How nice is *too* nice? The question arises after viewing two films written and directed by author and filmmaker Max Allan Collins. Collins, a Muscatine resident, is the author of the graphic novel *Road to Perdition*, along with dozens of other books. In addition to his literary endeavors, he has – somehow – found time to forge a side career as a filmmaker, and his most recent efforts will make their Quad Cities debuts in conjunction with the author's current Quad City Arts literary residency: *Caveman: V.T. Hamlin & Alley Oop*, an hour-long documentary that explores the life and career of the man behind the famed prehistoric comic strip, and the feature-length *Eliot Ness: An Untouchable Life*, which examines the Depression-era Treasury agent who, along with his fellow "Untouchables," helped bring down Al Capone's criminal empire.

Both films are full to brimming with biographical information, reveal obvious passion for their subjects, feature moments of keen insight, and display a great deal of technical savvy.

And, in both films, Collins appears so determined to not ruffle any feathers – to keep the films, at nearly all times, *nice* – that the works themselves often suffer as a result.

A Pleasant Kind of Quicksand

Vincent Trout Hamlin was born in Perry, Iowa, in 1900, and originated his soon-to-be-legendary comic-strip character Alley Oop in 1930. By 1933, Oop and the other denizens of the Royal Palace of Moo were gracing comic-strip pages across America, where they can still be found in some 700 newspapers nationwide. In 1973, the strip was given to Hamlin's late-career collaborator, Dave Graue, and "Alley Oop" is today written and drawn by the husband-and-wife team of Jack and Carole Bender, in newspapers with a circulation totalling some 46 million. Hamlin passed away in the early '90s.

With a wealth of biographical material to cull from, Collins, in *Caveman: V.T. Hamlin & Alley Oop*, does a fine job of presenting the cartoonist's accomplishments in an engaging and informative manner, and perhaps the highest compliment I can pay the film is to say that this opinion comes from someone who, since his youth, has studiously *avoided* Hamlin's comic strip. Even as a child, I remember looking at Hamlin's panels, with their deceptively crude artwork and overstuffed dialogue balloons, and thinking that there were too many words and not enough jokes; indeed, one of the cartoonists interviewed in the film admits that "Alley Oop" was often considered "a simple cartoon strip for simple people."

However, as a kid who, for many years, lived and breathed dinosaurs, I was crazy about the strip's accompanying "Dinny's Family Album" panel (named after Oop's pet dinosaur) which, on a weekly basis, provided exhaustive information on – and, better yet for a young dino-phile, *dra wings* of – these creatures. In *Caveman*

, Collins' greatest accomplishment lies in how thoroughly he shows that I wasn't alone in my mania. For many readers across the country, Hamlin's comic strip was an introduction into the very
concept
of these prehistoric wonders, and Collins makes a convincing argument for "Alley Oop" being the reason that many children become transfixed by dinosaurs; Hamlin's love of the prehistoric era was apparent in the detail with which he explored Oop's world, and – by modeling the strip's characters and their environment on life in small-town America – Hamlin made the caveman's realm seem as unthreatening as a child's own backyard.

Throughout the film, Collins does an admirable, entertaining job of putting Hamlin's achievements in historical context. Interviews with active cartoonists, many conducted at a recent San Diego Comic Convention, provide both information and amusement; we learn how Hamlin was perhaps the first cartoonist to introduce an educational aspect to the daily comics, how the decision to place a time machine in the strip's prehistoric world gave millions of children their first exposure to Shakespeare and the Alamo and ancient Greece, and graphic novelist Trina Robbins – such a delightful interviewee in Terry Zwigoff's 1995 documentary *Crumb* – describes how Hamlin's artwork, with its brooding, lumbering men and vivacious women, not only predated underground cartoonist Robert Crumb but might, indirectly, have influenced his work. The hypotheses and reminiscences of Collins' interviewees are lucid and diverting, and they're presented with skill; Collins appears to be asking the right questions, and getting appropriately illuminating, even insightful, answers. (One cartoonist likens the process of getting hooked by a daily comic strip to falling into "a pleasant kind of quicksand.")

When *Caveman* focuses on Hamlin's professional life, it's smooth and effective, like a well-executed episode of A&E's *Biography*. Yet the film's most fascinating interviewees are Hamlin's daughter, Teddy Dewalt, and former collaborator Graue, both of whose recollections give the film a personal spin that Collins either doesn't know what to do with or chooses to brush off.

Dewalt, who comes across as a smart, no-nonsense type, explains that her father "had two very favorite subjects: 'Alley Oop,' and V.T. Hamlin. And that's all." She calls him "volatile" and "irritable" and "intense," and tells a heartbreaking story about how, as a child, she stumbled upon a series of her father's old drawings in a trunk, asked if she could have them, and was told, with no hesitation, that she *couldn't*, as he meant to destroy them years ago. The next time Dewalt looked in the trunk, the drawings were gone, never to be seen again. "I think he lived with Ally and his imagination more than he did with us," she says. "
Much
more."

And Jack Bender – who reveals that Graue and Hamlin were "not close friends," and "did not part friends" – tells an astonishing story about how, when Graue was assigned to do finishing touches on Hamlin's artwork, the Iowa artist wouldn't send his unfinished drafts to Graue for completion, even though he lived mere blocks away. He sent them to his cartoon-syndicate employers in *Cleveland*, with the understanding that *they* would send the drafts to Graue; at the end, it appears the simple act of licking a

stamp
required more involvement than Hamlin wanted to have with Graue.

Yet the reasons for Hamlin's acrimony toward Graue remain naggingly unclear – Graue, in the film, reveals that he stopped speaking to Hamlin to retaliate against Hamlin's ill treatment of *him* – and we aren't offered much explanation for the cartoonist's apparent disinterest in his family; the closest we get to a personal "understanding" of Hamlin is when one of Collins' interviewees says that "a lot of our best cartoonists were on the verge of crazy," adding that "that's not necessarily a bad thing." (I'm not sure that Teddy Dewalt and David Graue would agree.) No one expects – or
should
expect – artists to be genial and fun-loving, and part of the fascination of movies such as
Lust for Life
and
Pollock
and
Crumb
lies in the dichotomy between the beauty of the artists' work and the ugliness of their personal lives. Why, here, is Collins whitewashing his subject's dark side?

Collins hints at Hamlin's frequent ill temper and bullying tactics but just as quickly tries to divert our attention from them. For instance, we are informed that, after the cartoonist retired, Hamlin "embraced his family with renewed vigor and interest," and that the relationship between Hamlin, his son John, and his grandchildren "was warm and loving." But this information doesn't mesh with what we've been told of Hamlin's character and no one – certainly not John or the grandchildren, who are never referenced again – is on camera to back up this claim; it seems included merely to counteract the unpleasant revelations of Dewalt and Graue. (Hamlin's voice is absent from the film, though Michael Cornelison, who narrates *Caveman*, also delivers first-person biographical information "in character" as the cartoonist.)

As it progresses, *Caveman*'s material becomes richer and the movie begins to show a welcome dark side, but it doesn't seem to be a side that Collins is much interested in pursuing, and by the end, the filmmaker seems to have all but disassociated himself from his subject; the film wraps up with the revelation that this was the last interview Graue gave before his death in 2001, and you realize, with a shock, that Collins never mentions during *Caveman*'s entire running length when Hamlin
himself
died. (June 14, 1993, if you were curious.) For a film about someone who – based on the evidence here – was often a bastard, Collins' work isn't quite as tough, or as thorough, as its subject demands. It is, however, a very
nice
movie.

He Was Fond of Bad Puns

Niceness is also the chief impediment to Collins' *Eliot Ness: An Untouchable Life*, the movie version – shot on high-definition video – of the one-man stage show performed at the Des Moines Playhouse last August. (Although *Eliot Ness* opens and closes with shots of a live audience seated at the playhouse, they are never heard from during the movie itself, as Collins' work was filmed over several days and nights with the crowd *not* in attendance.) Enacted by *Caveman* voice-over performer Michael Cornelison, this is a more loveable, avuncular Ness than his tough-guy tales of gangland warfare and crime procedurals would suggest; he's a Ness you could take home to grandma. The material – Ness speaks directly to the audience for almost its entire length – has obviously been shaped for a very specific audience (and a very specific *theatre* audience) of older Midwesterners who might blanch at some of Ness's more *outré* stories. In this endeavor, Cornelison's Ness seems *embarrassed* at telling tales of bootlegging and brothels and serial killers, and delivers these stories with almost apologetic dismissiveness.

But while that might make Ness' stories more palatable to an older, easily offended demographic, it does nothing for an audience that might hope for something more than a Ness who engages in generic tough-guy-isms such as "He knew something was up, so he kept his head down," and cutesy laugh lines such as "If I'd have been a swearing man, I'd have said, 'The heck with 'em.' But I'm *not*, so, the *hell* with 'em." (The movie, which was filmed on the same Des Moines stage the play was first presented, might actually have benefited from being performed in front of a live audience, *à la* one of Richard Pryor's concert films or Julia Sweeney's *God Said, "Ha!"* – the amused reactions of the crowd might have given Collins' often-cornball dialogue some context.)

As in *Caveman*, we learn a lot – about Ness's upbringing, his encounters with Al Capone, his surprising career trajectory, the difficulties he faced in his personal life; Collins has obviously done a *lot* of homework, and deserves praise for delivering so much information painlessly and often amusingly. Yet – again, as in *Caveman* – Collins seems so determined not to offend that he offends in a completely different way. Eliot Ness, as we learn, was a tough and a heavy drinker and, like V.T. Hamlin, more than a bit of a bastard, but in Collins' envisioning, he's about as threatening as Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners* – you know he probably *could* pound someone to the moon, but you're not gonna see it happen here. Consequently, Ness comes off as something of a lightweight when, instead, he should be tough as nails. (His

readiness with a bad joke doesn't help matters; at one point Ness discusses a barrel warehouse "that Capone owned lock, stock, and ... well, uh ... " and I waited to hear "ba-dum-*ching*!" followed by Ness' instruction to tip the wait staff.)

Surely, had Collins wanted him to, Cornelison could have *played* him tougher. When Ness' ire is up, the hard-working actor comes through with some sensationally powerful moments – his performance must have been dazzling on stage – and, late in the film, he even gets the chance to pull off an enjoyably slimy Hannibal Lecter impersonation, when he briefly imitates Ness's late-career antagonist, the serial killer known as The Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Row. (Discussing the killer, Ness says, "He liked to tease. He was fond of bad puns." Like *this* Ness should talk.) Yet even playing this production's family-friendly Ness, Cornelison, from beginning to end, displays tremendous camera rapport and superb interpretive skills, and although he isn't quite able to redeem the film's uneasy transition from stage to screen, he's easily the best reason to see *Eliot Ness.*

The second-best reason is the filmmaking itself. Working with the cinematographer and editor Phillip W. Dingeldein, Collins lends the work a sharpness and clarity that's most unusual in the world of low-budget filmmaking; the colors and lighting are vibrant and rich, and the scenes flow into one another with grace. I wish there were more variety in terms of the staging itself – generally, a new Ness reverie will begin with the man either entering a room or preparing to leave it, which proves visually exhausting over the course of the film's running length – but it certainly *looks* great.

And while I still don't think that *Eliot Ness: An Untouchable Life* actually *merited* a film version, as long as one exists, I'm glad it's this one, especially considering Cornelison's work in the lead; this actor kept me diverted for more than 100 minutes, and at the end of his performance, I smiled and thought: *Nice*.

Caveman: V.T. Hamlin & Alley Oop *will be shown at the Quad Cities Arts Center (309-793-1213) at 7 p.m. on Thursday, February 2.* Eliot Ness: An Untouchable Life *will be shown at the Rocket Theatre (309-788-8439) at 7 p.m. on Friday, February 3. Both venues are in downtown Rock Island.*

Collins will conduct a lecture on his works, and participate in a Q&A session, at the Quad City Arts Center at 10 a.m. on Saturday, February 4.