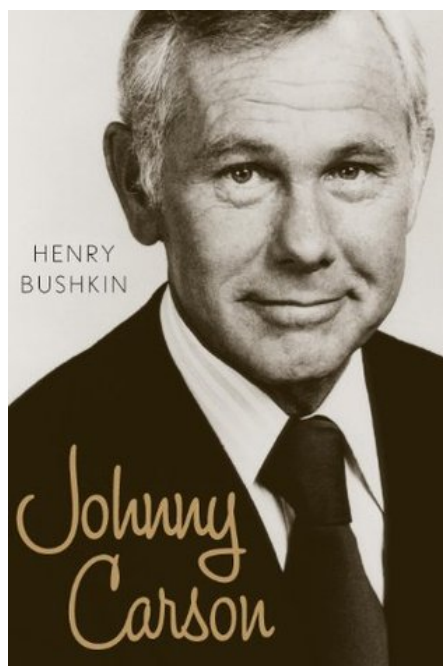




Johnny Carson

Henry Bushkin

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A revealing and incisive account of the King of Late Night at the height of his fame and power, by his lawyer, wingman, fixer, and closest confidant

From 1962 until 1992, Johnny Carson hosted *The Tonight Show* and permeated the American consciousness. In the '70s and '80s he was the country's highest-paid entertainer and its most enigmatic. He was notoriously inscrutable, as mercurial (and sometimes cruel) off-camera as he was charming and hilarious onstage. During the apex of his reign, Carson's longtime lawyer and best friend was Henry Bushkin, who now shows us Johnny Carson with a breathtaking clarity and depth that nobody else could.

From the moment in 1970 when Carson hired Bushkin (who was just twenty-seven) until the moment eighteen years later when they parted ways, the author witnessed and often took part in a string of escapades that still retain their power to surprise and fascinate us. One of Bushkin's first assignments was helping Carson break into a posh Manhattan apartment to gather evidence of his wife's infidelity. More than once, Bushkin helped his client avoid entanglements with the mob. Of course, Carson's adventures weren't all so sordid. He hosted Ronald Reagan's inaugural concert as a favor to the new president, and he prevented a drunken Dean Martin from appearing onstage that evening. Carson socialized with Frank Sinatra, Jack Lemmon, Jimmy Stewart, Kirk Douglas, and dozens of other boldface names who populate this atmospheric and propulsive chronicle of the King of Late Night and his world.

But this memoir isn't just dishy. It is a tautly rendered and remarkably nuanced portrait of Carson, revealing not only how he truly was, but why. Bushkin explains why Carson, a voracious (and very talented) womanizer, felt he always had to be married; why he loathed small talk even as he excelled at it; why he couldn't visit his son in the hospital and wouldn't attend his mother's funeral; and much more. Bushkin's account is by turns shocking, poignant, and uproarious — written with a novelist's eye for detail, a screenwriter's ear for dialogue, and a knack for comic timing that Carson himself would relish. *Johnny Carson* unveils not only the hidden Carson, but also the raucous, star-studded world he ruled.

Johnny Carson Details

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From Reader Review Johnny Carson for online ebook

Nick says

If you have read any of the recent articles reviewing this book, you won't be surprised by much. I think everything remotely shocking was covered and exaggerated to its fullest before this book hit the shelves. Yes, Johnny was at times nice and at times nasty. Yes, the mob makes a scary appearance, and so does Frank Gifford, or at least his apartment.

Johnny was the most generous man in the world one minute, yet cold-blooded and ruthless the next. Friendships end and begin on a dime. Yes, Johnny was more comfortable in front of a million viewers than a handful of admirers. Essentially this is the same story you'll find if you look at Elvis, Michael Jackson, Bob Dylan or any other big-time entertainment personality at the top of their field. It seems to be a necessary pattern of traits even for those who make it so big.

I found this book extremely comparable to Mr. S: My Life with Frank Sinatra. Both were up-close accounts from people with all-access passes to the lives of their famous employers, and both eventually wound up dumped, forgotten and never spoken to again. Curiously enough, both seemed to enjoy the good times so much though that any ill-will they had for their subject eventually faded.

Given how interesting it must have been traipsing around the world with Carson, I can't blame Bushkin much. Add to that the fact that he made many millions doing it, and you start to wonder why he even bothered with the work of writing this book. He surely doesn't need the money. My guess is that he had a lot of fun reminiscing, and that fortunately translates into a nice, breezy read.

Mac says

Who wants to read about a demanding, difficult, and damaged person with a suave, confident persona on air and a shy, sad, isolated life when not before an audience? Who wants to read about such a mercurial personality who hurts others, fires people, and divorces wives with cruel, bitter remarks? Who wants to read about someone who so cavalierly cheats on his wives and ignores his children? And who wants to listen to a self-serving author who believes Johnny would be pleased the book is cruelly revealing and not a gloss?

Well, I do (though I'm embarrassed to admit it). I liked the insights into Johnny's personalities, the anecdotes, the dialogue, the negotiating, the high life, and the petty jealousies. *Johnny Carson* is not good literature, but it is a good read.

Some editorial comments: What happened to Ed McMahon? It's almost as if he never existed.

Henry, I guess you should get some props for admitting you acted poorly during your time with Johnny, cheating on your wife and ignoring your family. But your apology seems *pro forma*, and you make no apology for having betrayed so many confidences in this book and for having betrayed Johnny himself, a man who above all valued loyalty.

And Henry, some advice for your next book. If you're going to break from the chronological structure (an effective structure in this case), please do a better job of letting us know where you are in your digressions. In *Johnny Carson*, some events are introduced, or repeated, out of their natural order; it's confusing and disconcerting.

Barbara says

Johnny Carson is best known as a comedian and host of the 'The Tonight Show', which he emceed from 1962 to 1992. When I plucked this (audio) book off the library shelf I thought it was a biography of the entertainer. It's not. Rather it's a memoir written by Carson's lawyer Henry Bushkin, who worked for Johnny from 1970 to 1988.

Bushkin's employment began when he was in his late twenties and not very experienced with entertainment law. The young attorney caught on quickly though and discovered that some of Johnny's advisors and employers were enriching themselves at Carson's expense. (According to himself) Bushkin quickly put all this to rights and soon became Johnny's loyal companion - functioning as 'lawyer, advisor, assistant, companion, fixer, tennis buddy, drinking partner' and so on.

On television Johnny came across as genial, intelligent, and funny...and his nightly monologue was 'must-see TV' for millions of people. Off the air though, Carson was uncomfortable with people, prickly, and quick to take offense. In addition, his personal life was turbulent. Johnny married four times but was a distant father and serial cheater who hardly hid his indiscretions. Johnny's problems are often attributed (in large part) to his cold withholding mother, and Bushkin's anecdotes seem to support this view.

The book doesn't especially enlighten the reader about Carson but it does provide a little information about his wives, sons, luxurious homes, expensive cars, affairs, agents, managers, visits to Las Vegas, casino performances, production company (which mostly managed to sponsor flop sitcoms and mediocre movies), etc. Bushkin also details a few visits from Johnny's parents, which never went well. In fact, Carson did not attend the funeral of either of his parents when they died. On the lighter side, Bushkin sprinkles some of Carson's jokes through the book, though they really don't seem to fit the narrative.

The book is largely about Bushkin himself, and being Johnny's attorney/friend/companion provided a lot of perks for the lawyer. These included: a hefty salary; a trip to the Wimbledon tennis tournament every year; cruises on yachts; dining in the best restaurants; access to classy tennis clubs; tickets to the Oscars; hob-nobbing with celebrities; visits to Las Vegas; lucrative business opportunities; etc.

Bushkin also describes how - with constant access to beautiful women - he became a cheating husband and neglectful father himself. Looking back Bushkin chides himself about this.....but he certainly seemed to enjoy it at the time. In this vein Bushkin also details how he did his best to manipulate business opportunities so that his and Johnny's future ex-wives would be cut out of the big profits. All this didn't endear the author to me but I guess his honesty should be acknowledged.

Though Bushkin sincerely praises Johnny's immense talent this book is not flattering to the entertainer. Carson is portrayed as pampered, self-centered, entitled, unreasonable, quick-tempered, nasty, vengeful, and so on. Moreover, anyone who got on Carson's bad side was cut off completely; Johnny never spoke to him/her again. In the end, this is what happened to Bushkin.

In 1988 Bushkin attempted to negotiate a business deal that Carson interpreted as trying to cheat him. Johnny immediately fired Bushkin and (except for a misdial) never exchanged another word with him. Even worse, Carson initiated a series of lawsuits that caused tremendous trouble and angst for Bushkin and his law partners. Later, when Carson died of emphysema in 2005, Bushkin asserts that he 'felt nothing.' A sad ending to a once warm relationship.

The book is interesting in a kind of voyeuristic, gossipy way. I was aware that Carson had a reputation as a skirt chaser but I was not aware of the rest of his bad behavior, and it detracts from my opinion of him. Still,

Johnny Carson was a talented performer who made a lot of people laugh and he deserves kudos for that.

If you're interested in knowing how Henry Bushkin became successful and rich this is the book for you. If you want to know more about Johnny Carson's real life, this book won't be especially helpful.

One more thought: I listened to the audiobook read by Dick Hill. Hill has won awards for his audiobook narration but his VERY DRAMATIC style seems more appropriate for a wartime epic than this celebrity exposé. I found it off-putting.

You can follow my reviews at: <http://reviewsbybarbsaffer.blogspot.com/>

Melody says

I don't think Johnny would have liked the book, but I did.

Lori says

This is a book written by Henry Bushkin. He was Johnny Carson's Lawyer for almost 20 years. Mr. Bushkin was more than just a lawyer. He was with Carson constantly, Playing tennis, traveling on vacations and many more chores than just his lawyer. he witnessed first hand what Johnny Carson was like in person. He was the lawyer for two of Carson's divorces and was hired to handle many other business deals for Carson. he gives an up close behind the doors description of Carson. Johnny could be a generous man at times and cruel and vindictive other times. I think Bushkin tried to be fair in this book. I know this is Henry Bushkin's opinion of the man he knew for 20 years before Carson fired him. A pretty interesting read. I was a fan of Johnny Carson and his show. still am.

tina says

My end of year reading left big holes in my reading heart. It's my own fault. what was i expecting from books entitled "merde" and "johnny carson" ? oh well - at least i didn't buy this book. i did however expect to laugh at "johnny carson". (I also expected to laugh at "merde"). But I didn't laugh once. Not once. Although I was very young when this man was in his prime, I watched and liked his show. I expected to like the book. Bushkin does not want that; his goal is to dispel generally favorable public opinion of the man and reveal the flawed person behind the personality. (why do I feel like i'm writing for a tabloid?)

The book takes a reader back to a mad men era of one on one lawyering, opulence (in one of the pictures carson looks like liberace) and hypocrisies. It seems like bushkin turned out to be a good lawyer for carson, until the end where he starts to negotiate the sale of carson's company where he would secure a position without disclosing the fact to his client. that's an ethical conflict. anyway, what's lacking, aside from a narrative, is the recognition of a different era, when men were less than people. at least bushkin could have acknowledged his own screwed up values and how they meshed well with his boss's. Instead, bushkin blame carson for his own poor choices, including his infidelities and lack of devotion to his own family. Last time i checked a penis belongs to just one man. But hey, i'm not expert. Bushkin nonetheless apologizes to his ex-wife and a former friend. But what good is an apology when it's accompanied with a pointed finger toward a grave? Buskhin returns repeatedly to the theme of carson's terrible mother and how she made him the incapable of happiness and satisfaction. something about that is rather rotten. he was a grown ass man by the

age of 60. maybe his midwestern sensible mother was rightly disappointed to have raised a son who couldn't keep his dick in his pants despite his desire to have a family and marry again and again. maybe she didn't approve of how he failed to raise his own family and knew that throwing money at a problem helps but is no substitute for presence. anyway, i'm diverging from the point here. the point is that bushkin makes excuses for his friend while blaming him at the same time. which makes this reader feel bad. I suspect that bushkin meant to paint such an terrible portrait of his purported best friend for 18 years. which is all very sad, not funny.

Roy says

Interesting to read this during the handoff of Leno to Fallon; the ads playing while I read the book showed Carson, Leno and Fallon, suggesting generation-passing of the Carson legacy. The book is a fascinating read on a figure that dominated the 1960s and 1970s. It gives a better view of Carson as a person than anything I've read. It is, by necessity, a biography only of the 18 years that Bushkin was Carson's lawyer and confidant, but those are the critical years of Carson's career. There are several reason I found this fascinating. Carson was a part of my life, at least if media is a part of it. Bushkin (who himself became an element in Carson monologues) is a very natural writer, which made this an easy read, more like a conversation. Bushkin does an interesting admission of his own problems upon being brought into Carson's orbit, and how he couldn't move away but also paid a price for being committed to an "always #1 client". Additionally, Carson seems to be a really interesting perspective on how someone can respond to an upbringing where he felt he was never able to get his mother's approval. I don't think Carson's failure at relationships and need to both perform and to be in control are the only possible impacts from such a psychological imprint, but I think that I've seen many others react in similar fashions. In the end, though, I came to feel that I learned more about Bushkin than Carson, because I'm not sure anyone fully understood Carson -- even Johnny himself.

Matt says

Just know what you're getting here. While the book is titled "Johnny Carson," it more accurately would be called "Bombastic Bushkin: The True-Life Story of What It Was Like To Be Johnny Carson's Lawyer."

In other words, there is little insight about Carson the icon, the entertainer, or the man. Learn instead about what it was like to be a satellite to Carson's burning sun. Did you know that after dumping his college sweetheart, Bushkin dated Three's Company's Joyce DeWitt? It's true!

Weirdly entertaining.

Susan says

A story of an unrequited love.

I think we all have stories that we hear our elders tell about us when we were younger that we have to smile at, even if we're not sure they're true. One story along those lines for me is about how the mother of one of my childhood friend's came into her living room at 11:45 to find me sitting on the floor watching The Tonight Show. She said when she asked me what I was doing up, I replied "Watching Johnny." Apparently, there was no reasoning with me when I was watching Johnny Carson and she left me to my show. From a

young age, I was fascinated with Johnny Carson.

This book did a brilliant job of enhancing that fascination and pulling those memories back to the front of my mind. Henry Bushkin tells multiple stories of his time as Carson's lawyer. Bushkin was more than just his lawyer -- he was his confidant, his business manager, his friend and, in the end, another broken heart left behind by Carson.

The book was well written and drew me into the stories. I felt like I was there with Bushkin and Carson, experiencing contract negotiations, Wimbledon, and so much more. If you are a Carson fan, I highly recommend this book. It made me laugh, smile and, at one point, cry because it hurt my heart.

JoAnne Pulcino says

JOHNNY CARSON

Henry Bushkin

I'm going to remember Johnny Carson as the master of the late night talk shows. Other than that there's not much to say about him personally.

He was a remote, angry, drinker and womanizer with very little warmth. He himself said he was not a good husband or father. He was not a nice man, and I'm surprised his attorney and friend Henry Bushkin wrote this book revealing so much especially considering his great personal losses due to his relationship with Mr. Carson.

Joe says

As a child my very first hero was Johnny. If anyone ever asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would always say, I want to be a comedian like Johnny Carson.

It's not hard to see why he would be such a fascinating figure to a small Nebraskan boy. He too came from a small Nebraskan town and made a living making people laugh. Let's just say, that sounded like the greatest thing in the world to a strange, silly kid who enjoyed making his brother laugh with (usually comically bad) impressions of various authority figures. Johnny Carson was a hometown boy made good. He was living proof that the dream of Hollywood was real and could happen to anyone!

It also helps that he was one of the funniest performers I've ever seen in my life. To this day, no one can work an audience like Johnny. He had the fantastic talent of actually being funnier when the material bombed, a trick later picked up by so many other comedians from Conan O'Brien to Aziz Ansari. I have always considered that skill what makes a performer truly gifted because if you can still make people laugh under those circumstances, then it is you that is funny, not just the material.

I say all this information only as an introduction. Everybody knows, or kind of remembers, or think they know who Johnny Carson was. That's where Henry Bushkin comes in. Bushkin was a young attorney plucked out of obscurity by Carson who went on to have a personal and professional relationship with him for over 20 years.

Bushkin waited for 8 years after Carson died to publish this book. Upon reading it, I can see why. Some people will be mad at him for putting many of these stories in the book. Stories that show Johnny to be cold, harsh, mean, drunk, petulant, and emotionally immature. But the stories also show him to be generous, hilarious, sharp, and at the top of his game.

Going into this book, I held Johnny in the highest regard and still do. It was so interesting to read about his relationship with his mother and how he was never able to get her approval. How he used his humor which seemed so warm and inviting to keep people at arms length. After all, if everybody felt like they knew him, then no one would ever actually try to get to know him. Johnny was hiding right out in the open and the public never realized it. He didn't let anybody inside his head because nobody hated Johnny more than Johnny.

I highly recommend this read to anyone who wants to understand humor and the dark costs and causes that can sometimes lurk behind that veneer.

Even after all this, I still want to be Johnny when I grow up.

Antigone says

Johnny Carson was a loner. This was understood. Perhaps nowhere more so than in the city he chose to make his home.

Los Angeles, as every transplant will be quick to perceive, is a very small town. It is a burg in which those six degrees of separation are pared to three, and the fundamental lesson learned by the up-and-comer is that bridges *will* be burned - most frequently by those in charge, and for the most practical reason of all: to keep the table settings to a minimum. Manhattan likes to lay claim to the culture's shark-infested waters. Los Angeles, if it bothered to respond, would slyly offer up late night's king in his bespoke suit, his Malibu tan and his innocently arched eyebrow. No one held more power in this cutthroat industry - no actor, no director, no studio head - than did Mr. Carson in his ascendancy. Careers were made on the offer of a seat at his side, and broken by its denial. Such influence, while hungered after, doesn't lend itself to creating a wide circle of friends. Which was, intriguingly enough, just fine with him.

There are two points here to consider. The first will be the paucity of first-hand accounts on life with Johnny Carson. Few possessed the privilege, and even fewer hold the urge to write about it. Second, allowances should be made for the type of individual who did. Because it stands to reason that the person who obtained admittance to this rarefied arena, and was permitted to remain within it over time, would own certain qualities or traits that set him apart from other men.

Henry Bushkin was Carson's lawyer, and a good deal more besides. But nothing shocked him quite so much as reading in an interview that Johnny considered him his best friend. Forty-three years after they met, eight years after Carson's death, amidst the writing of this book, Bushkin is still obsessed with his client's declaration. He returns to it over and over again, mystified by Carson's perception; unwilling to find it troublesome or tragic or by any means informative. It's simply strange to him - due largely, of course, to Bushkin's own social dysfunction. A dysfunction illustrated (rather unwittingly) in the recollection of an early meeting:

"The more Johnny talked, the weirder this moment seemed. People I'd known all my life, my best friends, none of them would ever unburden themselves to me. But here's a man I'd known for two days baring his soul, and I had nothing to say? Maybe that's why I was here."

This memoir can best be appreciated, and perhaps only be appreciated, through the recognition of its being written by an unreliable narrator. Pull back far enough and you'll find the fascinations abound.

Bushkin seems to me a man, and there are many of them, whose identity grafted on to the alpha force of the most powerful figure in his vicinity. Carson caught him at twenty-seven in New York, fresh to entertainment law and dazzled by the plucking. He doesn't give a lot of thought to the "Why me?" element of the equation, but instead rolls with the 1970s celebrity flow. Legal and financial maneuvers are made, temperaments are tolerated, questionable moral choices overlooked; Bushkin is well on the way to becoming indispensable. And with this comes the magic carpet ride of fame, wealth and excess. He embraces the move to Hollywood, the trips to Vegas and London; tennis with Johnny, parties with Johnny, negotiations on Johnny's behalf. There are Friar's Roasts and Academy Awards and presidential inaugurations - and there are late nights, and last minutes, and unreasonable demands; and there are women, because there are always women, and this is always part of the code. (The Rat Pack misogyny gets a little irksome.) And somewhere in all of this he loses a wife and a life of his own, but he'll be damned if he gives a flip. He's "Bombastic Bushkin" after all, so knighted by the king on network television; part of the monologue patter now, right there in the swing.

The relationship begins to sour when the men enter into business together - a development Bushkin refuses, even today, to view with an eye toward conflict of interest. He tries to own the white hat as the union crumbles, but that's awfully hard to do when one's sharing the headboard with the black. Bitterness and its soulmate, a heated self-defense, bleed forth in the recounting of the crash and burn. You might expect some moment of clarity or hard-won insight, but Bushkin's not in that place yet and may never be. The closest he comes is a bizarre attempt to lay it all on Carson's mother, Ruth, and the legacy of her heartlessness toward this singularly-favored son. He can't blame Johnny, I suspect, because in some decidedly twisted way it would be too much like blaming himself.

That he titled the book *Johnny Carson*, in the absence of all but the most rudimentary biographical sketch, delivers proof enough for me of his difficulty in distinguishing the difference.

Una Tiers says

While the book and information about Carson was mildly interesting, the repetitive back patting of this book forced me to scan more than read. I found one awesome quote by Carson: If things were fair, Elvis would be alive and all the impersonators would be dead.

Nancy Loe says

Carson indisputably was suave and commanding on the air and sad and isolated behind the scenes. His massive success of course came with a price. NBC's desire to continue making millions of dollars by keep Carson happy had a predictably corrosive effect on the entertainer, making him more difficult and demanding than can be imagined. Newly inaugurated president Ronald Reagan had to call him personally to apologize for the inferior seat Carson's third wife had at the pre-inaugural festivities. Ed McMahon's wife supposedly had a better seat than Mrs. Carson's and I find it chilling that on a day when the hostages were being released, Reagan was absorbed with sucking up to Carson and massaging his massive ego.

However reprehensible Carson was, his lawyer and the author of this book is vastly more despicable.

Bushkin blames others and always lets himself off the hook for his own bad behavior in his personal and professional life. While this might be a moderately juicy read, the book itself is a questionable work, self-serving in the extreme and violating attorney-client privilege. Conveniently published when the subject was dead and the author in need of (yet another) quick buck, I'm sorry to say I read it, but am glad at least I only borrowed it from the library.

Jkhickel says

Proving exactly what kind of a clever lawyer he is, Henry Bushkin waited until Johnny Carson was dead and cold in his grave before publishing this book, giving Bushkin some measure of protection against any possible charges of libel or violating Carson's attorney-client confidentiality. Very professional, Bushkin.

Here is Bombastic Bushkin's book, in a nutshell: When he first met Bushkin, Johnny Carson led a cold, lonely, suspicious life, and he was surrounded by incompetence and corruption. Bushkin managed to almost single-handedly save Carson, by immediately getting rid of the other idiots in Carson's entourage, and straightening out Carson's financial and legal activities. But years later, when Carson was getting old and cranky, he came to mistrust the innocent, hardworking, and results-producing Bushkin, and unwisely got rid of him. And as a result, Carson died alone and lonely, without the wisdom and comfort of Bushkin to get him through his final years.

I never knew Carson, beyond the talented and engaging performer I used to watch on television, but this book seemed ridiculous on its face. (That's "prima facie" if Bushkin's reading this.) I'm sure that, as one of the youngest members of Carson's team, he was counting on the other members of the Carson entourage to be too old, or too dead, to respond to some of his more ludicrous stories. But Doc Severinson, who was Carson's legendary band leader and at 86 is still very active, had this to say about Bushkin's book:

"I know Henry Bushkin and I knew Johnny Carson. And the idea that anybody would ask any single person to write a book about Johnny Carson and have it be Bushkin is beyond disgusting."

BOTTOM LINE: Bushkin was cuckolded by Carson, and this book is his cowardly revenge. Please read it in that light. And please take it out from a library, or borrow it from a friend. Don't contribute to the royalties of a grave robber.
