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An American Chaplin

Allen's showbiz persona of the bumbling schlemiel bears no resemblance to the adroit, relentlessly focused writer, actor and filmmaker.

By Edward Kosner
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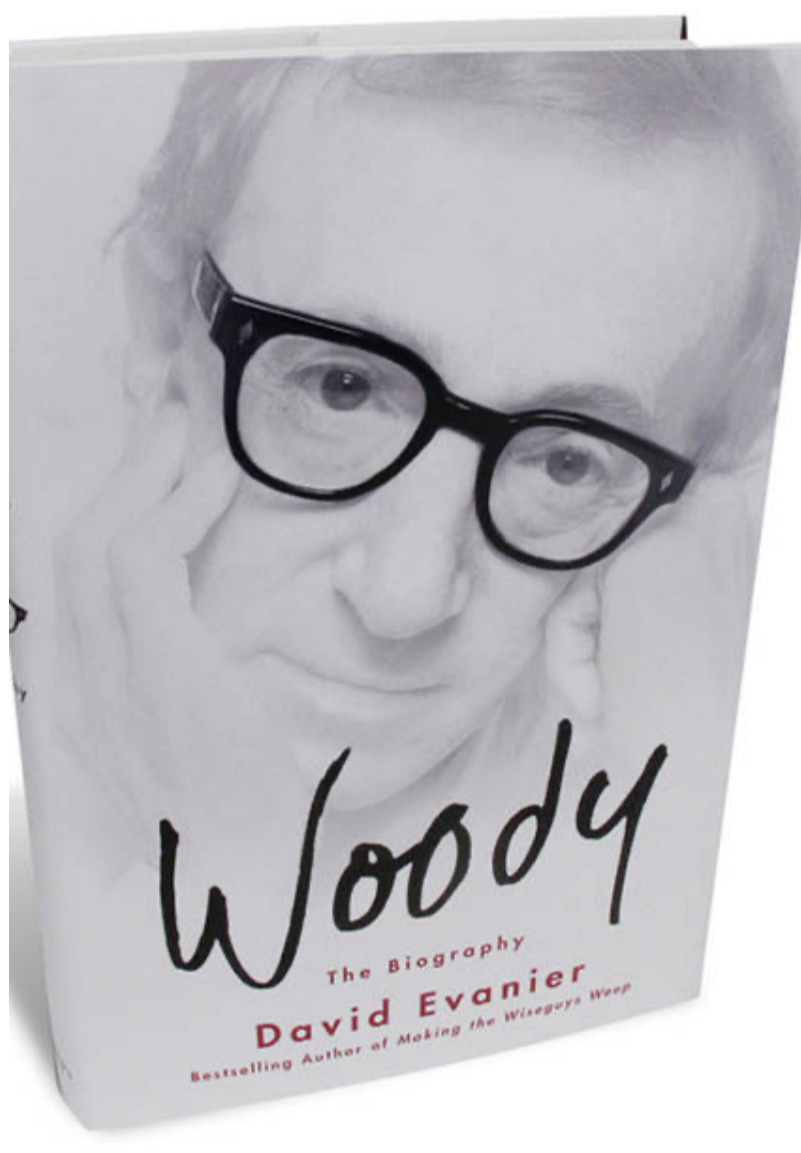
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Woody Allen is a Rorschach test: a brilliant comic auteur with a weakness for embarrassingly ponderous, faux-Bergman films—or a gifted, jokey narcissist with a Chaplinesque predilection for embarrassingly young women?

David Evanier's "Woody" certainly doesn't resolve the issue. But it gives the reader ample evidence to decide the question or, more likely, to wind up in the same muddle we've been in for years about the ultimate significance of Allan Stewart Konigsberg, who has directed 44 movies of his own over the past 46 years, acted in or scripted others, written jokes, TV sketches, movies and comic casuals for the New Yorker, and made some of his finest films at an age when most directors have subsided into senescence.

Mr. Evanier, who has written books about Tony Bennett and others, rather grandly subtitles his work "The Biography," suggesting definitiveness more evident in his ambition than execution. He starts with a major handicap: His subject doesn't want to have anything to do with him. The longest single quotation from his quarry is an email from Mr. Allen brushing off his would-be Boswell in the most exquisitely polite way. As a result, most of what we hear from Mr. Allen is cobbled from the many other pieces and books written about him over the years, including work by John Lahr and Eric Lax.

The rest is a discursive mélange of Mr. Evanier's analyses of nearly every Woody Allen film—he thinks "Zelig" and "Crimes and Misdemeanors" are masterpieces—and interviews with boyhood friends and others who have had peripheral contact with the subject at some stage in his life. There's even an unenlightening 16-page Q&A with Dick Cavett, billed as an Allen pal for more than a half-century.



WOODY

By David Evanier
St. Martin's, 384 pages, \$27.99

turned himself into a boldly original stand-up comic headlining on "The Tonight Show" and in Las Vegas, a New Orleans-style jazz clarinetist, and, finally, a movie director. To the author, he's a paragon—"the most amazing phenomenon in the history of American show business."

Readers may have a more nuanced view after they wade through his account of Mr. Allen's career and private life, especially his conduct with the long string of women he's been involved with over the decades. His first wife, Harlene Rosen, was 16 and Woody 19 when they married. He cheated on her with the comedienne Louise Lasser, then married Ms. Lasser only to cheat on her with Diane Keaton, the first of his shiksa goddesses. Ms. Keaton acted in eight of his movies, including the classics "Annie Hall" and "Manhattan," starring the 16-year-old Mariel Hemingway, who wrote later that the director tried to romance her during the filming. His next love was the waifish Mia Farrow, who made 13 movies with him during their 12-year relationship, which exploded when she discovered that he was having an affair with her adopted daughter, Soon-Yi Previn, to whom he has now been married for 18 years.

Mr. Evanier is plainly on his subject's side in the squalid controversy over whether Mr. Allen sexually molested 7-year-old Dylan Farrow, his and Ms. Farrow's adopted daughter—a sensational allegation that erupted anew last year when Dylan, now 30, repeated her story. Mr. Allen had been cleared of the accusations by specialists affiliated with Yale-New Haven Hospital and never charged, but the stigma lingers. The worst Mr. Evanier has to say about Woody is that he "seems to feel no sense of responsibility" about his treatment of women.

There are problems, too, with Mr. Evanier's appreciation of the Allen filmography. He goes to repetitious length to establish the director as one of the few real auteurs in American cinema, a man who writes, casts and directs his movies his way, with no second-guessing or worse from the money men who bankroll his projects. Yet he quotes a film editor, Ralph Rosenblum, on how he rescued Mr. Allen's signature film, "Annie Hall," from incoherence. At another point, he blithely pronounces 10 Allen films "masterpieces or near-masterpieces," among them "Alice" and "Bullets Over Broadway." Then he goes on the rhapsodize about 10 more, including the dud "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger."

Woody Allen is a masterly American artist with a messy private life whose inventive films over more than four decades have given boundless pleasure to moviegoers around the world. His work and his life deserve more discerning consideration than they get here.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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