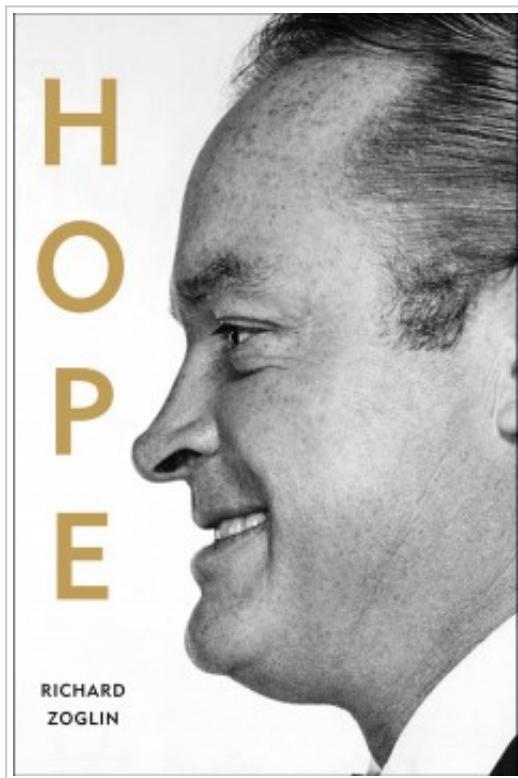


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Hope

by Richard Zoglin

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From the Publisher: The first definitive biography of Bob Hope, featuring exclusive and extensive reporting that makes the persuasive case that he was most important entertainer of the twentieth century.

Born in 1903, and until his death in 2003, Bob Hope was the only entertainer to achieve top-rated success in every major mass-entertainment medium, from vaudeville to television and everything in between. He virtually invented modern stand-up comedy. His tours to entertain US troops and patriotic radio broadcasts, along with his all-American, brash-but-cowardly movie character, helped to ease the nation's jitters during the stressful days of World War II. He helped redefine the very notion of what it means to be a star: a savvy businessman, pioneer of the brand extension (churning out books, writing a newspaper column, hosting a golf tournament), and public-spirited entertainer...

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What We Say

Entertainer Bob Hope is one of the signal figures in pop culture, a key influence on Woody Allen and an innovator in many areas of the star-making machinery and especially in his perfection of the monologue, that topical and somewhat anonymous form of stand-up that plays off the news of the day, making it both timely and ultimately disposable. Biographer Richard Zoglin is certainly the right man for the job of delivering a comprehensive and definitive look at this entertainer: he's an unabashed fan (surely only Zoglin believes that no one looked better in a tuxedo, news that would surprise Cary Grant and about ten thousand other stars). But he's also a serious enough journalist to not shy away from Hope's many extra-marital affairs, stand-offish nature and other less flattering details. Zoglin believes Hope has faded from memory because his best work -- the radio shows, the constant parade of TV specials for decades on CBS, those monologues with built-in expiration dates and his hosting of the Academy Awards -- are dimly remembered or simply not seen and heard today. He tells Hope's story with care and intelligence, from the man's birth in 1903 to his death in 2003, from his heights as the top radio and movie star in the world to the long, slow decline during which this entertainer never learned how to exit gracefully and thus tarnished his legacy. Zoglin certainly had me appreciate anew what Hope accomplished in terms of branding and marketing (he tub-thumped for his movies and TV specials like every project was his first). And Zoglin especially makes clear how Hope's perfection of the monologue was a fresh new approach to stand-up embraced now by virtually every talk show host in late night around the world. (Hope had no rapport with Johnny Carson but the details of how they and their teams interacted are sparse here. Hope's true heir is probably Jay Leno.) What Zoglin can't do is retroactively turn most of Hope's career into one of artistic accomplishment. Quite simply, most of his movies are bad and Zoglin's descriptions of their filming and subject matter are master classes in shades of grey as he makes fruitless distinctions between projects that are merely awful from those that were lazily awful and the many that were godawful. It's also an exaggeration to say Hope was the only star to have top-rated success in every entertainment medium from vaudeville to TV. Actually, no star ever accomplished that. As Zoglin makes perfectly clear, Hope was arguably the last major star launched by vaudeville but he was not a big vaudeville star. Hope made his bones in that area but that world was dying off and he was never a big draw in it. (In later years he would tour the heartland in a vaudeville-like style to huge audiences, but that was long after the vaudeville circuit was gone.) And as Zoglin makes even clearer, Hope was by no stretch of the imagination a Broadway star, though he does illuminate what Hope drew from the experience. Further, Hope's recording career was negligible. That does nothing to detract from his remarkable success as the biggest name in radio (the TV of its day) and movies, where one year Hope was indeed the biggest star in America. More significantly, Zoglin can't make Hope terribly interesting. He wasn't introspective enough to offer insight into his own character. Hope wasn't cruel enough in private to make the contrast from his public persona more shocking. Even to his children, Hope seems to have been little more than a public persona, though not in a sad or fascinating way. That's just the way he was: a man who came alive on stage. And again, despite some genuinely good movies (namely the Road movies costarring the far greater artistic talent Bing Crosby) and some good one-liners, you don't want to return to much of his comedic work. Hope created a distinctive profile as the brash coward, the fast-talker with nothing to say, the sex crazy guy who probably wouldn't know what to do with the girl if he caught her. (Something that was assuredly not true with the real Hope right into his dotage.) It served him well throughout his film career. He pioneered innovations that stars draw upon today. His tireless work entertaining soldiers powered his career but was clearly genuine, even if his deeply conservative politics ultimately made him out of touch with the changing times and the Vietnam War. Zoglin is especially touching as Hope becomes bewildered by the soldiers he can't quite relate to as that disaster swamps Nixon and even for a while that ardent Nixon supporter Hope himself. In the end, the book is comprehensive but not penetrating. It's not the fault of Zoglin: there isn't much to penetrate in this story of a very commercially successful but essentially uninteresting man. -- Michael Giltz

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