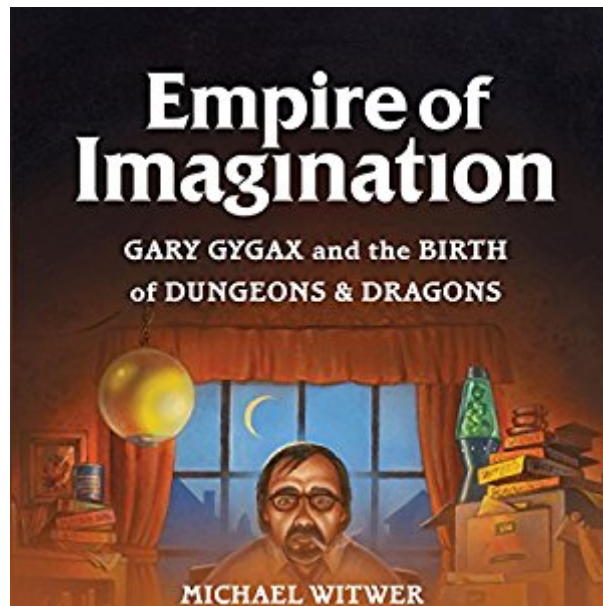


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Empire Of Imagination: Gary Gygax And The Birth Of Dungeons & Dragons



Synopsis

The life story of Gary Gygax, godfather of all fantasy adventure games, has been told only in bits and pieces. Michael Witwer has written a dynamic, dramatized biography of Gygax from his childhood in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, to his untimely death in 2008. Gygax's magnum opus, *Dungeons & Dragons*, would explode in popularity throughout the 1970s and '80s and irreversibly alter the world of gaming. D&D is the best-known, best-selling role-playing game of all time, and it boasts an elite class of alumni - Stephen Colbert, Robin Williams, and Junot Diaz all have spoken openly about their experiences with the game as teenagers, and some credit it as the workshop where their nascent imaginations were fostered. Gygax's involvement in the industry lasted long after his dramatic and involuntary departure from D&D's parent company, TSR, and his footprint can be seen in the genre he is largely responsible for creating. But as Witwer shows, perhaps the most compelling facet of his life and work was his unwavering commitment to the power of creativity in the face of myriad sources of adversity, whether cultural, economic, or personal. Through his creation of the role-playing genre, Gygax gave two generations of gamers the tools to invent characters and entire worlds in their minds. Told in narrative-driven and dramatic fashion, Witwer has written an engaging chronicle of the life and legacy of this emperor of the imagination.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Empire of the Imagination is a decent, but short, Biography of Gary's Gygax's life. It has a few shortcomings, but ultimately is a satisfactory work. Just some quick background on myself before I

get into the review--I was a friend of Gary in his later years. You can find my name or initials on much of the work in the latter half of the bibliography, mostly in the days when he was doing stuff with publishers Clark and Cheunault (and Mongoose). I'm still friendly with Gail. I wanted to make sure I'm upfront about this before doing a review, because obviously I have my own biases, but I also want to make sure I'm not dismissed as a "random guy on the Internet" either. The book itself is presented in a series of vignettes--a notable point in Gary's life with some dialog and then reflections on how he got to that point. The book does a decent job of giving an overview of how things were going in Gary's life at each point. It's clear the author has taken a lot of time and tried to compile a lot of different sources into a narrative. The stories are told in an entertaining style, and I enjoyed some of the new insights into Gary's earlier life, like reading about the "Big Fish Story", or why Gary stopped driving. Based on reading this book, it's fairly accurate, and doesn't conflict with a lot of both what I've read and the private stories Gary told me, so I think he does a decent job of getting his history right. And a lot of these stories are backed up by the public record as well. I trust that Witwer did a very good job on this. The main thing I like is that Witwer does a great job of producing footnotes for the book and bibliographies. There's footnotes for each chapter.

Through the first quarter of the book, I was inclined to agree with the majority of reviews I've seen that this wasn't a "proper" biography and that the way it was told through small vignettes glimpsing into Gygax's mind was seriously flawed (particularly the narrative of in-game D&D scenarios at the beginning of each short chapter as corollaries to his life). So I set the book aside for a few weeks before picking it up again to try to quickly zoom through the remainder. However, from the point where it begins to chronicle the actual creation of Dungeons & Dragons and its parent company, TSR, the book gained strength and drew my interest back in. The book does a fantastic job of telling that story more so than it even does of telling Gygax's. If you are looking for stories of Gygax with cocaine and hookers in Hollywood, then no, this isn't the book for you and you'll still have to wait for that. Those looking for a "proper" biography should take a second look at the title. It's not solely about Gygax, it's just as much about the creation of a new game that changed WORLDWIDE culture in a flash - literature, board games, video games, movies, TV, cartoons, art, philosophy, copyright law, intellectual property law, etc. ad infinitum - so much of what we take for granted today literally stems from what Gygax and his nerdy friends set in motion in 1974. The finish of the book, imagining Gygax meeting the Grim Reaper for a final game of chess, is admittedly cheesy, but it doesn't detract from the story of spiritual and philosophical conversion that Gygax experiences through the last several chapters leading up to it. It made my heart glad to see that he managed to

find peace before he departed this life.

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