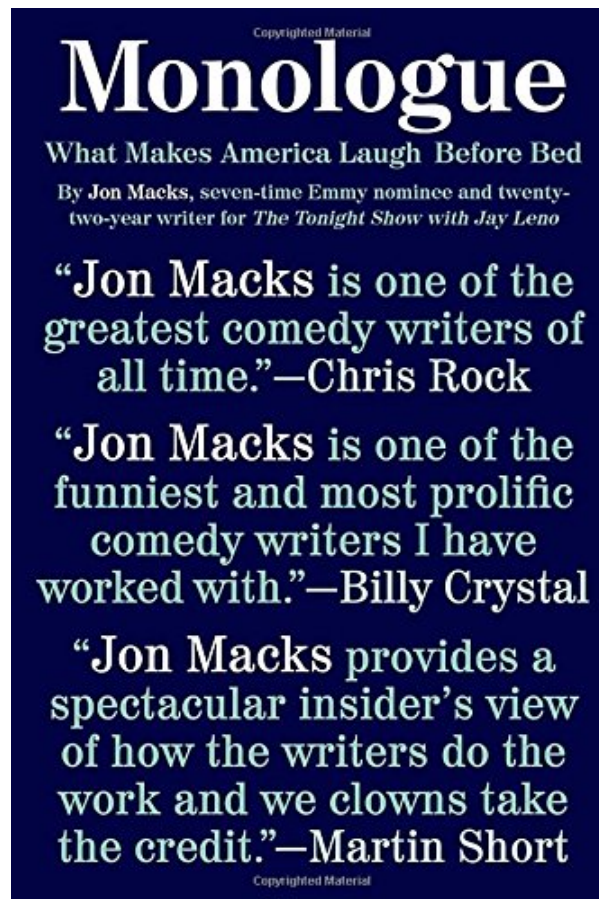


MONOLOGUE: WHAT MAKES AMERICA LAUGH BEFORE BED BY JON MACKS



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Monologue

What Makes America Laugh Before Bed

By Jon Macks, seven-time Emmy nominee and twenty-two-year writer for *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*

“Jon Macks is one of the greatest comedy writers of all time.”—Chris Rock

“Jon Macks is one of the funniest and most prolific comedy writers I have worked with.”—Billy Crystal

“Jon Macks provides a spectacular insider’s view of how the writers do the work and we clowns take the credit.”—Martin Short

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Review

“Macks, a longtime writer for The Tonight Show with Jay Leno...examines not only what makes something funny, but also how a joke can help shape public opinion and public behavior and what constitutes inappropriate material...readers looking for some behind-the-scenes intel on the big stars and the popular late-night shows won't be disappointed....Without Jon Stewart on late night, fans may need something else to do: this book should help.”

— Booklist

"Jon Macks is one of the funniest and most prolific comedy writers I have worked with. Like a great pitcher, he has a dazzling arsenal of fastballs and curves. Whether it's politics or pop culture, he gets it instantly. And everything he says about me in Monologue is true."—Billy Crystal

"Jon Macks is brilliant craftsman who provides a spectacular insider's view of how the writers do the work and we clowns take the credit."—Martin Short

"After more than twenty years writing for "The Tonight Show," Jon Macks knows what makes a great host and a great guest, a good joke from a bad one, and how to keep the audience at home up past bedtime. In Monologue, he tells the stories-behind-the-stories and proves that late-night TV is still the place where public opinion is formed." —James Carville

"Jon Macks is one of the greatest comedy writers of all time. Just like Billy Preston worked behind the scenes with the Beatles and the Stones, Macks has been the man behind so many great comedians it's impossible to name them all. I'm proud to say there is no comedic situation I'll ever enter without him."—Chris Rock

"After writing 500,000 jokes for Jay Leno, Jon Macks has written a funny and fascinating book about late night TV. He is the Cal Ripken of comedy, turning in an all-star quality performance for two decades. Monologue tells you how he did it, and reminds us all of why we love to laugh in bed."—Paul Begala

"More than one A-list star has dubbed Jon Macks "The Joke Machine," a nickname that's well-earned. Chances are you already know some of his most memorable lines, because he's written them for everyone, from the Beltway to Hollywood and back. If you don't believe me, just read this book. If you do believe me, read it anyway. He owes me money."—Dave Boone

About the Author

JON MACKS is the author of four previous books and was a top writer for The Tonight Show with Jay Leno for all twenty-two years Leno was on the air. He has also written for eighteen Academy Awards, the Emmy Awards, the Golden Globes, the Tony Awards, and for some of the nation's top comedians, politicians, corporate leaders, and sports commentators. Among the personalities Macks writes for are Billy Crystal, Martin Short, Steve Martin, Hugh Jackman, Terry Bradshaw, and Chris Rock. He lives in Los Angeles.

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King Johnny and the Princes

Although my experience has been primarily with Jay, this is about all the great late-night and sketch shows. Johnny, Jay, Dave, Jimmy Fallon, Arsenio, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, SNL, Bill Maher, Jimmy Kimmel, and Conan—these are the shows and people who I believe have truly helped shape the way America looks at politicians, celebrities, and events.

September 27, 1954, late-night TV was born with host Steve Allen. Two interesting facts: First, The Tonight Show was created by Pat Weaver, Sigourney Weaver's father, and second, no one remembers Steve Allen. But they should. He invented the modern talk show format, which, like the horseshoe crab and English anti-Semitism, has remained basically unchanged for eons. If you take a horseshoe crab from today (and they are delicious in a puff pastry) and one from 400 million years ago, they look similar. There are, however, differences in late-night style, for my belief is that each host takes what others have done, builds on it, and gives it a unique twist.

Steve's show in a nutshell: Steve had an opening, music, celebrity interviews, an audience bit, and, I usually hate this word but it is perfect applied to him, a sensibility best described as zany. He also did something that is key to the success of a show—he loved to laugh, and when he cracked up in the middle of a sketch with Don Knotts or Tom Poston or Louis Nye, it signaled to the audience at home that it was time to laugh. Take a look at the old clips or at PBS's great documentary in the *Pioneers of Television* series. You can trace a line directly from Steve Allen to David Letterman.

Steve Allen left as host in early 1957 and NBC decided to tinker with a winning format. Sound familiar? This next version of The Tonight Show was made more like the Today show, with news and features. The host was the immortal Jazzbo Collins, and it ended up being, what's the word I'm looking for . . . a disaster. NBC realized its mistake and switched back to the late-night format that had worked.

Next came Jack Paar. Jack was urbane and erudite, and you got the feeling that he was a genuinely witty man. What marked Jack's reign at the top was the intellectual quality of the guests. Paar had on guests such as William F. Buckley and Peter Ustinov (Google them), and he reveled in their stories. Jack wasn't as good a joke teller as he was a storyteller. He also was willing to go where no talk-show host had gone before, doing a show in the shadow of the Berlin Wall, and interviewing Fidel Castro as well as presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. He also was the first to show the true power of television, in essence destroying the career of newspaper columnist Walter Winchell. Winchell was an ink-stained bully who went unchallenged whenever he took on those he didn't like. But Jack Paar answered back in his nightly monologues, skewering Winchell. According to Neal Gabler's book about Winchell, it began when Winchell refused to retract an item in his column saying that Paar had marriage problems. Jack used his show to claim Winchell's column was "written by a fly," that "his voice was too high because he wore too tight underwear," and that Winchell had a "hole in his soul" and was a "silly old man." Paper may beat rock, but newspapers don't beat TV. In the end, television 1, newspapers 0. Winchell's may have been the first, but his was certainly not the last career brought down by a late-night monologue.

The problem with fully describing the styles of Steve Allen and Jack Paar is like describing eight-track tapes to people younger than thirty. The fact is, Steve's and Jack's time was before my time, I didn't see them live, and very few tapes of their entire shows exist. I know Ty Cobb was a great ballplayer but I have to take the word of those who wrote about him at the time he played. These shows are like dinosaur fossils. We know dinosaurs existed, we know they were big and important, but we can't really be sure what they looked like. That is unless you're a creationist who believes that the dinosaurs were around a few thousand years ago and that they lived on a diet of ferns and very slow senior citizens. Which reminds me of a great Lewis Black joke: If you believe that dinosaurs and people lived at the same time, you think The Flintstones cartoon is a documentary.

So despite The Tonight Show's having marked sixty years on the air, those earlier years and hosts are too far back in the historical record for me to really comment on. For our purposes, history began in October 1962, when Johnny Carson began his ninety-minute show in New York. Ninety minutes!

And what a first show. Johnny was introduced by Groucho Marx, and guests included Joan Crawford, Tony Bennett, Mel Brooks, Ed Metzger, and Rudy Vallee. Referring to his entrance as he walked onstage, his first joke was "Boy, you would think it was Vice President Nixon."

Right then and there, commenting on people who were in the news, Johnny set the tone for what was to be.

Johnny Carson was the king. Starting out in a world of three networks and not many entertainment choices, Johnny established once and for all what late-night monologues were supposed to do. People watched the evening news at dinnertime, and prime-time TV afterward—usually shows about genies, hillbillies, talking cars, and passengers stranded after a three-hour tour. He was the one who made everyone laugh at the news of the day. It was real-time viewing: no Hulu, no taping to watch later. You turned on the TV at eleven thirty, watched and laughed, had sex, and went to sleep. Or if you were real adventurous, you had sex while watching TV. By the way, I've tried that—the problem is, who has the remote?

Johnny took what Paar did and added great comedic bits plus something else; he made the guests funny in his interaction with them. His jokes were brilliant, and he was the one who made the monologue important by putting the focus on pop culture.

How does he rank? Ted Williams was the best hitter who ever lived, Jim Brown was the greatest running back, Ron Jeremy is the greatest porn star, and Johnny Carson is considered the best late-night host. How do we know this?

Let me make an analogy. If ten people tell you that you have a piece of spinach stuck in your teeth, you have a piece of spinach stuck in your teeth. When every host who came after Johnny idolizes him, when every observer of late night heaps praise on the same person and says he's the best, then guess what—he is the best.

And twenty-three years after he went off the air, Johnny Carson is still ranked number one in terms of popularity. In a 2014 survey by the people at YouGov research, 32 percent of Americans said Johnny was their favorite talk-show host of all time. Jay was second, at 8 percent, and everyone else was at 6 percent or lower.

One reason for Johnny's popularity is that he was able to use his "desk" and his interviewing style to amplify the comic brilliance of his guests. Look at any YouTube video of Carson with Don Rickles. Johnny was content knowing he was the star, and he could afford to turn the spotlight on his guests and let them shine.

I think the great Billy Wilder said it best about Johnny:

He enchants the invalids and the insomniacs as well as the people who have to get up at dawn. He is the Valium and the Nembutal of a nation. No matter what kind of dead asses are on the show, he has to make them funny and exciting. He has to be their nurse and their surgeon. He has no conceit. He does his work and he comes prepared. If he's talking to an author, he has read the book. Even his rehearsed routines sound improvised. He's the cream of middle-class elegance, yet he's not a mannequin. He has captivated the American bourgeoisie without ever offending the highbrows, and he has never said anything that wasn't

liberal or progressive. Every night, in front of millions of people, he has to do the salto mortale [circus parlance for an aerial somersault performed on the tightrope]. What's more, he does it without a net. No rewrites. No retakes. The jokes must work tonight.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I rest my case.

Johnny is the gold standard, and anyone who followed had an impossible standard to match. And Jay Leno came as close to it as anyone could.

Caveat three: I love Jay. He is the best monologist who ever lived, a great human being, and he made me part of the family for twenty-two years. He came to all three of my kids' bar mitzvahs, staying for the service and the reception when even I didn't want to be there; took care of an air ambulance to fly my wife home to LA after she had a stroke in Las Vegas; gave huge annual bonuses out of his own pocket to everyone on the show for twenty-two years; and made sure everyone got six months' pay when the show ended to make sure people didn't lose their houses or have to change their lifestyles. So anyone who says I'm biased in supporting him, they're fucking right. I am. It takes nothing away from Dave or anyone else to say Jay was the perfect and only person to follow Johnny. Or to say that he is the second carving on the Mount Rushmore of late-night hosts, right next to President Carson.

I'll let Bill Maher put Jay in perspective with the remarks she gave when inducting Jay into the Television Academy Hall of Fame.

Bill called Jay's twenty-two years as host "a drive down a highway in some giant, gleaming, pristine luxury car with the competition far in the rearview mirror—except one time when NBC, driving some beat-up clunker, blindsided him and beat the shit out of his beautiful car."

Bill pointed out that Johnny Carson, whom he loves, was not rebellious and edgy, while Jay is tame and mild; the truth is, they both spoke for Middle America. Bill then compared Jay to Israel. He said, "Jay isn't perfect but he's held to a standard I don't think anybody in the world is expected to live up to but him."

I love Bill Maher for that. And I think he nailed it.

Jay did more Tonight Shows than Johnny, and he told more jokes in his monologue than anyone. And, you know something, they didn't always work. Not every joke does. It's why Carson had his joke savers. Joke savers are comments comedians make afterward that let the audience know they're aware that the joke bombed. Example: "That joke went over like Donald Sterling at the NAACP convention." But to put Jay in baseball terms, he had more at bats and more hits than anyone who ever lived, which means by definition he was going to have some outs.

Some people like boxing, some like theater. Very few like both. Some people like Jay, some like Dave. I respect both artists.

To me, David Letterman is a true descendant of Steve Allen. Zany, especially in his earlier years, and uniquely brilliant. When Letterman likes a guest—a Billy Crystal, a Marty Short—he's an incredible host and the best audience a comic could want. The problem is that Dave can come off as cranky, and in later years has had a tendency to make it clear to the audience that he's not thrilled with a crappy guest. Johnny seemingly never did that. Johnny would fight to make a guest shine even if nothing was there. Jay had the confidence that even if he had a bad guest, he had already won, because night after night he delivered the best monologue.

Dave is a different joke teller than Jay. With Jay, you listen to the joke, react, and laugh. With Dave, you are often watching him to see how he reacts to the telling of it.

This is a perfect example of a joke where you can picture Dave and know his attitude at that moment: "Are you excited about the new Spider-Man movie? . . . Then you're twelve."

And, please, Spider-Man fans, don't write me to say I'm picking on that franchise. As if Spider-Man fans can write.

Dave's style raises the question of whether we like to feel uncomfortable watching an uncomfortable host. Dave clearly is not happy in his own skin, and there's a sense of danger around him. Johnny wasn't dangerous, nor was Jay. Dave is dangerous, and I mean that in good way. That personality edge is appealing to a lot of people, they love the mischievous part of Dave, the unpredictability, but in the end the reason Jay

was number one in the ratings for nineteen years was because Americans don't like "uncomfortable" and unpredictable late at night as much as critics do. It's also maybe why Jimmy Fallon dominates the ratings now. He's just more fun and easier to watch than anyone else on late night.

Conan O'Brien is a truly brilliant writer, and as a host he can be criticized for nothing greater than the fact that for some people he is hard to watch on stage. He has been on the air for twenty-two years but still has some of the same nervous mannerisms he had in 1993. They're real and not forced . . . which in many ways is the key to his success. Conan has never come off slick; he has always been real and that "going against the grain" is why his fans and supporters are so passionate.

Jimmy Fallon is the perfect host for a new generation of TV viewers. Young and young looking, he is likable in the Leno vein and innovative in a way that connects with younger viewers. He has the willingness to try new things as Conan did in the nineties and has the format in which they can be seen. Jimmy is an excellent impersonator and musician, is nonthreatening (like Johnny and Jay), and is polite to his guests (like Johnny and Jay), which means that celebrities are willing to go along with what he suggests. And that can result in comedy gold. This may not always go over well with older celebrities like Don Rickles, who, when asked if he was going on Jimmy's show, kiddingly said, "I don't play Ping-Pong." But that's not who Jimmy is after. He's not going for retro hip, he's aiming at young and current hip, and can get a president to slow-jam the news, Emma Stone to lip sync, or have Marty Short and Jerry Seinfeld play Pictionary. Jimmy has taken late night to a new and next level. He owns it, it's his show and he clearly loves what he's doing. He is having so much fun that we have fun just watching him. My prediction: he will be the king (or at least the top prince) for the next twenty years.

Another difference between Jimmy and other hosts is that Jimmy spends less time talking to guests and more time on comedy bits and music. According to communications experts at Grand View University (which is a real college, even though it sounds made up; it's in Iowa and the mascot is the fighting boll weevil—okay, I made the last part up), Johnny, Dave, Jay, and Seth Meyers all spent 51 percent of their shows talking while Jimmy spends 37 percent. And Jimmy spends 23 percent of his time on comedy and 14 percent on music, a much higher percentage than Jay and Johnny allowed. Jimmy has made his show successful by making it more of a variety show than what in England would be called a chat show.

Jon Stewart has created his own unique late-night show that is influential, smart, and funny. Jon makes his point with commentary and comic acting. For a long time I didn't realize that he is in fact an incredibly strong stand-up and joke teller. I knew he had done stand-up and heard he was good, but it never clicked until I watched Jon at the Don Rickles birthday salute. He killed. The salute was called One Night Only: An All-Star Tribute to Don Rickles. Jon started with "One night only, that's all the doctor said, huh? I'll keep my remarks brief." He pointed to the table where Don was seated with Robert De Niro, Martin Scorsese, Regis Philbin, Johnny Depp, and Jerry Seinfeld and said, "Nice wingmen, by the way. You're really getting laid tonight."

A total pro as a stand-up. But that's not where Jon makes his money. He makes it with his show and attitude and ability to invite us into his point of view. He has been incredibly influential in the world of politics and his recent decision to end his time on The Daily Show is yet another major game changer. For all fans of late night and smart political comedy he will be missed.

To give you an idea of how good he is, NBC explored having Jon host Meet the Press. Then, at the end of 2014, Meet the Press devoted a segment to whether Jon Stewart is bad for America. GMAFB (Give me a fucking break). The roundtable talked about whether Jon's show is too snarky or whether it inspires cynicism. My answer: Whorish, moneygrubbing congressmen who lie, cheat, steal, and vote to preserve their jobs rather than spend their time as public servants are why we are cynical. If anything, Jon shining the bright hot light of his show on Washington's hypocrisy and failures is what keeps us from becoming more cynical. He gives us hope that when things are wrong they can be "righted." We need Jon there every night to rip apart the Dick Cheneys of the world who think that torture is the American Way.

Bill Maher is one of my favorites, and not just for his pro-Leno comments. Like Jon Stewart, he's smart, funny, and opinionated and is a great joke teller. I'd rank him second only to Leno in the latter. His only weakness (or maybe it's his strength) is that he sometimes seems willing to take the joke a notch too far, not for the laugh but to make the point that he's willing to cross the line. Once in a while I get the feeling that it's edge for the sake of edge. Having said that, I would add that there is an audience for his brand of comedy, and HBO is the perfect home for him. What I also like about Bill is that he listens to his guests; sure, he has a point he wants to make, but he does it in context and he reacts to what they are saying. Some hosts have a tendency to say what they want, regardless of the context. Not Maher; his approach is all about flow, and for me, it's a must watch.

And Bill is powerful enough to start a national dialogue. When you have the Sunday-morning shows and the cable news shows talking about what you said, you are a trendsetter, not a trend follower. On a show in October 2014, he called out Islam for the violence of some of its adherents, then a few days later he doubled down, when he condemned liberals for being too afraid to denounce violence committed in Islam's name. That started a back-and-forth of criticism and support of Bill; regardless of your feelings about Islam, he has the guts to raise issues that need to be addressed.

If you watch Bill and Jon and John Oliver you have a range of edgy-smart to likable-smart. Think of Leno and Johnny and Dave as three men who told the jokes and let them stand on their own; if they were making a point, it was hidden in the joke. Jon and Bill and John are more like prosecutors. They lay out the case, and Jon uses his clips and acting and personality to "convict" the guilty, Bill uses his sharp edge, and John Oliver uses his outrage.

Stephen Colbert belongs in a special category. He's not a joke teller, he's an actor playing a character, and what's amazing is that he never breaks that character. A truly extraordinary and disciplined comic. It's going to be fascinating to see what he brings to CBS when he takes over for Letterman. Somewhere there's a joke for Stephen about how CBS stands for Colbert Broadcasting System. That joke is my gift to him. Don't even need to send the fifty-dollar freelance fee.

Jimmy Kimmel, like Jimmy Fallon, has a lot of success getting celebrities to "play along" with him. Where he scores with viewers time and time again are his bits like "I'm Fucking Ben Affleck" and in the good rapport he has with comedic guests like Billy Crystal and Marty Short.

Arsenio. Let's not talk about Arsenio 2.0, which was like watching Kobe Bryant try to play in 2014. All the instincts were still there, all the things we liked about him were still there, but it just wasn't the same. It was as if Arsenio had been frozen in 1994 and thawed out, but no one told him it was 2014. I admire him for trying, and in truth, I wish he had never gone off the air in 1994. He was hip before Jimmy Fallon and he had guts—remember his post-LA riots interview. But the world changed and Arsenio had not. I recall watching Arsenio in the old days, and Warren Beatty was on to promote Dick Tracy. Arsenio asked him what it was like to sleep with Madonna, and Warren said, "I don't know, what's it like sleeping with Eddie Murphy?"

That to me is where Arsenio was in 2014, still trapped in that Eddie Murphy era.

As I'm writing this—well, not exactly right now, but in the past few weeks—CBS named James Corden to follow Colbert and take over Craig Ferguson's old spot. I didn't know much about James other than he was a Tony Award winner, but then I got a chance to meet him. We had a great talk for about an hour about late night, and he totally gets it. At the time of this writing, his show has not yet debuted, but after watching him in Gavin & Stacey, I can see why CBS chose him. An awesome talent.

Now, what about the women of late night? Well, now that Chelsea Handler is off the air for a while there's . . . Wait, how can there be no women? I loved Chelsea's show and I'm thrilled she is working on a new show for Netflix. She is funny, has brass ovaries, and is a good joke teller. I really thought she might get Letterman's spot, but it went to Colbert. I actually predicted it. I'm usually right in my predictions about 10 percent of the time, which puts me 70 percent behind most of this book's readers and 9 percent ahead of the average TV executive.

Bottom line: It seems absurd to me that with all the late night shows and slots Chelsea is the only one

in the past few years to have gotten a chance. It seems that some network or cable channel would take a great female comic and give her a shot.

So in addition to Chelsea, which other women should have one? How about Amy Poehler or Amy Schumer? Hey, if there can be two Jimmys, why not two Amys? Either Amy or both would be a great addition to late night. I loved Wanda Sykes's show when it was on; let's give her another shot. And when I'm asked to run a network, I will give them all a show.

I've come up with a pretty good way to categorize the hosts. And it's based on my theory that all of life is just high school on a larger scale and without a curfew. Each host—or at least most of them—is just a grown-up version of people we met in high school.

JOHNNY CARSON—the coolest kid around, captain of the football team

JAY LENO—the funniest guy in the class, well liked, never mean

DAVID LETTERMAN—the sarcastic teacher who everyone wanted for at least one year because he was really funny

BILL MAHER—the wiseass who got suspended

JIMMY FALLON—the class clown, the one who made everyone laugh by being willing to do anything

JIMMY KIMMEL—the senior who was funny, sarcastic, and a little mean to the underclassmen

JON STEWART AND CONAN O'BRIEN—the smartest kids in class who got into Harvard and no one minded, even if they had to go to Boston College

CRAIG FERGUSON AND JOHN OLIVER—the foreign exchange students, the ones who knew how to get weed, not the girl from Trinidad who put out

STEPHEN COLBERT—the star of the drama department

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MONOLOGUE: WHAT MAKES AMERICA LAUGH BEFORE BED BY JON MACKS PDF

"Jon Macks is one of the greatest comedy writers of all time."—Chris Rock

A hilarious, revealing look behind the history and culture of American late-night TV, by a longtime comedy writer for *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

Ever since Johnny Carson first popularized the late-night talk show in 1962 with *The Tonight Show*, the eleven p.m. to two a.m. comedy time slot on network television has remained an indelible part of our national culture. More than six popular late-night shows air every night of the week, and with recent major shake-ups in the industry, late-night television has never been more relevant to our public consciousness than it is today. Jon Macks, a veteran writer for *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, takes us behind the scenes of this world for an in-depth, colorful look at what really makes these hosts the arbiters of public opinion.

From the opening monologue—what’s funny, what’s dangerous, what’s untouchable—to the best vs. worst guests, Macks covers the landscape of late-night comedy and punctuates the narrative with hysterical personal anecdotes, shining the spotlight on some of the very best late night jokes, and drawing from more than half a million of his own jokes written over the span of twenty years. With an insider’s expertise and a laugh-out-loud voice, Macks explains how late-night TV redefines the news and events of any given day, reshapes public opinion, and even creates our national zeitgeist.

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Review

“Macks, a longtime writer for *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*...examines not only what makes something funny, but also how a joke can help shape public opinion and public behavior and what constitutes inappropriate material...readers looking for some behind-the-scenes intel on the big stars and the popular late-night shows won’t be disappointed....Without Jon Stewart on late night, fans may need something else to do: this book should help.”

— Booklist

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"More than one A-list star has dubbed Jon Macks "The Joke Machine," a nickname that's well-earned. Chances are you already know some of his most memorable lines, because he's written them for everyone, from the Beltway to Hollywood and back. If you don't believe me, just read this book. If you do believe me, read it anyway. He owes me money."—Dave Boone

About the Author

JON MACKS is the author of four previous books and was a top writer for *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno for all twenty-two years Leno was on the air. He has also written for eighteen Academy Awards, the Emmy Awards, the Golden Globes, the Tony Awards, and for some of the nation's top comedians, politicians, corporate leaders, and sports commentators. Among the personalities Macks writes for are Billy Crystal, Martin Short, Steve Martin, Hugh Jackman, Terry Bradshaw, and Chris Rock. He lives in Los Angeles.

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King Johnny and the Princes

Although my experience has been primarily with Jay, this is about all the great late-night and sketch shows. Johnny, Jay, Dave, Jimmy Fallon, Arsenio, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, SNL, Bill Maher, Jimmy Kimmel, and Conan—these are the shows and people who I believe have truly helped shape the way America looks at politicians, celebrities, and events.

September 27, 1954, late-night TV was born with host Steve Allen. Two interesting facts: First, *The Tonight Show* was created by Pat Weaver, Sigourney Weaver's father, and second, no one remembers Steve Allen. But they should. He invented the modern talk show format, which, like the horseshoe crab and English anti-Semitism, has remained basically unchanged for eons. If you take a horseshoe crab from today (and they are delicious in a puff pastry) and one from 400 million years ago, they look similar. There are, however, differences in late-night style, for my belief is that each host takes what others have done, builds on it, and gives it a unique twist.

Steve's show in a nutshell: Steve had an opening, music, celebrity interviews, an audience bit, and, I usually hate this word but it is perfect applied to him, a sensibility best described as zany. He also did something that is key to the success of a show—he loved to laugh, and when he cracked up in the middle of a sketch with Don Knotts or Tom Poston or Louis Nye, it signaled to the audience at home that it was time to laugh. Take a look at the old clips or at PBS's great documentary in the *Pioneers of Television* series. You can trace a line directly from Steve Allen to David Letterman.

Steve Allen left as host in early 1957 and NBC decided to tinker with a winning format. Sound

familiar? This next version of The Tonight Show was made more like the Today show, with news and features. The host was the immortal Jazzbo Collins, and it ended up being, what's the word I'm looking for . . . a disaster. NBC realized its mistake and switched back to the late-night format that had worked.

Next came Jack Paar. Jack was urbane and erudite, and you got the feeling that he was a genuinely witty man. What marked Jack's reign at the top was the intellectual quality of the guests. Paar had on guests such as William F. Buckley and Peter Ustinov (Google them), and he reveled in their stories. Jack wasn't as good a joke teller as he was a storyteller. He also was willing to go where no talk-show host had gone before, doing a show in the shadow of the Berlin Wall, and interviewing Fidel Castro as well as presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. He also was the first to show the true power of television, in essence destroying the career of newspaper columnist Walter Winchell. Winchell was an ink-stained bully who went unchallenged whenever he took on those he didn't like. But Jack Paar answered back in his nightly monologues, skewering Winchell. According to Neal Gabler's book about Winchell, it began when Winchell refused to retract an item in his column saying that Paar had marriage problems. Jack used his show to claim Winchell's column was "written by a fly," that "his voice was too high because he wore too tight underwear," and that Winchell had a "hole in his soul" and was a "silly old man." Paper may beat rock, but newspapers don't beat TV. In the end, television 1, newspapers 0. Winchell's may have been the first, but his was certainly not the last career brought down by a late-night monologue.

The problem with fully describing the styles of Steve Allen and Jack Paar is like describing eight-track tapes to people younger than thirty. The fact is, Steve's and Jack's time was before my time, I didn't see them live, and very few tapes of their entire shows exist. I know Ty Cobb was a great ballplayer but I have to take the word of those who wrote about him at the time he played. These shows are like dinosaur fossils. We know dinosaurs existed, we know they were big and important, but we can't really be sure what they looked like. That is unless you're a creationist who believes that the dinosaurs were around a few thousand years ago and that they lived on a diet of ferns and very slow senior citizens. Which reminds me of a great Lewis Black joke: If you believe that dinosaurs and people lived at the same time, you think The Flintstones cartoon is a documentary.

So despite The Tonight Show's having marked sixty years on the air, those earlier years and hosts are too far back in the historical record for me to really comment on. For our purposes, history began in October 1962, when Johnny Carson began his ninety-minute show in New York. Ninety minutes!

And what a first show. Johnny was introduced by Groucho Marx, and guests included Joan Crawford, Tony Bennett, Mel Brooks, Ed Metzger, and Rudy Vallee. Referring to his entrance as he walked onstage, his first joke was "Boy, you would think it was Vice President Nixon."

Right then and there, commenting on people who were in the news, Johnny set the tone for what was to be.

Johnny Carson was the king. Starting out in a world of three networks and not many entertainment choices, Johnny established once and for all what late-night monologues were supposed to do. People watched the evening news at dinnertime, and prime-time TV afterward—usually shows about genies, hillbillies, talking cars, and passengers stranded after a three-hour tour. He was the one who made everyone laugh at the news of the day. It was real-time viewing: no Hulu, no taping to watch later. You turned on the TV at eleven thirty, watched and laughed, had sex, and went to sleep. Or if you were real adventurous, you had sex while watching TV. By the way, I've tried that—the problem is, who has the remote?

Johnny took what Paar did and added great comedic bits plus something else; he made the guests funny in his interaction with them. His jokes were brilliant, and he was the one who made the monologue important by putting the focus on pop culture.

How does he rank? Ted Williams was the best hitter who ever lived, Jim Brown was the greatest running back, Ron Jeremy is the greatest porn star, and Johnny Carson is considered the best late-night host. How do we know this?

Let me make an analogy. If ten people tell you that you have a piece of spinach stuck in your teeth, you have a piece of spinach stuck in your teeth. When every host who came after Johnny idolizes him, when

every observer of late night heaps praise on the same person and says he's the best, then guess what—he is the best.

And twenty-three years after he went off the air, Johnny Carson is still ranked number one in terms of popularity. In a 2014 survey by the people at YouGov research, 32 percent of Americans said Johnny was their favorite talk-show host of all time. Jay was second, at 8 percent, and everyone else was at 6 percent or lower.

One reason for Johnny's popularity is that he was able to use his "desk" and his interviewing style to amplify the comic brilliance of his guests. Look at any YouTube video of Carson with Don Rickles. Johnny was content knowing he was the star, and he could afford to turn the spotlight on his guests and let them shine.

I think the great Billy Wilder said it best about Johnny:

He enchants the invalids and the insomniacs as well as the people who have to get up at dawn. He is the Valium and the Nembutal of a nation. No matter what kind of dead asses are on the show, he has to make them funny and exciting. He has to be their nurse and their surgeon. He has no conceit. He does his work and he comes prepared. If he's talking to an author, he has read the book. Even his rehearsed routines sound improvised. He's the cream of middle-class elegance, yet he's not a mannequin. He has captivated the American bourgeoisie without ever offending the highbrows, and he has never said anything that wasn't liberal or progressive. Every night, in front of millions of people, he has to do the salto mortale [circus parlance for an aerial somersault performed on the tightrope]. What's more, he does it without a net. No rewrites. No retakes. The jokes must work tonight.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I rest my case.

Johnny is the gold standard, and anyone who followed had an impossible standard to match. And Jay Leno came as close to it as anyone could.

Caveat three: I love Jay. He is the best monologist who ever lived, a great human being, and he made me part of the family for twenty-two years. He came to all three of my kids' bar mitzvahs, staying for the service and the reception when even I didn't want to be there; took care of an air ambulance to fly my wife home to LA after she had a stroke in Las Vegas; gave huge annual bonuses out of his own pocket to everyone on the show for twenty-two years; and made sure everyone got six months' pay when the show ended to make sure people didn't lose their houses or have to change their lifestyles. So anyone who says I'm biased in supporting him, they're fucking right. I am. It takes nothing away from Dave or anyone else to say Jay was the perfect and only person to follow Johnny. Or to say that he is the second carving on the Mount Rushmore of late-night hosts, right next to President Carson.

I'll let Bill Maher put Jay in perspective with the remarks she gave when inducting Jay into the Television Academy Hall of Fame.

Bill called Jay's twenty-two years as host "a drive down a highway in some giant, gleaming, pristine luxury car with the competition far in the rearview mirror—except one time when NBC, driving some beat-up clunker, blindsided him and beat the shit out of his beautiful car."

Bill pointed out that Johnny Carson, whom he loves, was not rebellious and edgy, while Jay is tame and mild; the truth is, they both spoke for Middle America. Bill then compared Jay to Israel. He said, "Jay isn't perfect but he's held to a standard I don't think anybody in the world is expected to live up to but him."

I love Bill Maher for that. And I think he nailed it.

Jay did more Tonight Shows than Johnny, and he told more jokes in his monologue than anyone. And, you know something, they didn't always work. Not every joke does. It's why Carson had his joke savers. Joke savers are comments comedians make afterward that let the audience know they're aware that the joke bombed. Example: "That joke went over like Donald Sterling at the NAACP convention." But to put Jay in baseball terms, he had more at bats and more hits than anyone who ever lived, which means by definition he was going to have some outs.

Some people like boxing, some like theater. Very few like both. Some people like Jay, some like Dave. I respect both artists.

To me, David Letterman is a true descendant of Steve Allen. Zany, especially in his earlier years, and uniquely brilliant. When Letterman likes a guest—a Billy Crystal, a Marty Short—he’s an incredible host and the best audience a comic could want. The problem is that Dave can come off as cranky, and in later years has had a tendency to make it clear to the audience that he’s not thrilled with a crappy guest. Johnny seemingly never did that. Johnny would fight to make a guest shine even if nothing was there. Jay had the confidence that even if he had a bad guest, he had already won, because night after night he delivered the best monologue.

Dave is a different joke teller than Jay. With Jay, you listen to the joke, react, and laugh. With Dave, you are often watching him to see how he reacts to the telling of it.

This is a perfect example of a joke where you can picture Dave and know his attitude at that moment: “Are you excited about the new Spider-Man movie? . . . Then you’re twelve.”

And, please, Spider-Man fans, don’t write me to say I’m picking on that franchise. As if Spider-Man fans can write.

Dave’s style raises the question of whether we like to feel uncomfortable watching an uncomfortable host. Dave clearly is not happy in his own skin, and there’s a sense of danger around him. Johnny wasn’t dangerous, nor was Jay. Dave is dangerous, and I mean that in good way. That personality edge is appealing to a lot of people, they love the mischievous part of Dave, the unpredictability, but in the end the reason Jay was number one in the ratings for nineteen years was because Americans don’t like “uncomfortable” and unpredictable late at night as much as critics do. It’s also maybe why Jimmy Fallon dominates the ratings now. He’s just more fun and easier to watch than anyone else on late night.

Conan O’Brien is a truly brilliant writer, and as a host he can be criticized for nothing greater than the fact that for some people he is hard to watch on stage. He has been on the air for twenty-two years but still has some of the same nervous mannerisms he had in 1993. They’re real and not forced . . . which in many ways is the key to his success. Conan has never come off slick; he has always been real and that “going against the grain” is why his fans and supporters are so passionate.

Jimmy Fallon is the perfect host for a new generation of TV viewers. Young and young looking, he is likable in the Leno vein and innovative in a way that connects with younger viewers. He has the willingness to try new things as Conan did in the nineties and has the format in which they can be seen. Jimmy is an excellent impersonator and musician, is nonthreatening

(like Johnny and Jay), and is polite to his guests (like Johnny and Jay), which means that celebrities are willing to go along with what he suggests. And that can result in comedy gold. This may not always go over well with older celebrities like Don Rickles, who, when asked if he was going on Jimmy’s show, kiddingly said, “I don’t play Ping-Pong.” But that’s not who Jimmy is after. He’s not going for retro hip, he’s aiming at young and current hip, and can get a president to slow-jam the news, Emma Stone to lip sync, or have Marty Short and Jerry

Seinfeld play Pictionary. Jimmy has taken late night to a new and next level. He owns it, it’s his show and he clearly loves what he’s doing. He is having so much fun that we have fun just watching him. My prediction: he will be the king (or at least the top prince) for the next twenty years.

Another difference between Jimmy and other hosts is that Jimmy spends less time talking to guests and more time on comedy bits and music. According to communications experts at Grand View University (which is a real college, even though it sounds made up; it’s in Iowa and the mascot is the fighting boll weevil—okay, I made the last part up), Johnny, Dave, Jay, and Seth Meyers all spent 51 percent of their shows talking while Jimmy spends 37 percent. And Jimmy spends 23 percent of his time on comedy and 14 percent on music, a much higher percentage than Jay and Johnny allowed. Jimmy has made his show successful by making it more of a variety show than what in England would be called a chat show.

Jon Stewart has created his own unique late-night show that is influential, smart, and funny. Jon makes his point with commentary and comic acting. For a long time I didn’t realize that he is in fact an incredibly strong stand-up and joke teller. I knew he had done stand-up and heard he was good, but it never

clicked until I watched Jon at the Don Rickles birthday salute. He killed. The salute was called One Night Only: An All-Star Tribute to Don Rickles. Jon started with “One night only, that’s all the doctor said, huh? I’ll keep my remarks brief.” He pointed to the table where Don was seated with Robert De Niro, Martin Scorsese, Regis Philbin, Johnny Depp, and Jerry Seinfeld and said, “Nice wingmen, by the way. You’re really getting laid tonight.”

A total pro as a stand-up. But that’s not where Jon makes his money. He makes it with his show and attitude and ability to invite us into his point of view. He has been incredibly influential in the world of politics and his recent decision to end his time on The Daily Show is yet another major game changer. For all fans of late night and smart political comedy he will be missed.

To give you an idea of how good he is, NBC explored having Jon host Meet the Press. Then, at the end of 2014, Meet the Press devoted a segment to whether Jon Stewart is bad for America. GMAFB (Give me a fucking break). The roundtable talked about whether Jon’s show is too snarky or whether it inspires cynicism. My answer: Whorish, moneygrubbing congressmen who lie, cheat, steal, and vote to preserve their jobs rather than spend their time as public servants are why we are cynical. If anything, Jon shining the bright hot light of his show on Washington’s hypocrisy and failures is what keeps us from becoming more cynical. He gives us hope that when things are wrong they can be “righted.” We need Jon there every night to rip apart the Dick Cheneys of the world who think that torture is the American Way.

Bill Maher is one of my favorites, and not just for his pro-Leno comments. Like Jon Stewart, he’s smart, funny, and opinionated and is a great joke teller. I’d rank him second only to Leno in the latter. His only weakness (or maybe it’s his strength) is that he sometimes seems willing to take the joke a notch too far, not for the laugh but to make the point that he’s willing to cross the line. Once in a while I get the feeling that it’s edge for the sake of edge. Having said that, I would add that there is an audience for his brand of comedy, and HBO is the perfect home for him. What I also like about Bill is that he listens to his guests; sure, he has a point he wants to make, but he does it in context and he reacts to what they are saying. Some hosts have a tendency to say what they want, regardless of the context. Not Maher; his approach is all about flow, and for me, it’s a must watch.

And Bill is powerful enough to start a national dialogue. When you have the Sunday-morning shows and the cable news shows talking about what you said, you are a trendsetter, not a trend follower. On a show in October 2014, he called out Islam for the violence of some of its adherents, then a few days later he doubled down, when he condemned liberals for being too afraid to denounce violence committed in Islam’s name. That started a back-and-forth of criticism and support of Bill; regardless of your feelings about Islam, he has the guts to raise issues that need to be addressed.

If you watch Bill and Jon and John Oliver you have a range of edgy-smart to likable-smart. Think of Leno and Johnny and Dave as three men who told the jokes and let them stand on their own; if they were making a point, it was hidden in the joke. Jon and Bill and John are more like prosecutors. They lay out the case, and Jon uses his clips and acting and personality to “convict” the guilty, Bill uses his sharp edge, and John Oliver uses his outrage.

Stephen Colbert belongs in a special category. He’s not a joke teller, he’s an actor playing a character, and what’s amazing is that he never breaks that character. A truly extraordinary and disciplined comic. It’s going to be fascinating to see what he brings to CBS when he takes over for Letterman. Somewhere there’s a joke for Stephen about how CBS stands for Colbert Broadcasting System. That joke is my gift to him. Don’t even need to send the fifty-dollar freelance fee.

Jimmy Kimmel, like Jimmy Fallon, has a lot of success getting celebrities to “play along” with him. Where he scores with viewers time and time again are his bits like “I’m Fucking Ben Affleck” and in the good rapport he has with comedic guests like Billy Crystal and Marty Short.

Arsenio. Let’s not talk about Arsenio 2.0, which was like watching Kobe Bryant try to play in 2014. All the instincts were still there, all the things we liked about him were still there, but it just wasn’t the same. It was as if Arsenio had been frozen in 1994 and thawed out, but no one told him it was 2014. I admire him for trying, and in truth, I wish he had never gone off the air in 1994. He was hip before Jimmy Fallon and he

had guts—remember his post-LA riots interview. But the world changed and Arsenio had not. I recall watching Arsenio in the old days, and Warren Beatty was on to promote Dick Tracy. Arsenio asked him what it was like to sleep with Madonna, and Warren said, “I don’t know, what’s it like sleeping with Eddie Murphy?”

That to me is where Arsenio was in 2014, still trapped in that Eddie Murphy era.

As I’m writing this—well, not exactly right now, but in the past few weeks—CBS named James Corden to follow Colbert and take over Craig Ferguson’s old spot. I didn’t know much about James other than he was a Tony Award winner, but then I got a chance to meet him. We had a great talk for about an hour about late night, and he totally gets it. At the time of this writing, his show has not yet debuted, but after watching him in Gavin & Stacey, I can see why CBS chose him. An awesome talent.

Now, what about the women of late night? Well, now that Chelsea Handler is off the air for a while there’s . . . Wait, how can there be no women? I loved Chelsea’s show and I’m thrilled she is working on a new show for Netflix. She is funny, has brass ovaries, and is a good joke teller. I really thought she might get Letterman’s spot, but it went to Colbert. I actually predicted it. I’m usually right in my predictions about 10 percent of the time, which puts me 70 percent behind most of this book’s readers and 9 percent ahead of the average TV executive.

Bottom line: It seems absurd to me that with all the late night shows and slots Chelsea is the only one in the past few years to have gotten a chance. It seems that some network or cable channel would take a great female comic and give her a shot.

So in addition to Chelsea, which other women should have one? How about Amy Poehler or Amy Schumer? Hey, if there can be two Jimmys, why not two Amys? Either Amy or both would be a great addition to late night. I loved Wanda Sykes’s show when it was on; let’s give her another shot. And when I’m asked to run a network, I will give them all a show.

I’ve come up with a pretty good way to categorize the hosts. And it’s based on my theory that all of life is just high school on a larger scale and without a curfew. Each host—or at least most of them—is just a grown-up version of people we met in high school.

JOHNNY CARSON—the coolest kid around, captain of the football team

JAY LENO—the funniest guy in the class, well liked, never mean

DAVID LETTERMAN—the sarcastic teacher who everyone wanted for at least one year because he was really funny

BILL MAHER—the wiseass who got suspended

JIMMY FALLON—the class clown, the one who made everyone laugh by being willing to do anything

JIMMY KIMMEL—the senior who was funny, sarcastic, and a little mean to the underclassmen

JON STEWART AND CONAN O’BRIEN—the smartest kids in class who got into Harvard and no one minded, even if they had to go to Boston College

CRAIG FERGUSON AND JOHN OLIVER—the foreign exchange students, the ones who knew how to get weed, not the girl from Trinidad who put out

STEPHEN COLBERT—the star of the drama department

Most helpful customer reviews

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

If You Need a Laugh...

By Brenda Merson

Won on Goodreads - glad I did. Very quick read. Enjoyed reading about the behind the scenes of the late shows & the political happenings. Some very funny jokes. Interesting that he named names. Also interesting that some of the events he mentioned had just happened. Made it a joy to read. I’ll be passing this on for my friends to read & enjoy.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Night Life

By David Wineberg

Jon Macks wrote for Jay Leno, during Leno's entire stint as Tonight Show host. Macks churned out a hundred jokes based on politics and pop culture. Every day. Jay Leno added them to his total of a thousand, and then spent the day whittling the list down to a monologue. Every day. Macks now freelances for various tv shows and personalities, again both pop cultural and political.

The book is immensely gossipy, and therefore ephemeral. Many of the names he drops will be meaningless to readers in 10 years' time. He says at least 25 times the reader should google someone he's talking about if they're under 30. If there's another edition in 10 years, it will be 75 times.

There are really two books here. One is a book of jokes, both Macks' and others, which range from Huh? to hilarious. The other book is a Hollywood tribute to stars. How the hosts handle things, how the guests handle things. How the public handles things about the personalities they skewer. Macks limits himself by loving everyone. Everyone is great, everyone is terrific. It's a Hollywood B movie about working in showbiz. The result is there's no penetrating criticism, no revelations, no new insight. He skims like USA Today. He goes wide but not deep. The most insightful thing Macks says is that in his new timeslot, Stephen Colbert could be the biggest kingmaker – bigger than the Koch brothers and Soros, without spending billions.

You can tell one host's jokes from another by their style. You can just hear them telling these selections on tv. My own favorite in the book is this from David Letterman: Mitt Romney said he liked to fire people. Well, there's a pretty good message to send to Middle America. When Rick Perry heard that, he said "That's nothing. I like to execute people."

Interestingly (to me alone), Macks has an "everyman" he uses for setups. He calls him Joe Doakes. He uses Joe three times in the course of the book. Joe Doakes is the everyman Robert Benchley created for his New Yorker pieces in the 1920s and he played Doakes in his short subjects (For those under 50, google Benchley). I think Jon Macks is deeper than he makes out to be.

David Wineberg

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent fascinating look at late night humor

By straycatmama

I really enjoyed this book! It is very perceptive of the role of late night comedy..in fact it had the same result! One can only handle so many depressing news stories & political mishaps in a day without a little levity to lighten the load! I loved Johnny Carson & Jay Leno. I admire Jimmy Fallon & his youthful exuberance but find it harder to relate to at my age which is somewhere between "the greatest generation" & "generation x" ! This is a really entertaining look at what happens behind the scenes,written by one of the best comedy writers in the business. It is full of great jokes & I would highly recommend it!

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MONOLOGUE: WHAT MAKES AMERICA LAUGH BEFORE BED BY JON MACKS PDF

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Review

"Macks, a longtime writer for The Tonight Show with Jay Leno...examines not only what makes something funny, but also how a joke can help shape public opinion and public behavior and what constitutes inappropriate material...readers looking for some behind-the-scenes intel on the big stars and the popular late-night shows won't be disappointed....Without Jon Stewart on late night, fans may need something else to do: this book should help."

— Booklist

"Jon Macks is one of the funniest and most prolific comedy writers I have worked with. Like a great pitcher, he has a dazzling arsenal of fastballs and curves. Whether it's politics or pop culture, he gets it instantly. And everything he says about me in Monologue is true."—Billy Crystal

"Jon Macks is brilliant craftsman who provides a spectacular insider's view of how the writers do the work and we clowns take the credit."—Martin Short

"After more than twenty years writing for "The Tonight Show," Jon Macks knows what makes a great host and a great guest, a good joke from a bad one, and how to keep the audience at home up past bedtime. In Monologue, he tells the stories-behind-the-stories and proves that late-night TV is still the place where public opinion is formed."—James Carville

"Jon Macks is one of the greatest comedy writers of all time. Just like Billy Preston worked behind the scenes with the Beatles and the Stones, Macks has been the man behind so many great comedians it's impossible to name them all. I'm proud to say there is no comedic situation I'll ever enter without him."—Chris Rock

"After writing 500,000 jokes for Jay Leno, Jon Macks has written a funny and fascinating book about late night TV. He is the Cal Ripken of comedy, turning in an all-star quality performance for two decades. Monologue tells you how he did it, and reminds us all of why we love to laugh in bed."—Paul Begala

"More than one A-list star has dubbed Jon Macks "The Joke Machine," a nickname that's well-earned. Chances are you already know some of his most memorable lines, because he's written them for everyone, from the Beltway to Hollywood and back. If you don't believe me, just read this book. If you do believe me, read it anyway. He owes me money."—Dave Boone

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King Johnny and the Princes

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September 27, 1954, late-night TV was born with host Steve Allen. Two interesting facts: First, The Tonight Show was created by Pat Weaver, Sigourney Weaver's father, and second, no one remembers Steve Allen. But they should. He invented the modern talk show format, which, like the horseshoe crab and English anti-Semitism, has remained basically unchanged for eons. If you take a horseshoe crab from today (and they are delicious in a puff pastry) and one from 400 million years ago, they look similar. There are, however, differences in late-night style, for my belief is that each host takes what others have done, builds on it, and gives it a unique twist.

Steve's show in a nutshell: Steve had an opening, music, celebrity interviews, an audience bit, and, I usually hate this word but it is perfect applied to him, a sensibility best described as zany. He also did something that is key to the success of a show—he loved to laugh, and when he cracked up in the middle of a sketch with Don Knotts or Tom Poston or Louis Nye, it signaled to the audience at home that it was time to laugh. Take a look at the old clips or at PBS's great documentary in the *Pioneers of Television* series. You can trace a line directly from Steve Allen to David Letterman.

Steve Allen left as host in early 1957 and NBC decided to tinker with a winning format. Sound familiar? This next version of The Tonight Show was made more like the Today show, with news and features. The host was the immortal Jazzbo Collins, and it ended up being, what's the word I'm looking for . . . a disaster. NBC realized its mistake and switched back to the late-night format that had worked.

Next came Jack Paar. Jack was urbane and erudite, and you got the feeling that he was a genuinely witty man. What marked Jack's reign at the top was the intellectual quality of the guests. Paar had on guests such as William F. Buckley and Peter Ustinov (Google them), and he reveled in their stories. Jack wasn't as good a joke teller as he was a storyteller. He also was willing to go where no talk-show host had gone before, doing a show in the shadow of the Berlin Wall, and interviewing Fidel Castro as well as presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. He also was the first to show the true power of television, in essence destroying the career of newspaper columnist Walter Winchell. Winchell was an ink-stained bully who went unchallenged whenever he took on those he didn't like. But Jack Paar answered back in his nightly monologues, skewering Winchell. According to Neal Gabler's book about Winchell, it began when Winchell refused to retract an item in his column saying that Paar had marriage problems. Jack used his show to claim Winchell's column was "written by a fly," that "his voice was too high because he wore too tight underwear," and that Winchell had a "hole in his soul" and was a "silly old man." Paper may beat rock, but newspapers don't beat TV. In the end, television 1, newspapers 0. Winchell's may have been the first, but his was certainly not the last career brought down by a late-night monologue.

The problem with fully describing the styles of Steve Allen and Jack Paar is like describing eight-track tapes to people younger than thirty. The fact is, Steve's and Jack's time was before my time, I didn't see them live, and very few tapes of their entire shows exist. I know Ty Cobb was a great ballplayer but I have to take the word of those who wrote about him at the time he played. These shows are like dinosaur

fossils. We know dinosaurs existed, we know they were big and important, but we can't really be sure what they looked like. That is unless you're a creationist who believes that the dinosaurs were around a few thousand years ago and that they lived on a diet of ferns and very slow senior citizens. Which reminds me of a great Lewis Black joke: If you believe that dinosaurs and people lived at the same time, you think The Flintstones cartoon is a documentary.

So despite The Tonight Show's having marked sixty years on the air, those earlier years and hosts are too far back in the historical record for me to really comment on. For our purposes, history began in October 1962, when Johnny Carson began his ninety-minute show in New York. Ninety minutes!

And what a first show. Johnny was introduced by Groucho Marx, and guests included Joan Crawford, Tony Bennett, Mel Brooks, Ed Metzger, and Rudy Vallee. Referring to his entrance as he walked onstage, his first joke was "Boy, you would think it was Vice President Nixon."

Right then and there, commenting on people who were in the news, Johnny set the tone for what was to be.

Johnny Carson was the king. Starting out in a world of three networks and not many entertainment choices, Johnny established once and for all what late-night monologues were supposed to do. People watched the evening news at dinnertime, and prime-time TV afterward—usually shows about genies, hillbillies, talking cars, and passengers stranded after a three-hour tour. He was the one who made everyone laugh at the news of the day. It was real-time viewing: no Hulu, no taping to watch later. You turned on the TV at eleven thirty, watched and laughed, had sex, and went to sleep. Or if you were real adventurous, you had sex while watching TV. By the way, I've tried that—the problem is, who has the remote?

Johnny took what Paar did and added great comedic bits plus something else; he made the guests funny in his interaction with them. His jokes were brilliant, and he was the one who made the monologue important by putting the focus on pop culture.

How does he rank? Ted Williams was the best hitter who ever lived, Jim Brown was the greatest running back, Ron Jeremy is the greatest porn star, and Johnny Carson is considered the best late-night host. How do we know this?

Let me make an analogy. If ten people tell you that you have a piece of spinach stuck in your teeth, you have a piece of spinach stuck in your teeth. When every host who came after Johnny idolizes him, when every observer of late night heaps praise on the same person and says he's the best, then guess what—he is the best.

And twenty-three years after he went off the air, Johnny Carson is still ranked number one in terms of popularity. In a 2014 survey by the people at YouGov research, 32 percent of Americans said Johnny was their favorite talk-show host of all time. Jay was second, at 8 percent, and everyone else was at 6 percent or lower.

One reason for Johnny's popularity is that he was able to use his "desk" and his interviewing style to amplify the comic brilliance of his guests. Look at any YouTube video of Carson with Don Rickles. Johnny was content knowing he was the star, and he could afford to turn the spotlight on his guests and let them shine.

I think the great Billy Wilder said it best about Johnny:

He enchants the invalids and the insomniacs as well as the people who have to get up at dawn. He is the Valium and the Nembutal of a nation. No matter what kind of dead asses are on the show, he has to make them funny and exciting. He has to be their nurse and their surgeon. He has no conceit. He does his work and he comes prepared. If he's talking to an author, he has read the book. Even his rehearsed routines sound improvised. He's the cream of middle-class elegance, yet he's not a mannequin. He has captivated the American bourgeoisie without ever offending the highbrows, and he has never said anything that wasn't liberal or progressive. Every night, in front of millions of people, he has to do the salto mortale [circus parlance for an aerial somersault performed on the tightrope]. What's more, he does it without a net. No rewrites. No retakes. The jokes must work tonight.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I rest my case.

Johnny is the gold standard, and anyone who followed had an impossible standard to match. And Jay Leno came as close to it as anyone could.

Caveat three: I love Jay. He is the best monologist who ever lived, a great human being, and he made me part of the family for twenty-two years. He came to all three of my kids' bar mitzvahs, staying for the service and the reception when even I didn't want to be there; took care of an air ambulance to fly my wife home to LA after she had a stroke in Las Vegas; gave huge annual bonuses out of his own pocket to everyone on the show for twenty-two years; and made sure everyone got six months' pay when the show ended to make sure people didn't lose their houses or have to change their lifestyles. So anyone who says I'm biased in supporting him, they're fucking right. I am. It takes nothing away from Dave or anyone else to say Jay was the perfect and only person to follow Johnny. Or to say that he is the second carving on the Mount Rushmore of late-night hosts, right next to President Carson.

I'll let Bill Maher put Jay in perspective with the remarks he gave when inducting Jay into the Television Academy Hall of Fame.

Bill called Jay's twenty-two years as host "a drive down a highway in some giant, gleaming, pristine luxury car with the competition far in the rearview mirror—except one time when NBC, driving some beat-up clunker, blindsided him and beat the shit out of his beautiful car."

Bill pointed out that Johnny Carson, whom he loves, was not rebellious and edgy, while Jay is tame and mild; the truth is, they both spoke for Middle America. Bill then compared Jay to Israel. He said, "Jay isn't perfect but he's held to a standard I don't think anybody in the world is expected to live up to but him."

I love Bill Maher for that. And I think he nailed it.

Jay did more Tonight Shows than Johnny, and he told more jokes in his monologue than anyone. And, you know something, they didn't always work. Not every joke does. It's why Carson had his joke savers. Joke savers are comments comedians make afterward that let the audience know they're aware that the joke bombed. Example: "That joke went over like Donald Sterling at the NAACP convention." But to put Jay in baseball terms, he had more at bats and more hits than anyone who ever lived, which means by definition he was going to have some outs.

Some people like boxing, some like theater. Very few like both. Some people like Jay, some like Dave. I respect both artists.

To me, David Letterman is a true descendant of Steve Allen. Zany, especially in his earlier years, and uniquely brilliant. When Letterman likes a guest—a Billy Crystal, a Marty Short—he's an incredible host and the best audience a comic could want. The problem is that Dave can come off as cranky, and in later years has had a tendency to make it clear to the audience that he's not thrilled with a crappy guest. Johnny seemingly never did that. Johnny would fight to make a guest shine even if nothing was there. Jay had the confidence that even if he had a bad guest, he had already won, because night after night he delivered the best monologue.

Dave is a different joke teller than Jay. With Jay, you listen to the joke, react, and laugh. With Dave, you are often watching him to see how he reacts to the telling of it.

This is a perfect example of a joke where you can picture Dave and know his attitude at that moment: "Are you excited about the new Spider-Man movie? . . . Then you're twelve."

And, please, Spider-Man fans, don't write me to say I'm picking on that franchise. As if Spider-Man fans can write.

Dave's style raises the question of whether we like to feel uncomfortable watching an uncomfortable host. Dave clearly is not happy in his own skin, and there's a sense of danger around him. Johnny wasn't dangerous, nor was Jay. Dave is dangerous, and I mean that in good way. That personality edge is appealing to a lot of people, they love the mischievous part of Dave, the unpredictability, but in the end the reason Jay was number one in the ratings for nineteen years was because Americans don't like "uncomfortable" and unpredictable late at night as much as critics do. It's also maybe why Jimmy Fallon dominates the ratings now. He's just more fun and easier to watch than anyone else on late night.

Conan O'Brien is a truly brilliant writer, and as a host he can be criticized for nothing greater than the

fact that for some people he is hard to watch on stage. He has been on the air for twenty-two years but still has some of the same nervous mannerisms he had in 1993. They're real and not forced . . . which in many ways is the key to his success. Conan has never come off slick; he has always been real and that "going against the grain" is why his fans and supporters are so passionate.

Jimmy Fallon is the perfect host for a new generation of TV viewers. Young and young looking, he is likable in the Leno vein and innovative in a way that connects with younger viewers. He has the willingness to try new things as Conan did in the nineties and has the format in which they can be seen. Jimmy is an excellent impersonator and musician, is nonthreatening (like Johnny and Jay), and is polite to his guests (like Johnny and Jay), which means that celebrities are willing to go along with what he suggests. And that can result in comedy gold. This may not always go over well with older celebrities like Don Rickles, who, when asked if he was going on Jimmy's show, kiddingly said, "I don't play Ping-Pong." But that's not who Jimmy is after. He's not going for retro hip, he's aiming at young and current hip, and can get a president to slow-jam the news, Emma Stone to lip sync, or have Marty Short and Jerry Seinfeld play Pictionary. Jimmy has taken late night to a new and next level. He owns it, it's his show and he clearly loves what he's doing. He is having so much fun that we have fun just watching him. My prediction: he will be the king (or at least the top prince) for the next twenty years.

Another difference between Jimmy and other hosts is that Jimmy spends less time talking to guests and more time on comedy bits and music. According to communications experts at Grand View University (which is a real college, even though it sounds made up; it's in Iowa and the mascot is the fighting boll weevil—okay, I made the last part up), Johnny, Dave, Jay, and Seth Meyers all spent 51 percent of their shows talking while Jimmy spends 37 percent. And Jimmy spends 23 percent of his time on comedy and 14 percent on music, a much higher percentage than Jay and Johnny allowed. Jimmy has made his show successful by making it more of a variety show than what in England would be called a chat show.

Jon Stewart has created his own unique late-night show that is influential, smart, and funny. Jon makes his point with commentary and comic acting. For a long time I didn't realize that he is in fact an incredibly strong stand-up and joke teller. I knew he had done stand-up and heard he was good, but it never clicked until I watched Jon at the Don Rickles birthday salute. He killed. The salute was called One Night Only: An All-Star Tribute to Don Rickles. Jon started with "One night only, that's all the doctor said, huh? I'll keep my remarks brief." He pointed to the table where Don was seated with Robert De Niro, Martin Scorsese, Regis Philbin, Johnny Depp, and Jerry Seinfeld and said, "Nice wingmen, by the way. You're really getting laid tonight."

A total pro as a stand-up. But that's not where Jon makes his money. He makes it with his show and attitude and ability to invite us into his point of view. He has been incredibly influential in the world of politics and his recent decision to end his time on The Daily Show is yet another major game changer. For all fans of late night and smart political comedy he will be missed.

To give you an idea of how good he is, NBC explored having Jon host Meet the Press. Then, at the end of 2014, Meet the Press devoted a segment to whether Jon Stewart is bad for America. GMAFB (Give me a fucking break). The roundtable talked about whether Jon's show is too snarky or whether it inspires cynicism. My answer: Whorish, moneygrubbing congressmen who lie, cheat, steal, and vote to preserve their jobs rather than spend their time as public servants are why we are cynical. If anything, Jon shining the bright hot light of his show on Washington's hypocrisy and failures is what keeps us from becoming more cynical. He gives us hope that when things are wrong they can be "righted." We need Jon there every night to rip apart the Dick Cheneys of the world who think that torture is the American Way.

Bill Maher is one of my favorites, and not just for his pro-Leno comments. Like Jon Stewart, he's smart, funny, and opinionated and is a great joke teller. I'd rank him second only to Leno in the latter. His only weakness (or maybe it's his strength) is that he sometimes seems willing to take the joke a notch too far, not for the laugh but to make the point that he's willing to

cross the line. Once in a while I get the feeling that it's edge for the sake of edge. Having said that, I would add that there is an audience for his brand of comedy, and HBO is the perfect home for him. What I also like about Bill is that he listens to his guests; sure, he has a point he wants to make, but he does it in context and he reacts to what they are saying. Some hosts have a tendency to say what they want, regardless of the context. Not Maher; his approach is all about flow, and for me, it's a must watch.

And Bill is powerful enough to start a national dialogue. When you have the Sunday-morning shows and the cable news shows talking about what you said, you are a trendsetter, not a trend follower. On a show in October 2014, he called out Islam for the violence of some of its adherents, then a few days later he doubled down, when he condemned liberals for being too afraid to denounce violence committed in Islam's name. That started a back-and-forth of criticism and support of Bill; regardless of your feelings about Islam, he has the guts to raise issues that need to be addressed.

If you watch Bill and Jon and John Oliver you have a range of edgy-smart to likable-smart. Think of Leno and Johnny and Dave as three men who told the jokes and let them stand on their own; if they were making a point, it was hidden in the joke. Jon and Bill and John are more like prosecutors. They lay out the case, and Jon uses his clips and acting and personality to "convict" the guilty, Bill uses his sharp edge, and John Oliver uses his outrage.

Stephen Colbert belongs in a special category. He's not a joke teller, he's an actor playing a character, and what's amazing is that he never breaks that character. A truly extraordinary and disciplined comic. It's going to be fascinating to see what he brings to CBS when he takes over for Letterman. Somewhere there's a joke for Stephen about how CBS stands for Colbert Broadcasting System. That joke is my gift to him. Don't even need to send the fifty-dollar freelance fee.

Jimmy Kimmel, like Jimmy Fallon, has a lot of success getting celebrities to "play along" with him. Where he scores with viewers time and time again are his bits like "I'm Fucking Ben Affleck" and in the good rapport he has with comedic guests like Billy Crystal and Marty Short.

Arsenio. Let's not talk about Arsenio 2.0, which was like watching Kobe Bryant try to play in 2014. All the instincts were still there, all the things we liked about him were still there, but it just wasn't the same. It was as if Arsenio had been frozen in 1994 and thawed out, but no one told him it was 2014. I admire him for trying, and in truth, I wish he had never gone off the air in 1994. He was hip before Jimmy Fallon and he had guts—remember his post-LA riots interview. But the world changed and Arsenio had not. I recall watching Arsenio in the old days, and Warren Beatty was on to promote Dick Tracy. Arsenio asked him what it was like to sleep with Madonna, and Warren said, "I don't know, what's it like sleeping with Eddie Murphy?"

That to me is where Arsenio was in 2014, still trapped in that Eddie Murphy era.

As I'm writing this—well, not exactly right now, but in the past few weeks—CBS named James Corden to follow Colbert and take over Craig Ferguson's old spot. I didn't know much about James other than he was a Tony Award winner, but then I got a chance to meet him. We had a great talk for about an hour about late night, and he totally gets it. At the time of this writing, his show has not yet debuted, but after watching him in *Gavin & Stacey*, I can see why CBS chose him. An awesome talent.

Now, what about the women of late night? Well, now that Chelsea Handler is off the air for a while there's . . . Wait, how can there be no women? I loved Chelsea's show and I'm thrilled she is working on a new show for Netflix. She is funny, has brass ovaries, and is a good joke teller. I really thought she might get Letterman's spot, but it went to Colbert. I actually predicted it. I'm usually right in my predictions about 10 percent of the time, which puts me 70 percent behind most of this book's readers and 9 percent ahead of the average TV executive.

Bottom line: It seems absurd to me that with all the late night shows and slots Chelsea is the only one in the past few years to have gotten a chance. It seems that some network or cable channel would take a great female comic and give her a shot.

So in addition to Chelsea, which other women should have one? How about Amy Poehler or Amy Schumer? Hey, if there can be two Jimmys, why not two Amys? Either Amy or both would be a great

addition to late night. I loved Wanda Sykes's show when it was on; let's give her another shot. And when I'm asked to run a network, I will give them all a show.

I've come up with a pretty good way to categorize the hosts. And it's based on my theory that all of life is just high school on a larger scale and without a curfew. Each host—or at least most of them—is just a grown-up version of people we met in high school.

JOHNNY CARSON—the coolest kid around, captain of the football team

JAY LENO—the funniest guy in the class, well liked, never mean

DAVID LETTERMAN—the sarcastic teacher who everyone wanted for at least one year because he was really funny

BILL MAHER—the wiseass who got suspended

JIMMY FALLON—the class clown, the one who made everyone laugh by being willing to do anything

JIMMY KIMMEL—the senior who was funny, sarcastic, and a little mean to the underclassmen

JON STEWART AND CONAN O'BRIEN—the smartest kids in class who got into Harvard and no one minded, even if they had to go to Boston College

CRAIG FERGUSON AND JOHN OLIVER—the foreign exchange students, the ones who knew how to get weed, not the girl from Trinidad who put out

STEPHEN COLBERT—the star of the drama department

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