

Column Kelly Carlin writes about her dad George, but it's not 'Daddy Dearest'



Kelly Carlin's new book, "A Carlin Home Companion," is a memoir about her family and growing up as the only child of the famous comedian. (Dan Dion)



By **Patt Morrison** · **Contact Reporter**

Patt Morrison Asks

SEPTEMBER 9, 2015, 5:00 AM

Sure, he was funny, and your friends probably thought he was cool, but George Carlin was your dad, after all, and well, that can get complicated. In Kelly Carlin's new book, "A Carlin Home Companion," the comedian's daughter untangles the paradoxes of her life among "the Three Musketeers," her father's nickname for their family. Her master's degree in psychology comes in handy — along with a saving sense of humor. The memoir about the family her father didn't talk about in his performances follows a solo stage performance the onetime TV writer built around her life then and now — the afflictions and affection of a daughter who found herself sometimes having to be the parent. In it, George

Carlin emerges not only as a beloved and seminal figure in comedy but as a husband and the father of a loving yet discerning-eyed daughter.

The book's cover pictures you with your father. So many people loved him; how much of the book is for them and how much for you?

I would say 100% for both. I didn't get to tell my story while I was living it because of our dysfunction and denial and my fear of sharing it. Then there's the dance with my dad when I did want to start telling my story, and how uncomfortable it made him feel. And after my mom died, it became a real mission. Being trained as a therapist and seeing the importance of understanding your own story, part of my job was to share the pain, and then share the recovery and the hope too.

How did the book and your solo show come about?

After my dad died, I was on a cruise with Lewis Black; he was bringing a bunch of comics. He said, "Why don't you just play some clips of your dad and tell some family stories?" I did, and it was a huge success. I realized that because dad died so suddenly, fans didn't get a chance to say goodbye; this solo show was a way for fans to have some closure and experience his comedy one more time, while getting introduced to me and my story. The book is the next iteration. Some people think it's a biography of my father; it's not. It's definitely my memoir.

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— Kelly Carlin

But it's not "Daddy Dearest."

That was always my father's fear, that [people] were going to think that. When Mackenzie Phillips' memoir came out [*alleging a sexual relationship with her father, musician John Phillips*], I remember thinking, "Well, I'll never get a book deal because there's nothing that salacious in my story!" There's alcoholism and chaos, but my parents really loved me and did their best. Part of me absolutely wanted to humanize my father. I know that's risky, that some people won't admire him as before. But he's not "Daddy Dearest" — he's just a human who struggled with his family and his creative endeavors and at times his ego, just like all of us.

Even if he wasn't very public about his private life, he completely believed in authenticity. He [seemed] like Everyman onstage, that guy you could have a beer with, and that's who he was in real life. It became

apparent to me I'm [like] Richard Pryor, letting his guts spill out on stage, more than my father, whose highly perfected, highly constructed essays [were] memorized and presented to the audience.

Must comedy arise from angst and pain?

Especially in families, I think humor is used to soften edges, to keep relationships connected even though there's pain. Comedy can come out of anything, but comedy that comes out of misery is a special kind, and a special kind of person rises above the darkness in his life through humor. It's a beautiful survival tactic.

For the first time, all the finalists for the 2015 Thurber Prize for American Humor are women. I remember the Christopher Hitchens broadside that women aren't funny.

That's gotten more ridiculous: My heroes were always women. Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Lily Tomlin — those three lifted me up as a child. Watching "Saturday Night Live," of course Bill Murray was funny, but who fascinated me? Laraine Newman and Gilda Radner.

It's an incredible time for women in comedy right now. Tig Notaro and Amy Schumer inspire me, and they're 20 years younger.

You wrote about women who stifle their creative voices "in the service of safety and love."

That was the message we'd get from every episode [of "I Love Lucy"]: "Oh, Lucy, you're crazy for wanting that." Yet she was voicing the very thing screaming inside of women before the women's movement.

In my family, my dad had the voice, and his voice counted because the world believed in it and saw it as an incredibly powerful, true voice. But inside my family, it was, well, only his truth is going to get paid attention to, and I'm not quite sure what my truth is yet and it feels dangerous and possibly wrong to have it. My mom would never show her writing or painting to anybody; it broke my heart.

That's the big tossup: Do I step outside the tribe and make my own way? But when things get scary, who has my back? In the 1960s, my dad lived in the tribe, doing his best to be the mainstream guy, and it almost killed him emotionally. He had to step outside of it.

He discouraged you from performing in comedy, saying it was so different from when he began. Was that true?

It was different. I think it was a combination. I think he wanted to protect me from the precariousness of that life. He always believed he got very lucky and might have thought there's only enough luck for one Carlin. Of course, he also worked his ass off and he was a genius.

I had no desire to be a stand-up, to create laughter every 15 to 25 seconds. But being onstage, saying things

to an audience, yes, I do want that.

This is the year of political dynasties; is there such a thing as a humor dynasty?

I think there is, a bit. Rain Pryor is a good friend of mine, and she's got a beautiful solo show. Bridey Elliott is Chris Elliott's daughter, the granddaughter of Bob Elliott [*of the Bob and Ray comedy team*]. Some doors can be opened for us, which is lovely, but you have to bring something with you — that's the real test.

What comes through in the book is the value of celebrity versus its costs.

That fascinates me, the benefits of it and the trap of it at the same time. Having grown up in this town and watching my friends' parents and a lot of my friends go through this, it's Shakespearean. At the same time it opens doors for me, it [also makes me ask,] "How do I bring my true self to the work and not just do the work that opens more doors?" The trap starts to happen right away.

Comedy used to be the thing you saw when you were out on the town. Now, with the likes of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, it suffuses the culture.

We could begin with Mark Twain and Will Rogers, but since Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl came onto the scene, comedy became more than just entertainment. When my dad's "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television" helped [lead to a Supreme Court decision about how to regulate speech on broadcast TV], it stepped into even more of a role as a shaper of culture. Then there were the Smothers Brothers, "Laugh-In." In 1988, my dad began doing much more direct political humor. It's been an evolution, but [there's] always been the court jester, the fool, whose job it was to speak truth to power without getting his head cut off.

The culture has changed so much since your father proposed those seven words. Maybe there are only three or four now that can't be said.

There are some big ones on [that list] still. But "piss" [is a safer word]. [Blaming] political correctness is still valid in that, ultimately, they are just words.

What do you think your father would think of your book?

According to our history, he'd be uncomfortable with it, but hey, I'm of the Oprah generation. I think he'd be proud of my writing and the way I put this together. I do what he does: bring difficult subjects to an audience in a way so that when they walk out of his shows, they're always changed.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

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