

'Hergé' a fascinating story about the creator of 'Tintin'

It's a pretty safe bet that most Americans have at least heard of "The Adventures of Tintin," the animated film by Stephen Spielberg based on comic book characters created by Hergé, an artist/illustrator who was born Georges Prosper Remi in Brussels on May 22, 1907. The movie follows a young reporter as he engages in a series of exploits in various locations around the world, accompanied by his fox terrier, Snowy.

It's also an equally safe bet that most Americans don't know much about the man behind Tintin or the extraordinary life he led. But all that could change with the publication of "Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin," the book by Pierre Assouline, a well-known French journalist, film producer and author. To coincide with the premiere of the motion picture, a paperback version of the book — translated into English by Charles Ruas — was released in 2011.

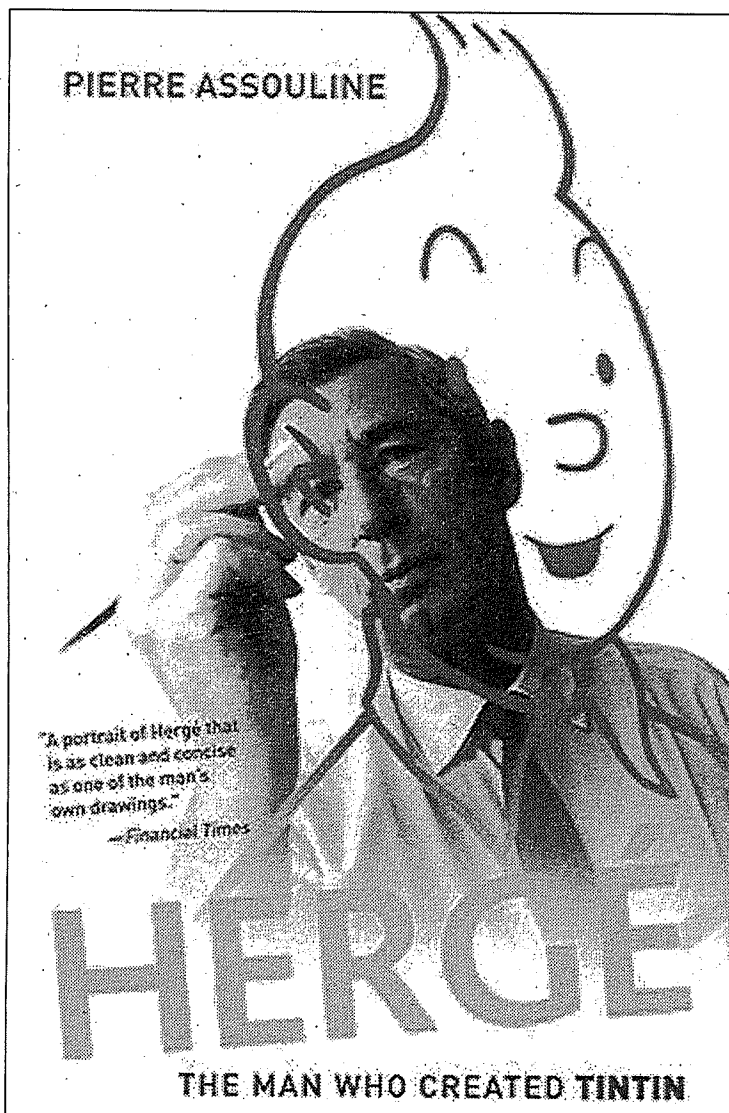
Tintin debuted in 1929 with Tintin in the Land of the Soviets and concluded with Tintin and Alph-Art, which was published posthumously in 1986. The series has sold more than 200 million copies worldwide and has been translated into more than 50 languages. Tintin was a phenomenon in Europe at roughly the same time Walt Disney was becoming a household name in America.

As is still the case today, the kind of success experienced by Hergé spawned an entire industry calculated to take full advantage of the commercial potential of the enterprise: "By 1936 Tintin was busily being merchandised. They were already busy launching a Tintin puzzle, a Tintin calendar, and even a cushion embroidered with Tintin and Snowy."

Although the characters had previously appeared in other outlets, it was during the period immediately following World War II that Hergé's work first attracted a worldwide audience.

"The first issue of Tintin magazine appeared on the newsstands on Thursday, September 26, 1946," Assouline explains. "It was easily identifiable, its logo consisting of the silhouette of the young reporter and his dog saluting the reader. The publication was unanimously praised. Success was immediate and stunning: 60,000 copies sold out in three days. 80,000 copies were printed of the third issue."

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"Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin," by Pierre Assouline. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011. 288 pages, \$15.95.

While his commercial success was undeniable, Hergé could be somewhat naïve when it came to understanding the significance of the political events that routinely formed the backdrop for Tintin's adventures. Several critics point to an oversimplification of the issues in some of his postwar work.

"Hergé had reduced four years of conflict between collaborators and resisters to a mere quarrel between optimists and pessimists," Assouline notes. "By the start of winter 1944 the government and the judicial system, not to mention the political world and public opinion, saw matters in a different light."

In 1944 he was accused of being a Nazi collaborator — an allegation that carried potentially lethal connotations in the years following the end of German occupation.

"The fact is that for certain writ-

ers and artists, the occupation was a golden age, as shown by the abundance and quality of work produced during this period," Assouline explains. "Hergé was among those who had done well during the occupation. He was 37 years old, and his life was to be changed irrevocably in ways for which he was unprepared and which would prove painful."

"Now he was the target of those seeking justice, for whom hatred of traitors was a sacred duty," Assouline continues. "Hergé put up with it as best he could. He was less afraid of capital punishment than of moral and social censure. He was haunted not by the specter of imminent death but by the threat of becoming a noncitizen."

The strain of these accusations, together with the pressure to maintain his extraordinary success, eventually took their toll on Hergé, as his editors noted in the magazine when he was unable to meet a deadline in 1947 and consequently dropped out of sight for a while: "Our friend Hergé needed a rest. Please do not worry; he is in good health. But by expending all his energy to meet the deadline of two pages of Prisoners of the Sun our friend exhausted himself. He will be back very shortly, God willing."

"In reality Hergé had suffered a breakdown," Assouline writes. "He vanished without leaving an address. It was a flight into the unknown, a real escapade — that of a man who had come to the end of his rope."

Getting back to the current big-screen production, it was interesting to learn that Spielberg first tried to secure the rights to Tintin in 1982.

"Spielberg's demands were draconian," Assouline asserts. "He wanted total control of the merchandising of the film, thus of the characters created by Hergé. He wanted sole artistic and commercial control of the whole project."

Initially, Hergé agreed to these stipulations. Negotiations ultimately fell apart, however, when Spielberg added a clause that would allow him to choose someone else to direct the film if he was unhappy with the screenplay.

"For Hergé such an eventuality was unacceptable," Assouline observes. "He had made all the financial concessions because Spielberg himself would be in charge of the film. He considered Spielberg a genius. But it was unthinkable that he would consent to allowing anyone else to make the film."

Obviously, this was not the end of the great director's quest: "After Hergé's death Spielberg obtained an option on Tintin from the estate, which he continued to renew on and off for roughly two decades."

The rest, as they say, is history.

Hergé died on March 3, 1983, after an extended illness. I had heard of Tintin before hearing about the movie or reading this book, but to be honest I was relatively clueless about the life of his creator. I thoroughly enjoyed the story and highly recommend the book. It will cause you to see the film in a whole new light.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.