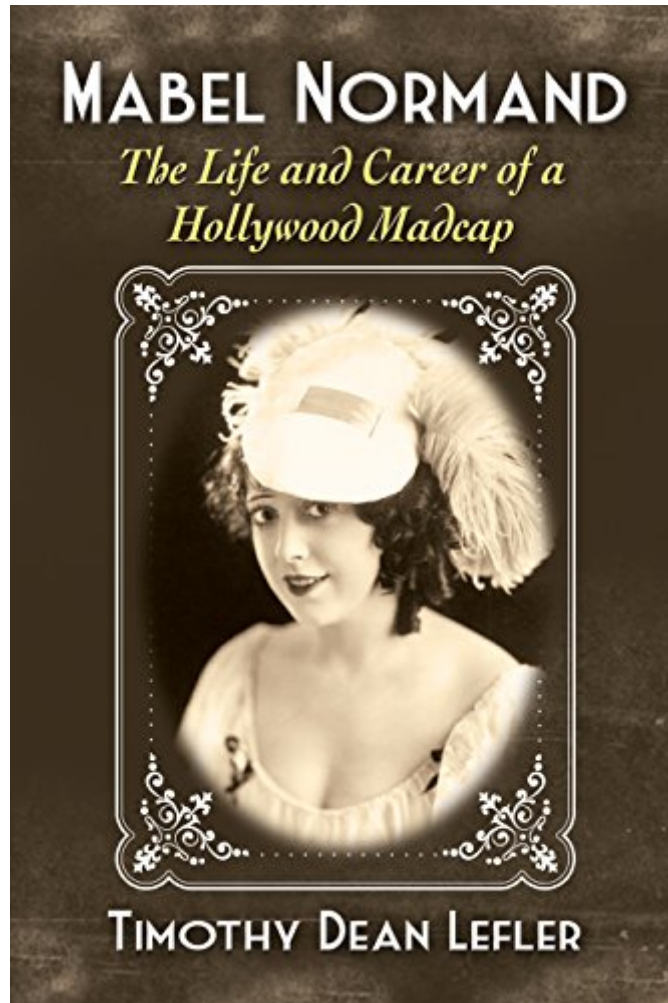


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Mabel Normand: The Life And Career Of A Hollywood Madcap



Synopsis

American silent film star Mabel Normand (1892-1930) appeared in a string of popular movies opposite the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle during the 1910s and 1920s, before dying of tuberculosis at age 37. Her brief but remarkable career, which included director and writer credits as well as heading her own studio and production company, was marred by scandal--police connected her to the unsolved 1922 murder of director William Desmond Taylor--that defined her legacy. This book highlights Normand's substantial yet long overlooked contributions to film history and popular culture, tracing her life from humble beginnings on Staten Island to the heights of world superstardom.

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Customer Reviews

Mabel Normand was due for a definitive book on her life and career. The problem for writing one is a lack of sources as her friends and co-workers have long passed. The author relied on information from Marilyn Slater's excellent blog, Looking for Mabel Normand, it should be noted that Ms. Slater was the ward of Mabel's nurse Julia Benson, who was devoted but over-protective of Mabel and her memory. The author also relied on an interview with Minta Dufree that I do question because

she was near senility at the time and there are no backup sources for the story of how Mabel was injured by a vase throwing May Busch. Mr. Lefler did show respect for the marriage of Mabel and Lew Cody which is opposite of Ms. Benson's (she clearly despised Cody) theory on the marriage. In Betty Fussell's book on Mabel she discloses a premature baby born to Mabel with Sam Goldwyn possibly being the father, for some reason the author did not touch on this story. The great points in the book are the appreciation for the career of Mabel Normand which if anyone has seen her films will agree. Mabel was a handful, willful, spoiled, and prone to temper tantrums at a perceived snub or an actress encroaching in her domain. She was also kind, funny, generous, and loyal to those she loved. I have read many remarks in other books by her friends and they all seem to have loved and wanted to protect her. I suppose I should touch on her part in the William Desmond Taylor scandal. Mabel was treated horribly and unfairly by the public just because she was the last to see Taylor alive. At no time was she ever a suspect. She was judged guilty by association. Mabel's great-nephew has a great deal of memorabilia and journals of Ms Normands and it is my hope that someday he will write his own book on her using those journals.

I defy anyone who has ever seen a Mabel Normand film, or even just her photograph, not to fall in love with her. So I was excited to read this new biography of her. It didn't disappoint--well, let me rephrase that: it disappointed me inasmuch as I wished her life had turned out happier, but the author could do little to remedy that! No, the book was well written, well documented, and its subject was treated in a very fair and even-handed manner. It really is one of the best books on her life I have read since the Fussell book so many years ago (which, frankly, left me with an oddly unsatisfied feeling).

The biographer is a bit too enamored of his subject to be objective about her life. In places, Ms. Normand's story is glossed over with praise and starry-eyed fan service instead of real research, and that's a shame, because Mabel Normand's life seems fascinating, if a bit mysterious. If you're a fan of Hollywood stories, scandals, and tales of pulling one's self up into fame, this book is worth a read.

I found this book to be a refreshingly uniquely written biography of a famous person. I am not an avid Mabel Normand fan, or at least I wasn't, but I am a fan of the Edwardian and World War I time periods and of silent films. I am also avidly interested in microhistory, the history of the everyday life of regular people. Obviously, this book is not a study in microhistory, as it is a

biography of a famous person, but it does incorporate the microhistory of the period well enough to give the reader a decent sense of the context of Mabel's actions. Also, this book is written in a series of vignettes, rather than a continuous monotony of names, dates, and places that seem to be so ubiquitous in biographies. Remarkably, this style does not take from the chronology of Mabel's life, but rather adds interest to it as each event of her life becomes a short story rather than an impersonal rattling off of facts. I do not mean to imply that this book has a lack of facts: on the contrary, it is well researched and well cited throughout. It gives the dates, names, and places, but gives them in such a way that they do not detract from the overall story of Mabel, which is the main thing that I personally care about. I find the language used to be succinct and well written. As an avid reader of many types of books, I can say that I am rather an expert on good writing. This book pulls you in and gets your attention. Many books that focus on non-fiction subjects can easily remind the reader that they are indeed reading. I prefer to get lost in a good story, even if that story is true! This is the type of book that you can get wrapped up in and forget the time, and to me, that is always a good book.

Mabel Normand has been dead for a long time. Her active career in films easily was over after the William Desmond Taylor scandal which she was inadvertently involved as well as the Dines murder. There is really very little known about her personal life beyond what can be picked up on the Internet and genealogy web sites. However, this is an interesting book that relies on what is known and what has been speculated before and since her death. It also (more importantly) looks at her career and her contributions to comedy and film to back when she was really not much more than a kid herself. She was portrayed as someone who could be easily angered and slighted but could also be enormously generous and sympathetic. So who was the real Mabel? I tend to think of her as a good chum who unfortunately let life and fame get in her way to her own detriment and believe that comes through in this book. Despite the source material, the author has done an interesting job pulling fact and innuendo together. I will still wonder about Mabel's relationship and marriage to Lew Cody, her admitted problems with cocaine, a rumored premature baby possibly fathered by Sam Goldwyn, Mabel getting decked with a vase by Mae Busch, and her longtime fiance/collaborator Mack Sennett. While this is a somewhat pricey book but quite consistent with its publisher McFarland, I grudgingly concede it has got me thinking about Mabel.

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