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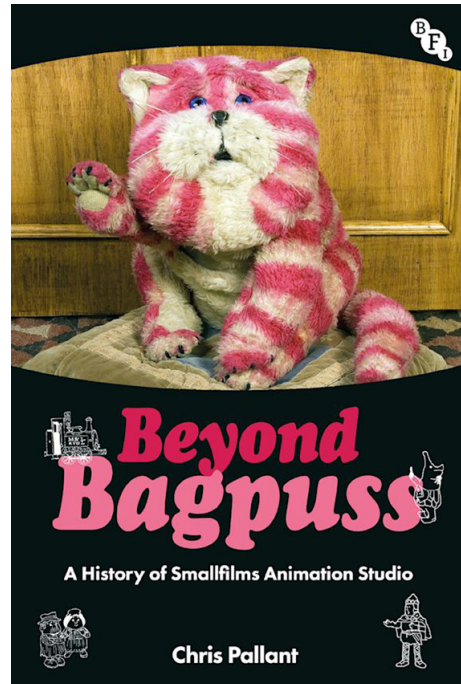
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The British Animation industry in the twentieth century was to a large extent comprised of a small number of studios, some of which were run as cottage industries. Because of the relatively small nature of these studios, as well as the fact that much of its output was made for advertisements and children’s television, British animation has rarely received the same level of academic attention and respect afforded to American animation, and interviews with British animators will often feature them trying to humbly downplay their achievements. Perhaps no other studio is as emblematic of this as Smallfilms, the company run by the often self-deprecating Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin, which produced shows such as *Ivor the Engine* (1959–1962: ITV, remade in colour 1975–1977: BBC), *The Clangers* (1969–1972: BBC), and *Bagpuss* (1974: BBC), all created in several sheds located on Firmin’s farm.



It is this company that Chris Pallant’s *Beyond Bagpuss: A History of Smallfilms Animation Studio* (2023) focusses on, looking to expand the audience’s knowledge of the studio’s productions and cement its principal creatives as serious artists and media professionals worthy of respect. It achieves these aims using multiple methodologies. Close readings of every series that the studio produced are used to build a poetics of Smallfilms’ productions; while investigations of Smallfilms/BBC archives and interviews with the principal creatives are used to form a comprehensive history of Smallfilms and their production techniques. Both are informed by an analysis of the results of an online questionnaire covering viewers’ memories of Smallfilms’ output. With each chapter being dedicated to one or more Smallfilms show in as close to a chronological order as is possible, the book freely moves between these methodologies as necessary. It is not uncommon for a chapter to use the audience survey to introduce a topic, use interviews with the main creatives to indicate their intent to bring such topics into the shows, and then use close readings of the latter to investigate how these topics are realised on screen.

Chapter One introduces Smallfilms as a company, as well as the author’s aims and intentions for the book, while also quickly discussing four “frames of reference” for the reader to keep in mind while reading: Britishness; nostalgia and memory; the television industry as it was when Smallfilms was active; and the specific animation approaches used in the studio’s works.

Chapter Two covers the behind-the-scenes production of *Ivor the Engine* as a way of illustrating what Pallant calls the “whimsical authenticity” of Smallfilms’ productions, wherein their shows often mix fantastical ideas with carefully chosen details drawn from real life and a staunchly maintained sense of episode-by-episode continuity, making for texts which feel both surreal and grounded in reality. The chapter also focusses on Smallfilms’ attempts to produce quality merchandise based on their series, something which becomes a recurring facet of the book. Chapter Three provides a similar investigation of the production of *The Sagas of Noggin the Nog* (1959–1965: BBC; remade in colour 1982: BBC), looking at how the programme mixes Norse mythology, serialised storytelling and an understated sense of humour to build the world of the Nogs. It also looks at the later episodes of the series and how they work as a political comment in favour of nuclear appeasement, something which creator Peter Firman was a firm believer in.

Chapter Four looks at three further Smallfilms series: *The Seal of Neptune* (1960: BBC), *The Mermaid’s Pearls* (1962: BBC), and *Pingwings* (1961–1965: BBC). *The Seal of Neptune* and *The Mermaid’s Pearls*, being two of Smallfilms’ least remembered series, and which are difficult to find copies of, receive extensive plot summaries backed by many screengrabs, designed to raise awareness of the shows and their position in Smallfilms’ history. *Pingwings*, as Smallfilms’ first attempt at stop-motion animation, is presented as an unfairly ignored turning point in the studio’s history, and is used as an opportunity to discuss the importance of the handmade, crafted aesthetic which runs throughout Smallfilms’ filmography.

Chapter Five uses the series *The Pogles* (1965: BBC) and *Pogles’ Wood* (1966–1968: BBC) to illustrate the concept of what the book calls “Low-Angle Persons”, these being a type of protagonist archetypal to Smallfilms production who are diminutive characters with significant gaps in their knowledge and strained relationships with those around them who are considered their superiors. It links the prevalence of this character type to the fact that Smallfilms’ productions are primarily educational material for children, discussing how characters with much to learn about the world around them are a useful narrative device when dramatizing education content. The chapter also investigates how the series changed over time as a reaction to other programmes such as *The Magic Roundabout* (1965–1977: BBC); as well as looking closely at the business side of Smallfilms’ productions, recounting how the studio was able to negotiate a higher budget for *Pogles’ Wood* from the BBC and return to their attempts to produce merchandise based on their programmes.

Chapter Six focuses on the theme of technology in *The Clangers*, concluding that the show is mildly critical of the subject. It also focusses on how *Clangers* was designed to take advantage of being the first Smallfilms production in colour, and makes sure to

highlight the work of Joan Firmin in the production and maintenance of the Clanger puppets, expanding our view of Smallfilms beyond just being the work of Peter Firmin and Postgate.

Similarly to Chapter Four, Chapter Seven provides a production history and episodic summary of *Sam on Boff's Island* (1972: BBC), another relatively forgotten part of Smallfilms' filmography. The chapter focusses on the collaborative nature of the show's production: the fact that the show was developed by the BBC, written by Michael Rosen instead of Firmin and Postgate, and featured live-action elements not produced by Smallfilms. It also looks at certain criticisms that the show received from viewers who disagreed with its use of working-class accents, but also considers the BBC's defence of the programme.

Chapter Eight looks at the use of bricolage within *Bagpuss*. Once again focussing on the collaborative nature of Smallfilms' production methods, the chapter seeks to expand our awareness of the Smallfilms by highlighting how the paintings of Linda Birch and the music of Sandra Kerr and John Faulkner greatly contributed to the final show.

Chapter Nine looks at the final shows made by Smallfilms – *Tottie: The Story of a Doll's House* (1984: BBC) and *Pinny's House* (1985: BBC) – as well as their short film *Life on Earth Perhaps* (1985). It challenges the narrative (often voiced by Firmin and Postgate themselves) that these films are relatively unimportant and represent a winding down of the company's efforts, instead finding them to be complicated shows worthy of examination.

The final chapter examines the legacy of Smallfilms by investigating several attempts to reboot various Smallfilms franchises into different mediums after the studio itself had ceased to be. Using interviews with the creators of several of these projects, it looks at what elements of Smallfilms' productions are considered necessary for something to remain faithful to their hand crafted aesthetic, and examines how artists have attempted to maintain those in increasingly digitised industries.

Though the large amount of material being worked through can leave certain topics feeling quite briskly covered, *Beyond Bagpuss* excels as an introduction to Smallfilms and provides a convincing argument for what the core features of a Smallfilms show are. All future treatments of Smallfilms productions should use this book as their starting point: hopefully it shall succeed in its aim of inspiring more in-depth conversations, about what is one of the major historic British animation studios.

