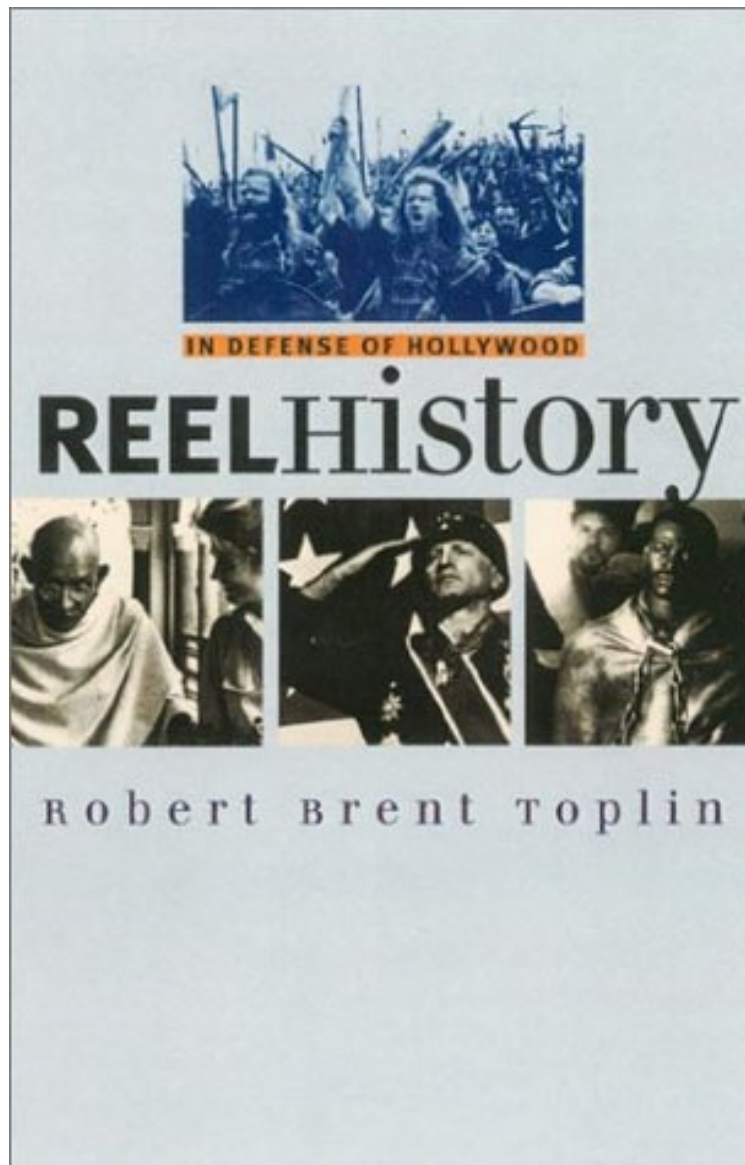


[Library ebook] Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood (Culture America)

Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood (Culture America)

Robert Brent Toplin

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Robert Brent Toplin : Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood (Culture America) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood (Culture America):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. the structure is pretty loose and content not sufficiently linked By Leon Lam Informative but not particularly well written. As mentioned in the previous comments, the structure is pretty

loose and content not sufficiently linked. Toplin provides a lot of information and some interesting arguments in *Reel History* but the issues of organization, to a considerable extent, hindered my reading experience. 10 of 13 people found the following review helpful. loose and baggy collection of remarks on historical films By A Customer Three and a half stars, really. The book gives some guidelines for what the author sees as the distinctive genre of "cinematic history" (his term--not very well defined--for a movie dealing with an historical event). He then argues by example about good and bad cinematic history, regularly invoking the genre requirements and the pressure to entertain that he sees as necessarily constraining factors in the creation of historical films. With the exception of a chapter-long discussion of a 1970s PBS docudrama, for which the author served as an historical consultant, none of the analyses are very extended. This seems a shame, as he is apt to see interesting things in the films that he does discuss. As the title implies, the attitude of the author is generally quite permissive about liberties taken by filmmakers. I think what he calls history, I'd call myth. Movies are mythic in their portrayal of the past. They have more in common with a short story, or even a poem, than they do with a history text. The implicit conception of the audience isn't very flattering, but probably accurate enough: most viewers won't pay attention to stories that don't conform to a critical mass of Hollywood techniques. The author tells historians, with some justification, to lighten up, but he does his best work in exposing the errors, sloppy thinking and general fallaciousness of academic film criticism over the past 30 years. The writing style is lucid and even lively at times, though he has an annoying habit of stringing long series of questions together, often without systematic effort to address those questions. Browse for the good sections, then dig in to those. On the level of extended argument, the book suffers somewhat (with the exception of the portion in which he takes on the film studies professoriate); but for bright insights, and intelligent moments, it stands up as an enjoyable read.

History has been fodder for cinema from the silent era to the blockbuster present, a fact that has seldom pleased historians themselves. As pundits increasingly ponder "how Hollywood fails history," Robert Toplin counters with a provocative alternative approach to this enduring debate over the portrayal of history in film. Toplin focuses on movies released over the past sixteen years during which twelve historical films won the Oscar for Best Picture and argues that critics often fail to recognize the unique ways that fictional films communicate important ideas about the past. A trenchant extension of his highly regarded *History by Hollywood*, Toplin's new work establishes commonsense ground rules for improving critical analysis in this area. Citing films like *Gladiator* and *Braveheart*, *Gandhi* and *Nixon*, he underscores the pressures placed on filmmakers to simplify and alter historical fact to conform to the demands of an extraordinarily expensive mass medium. Toplin demonstrates how a historical epic like *Glory* may contain "creative adjustments" that worry historians but shows how its distortions communicate broader and deeper truths about the Civil War experiences of African Americans just as *Saving Private Ryan* presented little factual detail about World War II and yet effectively conveyed the experience of combat. He also shows how other films such as *Mississippi Burning*, *Amistad*, and *The Hurricane* contain so many elements of fictional excess and oversimplification that they deserve the criticism they receive. Toplin deliberately steers a middle course between tradition-minded critics who castigate films for artistic liberties and cinema scholars wedded to pure aesthetics. He also draws upon his own experiences in film production and takes direct aim at recent writing about film dominated by jargonistic theory and empty rhetoric. He urges film studies scholars to move beyond their preoccupation with formal aesthetics and recognize that, in historical films, content does matter. In engaging prose that will appeal to any moviegoer, *Reel History* helps build bridges between defenders and detractors of history-by-Hollywood and enlarges our understanding of film as a communicator of truths about the human condition.

From *Library Journal* Toplin (history, Univ. of North Carolina, Wilmington) picks up where he left off in his *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*. He extends his argument for clemency in judging Hollywood's interpretations of history and thoroughly investigates its serious limitations and fabulous opportunities to construe history. Writing in a jargon-free and very accessible style, and using very recent films (including *Titanic*, *Schindler's List*, and *Pearl Harbor*) as examples, Toplin argues that Hollywood productions, particularly in the last 30 years, have been able to bring richly detailed impressions of past eras to a much wider public than have conventional history books. Those who find fault with filmmakers' tendencies to manipulate situations, personalities, and timelines are asked to consider the difficulties of condensing highly complex sequences of events, often happening over a long period of time, into entertaining two-hour dramas. Toplin makes his point eloquently, if somewhat repetitively, and builds a strong case for Hollywood's overall success in bringing certain aspects of history to life. This will interest historians, film critics, and readers who enjoy catching Hollywood out. Recommended. Andrea Slonosky, Long Island Univ., Brooklyn Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. "Without question most Americans today learn, or mislearn, history by watching movies. Toplin brilliantly grapples with the advantages and dilemmas brought about by this stark fact in a well-written, sober-minded analysis of the enduring power of cinematic history." Douglas Brinkley, author of *American Heritage History of the United States* Toplin's good common sense promotes a salutary (and long overdue) demystification of Hollywood-made history. Mark C. Carnes, editor of *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* A new and major contribution to the study of film and history. Peter C. Rollins, editor-in-chief of *Film*

History An excellent, well-written, clearly argued, and important book. Jeanine Basinger, author of *American Cinema: One Hundred Years of Filmmaking* From the Back Cover "Without question most Americans today learn-or mislearn-history by watching movies. Toplin brilliantly grapples with the advantages and dilemmas brought about by this stark fact in a well-written, sober-minded analysis of the enduring power of cinematic history."-Douglas Brinkley, author of *American Heritage History of the United States* "Toplin's good common sense promotes a salutary (and long overdue) demystification of Hollywood-made history."-Mark C. Carnes, editor of *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* "A new and major contribution to the study of film and history."-Peter C. Rollins, editor-in-chief of *Film History* "An excellent, well-written, clearly argued, and important book."-Jeanine Basinger, author of *American Cinema: One Hundred Years of Filmmaking*