



Caseen Gaines, author of *Inside Pee-wee's Playhouse: The Untold, Unauthorized, And Unpredictable Story Of A Pop Phenomenon*

By Marah Eakin for The A.V. Club - Feb 23, 2012

Caseen Gaines likes *Pee-wee's Playhouse* a lot. So much, in fact, that he wrote a new unofficial guide to the show, *Inside Pee-wee's Playhouse: The Untold, Unauthorized, And Unpredictable Story Of A Pop Phenomenon*. Featuring interviews with many members of the cast and crew—though not Paul Reubens, who's reportedly working on a book of his own—*Inside Pee-wee's Playhouse* is an intriguing look at a childhood memory, not just on the screen but also behind the scenes. Gaines will be in Chicago [Friday, Feb. 24 for a reading at Quimby's](#), but before that he talked to *The A.V. Club* about the book, the show, and the cult of Pee-wee.

The A.V. Club: What made you decide to write this book? As in, how did you decide to convert your fandom into something more?

Caseen Gaines: I've been a lifelong Pee-wee Herman fan. I was a *Playhouse* baby, born in 1986 myself, so I grew up watching it. When I heard he was bringing the character back, I went on the Internet and tried to figure out who might be rejoining him on projects, and I found some contact info for some of the actors. I messaged them on Facebook, and, much to my surprise, they wrote back. They started telling me great stories about working on the show, and that was the catalyst. I figured other fans would like to read it too.

AVC: You were just a baby when *Pee-wee's Playhouse* started. How can you remember it?

CG: I have such vivid memories of watching that show. I know that there were a lot of VHS releases while the show was on TV from '88 to '91, and then I had some on tapes we made. I must have watched it when it was off the air, but I'm positive I watched the original '81 HBO special religiously and, honestly, though that was *Pee-wee's Playhouse* too, I didn't get the distinction.



AVC: You went through with the book even though Paul Reubens declined to participate. How did you make that decision?

CG: One of the first people I contacted was him, and they hastily said he wasn't going to be able to participate. I questioned whether I wanted to continue on because I was writing as a fan and I wanted his support and participation. What encouraged me, though, was while I was having this discussion with his people to try and convince them to get on board, I continued to do interviews, and the stories people were telling me were too good. I have a unique opportunity.

I mean, when you think about *Playhouse* or *Big Adventure*, you think about Paul Reubens. I was certainly not aware of the hundreds of other people that contributed to the shows. They really left their mark on it the same way he did, and I wanted those people to be remembered for their work and celebrated. They were on board with the book and wanted to share stories, and because they could help tell the history, it didn't seem fair to stop the whole thing just because one person didn't want to help out. Anyway, that's the answer I'm legally allowed to give.

AVC: Some of the stories people have to tell about Reubens aren't exactly flattering.

CG: I don't know if this comes across, but one thing that I really learned is that he is a perfectionist. He's a little bit of a micromanager, and that's not necessarily a bad thing.

One thing that I was told by his manager is that Paul Reubens is in the middle of trying to stage a comeback, and he was concerned that some of the content in the book might not paint him in the best light considering he wants to remind people of all the good days of Pee-wee Herman. To me, that's who he is. The people who worked

with him in '81, '85, '91—everyone said Paul was very controlling in terms of the Pee-wee Herman properties, and that's understandable. This isn't an officially licensed book, but I think Pee-wee Herman people feel the same relationship toward it.



AVC: Did you see him on *Top Chef* this season?

CG: Of course I did. Then I went to Amazon to see if there was an uptick in my sales. Let's keep him working.

AVC: So do you think this resurgence is happening? Do you think he can come back?

CG: I hope so. My big idea is that he would be a great late-night

host. He needs a show like Conan or George Lopez. Him interviewing people would be hilarious.

I think when you write a book about Pee-wee Herman, you get a lot of unsolicited opinions about him, and I think some people still find him weird and don't get it. But there's also this fascination people have. They don't like him, but they don't turn the channel.

AVC: Do you think a third Pee-wee movie is going to happen? It's been in development forever.

CG: I don't know. If I were a betting man, I'd bet against it—but I hope it happens. The only reason I'd bet against it is because Paul Reubens has been teasing it since '99 and Judd Apatow's attached. He's a huge name, and the movie has a development deal with Universal—but that being said, it's been in development for almost two years at this point. As I'm sure you know, usually when something's going to happen, it happens quickly. This has been in development since even before the idea for *Bridesmaids* was around. If there's an Apatow property that works, there's a fire under him for that.



AVC: *Pee-wee's Playhouse* worked a little blue sometimes, right?

CG: One thing that a lot of people forget is that Pee-wee Herman gained visibility between '83 and '85 on MTV and on the *David Letterman* show. Those are things that high school kids, college kids, and adults watch. A lot of those people followed him to the kids' show. I think because the humor was irreverent and there was this air of "I can't believe they're saying this on television," adults and college students would tune in to see what they would get away with next. Was there anything else sexually funny or suggestive that could be done? I mean, there's an episode in the fifth season where Conky is reading *Playrobot*. I can't believe they can make a *Playboy* joke on Saturday morning TV.

Part of the genius of the program is knowing what it could get away with. They play in both worlds with jokes adults get and that kids would never know. That's part of the fun about it.

It was crazy for me to write the episode guide, because I had to watch everything again. I had this deadline, and I caught this wicked summer cold right before it. I was in bed with the chills, the sickest I'd been in a long time. It was the dead of summer, and I was freezing cold and on medication. I had to watch the series and take notes, though. As I was watching, I kept thinking, "Is this the Nyquil or is this really happening?" The humor is just so crazy.

AVC: One of the things that I really liked in the book is the chapter about the Pee-wee Herman licensing blitz. Can you talk about that a little?

CG: They covered the market pretty well. They made all sorts of crazy things, but one of the ideas that never materialized was Pee-wee Chow, which was a breakfast cereal that Purina was releasing. They had this commercial cut where kids would be crawling on the

floor like dogs, and someone would say, “Time for your cereal,” and they’d all eat it like in *A Christmas Story*, out of the a bowl on the floor. What they found was that kids hated the taste of it. They hated it. Paul Reubens described it as tasting like Trix cereal, but I think everyone believes it might just have been the visual, that crawling on the floor. It died there.

My favorite bit of unreleased merchandise is the Penny talking doll. It’s amazing. It’s one of my favorite finds for the book that I had no idea existed before. The person who designed it, Timothy Young, he’s a friend of mine at this point. I think it’s just amazing that they made this doll based on an incredibly popular character in the show, and it was never released. He still has the heads of the doll, though. I got to hold one and play with it. I tried to steal it, but nope.

AVC: What will your event at Quimby’s be like?

CG: I love meeting Pee-wee fans. When you’re a fan and it’s 2012, you feel like you’re the only one in America sometimes. When I go to these events, people show in shirts and bring dolls. It’s crazy. I don’t tell them to do it. They’re just coming out to have a party. As far as what we’re going to do at Quimby’s, I think I’ll talk a bit about the book, sign the book, and then get to mingle with other Pee-wee Herman fans. We can share stories about what we liked best about Pee-wee and our favorite moments.

AVC: I’m really glad you did this because I write about *The Adventures Of Pete And Pete* for *The A.V. Club*, and one thing I’ve found is that for older shows, there’s just not that much information about them on the Internet. Now, if you have a TV Show, there are 9,000 paparazzi shots of the set and every cast member has a Twitter, and a website, and it’s all there.

CG: I was shocked that when I went online and started looking for

info, it was all very generic. The [Wikipedia](#) has a lot of text, but a lot of that is just info that you can get from watching the show, like what the secret word is for every episode. I mean, where are the people? Where are the stories? It's such a character-driven show, and everything about it online is so encyclopedic.

So, I wanted to put the people back into it. I was so pleased about the people I was able to find, really. These are people that, in some cases, dropped out of the business 20 years ago. They don't have Facebook. They don't have Twitter. They aren't on the grid in that way, so I was so lucky to be able to find them. Some of the actors don't even live in this country anymore. I'd have to Skype to England and stuff. It's great that they could be tracked though and archived in that way. There are lots of other people that I interviewed for the book who didn't make it, unfortunately, just due to page limits and things. Even for the context, though, talking to them was great. A lot of the information that's not directly attributed to one person comes out of interviews with other people. It was all very helpful.



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