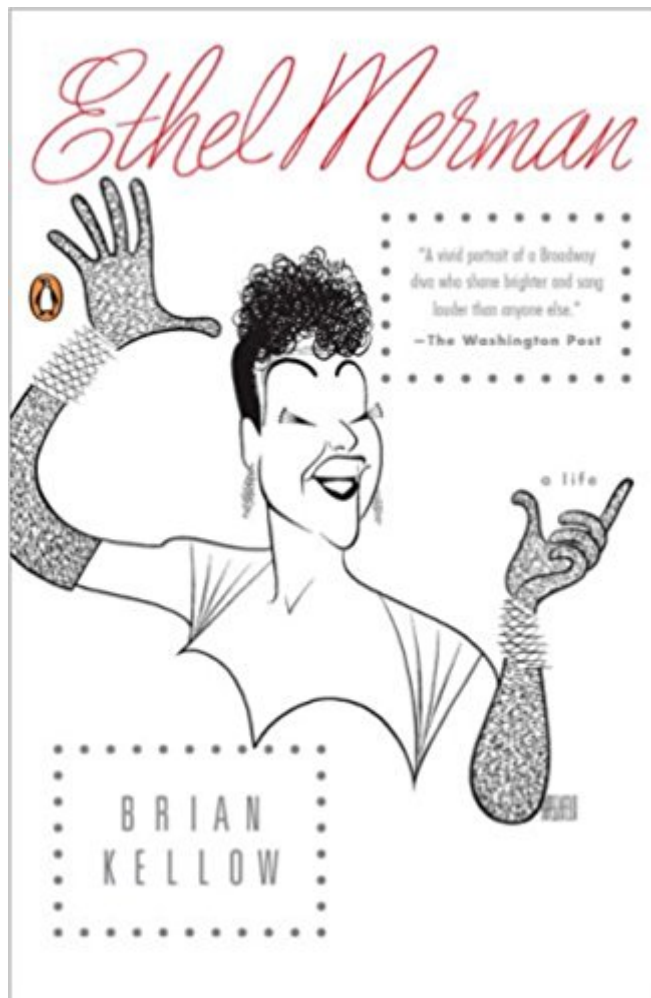


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Ethel Merman: A Life



Synopsis

“Kellow’s chronology is dishy and seamless; he understands the dynamics of the theater world and makes you feel the exhilaration of an evolving hit and the frustrations inherent in working with a performer like Merman.” •The New York Times Book Review
 “[Kellow] has painted a vivid portrait of a Broadway diva who shone brighter and sang louder than anyone else.” •The Washington Post BookWorld
 More than twenty years after her death, Ethel Merman continues to set the standard for American musical theater. The stories about the supremely talented, famously strong-willed, fearsomely blunt, and terrifyingly exacting woman are stuff of legend. But who was Ethel Agnes Zimmermann, really? Brian Kellow’s definitive biography of the great Merman is superb, and the first account to examine both the artist and the woman with as much critical rigor as empathy. Through dozens of interviews with her colleagues, friends, and family members, Kellow (author of *Can I Go Now?: The Life of Sue Mengers, Hollywood’s First Superagent*) traces the arc of her life and her thirty-year singing career to reveal many surprising facts about Broadway’s biggest star.

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (October 28, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143114204

ISBN-13: 978-0143114208

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.7 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 30 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #580,833 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #227 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Theatre #267 in Books > Arts & Photography > Performing Arts > Theater > Broadway & Musicals #3065 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies

Customer Reviews

With dueling Merman biographies being released just prior to her birth centennial in 2008 (see review above of Caryl Flinn’s *Brass Diva*), Kellow’s slimmer tome is the livelier of the two with new interviews with friends, family and co-workers bringing vibrant life and clarity to even familiar anecdotes. Kellow (*The Bennetts: An Acting Family*) is less interested in digging for psychological

insights and bluntly paints a more temperamental portrait of the Broadway belter, but readers will be swept up in the colorful eyewitness accounts of her stage triumphs (Anything Goes; Call Me Madam; Annie Get Your Gun; Gypsy; Hello, Dolly!) and her less successful attempts to move from stage to screen (There's No Business Like Show Business; It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World). With four failed marriages (including a legendarily short one to Ernest Borgnine—she flew back alone from their honeymoon after just two days), a distant relationship with her son and daughter (who died of an accidental overdose in 1967) and volatile personality, there's plenty of diva drama. She found a younger audience with appearances on Love Boat and a show-stopping cameo in Airplane!, but an inoperable brain tumor finally silenced the bombastic singer in 1984. Testimonies from those who were there during her decline bring an emotional wallop to her final days. Photos not seen by PW. (Nov. 5) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“Kellow’s chronology is dishy and seamless; he understands the dynamics of the theater world and makes you feel the exhilaration of an evolving hit and the frustrations inherent in working with a performer like Merman.” • The New York Times Book Review “Kellow [Kellow] has painted a vivid portrait of a Broadway diva who shone brighter and sang louder than anyone else.” • The Washington Post BookWorld “Detailed and perceptive.” • The Atlantic Monthly “Finally, an up-close and personal Merman who is a whole person. Thanks to this compelling biography, I finally understand how Merman truly defined what was and wasn’t worthy of Broadway. Don’t miss this one.” • OutSmart “Once you start reading you’ll find it difficult to put down.” • Talkin’ Broadway “If I had to pick one book to read, it would probably be Kellow’s. . . . Kellow, meanwhile, manages to paint a much more vivid portrait of Merman as a Broadway icon, mother and wife four times over. . . . While Kellow still has admiration for his subject, he dishes on the Diva. It’s a much more enjoyable read and its lighthearted tone is much more in keeping with the musical comedies for which La Merm is best known.” • Misha Davenport, Chicago Sun-Times “Kellow nimbly sidesteps the booby traps other writers have hit while writing about Ethel Merman. Though he gives her temperament its due, he admirably avoids overloading his account with tales of a sometime-outrageous diva. . . . Kellow displays a keen sense of how and why Merman worked, and his profile of her personal life is an aching refrain worthy of the musical Follies.” • Kirkus Reviews “A wonderfully vivid portrait of a unique

Broadway star. You can almost hear Merman's trumpet voice with every turn of the page.

• John Kander, composer of *Chicago* and *Cabaret*

“In *Ethel Merman: A Life*, Brian Kellow paints a portrait of Ethel the larger-than-life Broadway star, and Ethel the woman, emotionally crippled offstage by personal tragedy. This book is engrossing, emotional, and entertaining.”

• Marin Mazzie

“Thank you, Brian! I am so grateful to you for giving us the human Merman. She has been so often satirized, sent up, and imitated that it is wonderful to have a lucid portrait of her inimitable career. She lived and worked the whole history of Broadway. It's about time she rates this loving and truthful tribute.”

• Tyne Daly

“Ethel Merman was unique, and so is this book. A fascinating read and a thorough theatrical history of her time. Loved it!!”

• Jane Powell

This painstaking, eloquent biography explains why Merman was the greatest Broadway star--across three generations. Her exacting, blunt personality was perfect for enunciating words and musical phrases in large theaters before microphones. She was, indeed, the Guiditta Pasta (for whom *Norma* was written) of America: she illuminated the genius of Cole Porter's lyrics and music, George Gershwin's Broadway wit and melancholy, Irving Berlin's All-American anthems. She had a particular genius for rhymes within rhymes, socko syllables heard in the last row and perfect comic timing. Her thrilling presence had to be seen and felt in person to be believed although records capture much of her history. As a ten year old I saw her in *Gypsy* and am grateful to this day. Because Brian Kellow has written a deeper portrait of this American icon, I know now I was right at that young age to sense that I shouldn't ask for an autograph. Inside her soul, hidden by NOISE, there was anger and vacancy. Very sad to know. Kellow carefully shows us her dark side, lacking in self reflection, her pain over failed marriages and her damaged children. She was as relentless as Mama Rose. And also the greatest musical comedy star this country has known: she was so disciplined, rarely missed a performance and could only be described as thrilling from first to the last. Her voice was more accurate and even delicate on high notes in the thirties. Towards the end she was blunt. Her inner sadness never showed in her performances, although one could intuit the "laugh, clown, laugh" that stood behind her phenomenal strength.

As someone with only a superficial knowledge of Ethel Merman and her place in the American musical theater, this book was a revelation. It's not only a fascinating and lively portrait of this one-of-a-kind show biz icon, the book also provides some terrific insight into how the Broadway

musical evolved with the ever changing currents of American culture. Kellow wisely avoids the biographer's temptation to write an "authoritative" version of his subject's life. He avoids the pitfalls of the academic tome and instead offers the reader a vivid portrait of Merman's professional triumphs and personal failures. Kellow sketches the arc of Merman's life through vivid anecdotes, the memories of those who knew her, and, most importantly, through Merman's own words. For me, the latter was the most enlightening and entertaining. Bossy, brassy, sharp-tongued and often vulgar, Merman was at heart a kid from Queens who, Kellow reminds us, despite her success and the circles she ran in, would never be accused of pretentious affectation. And to me, that's the real joy of this book. Kellow lets us see Merman warts and all. This is certainly no hagiography, but Kellow clearly has affection and respect for this legend of the musical theatre. His prose is vibrant and evocative as he deftly shows the reader how Merman owned the stage like no one before or since. And Kellow doesn't sentimentalize Merman's ill fortune offstage. In the end, Merman was incapable of being anything but the persona she had created, and in the end, that was all she was left with. Kellow understands that this is the heart of the Merman story-- the monumental achievements onstage and the disappointments, betrayals and tragedies of her life offstage. Finally, I have to say that there were many hilarious moments in this book. Kellow deftly lets these moments play without embellishment. Often it's Merman in her own words who provides the laughs. But any book about Merman would have to include the incredible number of show biz legends she either knew or worked with. Many of these moments are terrific but one bit in particular concerning a moment onstage between a young Betty Grable and the incomparable Bert Lahr nearly caused me to crack a rib with laughter. This book is a real page turner and not just for people with an interest in Merman or the American musical theater. You don't need to be a Merman fan or a Broadway fan to thoroughly enjoy this compelling portrait of a time when American power and American culture were ascendant and Ethel Merman was the confident voice of a nation hitting its stride.

I've read three of Mr. Kellow's biographies, so I feel I can speak from an informed perspective. His writing is intelligent, introspective and thoroughly researched. He writes, not to the lowest common denominator in the reading public, but rather to bright, educated people who want something more than mind candy or brain fluff. I've always bought a biography because of the subject, not the author. Well, I can say whole-heartedly that I shall be looking for the next book, regardless of subject, by this talented writer.

This is a must-read for any Broadway Musical fan or historian. It makes clear that Ethel Merman

was an amazing talent, consummate perfectionist, and flat out miserable human being. Fascinating!

As an oldtimer(77) I was always in awe of Merman's extraordinary powerful voice. I did meet the lady once, and became a bigger fan. This book is a wonderful record of her life. It has great detail, is kindly to her - we read how demanding she could be, but rightly so. I loved every page of the book, and also it has some interesting facts about the shows she starred in. I can highly recommend this book to anyone who was a fan of Ethel. Unfortunately you have to be a "Senior" to appreciate her story. I loved it. !!

An excellent and knowledgeable biography by the regular writer of a column on 'divas' for Opera News!

WARNING: NO PHOTOS IN KINDLE VERSION. The book is enjoyable. I wish I had had a chance to see Ethel Merman in person. Great stories about her life and Broadway. The lack of photos in the Kindle version is just so frustrating--no warning. That's not right.

A great read. Very entertaining and well researched.

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