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Room to Dream review – a remarkable insight into David Lynch

This hybrid biography cuts between essays from Kristine McKenna and reflections from the great auteur



David Lynch. Photograph: Dylan Coulter for the Guardian

Kristine McKenna admits at the outset of *Room to Dream* that she and David Lynch have come up with an approach to life writing “that some might find strange”. This hybrid form combines memoir and biography: each of McKenna’s chapters is followed by one by Lynch on the same years, “having a conversation with his own biography”. Clearly this highlights the subjectivity of experience and the inadequacy of life writing, but it could also compromise a biographer’s freedom to speak frankly about her subject. Nevertheless, *Room to Dream* is a memorable portrait of one of cinema’s great auteurs.

Lynch was born in 1946; his devout Presbyterian parents moved to Boise, Idaho, in 1955. This “most beautiful golden era” of rock’n’roll, early TV and girls in bobby socks and saddle shoes laid the foundations of the Lynchian universe: “When I picture Boise in my mind, I see euphoric 1950s chrome optimism.” But as McKenna notes, it’s what lies beneath the “gleaming veneer of innocence and goodness” that truly defines his art, from the “agony and ecstasy” of his first film *Eraserhead* (1977) to the darkly surreal *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017). Lynch is a perfectionist and his

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attention to detail – such as the colour of fake blood (“Blacker! Blacker!”) – is legendary. An extremely practical person (“I love plumbing”), he wants to have a hand in every aspect of his films, even attempting (and failing) to craft John Hurt’s prosthetic makeup for *The Elephant Man* (1980), the movie that brought him international acclaim. His following film, *Dune* (1984), was by his own admission “a humiliating major failure”. But with *Blue Velvet* (1986) and the TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990) – both rooted in his memories of small-town America – Lynch reasserted his claim to be one of the most original directors. His films have often divided critical opinion, but for McKenna the key theme is always the attempt to reconcile the dualities that each of us – and all his unforgettable characters, from Frank Booth to Laura Palmer – must confront in daily life: “Nobody is all one thing.”



Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet* (1986). Photograph: Allstar/Cinetext/WARNER BROS

In a recent Guardian interview, Lynch said that Donald Trump – a figure as surreal in his own way as the Log Lady – “could go down as one of the greatest presidents in history” (greatest meaning significant) for the way he has disrupted politics. Trump seized on this comment, though bizarrely at a rally he mixed up the names, saying: “David Lynch could go down as one of the greatest presidents in history.” The crowd cheered anyway, as if the words didn’t matter and at moments like this the US seems more Lynchian than ever.

Room to Dream feels a bit like a valedictory festschrift, but it provides a remarkable insight into Lynch’s intense commitment to the “art life”, from his painting, photography and music to furniture design. As McKenna says: “To a remarkable degree his life is an exercise in pure creativity.”

—PD Smith