

The Movies, the Magic and Me

by JoAnna Ramsey

I was 14-years-old when I watched my first silent film. I was planted firmly in front of the television with my dad watching Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last!* when suddenly there was Lloyd hanging onto a gigantic clock on the side of a skyscraper. I laughed harder than I had ever laughed before and then, when I had finished laughing, I began to wonder about how the movies was made and how successful it was when it premiered. It was at this point that I had an epiphany: I loved movies. I really, truly loved movies! This realization was not entirely unexpected. I'm fairly certain that this love of movies is genetic in some way. My father is also a huge movie buff and it is mostly because of him that our film collection is as big as it is. It is because of my father that I have been surrounded by films since I was born, but it wasn't until I saw *Safety Last!* that I began to realize just how much there was to learn about films. It wasn't until I saw this silent film that I really fell, head over heels, in love with movies.

Once I discovered my love of movies it was as if the floodgates had opened. I began watching every movie we had and, after a while, I found that I wanted to know more about the stars themselves and about the movie industry. I started to read my dad's books and going to the library almost every week to check out those he didn't have. Soon after I began going to the library I found that there were too many books I wanted that the library did not own. I began to go online to buy books and for a while it worked, but it didn't take too long for me to discover that I simply couldn't afford to buy all of the books I wanted to read. Luckily, there was another option, and it was this option that really gave me the opportunity to build my book collection.

My mother had noticed my growing interest in books and recommended that we look at The Baltimore Book Thing in the city. I had absolutely no idea what exactly she was talking

about at the time, but when I heard the words “free” and “books” I was hooked. Before I walked into the small non-descript building I was skeptical of what I would find but by the time I left I was in heaven. Right through the door was a full section reserved for books related to movies and television. I found books on Lauren Bacall, George Burns, Katharine Hepburn, and a number of others. The first time I visited The Book Thing I left with about 10 books in my arms. I devoured them all.

I continued to order books online but when I couldn’t find a certain book, or if I thought it was too expensive, I would add it to my growing mental list of what to look for at bookstores or at The Book Thing. At one point I lost track of the books I owned and realized that I had three of the same Katharine Hepburn book. As my collection of books increased so did my knowledge of film history.

The more books I read and movies I watched, the more I learned about the film industry and its history. The books I read were forging a bridge between the history of film and the films themselves. I found myself beginning to make connections between a certain period in history and a particular film, or between the changing technologies and their effect on actors in films. I watched Greta Garbo’s *Queen Christina* and learned enough about both Greta Garbo and her screen partner John Gilbert in other autobiographies to learn that although it also starred John Gilbert, and was designed to help boost his career, his part was never advertised and in the end it did nothing to help his failing career. I learned words written by actors just how much the Great Depression and the Red Scare really affected movies and the lives of people associated with the industry. Through my books, I was learning not just about movies, but also about history and the people who lived through it. I have learned so much through my collecting and I continue to learn each time I pick up a book or watch a movie.

My collection started small and with 49 books, it is still not as big as I am sure it will grow to be, but as it grows, I grow. I have found a language in which I am reaching proficiency and at the same time I have also found something that I doubt I will ever lose interest in. Luckily enough, there are always new books to read and movies to watch, just as there are always new connections to make, new actors to discover, and thousands of stories to be told through the magic of the movies.

Bibliography

1. Bacall, Lauren. *Lauren Bacall: By Myself*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

I love the fierce and incredibly outspoken nature of Lauren Bacall and she does not shy away from these qualities in her autobiography. Her autobiography sheds light on the studio system of the 40s and how in some cases it helped her career and just how quickly one bad film almost ended it. Her romance with Humphrey Bogart is documented from its surprisingly non-dramatic beginning to its tragic ending. In this book as she depicts him in a way she claims no biographer had ever been able to successfully do thus not only telling her story but that of another star as well.

2. Bankhead, Tallulah. *Tallulah: My Autobiography*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952.

Tallulah Bankhead's autobiography was not as sensational as many (including myself) had hoped. She did not confirm rumors of sordid love affairs, wild parties, or drug use. Instead she used her book to put an end to unfavorable rumors while reminiscing over her childhood as well as her career in stage, screen, and radio. Many of the rumors she denies in her book have since been confirmed, but her book is still full of her sarcastic dry humor making it an incredibly enjoyable and enlightening read.

3. Blum, Daniel, and John Kobal. *A New Pictorial History of the Talkies*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1982.

This book not only traces the beginnings of the talkies to the 1980s but it also uses hundreds of pictures to document the change. Through this book I not only learned about the changes occurring in films, but also about what were the most popular movies of each year and who were the biggest stars. The pictures in this book are also fun to look at and the interesting information it includes has me re-reading this book again and again.

4. Blum, Daniel. *A Pictorial History of Silent Screen*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1953.

Daniel Blum's book about the history of the silent screen is very similar to his history of the talkies. Both books trace the history of these two film periods through brief descriptions and pictures. The pictures in this book track the developments and changes in film during the silent period much better than that of the later book because the changes were much more dramatic. I really enjoy reading this book because it begins at the very start of film with the Edison shorts and goes all the way to the last silent film before the rise of the talkies.

5. Brown, Kelly R. *Florence Lawrence, The Biograph Girl: America's First Movie Star*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1999.

Kelly R. Brown's biography of Florence Lawrence looks at a star who quickly rose to fame and then just as quickly fell. Said to be the first real movie star, Lawrence was labeled "The Biograph Girl" and after becoming incredibly famous was famously forgotten. Most of her films were lost and she is not often mentioned in film history books but this biography

helped me get to know the star and why she was so important in the creation of the “movie star” as we know them today.

6. Burns, George. *Gracie: A Love Story*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1988.

This is one of my favorite memoirs in my collection. George Burns recounts his romance with comic partner Gracie Allen from their meeting to her death. Told with Georges trademark humor, this loving memoir took me on an emotional rollercoaster while also informing me on the inner workings of vaudeville, radio, and television.

7. Cavett, Dick, and Christopher Porterfield. *Cavett*. New York: Bantam, 1975.

Dick Cavett's memoir looks at the many celebrities he has interviewed over the years as well as his own life. He writes about how he went from being an actor to a respected talk show host who interviewed them. He shows a behind the scenes look at celebrities and how television interviews work providing not only his own perspective of famous actors that he has met but also an encompassing look at the art of the interview.

8. Deneuve, Catherine. *Close up and Personal*. Trans. Polly McLean. London: Orion, 2005.

Catherine Deneuve's memoir takes the form of diaries she kept during the filming of five movies most of which were filmed in France while some were filmed in other countries. Her diaries reveal a warm and compassionate woman, a side to her that is not often seen. I own both the English translation and the original French publication of her memoir *À l'ombre de moi-même* (In My Own Shadow). This was the first French book that I ever read and with both versions of the book I was not only able to learn more about Catherine Deneuve, but also about French.

9. Fowler, Gene. *Good Night, Sweet Prince: The Life and Times of John Barrymore*. New York: Viking, 1944.

This biography of John Barrymore shows the effects of alcoholism on an actor's career and on those who know him. From someone who knew him at the end of his life this biography attempts to understand the workings behind a man who was considered to be one of the greatest actors of all time. This book is one of my favorites in my collection not only because of the sketches done by John Barrymore that are printed on the inside cover, but also because there is a note inside that says "this edition is produced in full compliance with the war production board conservation orders" and I think its really interesting that, that was printed in the book.

10. Golden, Eve. *Vamp: The Rise and Fall of Theda Bara*. Vestal, NY: Emprise Pub., 1996.

This biography looks at a star who was once one of the biggest names in Hollywood but is not often written about in such a comprehensive manor. Most of Theda Bara's films have been destroyed in fires (common for most nitrate films) and all that exists from what is said to be her best film is about 45 seconds. This memoir attempts to what has never truly been

attempted and, using what few resources still exist, was able to give me a unique look at the rise and fall of a unique and influential silent film actress.

11. Haun, Harry. *The Movie Quote Book*. New York: Bonanza, 1986.

This book should be a staple in the collections of every movie lover. With quotes from the beginning of the talkies all the way to about 1985, this book acts as a dictionary for people, like me, who love to quote movies.

12. Hepburn, Katharine. *Me: Stories of My Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

Katharine Hepburn's autobiography tells her remarkable story in her own unique voice. Her eccentric ways and the ups and downs of her career are recorded in this entertaining book. She also delves into her 27-year romance with her on screen partner Spencer Tracy. The writing style of the book is reflective of Hepburn's speaking voice and it really made me feel as though she is telling me the story of her life instead of simply recording the facts.

13. Heston, Charlton. *The Actor's Life, Charlton Heston: Journals, 1956-1976*. Ed. Hollis Alpert. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978.

Charlton Heston's journals began my venture into book collecting. It was the first autobiography of a movie star that I had ever received. The book was given to me a few years ago by my uncle who told me that it was my grandmother's. She had met Charlton Heston at a book signing and had him sign her copy of his book for her. Not only were these journals fascinating, but the book itself was also able to connect me to my grandmother in a way I never had the chance to be.

14. Kanin, Garson. *Tracy and Hepburn: An Intimate Memoir*. New York: Bantam, 1972.

This memoir was written as a love letter to two of Garson Kanin's best friends. Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy were both on screen lovers and off for 27 years and this wonderful book looks at their relationship through the eyes of a close friend. . It is a very enjoyable read with many entertaining anecdotes about the two and the intricacies of their relationship. Done with delicacy, honesty, and love this memoir offers a unique outside perspective on one of the greatest film romances of all time.

15. Kotsilibas-Davis, James, and Myrna Loy. *Myrna Loy: Being and Becoming*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Myrna Loy's autobiography traces her life from her modest beginnings in Montana to her rise to stardom in Hollywood and her subsequent work with the United Nations. In her memoir she looks at the effects of typecasting on her career, her career on her marriage, and her celebrity status on her involvement in politics. Providing a full look at herself and at those around her, Myrna Loy not only wrote about herself, but also included advice about life, that encouraged me to reach out and never let myself feel limited in what I can do in life.

16. Marx, Groucho. *The Groucho Letters: Letters to and from Groucho Marx*. New York: Manor, 1974.

This compilation of letters written to and from Groucho Marx is great fun to read. They reveal the man behind the face paint and, while he still shows his potent humor in his writing, he also reveals a side to himself that is not seen in his films. I love reading his letters to friends and then those written to executives because I think it is the differences in his language and tone that says the most about him.

17. Riva, Maria. *Marlene Dietrich*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

This biography of Marlene Dietrich was written by her daughter and released after her death. Unlike the sordid tale written by Joan Crawford's daughter, Maria looks at her mother in a very compassionate and understanding way from both an outside view and from her own perspective as a daughter. Shedding light on the inner workings of a woman that was once one of the biggest film stars of all time this book showed me the good, the bad, and the complexity of the woman that was Marlene Dietrich.

18. Russell, Rosalind, and Chris Chase. *Life Is a Banquet*. 1st ed. New York: Random House, 1977.

Published, un-edited, after her death, Rosalind Russell's autobiography is not only funny but it is also inspiring. From her rise to stardom and her numerous battles with illness, Rosalind Russell was fearless. With a touching introduction written by her husband this autobiography inspires readers to have fun and live life to the fullest.

19. Stine, Whitney, and Bette Davis. *Mother Goddam: The Story of the Career of Bette Davis*. New York: Hawthorn, 1974.

This book is done in a very unique way. For the most part it is a biography but it also includes running commentary by Bette Davis. With this the author gives the readers the facts and Davis can give her reactions and comments in response. This book was able to give me a new understanding of Bette Davis.

20. Swanson, Gloria. *Swanson on Swanson*. 1st ed. New York: Random House, 1980.

Gloria Swanson's memoir was written when she was 87 years old and yet it is incredibly detailed, accurate, and witty. The book itself is beautiful with amazing photographs inside and out. With over 60 years of experience in the film industry, Swanson uses her book to paint a portrait of what it was like to witness history change and how she was forced to change with it.

Wish List

1. Charles Chaplin – My Autobiography (1964)

Charlie Chaplin is one of the most influential people in the history of film. He was not just an actor but a director, producer, and songwriter. This man of many talents had a very interesting and controversial life that I am sure is well documented in his autobiography. Knowing more about Chaplin and the film industry from his own voice will greatly benefit my understanding of silent film, the transition to talkies, and of the comedic genius himself.

2. Mary Pickford – Sunshine and Shadow (1955)

Mary Pickford was the most independent woman in Hollywood during the silent film era. She joined with Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin to create United Artists. I am incredibly interested to see what she recounts in her autobiography and how much detail she includes. I think reading her story will not only give me another voice to help me understand the silent film era but also help me understand how she was able to be so independent during a time when women were not thought of as equal.

3. Lillian Gish – The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me (1969)

Lillian Gish had a long working and personal relationship with film pioneer D.W. Griffith. She was in some of his most controversial films including *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*. After what was at the time of this book a 57-year career in the film industry she is sure to have some interesting stories to tell not only about other stars but also about the evolution of the film industry. From a remarkable woman I am sure comes a remarkable story that is to be very informative about the history of film and its stars.

4. Marlene Dietrich – Marlene (1989)

While many know that Marlene Dietrich's daughter wrote her biography and published it after her death, not many are aware that Marlene Dietrich published her own autobiography shortly before she died. I have heard that there are many inconsistencies in this book regarding films she has been in as well as other aspects of her life but I think that it would be fascinating to hear how she viewed her life. To learn what she felt was important to be clear about and what she was okay with not remembering will tell much more about who she was than any biography ever could.

5. Jane Powell, Lori G. Berthelsen, and Anthony Slide – Now Playing: Original Movie Posters from the Silent Era to the 1940's (2007)

This book has been on my “wish list” for about two years now. It is a look at the lost profession of artists who created famous film posters. Some of these posters are all that exist from movies that have been destroyed or lost and they show the artistry of the film poster and the evolution of film styles. With pictures, and with what I have read to be a very detailed and accurate look at a profession that is not often thought of when one looks at films, this book continues to hold first place on my wish list.