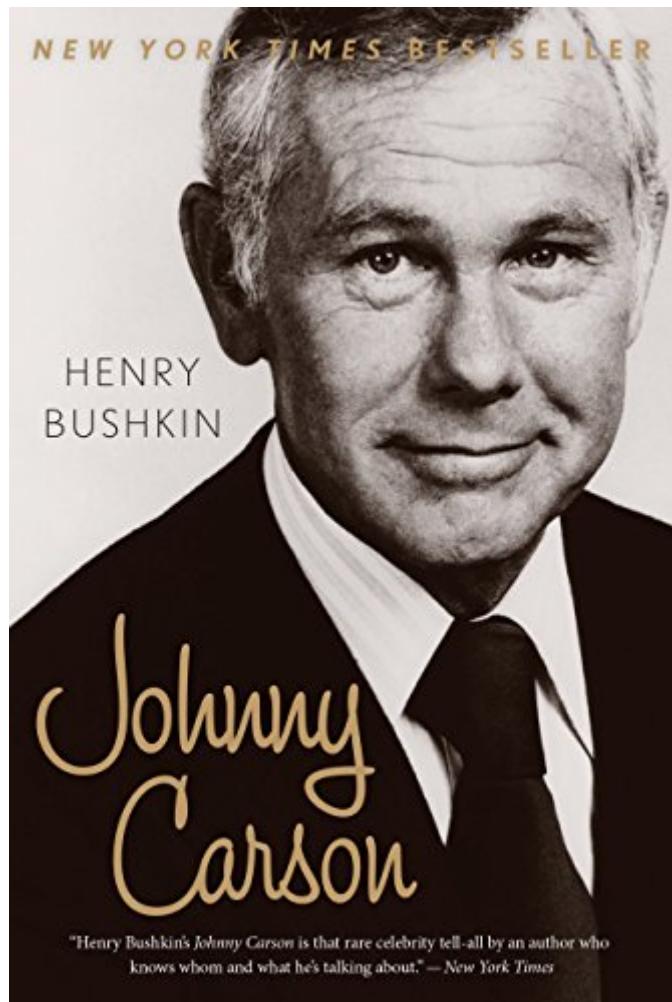


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# Johnny Carson



## Synopsis

“A close look at how show business power corrupts . . . The dishiest read of the year.” Janet Maslin, *Ten Favorite Books of the Year*, *New York Times* “Here’s Johnny!” Probably everyone in America knows the phrase, whether they watched every episode of *The Tonight Show* or none because they had to go to bed early on school nights. From 1962 to 1992, Johnny Carson and his *Tonight Show* dominated the American consciousness. Henry Bushkin was Carson’s best friend and lawyer during that period, and his book 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 couldn’t visit his son in the hospital and wouldn’t attend his mother’s funeral; and much more. Johnny Carson 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. “A fascinating book about a complex man.” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette “Like *The Tonight Show*, the book has many a merry moment . . . [Johnny Carson] was also one of a kind, and is missed. This book brings a bit of him back.” St. Louis Post-Dispatch *People* magazine Top Ten Book of the Year

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Perhaps the saddest Hollywood bio in recent memory, Henry Bushkin's "Johnny Carson" paints a vivid picture of a kind of genius savant. Johnny was a brilliant live broadcaster. He was not much good at anything else. Bushkin was Carson's personal attorney and business advisor in the 1970s and 80s and saw every private wart there was to see. With a thoroughness that makes you wonder whatever happened to attorney-client privilege, Bushkin spills everything, and for the reader the cringes outnumber the laughs. We have heard for years that Carson was aloof, demanding, and harsh -- but never read proof like this. As his fame and power grew so did his ego, and his suspicion of everyone around him, from NBC, to friends and family, and eventually Bushkin himself. Carson nursed a terrifying, irrational hair-trigger temper and numberless grudges. It is difficult to square our memories of the genial, gracious late-night star who chatted up tourists playing "Stump the Band" with Bushkin's portrait of the compulsive, drunken womanizer who nearly got himself rubbed out for trying to take a Mob figure's girl to bed. Or the lunatic egomaniac who required a personal apology from President Reagan after his equally out-of-balance wife Joanna dissolved into hysterics over the location of her seat at Reagan's inaugural celebration. "He's insane," Bushkin says he muttered to a companion after a Carson outburst ruined a vacation on a luxury yacht in the Mediterranean, and as you read Bushkin's account you will come to think so too. He forces you to reappraise Johnny even if you revered his work on TV. There's a searing view of Carson suffering at the hands of his cruel, critical Midwestern mother -- her refusal to express love or approval explains a lot of his pain and relationship failures. But Carson made things worse with his addictions to alcohol, tobacco, and especially beautiful women. He was married four times but Bushkin shows he had no interest in fidelity; he seems to have acquired wives the way most people buy cars or refrigerators -- as necessary appliances. Bushkin names plenty of Other Women, from Oscar winners to Vegas showgirls. For all the juicy star gossip here there is quite a lot missing. Not a word about Carson's comedic technique, the mannerisms he stole from Jack Benny and Fred Allen, or the day-to-day workings of the little universe he controlled, "The Tonight Show." Nothing about the strangest video document of Carson, the 1982 NBC special "Johnny Goes Home," which followed him back to Nebraska and laid the man bare -- weird and counterintuitive for so private a man. (He dedicated it, no doubt futilely, to his mother and father.) Numbing detail about certain financial deals gone wrong,

but only a few breezy sentences about the one everyone wants to hear about -- Johnny's investment in the ill-fated DeLorean car company. Carson not only couldn't pick winning investments, he had no gut for what worked in the entertainment world outside "The Tonight Show" bubble, and no interest in learning. His Carson Productions produced tons of TV duds and Carson hated its one unqualified hit, the movie "The Big Chill." Johnny eventually shut down his production company, like a lot of his ventures, because he couldn't be bothered and hated doing business. Despite his professed disinterest in money, Bushkin's management skills meant he left an estate of \$450 million at death. But by Carson's passing in 2005 Bushkin was, of course, long gone from the king's court. Carson eventually dismissed almost everybody in anger; Bushkin should have seen it coming. In their 18 years together Bushkin rose from meek sycophant to Hollywood power in his own right, and Carson liked sycophants. He mimicked too many of Carson's self-destructive tendencies, divorcing his wife to gad about the south of France with Johnny with stars like Joyce DeWitt or Mary Hart on his arm, billing everything back to NBC. (He seems remorseful now, though not about the millions Johnny put in his pocket.) Fascinating and highly readable, "Johnny Carson" is not just a show business memoir but a Shakespearean tragedy: a Boswellian view of a tragic hero of our culture, a genius beloved by millions who made himself unlovable. It will make you reconsider not only Carson but many a star you think you know, especially those who "wear well," as the saying goes, in TV. My goodness, the price that is paid for keeping the show going -- by them and those around them.

I tend to shy away from biographies of celebrities written by former staff members...I can't help but wonder how self-serving the narratives are. This book appeared to be up front and honest but of course no one can know for sure. I like millions of others in the seventies went to work tired on more than one occasion simply because I stayed up to watch "The Tonight Show." Johnny never failed to deliver whether it was with the guest lineup or "Carnack" or any of the other characters he created. I've been tempted to buy CDs of his old shows but am afraid they may have lost something over the years and that I'd end up disappointed. Bushkin's book seems to be fair and because he doesn't take cheap shots at Johnny I'd recommend it to anyone who still misses the class act that was Johnny Carson. Sorry, Letterman and Leno and the cast of thousands that followed Johnny just don't have what he did. Wonderful trip down memory lane.

I didn't expect to like this book as much as I did, given some of the reviews that made it sound like the author made the narrative more about himself, but I really enjoyed it, found it riveting. I felt the

deals and maneuvering Mr Bushkin did for his client, and in general the 'how the sausage is made' aspect of a career of star of Johnny's magnitude, was fascinating. It is also telling about mid 20th century mores and culture. If you're a Mad Men fan, you may really appreciate this book. No, Johnny Carson doesn't come across as completely sympathetic, but the author did paint a portrait of a man of great complexity. His demons mostly seemed to be ascribed to his withholding mother, but to me that didn't explain his dark side completely.. I also learned things about Johnny Carson I never knew, and at the end of the book, I still wanted to understand more. I would love to someday read a well written book about him, by a woman who was close to him, who could maybe elucidate more of what made him tick, on an intimate level. A very worthwhile read of a major cultural figure.

This book reads like a cross between an extended People magazine profile and the tawdry luridness of a TMZ exposé. I quite enjoyed it.

Henry Bushkin was the best thing that ever happened to Johnny Carson - and this biography is a monumental gift to all of us who 'loved' Johnny - and wondered from a great distance who the very private Carson really was. A page-turner extraordinaire, Henry tells ALL sides of the story. I REALLY got it, having worked for some crazy years for a high-profile entertainment industry executive whose similarities were truly striking. Query: does money and fame make them this way, or does the business attract these tortured individuals? I STRONGLY RECOMMEND this book, even more for its even-handedness and the feeling that I was getting the whole story than for the obviously fascinating story of Johnny. It was not just a love fest or hate rant, but rather a rare portrait of a complicated, and ultimately extremely lonely, soul. It is a tribute to Henry Bushkin that his beautifully written story made me love AND hate Johnny in equal measure. The story of Joan Rivers literally made me cry for its naked look at the hearts, egos and troubled communication among people whom we ALL assume 'have it made' -- and feelings that he expresses on the last couple pages of the book hit me even harder than THAT. Finally, Henry, although you wrote a story primarily about Johnny, it spoke volumes about you. My conclusion: Henry Bushkin, you are a good and decent (oh, and immensely talented) man. Thanks for a GREAT book!

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