



LAMBORGHINI IN THE HAMPTONS—AN EXHILARATING SYNERGY.

Discover the Experience that will Shift the Driving Culture in the Hamptons— Forever.

JOIN THE EXPERIENCE

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. CMO TODAY. Get the facts on shifting marketing trends. Sponsored by Deloitte. SIGN UP

Book Review: 'Cosby' by Mark Whitaker

The comic paid the price and reaped the benefits of his determination to be an American—rather than an African-American—star

By Edward Kosner

Sept. 12, 2014 5:31 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT

29

Variety once called Bill Cosby "Television's Jackie Robinson," but he's really the Michael Jordan of show business—a matchless performer who combines superlative talent, brains and stamina with a relentless perfectionism.

The comic paid the price and reaped the benefits of his determination to be an American—rather than an African-American—star

He started in two of the most popular TV programs of all time—"I Spy" in the 1960s and "The Cosby Show" two decades later—earned top dollar on stage in Las Vegas, sold millions of comedy LPs, pioneered two acclaimed educational television shows for children, made an additional fortune as a pitchman (most memorably for Jell-O), assembled the finest collection of African-American art in the world and, at 39, earned a doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts. Not bad for the son of a maid and a mostly absent father, especially since young Cosby broke his mother's heart twice by dropping out of high school to join the Navy and, later, quitting college to become a comedian.

Viewed on YouTube today, the celebrated old Cosby monologues, like "Noah," in which the ark-builder's banter with God is punctuated by the comic's virtuoso sound effects, seem quaint. Old episodes of "The Cosby Show" have an untarnished innocence: Dr. Cliff and Clair Huxtable and their five adorable children are endearing, and, three decades later, the show remains irresistibly funny.

For all his enduring success, Mr. Cosby has become a problematic figure. As he has aged, he has affronted some blacks and whites with his lectures to African-American parents about taking responsibility for their children and his admonitions to young gangbangers to straighten up. And his reputation as a moralist has been clouded by accusations by several young women that he drugged them and took advantage of them sexually.

So, a complicated man, who has based many of his comedy routines and elements of his TV series on wholesome episodes from his own life story. Now, in "Cosby: His Life and Times," this remarkable American life is spun into a full-scale biography.

His Boswell is Mark Whitaker, the last old-school editor of Newsweek before its collapse, a news executive at NBC and CNN, and the author of a well-regarded memoir of his mixed-race heritage. His book has all the virtues of a classic news-magazine cover story—it's fluid, admiring, packed with detail and anecdotes. But, like an old Newsweek or Time piece, it's polished to such a sheen that Mr. Cosby's complexities often recede beneath the gloss.

And the sexual-abuse allegations go unmentioned. Otherwise, Mr. Cosby has essentially practiced what he's preached implicitly and explicitly as an entertainer for more than 50 years: hard work, loyalty to colleagues, intellectual rigor and philanthropy. No star of our times has so reliably sustained his level of effort, squeaky-clean quality of material and undimmed popularity.

"From his early days as a stand-up comedian and recording artist," Mr. Whitaker writes, "he brought the gifts that had first made him a star: the jazz-influenced style of improvisational storytelling; the fair for comic voices and sound effects; the remarkably rubbery and expressive face."

When older, "he commanded those gifts in a way that was at once more effortless and more virtuosic, like the Frank Sinatra of the Capitol Records years compared with his crooner years with Columbia."

Mr. Whitaker traces the Cosby roots to Virginia slaves in the early years of the 19th century. As part of the great black migration north, grandfather Samuel Cosby moved his family to Philadelphia in 1913, where he and other rural Southern refugees were sheltered by the established black bourgeoisie of doctors, dentists, ministers and undertakers.

As a child, "Shorty" Cosby's prospects were as unpromising as any of the other urchins in his poor Germantown neighborhood in the years just after World War II. Sassy and athletic, he wasn't much of student. Still, a test administered when the boy was in fifth grade showed that he had the highest IQ of anyone in his elementary school.

He helped his mother by shining shoes, delivering newspapers and bagging groceries for extra cash, but he was held back twice in 10th grade and eventually dropped out, following his father into the Navy, where he flourished as a medical corpsman. A female naval officer he worked for helped him get a scholarship to Temple University—the first of a long list of white "abolitionists," as Mr. Cosby thought of them, who advanced his career over the decades.

Still a cut-up, he lost patience with the academic life and headed for New York, where he got his start at the Gaslight coffee house in Greenwich Village. He told jokes between the folk sets by, among others, Tom Paxton and Bob Dylan and often slept in a backstage storage room. As the cool young comic sharpened his routines, he got bookings in bigger clubs and began performing on Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show."

After one spot on the Carson show in 1963, Carl Reiner, the Sid Caesar alumnus who turned Mel Brooks into the "2000 Year Old Man," introduced him to an associate who was developing a TV sitcom spoofing the James Bond craze.

The most interesting chapters in "Cosby" describe the evolution of "I Spy" and "The Cosby Show," which turned an offbeat black stand-up comic into an American entertainment icon. Revisited, the characterizations and other elements of these shows look seamless and inevitable, but, as Mr. Whitaker writes, they resulted from endless creative and political choices, many of them made by Mr. Cosby himself.

His "abolitionists" on "I Spy" were the veteran TV producer Sheldon Leonard and the actor Robert Culp, who had already been signed to play the white secret agent in the black-white duo that was the show's radical innovation.

From the first, Mr. Whitaker recounts, Mr. Cosby was determined that his character wouldn't play Tonto to Culp's Lone Ranger—and certainly wouldn't be a dopey caricature like those played by the black movie actor Stepin Fetchit:

"Will he carry a gun?" he asked.

"Naturally!" Leonard said.

"And when he's attacked, he'll be able to fire back?" Cosby said.

"He shall!" Leonard said.

"So he's not going to run and hide in the bushes?" Cosby said.

"Never!" Leonard said. "He will be a full-fledged secret agent on assignment for the United States government, with a license to kill!"

Culp did his part by chipping in four scripts that further equalized the relationship between the black and white agents, making sure, for example, that the Cosby character got to romance women in several episodes—another taboo-breaker.

With no acting experience, the comedian struggled filming the first shows. The NBC suits wanted him fired, but his co-star and the producer stood up for him, and Mr. Cosby found his rhythm, especially when he and Culp began improvising dialogue and stage schtick. "I Spy" became a huge hit, Mr. Cosby won the outstanding actor Emmy for the first two seasons and now commanded \$100,000 for a week's stand-up gig in Vegas—equivalent to \$750,000 today. He was a star.

But his next ventures flopped. He lost all but \$50,000 of the millions he had invested in an ambitious production company. His highly touted next NBC sit-com, in which he played a gym teacher, never got traction. Nor did a show he did for ABC called "Cos" or a Broadway collaboration with Sammy Davis Jr. A movie called "Man and Boy" bombed.

It wasn't until 1984, when soapy dramas like "Dallas" and "Dynasty" ruled TV and sit-coms were thought obsolete, that Mr. Cosby made his triumphant return to prime time and scored his greatest success. This time he wanted to play a limousine driver whose wife would be a Latina carpenter or a plumber. The producers held out for a doctor married to a lawyer living with their five children in a Brooklyn brownstone. Thus were born the Huxtables and their brood. The show captured the TV audience, black and white, reigned for years at the top of the ratings, made Mr. Cosby a huge new fortune in syndication fees, and is in perpetual re-run in American pop-culture heaven.

Mr. Cosby's other spectacularly lucrative success was as a pitchman for Jell-O in a long series of TV spots that showcased his gift for charming tomfoolery with children. He parlayed the Jell-O commercials into others for a blue-chip roster of companies including Ford, Kodak and Coke. He had the golden touch—unmatched until Michael Jordan started hustling Nikes and Hanes underwear.

Much of the Cosby appeal was grounded in his persona as a family man. He met Camille Hanks, the brainy, beautiful daughter of a middle-class Washington family, in the early 1960s and married her as soon as she would have him. They've been together ever since, raising five children. One of them, a son named Ennis, was murdered in a botched robbery in Los Angeles in 1997. When he was 27, Camille has been showered with praise and gifts by her uxorious husband, often out of guilt over his own philandering.

Mr. Whitaker is circumspect to a fault in discussing this phase of the Cosby story. The first fleeting reference to his "roving eye" doesn't turn up until page 237. In the next chapter, the reader learns of his Las Vegas fling with a 20-year-old woman named Shawn Berkes, who claimed afterward that he had fathered her daughter, Autumn. (Decades later, Autumn went to prison for blackmailing Mr. Cosby, who persuasively denied that she was his child although he had helped support her.) There's one other reference in the book to an unnamed "longtime girlfriend."

And not a word about the young women with near-identical stories of being drugged and assaulted by the comedian, despite the fact that in 2006 Mr. Cosby quietly settled a lawsuit brought by one of them. No criminal charges were ever brought.

There's a Cosby temper, too, but it's not much in evidence here. He seemed to enjoy tormenting some of the writers of his early shows, and he once sucker-punched rival comedian Tommy Smothers for patronizing him at the Playboy Mansion while his short-lived variety show "Cos" was floundering.

From the start Mr. Cosby never played the race card—in fact, he kept it so far up his sleeve that it was invisible. He did perform at luners for civil-rights causes and walk in the cortège after the assassination of Martin Luther King. But he made few public pronouncements, and his TV shows and movies strenuously avoided racial issues. NBC executives anticipated white protests when "I Spy" went on the network, but there was hardly any blowback.

Criticism, instead, came later from some blacks who felt the Huxtable ménage was a fairy-tale about black family life that diverted attention from the obdurate problems of African-Americans. Mr. Cosby further inflamed them when he began to lecture black mothers, and especially fathers. "I'm talking about these people who cry when their son is standing there in an orange [prison] suit," he exclaimed at a celebration of the 50th anniversary of school desegregation. "How come you don't know he had a pistol? And where is his father and why don't you know where he is?"

Without fanfare, Mr. Cosby had worked for years to increase the number of blacks recruited behind the scenes in TV and the movies. And he was a top benefactor of historically black colleges, including a \$20 million donation to Spelman College. None of it mollified his black critics.

Over a five-decade career, Bill Cosby paid the price and reaped the benefits of his determination to be an American—rather than an African-American—comic star. For all his "abolitionists," he really has no one to thank—or blame—but himself.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

SHOW CONVERSATION (29)

SPONSORED OFFERS

- WALMART: Walmart coupon: \$10 off all departments
KOHL'S: 20% off your entire order with Kohl's coupon
EXPEDIA: Expedia promo: 50% off fully-refundable hotel bookings
EBAY: Up to 15% off branded sneakers & more with eBay coupon
HOME DEPOT: 10% off furniture using Home Depot coupon code
TARGET: \$15 gift card with Spectra breast pump - Target offer

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

- What Happens to All of the Unsold Clothes?
Young Wuhan Evacuee Finds No Refuge From Coronavirus in U.S.
Weekly Unemployment Claims Drop Below One Million for First Time Since March
Admit It, You Do Laundry During Work Video Calls
WSJ News Exclusive | Breset by Coronavirus, Health Authorities Brace for Flu Season
Stir-Crazy Travelers Are Ordering Airline Food to Relieve the Flying Experience
Coronavirus Grips Midwest Rural Areas That Had Been Spared
A Deadly Coronavirus Was Inevitable. Why Was No One Ready?
Joe Biden-Kamala Harris Ticket Makes Debut After Historic VP Pick
WSJ News Exclusive | China's Xi Speeds Up Inward Economic Shift