



Monologue

Jon Macks

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A hilarious and revealing look at how American late-night TV has shaped our understanding of popular culture, politics, entertainment, and world events, by former top writer for *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

Monologue Details

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From Reader Review Monologue for online ebook

Lisa says

Wonderfully insightful and funny. I received this book via the Goodreads First Reads program.

Jonathan Z. says

An occasionally amusing memoir written by a seemingly self-righteous liberal. Not what I was hoping for. A short read that I don't recommend.

(a)lyss(a) says

"Jay always felt that his jokes reflected what was already out there (the thermometer), but to me, regardless of whether it was Jay or anyone else with a late night microphone, their jokes do influence the way we feel about events. They are a thermostat."

This book is around 3.5 stars for me.

It got better as I stuck with it. While the book starts out like an essay on what makes a monologue a monologue, this book is also part autobiography, part history of late night, part exploration of humor, and part influence of politics and news on TV. The book also touches briefly on the fact that Chelsea Handler is one of the only women in late night and how there should be more women hosting.

There's some interesting anecdotes and funny quips by the author as he talks about his history on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno, but I think where this book really shines is in talking about the shift of using late night TV as news and how an entire voting demographic can be reached through these shows. The influence of the shows, such as the Colbert Bump, is a real and fascinating phenomena.

It's not an especially linear book of story telling but it has some good points.

Steve says

Comedy writer Jon Macks' 226-page monologue should serve as a good reminder whenever we hear a late night TV comic do his or her shtick. To paraphrase an American president, "He or she didn't build that." The comedian probably didn't write those jokes. He or she had help. Lots of help. That's where people like Macks come in. The people behind the curtain. The faceless names who actually write those funny and sometimes not-so-funny one liners that end up on cue cards and teleprompters.

Macks claims here that "the main reason" America watches late-night TV "is to watch the monologue and

comedy bits.” Assuming that’s true, Macks’ purpose here is to present “the larger meaning of how late-night comedy monologues and sketches can influence and impact us.”

To put it all into perspective, Macks begins with a history of late-night TV, from Steve Allen in 1954 to Jimmy Fallon in 2015. As part of that retrospective, Macks analyzes the gifts of each host, including Johnny Carson, “the gold standard” by which all other TV talk show hosts are measured. Macks also catalogs the talents of Jay Leno, Dave Letterman, Conan O’Brien, Jimmy Fallon, Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Kimmel, even Arsenio Hall.

Chapter two is a highlight for this reviewer. Here Macks explains the “five elements that go into making a great late-night host.” He immediately follows that up in the next chapter with a list of “topics Americans like to laugh at.” Bottom line, Jay Leno perhaps put it best. We find the funny in all those topics when we ask ourselves, “What’s stupid about this?”

In chapter four, Jon Macks gets very personal. He reveals here the process he himself uses when writing comedy.

From this point on, Macks seems to abandon his original premise and instead, takes us on a tour of backstage. For the rest of this short volume, Macks dissects the comedy writing industry. We read about the peak value and career value of persons who are targets of the monologue writer. We learn about when a joke goes too far. The perfect joke storm. The joke runs. The hidden-truth joke. The three attributes of a comedy writer.

For this reviewer, the scariest thing Macks shares is found on page 93. Macks claims, “The late-night monologues gave us our take on the news and now we consider them a source where we actually get the news. Which means that each joke and each late-night show shapes the way we look at events, at celebrities, and, perhaps even more important, at our political leaders.” What should be equally frightening to those who still value newspapers and the major news networks as sources, is what’s found a few pages later. Macks writes, “Jokes and shows are creating opinions about people and events, not just reflecting what is out there already. The jokes are conveying information to the public whether it is accurate or not. The lines and the sketches are telling people, ‘This is who this person is, this is what happened, this is what we should collectively think.’ “

Macks then turns political. While writing comedy twenty-two years for Jay Leno, Macks learned the theory held by Johnny Carson’s successor: “The emperor, regardless of (political) party, (always) has no clothes. Leno understood the late-night rule of making fun of the president no matter the party.” As Macks points out, “We live with the stupidity of our leaders; laughing at them is our chance to punish them. The jokes may also play another role; they may actually in a strange way help a politician in trouble.”

So, “why do politicians appear on the same late-night shows that use them for comic fodder?” Macks covers that in Chapter Six. Hint: it has a lot to do with Macks’ premise that “for the most part, (late-night show viewers) are likely undecided (politically) and/or open-minded. They are watching for entertainment, not to be consciously informed.” In Macks view, politicians sit on late night TV couches to help “dispel the persona jokes (at their expense) have (previously) reinforced . . . as an opportunity to come across as regular guys . . . a chance to show they are likable human beings.”

Self-confessed Democrat Macks gets very provocative in Chapter Seven, a description of “when news really does happen on late night.” Macks claims, “For some reason Republicans are much better at self-deprecation. Maybe because they believe they have God on their side.” Then here it comes. (Wait for it. The

below-the belt rim shot.) “Which is the same thing ISIS says.” Equating the Grand Old Party with Islamic terrorists? Nice touch, Macks. So mature.

Politicians don't stand alone in Macks' bull's eye. In the next chapter, which lists the “greatest (TV) guests of all time,” the author claims, “as a general rule, comics are better than actors.” Again, “as a general rule, (comics) are better guests, regardless of whose show they are on.” What makes a guest great? You'll have to read the book to find out. Why are they there? Ninety-five percent of the time? Four percent of the time? One percent of the time? Read Macks' book. Do you want to know why Al Gore bungled his 2000 presidential campaign? You guessed it. Read the book.

Macks covers all the bases. The importance of late night in politics. The futility of attempting to “disassociate yourself from the descriptive word that follows the comma after your name.” Macks gets into the current state of late night where “the PC police have taken over.” He acknowledges the changing landscape for late night. Therefore, talk show comedy writers have to know their audience. And always look for “what's stupid about this?”

Erin says

ARC for review.

I've waited far too long to review this book so I'm really relying on my notes. Macks has quite the resume from years with Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show* (actually he was there the entire time Jay was the host, first show to last) to work on the Oscars, Tonys, etc. He dishes a little (the Hathaway/Franco Oscar hosting fiasco - totally Franco's fault) and has some interesting thoughts on whether late night hosts really impact politics (yes, especially Jon Stewart) and is it ever "too soon" for certain humor or are jokes on certain subjects totally off limits (probably not, in that there are always people ready and willing to be butt-hurt about something).

He also covers the basics of late-night history (created by Steve Allen on *The Tonight Show*, with Johnny Carson the undisputed king. However, he spends a great deal of the book making his case for why Jay is second only to Carson, which is fine, but obviously comes across as a bit biased considering that he worked for Leno throughout his *Tonight Show* years. After Johnny and Jay he also admires the work of David Letterman, Jimmy Fallon, Arsenio Hall, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, the cast of *Saturday Night Live* and Bill Maher.

He also shares his list of five elements that he maintains make a great late-night host - monologue delivery, rapport with guests, willingness to ask the question or make the comment on everyone's mind, likability and the ability to come up with new bits over a sustained period. Though he still admits Johnny is king, this list seems a bit skewed toward making a case for Jay as the best late night host ever. It was especially good timing for me to examine these as I read this book as David Letterman was airing his last shows, and of the Johnny/Jay/Dave trifecta, Dave was always my preference, and I'm guessing he wouldn't have scored highly on Macks's "likability" standard. (Now, this was pre-Jon Stewart and for me Stewart on *The Daily Show* completely changed the game. And the book is notable for its failure to do more than mention Chelsea Handler, and though Arsenio Hall is given some props, I believe he's the only host of color mentioned).

Overall, other than Macks's constant pro-Jay bias (he actually compares him to Oprah. Oprah. And while

Macks feels Jay's monologues are genius, far surpassing even Johnny's, I never found them that funny) it was an interesting book for those interested in late night (but don't forget that hosts change quickly). And if you love Jay Leno, run out and buy this book immediately.

Anthony Greiter says

An interesting perspective on and insight into the world of late night comedy. I would consider this an entertaining read for anyone in the business of making people smile...which should be everyone.

Rachel says

Jon Macks is--among other things--a jokewriter, and he worked for Jay Leno's Tonight Show for 22 years, primarily on the monologues and skits...and that background shows in this book. There are many interesting looks behind the scenes of late night talk shows and many insights as well, and I was pleased to have read it for those, but the book as a whole lacks coherence and continuity. Rather than following some path, it jumps from subject to subject, sometimes very abruptly.

It also, purposefully or not, points up the fact that rhythm and delivery are vital to humor--jokes that may have killed when told by a particular comedian are not nearly so funny on paper. (They do improve if you try to imagine the person in question telling the joke, which is interesting.)

One thing that drove me crazy all the way through was in the design of the book. Each joke in the text was set off as a block quote. That's fine, and I have no problem with it--but each and every one began with the first three words in all small caps. There's no reason for that, and it's confusing, because that looks like it's identifying the speaker, and it's not, it's just the first three words. Book design is my profession, so of course I'm more likely to notice that than most...and now you will be, too!

Shaun says

This book was a little different than I expected. It's really a book written as a "how-to" guide or manual for someone that wants to write a monologue. The description of the book is what the book is, no more, no less. Jon Macks goes into how he comes up with jokes for a monologue, the process of getting them on the show with a lot of examples.

The book has many, many examples of jokes both used and unused by both Jay Leno and numerous other comedians and late night hosts. I don't find printed one-liners to be that entertaining (in my view, the delivery is 90% of telling a good one-liner; written on a page it loses that). For a reader that does enjoy them, it would be a completely different book than it was for me.

I wanted more about Macks himself. More of a autobiographical feel, rather than a manual or textbook feel.

Most of what he discusses about himself is who he writes for, wrote for, and different jobs he's had. Therefore, I was disappointed with it.

I received a copy of this book through a Goodreads First Reads giveaway.

Hilary says

Copy received through Goodreads' First Reads program.

Monologue is a series of reflections on the importance, history and political/cultural relevance of late night jokes and monologues by one of the only writers to stay with Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show* for 22 years. Macks isn't just a comedy writer - he also earned his law degree and was a political consultant and campaigner for years, so he brings a lot of insights, stories, and jokes to the table, a unique perspective. It's an amusing read of particular interest to anyone who's interested in late night shows.

Brian Smith says

Amusing. Quick read.

Alesia says

great book really funny

Michele Benchouk says

I got this book as part of the First Reads program. It offers an interesting insight as to why we like late night so much. The formula works.

Terry Dullum says

Backstage at Jay Leno's Tonight Show.

Larry Hostetler says

Very enjoyable read.

The title suggests (and the early pages of the book echo) that the book will be about late night humor, particularly through the monologue. And while much of the book talks about that, the book is much about

the author and his life, which began with political campaign consulting and continued through a long stint writing for Jay Leno. It is an interesting life, and while there are many mentions of others for whom he's written humor it is instructive to read and get his perspective on these people.

I particularly appreciated his dissections of jokes, along with other observations on what makes something funny, what makes it "too much" and some of the ways he avoided pitfalls and constructed 100 jokes a day.

Too quick a read, I didn't give it five stars because it seemed a bit lacking in focus and consistent direction. One theme did not drive content, but that didn't make it less entertaining or difficult.

It was still a very good read.

Mary says

Loved the book, Monologue, What Makes America Laugh Before Bed! Everyone needs to read this book by Jon Macks. It's entertaining, real, interesting and well written. He's very honest and shares his experiences writing for The Tonight Show. Excellent book.
