



She Always Knew How: A Personal Biography of Mae West

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In "She Always Knew How," her wonderful new biography of legendary actress Mae West, acclaimed biographer Charlotte Chandler draws on a series of interviews she conducted with the star just months before her death in 1980. From their first meeting, where West held out a diamond-covered hand in greeting and lamented her interviewer's lack of jewels, to their farewell, where the star was still gamely offering advice on how to attract men, Mae West and Charlotte Chandler developed a warm rapport that glows on every page of this biography. Actress, playwright, screenwriter, and iconic sex symbol Mae West was born in New York in 1893. She created a scandal -- and a sensation -- on Broadway with her play *Sex* in 1926. Convicted of obscenity, she was sentenced to ten days in prison. She went to jail a convict and emerged a star. Her next play, *Diamond Lil*, was a smash, and she would play the role of *Diamond Lil* in different variations for virtually her entire film career.

In Hollywood she played opposite George Raft, Cary Grant (in one of his first starring roles), and W. C. Fields, among others. She was the number one box-office attraction during the 1930s and saved Paramount Studios from bankruptcy. Her films included some notorious one-liners -- which she wrote herself -- that have become part of Hollywood lore: from "too much of a good thing can be wonderful" to "When I'm good, I'm very good. When I'm bad, I'm better." Her risque remarks got her banned from radio for a dozen years, but behind the clever quips was Mae's deep desire, decades before the word "feminism" was in the news, to see women treated equally with men. She saw through the double standard of the time that permitted men to do things that women would be ruined for doing.

Her cause was sexual equality, and she was shrewd enough to know that it was perhaps the ultimate battleground, the most difficult cause of all. In addition to her extensive interviews of Mae West, Chandler also spoke with actors and directors who worked with and knew the star, the man with whom she lived for the last twenty-seven years of her life, as well as her closest assistant at the end of her life. Their comments and insights enrich this fascinating book. "She Always Knew How" captures the voice and spirit of this unique actress as no other biography ever has.

She Always Knew How: A Personal Biography of Mae West Details

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Richard Bennett says

An interesting and funny book on the life of Mae West, a lady who knew how to control her career while other stars were being kicked around the movie lots. She had a Broadway career before starring in movies, and another Broadway career afterwards, so she was always busy and in demand, but what gets me is that she wrote her own lines, plays and books, and wanted full control of her characters in the movies. She didn't start appearing in the movie-flicks until she was around 40, but by then she was already an established star who knew what she wanted and had plans. Strange thing is, she didn't start out in life being poor and work her way up, she was born into an established home and loved her mother and father, brother and sister. After arriving in California for films, she invested in diamonds and land, the land to build on and the diamonds to wear & play with ... she had tons of clothes, being a showstopper for what she wore on stage and film, and exuded sensuality without taking them off.

Her off-screen persona was a bit different than her stage character, and she cared for her family and others who worked for her when they were down on their luck or in poor health. She outlived all her family, except for one sister, living until the age of 87. Strange how she was born in 1893 and was locked up in jail for 10 days for obscenity in the 20th century; times have sure changed since her early years.

A sad note ... the person she loved most, her mother, died at age 56, and Mae spent years getting mixed-up in seances and spiritualism trying to get back in touch with her Mom ... also, Mae had been married once, when she was very young, and then spent the rest of her life never marrying again, because as she says, she was married to her career.

But other than that, this is a good read, and Charlotte Chandler did a great job in bringing us Mae West.

Julie says

She Always Knew How: A Personal Biography of Mae West by Charlotte Chandler is a 2009 Simon & Schuster publication.

I have always wanted to know more about Mae West but have never seemed able to find the time to watch any documentaries over her life or read a biography about her, but I came across this book and decided to make the time to read it.

This biography is organized the way I think a bio should be, in chronological order. There is a brief section on Mae's childhood, her close relationship with her mom, and her childhood performances.

From there the author takes us through Mae's stage plays which got her thrown in jail due to the subject matter, which often revolved around homosexuals and drag queens, which would have been very scandalous in those days.

This is just one example of how far ahead of her time Mae was. She was bawdy, controversial, with no

shortage of confidence, but was also shy, surrounding herself with family and only a few close friends.

This biography gave highlights of Mae's Hollywood years, breaking down the synopsis of the movie and the characters Mae portrayed. Mae spoke about each film, relating her thoughts about the movie, her personal experiences while shooting the film and her relationship with her co-stars.

Mac's personal life was also examined and the nature of her relationship with men, and the one guy she really did love, who was with her to the very end.

Since I am not an aficionado in Mae West, there were many facts related here that I was unaware of. I felt that the author did indeed know this larger than life lady intimately and did strive to honor her memory as well capture her spirit.

I loved that Mae's voice was a big part of this book, and the insights came from largely from Mae's own words. However, I got the distinct impression that Mae remained in character for the most part and I'm not sure if anyone except those very close to her ever really got to know the real Mae West.

This book did not dig too terribly deep into Mae's personal life and never addressed any of the lurid rumors that have cropped up over the years. It's obvious the author glossed over quite of few areas and totally ignored anything that might have tainted Mae's image.

Mae's first love was her career and so perhaps it was fitting that the focus of the book was primarily on her work.

Now that I have a nice list of Mae's more notable performances, I intend to look those movies up and watch them.

I would like to find a more in depth bio that might give me more insight into Mae's true nature and personality off camera, but overall this is an interesting read, and I have to say I really enjoyed Mae's personal musings more than anything else.

This is not a bad way introduce yourself to Mae West, if you are not familiar with her. Her quotes are used every day and still resonate. She lived her life, her way, on her own terms, and never once apologized, which for a woman of her era was groundbreaking and not always an easy accomplishment.

3.5 stars

Carol says

I recommend this biography of Mae West because it describes her single-mindedness about her career and how that aided her success. She was the worshipped eldest daughter of a Brooklyn family, of German descent, who was stage-struck from early childhood. She bathed in the strong approval of her parents who supported her vaudeville career as a child singer and dancer. Her mother encouraged Mae's devotion to her self and to a career. There was a teen-age marriage, which didn't last because Mae put her career first, but there were never, ever any children. Mae lavished her focus on her health, her presentation to the public, and

her material. She developed her stage persona early and stuck to it. She demanded approval of her lines, indeed, wrote most of them herself. She had little formal education but a formidable understanding of what it took to preserve her unusual appeal. (She also salted away a lot of money, never having been taken advantage of by a spouse, as so many Hollywood actresses have been.) She took care that only her public persona ever was on display. I remember the days when a "Hollywood Star" would not venture outdoors unless s/he were well-dressed and groomed, and I sort of miss it. In Mae's middle years, she had a long-term male protector, and upon his death, another long-term live-in protector who lasted three decades until her death in her late 80's. I was intrigued by her single-minded devotion to her career, and thought how many other great female successes -- in science, in medicine -- were unmarried or childless and able to maintain an intense focus. I did not see Mae as selfish, indeed, she was generous to family and friends. Rather, she was dedicated.

Sean Wicks says

Considering that Mae West was known as a sexpot, unafraid of her sexuality or sex, it is quite surprising that this bio of her paints a picture of a woman not surprisingly comfortable in her own skin and open in her love of men and sexuality, but also very generous and considerate with no real "controversy" in her career or personal life to speak of.

Most of the events come straight from the subject's own words as the author outlines how she met Miss West and was immediately told that it was rare that a "woman would be given access to her" and that West would be more open to a man. West is always dropping lines through the text about men and how she prefers men and sex....but while reading this even the fact that she openly had mirrors on her ceiling because she liked to watch what she was doing in bed isn't anything remotely shocking at all. It becomes clear that although her position on sex is genuine, much of her persona was a customized one so as to not disappoint her fans. She had a lovely childhood with a mother she adored, and a father - a former boxer - who was a decent man so no crazy stage parents or bad childhood like others I have read.

The problem with the book is depth, or the overall lack of. The Hollywood years get very little detailed attention with merely a paragraph or two setting up each film, a description, a quick aftermath and then move onto the next. The later years get much more detailed as the author gets more opinions from people around her (lacking in the earlier sections) but again it paints a picture of a generous woman who was very private and almost modest even while she would get excited over nude pictures from men who sent her fan letters.

It's not that her life was boring that makes the book somewhat bland, it's the approach. There isn't enough information covering the Hollywood years - which is what I was really interested in - nor enough outside personal opinions to offering outside observations, that is until the later years and those chapters are way more interesting because of it.

Kelly Parmelee says

A wonderful biography of Mae West, the person. She truly paved the way through her plays, films and live performances for women to be able to enjoy sex on equal terms with men while making the situations humorous. Mae West, the person behind the character she created, was and continues to be an endlessly fascinating figure (pun intended). If you're a Mae West fan or if you're curious about her, this book is highly

recommended!

Colleen says

One day, a young go-getting journalist named Charlotte Chandler managed to get in to see Mae West. Which was difficult since she was a woman, and Mae West didn't like being interviewed by women--even though a self described "feminist", West preferred being around men since it allowed her to be in her persona.

And this book is the result. It's not a biography. It's a 300 page interview. There is very little background information or putting things West says in perspective, and I'd be very curious if this was word for word (was this interview taped? if it wasn't taped than it's like 300 questionable pages).

The author interjects herself into the book a lot--Mae West approved of how she ate, didn't approve that when she tried to get the author to try on some lacy nightgown, Chandler put it on over her street clothes (weird.....), etc etc.

However, the star of it is Mae West, so still a fascinating book and it has a lot of introspection from West about her career and life. There are neat tidbits in here that aren't elsewhere--her closeness with Edith Head for example. I went through my biographies of Edith Head after reading this, and Mae West is barely mentioned in them. However, in this book, part of Edith's rise to the head designer in Paramount was due to West, and West did reference her a lot and use her till the end of her life, so that was a fun fact. West was fluent in German, since her mother was from Germany and conversed with next door neighbor Dietrich was also pretty neat. I knew Dietrich & West were buddies (to be a fly on a wall for their conversations), and West's observation that Dietrich was lonely & insecure is something I've actually never read before. Dietrich and Garbo hanging out and talking in German together was also fun to read about.

So little asides here and there a good book, it just could have been much, much better with all that material to work with.

Rachel says

I had no idea what a raunchy person West was! The author based her writing on multiple personal interviews. She clearly communicates West's perspectives, and the language is clean, except for the fact that her entire life's focus is on sex and expanding the acceptability of sex in entertainment.

Larry Hostetler says

I was surprised at how much I enjoyed this book. Not only did it paint a good picture of the woman who said "goodness had nothing to do with it" but it also gave insight into much of 20th century acting, from vaudeville through Broadway and the movies into television.

Mae West is portrayed as the protector of an image, and one of the most famous images in entertainment history. "Diamond Lil" was her creation and her career, with a sexual insinuation unmatched. Her humor and pushing of boundaries is well-known, but I was unaware of other ways in which she pushed boundaries, for

the gay and other minority communities.

She was a smart woman who made a fortune investing in California real estate, sufficient to be able to support not only her love for diamonds but also family members and friends.

Much of the book includes perspectives from those who knew her, and most of the book are her words as rendered to the author in a series of interviews late in Mae's life.

The biggest complaint I have about the book is the inclusion of synopses of the storylines of plays and films in which Mae appeared. I found it distracting and a diversion rather than adding to the portrait.

There are depths in the portrayal that show Mae in a fashion she would not have shown herself. Compassion, vulnerability, intelligence, and wisdom combine with a controlling nature and some oddities of behavior and preference to make for an interesting person.

While I started the book for its entertainment value I appreciated the result being an insight into entertainment history, particularly of the first half of the 20th century.

Shirley says

This book is part biography and part interviews of Mae West. The author organized the chapters chronologically starting with her parents' background and her childhood. About 95% of the chapters are long quotes by Mae West. Mae loves to talk about herself.

I have the impression that the author just let her talk and talk was what Mae did. Mae West talked about everything; her family background, how she got started in show business, people she worked with including how she got Carey Grant his first movie role, her marriage...and divorce, etc.

If you are interested in the early days of show business, then you might like this book. There is a lot of info about the early days of vaudeville and the early days of talking pictures.

I wish the author would include other sources of info instead of just relying on conversations with Mae. It would be nice to hear other people's impression of Mae West such as her co-stars or directors. However, I like that the author includes a detailed synopsis of each of Mae's movie or show throughout each chapter. Because I have never seen any of her movies, the synopsis satisfied my curiosity about the kind of work Mae did.

Marnie Zorn says

"I made up my mind very early that I would never love another person as much as I loved myself" .. Despite coming across as self-centered it seems she also had a genuine and generous side..

Corrie Ventura says

I loved it! I felt like I was having an intoxicating conversation with Mae West. A conversation littered with secrets of success and magic!

Freder says

The vast majority of the book seems dictated by West herself. It's derived in large part from extended interviews with West, and insofar as it presents West in her own voice, it's a delight. But it feels incomplete as an objective biography and I was left wanting to know more; both about her and about Paul Novak, the man who was her husband in everything but the legal sense, and who seems to have taken nothing from the estate when she died.

Michelle says

Mae West and her one liners had me on the first page. She is so entertaining, vivid and funny. I have always loved her a little more than average, and this boom shows a glimpse into the real Mae, that I bet most fans didn't know. I sure didn't know most of this.

Only real complaint is the author. She offers very generic, bland descriptions that give zero insight into what it was like to be one of the only people in history to interview Mae West. I would have described every gesture, movement, pieces of furniture...All this lady did was make a chronological list of Maes movies, and print quote after quote. Lucky for us all we really need are Mae's quotes. She wrote this book, not the author.

The only time it got remotely personal was at the end. Hearing about her and Paul brought tears to my eyes. Picturing her final days brought even more. Mae West is a powerhouse. This world needs to remember and respect her forever...they don't make 'em like this anymore.

Edyta says

The only conclusion I have after reading this is this: Mae West was delusional.

Yes, she was a star, and she was an icon, but she saw herself as this amazing demigod with no faults. She had the best mother, best voice, no stage fright, best figure, she was talented and could speak with ghosts. And every man she ever met fell hopelessly in love with her.

Wow. Just wow. Was there anything she couldn't do? I mean she did know she cannot i.e. fly, right? Because the way she spoke about herself... I think she might have, if only she wished it.

But as annoying as this was, reading about Mae West was fascinating. Her words depicted a grand time in history of cinematography and I can easily believe that she rose to super stardom. She was quite a character. Though, I think that nowadays she wouldn't stand a chance.

Anyway, worth to read for all the juicy anecdotes.

Clista says

For such a character, I found the book a bit flat. Mae was a very focused and driven person who had her eyes set on becoming a performer from a very early age. She's actually a great exemplar of Law of Attraction in motion, in that she dreamed it and then she accomplished it, never wavering in her belief that she would get there. She is completely, unapologetically self-absorbed, yet also generous and loyal. Given the time that she lived in, she was also ahead of her time in wanting to be financially and emotionally independent. The greatest love of her life was her mother, although she had several long term relationships with men, including a much younger lover who was devoted to her until her death.
