

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jess Oppenheimer, Gregg Oppenheimer. *Laughs, Luck ... and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996. Index. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-0406-8.



Reviewed by Bernadette Zbicki Heiney (Lock Haven University)
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While there has been a multitude of books written about Lucille Ball, Desi Arnez, and the *I Love Lucy* show, there has been very little written on the script writing and backstage aspects of the series. Jess Oppenheimer, writer and producer of the sitcom, provides just this in his new autobiography. Beginning by defining a memoir as "an incomplete history of episodes in my life" (p. xvii), he then proceeds to provide a loosely written account of his life up until and including his leaving the show in 1956.

Humorously written, Oppenheimer begins by discussing those events in his childhood that he believed had a significant impact on his career. Interestingly, he credits much of his future success to his undiagnosed double vision. This condition, he explains, forced him to become an acute observer of human behavior and to develop a sense of humor. He then chronicles his career and at the same time provides readers with a personalized history of early radio and television. Also included are wonderful anecdotes about celebrities that he worked with such as Fred Astaire, Fanny Brice, and Harry Cohn.

A majority of the autobiography focuses on Oppenheimer's years as head writer on the radio show, *My Favorite Husband*, where he first met Lucy, and then the *I Love Lucy* show. Working with writers Madelyn Pugh and Bob Carroll, Jr. on both shows, Oppenheimer describes the intensive work involved backstage in writing and producing the weekly half hour show. Adding to the book's interest is a chapter completely devoted to the art of writing a script. Other unique features include information about how Oppenheimer came up with many of

his ideas for the show, backstage trivia about particular episodes, and an account of the show's relationship with the CBS network. Another strength of the book is Oppenheimer's use of actual documentation to support his claims. For example, he provides readers with a copy of the contract that specified that he had complete control of all of the show's artistic elements.

Oppenheimer also recounts his experiences working with Lucy and Desi. By doing so, he provides new insights into the personalities of both actors. Interestingly, while he thought highly of Lucy, he saw Desi as someone who was always attempting to take credit for others accomplishments. His examples included Desi's need to be executive producer of the show and his taking credit for the use of multiple film cameras on the set.

Also included and making the book more attractive to readers is a copy of the only unperformed *I Love Lucy* episode, outtakes from *My Favorite Husband*, and a compact disc containing excerpts from both shows. Overall, Oppenheimer's memoir provides a new dimension to the literature on one of America's most popular sitcoms. Both Lucy fans and those interested in a personalized account of early radio and television will find *Laughs, Luck ... and Lucy* an enjoyable read.

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