# Walt's Original Sins: Exploring the Racist History Behind Disney's Legacy



Walt Disney, the father of modern animation and the creator of some of the world's most beloved characters, has long been celebrated for his imagination and creativity. However, behind the seemingly wholesome and enchanting facade, a darker history lurks – a history marked by racism, prejudice, and harmful stereotypes.
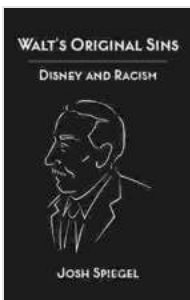
**Walt's Original Sins: Disney and Racism** by Barrington Barber

★★★★☆ 4.8 out of 5

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In recent years, Disney's legacy has come under increasing scrutiny as scholars and historians have delved into the hidden corners of the company's past. This article delves into the complex and disturbing history of Walt Disney's racism, exploring its origins, manifestations, and lasting impact on the company and society as a whole.

## Early Life and Influences

Walt Disney was born in 1901 in Chicago, Illinois. He grew up in a small town called Marceline, Missouri, where he was exposed to racial segregation and prejudice firsthand. Disney's father was a carpenter who held strong anti-Black views, and these views likely influenced Disney's own early perceptions of race.

As a young man, Disney moved to Kansas City, where he worked as a commercial artist. In the early 1920s, he created a series of animated short films featuring a character named Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. These films were popular, but Disney lost the rights to the character in a contract dispute.

In 1928, Disney created Mickey Mouse, the character that would become his most enduring creation. Mickey Mouse quickly became a global icon, and Disney's company, Walt Disney Productions, grew into a major entertainment empire.

## Racist Caricatures in Early Films

From the very beginning of his career, Disney's films were marked by racist caricatures and stereotypes. In the 1930s, Disney's animators created numerous shorts featuring black characters that portrayed them as lazy, superstitious, and prone to violence. These characters often had exaggerated features, such as thick lips, wide eyes, and buck teeth.

One of the most infamous examples of Disney's racism is the film "Song of the South" (1946). Set in the antebellum South, the film features a black character named Uncle Remus who tells stories to white children. Uncle Remus is portrayed as a wise and gentle old man, but he also embodies many of the racist stereotypes of the time.

Disney's racist caricatures were not limited to black characters. In the 1944 film "The Three Caballeros," Disney animators depicted Mexican characters as lazy, sombrero-wearing buffoons. Native American characters were also often portrayed in a stereotypical and disrespectful manner.

## Disney's Collaboration with the Nazis

During the 1930s, Disney collaborated with the Nazi government in Germany. In 1938, Disney sent several of his animators to Germany to study the Nazi propaganda techniques of Leni Riefenstahl. Disney's animators were impressed by Riefenstahl's use of film to glorify the Nazi regime, and they incorporated some of her techniques into their own work.

In 1939, Disney released the film "The Fuehrer's Face," a propaganda film that satirized Adolf Hitler. However, some historians believe that the film was actually more sympathetic to Hitler than it was critical.

Disney's collaboration with the Nazis has been a source of controversy for many years. Some historians believe that Disney was a Nazi sympathizer, while others argue that he was simply trying to appease the German government in order to protect his business interests.

**Disney's Post-War Legacy**

In the years after World War II, Disney continued to produce films that contained racist stereotypes. However, he also began to make some efforts to promote racial tolerance and understanding. In 1964, Disney released the film "Mary Poppins," which featured a black character named Bert who was portrayed in a positive and respectful manner.

In the 1970s, Disney began to publicly address the issue of racism in his films. In a 1971 interview, he said that he regretted the racist caricatures that he had created in the past. He also said that he was committed to making films that were more inclusive and respectful of all cultures.

Despite Disney's efforts to address the issue of racism, his legacy continues to be tainted by his past actions. In recent years, there have been several calls to remove or rename attractions at Disney theme parks that contain racist imagery. Disney has also been criticized for its lack of diversity in its films and television shows.

Walt Disney's legacy is a complex and contradictory one. He was a brilliant animator and storyteller who created some of the most beloved characters in history. However, he was also a man who held racist views that were reflected in his work.

Disney's racism is a reminder of the ways in which even the most beloved and influential figures can be flawed. It is important to acknowledge and confront this dark history in order to learn from it and to create a more just and equitable world.
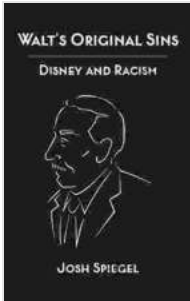
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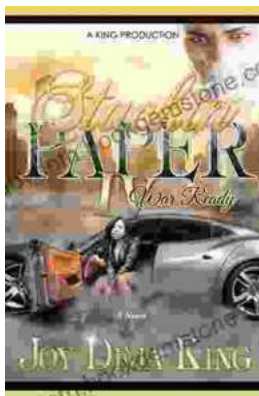
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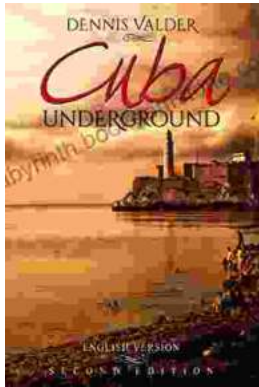
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