



The Dark Side of Genius : The Life of Alfred Hitchcock

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"Absolutely compulsory reading." The New York Times Book Review

No one but a tortured genius could have created such brooding, suspenseful, and utterly original films as SPELLBOUND, PSYCHO, and THE BIRDS. Now Alfred Hitchcock, the intensely private and often bizarre creator of these masterpieces, is fully revealed in a masterful biography that traces the roots of his obsessions back to a childhood in which the seeds of his future films were sown.

The Dark Side of Genius : The Life of Alfred Hitchcock Details

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F.R. says

On a recent flight to the US I sat and watched Toby Jones in 'The Girl', while next to me the other half fixed her attention on Anthony Hopkins in 'Hitchcock'. Our side by side pursuit of the dark side of Alfred Hitchcock inspired me to get Donald Spoto's tome out of storage and read it again for the first time in 20 years.

'The Dark Side of Genius' is both an apt and unapt title. Without a shadow of a doubt Spoto sees Hitchcock as a genius, being unstinting in his praise of his masterworks (and even of his more interesting failures), but the dark parts are what Spoto really wants to write about. The problem is that the more unsavoury elements don't become as apparent until the last 25 years of Sir Alf's long life; so whereas the genius is on display throughout, there's a lot of book to get through before the dirt is dished.

It makes for a somewhat unbalanced biography. Hitchcock's childhood in Leytonstone is something of a plod for the reader to get through. Spoto – a man who largely writes Hollywood biographies – seems lost in the East End of London. (I could imagine poring over his 'Collected Works of Charles Dickens' to try and see how one does it). He finds himself on surer footing when Alf enters the British film industry and – of course – when he moves to Hollywood. But the real bravura stuff comes when looking at his treatment of Tippi Hedren (and earlier Vera Miles - as well as other actresses), which is rivetingly disturbing.

However, as a Hitchcock fan, George Orwell's 'Benefit of Clergy' came to mind as I read about the latter thwarted obsessions and drunken decline. How much should our knowledge of an artist's life affect our appreciation of his or her works? To use Orwell's example, what would we say about Shakespeare if we discovered that he was Elizabethan England's most ruthless serial killer? In Hitchcock's case a lot of his darker urges were without a doubt transformed into entertainment for the masses – there's the obsession with blondes throughout and in 'Vertigo' the taking apart and remaking an individual. While as he got older, Spoto tells us (with a commendable absence of glee) rape fantasies burst more and more to the surface, as can be seen in 'Marnie' or 'Frenzy'. Spoto's narrative manages to combine feeling sorry for the man in his frustration and loneliness, with also being repulsed by him. But does any of this dent my enjoyment of 'Rear Window'? Or 'Strangers On A Train'? Or 'Psycho'? It's an elegantly written and meticulously researched biography, but once those films start, I'll just get lost in them again and forget all about it.

Elaine says

If your interested in Alfred Hitchcock this is a very informative book!

Paul Bryant says

A very fine biography which spreads out Hitchcock's unhappy psychology like a banquet for us to dine on. What was this fat ugly film director going to do but hire a succession of lovely blonde actresses and then sexually assault them by proxy in his movies... culminating in Tippi Hedron's brutal rape-by-birds scene - he insisted on take after take, it went on for days. Well, this book fingers that scene as the nadir of Hitch's

horribly creepy treatment of women - because at the time he was also attempting to take over Tippi Hedron's entire life. But the ultimate sadism is to be found in *Frenzy*, which is not for the squeamish. This is the only book I've yet come across which meditates on the fate of people who are ugly and know they're ugly. It's kind of a taboo subject.

Naturally that's not all what this book is about. Hitchcock was a genius.

David says

An affecting portrait of a very sad man. No matter what his successes and accomplishments, Hitchcock—at least as Spoto portrays him—was almost never content, happy. Some of that eternal misery found expression in behaviour that, today, would have Hitchcock expelled from The Academy. That, too, is sad. He joins an ever-longer list of creative artists of whom we must ask if it is possible to separate the accomplishments of the art from the severe human limitations of the artist.

Michael says

Whenever one delves into the background of someone famous, one runs the risk of finding out things that one might not wish to know. The question becomes, does one want to know the potentially tarnished portions of the individual's past or stick with the unsullied image?

Obviously, if you are going to stick with the unsullied version, you probably do not want to read a biography which has the phrase “dark side” in it.

The Dark Side of Genius: The Art of Alfred Hitchcock is a fascinating exploration of the master director. The author does a fine job of walking the line between writing a biography of the man and exploring his long, amazing career. The films and their major motifs are put into the context of what was happening in Hitch's life. A healthy dose of armchair psychology accompanies this examination, providing a very full, if at times incredibly sad, picture of the artist.

The result is a study of a man who was a brilliant director and producer, someone who was able to manipulate audiences using a variety of images and visual (as well as audio) techniques. We also see Hitchcock as someone who spent a good deal of his life manipulating people off set as well, someone who spent a major portion of his time searching for or trying to create an idealized feminine reality despite his long marriage.

The Dark Side of Genius gives us a glance at the many psychological issues which Hitchcock dealt with. The result, like one of Hitch's best films, both repels the readers with its unpleasant imagery while drawing them in, making them feel and even sympathize with the main character.

Donald Spoto does an excellent job of laying out the life, history, psychology, and career of Alfred Hitchcock. He holds nothing back, which may be difficult for some readers.

On a personal note, I found some of the early material fairly mind blowing. It never crossed my mind that Hitchcock started his career as a young man when the cinema was first forming, that he might have actually worked in Germany as some of the great masterpieces of early film were being created. It did not dawn on me that he was a contemporary of H. G. Wells and others.

A note on the audiobook. Unfortunately, the audio transfer leaves something to be desired. The audio version is riddled with unnecessary pauses which can only be the turning of script pages. They appear with alarming frequency throughout the biography. I found this very distracting. There are also a few gaps where there is missing narration. Granted, it is only a few words, at most a sentence, but still a problem. Towards the end of the audiobook there is a mention of which tape and take they are on. All of these problems should have been addressed during the editing process.

Anna Burke says

I am fascinated by Alfred Hitchcock's work. He's an early master of the macabre, yes, but skilled at so many aspects of film-making: direction, lighting and cinematography, the ability to weave humor into dark and even desperate situations. He also benefited from the skilled expertise of his wife Alma who was, among other things, a skilled film editor. His work is iconic, but the man remains a mystery. My hope is to find a biography that will reveal something more about the man behind the legend, without resorting to rumor or devolving into something salacious. This book just didn't cut it for me. There's more here about the art than the man, which is fine by me, although I hoped there would be more new biographical information than was presented in this book.

I object to much of the pseudo-psychologizing that goes on about Hitchcock. It just makes no sense to perpetuate the notion that his work was a reflection of inner demons, a repressed upbringing, twisted longings, blah, blah, blah. From what I can gather, after reading about Alfred and Alma, his early life wasn't all that different from other young British lads raised in his day. So, why didn't dozens of creative artists of his ilk find their way into film?

In his conclusion, Spoto counters the notion that Hitchcock's art was the outpouring of a peculiarly troubled mind. In the author's words:

"Had his films been simple incarnations of his own fantasies and dreams, with no wider reference, he would have perhaps won a small and devoted group of admirers. But he expressed those elusive images and half remembered dreams in terms that moved and astounded and delighted and aroused awe from millions round the world."

So, how about a book that picks up where this one left off?

A.M. says

The audiobook is read in a deadpan way I found unappealing. Also the narrator is an American who mispronounces a lot of the English words and place names.

The way Hitch tried to get around the censors was fascinating. He was so proud of putting a flushing toilet in Psycho. It's also interesting that the man who filmed and brought psychiatrists to the screen never thought to see one himself for his own phobias and issues.

I also took comfort that all he had as an idea for North by Northwest was a chase over the Mount Rushmore monument. [half my own story ideas start with something equally as vague]

Spoto spends a lot of time on Psycho, which is understandable.

BUT... there's a heck of a lot of speculation based on nothing... other than the opinion of the biographer.

Hitch's manipulation of Tippi Hedren is frankly horrifying. Especially given this is an older title from 1983 and she came out in 2017 with ACTUAL sexual assault allegations against Hitchcock not just the

manipulative stuff that is reported here. Being dead, it's a one sided conversation, but I believe her. Her statements in the following article match so much of what this biographer has already identified. The oft-quoted story of a blonde in the back of a taxi, for instance.

<https://variety.com/2017/film/news/ti...>

Even in this bio Spoto admits that Hitch was terribly put out by women who had the temerity to get pregnant during the time that they had contracts with his production company, or the one he was working for. One child was sufficient, he was supposed to have told Vera Miles - couldn't she have refused her Tarzan husband - and to have a third child?! Gasp.

[given a choice between Hitch and Gordon Scott, I know which I'd be picking. It was also her first child with her then husband, a point Spoto doesn't bother to make.]

But this makes me frown:

Hedren says she never saw Hitchcock again but refused to stay silent about his abuse. She told many colleagues privately about what happened and first talked publicly about Hitchcock's harassment to his biographer, Donald Spoto, for a 1983 book. She revisited her tortured experiences on "Marnie" in her 2016 autobiography, "Tippi: A Memoir."

That would be THIS book... which is odd as Spoto talks more about how she had to go in a cage for days with the birds for the Birds than her experiences in Marnie.

PLUS Spoto almost blames Alma for her husband's behaviour. And NO SIR, that will NOT be allowed.

I freely admit to being more intrigued by Hitch's wife, Alma... Spoto says she was given writing credits as a way for him to earn more... *frowns* uh huh. [jeez, how many times have we heard that before? ... my wife types my manuscripts, does my research etc] She worked as a script adviser in the industry before he even got a job above making the title credits, she always proved useful to him.

I really want to hear HER story and I guess I'm not alone in that as per the usual movie way, not one but TWO Alma biopics came out recently.

Why did she stay in this sexless relationship? With only one child. Here, Spoto says her pregnant figure disgusted Hitch - which is a big reach for a man who didn't journal and rarely spoke about personal matters. Spoto also implies that she mothered her husband; driving him around and cooking his favourite meals. [not odd things, surely?] Spoto tells stories of how she had to rush home for dinner or she'd be in so much trouble.

makes a skeptical face

Hitch uses their own life for script story points: the seasick proposal of marriage, the arguments, the issues, his controlling all powerful mother figure, the vague apologies, the renaming of characters to 'Alma', the woman whose good opinion he quoted often 'Alma likes this cut...' was the highest praise he could give people.

It's bloody obvious she has more influence than this biographer has given her; even in his OWN narrative.

Stephen Rebello, on whose book [the movie] Hitchcock is based, gives two examples of her contribution to Psycho alone.

'Hitchcock wanted no music in the shower scene [in which the heroine, Janet Leigh, is stabbed to death]. He just wanted the screams of Janet Leigh and the sound of the water running. He was adamant about it.'

Meanwhile, the composer Bernard Herrmann had created the now-legendary score of screaming strings for the scene - which Reville thought was rather good.

'Hitch and Bernie were at loggerheads. Alma was extremely diplomatic, seductive and charming, and you'd want to please her because she was so smart.'

'Alma persuaded Hitchcock to listen to what Herrmann was doing with that sequence, not just to reject it out of hand.

'She really had a major impact on the film, by just persuading Hitch to back off from his own ego and listen to the idea of somebody else. In this case, a brilliant idea.'

And she saved Psycho from the ultimate goof by spotting Leigh swallowing while lying 'dead' on the floor.

'We must have run that sequence back and forth a couple of hundred times – we completely missed it,' says Psycho's script supervisor, Marshall Schlom.

Outraged by the lack of recognition for Reville on her death in 1982, the film critic Charles Champlin wrote an article in the Los Angeles Times entitled 'Alma Reville Hitchcock – The Unsung Partner'.

'The Hitchcock touch has four hands,' he wrote. 'And two of them are Alma's.'

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/f...>

Exactly.

Spoto doesn't even suggest Alma was involved in these movies at all.

Another quote from that article:

Film and food is where the passion in the Hitchcock marriage lay. It was a sexless relationship. Hitchcock was open about his impotence and often quipped that they'd only had sex once, when they'd conceived Patricia.

Oh, Alma honey... please tell me you got more than that.

And there was a few other things that struck me as odd about Catholicism and I was suprised to look it up later and find Spoto is a theologian. I can't remember what now... [the curse of audiobooks - can't mark passages]

So all in all it was very detailed, especially about the movies, but somehow left me less interested in the subject and more interested in his wife.

2 stars

Andrew Farley says

An incredible look into the life and works of one of the worlds greatest filmmakers.

It is easy to tell that huge amounts of research went into this detailed work of the life and movies of Alfred Hitchcock. Each chapter represents a group of years listed chronologically. Within a chapter you may jump forward or backward at the mention of a certain work, but overall you follow the timeline from his birth through his death.

However, this book is not so much a biography of Hitchcock's life as it is a commentary on how the author feels Hitchcock's films were representative of the inner demons he faced. Too often was I told how Hitchcock felt, not in a quote from the man himself, but written as fact from the mind of the author. At one point it is even pointed out that other Hitchcock biographers think(opinion) he was motivated by one particular thing or another, but they are wrong, because Hitchcock was(fact) motivated by this or that. As the title of the book suggests, all of these motivations come from a "dark side" of his mind that plagues him with desires most foul.

Overall this book was a decent in-depth look at the life and works of Alfred Hitchcock. If you can wade through the haze that is the author's opinion, being presented as fact, you will acquire a large amount of knowledge about the man himself, his works, people he worked with, his rise, and finally his decline. If, however, you would prefer something shorter to inform you about his works and allow the formation of your own opinions, I would suggest you look elsewhere.

Evan says

HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION!

A tour-de-force, un-put-downable biography, and thus far the best Hollywood bio I've ever read.

When Donald Spoto's ambitious, daring and provocative biography on the "master of suspense" appeared in 1983, it blew all previous efforts out of the water. It also engendered controversy. Some fans of Hitch were outraged and scholars and critics were uncomfortable with the level of speculation, artistic license and psychoanalysis Spoto engaged in to match the bizarre content of the director's films with the life influences that may have given birth to them.

The book seems to have spawned a cottage industry of authors eager and willing to rebut, refute or otherwise take down Spoto.

But, having read the book, I see almost nothing out of line in Spoto's observations, certainly nothing outrageous or inconceivable. In fact, I find Spoto very precise and consistent in how he matches the known and reasonably extrapolated factors of Hitchcock's life and statements with the obsessions, themes, and subject matter in the director's films. And what makes the book a tour-de-force, in part, is how well Spoto knows the totality of the filmmaker's work, and how he traces similarities of themes and content over a canon that spanned half a century: how quirky bits of business in Hitchcock's silent movies, for instance, still show up in his films decades later.

Yes, Spoto does extrapolate how Hitch's devotion to his mother, his Catholic upbringing and Catholic guilt, the Cockney rebellious streak of his parents, his general "Englishness", his social awkwardness and introversion, his late loss of his virginity, his tendency toward control and humiliation of people borne of a sense of social exclusion and lack of self confidence, and his unrequited desires for women he could never have, make their way into the celluloid art for all to see. Spoto more or less argues that Hitchcock's oeuvre is a coded biography of the secret desires and repressions of his life. And I find it a very convincing argument.

In addition to seeking links between the secretive Hitchcock's life and art, the book tries to explain or at least document the director's sometimes sociopathic and even cruel Svengali tendencies on and off the set, particularly toward his leading ladies, but also toward his writers and other associates.

I had planned to pen a much longer review (I have five pages of notes), but am choosing to keep it short.

The book is one of the most memorable reading experiences I've ever had, and no matter what side you come down on it, or whatever your opinion is of Hitchcock's films, the book is endlessly fascinating and compulsively readable. And yes, I did learn a lot about movies I thought I knew well.

(KR@KY 2017)

Chad says

Definitely an interesting read. I think that a film student would get more out of the technical aspects of the book in terms of specific films of his. I have only seen a small percentage of his massive filmography but I enjoyed getting little glimpses at the man behind the name.

I was intrigued to find out more about his cameo appearances in his own films. I had always taken it as just a unique calling card but it was actually much more deliberate and calculated. Hitch was generally of the opinion that popular actors come and go. Appearing in the film provided a sort of stamp of directorial ownership and was meant to establish himself over the long term as the creator of the movie.

Along those lines, I was also interested in seeing his apparent disdain for actors in general. He definitely seemed to be of the type who believes in the notion of a battle being won before it starts. I think it spoke tremendously to his artistic vision that his work was mostly done before shooting even began. Once that stage was underway, he often seemed to lose interest entirely.

It's troubling to think of how much work was really his and how much was done by the cast of people around him. His wife Alma probably doesn't get enough credit for being the rock that grounded him emotionally, as well as her creative contributions as a writer for him. Hitch seemed to be the type to take credit for as much of a film as possible while allowing his crew to be portrayed almost as elves, bowing down to the creative master.

And of course there is the issue of how he treated his leading ladies and how progressively worse he became over the years. Listening to Tippi Hedren's experiences during shooting *The Birds* was terrifying and sickening.

Still, an amazingly adept director with a great visual eye. Probably one of the most technically brilliant directors we've seen just in terms of the overall process. A complicated man with a gross tonnage of personal issues - this definitely made for an interesting read.

Robert says

Alfred Hitchcock is quickly becoming one of my favorite film directors, and for good reason. He was able to tap into primal emotions in a way that many couldn't. And for this same reason I love this biography by Donald Spoto. Seeing as he featured prominently in the various retrospective documentaries packaged with the fifteen films I watched last month, I knew I had to get my hands on this book because he seemed to be the definitive interpreter of Hitchcock's oeuvre and personality. While arranged in typical biography fashion, i.e., chronologically, Spoto interweaves his own assessment of Hitchcock's psychology and how this manifested itself in his art. That aspect was most fascinating and keeps it from being a by-the-numbers list of facts/filmography. It's also packed with anecdotes and footnotes that provide additional insight. From a literary perspective, it's one of the best biographies I've ever read and I was able to power my way through it because I was so invested in the material and the way it was presented. Although I was familiar with bits and pieces of Hitchcock's personal life, there were certain details revealed (towards the end of his career) that alternately made my stomach turn and yet still feel pity for him. In no small part I feel the latter because I saw a lot of psychological similarities between him and myself (at least in the way we approach human relationships). If you're the least bit interested in film history, or Hitchcock in particular, I would highly recommend this. It's well-organized, fun to read, and contains a wealth of information and analysis.

Vicky says

Wow. This is a heavy book - in terms of length, certainly. It would be a terrific doorstop, although in my case I listened to the audiobook. But also heavy in terms of minutiae of Hitchcock's filmmaking and pseudo psychoanalysis of his films and life. I give it 4 stars because it succeeds on the film minutiae end but falls short a bit under the weight of the amateur psychology. I have Spoto's *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock* - another great doorstop - and it certainly seems Spoto has taken on a negative view of Hitch since that book in the *Dark Side*. A well-deserved negative view it seems. This depiction of Hitchcock is supported by interviews and correspondence with others. The psychobabble, on the other hand, is not attributed to any authority and gets tiresome after awhile. It is especially heavy during the accounts of *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, and *Frenzy* - three of Hitchcock's darker films to be sure - and, to a lesser extent, in *The Birds*. I could only listen to about an hour at a time without getting bored by it. The book did leave me wanting to see Hitchcock's films again, to know more about Alma Reville and Pat Hitchcock, and to see the biopic, *Hitchcock*. It definitely is a book that will stick in my memory.

Eric says

This book is as much a treatise of early film and television as it is a biography. Hitchcock is revealed to be a learned visual artist inspired by his own perverse fears and masochism. The film and television industry rewards his films' financial success by allowing him to wield his vicious, carte blanche control over his writers producers and actors. In the early days, actors did not have a union and were contracted to a production company for their unspecified use on whatever picture they desired of them. Hitchcock fully abused this system and particularly abused his female leads on a deep level. Hitchcock is no genius as the author may believe, but simply an unduly celebrated masochist puppeteer that played out his fantasies through his actors.

Elmwoodblues says

As a kid, I ran home after school to watch Alfred Hitchcock walk into that rotund silhouette, the iconic 'bum-da-ba-de-DUM-be-bum' signalling the start of 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents'. As a teen, watching 'Notorious', the thrill was commensurate with the hormones: hinted undercurrents of sex and death, submission and sadism, power and things out of control. As an adult, there always remains, after countless viewing of the canon, some new thing to see, some trick to observe, some 'I see what he did there' moment.

So, 'The Dark Side of Genius' presented me with the problem of learning how the magician did the trick: cheapened it all just a tiny bit, made some aspect of MY interpretation of what it all means now open to more-empirical evidence. A thorough, if repetitive, look at seminal psychological imagery, carried out in Hitchcock's case on a grand stage of film and for the record, this case study is certainly valuable to any Hitchcock fan, movie fan, psych fan, film-maker fan. Studio politics of the day, technical details spanning the move to sound in movies, color, censors, how the American government wanted itself to be seen by the viewing public; is all here. Just, don't expect a Hitchcock-paced thriller; you can see where it is all going, and how it will end.

Maria E says

What I got out of this book is that I haven't seen as many Hitchcock movies as I thought I had and the author talked about what a sick SOB Hitch was but without analyzing it. Soto gave enough of the background to assign blame to a repressive Catholic upbringing, the Hollywood scene, post-Victorian London, and just being a sadist (but aren't all directors?)

I did wonder though about the focus on Rape/Murder scenes toward the end of Hitch's life and Hitch's belief post *The Birds* that the American public would find such movie scenes enjoyable. Then I look at *Criminal Minds*, *CSI*, *NCIS* and realize that they do.

Andy says

I had a great time revisiting this book after 30+ years. Essential reading for fans of Hitchcock or movies in general. I also highly recommend the *Attaboy Clarence* podcast which features the 3-part series *The Adventures of Alfred Hitchcock*.

Sketchbook says

Cher maitre, Hitchcock. From his 5-decade career, I can cite at least 12 pix that are outstanding for me. Fr other giants - Hawks, Lang, Lubitsch, Sturges, Wilder - I spot about 4-5 each. My Hitch favs: a) "Notorious." Sublime Bergman, s&m. Cary forces her to sleep w enemy agent who does nightly bedside reports to mummie as Hitch, Spoto notes, did w his own. This is his most visually sublime, too. b) Then, "Strangers on a Train." Ray Chandler, signed to sc, didn't connect w Hitch, said his work was 'erased.' Seeking the cinematic, Hitch made the 'good' guy a tennis player instead of architect as in Highsm's novel. R Walker ('boy next door') was damn brill as a psychotic. He was 31 and dead a year later. c) "Vertigo"...Kim Novak's insecurities, we learn, informed her performance. The story, adds Spoto, reveals Hs attraction-repulsion to an idealized blonde, along w his double-image fascination.

That H played infantile pranks and bullied the vulnerable cannot be ignored. In 2008 Tippi Hedren was still talking about his hurtful manipulation (London Times). "Psycho" made H vastly rich. Add Truffaut's adoration, plus his age, and out popped the pervo. (Even H might like to ignore 3 'clinkers' as Kael described the follow-ups). "Torn Curtain," '66, has one fresh element: the difficulty in killing someone, which came fr his writer.

Spoto describes his growth in the emerging film world of 20s: at UFA in Germany he learned consummate technique. He also learned the importance of telling a film visually. The sound could go off, he said, and you should understand what was happening. He never cadged sc credit as every squirt director does today.

A complicated man: his betrayal of Bernard Herrmann, to many, is defining. Studio newts, realizing "Torn Curtain" was embalmed, wanted a 'modern' score. After their 6 marvelous pix, Herrmann was booted by H - ending a long, creative friendship. He then used a faux-Herrmann score. Generously, Spoto doesn't focus on this. But I ask: what price Hollywood?

The fact is, Hitchcock could be contemptible: after four successful films w writer John Michael Hayes, he was jealous when Hayes won a mystery writer's award, and, though they worked well together, Hitch was stingy about pay and cut their relationship when Hayes proposed a raise.

The sexually repressed Hitch (I sus he was basically gay) deliberately got Monty Clift drunk at dinner. He thought this was an amusing stunt. So I jest: his one tryst w cineaste wife Alma evokes the British chestnut, "My dear, I know this is unbearable for *both of us*, but let's just close our eyes and think of England." They thought of the next Hitch pic.

Cher maitre, up yours!

Jason says

This was a tough one. Since there is very little known about Alfred Hitchcock, most of this biography was speculation gleaned from a few facts and reading into his films. A lot of it I found repetitive, in terms of going into how he worked on each films-it was pretty much the same, but there were pages devoted to his process for each and every film, over and over again. Some information I didn't have have and that was interesting, but I found this one to be kind of blah-which is rare, having read many of Mr. Spoto's works in the past and loving them.

Kathrina says

A while back, while reading Mr. Peanut, I was distracted by a small side-story of two lovers who meet in a Hitchcock seminar. Regardless of these characters and their roles in that story, I became increasingly jealous of their enrollment in such a course. I never got to study Hitchcock in school! But I want to! I do!

Spoto's Hitchcock bio (this one, I mean. He's also written two more) was the perfect overview of Hitchcock's films and his at times creepy, pathetic, inspired and always melodramatic persona as genius director. I was fascinated with Hitchcock's slow evolution from introspective new kid to generally respected director to legendary and untouchable commander of his realm. It was a good lesson in how, as we grow older, we become concentrated caricatures of ourselves; Hitchcock only became more lugubrious, more opinionated, and more fat as he aged. And, if Spoto is to be believed, more viciously obsessed with his leading ladies the more sexually abstinent he remained.

Also, here's the kind of stuff I just eat up like candy, and most of you probably already know already, and I probably knew, too, but promptly forgot, and can enjoy just as much the second time around:

--Tippi Hedrin is Melanie Griffith's mom; Melanie was four years old at the filming of the *The Birds*, and Hitchcock gave her a doll dressed as her mom (green dress), nailed into a little doll-sized box.

--Anne Baxter is Frank Lloyd Wright's granddaughter.

--Carole Lombard might have been Hitchcock's own first superstar, if she hadn't died in a plane crash at the age of 33.

Of course I've been watching a few more Hitchcock films than usual lately. I really recommend *39 Steps*, and watch for all the sexual double-entendres you wouldn't usually expect in a suspense drama of its era. I watched *The Trouble with Harry* last night, and was really thrown by just how weird it was. Shirley McLaine makes her film debut here (Hitchcock discovered her on the stage), and she is just...high. I'm pretty sure she's high the whole time. Her later embrace of New Age really doesn't surprise me in the least.

This bio was long on a chronological study of Hitchcock's character, but short on film analysis. Of course, that was Spoto's intention, so I can't fault that. But I'll certainly be reading more about the films themselves. Talking about long, have you seen Spoto's backlist? Enormous. And he's still doing it -- his Joan Crawford

just came out last week.

Nick Smith says

How does one get inside the head of a major director? In his films, he really places a lot of himself, and so it was in this biography of my favorite director ever. Now I can go enjoy more of his films I've not yet seen armed with intricate commentary and critical review. I am a cineaste in the pure form and always will value art above box office value. But it is curious and interesting to note when those two coincide and when they diverge. One could "write a book about it."

This biography of Hitchcock reminds me of "Stephen Crane: A Life of Fire," in that Hitchcock and Crane were not really recognized in their time, but were thought highly of largely after they died. It is true that both were very popular to their audiences and fans, and while one suffered horribly from financial debts and problems, the other was essentially very-well compensated.

In its incisive gaze on the director, and its evolution of a psychology or character of mind over time, judging by the films, of course, but also having a dialogue with those who worked closely with Hitchcock, it really does a great deal to show how private fantasy is articulated into film, and thus, elevating film to high art form. I was so pleased by the totality of the book, that I can recommend it to anyone who wants to know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about this iconic filmmaker. Five Stars!
