

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by author, historian, and filmmaker Mindy Johnson to talk about Bessie Mae Kelley, an animator in the early film industry. So why don't we start with, what can you tell us about her career?

MJ: Well, it's an incredible surprise, even for me, although I'd had a theory that, of course, women had to have been in the room from the very beginning. But her career is far more reaching, far more dynamic, far more cutting-edge in that timeframe than I could have even imagined. And as the story is still unraveling, it just gets better and better. It's a remarkable story.

AT: And so she started studying art at New York's Pratt Institute, and she was part of the very first generation of cinema, and she just fell in love with it.

MJ: Yeah. I mean, you think about it. We take this for granted. We can carry film and media around in our pockets today, but as a young girl growing up in Caribou, Maine, the high school she went to had one of the first movie projectors in the state of Maine. And that was a big deal, and this was on nitrate. So they had to be very careful about fire and any sort of issues that that would entail. And then getting films to be able to screen, it was the Wild West at that point. Everyone who could get a camera was making films, very much like today, but a very different approach - physical media, actual physical film that had to be exposed, and then developed, and then physically edited together. So it was a whole different construct.

And in her, again, small community, it's the northeasternmost city in the country of the U.S. here, way up in northern Maine, beautiful area. I had the great opportunity of traveling there in my research and getting firsthand experiences in her world as a young girl growing up. One of the first buildings built as a motion picture theater in the state of Maine, Powers Theater, was also part of her youth. And it's there that she saw Winsor McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur*. And that sparked her. She had been exploring art. She was very talented as a young girl and had studied at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. And funds ran out a little bit, she went and got a job and then was back in her hometown and saw *Gertie the Dinosaur* at Powers Theater. So Julia Powers ran the theater with her five daughters. And it was a staple in that region for decades. It's an incredible story where we look at these things and think, "how quaint and look at the early origins of our industry" in terms of animation and film. And yet this was in a brand-new world for her and a world that combined two of her passions. She loved to draw. She loved animals. She loved the world around her. She was very much a people person. And in the darkened theater there in her hometown, she saw *Gertie* and said, "that's it. I have to figure this out."

And she made her way to New York again, back to New York. And literally made a pest of herself at Bray Studios. It was a small little concern in New York City and in her writings and a few other things that said she made a pest of herself until Mrs. Bray said, "give her a job." And she got started working, doing what was called blackening at the time, which would mean blackening in the cells so that it would read on film, and later evolved into ink and paint. But she took it upon herself to say, "well, wait a minute, there's more to this. I want to do more." So working directly with Max Fleischer and J F Leventhal and John Bray and Walter Lance and others, she started training for, took it upon herself and trained herself to animate. And later

then, Walter Lance became a very dear friend of hers. And she was helping him, kind of training him a little bit with how things worked at Bray and how they did their work. And she assisted, worked and began assistant animating with Bert Green and other top young, very early pioneering animators. And then soon she was doing her own pencil tests and put them in front of John Bray. And those pencil tests involved the very first animated mouse couple over a decade before Mickey and Minnie. They later became Milton and Mary, she created, Roderick and Gladys was their first names. And they're very basic. Mice individually or collectively as groups of mice had been part of early animation, early comics in fact. Much of our early animation stemmed from early comics that were the the big pop culture craze of the day. And she designed these characters. That was her first pencil test with J.R. Bray, got her advanced from blackening into animating.

But she brought them then, one of her colleagues at Bray was Paul Terry briefly. She knew the community, one of her colleagues from Bray got her linked into Paul Terry's studio. And they were just starting the *Aesop's Fables*. And so she brought her mouse couple and they're featured in a few of the early Paul Terry *Aesop's Fables*. And over the course of that time, things were pretty nebulous about naming characters. And based on what exists in Bess's collection and what's out there in the wider world of animation, the educated guess is it was a publicist who put the names Milton and Mary to her mice. And then that changed over the years as well. You had Elizabeth and Lizzy and other permutations of other names for these characters as they came through the Fables and later Van Buren Studios. But they were over a decade before Mickey and Minnie. And Walt Disney's own record is saying when he first started that he just wanted to make cartoons as good as the *Aesop's Fables*. So she made note of that and she knew Walt and Roy would visit them when she'd be out in California or when they'd come to New York. But she made made note of that when she was on vaudeville. And that was part of her log line, was that the grandparents of Mickey and Minnie.

She was a pretty unique character. And I think her personality was a key part of, she was quite vivacious, very bubbly, had a great sense of humor. Her family, the few that knew her just beam when they talk about her. And you can tell that she had a very magnetic personality and was it was a real character and that she fit in and felt this was her medium. I think when the industry slowed down in the mid-'20s she adapted and took it on the road and was one of the first, in many cases, for small towns beyond seeing the novelties that they would in their movie theater. She was the first to explain the process of animation for millions of people all across the country through very tough vaudeville circuits, traveling by train long hours. And I do a lot of travel by plane today and I think, "what was that like for her in those days, carrying a big giant trunk arriving at 2 a.m. in some small town and nobody there to greet you and having to sit at the train station until somebody showed up with a wagon to pick up your trunk and get you to the Chautauqua tent?" It's an entirely different experience, but my goal here is to be able to get her story and the story of a lot of other, many other very early women who are largely responsible for getting us to where we are today with animation, finally getting their stories properly told.

AT: And so she was able to progress relatively quickly by today's standards, so she started her career late in 1917 and then she was able to be directing and animating short films by the '20s so Gasoline Alley was 1920, Flower Fairies 1921, A Merry Christmas 1922.

MJ: Yeah that's pretty remarkable. Well a couple of things - she was very talented, she could emulate other styles. It's been a little challenging to go through the collection and to work to verify whether these are drawings by others, in some cases that's true. And there are examples where she's emulating one of the early comic artists, Carey Orr out of Chicago Tribune who worked along with Frank King. And so they were exploring a couple of his early comics in making them animated, so it's her drawings experimenting with that. That was one of her talents was being able to take 2d, static, single-frame or or multiple-frame comics and bringing them to animated life. Hence her opportunity within Chicago with the Bray Studios to bring Gasoline Alley, which was the number-one comic at the time, to bring it to animated life. You had a built-in audience with that, millions of newspaper readers syndicated all over the country and they would want to see those characters come to life as well so it was a a good mix at that time. This was the very beginning of animation as an industry and it had only been around a handful of years starting roughly 1912, 1913 with the Brays 1914 and they're still figuring it out and you do have other artists in other places going, "I want to try this animation too." But it was not the global industry that it is today and it was very very cutting-edge. I liken it to where we are with AI, although AI now is undergoing a huge tremendous boom. But it was only a select few in pocketed areas of artists who were trying this and many of them felt too, nothing's gonna come of it because who's gonna be that crazy to do all these tens of thousands of drawings just for a few minutes of life on the screen. So there were lots of times, particularly in the mid-'20s, where "this isn't gonna fly, it's just a novelty, it's never gonna be an industry." so it's a fascinating, fascinating journey.

AT: So even within the context of, people weren't sure film itself was going to be a long-lasting thing rather than a trend or a fad but animation specifically because it had all of those extra steps was even more uncertain.

MJ: Film certainly, by the early/mid-teens, the film was quite established and it became a way of life and shifted during World War One where suddenly, as did animation. It became an opportunity to develop educational applications for animation training films. We see the earliest animated maps and that's another part of Bess's story. She trained with Max Fleischer and J F Leventhal at the Bray studios and a couple of other artists who have been credited with developing "technical animation", they called it. And you were essentially finding ways to apply, how do we define terrain so we can imagine what it would be like, train troops come in and they're looking at a map or if they're gonna fly over. Aeronautics were a new thing in World War One. They're gonna fly over a region, how can they tell the terrain? Animation will work and it became this new application. So there were special teams, Max Fleischer and J F Leventhal went off to serve by training and helping to create early animated materials for the war effort Bess was part of that and was training with that as well. And in the 1920s after coming back from Chicago, just there for a couple of years and then she returned to New York briefly, was working on the *Aesop's Fables* and the *Koko the Clowns*. On some of the cartoons it's her hand you see drawing Koko the Clown. She, in her time in Chicago aligned with one of the first arctic cinematographers who had been working with Admiral McMullen and he was considered one of the top three arctic explorers and McMullen was part of Perry's sort of first infamous North Pole

trek but he went on, established his own exhibition teams and was one of them first to bring the radio to the Arctic, airplanes, aeronautics and also cinematography. So he brought back some of the first actual film footage and it was Bess who did all the title treatments and the intertitles for his films all throughout the 1920s, which were still silent but she also did the first animated maps of the Arctic. And you think about it - the Earth hadn't been fully explored yet. It was like where we are with space today and everybody's on the, we have a renewed space race and privatized space race today. That was the case with our own planet, where the Arctic hadn't been fully navigated or even documented. It was a great mystery and there was a huge fascination with travel and exploration. The Chautauqua lectures and the Lyceum lectures and vaudeville lectures - this is where Admiral McMullen and others were sort of doing their fundraising to be able to continue their expeditions. But audiences were astounded and eager to see it, he had packed houses around the globe. He would include these film elements that Bess had pulled together and created title treatments for and animated maps for. And they've just been rediscovered, so we've got those and some new pieces are coming about but it was a woman behind these and for many it was the first time audiences all over the globe were learning about their world through her work.

AT: Now my understanding is that her work is believed to be the earliest surviving hand-drawn animation drawn and directed by a woman and on a previous episode about early Hollywood and female directors, my understanding is that it was easier for women to break in because it was a new industry and we hadn't had that sexist idea that a director equals a man and so because that hadn't been created yet, we didn't have that inherently entrenched bias and you see the same thing in computer science as well.

MJ: And women at Disney, even when Disney was expanding into digital, the digital age there were women right there at the forefront, Tina Price and others who you know, these were these fascinating boxes that were out there and let's see what we can do how can we apply this to our medium. We tell stories, let's see what we can do to use that so it was very much a little bit of the Wild West and getting it figured out but women were there, absolutely.

AT: The story of how Bessie came to your attention is reflective of how that sexism is actually retroactive.

MJ: Oh that's true, sadly, so true. I had finished an earlier book, it's called *Ink and Paint* but it's about the women of Disney's animation, which goes beyond that. And it was revelatory when I first pitched the idea and I had been working in the industry and told the stories of, "oh they were pretty girls who traced and colored" and "they pulled women off the streets and they bring their sisters in." But it was women, so it was women's work, it was a pink ghetto and okay well let's explore this, there's got to be fascinating stories and people there. About six months into my research I had a bit of a panic attack because it was an avalanche of, holy cow these women were powerhouses and the work that they did, the level of artistry that they accomplished, the contributions that they made no one had talked about or explored. They had been belittled. We had all missed out on it. It was half of our collected experience completely

obliterated. Every book out there on the market and there's great books out there and and I, not disparaging my brethren in this field, but they'd only told half the story. You could go to any index and you'd see maybe the same four or five women maybe and it was usually the Mrs. Disneys, Margaret Winkler who was the woman who actually gave Walt Disney his start. She was the first woman in the Producers Guild. She was a distributor, early distributor, producer. We owe Koko the Clown, Felix the Cat, Walt Disney to her. We would not be where we are today in animation if it wasn't for Margaret Winkler and so this revelation just unfolded in front of me. Then realizing that, the dearth of anything accurate about these women. Margaret Winkler had been maligned, she was villainized and treated horribly in any articles or things written, again by many of our brethren, who we love. But just working with very minimal information and not doing the proper digging and diligence of getting her story and all across the board really just sort of passing it off as, "yeah, pretty girls who traced in color, nothing to see here, keep moving. Let's talk about the men." We love our men with pencils - that had erasers - but the women were doing things with the hand-inking and painting artistry that elevated animation to a Rembrandt-esque art form.

In fact Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston commented when they saw the work that the women were doing at Disney, they had elevated color, the advent of color. In fact the first Oscar for animation, *Flowers and Trees*, it was the first application of the three-strip Technicolor applied to animation and it wasn't our men with pencils. It was Hazel Sewell and her team of all women ink and paint artists who had to feel their way with color. The animation before and the animation after is nothing new or different, it's the advent of color. And it was the women who accomplished this, that achieved the first Oscar for animation. They worked with the 80 shades of color that you pulled off the shelf at the local hardware store, trying to feel their way with how this was going to look if, what colors would wash out with this new technology or not, what works what doesn't work. It was monumental what they achieved and Hazel Sewell and her teams transformed color and how we see and experience animation and there were other studios as well, so many other really great women in those areas who advanced and elevated this experience.

Mary Wiser - there was a woman at Disney who said, "well you know these paints are designed to paint furniture and barns or walls, not to work on nitrate cellulose and we're having so many problems." So she took it upon herself to study chemistry, as one does. She was a brilliant fine artist, said "no we gotta fix this." So she went and studied, got her her degree in chemistry and she created and developed the first and only paint lab in the world creating paints exclusively for cell based animation, taking those crazy 80 shades of color that were paints designed to paint your chairs to over 1500 shades of custom-created color specifically and exclusively for cell-based animation, taking it from something very simple to the sophistication of a Rembrandt-esque level when you look at *The Old Mill*. And it was in 1937, that came out earlier, and it was Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston who said, "we didn't think we could do a feature-length animated film, *Snow White and Seven Dwarves*, until we saw what the women accomplished with color on *The Old Mill*." That quote mysteriously never showed up anywhere. Frank and Ollie put it in their book but nobody else did. And so it's it's rooting out these threads, these fine delicate threads of detail and information, weaving them together to rebuild the collected, comprehensive look at our animated past and getting the women's contributions added. That's

what I do because there's so many incredible stories like that. Natalie Kalmus, with Technicolor, they called her kind of the color police, color in terms of rainbow-esque colors. She had so much power in Hollywood if you were going to use Technicolor cameras, she had control over the final print. And she developed a color theory. And I still meet colleagues who kind of roll their eyes whenever her name comes up but she was a powerhouse. She was the only woman in that company and she was the ex-wife of Herbert Thomas who ran it. But she knew her stuff and she even had more control over the art directors on the film, which is partly why this negative reaction occurs whenever you mention her name still amongst people in Hollywood. But she had a penchant for very odd hats too so that didn't help.

AT: And so obviously once you start actually looking for the women, they're right there and in your case, Bessie Mae Kelley was literally right there in some images that you saw.

MJ: She was. I'd had a theory after I finished *Ink and Paint* and was out speaking about it and I then received a very lovely award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and was tasked with, "keep going." And I said, "yeah I'm sure that there are more women very early on." "Well how are you going to find them?" I said, "well I have a couple of theories." And it really began as a theory and just as Winsor McCay and Sid Smith and other early men of animation when it's a very early novelty, had taken that novelty to vaudeville. I thought, "well there has to have been women in vaudeville." So I spent several years culling around vaudeville material and finally after, it's easily a year and a half, almost two years, I came across this really innocuous article about "the only woman animator" and I thought, no. I was skeptical because I thought, wow this is early. And it was, and in reading it, it made some pretty big claims - Bray Studios, Max Fleischer, Paul Terry. And it also, for about a year and a half, almost two years I was stuck where I could only find anything about her from the 1920s when she was on vaudeville, working the vaudeville circuits with her act as "the only woman animator." it still sounded like a bit of hyperbole but I had no idea where she was from. Bessie Mae Kelley - is that short for Bess? Elizabeth? Margaret? Mae? Meg? Kelley - K-E-L-L-Y? K-E-L-L-E-Y? K-E-L-L-I-E? Every permutation, M-A-Y, M-I-A, M-A-E, trying everything to unlock, where was she from? Where did she die? How long did she live? Did she have children? Where do I find? The pandemic came along and I had a bit of extra time, so finally unlocked through some kind of peripheral ancestry, pushing through different theories and hitting dead ends and process of elimination, finally unlocked where she was from and her family and calling cold. And then learned she actually lived in my home state and then started calling, cold-calling historical society. So I thought a woman like this had to have had a scrapbook and trying to think, "well hopefully she left it or somebody left it" because I couldn't find any children, any family. Long story short, I was back in Minnesota sort of on an emergency basis and I had all my material with me and had some time. So I started Google searching in the area because I knew she was in Minnesota. Well the algorithms change - I'm based in Los Angeles but the algorithms shift and you start Googling locally and boom, up popped the name of a niece. I was trying some family searching and up popped the name and the obituary of a niece who took care of her when she was older. And long story short, made the strange phone calls of, "hi you don't know me but I'm wondering if you were related in any way to," leaving messages. 10 minutes later I

got a call back and it was a great-niece and she said, "yeah she was my aunt and while I used to have a number of things" - my heart sank. She said, "but a cousin of mine came and took them a number of years ago." I said "well, would he still have them?" "Oh he might, let me call but," she said, "he's not here in Minnesota. He's in California." Even better! So ended up, literally got off, back to LA on a Thursday. Sunday morning, I was driving down to San Diego and knocking on the door of her great-nephew and he had everything laid out on the table and had been trying for years to get anyone to pay attention to her story, but everybody said "well women didn't do that." So it's been a real joy and a deep honor to be able to get this changed and sure enough there were two films that we were able to save. There was another can that had twice as much film stock but it was dissolving. So that, I was able to get on to a flatbed scanner and get a sense of what was in there and that's where the Gasoline Alley materials were, but proved that that did exist, that these are her work, that she directed and it's been a remarkable story. Now in getting others to become aware of her, we had to kind of keep it secret for a bit but I began unearthing digging through the material, telling, finding her story, threading it together and in reaching out to colleagues in New York and Chicago and comic book experts and animation experts and got a lot of pushback. And found a gentleman who had had a set of drawings by another artist, a renowned artist, Frank Moser, who was very key to the earliest days of animation. And he said, "well I have a set of drawings that he did. It must have been on the lunch hour, just doing portraits of people. But there's a woman in there, but we all figured it was a cleaning lady or a secretary." And I said "can you describe it?" He said, "well she's very '20s, she looks like she's got a flapper hat." And I said, "can you send me just a quick photo of it?" Sent me a photo and I sent back paralleled with a photo of Bess and I said, "that's Bessie Mae Kelley. Did it ever cross your mind that it could be an animator?" No. No. It's that steeped unconscious bias that women were only secretaries or ink and paint artists or not even artists, just ink and paint **girls**. And it was an interesting lesson, we'll leave it at that.

We've all been raised and steeped in this, his story, it's his story. When I first began work on my *Ink and Paint* volume, I thought it was going to be a charming little volume about pretty girls who traced and colored because that's all I had been told and knew. That's all anybody knew. And when I walked into, I've been in there many many times at the Disney archives and for work that I had done when I was there, and knew various resources that would be there. And I was in this mindset of the Nine Old Men and knew about all the men, maybe Mary Blair, one or two women and that was about it. But when I walked in with this topic and I had the green light on my manuscript for the *Ink and Paint* book, I will never forget the dear, wonderful archivist face. Wonderful guy, and I said "okay I'm going to need everything on these key films, and let's go through Walt and Roy's ledgers because this is a very materials-based division, so let's see where they're getting stuff. And then I'll need everything on ink and paint." So I had boxes and boxes of things to go through on these certain films, no surprise. I had stacks of ledgers to go through on finding where the materials came from and what they were paying and how many they were ordering, no surprise. And I will never forget his face he came out and he was stunned. And he had a folder in his hands and he said, "this is all we have on women in the Ink and Paint department" and it was a folder that had five pieces of paper in it. I wasn't surprised at this point. I was well immersed in all this, and I said "okay let's think peripherally." So we did and and we did find a few other little bits and pieces in other places. Now they've got drawers of

stuff, I've made sure of that. But it was proof to me and again God bless Dave Smith for all that he did in getting that archive started, that was vital work. But history is recorded, written about, documented, preserved and stored from a male perspective. And that's half of the experience. That was, half the final work you see on the screen is the work done by the women, their color work, their line work - all of that had to be locked in and tightened because we love our men with pencils but their lines were not that solid and it would flutter on the screen. So it was up to the women, these master premium calligraphic anchors and then the painters coming in. You had to come in with a portfolio, you had to have true artistic training and even then you were brought in to train in the inking and painting teams. They would have like 30 women training for, you get half pay for a multi-week program and they'd get maybe two people out of it who were really truly qualified to do these jobs. And then they still had to go through training beyond that. So it was an opportunity to bust a number of these myths, these prevailing myths of pretty girls who traced and colored, and change that narrative, lift the lid on the process and tell the other half of the story.

AT: And again I'm seeing the parallels with computer science because there are all the photos of women programmers literally working with the machines and you still get people who say, "oh those were probably models brought in to pretty up the image for publicity purposes." And it's just the lengths that people will go to to write women out of history when they are literally right there.

MJ: Exactly and that's the sad part of how prevailing this unconscious bias is and we've all grown up in it. And I'm probably one of those few people in the room of like, your toes start curling and you're like, "oh wait a minute!" I can catch it where I look around and I see many of our brethren but other women just "okay, yeah, great, sure, yeah that's how it was." And I'm like "whoa, doesn't that bother you that she's not even being acknowledged or not getting looked at or she's not getting the advancements that the men are getting but she's the one who's worked twice as hard?" Hmm, okay. We have a lot of educating to do.

It's just over five years since the *Ink and Paint* book has been out, and I started teaching at CalArts. I was up, there they asked me to speak and I said, "you know this is a class." And it was right at the time where they were like, "it's interesting we have more women studying animation than we have men. Wow isn't that interesting?" I'm like, "yeah! So something with that. Let's tell their story. And now finally, anywhere that I'm teaching, my students sit up a little taller because they see themselves in our past and they've always been there. That's not just women but other underrepresented artists. Animation has been one of the most actually progressive industries because it didn't matter about your gender, it mattered about your artistry. Yet we still have these societal biases that enter into it but we've failed with that. We've failed to tell our collective story and I'm trying to change that.

AT: Well there are other parallels that I see what you are telling me with what I've seen in other areas of women's history where for example the very tedious nature of what these women were doing. Women have often been given the less fun, exciting work so to speak but also vitally important so like you see this especially I'm thinking in astronomy - they're doing the the tedious

work that the men don't necessarily want to do and they're doing it for much less pay.

MJ: And patience. Women handle these fine delicate things. That's true of, when you look at film history we have women Margaret Booth and other women in Editorial because it was looked upon as like something like knitting and required patience. And so women will be better at that. There are these powerhouse women, Blanche Sewell and all throughout Disney history too, Evelyn Kennedy, Shirley Gross, on and on and on, Bea Selk. Music editors - Louisa Field, the first female music editor in Hollywood, worked on - Walt brought her in to work on a little film called *Fantasia*, had a few things to do with music right? And yet there are these great images of her and it's in the sound stage and there's all these guys and you see Louisa because she's got a little bow in her hair and the captions will read, they won't identify her or they'll say "oh and the secretar." And she's the one in charge! There's that crazy false assumption that if it's a woman, she's a secretary or she's there taking notes. And it's it's painful today as a woman to be underestimated but to see that even historically, and not fully recognized for your value, your contributions and to be essentially rendered invisible. Nah, we're done, it's time for change.

AT: Well there's also the diminishment of the women's work, so obviously saying someone's a secretary when they're actually the boss. No offense to secretaries, we love and respect secretaries, but there is a very different perspective on that person's power and influence. And you see this more broadly with the titles that women are given, broadly in terms of their work so again I'm thinking of the astronomers or all the women who were relegated to the "assistant" role because they weren't allowed to have a higher level role. And as you've been talking about you know the the paint and ink "girls" like the the very diminishment of that whole department, which is fundamentally vital to the output. I mean this is so important and yet, "oh those are just the paint and ink girls."

MJ: Well but here's the thing. I was delighted to find this too because you know people, "oh well Walt wanted it that way, the men wanted it that way." No it was Hazel Sewell who ran, she was one of the first women to head a department in California animation. There was New York, there were a couple of other women but here in Los Angeles, she was one of the first women to run a department. She said, "no the women are better" because men were doing it early on, she said "no the women are better, thank you. We'll just keep it to the ladies and it'll be a much more comfortable environment for the women to be in." I found memos that were issued where, when the women were moving into animation, there was a prevailing attitude that women didn't have the power. You have to remember early on, this is not any kind of excuse but it was a lot of pratfalls and physical comedy and side gags in the early novelty days. And that's what's so great about the discovery of Bess is that she proves that wrong, that no there weren't and people thought, in fact there's a woman, Lillian Friedman Astor. Now this shifts everything, because she was billed as "the first woman animator." In fact even on her grave site, it says "first woman animator." She's the first to get a credit but even then, Bess had her own credits on her film but she was an early woman in the '30s who did get credit at Fleischer Studios. But the great thing about Bess and her discovery is, there are many other women now that her story has now unlocked. So, forthcoming book and film on all that, but the great thing about Bess is that she

proves all of these entrenched log lines that we've all been living under in this industry as inaccurate. And it shifts the whole narrative to proving them all wrong. And there were other women who, there were women who animated in stop-motion a couple of years before she started in hand-drawn animation. And we do have another woman in Europe who was assisting that we know of, but these films in terms of hand-drawn animation, that's why it's "the earliest **known**," because we never know. If I'm able to uncover someone earlier, you never know, but this discovery is pretty landmark. When they debuted at the Academy, Christmas of 2022, we hit it on the actual centenary of when her second film debuted and so it's pretty landmark, pretty remarkable and it's exciting to see. So I had to, once I'd uncovered these films and I pulled this bull back and it's "happy new year 1923." I went, "oh my gosh I've got less than a year to get this thing together and get her story finalized." And still discoveries being made but we were able to make it so it was pretty exciting.

AT: And so your upcoming book is titled "*The Only Woman Animator*", which as you've mentioned when she was on the vaudeville circuit that's how she billed herself but I also have to assume that it's sort of tongue-in-cheek and pointing out this fallacy that there's never only one.

MJ: Right. And while working on *Ink and Paint*, there were so many myths and people who, when you are the only woman in the room I've been there I can't tell you how many times. And you look around and think, "yeah it's just me. I've got an incredible heavy tall glass ceiling I'm gonna have to push through" and you don't see yourself, you don't think that there's anybody else out there. So "well yep, I must be the first." That was the case while I was working on *Ink and Paint*, I kind of proved a lot of women very talented women who came up in the '70s, '80s, '90s who looked around and thought, "well I'm the first. I'm the only one." And so I had to kind of, "oh not quite, there were many many women," so it's a lot of re-educating.

But the title is actually in quotes because that was her her logline, her catchphrase for her act and at the time she would have been a very rare woman. And she did achieve a level that at that time nobody else had. She did later in the late '20s early '30s as other, Edith Vernick and other women were animating at Fleischer and other studios, she kind of alluded to the fact that "that I know of" and you have to remember too, you didn't have the Internet at that point. You just had newspapers and they weren't always either accurate or interested in what women were doing, at least in the world of animation because you had the men really sort of raised up to be these "the only man," "John Bray, who developed animation" or these myths were created very early on. And so it is a little tongue in cheek in that it's designed to appeal to anyone who's ever been the only woman in the room, who's been invisible, who hasn't had their voice heard or hasn't felt that their contributions were recognized. And sadly the numbers are far too many on that.

AT: Well I think it definitely is a self-fulfilling prophecy where you can't be what you can't see, and the reason that that person may be the only woman in the room and maybe she won't stay in that room because it's just that uncomfortable. But this whole premise that, well you've talked about as a teacher, you see how important it is that particularly young women are hearing these stories and knowing that women have always been there.

MJ: Our young women and our young men, it's important that they see that and I tell them always that it's in their hands to make this change. If you think about it, look what we've missed out. We could probably have cancer cured by now if women had been given even a semi-equal approach to their lives. We've all missed out on this and we've got a terrific group, I get a lot of guys in my history of women and other underrepresented artists class up at CalArts and I've asked now to be teaching more history of animation classes. And I always am very frank by saying, "look I can teach about our dead white guys who we love and are great but I'm going to give you a much more balanced approach, the first of its kind." They're like "great!" So it's wonderful to see that in academia and industry is seeking this out. They want it. Like I said, animation has always been a very progressive industry. We've had much more diversity than people realize all throughout its ranks from the very very beginning, because it largely was based on your skills and your talents. And the more you learn about that diversity, you begin to see why it's continued, you look at the top box office champs for the last year, I think the top six or seven of them were primarily animated films. It's not a genre, it's a medium and any kind of story can be told through that medium. And it gives a testament I think when you look at the full picture of animation incorporating our women as well as our men. It's a remarkable art form and it's really exciting. I can't wait to see where the generations that I'm teaching now are going to get out there and the changes that they're making. I just had the Annie Awards and I can't tell you the number of people who came up to me out of the crowd going, "oh my gosh I'm so glad you were here, you were my professor, and look what I'm doing now!" "That's awesome, keep going!" So it's really exciting um they're empowered and they're excited about it and I think we're gonna see some remarkable stuff coming up. I'm looking forward to that.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history