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Jef Raskin Information

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L E G E N D S

JEF RASKIN

THE REAL FATHER OF THE MACINTOSH is sitting in his study, right next to his books on insects, and is talking a little creative heresy: The genesis of the mighty Macintosh—the machine that brought computer power to the common man—did not occur at Xerox PARC or Fairchild or even in the minds of Steve Jobs or Steve Wozniak. “When I was a kid, I read lots of science fiction. I thought if the Martians ever come to Earth and select me as a human being to study, I want to be able to represent this human race well. So I decided to get as much human knowledge as I could.” For the next 20 years, up until Jef Raskin’s fate ran smack into that of two young men selling Apple computers in a garage, his childhood dream transformed into a quest to learn. He studied the arts, eventually composing and performing music professionally. His computer-facilitated abstract art appeared in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In college, Raskin majored in math and physics, with a minor in philosophy and music. In 1967 while at Penn State getting his master’s in computer science, he was given the “difficult” task of helping liberal arts students feed punch cards to the university’s carnivorous computers.

“I sensed one could design systems to be a lot easier to use,” says Raskin, 54, who envisioned a computer that could easily and simply do everything he liked to do: draw, paint, compose, calculate, and write—complete with umlauts and accents. He also wanted it to be portable. He once wheeled his large Data General Nova into a restaurant to calculate the tip. “Just so I could feel what it would be like to have a portable computer.”

In 1978, Raskin became Apple’s 31st employee and manager of the publications department. A year later, Chairman Mike Markkula asked Raskin if he would like to help create a \$500 game machine. Raskin declined the offer but said he had another idea—for a computer he had envisioned years earlier at Penn State. He even had a name for it: “Macintosh”—his favorite apple. “Jobs wanted to call it the *bicycle*,” scoffs Raskin.

Throughout much of the Mac project, Raskin’s relationship with Jobs was not good. As a company, Apple had just started to boom and responsibilities were fluid. Jobs began to elbow his way into Raskin’s territory. The two quickly bumped egos. “I don’t truckle to anybody,” says Raskin. The relationship got so bad, he says, that Jobs would not even heed his advice to visit Xerox PARC, a groundbreaking R&D lab. Never one to be denied, Raskin had his friend and colleague Bill Atkinson coax Jobs to Xerox PARC. There is plenty of irony, but only a little bitterness, when Raskin talks about his behind-the-scenes orchestration of what has become legend: Jobs’s decision to visit Xerox PARC, where he saw the miracle of the mouse and menus and called it “revolutionary.” “I certainly, at times, have not gotten credit where credit is due,” says Raskin. “But do I feel like history’s passing me by? No.”

Raskin’s lack of bitterness may be due to the stock options he received (he refused to give a dollar amount, but said he received no bonus or extra stock for his role as Mac founder). It is also a realization that while he is the father of the Mac, Jobs was its champion, an “essential” role, he says. But more to the point, since resigning from Apple in 1982 (“I could not, in good conscience, work with Steve Jobs,” he says), Raskin has been too busy composing, writing, reading, and tinkering to cultivate bitterness.

He is hard at work learning archery and designing the latest in radio-controlled cardboard airplanes. He is also busy imagining the next generation of computers, one with a user interface so transparent that there will be no need to boot up, no need to pick an application. Raskin wants to create a computer that will truly free even the rare Renaissance man like himself. Only then can he forget about keyboard commands and focus on the really important task at hand: to perfect his being before the Martians arrive. —Eric Pfeiffer



Photography by R. J. Muna

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