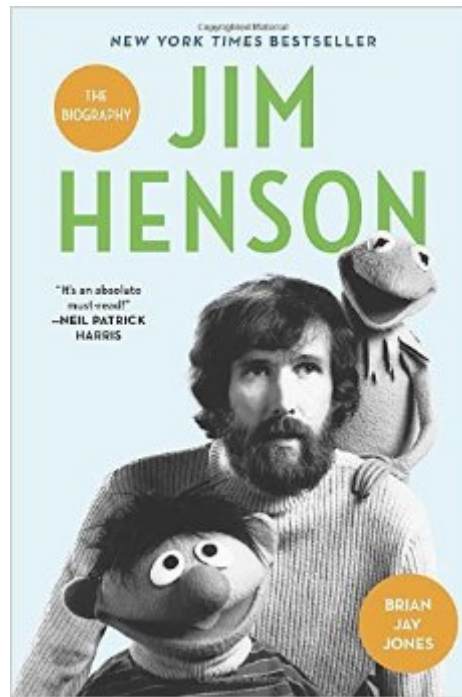


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Jim Henson: The Biography



Synopsis

NATIONAL BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY BOOKPAGE

For the first time ever—a comprehensive biography of one of the twentieth century’s most innovative creative artists: the incomparable, irreplaceable Jim Henson. He was a gentle dreamer whose genial bearded visage was recognized around the world, but most people got to know him only through the iconic characters born of his fertile imagination: Kermit the Frog, Bert and Ernie, Miss Piggy, Big Bird. The Muppets made Jim Henson a household name, but they were just part of his remarkable story. This extraordinary biography—written with the generous cooperation of the Henson family—covers the full arc of Henson’s all-too-brief life: from his childhood in Leland, Mississippi, through the years of burgeoning fame in America, to the decade of international celebrity that preceded his untimely death at age fifty-three. Drawing on hundreds of hours of new interviews with Henson’s family, friends, and closest collaborators, as well as unprecedented access to private family and company archives, Brian Jay Jones explores the creation of the Muppets, Henson’s contributions to Sesame Street and Saturday Night Live, and his nearly ten-year campaign to bring The Muppet Show to television. Jones provides the imaginative context for Henson’s non-Muppet projects, including the richly imagined worlds of The Dark Crystal and Labyrinth—as well as fascinating misfires like Henson’s dream of opening an inflatable psychedelic nightclub. An uncommonly intimate portrait, Jim Henson captures all the facets of this American original: the master craftsman who revolutionized the presentation of puppets on television, the savvy businessman whose dealmaking prowess won him a reputation as “the new Walt Disney,” and the creative team leader whose collaborative ethos earned him the undying loyalty of everyone who worked for him. Here also is insight into Henson’s intensely private personal life: his Christian Science upbringing, his love of fast cars and expensive art, and his weakness for women. Though an optimist by nature, Henson was haunted by the notion that he would not have time to do all the things he wanted to do in life—a fear that his heartbreaking final hours would prove all too well founded. An up-close look at the charmed life of a legend, Jim Henson gives the full measure to a man whose joyful genius transcended age, language, geography, and culture—and continues to beguile audiences worldwide.

Praise for Jim Henson

“Jim Henson vibrantly delves into the magnificent man and his Muppet methods: It’s an absolute must-read!” Neil Patrick Harris

“An exhaustive work that is never exhausting, a credit both to Jones’s brisk style and to Henson’s exceptional life.” The New York Times

“[A] sweeping portrait that is a mix of humor, mirth and poignancy.” Washington Independent Review of Books

“A meticulously researched tome

chock-full of gems about the Muppets and the most thorough portrait of their creator ever crafted. "Associated Press Jim was one of my closest friends. And yet I found out things about him in Jim Henson that were new to me. Brian Jay Jones has captured the layers of Jim's genius and humanity, as well as the flaws that made Jim, like all of us, so delightfully imperfect. I thank Brian for giving Jim life again. This book has captured the spirit of Jim Henson." Frank Oz

From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

If you love Muppets, Sesame Street and/or just want to get into the creative genius that was Jim Henson, this is a wonderfully thorough and beautifully written biography paying tribute to one of the most creative minds of the 20th century. I highly recommend it for anyone who wondered about the tall, bearded man who brought us Kermit the Frog, the Dark Crystal and most of the cast of Sesame Street. I don't normally read biographies but this is one I knew I could not pass up. While the book is quite lengthy and does take time to get to the initial creation of what we know today as the Muppets, Henson's life is fascinating in that he never wanted to actually be a puppeteer, he sort of stumbled on to it and resisted it for so long because he did not want to be labeled "a children's puppeteer." Instead, he pioneered that form of entertainment by moving beyond marionettes and wooden puppets with flat expressions, creating the Muppets from anything he had lying around (Kermit was originally a blue housecoat his mother owned). The Muppets were unlike other puppets because they were so lifelike including having facial expressions and eye movements never seen

before. Henson's trip to stardom never went to his head and he continued to do many of the pieces he accomplished because he enjoyed them (see the section on commercials the Muppets made). The BEST part of this bio in my opinion is seeing the evolution of your favorite characters. Cookie Monster and Grover were both background monsters who were repurposed to become our beloved Sesame Street characters they are now. Gonzo used to be a hooked nosed monster living in a cigar box named Snarl. These are just a few examples of the treasures to be found in this bio.

While I am certainly quite familiar with a good deal of Jim Henson's work - and admire nearly all that I am familiar with - I came to this knowing little or nothing of Henson the man. After 490 pages, I still don't know much about him. It is certainly entirely possible that Henson was a wonderful person, filled with love and good will toward everyone he met, exuding generosity and kindness toward all living things. That is, it is possible that the biographical aspects of this biography are both accurate and complete. I just don't quite think so. To expound, I do not think that it is of necessity for a biographer to expose some "dark side" or hidden vices of their subjects, I DO think it is necessary to present a three dimensional portrait of their subjects and that simply is not present here. Whether Henson had any sort of dark side is beside the point: There are a lot of people who manage to live their lives w/o ever being monsters or ogres along the way, including a lot of successful and public people. That is fine. That is admirable. However, author Jones, clearly and admittedly an admirer of Henson, gushes so extravagantly as to rose-color his entire undertaking here. That this is an authorized biography, written with the sanction and cooperation of Henson's family only muddies the issue further. There are hints here of something deeper than the gentle-genius-who-loves-everyone. We get hints of Henson the serial womanizer, but then we are discreetly ushered away. We see glimpses of a man who buries his emotions and refuses to express what he is really feeling to those closest to him, but then a Muppet is waved in front of us and we are distracted again.

Acknowledging quirks and faults does not malign a man; it makes him real and relatable.

Typically, only presidents and world leaders get 500-page biographies with this level of attention to detail. I'm glad Brian Jay Jones took the time and effort to write a thorough biography of somebody who brought so much joy to people. I grew up with some of Henson's creations, most notably Fraggles and Muppet Babies. I've grown up to appreciate some of his other work, such as the Muppet Movie and Dark Crystal. Yet, even more than watching Henson's creations on screen, this book gave me an enormous respect for the boldness and creativity of the Muppets. Jones crams a huge amount of detail into this book, yet he manages to convey that information in an engaging and

exciting manner. Jones clearly respects Jim Henson and appreciates the man's work. Jones' writing beams with genuine excitement when describing the Muppet Show. Readers get a real sense of the playfulness amongst the puppeteers. This is definitely a fun, almost effortless biography to read. One thing I really appreciate about this book is that Brian Jay Jones is candid about Henson but also respectful. Jones does not ignore some of the less appealing aspects of Henson's life, such as his extramarital affairs. However, Jones keeps them in the proper perspective. Unlike many biographies, he doesn't spend pages describing the life and background of Henson's mistress. Jones discusses Henson's relationship with his mistress because it was an important part of Henson's life and work, but it takes only a small portion of the book. The majority of the book is spent on Henson himself and his creations. I think the book did a pretty good job covering all of the aspects of Jim's career, from the earliest days on "Sam and Friends" to "Labyrinth".

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