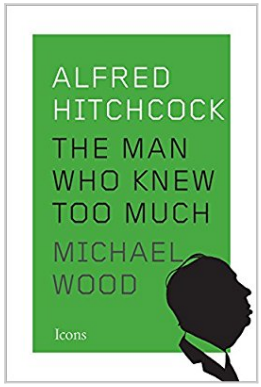

Alfred Hitchcock: The Man Who Knew Too Much (Icons)

By Michael Wood

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Widely regarded as the greatest filmmaker of the twentieth century, Alfred Hitchcock had a gift for creating suspense and a shrewd knowledge of human psychology. His film career, spanning more than half a century, is studded with classics from *The 39 Steps* to *Psycho*, *North by Northwest* to *Vertigo*. A master of intricate storytelling, Hitchcock was one of the first directors whose films belonged to both popular culture and high art. By the end of his life, he had gone from being the overweight son of a greengrocer in a London suburb to Hollywood's reigning director, whose cameo roles in his own films were one of their most anticipated features, and whose profile was recognized by millions (thanks to the television show *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*). Michael Wood describes this journey with the wit and erudition that are the trademarks of his work, showcasing his singular ability to detect hidden patterns within apparently disparate forms. Whether he is writing about Henry James or Hollywood in the 1920s, he is alert to the fundamental truth lurking behind the stated meaning. In *Alfred Hitchcock*, Wood has found his ideal subject—an artist for whom explicit statement was anathema, who made conventional plot a hiding place rather than a source of revelation.

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Editorial Review

Review

"…an elegant introduction to the director for the novice and a wealth of knowledge for cineastes, demonstrating that when it comes to Alfred Hitchcock, you can never know too much." —*Wall Street Journal*

“An intelligent introduction to the life and works of a very complicated director.” —*Booklist*

"It's a rare pleasure for a book to carry you from cover to cover with wit, verve, and profit. That's what happens with this new overview by Michael Wood." —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Fine, brief biography of Hitchcock...The value of this book lies in its insights into Hitchcock’s art.” —*The Washington Post*

“With the confidence that he is among well-read friends, the author—a fellow Englishman transposed to America, and a professor emeritus of comparative literature at Princeton—wanders at a lively pace through intriguing and subtle observations about this great artist.” –*The New York Times Book Review*

“This slim contribution to the Hitchcock library, by a professor of literature at Princeton, surprises with the splintered connections it makes between individual films and other points of culture and politics.” —*The Economist*

“Elegant, elliptical new book.” —*The Economist*’s *Intelligent Life Magazine*

"As a literary critic, Wood probes more deeply into films that for him are 'visual texts.'" —*The Guardian*

“Wood’s achievement in this startling, insight-laden book is to point up how strange Hitchcock’s pictures remain, how so unlike conventional movies even his most conventional movies are. After an hour with Wood, you go back to Hitchcock more unsettled than ever.” —*The Spectator* (UK)

“A highly readable, entertaining, and thought-provoking overview of Hitchcock’s oeuvre.” —*New York Journal of Books*

“Sharp-witted contribution to the Amazon/New Harvest Icons series” —*New Statesman* (UK)

About the Author

Michael Wood is the author of many works, including *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction, Children of Silence: On Contemporary Fiction,* and *America in the Movies,* a survey of Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s. He is a regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and a professor emeritus of comparative literature at Princeton University.

First Steps

A Touch of Class

Alfred Hitchcock was born a few years after the advent of cinema and just before the twentieth century began, on August 13, 1899. He grew up in East London, the child of a hardworking, serious Catholic family. His father owned and ran a greengrocer's shop and the family lived above it; the father, with his brothers, also had an interest in a wholesale fruit and vegetable business. The Hitchcocks were not rich, not poor; they were rising in the world, but there wasn't far for them to rise. Their class had dignity and self-respect, but it didn't have the privileges of the upper orders and the haute bourgeoisie, and it didn't have the solidarity and burgeoning energy of the newly self-conscious working classes (the British Labour Party would be founded in 1900). Margaret Thatcher, born a quarter century later and decidedly *not* a member of the Labour Party, belonged to precisely the same class as the Hitchcocks and could be said never to have left it in her manners, dress, and assumptions?—???only her (diligently acquired) accent and pitch of voice suggested a personality accustomed to command. I don't want to claim that class, even in England, determines everything or even most things, but it's worth noting that members of the Hitchcock/Thatcher category are likely to have certain perspectives in common: an eye for the market, a distrust of the state, a healthy disapproval of people who are too posh and people who are too disreputable, and a firm conviction that if you want something done you should do it yourself.

Hitchcock's father has entered legend less as an authoritarian than as a man who liked authority. He is supposed to have sent his son to the police station with a note saying he had misbehaved and asking the constable in charge to please lock the small offender up for a time. Hitchcock claimed he always remembered "the clang of the door?.?.?. the sound and the solidity of that closing cell door and the bolt." He would have been four years old at the time, or perhaps eleven, or perhaps?.?.?. His age changed with different tellings of the story. Its general outline was confirmed by Hitchcock's sister, but of course she may have been only preserving a family legend. I don't see why it couldn't be true, but even if it is, its symbolic import far outweighs any documentary effect. This is a myth of origin for a distrust of authority, and in Hitchcock's films this distrust takes a very particular form: the inability to believe that policemen, or any other figures of institutional command, know how to do anything except take orders or collude with father figures (or fathers). This means that they will, in one way or another and almost infallibly, get things wrong. They are not to blame if they can't think for themselves, or if reality is too difficult or elusive for them; but they are not to be relied on either.

Patrick McGilligan, author of the most substantial Hitchcock biography, counters this story with the report that "Alfred was so well behaved as a boy, his father dubbed him 'my little lamb without a spot.'?" I don't find the two stories completely incompatible. In my English childhood, the question "Have you been good?" meant "Have you not caused anybody any trouble?" Indeed, "good" often meant entirely passive or even fast asleep, incapable of mischief for the moment. And we could read Hitchcock's lifelong worry about policemen in this simpler way too. He was afraid, not of being locked up as an innocent man, but of being found out as a mild offender?—??he was his own policeman and scarcely ever drove a car for fear of driving badly. His wife, Alma, said that once after having "swerved slightly across a white line in England" and being pulled over and warned by the police, he spent days wondering whether he was going to be summoned to appear in court.

Another childhood scene is less dramatic but more haunting, I find, and leads us into other regions of Hitchcock's movies. John Russell Taylor, Hitchcock's first biographer?—??who presumably had the story directly from Hitchcock?—??recounts that the child woke up "around eight o'clock one Sunday evening to find that his parents were out and there was only the maid watching over him in his room." This fact "made an unaccountably profound impression on him?.?.?. [and] produced such a feeling of desolation and abandonment that he still remembered it when he got married." Young Alfred would not be the first or last child to feel that a babysitter was no substitute for a parent, nor was he the first or last member of the middle class to have restricted ideas about the capacities of maids. What's remarkable here, I think, and would be remarkable in any similar case, is the implied or discovered fear. Not just: *My parents have abandoned me,* but: *I always knew they would.* Hitchcock's films are full of premonitory fears of this kind, often all the more

powerful because they turn out to be unfounded. If the event doesn't justify them, as it certainly did not in Hitchcock's personal case, what does justify them, and why don't they go away?

These fears, of abandonment and incarceration and much else, are not unusual and do not indicate a troubled childhood. But they do suggest a slightly beleaguered sense of existence, and I am persuaded by Taylor's picture of a plump, secretive, watchful child, convinced that if he stepped out of line in any way, if he revealed anything of what he thought and felt, betrayed his emotions to anyone else, *they* (the harsh, rationalistic, disapproving "they" of Edward Lear's nonsense poems) would somehow come and get him.

As a child Alfred attended several Catholic schools in East London before settling in at St. Ignatius College in Stamford Hill for his secondary education. This was a Jesuit school, and therefore, to a large extent, it shared the curriculum of other schools of the same denomination at home and abroad: -Clongowes Wood College in Dublin, for example, where James Joyce was a pupil from 1888 to 1891, and Colegio del Salvador in Saragossa, where Luis Buñuel, born in 1900, was a pupil from 1908 to 1915. The school was strict but wide-ranging in the topics taught, and even hellfire, part of the required curriculum, could burn differently in different places. It was milder at St. Ignatius than at Clongowes Wood. Still, many critics have made a big deal out of Hitchcock's Jesuit instruction, and it does seem that everything that separates him from Joyce and Buñuel plays itself out against a ground of shared fidelity to old fears and orthodoxies. Fears can't be trivial, these artists suggest, whatever other people think, and orthodoxies can't be abandoned or contradicted until you have given them your full attention.

Hitchcock seems to have been fairly lonely in school, although he did make one or two friends he stayed in touch with for the rest of his life. He was shy and not keen on mixing with the other pupils, but he did well academically and was confident about his abilities. He was among many boys whose families were better off than his was, and who themselves thought they were likely to be ruling the world one day soon. He knew how clever he was, but also knew he was headed for different pursuits. He knew this not because he had decided where he was going but because he knew the direction would depend on him. He believed in luck, and over his film career became more and more preoccupied with chance and its strange apparitions. But he thought a person could do a lot to make luck come to him rather than pass him by.

Hitchcock put this belief into practice as soon as he left school. He was fourteen years old. He took courses in an array of scientific subjects at the London County Council School of Engineering and Navigation and later attended art classes at Goldsmiths' College. His interests in design and construction were becoming clear. He found a job where, after a spell of rather miscellaneous beginner's tasks, he entered the sales department. As McGilligan says, if Hitchcock had been something of an oddity at St. Ignatius College, the reverse was true at W. T. Henley's Telegraph Works, where "he was decidedly well known and well liked." His father died in 1914, when Alfred was fifteen years old, a month or so after he started work; a severe shock but only one of many, alas, in a country that had been at war since July of the same year. There had never been any plan for Alfred to take over the family business, so he was free to continue the career he had found.

Users Review

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