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Somebody: The Reckless Life and Remarkable Career of Marlon Brando

Stefan Kanfer
Faber and Faber
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Surely one day someone will make a film of Marlon Brando's life, although it must surely come with an X or Restricted certificate. He was an actor like few others, who had Valentino's ability to excite women, while at the same time becoming the kind of role model that parents would not want their sons to follow or daughters meet.

Brando was the first film star to receive \$1 million for a single movie but despite the fame and fortune, was rarely happy during his long life.

In childhood, he and his two sisters grew up in middle-class districts in Nebraska and then California but had to put up with a bullying father, Marlon Senior and a mother, Dodie who was perpetually drunk. This turned the youngster into a rebel who seemed to relish causing trouble in an attempt to get attention.

However, having been sent to the strictest of military schools, which sounds closer to a Borstal than a public school (in the English sense), he had the good fortune to come upon a teacher who spotted a talent for performance and, in doing so, launched a career like few others.

After a few stage misses, the moody youngster took Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* to Broadway and then Hollywood with an unforgettable performance playing Stanley Kowalski as the first of many mumbling bad boys.

For the most part after that, his performing career took place on film and was by no means consistently successful. Brando had more than his fair share of disasters, which might owe more than a little to his unerring ability to select a dud but also periodic requirements to make money.

His private life was scandalous, regarding women as toys to play with for a day or two and then discard for a newer version. Repeatedly, he raised hopes and then dashed them in the most brutal way, bringing happiness neither to the victims nor to himself.

From an early stage of his career, the actor realised that he needed emotional support and relied heavily upon his therapist. He suffered even when he was a superstar in the early years, following *Streetcar* and *On the Waterfront*, and the situation only got worse when failures came thick and fast, both personal and professional.

Despite all of this, Brando was for a time the best-known and most popular actor of his age and despite some very low periods during his career, came back later on in films like *The Godfather* and, much more controversially, *Last Tango in Paris* to remind us all of his talent.

In many ways, the failures were as remarkable as the successes. Before *The Godfather*, Brando managed a remarkable sequence of 14 consecutive turkeys, for the majority of which he received the kind of paycheques that would take most people a lifetime of work to bank.

It was not only his professional career that turned sour but also Brando's private life. His choice of women was rarely judicious and the consequence was that three marriages and more particularly their aftermaths ensured that the star was forced to work to make ends meet despite the tens of millions that he earned during his life.

His children also suffered more than their fair share of calamities with murder and death and prison featuring far too frequently towards the end of the tale.

A good heart lay beneath the tough guy image and Brando always had time for the underdog, in particular championing the Civil Rights movement and also what are now known as Native Americans.

Stefan Kanfer is a really excellent writer who enhances the story of Marlon Brando with deep knowledge of the film industry and enough social history to give us perspective and locate films and career moves in their rightful place in world and American history.

Somebody is far more satisfying than the average cult film star biography and thanks to the colourful excesses of its subject, will prove an eye opening read for anyone tempted to pick it up.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)