



Spanning software's
diverse theories,
practices, and
philosophies.

Galen Gruman

TWO BOOKS ON THE MAN YOU LOVE TO HATE

IN HIS 20 YEARS IN THE SOFTWARE BUSINESS, Bill Gates has become the man everyone loves to hate. He's a nerd, he's really just a glorified hacker, he's exploitative, he's cheap, he has hygiene problems, he steamrolls competitors, he sells promises instead of product, he merely lucked into becoming the richest man in America.

As *PC/Computing* columnist Stephen Manes and *Seattle Times* technology reporter Paul Andrews show in their definitive history of Gates, Microsoft, and incidentally the whole PC industry, Gates deserves all those criticisms save one: He did not merely luck into becoming the richest man in America. Manes and Andrews show that in his 20 years in the software business — from his moonlighting while an undergraduate student at Harvard University to his domination of the DOS and Macintosh software markets under Microsoft to his current yearnings to enter the biotechnology field (with Gates's interest, "wetware" may one day no longer

be a cyberpunk plot device) — Gates has followed a consistent, dogged approach to ensuring domination of the PC software industry, and thus of the PC industry in general. Luck may have helped, but Gates himself is primarily responsible for his success.

The intertwined history of the man and the industry is fascinating. But it takes a while to get the rhythm of the authors' style for two reasons: First, it's clear from the many snide remarks and belittling asides that Manes and Andrews have a personal distaste for Gates. Gates may well have earned such a reaction, but this style threatens to simply make you put the book down in disgust. Here's an example from page 7: "Alone in the spotlight, with his face filling the screen overhead, the owlish Young Achiever with a developing middle-age wattle executed his performance stiffly, awkwardly..." On the same page are "he actually looked his age" and "Billion-Dollar Bill." It's annoying, although, to be fair, the authors find similar things to say about others.

**ONE BOOK GIVES
AN ALMOST
TOO REALISTIC
ACCOUNT; THE
OTHER IS A
QUICK READ.**

A SOFTER, BUT LESS DETAILED LOOK

Although most people don't have the time — nor likely the inclination — to read more than one book about Bill Gates and Microsoft, there is another good choice if you want the story in a straightforward package you can read cover to cover in an afternoon.

*If Gates is an in-depth but slightly sarcastic recounting of the rise of Gates, James Wallace and Jim Erickson's *Hard Drive* is an even-handed but less detailed history. The authors — both reporters at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* — tell the same story that Gates does, with many of the same anecdotes.*

But their narrative style, while a bit choppy in the typical Sunday-paper style, doesn't cast Gates so negatively. That's not to say the book avoids or downplays Gates's character flaws. It doesn't — but it does let you evaluate the man for himself.

The authors try hard to uncover details that other books and articles have missed. There are many mentions of other authors' incorrect or exaggerated stories. This can be annoying, since it distracts from the story and sometimes appears as grandstanding rather than factual correction. Many of the discrepancies are minor, apparently based on different recollections by the people who knew or worked with Gates over the years. That's always a peril in personal histories.

Another favorite tack taken by Wallace and Erickson is to stress the contribution of others to Gates's success. That approach occasionally seems aimed to belittle Gates subtly, although most of the time it is meant to credit those who have been overshadowed by journalists, corporate biographers, and instant historians, whose demands of immediacy and brevity tend to obscure all but the major players. Gates himself has acknowledged the many people over the years who have contributed to his success — it certainly is no secret who did what.

*These are minor criticisms, however. *Hard Drive* is very readable and the history is both solid and personal. *Hard Drive* by James Wallace and Jim Erickson, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1992, 426 pp., \$23. ISBN 0-471-51011-1*

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