

Parts of *Facing Blackness* are carelessly organized (many of the endnotes should really be in the text) and sketchy, and Clark overstates his case when he calls *Bamboozled* the central work in Lee's filmography, "the house on fire to which all roads lead." I'm still not convinced that it's a top-flight film, but Clark has made me more aware of how craftily its flyaway parts fit into the messy, shambolic whole. Much of Lee's filmography amounts to a razor-sharp indictment of American racism and intolerance, and no movie by anyone treats the subject with more blistering rage and acidic wit than the flawed, ferocious *Bamboozled*.—David Sterritt

Woody:

The Biography

by David Evanier. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015. 384 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$27.99.

Woody Allen has produced one of the most remarkable bodies of work in the past half century of American cinema, and his extraordinary run of sixteen films from 1977 to 1992 (not to mention the dozen scattered gems that followed), have secured him a place in any serious history of the subject. The general contours of this story are broadly familiar: Woody abandoned a lucrative career writing for television in the 1950s to grasp at the very uncertain prospects of stand-up comedy; years of struggle eventually gave way to enormous success, providing the opportunity first to write for the screen, and then to direct

His career as a director can be seen in five phases: First as a comedian who made movies, then, improbably, with the critical and commercial success of *Annie Hall* (1977), Woody became a movie star. Even more improbably, sometime in the mid-1980s, with *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) sealing the deal, Allen was recognized as an American auteur. A fourth phase of remarkable consistency followed, one that atrophied at the turn of the century and suggested an inevitable past-his-time decline. This period, even at its artistic peak, was associated with dwindling domestic audiences, whose drift toward the exits was accelerated by the shocking revelation of his relationship with (and subsequent marriage to) the daughter of his paramour and then-leading lady Mia Farrow—and the bitter, acrimonious, tabloid-filling meltdown of their relationship. Finally, and against all odds, a fifth phase emerged: Allen, working essentially as a European art-house director, has enjoyed an inconsistent but unmistakable late-career resurgence, maintaining his indefatigable film-a-year output.

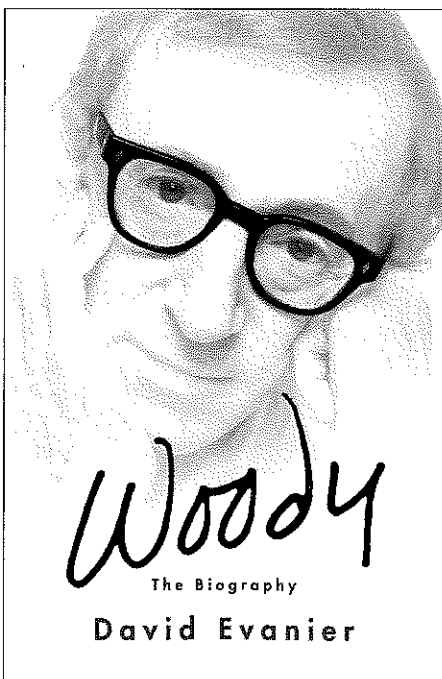
There are half a shelf of decent books on Woody Allen, but there is room for plenty more, especially because two of the best, Eric Lax's biography and *Woody Allen on Woody Allen: In Conversation with Stig Björkman* date to the early 1990s—or in

Woody years, about two dozen films ago. So it is with eager anticipation that one cracks the covers of David Evanier's new, promisingly titled *Woody: The Biography*.

Unfortunately, Evanier announces on page thirty-three, "this is not a blow-by-blow or a standard critical biography." Oh. Instead, claiming that Allen has "eluded the grasp of biographers," he aspires to "add what has been missed about his work, while sketching in some essential brushstrokes of his career." Unfortunately, although the latter sounds about right, the former is completely absent from this book. And that penciled sketch will sound familiar to anyone with passing knowledge of the subject. Woody is Jewish. Woody was a comedian. Woody is always working, and actors like working for him. Woody writes really good parts for female characters. Woody loves magic and jazz. Woody has a depressive streak.

Drawing very heavily on previously published sources (included in a bibliography but without detailed attribution), and supplemented by a slew of interviews taken at face value, Evanier offers a breezy, featherweight rearticulation of conventional wisdoms. Worse, this is the first book by its much-published author on the movies, and it reads like it.

The first two thirds of the book are superficial and lazy, padded by long summaries of films and then reviews (nothing a few clicks on IMDb would not provide), followed by pedestrian quotes from interviews—by the paragraph—that invariably begin with "so-and-so told me." Repetitive (Allen is hand-wavily compared to Claude Chabrol three times within twenty-two pages) and riddled with basic factual errors that could have easily have been cleaned up, this was a project that begged for a firmer editorial hand.



At times the author seems inattentive to his own prose. Laudably praising Allen for his legendary unwillingness to chase the box office, Evanier nevertheless features an insistent *Entertainment Tonight* fixation on his movie grosses. Readers will learn nothing new about *Sleeper* (1973), except perhaps that "the film ranks ninth economically among all of Allen's films."

Woody: The Biography fails to live up even to the modest standards it sets for itself. Promising to "focus on" those Allen films Evanier declares to be "the best," by book's end less than half of them (invariably the usual suspects) have been given more than passing mention. And even those movies considered are little more than described. This is not a book that pauses to analyze, and when it does, it is rarely insightful—"It is not difficult to understand why audiences confused [Allen's] persona with its canny creator" is one chestnut offered. Evanier praises *Manhattan* (1979) to the stars (no argument here), but without giving it a moment's real thought, or working through the still-astonishing fact that Woody begged United Artists not to release it. Instead, on offer are overlong summaries of plot points, some of which go on for pages at a stretch, perhaps useful to those imagined readers who have never seen *Annie Hall* (Allen's "fourth all-time grosser"!), but are eager to dive into an Allen biography, or for those who would like to read an exhaustive list of every New York location shown in the opening montage of *Manhattan*. (Such endless retellings plague the book in every possible context, down to old comedy routines that were surely funnier in the original Woody.)

About two thirds of the way through, the book leaps off the rails entirely, as if Evanier was desperate to finish in time to coincide with the marketing milestone of Woody's recent eightieth birthday. In this slapdash sprint to the finish line, narrative coherence is lost to the breeze and the book's flaws become plainer still: the repetitions pile on, the errors become more egregious, and the prose deteriorates. A fourteen-page interview with Dick Cavett arrives unannounced (and seemingly unedited), inserted as a chapter with little regard to where it might fit in the book (and why in that format).

These last stumbling chapters are a double blow to the reader, because it is in the later phases of Allen's career where a new biography would likely find its greatest value. Indeed, Evanier argues, repeatedly, on behalf of the treasures to be found in Woody's late-career resurgence (at one point breathlessly describing this comeback as "one of the most amazing sagas in the history of American film and show business.") Yet the last two decades of films are crammed into a hurried ten pages—fifteen films are dispatched in the space of one paragraph (including nine on the author's list of "Woody's best"). A missed opportunity, this was a manuscript two major revisions short of being publication-ready.—Jonathan Kirshner