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Dick Cavett, renowned for his droll, acerbic wit, hosted various TV talk shows from 1968 to 1996, most notably on ABC from 1969 to 1974; a show that attracted top-notch guests, often a hipper cadre than appeared on the rival *The Tonight Show* hosted by Johnny Carson on NBC. DVDs available of selected Cavett shows from the late '60s and early '70s are time capsules of the arts, entertainment and politics of the era. Before that, Cavett was a writer for *The Tonight Show* and a stand-up comic. This 1974 book of self-reflections takes both the form of an interview (conducted by long-time friend and colleague, Christopher Porterfield) and biographical narratives written by Porterfield with Cavett's input. Nothing is sacred in *Cavett*; the talk ranges boldly and freely, as talk between friends often does, from the silly to the satirical and from the serious to the scatological.

Cavett Details

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From Reader Review Cavett for online ebook

Kurt says

Memoir of the comedian and talk show host. The first two-thirds of the book -- Cavett's youth and years at Yale, and his rise in show business -- are much more interesting than the last third, essentially a behind the scenes look at the Dick Cavett Show (which I've only seen occasionally). Most of the narrative is a dialogue between Cavett and his co-writer, his college roommate, which is interesting and effective -- it's a genuine back and forth, not just Q&A.

Ruthmarie says

Good airplane reading. Sometimes laugh-out-loud, other times a reminder that time passes on to newer faces, newer outlooks. Still, Cavett has a way with words that intrigues. And he knows/knew everybody . . . of a certain generation. But yay for keeping Groucho alive in our hearts!

Evan says

The danger with nostalgia, of course, is the tendency to isolate what was once good from the general context, or more precisely the convenient forgetfulness of that which was bad or simply banal about the past.

And so when I read this book, reflecting on a time when the likes of Noel Coward or Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontaine and Orson Welles and Groucho Marx could appear on a national TV talk show, I'm tempted to offer that as proof that the past was somehow better, that people were somehow smarter and that entertainment was of a higher caliber. It's easy to come to that conclusion when one scans the talk show scene today, when the likes of Jessica Simpson or the guy from the Twilight movies along with a rogue's galaxy of other mediocrities are considered major guests. (Yes, I meant rogue's galaxy, not gallery, as a sort of show-biz witticism). But it was only TV, and it was dumb then and dumb now. Gilligan's Island was on the air, after all.

Cavett's weeknight talk show, from 1969 to 1974, has often been cited as an example of "smart TV," the kind that no longer exists. As it happens, I have several DVD box sets of selected *Dick Cavett* shows from that era. I'm ancient enough to have actually seen some of them on their original airing, though how I managed it is a mystery as I was little and my parents were very strict about a 9 p.m. bedtime.

Watching those DVDs now evokes mixed feelings, the same I experienced watching some uncut, complete (with commercials) DVDs of old Ed Sullivan shows. The tendency, as I mentioned, is to remember these things in glowing terms, as examples of a brighter, more exciting time in entertainment. In fact, the shows were highly flawed. Along with the dazzling moments there were equal dollops of longeurs and boredom and failed jokes and conversations gone awry.

The strengths of Cavett's show, however, were considerable. The guests were often of a hipper or more intellectually scintillating cast than would appear on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin and Jefferson Airplane would not be found on Carson, but were very welcome on Cavett's show,

and thus his show attracted a younger, cooler audience. But Cavett also had a deep and abiding respect for legends of show business, and that's why his show was an amazing parade of entertainment luminaries: Marlon Brando, Fred Astaire, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Groucho Marx, Katharine Hepburn, Laurence Olivier and countless others of the cream of Hollywood's and theater's golden ages.

The roll call of literary guests was equally staggering: Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal and so on.

The other strength of the show, was, of course, Cavett himself. I think it's safe to say that his likes do not exist anymore on network TV (apart from PBS, and even there things are in decline); he was a quick, culturally literate wit well beyond the sort that would be allowed before a camera today.

His natural attraction toward wide-ranging conversation, however, was frustrated by the commercial and time limitations and presumed audience expectations of TV formats. The tantalizing moments of wit one derived from Cavett on his shows are much more fully realized in this memoir, a wide-ranging and often hilarious look at his life and rise in show business. The book is not a true autobiography; it's more of an "as told to" bio, penned entirely by his longtime good friend, Christopher Porterfield.

Part of the book consists of straightforward accounts of Cavett's life--including a wonderful account of his days at Yale. Most of the rest consists of alternating sections of interviews, or conversations, with Porterfield.

Some of the best things in the book are Cavett's memories of great show-biz legends that he came to befriend, including Stan Laurel and Groucho Marx. His reminiscences of visting Laurel at his home are deeply moving and highly recommended for fans of Laurel & Hardy. His remembrances of his relationship with Groucho are equally delightful.

Cavett was (and is, since as of this writing he still breathes and nibbles at show biz) a complicated man: open-minded, yet Puritan; funny and open, yet reserved; corn-pone Midwestern with New York sophistication; well-read and highly intelligent yet not a true intellectual; a procrastinator who, when he decides to work (at script writing, for instance) is one of the fastest and best in the biz; dignified yet a shameless show-biz queen bee, and seemingly sexually ambiguous.

Great pains are taken early in the book with anecdotes to assure us that Cavett was an all-American straight man averse to gay advances, yet the slight lisp to his voice, occasionally mincing and flamboyant mannerisms and persona as an enlightened sensitive male metrosexual of the Frasier and Niles vein has cast doubt among his audience about his orientation. His tendency to hang with Judy Garland and Noel Coward along with his marriage to husky voiced Carrie Nye (often compared to fag-hag favorite Tallulah Bankhead) make one ponder. But the collected evidence here is that Cavett is what he says he is, though his hesitation to "kiss and tell" about his sexual encounters does leave the reader wanting. Otherwise this strikes me as an honest and fulsome account of this life.

To his credit, Cavett is a very self aware man, he owns and admits his flaws. Call this Cavett's caveats, if you will. He is well aware of his elitist bent, but is not guilty and ashamed of it, having been on both sides of the fence. His recollections of trying to get a foot in the door of the entertainment world while practically starving in New York are vivid and fun. His amazing ability to charm the famous and somehow get into places off-limits make for tantalizing reading.

The funniest part of the book is the opening chapters, detailing Cavett's youth. Every paragraph has a boffo punchline that had me laughing constantly.

Though Cavett's long-time marriage to the late and accomplished actress, Carrie Nye, was said to be tumultuous (who's isn't?), that aspect of Cavett's life is glossed over somewhat in this book. That is a weakness, for Nye seems to have been a very fascinating character. Oddly, every time she is referred to in this book, it is as "Carrie Nye" (full name), rather than simply, Carrie.

One of the aspects of Cavett on TV that got him branded as a "cold fish," which actually was part of what made him refreshing among his peers, was that he refused to cave to the easy path of sentimentality, as he elaborates on in this passage:

"Many times I consciously resist moments where I know I could score points as a good, warm soul with the kind of banality I have seen others exploit on the tube...I guess it's because I know that some of those people who come off as cuddlesome and warmhearted souls on TV are such phonies. I think they genuinely believe the sweet sentiments they mouth while they're saying them, but their true inner nature is expressed during the day, when they're bestial to their underlings, lousy to their families, and kick cats."

On the matter of balancing "intellectual" content and the TV world's desires for light, amusing entertainment, he says: "I would rather be funny than heavy, given the choice. I don't think of myself as a sage, but I have, on occasion, bordered on wit."

Groucho Marx's testimonial on the dustjacket of this book refers to this as "the greatest book I have ever read about television." I'm not sure I can vouchsafe that, but it is a very good one in that regard, especially chapter 12, in which Cavett revealingly expounds on television's quality, ratings and censorship issues. I also loved pages 296-299: A New York Times critic's review of the show and Cavett's hilarious and devastating retort letter.

Perhaps Cavett's greatest legacy is that he was the only talk show host who did NOT book the Gabor sisters.

Anyone interested in a memoir that covers a wide swath of an amazing era of show biz should greatly enjoy this book.

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KR@KY (reposted with minor corrections in 2017)

David says

made me want to move to new york..loved his descriptions of the city

Martin Bihl says

yeah, it's highly self-involved, but still an amazing story of how small the show biz world was, and how, if you had audacity and could talk a good line, you could meet everyone from woody allen to groucho marx (okay, maybe that's not a very long line) and the creme of the entertainment world.

Mark Pool says

This was a funny autobiography by the erudite talk show host who was friends with Groucho Marx and Woody Allen.

Victoria Mixon says

I read this book as a teen when it first came out, because my aunt was among those daytime TV-watching American housewives who fell for Cavett's svelte figure and irreverant witticisms. Now I've re-read it thirty years later, and it's still hilarious, even the part about the vacuum cleaner.

What rising 1970s comedian *wouldn't* do well to forge a warm, mentoring friendship with Groucho Marx?

The only difference in the read is that now, to an adult with decades of my own career under my belt, Cavett's dismally overstressed experience with his talk show reminds me yet again of the old adage, "Be careful what you wish for, as you just might get it."

Eric says

An interesting look at Dick Cavett and his show, with the expected humorous backstage anecdotes. I had enjoyed watching Orson Welles turn the tables on Cavett one night and play the role of interviewer with Cavett as the guest. I always found Cavett to be a fascinating person, and to have wonderfully unique experiences with some entertainment legends, most notably his friendship with Groucho Marx. He details meeting Marx, the humorous moments they shared, and some legendary examples of Groucho's ability to write an effortlessly hilarious letter. Cavett's sometimes biting reviews of his industry and its practices in the last third of the book are also well worth reading.

Larsenross says

I read this book a long time ago.

I remember Cavett's observation on marriage. He described it as the focus of a woman enveloping a man. I should have passed that on to my brother who has since passed away.

Rochelle says

In the 70s, Dick Cavett was known for his acerbic wit on the Dick Cavett show -- which aired before I was born. I know him from his current column in the NYTimes and was intrigued enough from his clever posts to decide this book would be worth a read. I was not disappointed. *Cavett* was a pleasant anecdotal read on many things from the sixties and seventies I had never heard before -- both from the entertainment realm and that of politics. Mr. Cavett is a brilliant man who makes me wonder why he has virtually disappeared from

mainstream media until now. The entertainment industry would be a much more thought-provoking medium with people like him around. Visit the library or pick this one up at your local bookstore -- it's a refreshing, straightforward read.

Samantha Glasser says

Dick Cavett may not be a household name today, and his television show was never as popular as Johnny Carson's, nor did his comedy rival that of Woody Allen, but Cavett scored a place in television history in the late 60s through the 80s for his conversational interview style.

Although he may not feel entirely comfortable being labeled an intellectual, these pages reveal Cavett to be an educated and thoughtful man whose playful and sporadic sense of humor seems to be a counter-balance to his moments of wisdom. These nuggets, combined with the comedy and entertaining stories, are more than worth the price of a used copy of this book. Although it is not a tell-all about life on the set of The Dick Cavett Show, it is better for going deeper behind the scenes. In a way, this book is set up the way the show was. Cavett's talk show was praised for getting details from his guests that other talk shows never even grazed. Here we don't get answers to surface questions like who was the best guest or who he wished he had on the show. These are conversations which reveal much more at the heart of the matter of having a television show and the road to getting there.

Red Morrison says

Not as funny or witty as I thought it would be.

Carolyn says

Dick and his college friend Christopher Porterfield reminisce and discuss Dick's career. I've been a Cavett fan for a long time, and enjoyed this sort-of biography and his anecdotes about other celebrities.

Carolee says

I grew up on this man. I developed a crush on him in the early 70's. He's just so dapper and clever, masterfully articulate, and I love his delivery. Dry drollery usually, but when he cracks up it's hilarious. Oh sure, I've tried to fill the void through the years with Dennis Miller or Jon Stewart, but no one has the whole package like Dick does.

Still says

I've read this at least twice. Maybe three times.
I don't know who I'd recommend this to.

If you were born after 1970 you don't even know who Cavett was.

To me - as a high school kid, Cavett was everything hip.

So clever, so cutting.

God - I'd stay up nights during high school and see him interview authors like Gore Vidal, Mailer, and so many others... it was like nothing I'd ever seen.

And he had a band of Jazz sessions musicians who'd played on some major recordings by Jazz giants.

I own the Shout Factory DVD box-sets of selected programs. There are at least three of them. Musicians, Comedians, and Hollywood Legends.

I liked the guy then, I like the guy now.

Not recommended for anyone under the age of 50.
