fill in Snoopy's black nose, and, time and again, letter the words Good grief. --Tom Nissley

**Personal Review: Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography by David Michaelis**

I dont go to the library nearly enough to get books - my own reading list generally precludes me from this, and any book that I really want to read, I tend to end up buying. But, every now and then, Ill see something interesting worth reading, and will pick it up on a whim. This was the case with the first authorized biography of Charles Schultz, by David Michealis, called Schultz and Peanuts, which was released late last year.

The biography is wonderfully complete and extremely detailed, spanning the famed creator of Peanuts life from beginning to end. In addition to just talking about his life, this book is a discussion of how his life impacted his creation, and shows just how much of Schultz is revealed within the classic panels that ultimately defined his life.

Schultz was born November of 1922, and was the only child of Dena and Carl Schultz. His early childhood seemed to be one of loneliness, isolation and insecurity - all themes which would be prevalent in Peanuts. He was extremely attached to his mother, and was devastated when she died when he was twenty-one years old. It was during his early life that he began to draw, through his time in the army to a course where he began to draw small cartoons. Lil Folks began in June of 1947, to limited success, but which would slowly grow to be an enormous multi-media platform that would lead Schultz from his humble beginnings to becoming one of the highest paid entertainers in the United States.

In addition to an examination of Schultzs life, this book serves as a sort of literary critique of Peanuts itself. Each character is examined, their personalities and lives compared to Schultzs and storylines are looked at within the same context. Ive never read over the entirety of Peanuts, but this look has really given me an extremely detailed look not only at the evolution of the comic, but its inspirations and the meanings behind each panel.

What struck me the most about Schultz was the degree to which he and Peanuts were intertwined. While he denied that he utilized his own life and his children in the comic strip, it is very clear that was just not the case, intentionally or otherwise. From the start, he seemed to be destined for art, and looking back across his life, Peanuts is the only accomplishment for which he was entirely dedicated to - his purpose was singular, but perfect. The end result is a cartoon that is widely considered one of the greatest works of American art/literature, certainly one of the greatest comics, for which we owe much of our nations character to. Ironically, I have been reading about NASA and the lunar missions recently, and Schultzs
influences are felt there as well, as the Apollo 10 Lander (which was the test craft to circle and evaluate landing sites for Apollo 11, which did land on the moon) was named Snoopy and the Command Capsule was named Charlie Brown. Schultz also designed the mission patch for the first Skylab mission, featuring Snoopy and the names of the three crewmen. (My review for Homesteading Space can be found here.)

While Peanuts is a widely known work, its creator isn’t - this biography allows for an unparallel look at his life. In many respects, Schultz was Charlie Brown. Throughout the book, individual strips are presented, often highlighting elements of Schultz’s personality at various stages of his life. Characters are examined, picked apart and revealed through their creator to largely be an extension of his own life and personality. In a way, it is extremely fitting that not only was Peanuts not allowed to continue after his retirement, the last strip and his death occurred on the same day.

Schultz’s life was not an unhappy or miserable one - it was he that was unhappy and miserable for much of his life. He was self-deprecating, a little vain and incredibly insecure - not unlike his famed creation. He seemed to suffer from many phobias, and clung to people throughout his life, all the while maintaining a mild-mannered and quiet presence. His first marriage, which lasted twenty or so years, pitted him against his wife, who was far more assertive and combative, while his second was far more mutually friendly. Ironically, for a creator known for his portrayal of children, Schultz seemed to be fairly distant from his own, leaving the raising of his family to Joyce (his first wife), who dominated the house and family.

Reading through the book, I was interested to find that there are a number of elements of Schultz’s personality that match my own - to a point. I’ve illustrated the desire to change some aspects of this, and looking at Schultz’s life, one can see the effects of his personality upon the direction of his life and the people around him.

In the end, there is no doubt that Schultz had created something wonderful, tragic and heartwarming. Peanuts is arguably one the quintessential American tales, rife with meaning throughout, something that inspired generations of people around the world for its simplicity and brilliant storytelling. This was Schultz’s legacy to the world - unhappy, lonely, but enlightening.

(Originally posted on my blog)

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