

## Books & Writers



### From *Mork & Mindy* to *Good Will Hunting* and beyond

*NYT's Columnist Writes Memorable Biography of Robin Williams*

By David R. Altman  
Books & Writers Editor

It's called, appropriately, *Robin*, the biography by Dave Itzkoff of the extraordinary Robin Williams, whom we lost five years ago last month.

Itzkoff, a culture columnist for the *New York Times*, who wrote the book over a three-year period, told a Vox interviewer that Williams' death was not fully understood and that the complexity of his family life and career were never known (much less appreciated) by most of his fans.

"A lot of people came to that immediate conclusion that, 'Oh, he was depressed, he didn't like the way his career was going.' And for them, that was the answer. That's the story that they tell themselves," said Itzkoff.

Williams committed suicide by hanging himself at his home in August 2014, just months after being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

The actor grew up attending private high schools in Detroit and San Francisco as the son of a Ford Motor Company executive, and was elected "Most Likely Not to Succeed" and "Funniest" in his senior class.

Williams was perhaps best known for his legendary roles in *Popeye*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Awakenings*, *The Birdcage* and for his most critically acclaimed role of Dr. Sean McGuire in *Good Will Hunting*, for which he won an Academy Award. Still, Williams was not exactly an overnight success, having worked in the seventies for late night comedy clubs up and down the West coast.

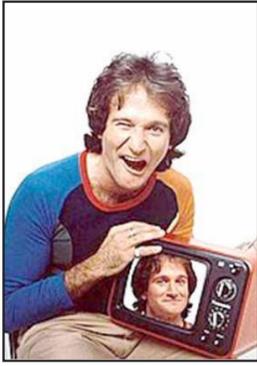
Itzkoff wrote that most Americans were first introduced to Williams in the late 1970s in an episode of *Happy Days*, where he appeared in a short guest appearance wearing a red jumpsuit and coming from the planet Ork. From there, he was soon cast as Mork in the meteoric (albeit short-lived) series *Mork & Mindy*. The show ran only four years, but Williams won an Emmy Award for his role.

Itzkoff writes about *Mork & Mindy's* stunning debut on September 18, 1978.

"Robin was no longer just another striver peddling his comedy act at the Los Angeles clubs; he was a bona fide star, and soon everyone in the country would know exactly who he was," wrote Itzkoff.

*Robin* is a chronology of Williams' life in deeply personal terms, including passages that shows Williams inherent humility and his life-long interest in helping others.

Itzkoff chronicled some of these contributions in great detail, including Williams' tours to the Middle East to entertain the troops; showing up backstage to help struggling comedians in late night comedy clubs around San Francisco; and, his deep friendship with Christopher Reeve, with whom he studied at Julliard, and later built an elevator for in his California home when Reeve would



*Famous Time Magazine cover on March 12, 1979, showing the two faces of Robin Williams (his Mork & Mindy/Popeye face and the 'thoughtful' Robin face on the TV set).*

*This photo was installed in the National Portrait Gallery to commemorate him posthumously. (courtesy Wikipedia)*

come to visit after becoming paralyzed.

Still, Itzkoff reminds us that in spite of all the goodness of Williams and his ability to bring laughter to so many, there remained in him a high level of insecurity, which would later lead to anxiety and issues with drugs and alcohol.

When Williams decided after a year of college that he wanted to be a comedian, his father was not impressed, telling him he needed to make sure he had a backup job, perhaps as a welder. Still, Itzkoff writes of Williams' closeness to his father and mother throughout his life. The book's narrative often references the family's intimacy, even as Williams' roller-coaster life experiences were beginning to weigh on him.

Williams' film career moved on with *The Birdcage*, a 1996 comedy directed by Mike Nichols, whom Williams had worked with on Broadway when he and Steve Martin teamed up for a short-lived Broadway production of *Waiting for Godot*.

But it was a supporting role that became the one Williams was perhaps best known for. *Good Will Hunting*, where he played Dr. Sean Maguire, won the Tiburon, California resident an Oscar in 1997. His emotional acceptance speech (available on YouTube) was unforgettable.

In the late nineties, while his movie career was soaring, Itzkoff wrote compassionately about how Williams faced both the death of his father and the passing of Christopher Reeve. Along with a very public and painful divorce, where he had separated from Valerie, his first wife, and became involved with his son's nanny (whom he would later marry), the emotional turmoil took its toll.

According to Itzkoff, it was during this period that Williams, after twenty years of sobriety, fell hard off the wagon. At age 53, he was becoming more troubled than ever.

The book explores Williams' close relationship with his three children, Zak, Zelda and Cody. Itzkoff,

who spent many hours interviewing Zak, quoted Williams' oldest child saying "...Dad's happiness was correlated very much to how he was doing career wise. When there were films that would be less successful, he took it very personally," said Zak. "He took it as a personal attack. That was really hard for us to see."

Itzkoff details the actor's series of "physical ailments in the fall of 2013...the tremors in his left arm had returned. His voice had diminished, his posture was stooped and at times he seemed to freeze where he stood." Williams would be diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in May 2014.

One particularly touching moment in this book (and there were many) was when Robin called Billy Crystal, his life-long friend, after Williams was diagnosed with Parkinson's, his voice weak and almost unrecognizable.

"I never heard him like that before," Crystal said. "This was the boldest comedian I ever met—the boldest artist."

There are so many moments like this near the end—and they are poignantly told by Itzkoff. These are the stories of a man who made more than 50 movies, had won an Oscar, a Grammy and a Golden Globe—but he was deteriorating, both physically and mentally. The sad part is that he knew it.

As Itzkoff reports, Williams true physical ailments were unknown until after he died. An autopsy showed he had "diffuse Lewy body dementia" a disease that mimics Parkinson's, but is basically incurable.

Though many celebrity biographers choose to sidestep some of the unseemly characteristics of their subjects, Itzkoff, forever the reporter, left nothing out in his treatment of Williams.

While the author clearly had an enormous respect and appreciation for Williams' one-of-a-kind talent, he reports with integrity and brutal candor the demons that would plague the actor in his final months. Itzkoff's exceptional insight into Williams character and lifestyle make this biography different than so many others.

If you were a fan of Robin Williams, you owe it to yourself to travel Itzkoff's remarkable journey into the life and death of this great American entertainer.

*[David R. Altman writes about books & writers. He is a former Georgia Author of the Year nominee and is a member of the American Academy of Poets and the National Book Critics Circle. He can be reached at altmandavidr@gmail.com or www.davidraltman.com.]*

### Marine Corps League meeting Sept. 21

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