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Book Review: 'Johnny Carson' by Henry Bushkin

A tell-plenty memoir by Johnny Carson's lawyer depicts the star as a nasty, addictive womanizer.

By *Edward Kosner*
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There sits Carnac the Magnificent in his black cape, his head swathed in a giant bejeweled turban topped with a marabou feather. He takes the envelope from Ed McMahon, touches it to his forehead and intones: "A brilliant but miserable human being."

He tears off the end of the envelope, blows into it, removes the index card within and reads the question to the audience: "What is Johnny Carson really like?"

Carson never delivered that punch line during his 30-year reign as host of "The Tonight Show" and ringmaster of America's celebrity circus, and one of the very top stars in show business. But his longtime lawyer and self-appointed consigliere, Henry Bushkin, documents the case for that verdict in his tell-plenty memoir, "Johnny Carson."

JOHNNY CARSON

By *Henry Bushkin*
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 294 pages, \$28



Johnny Carson in the 1970s, after "The Tonight Show" moved to California.
NBC/Getty Images

Secure in the showbiz pantheon, Carson and his reputation will survive having Mr. Bushkin as his Boswell. Of the comics who have headlined "The Tonight Show"—Steve Allen, Jack Parr, Carson, Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien and Mr. Leno again (a sort of late-night Grover Cleveland)—Carson is the paragon. He manned the desk longest, had the funniest monologues and routines, rang up the highest ratings, and made the most money for NBC and himself. His five stints as MC of the Academy Awards outshone Billy Crystal, Steve Martin and all the rest, even the sainted Bob Hope. He helped propel the careers of some of the stellar comedians of his era, among them Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby and George Carlin. A guest perch on Carson's "Tonight" couch was a perk beyond price.

In Mr. Bushkin's telling, Carson's story is a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde tale, heavy on the Hyde. They met in 1970, when young Mr. Bushkin, just a few years out of law school at Vanderbilt, was summoned to Carson's grand office at 30 Rockefeller Plaza through a mutual friend. Mr. Bushkin was a very junior member of a Manhattan entertainment-law firm, but the great man unaccountably took a shine to him.

Installed as Carson's lawyer, Mr. Bushkin promptly employed the surefire technique favored by wily hairdressers, dentists and IT specialists. He showed Carson how badly he had been served by the big-name agents, business managers, tax accountants and others who had attached themselves to the star. More than that, the lawyer became Carson's one-man entourage: tennis partner, predawn drinking buddy, hand-holder, fixer of noisome problems, and "cleaner" of embarrassing and potentially expensive messes left by his one and only client.

Carson's on-screen persona—the puckish grin, the slyly raised eyebrow, the occasional smirk—hardly reflected the full gamut of his off-screen personality: "He could be the nastiest son-of-a-bitch on earth," writes Mr. Bushkin. "One moment gracious, funny, and generous and curt, aloof, and hard-hearted in the next."

Mr. Bushkin's audition assignment had been to accompany Carson and some cronies as they bribed their way into an empty East Side apartment surreptitiously rented as a love nest by the second of Carson's four wives, Joanne Copeland. Inside the flat, the raiding party found pictures of Joanne with the quondam football great Frank Gifford and men's and women's clothing mingling in the closet. His suspicions confirmed, Carson, who had a .38 holstered on his hip, began to sob. Later he complained to Mr. Bushkin: "That guy plays three positions on the field. I could never get Joanne to go for more than two." (The ex-Mrs. Carson and Mr. Gifford, through wife Kathie Lee, have denied that they were lovers.)

This was the first of two divorce actions and uncountable marital crises that the loyal lawyer massaged for Carson, an addictive womanizer whose temper often ignited when he was drunk, which seems to be as often as not. "A stiff p-ck has no conscience," Carson observed to Mr. Bushkin, in a delicious but unconscious double-entendre. On one occasion, Carson picked up an attractive brunette at Jilly's, the West 50s joint owned by Frank Sinatra's buddy Jilly Rizzo. The woman turned out to be the "goomar" of a mobster, who, as the story goes, had a couple of his heavies head Johnny down a flight of stairs.

Another time, Carson on TV kept needing a nondescript actor named Keefe Brasselle until one of Brasselle's buds accosted Johnny at a Hollywood boîte called Sneaky Pete's and beat him up. Yet another time, a drunken Carson had to be restrained from punching out Tom Snyder, whose successful 1 a.m. talk show followed "Tonight," over some unknown grievance.

Carson blamed his successive failures as a husband and father—he had three estranged sons from a first marriage to Jody Wolcott, a college sweetheart—on his mother, a cold, wily woman who raised him in frozen Nebraska. Now a huge star resettled in Los Angeles, he invited his parents to a glittery Hollywood party and later asked her how she'd liked it. "I guess parties are the same all over the country," she replied. Later he sent his parents on a round-the-world cruise and equipped them with a credit card to buy anything they liked along the way. "I'm glad to be home," was all mom had to say on her return. "My marriages failed because she F-cked me up," he complained. "The wicked witch is dead," he announced to the lawyer when his mother died. He skipped the funeral.

Deadpanning the obituary for his doomed second marriage, Carson said: "Joanne has broken my heart . . . to the extent that I even have one." He promptly settled on No. 3, a brainy ex-model named Joanna Holland ("Johnny didn't want to have to change the monogram on the towels after every marriage," cracked Bob Newhart.) His ever-prudent mogul urged him to make a prenuptial agreement with her, drafted it and cleared it with the willing prospective bride. Carson tore it up on the eve of the wedding.

He had married up with Joanna—she redecorated his huge new home, introduced him to fine wine, art collecting and other tastes not bred in Nebraska. Every time Carson strayed, she scored a new reward: jewelry, a Picasso, even a white Rolls-Royce Corniche. Without that prenup, the inevitable end of the 13-year marriage cost Carson \$35 million.

He could afford it. Mr. Bushkin artfully sketches in the dimensions of Carson's genius for high-wire, live-on-tape TV. The comic worked obsessively, spending weekends and vacations doing two-a-night standup shows in Las Vegas and on the road. These lucrative gigs sharpened his material and his timing, but he had a faultless gauge for judging the quality of his TV performances and never coasted.

Mr. Bushkin's book is especially good in capturing Carson backstage with Bob Hope and other comedy legends telling jokes, none fit for the pages of this newspaper. And then there are the arcane protocols of show business at the top. Producing Ronald Reagan's first Presidential Inaugural Gala in 1980, Frank Sinatra wanted Carson to be the MC. Sinatra called Carson and, Don Corleone-like, cast the request as a personal favor to the Chairman of the Board. Carson dutifully kissed the ring.

By his own account, the business deals Mr. Bushkin kept making for Carson were a bonanza. In a hush-hush private civil trial before a moonlighting judge, Carson liberated himself from his NBC contract, freeing him to dicker with other networks. ABC offered Carson a late-night show competing directly with "Tonight." Advice was sought from Lew Wasserman, the head of MCA and a true Hollywood godfather renowned for his sagacity. "It is not prudent," quoth the oracle, "to ask people to change their nightly viewing habits." So Carson stayed with NBC, and Mr. Bushkin cut him a deal that gave him ownership of "The Tonight Show" and all its back programs, set up his own production company to sell other shows to the network, and paid him \$71 million a year in today's dollars to put on 111 one-hour programs—a rate of \$640,000 an hour.

None of this made Carson especially happy. He loved tennis, but his courtside manners—he cheated flagrantly on line calls—made him a pariah on the Har-Tru. He married for a fourth time but kept drinking and philandering. Mr. Bushkin's marriage was a casualty of his obsessive attention to Carson and their sexcapades, especially in Las Vegas, where the hotel owners lavished pleasures on their headliner with leftovers for his sidekick. More than once, Carson exercised his droit du seigneur with his vassal's latest playmate.

Predictably, it all ended in tears—and litigation. Carson's fourth and last wife, Alexis Maas, developed an understandable dislike for wingman Bushkin and, he writes, undermined him with his client. The lawyer sealed his own fate by discussing the sale of Carson Productions with some interested buyers without giving a heads-up to the man whose name was on the building. After nearly two decades together, Carson fired him in a three-minute conversation and later sued him for malpractice.

Carson retired at 67 from "The Tonight Show" in 1992. All that smoking and boozing left him with emphysema and a heart condition, and he died at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles on Jan. 23, 2005. He was alone and worth \$450 million.

In his valedictory paragraph, Mr. Bushkin writes: "I . . . like to think he would be happy with this book."

Think again, Henry.

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

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