



Young Orson: The Years of Luck and Genius on the Path to Citizen Kane

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On the centennial of his birth, the defining wunderkind of modern entertainment gets his due in a groundbreaking new biography of his early years--from his first forays in theater and radio to the inspiration and making of Citizen Kane.

In the history of American popular culture, there is no more dramatic story--no swifter or loftier ascent to the pinnacle of success and no more tragic downfall--than that of Orson Welles. In this magisterial biography, Patrick McGilligan brings young Orson into focus as never before. He chronicles Welles's early life growing up in Wisconsin and Illinois as the son of an alcoholic industrialist and a radical suffragist and classical musician, and the magical early years of his career, including his marriage and affairs, his influential friendships, and his artistic collaborations.

The tales of his youthful achievements were so colorful and improbable that Welles, with his air of mischief, was often thought to have made them up. Now after years of intensive research, McGilligan sorts out fact from fiction and reveals untold, fully documented anecdotes of Welles's first exploits and triumphs, from starring as a teenager on the Gate Theatre stage in Dublin and bullfighting in Sevilla, to his time in the New York theater and his fraught partnership with John Houseman in the Mercury Theatre, to his arrival in Hollywood and the making of Citizen Kane. Filled with intriguing new insights and startling revelations--including the surprising true origin and meaning of "Rosebud"--Young Orson is a fascinating look at the creative development and influences that shaped this legendary artistic genius.

Young Orson: The Years of Luck and Genius on the Path to Citizen Kane Details

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From Reader Review Young Orson: The Years of Luck and Genius on the Path to Citizen Kane for online ebook

Bettie? says

BOTW

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06tqsbz>

Orson Welles, the defining wunderkind of modern entertainment, gets his due in a new biography of his early years - including his first forays in theatre and radio before his groundbreaking move to Hollywood. Read by Jack Klaff

Episode 1: A star is born - in Kenosha.

Episode 2: Orson gets his first professional acting job at the Gate Theatre, Dublin.

Episode 3: A 20 year old white actor from the Midwest is the surprise appointment to direct Macbeth for the Negro Unit.

Episode 4: Until Orson, no one wanted to produce Marc Bernstein's pro-labour opera The Cradle Will Rock, with its clear left-wing union sympathies. Enthralled with Bernstein, Orson with his partner John Houseman, commit to a Broadway run. But as the hot subject of unionisation rages across the nation, the Federal Theatre Project is made to take drastic action.

Episode 5: Welles and Houseman agree on a Halloween Eve adaptation of The War Of The Worlds. What could possibly go wrong?

kerrycat says

Decidedly and unashamedly pro-Welles, this is just stunning - one of those "long" books that don't feel dragged out at all. Very entertaining, to the point, and honest as to Welles' faults as McGilligan navigates the evolution of Welles' abilities, culminating in the production of Kane. Excellent work.

Richard Stueber says

This book contains part of the career of the great (George) Orson Welles, born May 6, 1915, a native of Kenosha, Wisconsin, but the family moved to Chicago in 1918. The first 66 pages tell about his ancestry. The Wells (or Welles) family arrived on the Mayflower says the book, though I have traced my connection to Orson to Priscilla Mullins, his 8th great grandmother who did arrive on the Mayflower and is my 12th cousin 9 times removed.

Orson did attend school in the 4th grade when he was 10 years old in Madison, Wisconsin and lived then on the corner of State and Francis Streets. His first published photograph appeared on February 19, 1926 in the afternoon edition of the Capital Times. He was already a boy genius. By May 26 he had run away from

Madison and took the train to Chicago. Orson's mother had died already on May 10, 1924. By age 16 Orson was acting professionally in Ireland.

By 1938 Orson's Mercury Theatre was doing "The War of the Worlds" on radio and created a great deal of panic for those who were taking it seriously that the Martians had landed in New Jersey. By 1940 Orson was preparing what many considered the greatest film of all time "Citizen Kane".

That where the main part of the book ends, skipping to October 9, 1985 when Orson appeared for about the 50th time on the Merv Griffin show. The next morning he was found dead on the floor.

A lot happened between pages 69 and 706, covering little more than 25 years of Orson's life. You'd have to read other books to get most of what happened in the years between 1940 and 1985, but this is a very good place to start. Orson is one of my earliest heroes and still is one.

Jenny says

I love Orson Welles. But this book was too much for me. I felt like the author reminds the reader every other paragraph that Welles created Citizen Kane. It seemed constantly repetitive. Ruined the whole book. It could have been cut in half. Too drawn out for my tastes.

Nicola Pierce says

This was a glorious journey through the first twenty-five years of Orson Welles' life though I was surprised and delighted to discover that the last chapter was an account of his last day. About a third of a way into the book, I found myself lamenting my lack of drive and ambition ... and becoming bitter about the wasted hours I spend fast asleep. Whatever about Welles being a genius or a child prodigy, I was absolutely gobsmacked at his capacity for work. I'm finding it hard to recall a single example from his teens or early twenties but he was writing/editing/directing/acting in plays while working on other plays, thinking about other plays, getting involve in radio plays, running a theatre with John Houseman ... simultaneously, or something like that. He was a grafter of phenomenal capabilities who lived off a quick snooze every now and then. And he didn't lick if off the ground, his mother, an accomplished pianist, and social activist, shared his drive, filling her days with as many and varied interests as she could.

The book ultimately ends as filming begins on 'Citizen Kane' but provides a fascinating account of the preparations made by Welles before he was ready to shout 'Action!' For anyone interested in theatre or film, I highly recommend this as I learned a lot about writing for the stage and screen. I didn't want to finish reading this but I know who to read next as McGilligan generously soaks his text with references to the other Welles' biographers, including Simon Callow, and their books. A bloody wonderful read!

Dan Lalande says

Voluminous account of the meteoric rise of mega-talent Orson Welles and the bumptious imprint of his outsized persona on Broadway and Hollywood. Here, Welles, like Citizen Kane, is many people, some familiar - precocious prodigy, workaholic visionary, thunderous tyrant - and some foreign - way faring illustrator, struggling playwright, loving husband. So detailed is this study that even the most devout Wellesians will uncover some new "Rosebuds" (eg- that "Kane" was originally conceived as a musical!)

Michael Samerdyke says

A splendid book on Orson Welles.

It starts a little slowly, with a lot of material about his parents, but what makes this book valuable is that it looks at Welles' early career with a sympathetic eye. (Unlike Simon Callow's "The Road to Xanadu.") We get to marvel at the inventiveness and energy of Welles, and, in another nice touch, McGilligan takes Welles' seriously as a writer.

The book takes us up to the first day of shooting on "Citizen Kane" and then leaps to the last day of Welles' life.

In a way, this is the kind of biography Welles would have liked: fun, focused on the accomplishments, and not scolding or looking for the hidden flaw that would spoil everything. I learned some things about Welles I never knew, and I found this book most enjoyable.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:

Orson Welles, the defining wunderkind of modern entertainment, gets his due in a new biography of his early years - including his first forays in theatre and radio before his groundbreaking move to Hollywood.

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Episode 2:

Orson gets his first professional acting job at the Gate Theatre, Dublin.

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Until Orson, no one wanted to produce Marc Bernstein's pro-labour opera The Cradle Will Rock, with its clear left-wing union sympathies. Enthralled with Bernstein, Orson with his partner John Houseman, commit to a Broadway run. But as the hot subject of unionisation rages across the nation, the Federal Theatre Project is made to take drastic action.

Episode 5:

Welles and Houseman agree on a Halloween Eve adaptation of The War Of The Worlds. What could possibly go wrong?

Written by Patrick McGilligan

Read by Jack Klaff

Abridged and produced by Karen Rose

A Sweet Talk production for BBC Radio 4.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06tqsbz>

Bill Tyroler says

Orson Welles: all his appetites were outsized -- food, alcohol, female companionship, work, play, disputes, loyalty. Larger than life, indeed. Pat McGilligan pays homage to Welles with a fittingly massive biography. The subtitle, if somewhat ponderous, accurately describes the subject matter: "The Years of Luck and Genius on the Path to Citizen Kane." A poignant coda covers Welles' last day on earth, but otherwise, all roads indeed lead to Citizen Kane. There may be an assumption that Kane was the apotheosis of Welles' career; that's more or less conventional wisdom, not necessarily Pat's view, at least as expressed here. It's fair to say, I think, that Kane is a work of unquestioned genius. So, then, taking Welles' career to Kane and no farther sharpens the question of how much of Welles' trajectory to that point can be apportioned to genius, and how much to luck. Wisely, Pat leaves that conclusion to the reader. Welles was preternaturally mature, at least in the sense that at an early age he could comfortably relate to high-functioning, successful adults who seemed to treat him as a near-equal. Combine that with the boy's unadulterated love for performance, including staging plays, Shakespeare in particular, and you simply take as given a genius for language and social intelligence without caring what his scored IQ might have been. As for luck, great artists tend to make their own, don't they (<https://www.facebook.com/bill.tyroler...>)? The recently orphaned Orson takes off for Ireland as an adolescent and in the course of his travels, manages to befriend some of its most celebrated actors and land stage roles of his own. Luck, or exploiting opportunities we mere mortals would have missed? I won't belabor the point; while On the Road to Kane, Welles invariably found himself in the right place at the right time, and just maybe that's because he was himself the uniquely right person to recognize and seize the opportunity the typically blinkered individual would have missed. Many philosophers, from Lefty Gomez to Napoleon, have expressed a preference for being lucky rather than good (<http://ask.metafilter.com/.../Better-lu.....>). I'd prefer to see it as a function of, the better you are, the more that luck seems to come your way. Welles made his own luck, I'd say.

A word on Pat's writing, which is a sheer pleasure to read. Pat has a genuine knack for finding the right word, the precise adjective, the witty epigram: "Orson's maternal great-grandfather led 'a quiet tick-tock, tick tock existence ... and looked like a clock of a man.' John G. Ives's progress toward prosperity was also metronomic." And: "(Delores) Del Rio, who frequently served as a tabula rasa for the men in her life, enjoyed listening to Orson almost as much as he enjoyed listening to himself." And: "Alcoholism usually brought out Orson's sympathy --- it reminded him of his father and of John Barrymore too -- and alcoholism allowed him to rationalize all manner of outrageous behavior. Mank(iewicz) was like a writer's Barrymore." In a Sports Illustrated column, Tom Verducci employed a Latin phrase to describe the incomparable Vin Scully: "eloquentia perfecta." Communication of the highest order. Seems aptly applied to "Young Orson." Combine that with Pat's infectious enthusiasm for his subject and an apparent encyclopedic knowledge of the history of dramatic arts (film, theater, radio) and you've got a book I can't recommend highly enough.

Welles' career didn't end with Kane, of course, and his subsequent filmography would be the envy of all but a handful of the best directors (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orson_W...). There's more material to be mined, in other words, not least an exploration of why Welles is thought to have had a failed career (true only if measured against the impossible standard of helming the greatest film ever at an impossibly early age). But

Pat doesn't evince any intent to play Robert Caro to LBJ's Orson Welles. That's OK, Pat's attained near-perfection with this account of Welles' early life.*

*One minor error. The photographic plate displaying several of Welles' putative love interests, mixes up Tilly Losch and Vera Zorina. For that matter, the actual picture of Losch doesn't really do her justice; she was quite stunning and it's easy to see how Welles would have been so smitten by her. Consider this little vignette (<http://www.jewishjournal.com/holl.../.../...>)

"Shortly after the war, Welles was invited as the guest of honor to a celebrity dinner in Vienna. The post-war mood among the guests was somber. According to Jaglom, one guest reportedly said, 'Vienna is not what it used to be! Something has gone out of Vienna.'

'Welles tartly replied, 'Yes. The Jews.'"

Welles had run across and worked with many Jews in New York and Hollywood of course (and his legal guardian was Jewish as well), but none were from Vienna, at least none that appear in the book. Except Tilly Losch.

Philip Schlotfeldt says

The only pristine biography I have ever read. McGilligan's research is tireless as it challenges competing histories of Welle's sometimes ambiguous early years. Yet through it all the book sustains interest and entertainment.

Wisconsin Alumni says

Patrick McGilligan '74

Author

On the centennial of his birth, the defining wunderkind of modern entertainment gets his due in a groundbreaking new biography of his early years—from his first forays in theater and radio to the inspiration and making of Citizen Kane.

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Gary says

I thank my 8th grade English teacher for awakening my avid interest in THE HOBBIT, THE LORD OF THE RINGS, and Orson Welles Radio play WAR OF THE WORLDS. We listened to the play in class, then she challenged us to do our own play on a cassette, and she played it in the class, if you did one...which my nephew and I did together..... I still have the tape somewhere. I became a fan of his, and his movies...and I've enjoyed the talents of Orson for years. I had a friend mention that he had bought this book as a Christmas gift, and I was intrigued. I downloaded it on my NOOK, and while reading it I listened to the play again. My son gave it to me for a gift several years ago on cd. I haven't seen CITIZEN KANE in many many years. I am thinking that I need to get a copy somewhere or see if I can find it online to watch. I had recently watched both TOUCH OF EVIL and THE THIRD MAN. Orson was not afraid to be his own person, to be free to experience on the stage, on the radio, and in Hollywood. He had many failures, but pulled himself up by his bootstraps, and kept forging forward. He made many friends, and many enemies, but he was a success, and quite a character to boot. If you have any interest in him, and his life, I highly recommend this book. It read pretty quick considering it was quite long. The writing was free flowing, and interesting to say the least. Experience Orson!

Luke Powers says

A fantastic biography of Mr. Welles. I've read many others including the Barbara Leaming one which is the closest thing we have to Orson's version of things. This one is well researched and corrects the record on many of the previously published biographies. It isn't all encompassing as the title should indicate to you but it focuses on Orson's life leading up to the filming of Citizen Kane. It begins with family background on Welles parents which can be a bit of a slog to get through but if you are interested in this, it is the most comprehensive that I've read. The last couple of chapters do jump to Orson's final days and touches on his unfinished projects including the Magic Show. I personally hope that I do one day get to see The Other Side of the Wind which was his most complete project which could still be called Orson's. If you are interested in learning more about that film, there is an excellent book titled Orson Welles's Last Movie: The Making of The Other Side of the Wind which I would recommend. I also want to mention that the theory espoused by some other biographers and others that the Magnificent Mr. Welles was washed up during his later career is absolutely false. The two films that one should check out and that proved this to me are Chimes at Midnight and F for Fake. F for Fake in fact has the most masterful editing I've ever seen in a film.
