

*Review Manuscript*

**Nathalia Holt, *The Queens of Animation: The Untold Story of the Women Who Transformed the World of Disney and Made Cinematic History*, Hachette, UK, 2019: 400 pp.: ISBN 9780316439152. Price: €24.34 (hbk)**

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*The Queens of Animation* by Nathalia Holt reveals the stories and struggles of women who have gone chiefly uncredited for their contributions to Disney Animation. By adopting a loosely chronological approach, Holt weaves the personal stories and creative influence of Bianca Majolie, Grace Huntington, Retta Scott, Mary Blair, Sylvia Holland and others throughout Disney animation's timeline from the mid-1930s to the present time.

Opening with a vivid account of the dread Bianca Majolie felt when attending story department meetings, Holt begins by exploring the experiences of the first women of the story department at Walt Disney Studios. The author claims that despite going largely uncredited and in the face of adversity, the women at the studios contributed significantly to animation in ways that have continued to impact cinema more broadly in present times. Holt explains that through a detailed investigation into the personal stories of the artists, it is possible to show how "they have shaped the evolution of female characters in film, advanced our technology, and broken down gender barriers in order to give us the empowering story lines we have begun to see in film and animation today" (p. 324). Through a triangulation of sources, the author successfully shows the women's adversity at the studio and reveals their contributions to the technology, characters, and narratives of the medium and beyond.

Nathalia Holt, PhD, is an accomplished author of multiple books and many other publications. In *The Queens of Animation*, Holt has turned her approach to animation to illuminate women's contributions to the field in the same way that she has successfully done in previous publications. One example is her book, *Rise of the Rocket Girls: The Women Who Propelled Us, from Missiles to the Moon to Mars* (2016), which tells the stories of women known as "human computers" who broke the boundaries of both gender and science at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in California. While researching another project, Holt realised that there were a lot of women involved in animation. However, upon investigating further to find out more about these people, the author noticed an absence of significant writing on their contributions. One challenge for Holt was that the vast majority of the women whose stories she wanted to share had passed away, possibly taking the stories of their experiences and accomplishments with them.

Despite not having direct access to the late artists, Holt writes about the women's very personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions, made possible by the source material that underpins her research. At the end of the text (pp. 327-364), Holt provides extensive notes that reveal the complex tapestry of source materials. Holt explains that the unpublished interviews conducted by John Canemaker formed the core of the biographical information.

Other sources included access to archival and personal documents such as letters, diaries, love notes, and photographs, supported by interviews with the artists' families and friends and interviews with people currently working at Disney and PIXAR (p. 327).

Holt successfully demonstrates how women have shaped female characters' evolution in animation by showing where female artists' interventions impacted character development at the studio. One such example is the development of Tinkerbell, who Holt describes as "an antidote to the princess", neither "the girl-child of Snow White nor the sexual fantasy of *Fantasia's* centaurettes" (p. 213). Holt explains that Tinkerbell had been given 'gifts' by each woman who had worked on her design. She is a womanly figure, sensual, feminine and colourful (p. 213). In collaboration with Marc Davis, Mary Blair gave Tinkerbell her attitude, which did not sit well with some "story men" who thought she was too "naughty". Another example of the changing approach to female characters is in their action. For example, on page 287, the author recounts the words yelled by Linda Woolverton during a story meeting for *Beauty and the Beast* (1991): "Belle is not baking a cake!". Woolverton, who would become the studio's first credited female screenwriter, openly rejected the changes made to a scene that replaced her original setting and action from one where Belle is interested in world exploration to her undertaking a simple domestic chore.

Although women were mostly relegated to the Ink and Paint department in the early years, they were not idle in their pursuit of improving the visual characteristics of Disney films. One of the most impressive technological innovations from women at the studio is the Grease Pencil, invented by Mary Louise Weiser. The Grease Pencil found use beyond the studio in military defence and aircraft control (p. 42). It has found its place in contemporary vernacular as the namesake of the digital equivalent offered in 3D Computer Graphics software such as Autodesk Maya and Blender 3D. Perhaps what is most prevalent throughout the text is how the creativity of these artists informed the technology and approach to process. Holt explains: "The art informed the technology, and the technology shaped the art, the two acting on each other in a constant, fluid exchange of innovation" (p. 67). This statement shows the continued relationship that art and technology have played in animation. Holt successfully demonstrates this via a wide range of cases, such as Barbara Worth Baldwin (p. 55), who was hired to lead the Air Brush department and pioneer new ways of creating Special Effects for Pinocchio. Other women are also acknowledged, such as Natalie Kalmus (p. 115) from Technicolor, who worked as a consultant to the studio, directly influencing the colour palette of many films.

Holt's text is a highly contextualised piece of work that tightly couples the women's experience at the studio with the broader social, cultural, political and industrial issues at the time. Holt weaves examples of women breaking down gender barriers within and outside the studio, demonstrating the women's drive and changing broader societal norms. Although grossly underrepresented, women had been challenging gender barriers in the studio's early years. A woman simply working outside of the ink and paint department, for example, proved to be a significant challenge professionally, personally and creatively.

Through various forces such as the impact of World War II and labour strikes, we see the studio's and society's need to embrace women's capacity to contribute to a broader range of positions. Walt Disney's open declaration in 1941, quoted by Holt, demonstrated the changing times as he recognised the potential for women to influence the medium positively: "[T]he girl artists have the right to expect the same chances for advancement as men, and I honestly believe that they may eventually contribute something to this business that men

never would or could” (p. 127). The change can be seen in the evolving stories and characters at the studio and emerges from Holt’s writing as a three-stage evolution. First, the “heroines of the 1940s and 1950s”, followed by the “Disney renaissance era” and finally, the modern strong-willed female leads exemplified by Merida in *Brave* (2012) and the sisters, Anna and Elsa, in *Frozen* (2013).

Just as women have gone unacknowledged within the studio, so too has it been in the field of animation studies. Perhaps due to the women's lack of visibility, there has been insufficient information to draw upon or awareness from the wider community. Indeed, as Holt explains in the preface (p. xiv), it was almost by accident that she became aware of how many women had worked at the studio. Concerning women, historians often cite the Ink and Paint department employees with little to no reference to their contributions elsewhere. The situation has slowly begun to change as texts such as *Ink & Paint* (2017) by Mindy Johnson have started to emerge. Johnson's text is similar to Holt's, telling the women's personal stories and giving them the much-deserved credit that has, until now, gone unacknowledged. Johnson's text ends at the beginning of the digital revolution. It is here where Holt's research departs by tracing the influence of the pioneering women into the present time, where women are now adequately credited for their contributions to the medium.

The author writes in a vivid manner that connects the reader with the personal experiences of the women while at the same time presenting exciting and detailed historical and technical information. A pleasure to read, it uses simple language that communicates very clearly what could be a very messy or dry historical account. At times it may become hard to follow as the text moves back and forth through time to provide context to the women’s stories and situate them to work in progress at the studio. Holt highlights these pioneering women’s contributions to the production of Disney films of their time, their enduring influence on contemporary cinema, and the many Disney artists that have followed in their footsteps. Despite highlighting the discrimination and sexism that the woman endured, Holt’s text is not a heavy-handed attack on Walt Disney and the Disney Studio. Instead, it highlights the women’s resilience and offers an overdue recognition for work that went uncredited. Holt successfully communicates the broad socio-political forces that impacted Disney’s ability to place women in creative roles and acknowledges some of the progressive thinking of Walt Disney, who in the 1930s was working against the social norms by employing woman at the studio.

## References

Holt N (2016) *Rise of the rocket girls: The women who propelled us, from missiles to the moon to mars*. Little, Brown.

Johnson M (2017) *Ink & Paint: The Women of Walt Disney's Animation*. United States: Disney Editions.

## Author Biographies

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