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Short Biographies: Matt Groening and Don Hertzfeldt

Matt Groening:

Matt Groening is an American animator, cartoonist, and voice actor who is known for his famous television series that includes The Simpsons, Futurama, and Disenchantment.

Matt started his early career in 1977 at the age of 23. Living in Los Angeles, he worked a bunch of every-day jobs that included bussing tables, washing dishes, and appearing as an extra in a television movie. He described his life through a series of self-published comic strips he titled “Life in Hell,” and he sold them in a book corner of a record store. It wasn’t until he gained employment at the Los Angeles Reader that his work started getting attention. After showing his comic strips to the editor, he was given a spot in the newspaper that sparked a lot of public attention. It became popular enough that he sold over 22,000 copies of his first book in the first two prints.

Life in Hell caught the attention of James L. Brooks, a Hollywood writer-producer who contacted Matt with the proposition of working on an undefined animation project. He accepted the job and came up with the idea of a dysfunctional cartoon family called the Simpson family, and he named each character after each person in his family, with the exception of Bart who Matt Groening named as an anagram of brat.

The original designs of the Simpsons characters were crudely drawn because Matt Groening submitted crude sketches to the animators and assumed the animators would clean them up. Instead, the animators simply traced over his drawings. Matt included a few redesigns to make them a bit cleaner, and he made sure each character was easily recognizable by their silhouette. These designs were originally used for shorts that first appeared in the Tracy Ullman Show on April 19th of 1987.

Although The Tracy Ullman Show wasn’t that popular, the popularity of the Simpsons shorts eventually led to a half-hour spin-off production a couple years later. A team of production companies adapted the show to fit for the Fox Broadcasting Company. James Brooks negotiated with Fox to prevent them from messing with the content because Groening stated “He wanted to avoid any mainstream trash” that the audience was watching. The half-hour series eventually premiered on December 17, 1989 with a few episodes such as “Simpsons Roasting an Open Fire, A Christmas Special, and Some Enchanted Evening.

To the surprise of everyone involved in the production, The Simpsons quickly became a big hit worldwide. He said “Nobody thought The Simpsons was going to be a big hit. It sneaked up on everybody.” The show was co-developed by Groening, Brooks, and Sam Simon, with Sam eventually leaving in 1993 over creative disputes with Matt. Since production, the Simpsons has continued making new episodes and it is currently one of the longest running animated series in history. To this day, Matt currently serves as an executive producer and creative consultant of the show.

Matt Groening also ventured on to work on other projects, such as Futurama and Disenchantment. Futurama was a science fiction show that took place in the year 3000, and the show first premiered in 1999. Although it had a hard time initially gaining tract, strong DVD sales and high ratings brought it to life. Its production lasted until the last episode aired on September 4th of 2013.

Disenchantment was the third animated series Groening helped develop alongside with Netflix. It began airing on August 2018, and new episodes are currently in production with a planned schedule to air them in 2020 and 2021.

Don Hertzfeldt:

Don Hertzfeldt is an American animator and independent filmmaker. He is a two-time Academy Award nominee who is famously known for his animated films such as *World of Tomorrow, It’s such a Beautiful Day,* and *Rejected.*

Hertzfeldt liked to draw cartoons as a kid, and he eventually found a draw to animation. He stated that he liked to approach animation from a strange angle, “like a regular filmmaker who just happens to animate.” He never held a real job other than just creating his animated films. Hertzfeldt studied in film school at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and he later graduated with a B.A. in Film Studies.

What makes Hertzfeldt stand out from other animated films is that he takes a very minimalistic approach to animation. His work commonly features hand-drawn stick figures drawn with pen and paper, and he uses antique 16mm or 35mm-film cameras to photograph his drawings and old-fashioned special effects techniques. The stories themselves typically feature some form of black humor, surrealism, and tragicomedy. His films are described as containing existential and philosophical themes, while other times he has very slapstick and absurdist humor. Hertzfeldt claims that his approach to using very “outdated” or “harder to work with” techniques are what give his films their unique visual aspect, and that “it would be impossible to get the same effect with digital tools.”

One of his most popular films, *Rejected,* was one of his first shorts created after graduating from film school. *Rejected* is a series of animated shorts that contain very surreal humor that are used to advertise products related to a fictional “Family Learning Channel.” After being released in theaters in 2000, it won 27 awards and was nominated for an Oscar for Best Animated Short Film in the following year. It also became a cult classic after becoming a viral sensation on the internet in the early 2000s. In 2010 it has been regarded as “one of the most innovative animated films of the past ten years” by The Huffington Post.

Later on Hertzfeldt went on to work on *The Animation Show* and three short films titled *Everything will be OK, I am So Proud of You,* and *It’s Such a Beautiful Day.* Eventually, these three films were combined into one large film under the name *It’s Such a Beautiful Day.* Each of the films won multiple awards, and each one was described by Steven Pate of *The Chicagoist* as ways to hit you deep and make you feel something in your chest… like when something “profound and undeniably true is conveyed about the human condition.”

Hertzfeldt described his writing process like building a raft while floating in the ocean. You just wait and you wait and wait. Eventually, small little bits and pieces of stuff come drifting by, like a memory, and you hang onto it, and then another little piece comes around. It could be unrelated, maybe a funny sentence you heard somewhere. You keep collecting all these little things, and eventually you find enough connections to build a raft. You might toss some pieces out or keep others for later, but there’s never a lot of active effort or calculation. The big ideas don’t come from sitting down and mentally stressing about them.

Hertzfeldt has had prominent influence on surrealism and absurdism in animation in the 2000s, including Adult Swim’s animated comedies. In 2012, he was ranked #16 in the animation industry and was regarded as one of the Top 100 Most Influential People in Animation.