Grandview native, Bill Peet, Walt Disney storyteller

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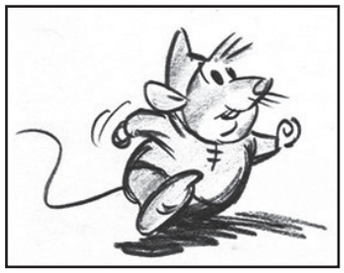
III.

Inventing stories is a solitary endeavor; just ask any writer.

In truth, plots and themes may be *discussed*, but the actual doing, the actual writing, must be performed by one person — alone.



Perhaps in this way, a cartoonist is like a writer. The cartoonist possesses a penchant for invention, an inclination toward expression, and the cartoonist is his own counsel.

Peet kept his head down at Disney Studios. In his autobiography, he goes so far as to depict himself sketching for Disney on a family vacation, calling the studio's artistic puzzles "haunting."

Some of the most recognizable characters in motion picture history are attributed to Peet's genius: the clever mice and sinister cat in *Cinderella*; the baby elephant and accompanying sequence in *Dumbo*; and the artist contributed sequences, original characters and drawings to *Alice in Wonderland* (the tea party, playing cards and Caterpillar scenes among others), *Peter Pan* (various pirate characters, the croc and Captain Hook, etc.), *Sleeping Beauty* (lots of story development, including the Prince and Princess meeting in the woods sequence) and an incredible number of smaller Disney productions of the time.

All the while, Peet worked at home on subjects of his own invention. Eventually, he showed a story he'd written to his boss, Walt Disney.

Publicly, Bill Peet was forthright about his rocky relationship with the successful entrepreneur. If any 20th century Disney animators may be accused of glossing over professional inconsistencies or overglorifying Walt Disney Company's workplace demands, Bill Peet is not among them. One gets a sense of the truth — and sometimes the cutting truth — of the constant turmoil, strife and competitiveness of early Disney culture from Peet. "A brutal place," he called it. (Peet openly discussed participating in the Disney cartoonists' strike of 1941.)

Rather than paint the charismatic namesake of the company with the gentle, grandfatherly persona pushed by studio marketing, Peet consistently offered an adult view of Walt Disney — a portrait of a shrewd businessman, calculating, dismissive, demanding, egotistical.

To Peet's surprise, Walt Disney was impressed by his original story, and it was produced into a short film, *Goliath II*. It was the beginning of several short film projects for Peet, most of them starring audience favorite, Goofy.

Around that time, Peet challenged himself to finish a project outside of Disney's influence. His first children's book, *Hubert's Hair-Raising Adventure*, was the result, and Houghton Mifflin Company published it in 1959. More books followed in the next several years, but Peet felt he was a long way from making it as an individual author. Then, one afternoon, Peet found a copy of British writer Dodie Smith's novel *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* on his desk.

Peet was tasked by Walt Disney to complete an entire screenplay and storyboard for a full length feature based on the children's classic. Peet poured himself into the project. The result, of course, was the creation of one of the most remarkable animated films ever penned, including one of the studio's most original villains, Cruella de Vil. Nearly every character designed in the film is Peet's.

Peet suggested another feature based on children's literature. This time it would be a King Arthur story, T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*.

"In the book," told Peet, "T. H. White describes the wizard as a crusty old curmudgeon, argumentative and temperamental, playful at times, and extremely intelligent." Walt Disney liked the idea for the feature, and secretly, Peet designed the Merlin character to resemble his larger-than-life boss.

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