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My Lunches With Orson: Conversations Between Henry Jaglom And Orson Welles



Synopsis

Based on long-lost recordings, a set of riveting and revealing conversations with America's great cultural provocateur. There have long been rumors of a lost cache of tapes containing private conversations between Orson Welles and his friend the director Henry Jaglom, recorded over regular lunches in the years before Welles died. The tapes, gathering dust in a garage, did indeed exist, and this book reveals for the first time what they contain. Here is Welles as he has never been seen before: talking intimately, disclosing personal secrets, reflecting on the highs and lows of his astonishing Hollywood career, the people he knew—FDR, Winston Churchill, Charlie Chaplin, Marlene Dietrich, Laurence Olivier, David Selznick, Rita Hayworth, and more—and the many disappointments of his last years. This is the great director unplugged, free to be irreverent and worse—sexist, homophobic, racist, or none of the above—because he was nothing if not a fabulator and provocateur. Ranging from politics to literature to movies to the shortcomings of his friends and the many films he was still eager to launch, Welles is at once cynical and romantic, sentimental and raunchy, but never boring and always wickedly funny. Edited by Peter Biskind, America's foremost film historian, *My Lunches with Orson* reveals one of the giants of the twentieth century, a man struggling with reversals, bitter and angry, desperate for one last triumph, but crackling with wit and a restless intelligence. This is as close as we will get to the real Welles—if such a creature ever existed.

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Customer Reviews

People who have read Peter Bogdanovich's THIS IS ORSON WELLES will want to read this book, too. Less a series of intentional interviews, it is, as the title tells, transcriptions of informal table talk at lunch. Welles insisted that the tape recorder be out of sight so that the conversations could be as unselfconscious as possible, and the results are nothing if not candid and opinionated--but also stimulating and insightful. Anyone who has seen an interview with Welles knows what a spellbinding talker he was, and every one of the book's 27 chapters verifies this, nearly every one of the 286 pages. The conversations all come from the last three years of Welles's life. The overall picture that we get is mostly personal. As one might expect in lunching with a friend, there's gossip, personal opinions, remarks about his current projects, even comments on mid-80's current events (the death of Tennessee Williams, the fear of catching AIDS from casual contact). Sometimes other people (Richard Burton, Jack Lemmon) drop by their table (Welles is rude to Burton, kind to Lemmon). A representative snippet from the book is these sentences about Welles's friend from the Forties, the actress Carole Lombard. He tells Jaglom that Lombard swore freely in an age when the daily discourse was more reserved: "My God, she was earthy. She looked like a great beauty, but she behaved like a waitress in a hash house. That was her style of acting, too, and it had a great allure." The gossip of the first two sentences becomes in the last sentence a smart point about Lombard's art. That happens a lot in the book, as I suppose it could at the lunch tables of America every day: what starts off as dishing dirt transforms into something intelligent.

For years, actor/director Henry Jaglom hung out with film legend Orson Welles, not only having lunches, but hustling for him and his projects. With Welles's consent, Jaglom taped their conversations by means of a tape recorder hidden in Jaglom's bag. Unlike filmmakers Hitchcock and Ford, for example, Welles was never able to parlay his genius for making some of the best films to come out of Hollywood (or anywhere else) into a flourishing career. Early on, he got tagged by the screw-ups of others -- studio executives, jealous colleagues, government cultural bureaucrats in Europe, small-minded know-it-alls in general -- as a man who could never finish anything, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. The word on Welles, as well as his corporal image of self-indulgence, made it difficult and finally impossible to get financing for any project. At the time of his death, he had 19 scripts, many complete, a few not, including what might have been a great King Lear. It's definitely our loss, but there's always the next witless movie franchise (Fast and Furious XXI, for example) all too available to take up brain space. I never really understood why some billionaire wouldn't just give him 5 mil to make a film, even if the project turned to powder. It still would have been money better spent than on a giant party in the Bahamas catered by the

trendiest celebrity chef and adorned with ice sculptures. Unlike many who called Welles a friend, Jaglom actually went out of his way to be of practical service to Welles's career, shopping Welles's scripts and even casting him in *Someone to Love*, Welles's last film appearance. Why, especially when most people were more than willing to accept Welles as a talentless sprawl (Welles had passed "obese" decades before) of failure?

I've always liked Hollywood gossip, mostly because the participants take themselves so very seriously, while the stakes are so very low. This book provides plenty of it, and Orson Welles' personality really comes through, better I think than a more formal interview could have provided. Presented as transcribed lunchtime conversations with his friend Henry Jaglom, these dialogues are very funny and insightful - not laugh-out-loud, but entertaining. Welles doesn't self-censor because he knows he'd be long-gone if the contents were revealed, and so he is. John Houseman, Laurence Olivier, and many others come in for a thrashing. But it also works because Welles doesn't seem to take himself that seriously, as he casually dismisses many directors, producers, and stars of his era - while also giving plenty of credit. This book provides a reader an interesting walk-through of Welles' moviemaking experience and also his personal life - and Welles' honesty makes it clear there were many disappointments in both, which he's happy to discuss to Jaglom (who gives as he good as he gets, which makes the conversations much more interesting than sitting across from some sycophant). It is melancholy that "Citizen Kane" comes up so much - as you'd expect. But it was 40 years old at the time of these interviews, and it's sad that no other Welles movie came close to its impact or creative success, which Welles recognizes. It's not that he didn't have plenty of other projects, just that he knew lightning would never strike like "Kane" again. His discussions of other projects almost seem like busy work, more than any kind of true effort. Welles died at 70 in 1985 - and career-wise, he was mostly irrelevant by then - he was a legend, but not current.

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