

# Book Reviews

## Comptes rendus de livres

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Review of

Solecki, Sam. 2015. *A Truffaut Notebook*. Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Pp. xii. 340, b/w photographs, notes, chronology, bibliography, index, English, hardcover, ISBN 9780773546240.

François Truffaut, died in 1984 yet his films continue to be part of cinematic iconography three decades after his death and are extolled, deciphered, and scrutinized in Sam Solecki's *A Truffaut Notebook* (2015). In it, Solecki reveals his fascination with, and love for, all things Truffaut, a fascination which he presents to us in accessibly short chapters. The book is very much a personal notebook about his subject and displays all the characteristics of anyone's personal notebook: random impressions, disjointed feelings, and wistful ruminations on the director's life and work. But Solecki is not just anyone; his is a rich inner world in which I found myself becoming more and more eager to share.

Surprisingly, Truffaut began his career as a film critic, writing for *Cahiers du cinéma* for eight years before he turned to directing. He had had an impoverished boyhood, and had ended up in reform school before getting a job in a factory at fourteen. The privations of childhood were a continuing theme in many of his movies. Along with the films of Goddard and Rohmer, Truffaut's work forms part of the cultural currency of the French New Wave of the 1950s and 60s. Films like *Jules and Jim*, *Shoot the Piano Player*, and *The 400 Blows* (which Goddard later said was the one film that "truly expressed him [Truffaut] ... afterward he merely told stories") continue to be part of the film canon. Truffaut has always elicited strong but mixed opinions. Susan Sontag extolled both

*Shoot the Piano Player* and *Jules and Jim* for their "liberating anti-symbolic quality," while Pauline Kael described Truffaut as "a bastard pretender to the commercial throne of Hitchcock." Kael wrote a couple of unfavourable reviews of his films and, in fact, decided not to review *The Woman Next Door* and *The Last Metro* even though they were commercially successful, feeling she had already thoroughly voiced her criticism of Truffaut.

So what is the enduring appeal of Truffaut? Why in spite of critical opinion does his influence remain so strong in the face of his somewhat uneven success over the years? It is these questions that Solecki frames and identifies, and while his interest is more homage than obsession, there are elements of obsession in his writing. The topics of each chapter are disparate—ranging from notes on the films themselves to Truffaut the man (he was a dedicated writer-of-letters versus user-of-the-telephone), to quizzes, to comparisons of Truffaut and Goddard (one chapter is titled "Truffaut and Goddard: Resemblances"), and even to Truffaut's grave in Montmartre. The themes are all over the place, yet somehow coalesce and demonstrate, essentially, how movies "make" us. There are comparisons with contemporary movies like *Amélie* and discourses on Truffaut's appeal as a director and writer, and his legacy as exemplified in the work of directors like Woody Allen and Noah Baumbach.

Truffaut himself did a series of interviews with his own great role model, Alfred Hitchcock, later published in his book *Hitchcock* (1967). Solecki shows the powerful continuity of the director's (Hitchcock's) influence on a director (Truffaut) and his subsequent influence on other directors (Allen and Baumbach, among others). There are Solecki's reflections on why we go to the movies, and references to still *other* movies, and to Kierkegaard, and Nabokov, and Proust, and wonderfully apposite quotations like Truffaut's own: "...filmed by an inspired director the most ordinary thriller can become the most moving fairy tale." At one point Solecki discusses *The Woman Next Door* and says, "Whether you live alone or with a new love you carry the toxic mixture of hope and despair in secret: not just the self divided, but also the self divided against itself." Solecki is a sweeping and satisfying writer, and he rewards the reader with lots of food for thought in the very best sense.

Solecki's ratings as an academic by former students remain on-line and reveal what an engaging lecturer he must have been, and this is clearly apparent in his writing. An emeritus professor from the University of Toronto, his thoughts and impressions are nuanced, voluble, and to be pondered appreciatively. Reading *A Truffaut Notebook* makes me regret not having been a student in Solecki's classes—or even better, a dinner companion—since he brings the whole enchilada to the page. One cannot help but speculate on how meaty and delicious a conversation with the author might be. This book warms and excites the blood much in the way the dialogue in *My Dinner with Andre* did. You want to be part of the conversation and find yourself

reflecting on Solecki's meditations after each taste of this book. Which, of course, is another part of the book's appeal—it can be devoured in great gulps or tiny sips; there are both full length essays and one-page contemplations.

*A Truffaut Notebook* is essentially a commonplace book and takes us directly inside Solecki's interior realm. He enables us to appraise Truffaut's work through his primarily European sensibility toward the cinema. No ground is given to the Hollywood zeitgeist which dictates a movie's trajectory must always be on the ascent; that a director's movies must each surpass its predecessor in gross takings and audience size. To my mind Truffaut's films have a meandering, amorphous, and slightly unfinished quality that makes me think "Get to the point!" and occasionally "What *is* the point?" Coming to Truffaut through Solecki however, I have had to re-evaluate my perceptions and consider seeing some of his movies again, now to be perceived through a composite lens of both my own vision and Solecki's. As he reveals the inner Truffaut, Solecki also reveals himself, and in so doing compels us to re-visit the director's work—or for some younger readers, possibly come to Truffaut's films for the first time. The late critic Gene Siskal had a standard question he asked in any critique of a film: "Is this film more interesting than a documentary of the same actors having lunch?" I want to paraphrase this sentiment and apply it to *A Truffaut Notebook*: "Is this book more interesting than its subject?" My response is "*Peut-être*," and yet I still feel compelled to see Truffaut's movies again. At heart this is what an overview of a director's work should make us want to do: see his films.