



Alfred Hitchcock: The Man Who Knew Too Much (Icons)

Michael Wood

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Widely regarded as the greatest filmmaker of the twentieth century, Alfred Hitchcock had a gift for creating suspense and a shrewd knowledge of human psychology. His film career, spanning more than half a century, is studded with classics from *The 39 Steps* to *Psycho*, *North by Northwest* to *Vertigo* (which in 2012 unseated *Citizen Kane* as the best movie of all time according to *Sight and Sound*). A master of intricate storytelling, Hitchcock was one of the first directors whose films belonged to both popular culture and high art. By the end of his life, he had gone from being the overweight son of a greengrocer in a London suburb to Hollywood's reigning director, whose cameo roles in his own films were one of their most anticipated features, and whose profile was recognized by millions (thanks to the television show *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*).

Michael Wood describes this journey with the wit and erudition that are the trademarks of his work, showcasing his singular ability to detect hidden patterns within apparently disparate forms. Whether he is writing about Henry James or Hollywood in the 1920s, he is alert to the fundamental truth lurking behind the stated meaning. In Hitchcock, Wood has found his ideal subject—an artist for whom explicit statement was anathema, who made conventional plot a hiding place rather than a source of revelation.

Alfred Hitchcock: The Man Who Knew Too Much (Icons) Details

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Jeanne Bishop says

Mostly a breakdown and insight into the films of AH

Michael Wood obviously did a substantial amount of research before putting pen to paper. He explains in some detail his -- and others' -- views of Hitchcock's films. He gives the reader a good synopsis of each film and then goes on to explain some of the reasoning and symbolism inherent in many scenes.

He doesn't just write about the well-known films but also includes insight into many of Hitchcock's earlier British productions.

However, I found it somewhat disconcerting that the information is presented in a rather disjointed fashion. The author seems to jump around from one film to another for no apparent reason.

I was also somewhat confused at times as to whether an opinion is the author's personal view or generally accepted knowledge of others. For example, he writes of the actor Claude Rains being thought of as French because he played a French character in Casablanca. He used the plural "we" in his statement. I believe most serious film buffs -- and anyone bothering to read a book about such a famous director -- know Claude Rains as being born and reared in England -- and even if someone did not know that, would not assume just because he played a French policeman that he would necessarily be French.

Regardless, there is a lot of interesting information about Hitchcock's films here, and some information about the man himself.

I have given this book three stars because I do think it is okay and worth reading. It just doesn't seem to be extraordinary.

Debbie says

I did not finish this book. I got about 20% through and put it down. I just couldn't get back to it. I thought there would be more stories, more personal stuff. In actuality it was more like an outline with the order having no rhyme or reason. I read to be entertained and this felt like a teacher standing at the head of the class giving out facts and information on Alfred Hitchcock. Disappointing for sure.

Thank you New Harvest and Net Galley for providing me with this free e-galley in exchange for an honest review.

Jason Schneeberger says

I received this book from New Harvest and NetGalley for an honest review. The official release date is March 25th

In my opinion, Alfred Hitchcock is the single greatest movie director of all time. His body of work speaks for itself; constantly reinventing his style, Hitchcock's films span a half a century and even his "weakest" films, usually exceeds other directors best works. Having never read a book about Hitchcock, I jumped at the chance to review this book.

Being a very short book at a mere 146 pages, I didn't expect this to be a thorough examination of Hitch's vast catalog, but many of his films are so skimmed over or out right skipped, that this book felt unfinished. It felt like a first draft, a rough take of what the author wanted to really put out. The majority of the first half of the book is examining how World War 2 shaped the things Hitch had to say in his movies during that time period. *Blackmail*, *Saboteur* and *Lifeboat*, amongst others are examined here, but *Shadow of a Doubt* takes up the majority of the dissection.

During the second half of the book, we hear tales of how Hitch had an obsession with blondes, namely actresses Grace Kelly and Tippi Hedren, his struggle with the changing Hollywood system and the second half of his filmmaking career, but like the films themselves, everything is too briefly discussed to really make an impact with the reader. Not only that, but often times, the examinations of the films is primarily a recap of what is already shown on the screen, with very little in the way of an essay into the thoughts the author has on the movie he is discussing. Case in point, *Vertigo*; the author spends several pages telling you what you already know happens. Scene after scene is described and granted, there is talk about the themes and meanings behind what Hitch was going for with certain scenes, but way too much of the time it is nothing more than a description of the movie itself.

The biggest flaw with this book is the length; it's simply far too short to try and cram an entire body of work of the greatest director of all time into 146 pages. It would have been better suited as a look at five films that the author liked best or he should have held off until he could have really done films the justice they deserve. I give this one 2/5

N.N. Light says

I love Alfred Hitchcock and I was excited to review this book. All I can say is how disappointed I was. The writer seemed to have a grudge against Hitchcock and focused entirely on Hitchcock's personal life rather than the film innovator he was.

More critical than enjoyable.

Koren says

I'm sure there are better Alfred Hitchcock bios out there if you are interested. This one is about 50 % bio and 50% telling about the movies. It is mostly what the movies are about and not that much behind the scenes secrets. It is a short read.

Alayne says

This was an interesting book but more about Hitchcock's movies than about the man himself. I was expecting a biography but got a filmography! Still, the author did say that Hitchcock was a very private man so I guess it is hard to get too much information about him. A short and easy to read book. Pleasant.

DirqusMaximus says

Clocking in at 116 pages, this book gives only the briefest glimpse into the life and career of Alfred Hitchcock. It is written in what I would call an "informal essay" style, with author Michael Wood jumping from film to film and idea to idea with no real cohesive structure. He lingers on very minor films like "Lifeboat," but skips both versions of "The Man Who Knew Too Much" almost completely (an odd choice when that's the title of your book).

The book's major flaw is Michael Wood's overblown "critic-speak," which is SO overblown here that it borders on parody. An example: "Let me suggest that a good narrative plot is not just a causal arrangement of events but a scheme pointing to its own scheming, a matter both of conspiracy and organization. Not every plot is a double plot, but every plot has a hint of duality about it." This is the worst form of meaningless pseudo-analysis, and the author doesn't even try to make his case for such absurd statements. He just makes them and moves on.

Too brief to be comprehensive and too esoteric to be a primer, only the most ardent students of Hitchcock will even want to give this a second glance (and most will have heard almost every idea in it explored much more skillfully elsewhere). Instead, try "The Art of Alfred Hitchcock" by Donald Spoto, an amazing book that I've returned to again and again.

Jesse says

Ok

This definitely got me interested in Hitchcock's films and I love film but I'm not sure why it was so highly recommended.

Margaret Sankey says

Meditation on the evolution of Hitchcock's work, with the strongest chapter being about the director's WWII work, which highlighted the ambiguities of the resistance and included the unaired documentary about the liberation of concentration camps.

Al Bità says

I thoroughly enjoyed this comparatively brief overview of Alfred Hitchcock and his films, but with the warning that anyone wanting to get a more comprehensive view of individual films might find this a little disappointing. In a sense, this extended monograph seems to be more intended for those who are already pretty familiar with the subject already — an irony, in that the latter may well be in the van of those who might be disappointed.

A great deal has been written about Hitchcock's films, and the areas covered are quite extensive, from the sublime to the ridiculous, and just about everything in between — such is the interest, esteem and influence of the man and his work. Wood's selective bibliography in the book will provide more than enough as an introduction for the interested person to explore further; and Wood also provides a complete chronological listing of all of Hitchcock's cinematic films (the main subject of interest) which can be of help.

I suspect that one of Wood's concerns might be to calm down some of the more excitable conclusions of commentators and biographers, especially those who might want to psychoanalyse (and perhaps find fault with) Hitchcock the *man* based on their interpretations of his films.

Wood gently argues more for an understanding of what Hitchcock the *director* is doing in his films, and how this affects his audiences in the inimitable way that he does, to both enthrall, terrify, and entertain, all at the same time.

It is the impact of the completed art form on the viewer that is the important thing — and with his best films, Hitchcock not only provides that, but also sets off complications and repercussions for those who think on these things, which in turn can stimulate sometimes unwanted or disturbing thoughts in the mind of the *viewer*.

All this means, however, is that whatever emotions and feelings we might entertain as a result of this are more a reflection of what is in our minds and in our hearts rather than what we think we might have seen on the screen. To believe that such emotions, etc. are indicative of the personality and character of the director himself is the same as saying that they are indicative of us ourselves (and maybe, just maybe, we just don't want to deal with that at all!) — a nice conundrum. And typically "Hitchcockian".

Víctor says

A great recollection of the life and films of Alfred Hitchcock. Has giving me a last minute New Year's resolution of catching up with his filmography.

Denis Tessier says

OK... But no new insights about the Master of Suspense. If this is the first biography of Hitchcock you read, you owe to yourself to read McGilligan's "A Life in Darkness and Light" to fully appreciate the man and his craft.

Barbara says

A good description of Hitch's films more than Hitch. I got the Kindle version and listened to it as text-to-speech in the British voice, which made for pleasant listening. Hitchcock is my favorite film director of all time, and I love his films. I enjoyed hearing the details of behind the scenes and how he related to the actors while filming.

Kristine says

Alfred Hitchcock: The Man Who Knew Too Much by Michael Wood is a free NetGalley ebook that I began reading at school in mid-March. Having worked my way through a recent boxed set, *The Girl*, and, just last month, *The Lady Vanishes*.

Michael Wood is expansive yet concise in his telling of Hitch's public and private life, but he mixes together timelines and personal theory (i.e. Did you notice this scene in the same way I did? Wasn't that remarkable?) quite liberally.

Kris - My Novelesque Life says

DNF

I am not sure what the author was trying to do with this biography. I gave up as it was dry and seemed to have the author's thoughts too much into the writing.
