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Review:

Peter Stephan Jungk, *The Perfect American*

Trans. Michael Hofmann (originally *Der König von Amerika*)

New York: Handsel Books/Other Press, 186 pp., 2004

*The Perfect American*, Peter Stephan Jungk's fictional biography of Walt Disney, is part novel, part broadside. It is set in 1966, the last few months of Disney's life, when the 65-year-old studio chief was plotting his Orlando empire and, after a lifetime spent building the company that made his an immortal name — “no different from Campbell's, or Westinghouse Electric, or Ford Motors, or Howard Johnson's” — confronting his own disappointments and decline.

Jungk's narrator is one Wilhelm Dantine, a thirtyish illustrator who worked on *Sleeping Beauty* before being fired in 1959. “I spent a lot of time subsequently without satisfying work, and planning my revenge,” Dantine reveals; his fascination with Disney propels him around the country to interview Disney's confidantes and spy on public appearances. Call him a biographer, or a stalker: Dantine reconstructs Disney's life with an exacting appetite for dates and details, his credulity founded in great part upon biographical fact. But Dantine's mania is part worship, part hatred: he carries the banner of the artists, animators, and little people (Beethoven, for

one) whose contributions to the Disney oeuvre were undercredited and underpaid. “Not even your *signature* is your own,” Dantine huffs, and the critique rings true: the book’s truest indictment is its simple articulation of the volume of painstaking work that went into a second, a minute, an hour of animation — and the anonymity and poverty of the craftsmen who created *Snow White* and *Fantasia* compared to the “averagely successful American CEO” whose name the work bears, now and forever.

Yet Dantine’s enmity serves a hollow alibi for the book’s bitterness: we’d call this historical fiction were its polemical intention only a little less obvious. The dialogue Dantine recreates is sometimes harrowing, overstuffed with exposition and self-aggrandizement; the long episodic chapters invariably amount to humiliations. Disney learns the limits of his Missouri hometown’s indulgence; a family dinner goes painfully awry; he holds an Ellisonian *tete-a-tete* with Disneyland’s animatronic Abe Lincoln doll, which pummels him after they disagree over human rights. Jungk’s Disney is a graceless Nixonian blowhard, and Dantine, who suggests without remorse that he has hastened Disney’s death and thereafter cuckolds him, in a manner of speaking, shows little restraint in dancing on his grave. When Dantine relates his own life story in the final chapter, we sense

Jungk's design: to supplant the flabby myth of the studio head with the blood-and-guts biography of an artist. But *this* one?

Like Humbert Humbert, who fifty years ago traced his own coy and creepy track around American byways and popular culture, Dantine is a train wreck of a narrator: comic, compromised, laceratingly self-conscious. He cuts himself few favors: his prideful moments sting with an awareness of how paltry a life he has created for himself and his family. And sometimes — like Charlie Chaplin, whose betrayal by Disney is one of the book's somberest notes — he achieves a fine absurdity: his subterfuges fall flat among the most innocent of company, and when at last he plays the avenger, it's with his nine-year-old son in tow. Like a train wreck, *The Perfect American* is often hard on the ears — but it's difficult to look away.