

# King of the movies

## Maltin still makes the A-list

by MICHAEL GILTZ

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Leonard Maltin is the only movie critic to be both a champion of animated classics and a regular columnist for *Playboy*.

He also appears frequently on "Entertainment Tonight" and on a daily radio show, combining an enthusiasm for current movies with a serious knowledge of film history.

He's even been parodied on the TV show "South Park."

Maltin, 50, has written several books — including in-depth looks at Disney and the Little Rascals — but his main claim to fame is the exhaustive reference volume, "Leonard Maltin's Movie & Video Guide," the annual update that just hit the stores.

The series has been phenomenally successful. Since its debut in 1969, the yearly guide has sold more than 5 million copies — and no doubt ended numerous disagreements over which actors starred in which films.

For the Manhattan-born Maltin, who lives in Toluca Lake, Calif., just outside L.A., with his wife, Alice, and 15-year-old daughter, Jessie, the books pose a constant challenge to stay on top of new movies and refine and update information on the oldies.

"It never ends," says Maltin from the L.A. set of "ET," where's he filming a segment. "For example, I cannot tell you how many years it took before it was pointed out to us — and we concluded — that Robert Altman's 'MASH' didn't have asterisks in it."

Getting those details right is crucial to the success of his guides. It's also the main reason they're

still bookstore champs despite dozens of competitors.

"There are a lot of books that do the same thing — *Blockbuster's*, *Variety's*, *Roger Ebert's* — but Leonard Maltin's is the best one," says Coliseum Books manager Ronald Stephenson. "It's also the bestselling."

Still, Maltin knows his success is relative by the standards of Hollywood.

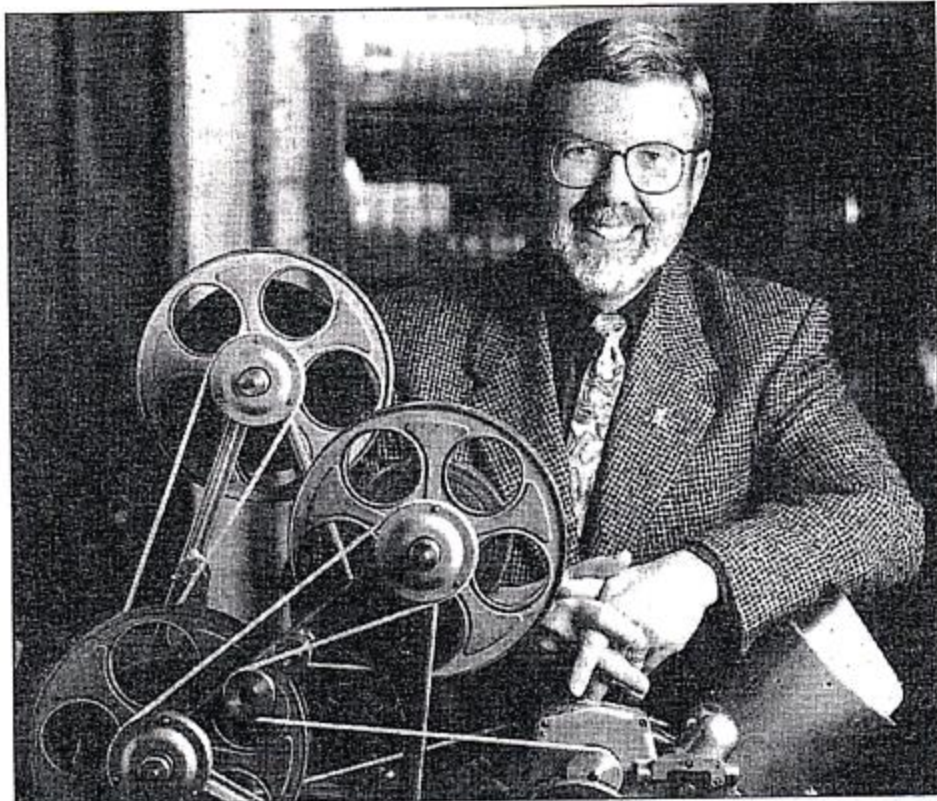
"I remember the first year we sold more than 100,000 copies, which just

knocked me out. My editor was also doing movie tie-in books. The novelization of 'The Omen' came out that same year and sold 3.2 million copies." He laughs. "That gave me some perspective."

The book has survived so long since first appearing that Maltin can no longer cram in every title he tracks down. Quite simply, the book has reached its limit with almost 20,000 titles.

"There's a finite amount of space," says Maltin. "They cannot bind a thicker book. And we cannot find thinner paper that will hold up. We looked at Bible paper, but we didn't think that was very practical."

The result? In the last five years, he's been forced to cut some older



"There have to be some advantages to being the boss," says Maltin, whose annual tome (left) is the top seller in the movie-guide market.

titles (mostly obscure TV movies) when new ones were about to be added.

If you have any complaints (such as Maltin's pan of "Blade Runner"), the responsibility rests solely on the author.

Naturally, he can't see every movie included — he's aided by a team of contributors that includes his wife and daughter and Mike Clark of *USA Today*.

But if a reviewer turns in a glowing review for a movie Maltin has heard is awful (or vice versa), he will check the film out himself to make the final decision.

"There have to be some advantages to being the boss," he laughs.

Happily, combing through trade papers and making notes about bits of trivia is a passion Maltin's

had since he was a little boy.

"I was the kind of kid who — when there was something really rare on the late show — would go to sleep a little early, set my alarm and wake up at 2:30 in the morning," says Maltin. "I was so thrilled to have the chance to see them."

He began writing and editing his own fanzine while still in high school. One teacher liked it, encouraged him and suggested Maltin have lunch with a friend of hers who was an editor at *Signet*.

The editor was startled to realize this high school kid had produced the fanzine he'd subscribed to himself. He asked Maltin how he might improve on a book called "Movies on TV," the first reference

work of its kind.

"I started rattling off answers. I said, 'Well, I would put in the director's name and I would put longer cast lists and I would say whether it was in color or black and white. And I would give the running time.' He said, 'How'd you like to do it?'"

The editor had faith in Maltin, but they were both leery of letting the bosses know their latest author was a teenager. So they made the contract out to his magazine — that way, Maltin's dad wouldn't have to co-sign — and kept him under wraps until he'd turned in some pages and the publishers were pleased with the work.

"It probably wasn't legal anyway," laughs Maltin.