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Street Gang: The Complete History Of Sesame Street



Synopsis

The New York Times bestselling account of the story behind one of the most influential, durable, and beloved shows in the history of television: Sesame Street, moving to HBO this fall. Davis tracks down every Sesame anecdote and every Sesame personality in his book . . . Finally, we get to touch Big Bird's feathers. • "The New York Times Book Review Sesame Street is the longest-running-and arguably most beloved- children's television program ever created. Today, it reaches some six million preschoolers weekly in the United States and countless others in 140 countries around the world. Street Gang is the compelling, comical, and inspiring story of a media masterpiece and pop-culture landmark. Television reporter and columnist Michael Davis-with the complete participation of Joan Ganz Cooney, one of the show's founders-unveils the idealistic personalities, decades of social and cultural change, stories of compassion and personal sacrifice, and miraculous efforts of writers, producers, directors, and puppeteers that together transformed an empty soundstage into the most recognizable block of real estate in television history.

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Customer Reviews

The television show that can appeal to children and make parents feel like they are good parents and upright citizens for showing it to their kids, that is where the money lies, my friends. Growing up I was not a discerning television viewer. I watched Mr. Rogers, Reading Rainbow, Pinwheel, Today's Special, and a whole host of bad cartoons ranging from Space Ghost to that bizarre time traveling one that was basically just a half hour commercial for Laser Tag. There was maybe only

one show amongst the batch that some part of my small reptilian brain recognized as better than the rest. I was an avid Sesame Street fan. I loved the show, the movies, the awful books they churned out (The Monster at the End of this Book excepted). Oddly, this love didn't fade as I grew up. I still have a strange fascination with the world it created and years ago I purchased Sesame Street Unpaved to sate some of my curiosity. Who were these people who created my mental childhood home? Who were the actors? The puppeteers? The writers? Unpaved didn't do much to answer any of that, aside from giving me choice nuggets like the fact that Bob was a teen singing sensation in Japan. So the time seems just about right for Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street. Pulling in at a cool 406 pages, author Michael Davis has gone above and beyond the call of duty.

When I was in grad school, I signed up for a class called Death and Literature. The description sounded awesome and I was being a bit morbid. What it turned out to be was a philosophy class in literature class clothing, which resulted in me reading Heidegger for weeks at a time, only occasionally broken up by "She" or "Dracula." The few moments of awesomeness did not make up for the fact that I was dragged through "Being and Time." And that's what reading "Street Gang" is like. This is not a complete history of Sesame Street. This is a slog through the personal histories of several of the key players who created Sesame Street: Joan Ganz Cooney, Jon Stone, David Connell, Sam Gibbon, and Jim Henson. And when I say histories, I mean you learn about their parents' upbringing, their upbringing, schooling, weird relationships, everything! This book is hyper-detailed, bogging it down. What isn't about family history is about how the show got funded, which has the potential to be interesting if we weren't forced to walk through every step of the process. And, of course, we do. You finally get to the genesis of the show and its characters and stories in Chapter 12... so if you want just that, skip to page 166. To finish my complaint on the book's completeness, it skims a fair amount of the 1980s (compared to the detail of earlier chapters) and gives very little info on the mid-1990s and beyond. This is probably because management changed at the CTW and Davis does not fawn over these people. Elmo is the most-covered subject during this time period. I'd also have to say that the writing structure is incredibly awkward.

Davis' background as a journalist really shines through in this exhaustively researched look into the team behind Sesame Street. Spanning five years of interviews with cast and crew, Davis paints a painstaking picture of all the ins-and-outs, all the personalities, all the behind-the-scenes office politics that shaped this television institution. Pioneering the "edu-tainment" niche, Sesame Street was really the first children's show to take educational research seriously, incorporating PhDs on

their staff and applying for educational grants to meet budgetary needs. There's a lot of background info here... quite a lot on the earlier show, Captain Kangaroo. Warm and genial on screen, Bob Keeshan was a sometimes moody prankster on the set. A number of the writers and crew made the jump to Sesame Street when it started, and they brought lessons they learned from the Captain with them, namely, that an ensemble cast would provide less headaches than a single, temperamental actor. Jim Henson was probably the most widely celebrated Sesame Street contributor, with his furry, funny, wonderful Muppets. Davis also spotlights Children's Television Workshop founding member and Sesame producer, Joan Ganz Cooney and her struggles to be taken seriously in the "man's world" of television production in the late 60's and onward. I didn't know that Bob McGrath, one of the longest-running original cast members got his start as a Japanese pop-singing sensation! I was also unaware that Northern James Calloway, who played David on the show, had such a troubled history. Towards the end of his run on the show, his behavior became increasingly erratic as he struggled with manic-depression.

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