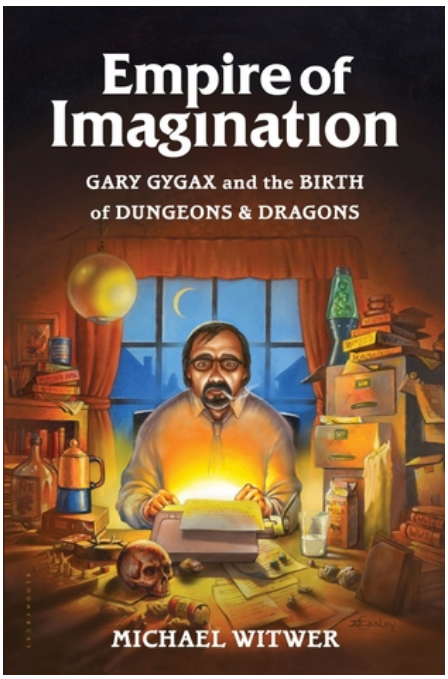

Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons & Dragons

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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 experience 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.

Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons & Dragons Details

Date	:	Published October 6th 2015 by Bloomsbury USA
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From Reader Review Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons & Dragons for online ebook

Eric says

Difficult to rate. Objectively, it wasn't a very good biography. It suffered from the author's efforts to create the feel of a biopic, with "scenes" from Gygax's life imagined by the author. It also left out a lot of key facts and felt somewhat disorganized, even though it was mostly chronological. There was a lot of good information, however, and I toyed with a 3 star review. It is a solid 2.5/5 in part because I find the subject matter interesting.

The other criticism I have is that this book spends at least 2 or 3 concluding chapters reflecting on the significance of Gygax's work. While there is no doubt that Gygax was instrumental in popularizing a certain genre of fantasy, particularly in the 80s and 90s, was a critical player in developing RPGs, and became a pop icon, the book overstates to a great degree his influence. All that being said, it was a reasonably enjoyable short read, and the story of the rise and fall of TSR was fun to take in.

John Adkins says

This is a fantastic book that tells the story of E. Gary Gygax, the creator of Dungeons and Dragons and by extension the entire role playing genre. The biography is extremely well researched through extensive interviews with Gygax's family and coworkers. In places dialogue is constructed based upon interviewer's recollections and Gygax's writings but in all such cases the areas of extrapolation are clearly identified in the copious notes provided. If like me you grew up playing the game or if you play most any of today's modern video or role playing games you should take a look at this book and see where it all began.

I was provided an eArc through NetGalley in exchange for this review.

Hal Johnson says

Empire of the Imagination isn’t really a biography in any traditional sense. If I liked it better I’d call it an experimental biography; but I did not like it, so it looks to me more like a category error. Rather than a biography, it’s a series of fictionalized vignettes about events in Gary Gygax’s life, loosely connected by nods at context. One chapter (for example) dramatizes over the course of three pages Gygax agonizing over what to do with his life, climaxing with him deciding to join the marines (and implausibly circling the recruiting ad in red pen, as through leaving clues for Scooby-Doo); the next chapter begins with him not in the marines, but fortunately there is a quick flashback later to establish that he was discharged.

The style and tone owe much more to the conventions of fiction than the conventions of biography – most of the book, if you showed it to a random observer, would be mistaken for a novel. “‘Keep it down, damn it!’ said the teen in the brown leather jacket as he worked his way around to the front of the car in the small barnlike garage” is the first sentence of chapter 6; “‘More champagne, ma’am?’ asked the flight attendant” is the first sentence of chapter 31; and these are I think a fair representation of the book. Unfortunately, because the conventions of fiction require so much dialogue and detail, the majority of the incidents in the book

require Michael Witwer to make things up; and in making things up, he takes the safest route and falls back on cliches, such as the red pen above. “Bang! Bang! Bang!” is the opening paragraph to the chapter in which Gygax’s wife pounds on the door and shouts, "I know you're in there, Ernest Gary Gygax!" (each chapter's opening is usually its weakest part). The end result is neither good fiction nor good biography.

The obvious inspiration for this manner of pseudo-non-fiction is the “dramatization” familiar from TV tabloid news. At the risk of sounding like a crank, I must say I find it remarkable, and also depressing, how often book authors insist on taking their cues from the death-throes of the moribund medium of television. This is most noticeable in the reality-TV-inspired “challenges” so many nonfiction writers assign themselves, but also in the flat, cold, trite, purely visual prose that we are subject to in many books, including this one.

Jumping around between various “good scenes,” as Witwer does, necessarily presents an odd, skewed portrait of a life. The time young Gary encountered a poltergeist reads like four pages of a Goosebumps novel – a good scene indeed! – but there’s very little attempt to justify its inclusion, or length, beyond the inherent drama of the situation. A general lack of rigor in the facts makes the accuracy of Witver’s imagined scenes suspect, or even more suspect than they already would be when viewed with a healthy skepticism about fictionalizing someone else’s life. One example: On page 97 Dave Megarry’s DUNGEON! board game is listed as an inspiration for Arneson’s original Blackmoor campaign; on page 126, Dave Magarry has joined TSR “to publish a board game version of D&D, aptly named DUNGEON!” These two statements are not irreconcilable, but they do demand some kind of explanation, which is not forthcoming.

Also, there’s an ongoing conceit in which…cosmic forces? game with Gygax in a campaign that is a sustained allegory for his life? This was not a good idea.

The end result is a book that is resolutely pro-Gygax – perhaps not an incorrect, but certainly a partisan and unbalanced stance – and consistently prioritizes atmosphere over content. This latter quality is so similar to a late-second-edition rulebook that I would almost think it was a homage, like the great Jeff Easley book jacket – except of course Gygax had nothing to do with 2e books.

I won’t be the first reviewer to mention that Peterson’s Playing at the World covers much of the same material in a fashion that is more authoritative and intelligent. This book does extend to later in Gygax’s life than Peterson’s does, and so interested readers won’t be wasting their time with this book. I’m still hoping Gygax will someday get the biography he deserves.

Thom says

A collection of scenes from the life and business of E. Gary Gygax. Not a true biography - whole incidents take place between the scenes, and are not explained. More a history of Gary leading to a history of Dungeons and Dragons. There were a few anecdotes I hadn't read, and I was surprised just how instrumental he was in starting and then building GenCon.

A solid 2.4 stars, but rounded up on the Gem Appreciation table to a 3.

EggSalad says

Just started. Page 7:
"Ironcially [sic], it was Tom's pen sketch of a werewolf [used in the first edition of D&D]."

Ok, really? We can't even run a spell check on a published book? What's even worse is that this is not ironic. Perhaps it is ironc, which is some new term which represents something other than irony.

Just for reference (from google): Ironic = happening in the opposite way to what is expected, and typically causing wry amusement because of this. His friend drawing a picture of a monster that his friend really liked for a game with monsters is not the opposite to what is expected, and did not cause any wry amusement.

Next: This is a fictionalized historic account, complete with what people were thinking. *Sigh*.

So far I'd say read Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventure from Chess to Role-Playing Games and not this.

I have not completely given up. Yet.

Ok, I stuck with it. It reads fairly easy, except for the occasional jarring moment, as mentioned above. The author's take on the death of Gary Gygax is so cheesy it is gag inducing.

After all that, I am going to give it 2 stars. It does provide a lot more detail on Gary Gygax that I have not seen in other books on this subject, and he was an interesting guy. And, I did finish it, which means it it cannot be that bad. Probably worth 2.5 stars if they allowed more granularity in the ratings.

Yoly says

Very good!

Lyn says

Gary Gygax changed the world.

Michael Witwer’s FREAKIN AWESOME biography of Gygax and the creation of Dungeons and Dragons is to old gamer nerds like me what a book about Abner Doubleday is to baseball fans or a book about Robert Johnson is to blues aficionados.

It is a study of origins.

And just as there was some kind of ball before Doubleday and there was delta music prior to Crossroads, there were board and strategy games before Gygax’s paradigm shift. But Gygax dragged it kicking and screaming from the basements and back rooms into the mainstream.

It has been said of America that hundreds of years from now, we will be known for the Constitution, Jazz music and Baseball. Can we add gaming? From its very humble origins in the convention halls of Wisconsin, Dungeons and Dragons fueled generations to make fantasy cool and gaming a scholarship source rivaling more traditional sports in billions of dollars of revenue.

And what of the wasted lives of youth spent in hours of mindless devotion and of wearing expensive and impractical colorful, cult like garb? What of grown men acting like kids and of spending precious time in idle and unproductive inactivity? And of course I'm asking about sports fans. Gamers who've sharpened their wits on strategy and diplomacy have gone on to change the world one roll of a twenty sided dice at a time.

Witwer chronicles Gygax early years, his shoestring and homemade early drafts of the game that would change the world, his meteor rise to the top and his inauspicious decline. And, most enjoyably, of the recognition in old age of his great contributions to our culture.

True, this may be just for fans, and to be fair, though Witwer is a talented writer, this was not great literature, but to this owner of some second edition books from the early 80s, this was a fun read.

Justin says

As an avid fan of *Dungeons & Dragons* and RPGs in general, I've always been interested in the history of this particular hobby. And while I've read books on the origins of the game itself (*Of Dice and Men*), this is the first time I've seen an in-depth biography of the man who started it all.

In-depth is certainly the right term here, as we see a cross section of Gygax's entire life, from childhood to his death in 2008. There were a lot of ups and downs at work here, both in his personal and professional life, and *Empire of Imagination* doesn't flinch away from examining them. But neither does it linger on Gygax's failures, any more than it overemphasizes his victories. This is a balanced, respectful look at the life of a man who changed the face of pop culture forever; for the first time, I feel like I have a solid feel for the life of the proverbial "man behind the curtain."

I'd definitely recommend *Empire of Imagination,* if you have any interest at all in *D&D*. It's full of unexpected revelations, interesting details, and raises a lot of what-if questions, about where the game would be today if things had gone just a little differently. It's not a long read, but it's certainly worth your time.

Sean Gibson says

The surest way to ensure a miniscule audience is to lead with the fact that you're writing something related to Dungeons & Dragons.

I can't imagine this imaginative biography of D&D creator Gary Gygax, which takes considerable (albeit informed) creative liberties to flesh out the entirety of his life through imagined dialogue and inner monologues, found a massive audience upon release, even though Gygax is revered as a deity in certain

nerdy circles. Now, if Witwer had led with the bit about Gary doing lines of cocaine while nailing Hollywood starlets when he sought to bring D&D to the big screen in the early 80s, that might have drawn a substantial crossover audience…

In the spirit of the book's approach, let's imagine what that sort of encounter would have looked like (get your dice ready):

Gary Gygax: Hey, baby…I'm Gary Gygax, creator of ultra-cool gaming phenomenon Dungeons & Dragons.

Starlet: Isn't that the game that all the dorky guys play? The one that, like, made that guy kill himself in the sewer tunnels in Michigan?

Gygax: That's not at all what happened. The media is populated with morons. Trust me—D&D is the height of cool. (Rolls a charisma check…gets a 2.)

Starlet: You're overweight and have a bad beard, and why do you have a ponytail, even though you're starting to go bald?

Gygax: (Reaches into his bag of holding.) Yeah, but I have a lot of money. And cocaine. Did I mention that I have cocaine?

Starlet: (Shrugs.) I'm into cocaine. Okay. I'll do you.

Gary's brief on-a-bender time in Hollywood is really just an irrelevant footnote in the tale of D&D's creation and ultimate rise to the pinnacle of the gaming world, an achievement whose influence far surpasses the revenue it's generated—a story that, by and large, Witwer does justice to.

Rest assured that I'm not about to subject you to paeans to the glory of THAC0, ruminations on saving throws versus poison, or thoughts on restrictions placed on multiclass characters, though I'd be delighted to opine on all of those topics upon request (I'll pause here so you can breathe a grateful sigh of relief). But, I would like to take a moment to reflect upon the outsized effect D&D has had on my life relative to time spent actually playing it.

I started role-playing around the age of 14 or 15, and, looking back, if you count up the total number of hours I've spent actually playing D&D over the course of my life, it would probably work out to fewer hours than I work in an average month (and certainly far fewer hours than I've spent exploring the wonders of my own bo…never mind; let's just move on, shall we?). But, if you tabulate the number of hours I've spent reading D&D rule books and related novels…creating characters…writing adventures to run as a DM…and generally thinking about the game, well, now we're talking about a pretty significant chunk of time.

It's entirely possible that the age of D&D (not to mention the broader world of pen-and-paper RPGs) has passed—I don't doubt that it will live on in perpetuity for a small subsegment of the gaming populace, but I suspect it will become increasingly niche (though let's not discount the value of the brand in the context of a virtual reality environment—that's where the future of the game is). Despite that, however, its influence on an entire generation of business, technology, and entertainment luminaries is undeniable—from Silicon Valley CEOs to innovative game designers to major movie stars, the number of influential people who spent their formative years holed up in a basement knocking back grape soda while slaying dragons with dice is mind-boggling, and, in turn, THEIR influence on popular culture is staggering.

I’m a somewhat competitive person, but I’m more of a collaborator, so the idea of a game that focuses on teamwork and achieving group success is particularly appealing to me, and was especially so during my formative teenage years, when the rigors of high school social life were sufficiently cutthroat and challenging without layering complications on top of that. Further, the world building and storytelling skills that are required to be a Dungeon Master couldn’t help but inform and develop my skills, and I doubt that The Camelot Shadow and The Chronicle of Heloise & Grimple would exist if I hadn’t honed those skills crafting D&D adventures (note to people who regret having lost hours of their lives to reading either of those worthy tomes: please send complaints to Mr. Gygax’s gravesite).

So, for a game that, all told, I haven’t spent that many hours actually playing, it’s had a massive influence on me, and while reading about the mismanagement and poor business decisions that led to the demise of TSR and Gygax’s ouster from the company he founded and disconnection from the game he so lovingly crafted (with an assist from the oft-overlooked Dave Arneson, the Steve Ditko of RPGs) was, at times, sad and depressing, there’s inspiration to be found in seeing the development of an enterprise that was driven by a pure love of gaming and entertainment and creating a shared, collaborative storytelling experience that would enable anyone and everyone to embark on the grandest of adventures from the safety of their living rooms.

A solid 3.5 stars.

Shannon Appelcline says

Witwer's biopic of Gary Gygax covers new ground by revealing Gygax as a person, while twining that together with his better known history as the creator of D&D and the founder of TSR. As a roleplaying historian myself, I found the biographic background particularly interesting (though I was familiar with most of what followed).

In general, Witwer's book offers three advantages over other takes on roleplaying history. First, it provides *details*; Witwer scoured interviews (and talked with people anew) to discover the texture of Gygax's life, giving it more verisimilitude. Second, it offers *continuity* by providing a lengthy throughline of Gygax's life and times. Third, it brings *readability* to this story by creating a light narrative.

I do have some issues with possible bias in the book. I disagree with the depictions of some things such as Dave Arneson, the Blumes, and AD&D second edition — all of which feel too touched by Gygax's own impressions and beliefs. I also felt that some of the broad overview at the end of the book, such as its take on the relative success of D&D 5E, didn't reveal the whole picture. With that said, I enjoyed the book and the details it provided on Gygax's life.

Alan says

I played a lot of *Dungeons & Dragons* when I was in college. A lot—though, y'know, not as much as *some* people; I don't think I could ever have seriously called myself a gamer. This was all back in the early 1980s, just a few years after Ernest (Gary) Gygax's company TSR had released its much-expanded and updated rulebooks for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (AD&D), the version we actually played. My then-girlfriend brought me into the group who had commandeered the long folding table in her dormitory's basement

laundry room, where we slew monsters and gathered treasure hour after hour, after hours and far into the night.

AD&D was involved in the end of that relationship as well, as it happens. I was acting as DM (Dungeon Master) for a campaign a couple of years later, peering over a cardboard screen filled with tables and percentages, when I saw her making out with one of the other players, watching her watching me...

That didn't put me off the *game*, though. I did have to find another bunch to throw dice with, and later on I did drift away from role-playing games almost entirely, forsaking them for other forms of late-night activity.

I did remember *AD&D* fondly, enough so to introduce it to my children and their friends many years later, hauling out those old rulebooks again in the 21st Century when the kids got old enough to play... and my son's friend Joe, now a young man in his own right, remembers our campaigns fondly enough himself, when he found a copy of Michael Witwer's biography Empire of Imagination in Powell's to give me for Christmas in 2016. (Thanks, Joe!)

Gary Gygax, who died in 2008, was without doubt a complicated individual, and Michael Witwer does a thorough job of capturing the many talents and the many flaws of the man who created the first *formal* fantasy role-playing game. Empire of Imagination contains extensive supplemental material, as befits a book about a man who created so many supplements to his own work. Witwer includes photographs (many in color), a bibliography, and detailed endnotes that include a citation for every direct quote.

The most surprising thing (to me, at least) was that Gygax was a Jehovah's Witness—both before and to some extent after he became the creator of a game that some concerned citizens (mistakenly, Gygax always maintained) considered Satanic. Gygax himself, at least according to Witwer, never saw a conflict between his faith and his career.

I must admit that Witwer's prose is never more than workaday, even awkward at times—but never unreadable. That, and the superfluous reminders of D&D's importance, are the most obvious flaws of this biography. Witwer does spend too much time justifying Gygax's place in history—as Gygax himself said, he'd just "come up with the idea for making 'Let's Pretend' into a game and publishing it." (p.217). Even so, though, it's difficult to argue with the assertion that *Dungeons & Dragons* really has become an integral part of popular culture.

If you're at all interested in how *Dungeons & Dragons*—and the many role-playing games that followed in its tracks—came to be, Empire of Imagination will transport you to that realm... and bring you back, safe and sound, maybe even with a few more (metaphorical) gold pieces in your mental pouch.

George says

I liked it, but kinda/sorta.

I liked the delving down into D&D's birth and evolution, and contrary to some, I liked the chapter intro snippets that establish a little flavour. The downside is, D&D is fantasy and this is a biography of sorts, of Gygax, of Arneson, of TSR, of rpgs in general, but once the realities of lawyers, lawsuits, drugs and so on intrude, sure, it's average biography, but I wanted to just waft on sugar coating.

By adding the hard edge of uglier truths, the biographer would have to be a more accomplished biographer. Thus, for flavour, a 5, for love of subject, a 5, for grittiness without the chops to really drill down into it, a 3. Wah. Oh and totally cool cover art, even if it does shamelessly mirror Unearthed Arcana.

Johnny says

It is very clear that *Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons & Dragons* is heavily colored by a Lake Geneva-centric perspective. That makes sense. It is, after all, a biography of E. Gary Gygax. At times, the book was a marvelous source of anecdotal insight to the early days of *Dungeons & Dragons* while, at other times, it seemed rather sophomoric in style. I was particularly unamused by the conceit of beginning each chapter with a supposed Dungeon Master refereeing a thinly veiled incident in Gary's life. Of course, as an editor, I've published conceits that were just as lame (or more so) than this one (Remember my pseudonymous "The Rumor Bag" or Charles Ardai's "Titans of the Game Industry?" in *Computer Gaming World*.). It's just that I feel like that conceit was so thirty years ago. That could be just me, but it reduced my rating for this book.

My second problem with the book was the cavalier marginalizing of Dave Arneson's contribution to the game. I'm almost as biased here toward Dave as Michael Witwer is toward Gary. I say, "almost" because I recognize the truth in a statement like "…although Arneson had great ideas, he didn't seem to be able to put the pieces together. This is where Gary proved to be most valuable." (p. 92, Loc 1309) Dave did some writing for me when I was at *Computer Gaming World* and I *know* that he was not the most prompt contributor in the world. I remember being amazed that someone as famous for his writing could make so many grammatical errors. As I realized how thorough his reviews were (He played one game more than 50 times that I thought exhausted its possibilities in a half-dozen tries—a political simulation called *Hidden Agenda*), I wrote off the missed deadlines and grammatical errors as being as irrelevant as a medical doctor's handwriting. It became a joy just to shape his work into an orderly presentation.

But, nothing in working with Dave ever gave me the feeling that he simply sat on his hands with regard to game design. He was always demonstrating his creativity. Certainly, he told me specifically about his legal experiences with TSR—twice litigating for what he considered to be his fair share of royalties. I'm pretty sure he resented a lot of the Gary-centric aspects of TSR. One of the things I remember him saying was, "I like to think I'm the 'father' of D&D and Gary is the 'mother.'" I got the feeling that he meant 'muthah' and intended me to fill in the last part of it. I can just hear Dave saying, "It was very much a case of me providing various ideas and concepts but not having any say as to how they were used." (p. 100, Loc. 1413)

Please forgive the rant, but I just don't believe the game would have happened in any sort of playable form if it hadn't been for both of these creators. Gary may have taken control for obvious reasons, but he was building on a firm foundation. Without ideas from Wesley, Carr, and Arneson, we probably wouldn't have role-playing as a genre in either the table-top or digital form. That being said, I learned a lot from this book—something I didn't think possible after reading that exhaustive tome, *Playing at the World* (which I felt was much more even-handed in presenting its research, but it wasn't a biography of either creator).

I didn't realize that the United States government had sent a pair of undercover Army Intelligence agents to check out Gary's miniatures group because they thought combat simulation games were a breeding ground for real-life insurgency (p. 79, Loc 1127). And, though I remember Dave saying that they didn't use "funny dice" (polyhedral) until later in the process, I don't remember reading about Gary's coffee can with the twenty (20) numbered poker chips as the random number generator before (p. 87, Loc 1243). I did remember

the folks at Flying Buffalo being very careful not to make any comparisons with *Dungeons & Dragons* when they spoke/wrote about either *Tunnels & Trolls*, *Monsters, Monsters* or even the later modern RPG masterpiece, *Mercenaries, Spies, and Private Eyes*. Apparently, they coined the phrase fantasy role-playing game after TSR threatened to litigate over "copyright infringement" when their early advertisements for *Tunnels & Trolls* mentioned *Dungeons & Dragons* (p. 128, Loc. 1766). I was glad to be reminded of this when I read *Empire of Imagination*.

I was somewhat surprised to read about Gary's supposed claim that he had seen the potential in computer role-playing early on, but hadn't had the technology or financial support to be able to invest in it (p. 203, Loc. 4846). That confused me, considering that TSR published a computer version of *Dawn Patrol* (aka *Fight in the Skies*) in the early '80s and Dave Arneson had published computer games like *Chennault's Flying Tigers* on the Atari 8-bit as early as the late '70s. Dave Wesely, the referee who discovered *Strategos*, the 19th century rules set which inspired his Brauenstein adventure, was a partner in 4D Interactive with Arneson. So, it was possible to produce such games at a relatively low cost. I suspect that Gary just wanted to make sure he controlled his digital games after seeing how easy it was to lose control of the tabletop game. But that's a different story. I was just surprised to read: "Gary had seen this potential in CRPGs since the late 1970s, and early issues of *Dragon* magazine had even featured an ongoing column about computer technology called The Modern Eye, but TSR had not been positioned technically or financially to invest in such a radical industry at the time. Now, the technology had caught up with the concept, and Gary had the capacity and desire to pursue it with full force." (p.203, Loc 2823)

My biggest surprise, however, was to discover that after hearing stories about Gary's prodigal years in Hollywood (from some very good sources, by the way), I was able to read: "'All I am is another fellow human that has at last, after many wrong paths and failed attempts, found Jesus Christ,' he wrote in January…signing the email with his favorite Bible verse, Matthew 5:16." (p. 218, Loc 3023) I knew that Dave had that conviction; it was nice to read that Gary did. How ironic that is in the light of all the accusations of Satanic worship leveled at the game over the years. Well, this is just a summary of my reaction to the book. I really liked reading about Gary's early years and his friendship with Don Kaye, as well as reading about the Lorraine Williams era from his family's perspective. The book was worth its price in spite of all my rants and self-indulgent observations. I have a personal investment in this history, having been the publisher of both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* at one time. Ironically, I can say that both Gary and Dave "worked for me" at one time (as freelancers for my magazines…chuckle).

Mattia Ravasi says

Video review: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNvVS...

The semi-fictionalization of most chapters serves neither a contextualizing nor entertaining purpose, and the book lacks in so much I wanted to know about Gygax's life as a creator (and abunds in details of his life inside courts). Mind, there are some good parts and it's very well researched (though there are some ghastly a-scientifical claims here and there), but if you're a D&D nostalgic who's on the fence about reading this, re-read Elemental Evil instead.

Louise says

Despite his large contribution to popular culture, “Gary Gygax” is not a well recognized name. I, myself, didn’t know it, but was attracted to this book from having lived 20 miles from Lake Geneva during the time a lot of this took place.

The short chapters, some foreshadowed by a Dungeons and Dragons excerpt, and author Michael Witmer’s style make this a fast reading book. In one long or a few short sittings you can learn about a lot about the creative and business life Gary Gygax (his personal life takes a back seat).

He pursued the work he loved and remained creative until his death. While he was an expert gamer, the people he brought into his enterprise and trusted took advantage; ironically he was a victim of corporate games. He could always rely on copyrights, contacts and creativity to keep him going, but the knocks were hard.

Curious things are mentioned with no detail. Examples of things that deserve at least a paragraph are: breeding Arabian horses; a cocaine habit; his first wife, mother of 5 of his children is an alcoholic; being a Jehovah's Witness (they don’t celebrate Halloween) and leaving the faith; how he gets from Dragonlands to Lake Geneva when he doesn’t drive; one minute Gail is his assistant and in the next mention they are married; how/why did he learn to make (or is it repair?) shoes?

The photos are mostly places in Lake Geneva, cover art and a few family snap shots. They seem to be what the author could get more than what the reader would like to see. I used the Index twice and both times it failed me. At the end there is a Chronology and an impressive list of Gygax’s creative output. The book does its job – it tells the story of Gary Gygax – no frills.
