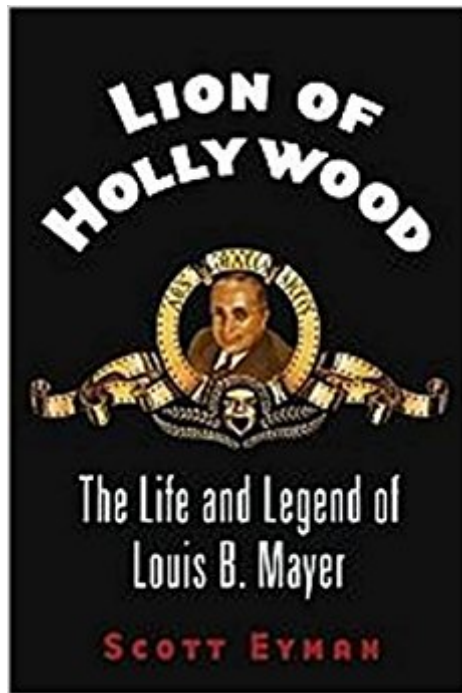


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Lion Of Hollywood: The Life And Legend Of Louis B. Mayer



Synopsis

Lion of Hollywood is the definitive biography of Louis B. Mayer, the chief of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer -- MGM -- the biggest and most successful film studio of Hollywood's Golden Age. An immigrant from tsarist Russia, Mayer began in the film business as an exhibitor but soon migrated to where the action and the power were -- Hollywood. Through sheer force of energy and foresight, he turned his own modest studio into MGM, where he became the most powerful man in Hollywood, bending the film business to his will. He made great films, including the fabulous MGM musicals, and he made great stars: Garbo, Gable, Garland, and dozens of others. Through the enormously successful Andy Hardy series, Mayer purveyed family values to America. At the same time, he used his influence to place a federal judge on the bench, pay off local officials, cover up his stars' indiscretions, and, on occasion, arrange marriages for gay stars. Mayer rose from his impoverished childhood to become at one time the highest-paid executive in America. Despite his power and money, Mayer suffered some significant losses. He had two daughters: Irene, who married David O. Selznick, and Edie, who married producer William Goetz. He would eventually fall out with Edie and divorce his wife, Margaret, ending his life alienated from most of his family. His chief assistant, Irving Thalberg, was his closest business partner, but they quarreled frequently, and Thalberg's early death left Mayer without his most trusted associate. As Mayer grew older, his politics became increasingly reactionary, and he found himself politically isolated within Hollywood's small conservative community. Lion of Hollywood is a three-dimensional biography of a figure often caricatured and vilified as the paragon of the studio system. Mayer could be arrogant and tyrannical, but under his leadership MGM made such unforgettable films as *The Big Parade*, *Ninotchka*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *An American in Paris*. Film historian Scott Eyman interviewed more than 150 people and researched some previously unavailable archives to write this major new biography of a man who defined an industry and an era.

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Customer Reviews

I was anxiously awaiting the publication of this book, and it was well worth the wait. Finally a book about the much maligned Louis B. Mayer that is balanced and objective. While the book primarily is devoted to telling the story of how Mayer went from dealing in scrap metal to running the classiest movie studio in Hollywood (o.k., Culver City) and then describing Mayer's eventual fall from grace, a wide cast of characters fills out Mayer's story. This book relates commonly circulated stories as well as some new ones. However, Eyman meticulously has researched his subject and allows his readers to draw their own conclusions by evaluating the validity of some of these stories which would be considered questionable. Eyman also provides his reader with an exacting description of the dynamics that came into play while Mayer was running a large movie studio as well as the dynamics within his own family. The list of those people Eyman interviewed while writing this book is mind-boggling. Many of his interviewees have died since he began this book which makes a lot of the information provided in this book even more significant. This book was long overdue and I am glad the author took this project on while there were still enough people alive who could provide first hand information about the subject. I am hoping that I don't have to wait too long for Mr. Eyman's next book.

What distinguishes this book about Louis B. Mayer, the fearsome and legendary Hollywood mogul of the classic MGM era, is that it's far more than a biography. I was tempted into reading not by a fascination with Mayer (though I came to be fascinated once I began reading) but by the author's, Scott Eyman, previous books about Hollywood and the studio system. His knowledge and understanding of movie-making back in the Golden Age of Hollywood are outstanding, nuanced and multi-faceted. "Lion of Hollywood" is so much more than just an insightful biography of a complicated man -- Eyman's expansive book is also about the ins-and-outs of MGM, from the business practices to the personalities, and how Mayer forged American cinema because he was the head of the greatest movie studio in Hollywood, therefore the greatest movie studio in the world. There is a lot of well-researched information and carefully argued hypotheses of Mayer's

personality and home-life, and while Eyman is full of understanding for his subject, he never lets Mayer off the hook for his hypocrisies or cruelties. He didn't write this book to redeem Mayer into a "good man" -- he wrote this book to properly give Mayer the place in movie history he deserves. When he and the other moguls arrived, L.A. and Hollywood consisted of orange groves and dirt streets. Mayer didn't build Hollywood with his hands, he did it with his massive will, guile, business acumen and cunning understanding of mass entertainment. What comes through in the book is not what a nice man Mayer was, but what a *great* man he was. Flawed and venal, yes. Brilliant and complicated, also yes. It's easy to look back at the movie moguls, with their terrible reputations for crushing actors and directors, their womanizing and vulgar ways, and condemn them as "what's wrong with Hollywood". But without them, without Mayer, Hollywood as we knew it wouldn't have existed. They set up and ran the studio system that nurtured such stars as Greta Garbo, Clark Gable and Gene Kelly. Mayer was a major reason American movies are the hallmark of mass entertainment all throughout the world today, and it wasn't because he was a great artist himself. He was that very rarest of beings: a businessman who understands, recognizes and nurtures talent in others. He was instrumental in setting up the Academy Awards because he instinctively got that actors and directors would almost prefer the prestige of awards over money. He was a dedicated Republican but hired Communists, Socialists, lefties of all stripes -- and said so to the McCarthy witch hunts -- because political affiliation had nothing to do with talent. He covered up murders, hushed up scandals, arranged marriages for gay stars: anything to keep the machine of movie-making well-oiled. Mayer knew movies and he knew his audience -- he prided himself on being the "average movie-goer" -- and he was a savvy enough businessman to know that you have to spend a dollar to make a dollar and ten cents. He was a man of many contradictions, especially in his personal life, and an emotional ogre, not someone I would like to sit down to dinner with, but I finished the book absolutely convinced of Eyman's overall theme: that Louis B. Mayer did a lot for the movies, perhaps more to build the glittering empire known as "Hollywood", than any other man or woman.

You can always rely on Scott Eyman for a readable, well-researched and even-handed bio. This is no exception: it's fascinating to see L.B. Mayer not as the monster so many have painted him, but as a well-rounded human being. Eyman also gives his readers credit for intelligence and judgment: he repeats the questionable stories (John Gilbert hitting Mayer; Mayer cheating Marie Dressler out of money), but then cites his sources and lets us make up our minds as to how legitimate these stories are. No doubt Mr. Eyman is taking a well-deserved breather after this book, but I am already

anxiously awaiting his next project.

How and when did so many great Americans get thrown into the dust bin of history? We really need hero courses in our schools to provide kids with information on these grand, legendary figures. Instead, we work to undermine what little hero worship there is. John D. Rockefeller is one such figure, Teddy Roosevelt another. No doubt, one could come up with a dozen such creators of new worlds, but instead they are belittled and destroyed by neglect. Louis b. Mayer has his detractors and no doubt deserves them, but the man we are talking about created one of the greatest arts institutions in the world. Unlike the founders of theatres and ballet companies, however, this great institution will last forever, or certainly as long as the great movies he produced can be preserved. The studio itself is long gone, of course, but through Turner we learn the films themselves will survive. This is a well-written, well-documented biography of one of America's titans of industry. His flaws are great, but in the end we must acknowledge the result of this man's devotion to great film making and admit that if he was flawed so are we.

I couldn't put it down. What an incredible journey into the years of building the famous movie studios from their beginnings as nicolodeons right up to the razzle-dazzle of the 40's and 50's! To read about Louis B. Mayer and the amazing people he drew in around him, is to read about the minds behind the images that so profoundly affected all of us growing up in America in the last century--whether we realized it or not. As a story of one immigrant's rise from abject poverty to fame and influence that few people ever acheive, Mayer's unstopability wakes you up and inspires you to get to work on making your own dreams come true.

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