

## BOOK WORLD

MEMOIR REVIEW BY LAURENCE MASLON

## Mel Brooks looks back on his delightfully deranged career

The most provocative comedian of our moment makes a cameo appearance late in Mel Brooks's voluminous memoir, "All About Me!: My Remarkable Life in Show Business," and immediately recontextualizes the hero of its previous 384 pages.

Dave Chappelle played a supporting character in Brooks's 1993 spoof, "Robin Hood: Men in Tights," and although the film is one of the director's middle-grade efforts (it has its partisans), the reference serves as a necessary reminder of Brooks's seminal role as the comedic agent provocateur of his time.

In one astonishing calendar year — 1974 — Mel Brooks opened with the groundbreaking "Blazing Saddles" and finished with the enduring and beloved "Young Frankenstein." Back then, if you were a movie-addicted 14-year-old boy, you dutifully stood in line with your pals, hoping the box office lady was looking the other way ("Saddles" was R-rated, rare indeed for a comedy) while you eagerly anticipated a chaotic comic cavalcade that gleefully served up racial satire, inappropriate sexual situations, naughty language (sometimes in Yiddish) and, of course, indelibly, bowls full of incendiary beans. To be a Mel Brooks fan at the height of his powers (from the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s) was to embrace anarchy at its most artful and to thumb your nose at all the so-called "standards" of your parents' generation. However, Brooks was a subversive even a mother could love. (Mine certainly did: She took me to see "The Producers" when I was 7.)

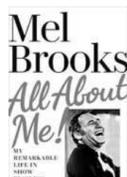
Brooks attacks his autobiography with a wholly characteristic lack of modesty. Some fans may feel they've heard much of this before; over the years, there have been several biographies, two behind-the-scenes books by Brooks himself, numerous documentaries, extensive DVD extras — even a one-man show that Brooks (God bless him, in his 90s!) takes across the country.

Still, for those who maintain their fondness for Brooks, "All About Me!" is an indispensable culmination of his work (copious helpings of legendary dialogue from the films and shows don't hurt). In "Young Frankenstein," Gene Wilder's eponymous character discovers his grandfather's secret volume: "How I Did It." Brooks's own tome is perhaps longer on "What I Did" than on the subtler and more conflicted "How I Did," and indeed, it begins with a wonderful anecdote about, of all things, young Brooks evading a Brooklyn rampage by Frankenstein's monster.

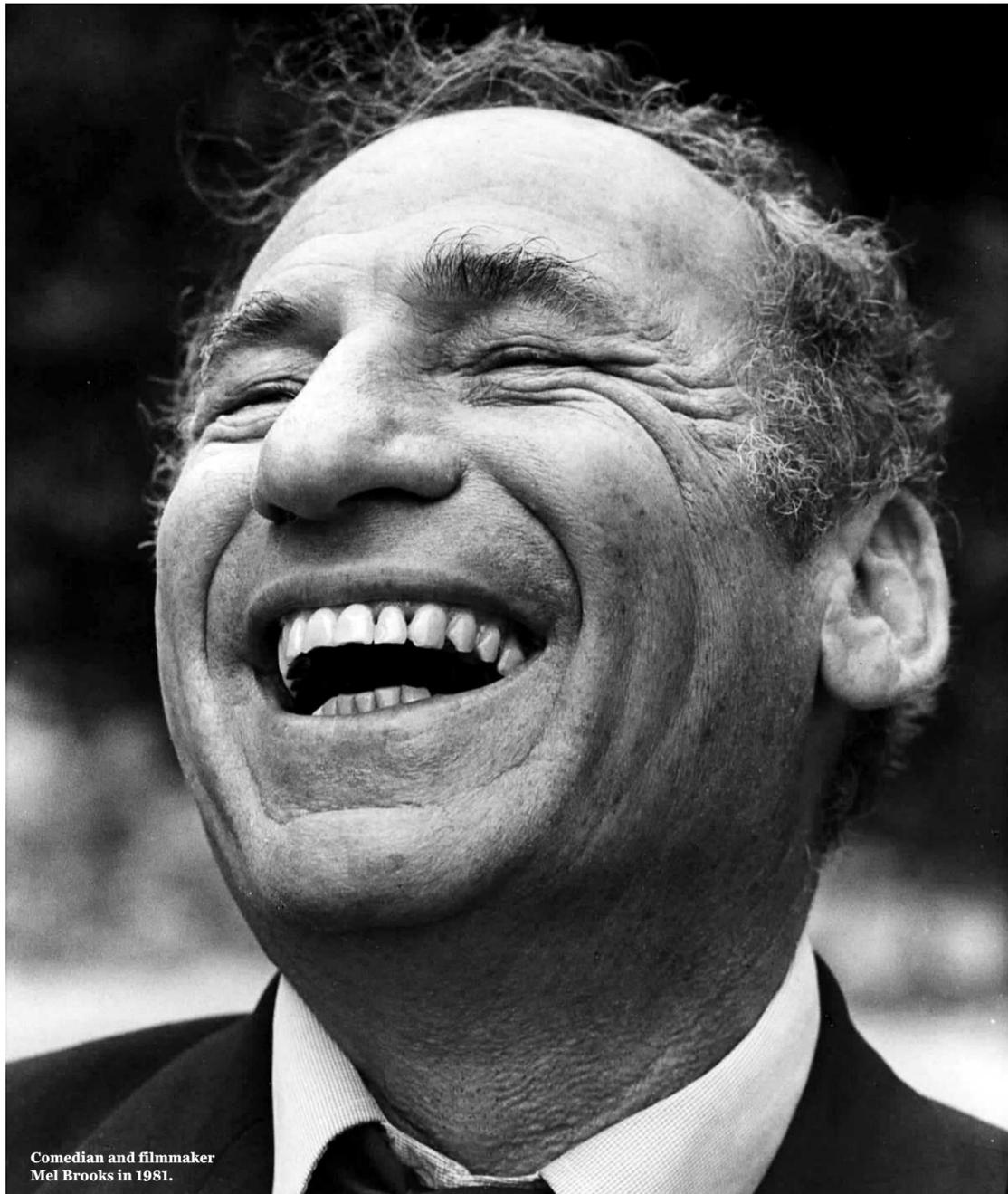
Most of the hills and valleys of his prodigious career are accounted for: his sentimental education as a writer for Sid Caesar's TV shows in the 1950s; his unexpected fame, along with colleague Carl Reiner, on LPs such as "The 2,000 Year Old Man"; his brazen attempt to both write and direct his first movie, "The Producers," in 1967 (the producer of "The Producers" blithely suggested that Brooks run out and direct a commercial to gain some quick cred); his unexpected hits of the 1970s ("Young Frankenstein" earned 30 times its production budget); one of the greatest comebacks in the annals of pop culture, writing a full score for the megahit Broadway version of "The Producers"; and the galaxy of friends, collaborators and stock-company members who surrendered to Brooks's unique autocracy of derangement over the decades.

Many memoirs seek to score points off perceived adversaries. Brooks, who has certainly cultivated a healthy ego, does the opposite; there are copious and sincere encomiums to Caesar, Reiner, Wilder, director Susan Stroman (who helmed the Broadway version of "The Producers") and frequent soundtrack composer John Morris (whose work has never been properly acknowledged), as well as delightful cameos by Bob Hope, Cary Grant, Alfred Hitchcock, John Wayne and Richard Pryor.

Where the book comes up short is in any introspection, analysis or exploration of doubt. Brooks's career has had its ups and downs, for sure, especially before 1967, when he implies he was panicking to support a new marriage to his adored Anne Bancroft. (A previous marriage — with three children, no less — zips by at the speed of light.) Longtime fans scratch their heads at the clunky, soulless films from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, when Brooks — despite the mem-



**ALL ABOUT ME!**  
My Remarkable Life  
in Show Business  
By Mel Brooks  
Ballantine,  
456 pp. \$29.99



Comedian and filmmaker  
Mel Brooks in 1981.

JAMES A. PARCELL/THE WASHINGTON POST

orable line in his "Star Wars" takeoff "Spaceballs": "May the Schwartz be with you!" — turned into an uninspired parody factory. Although he describes the challenges, as an untrained musician, of writing the score for the "The Producers" on Broadway, he claims he had to learn how a stage musical works from the ground up; odd, considering he wrote the books to two Broadway musicals in the early '60s, one of which, "All American," was a big, expensive show starring Ray Bolger.

There's no serious consideration of what his injection of Jewish tropes and Yiddishisms meant to a mainstream audience, back in the days when actors were still changing their names and bobbing their noses to

achieve crossover popularity. And how might his trademark anarchism resonate now, with pop culture torn between "anything goes" and cancel culture — anyone want to rerelease "Blazing Saddles" in this moment?

The short answer to these cavils is that such hand-wringing is simply not a part of Brooks's sunny disposition. Indeed, the book's most rewarding chapters are its earliest, with Brooks's accounts of Depression-era Brooklyn and the European front of World War II (and the early days of television, for that matter). This isn't Clifford Odets or Norman Mailer, but an epic adventure of possibility and positivity. Brooks's response to any potential calamity seems to have been: "Sure, why not?" Perhaps this was his secret

weapon all along. While other comedians of his era — Sid Caesar, Woody Allen, Larry David — were neurotic messes, Brooks was essentially, as the 2,000-year-old man put it, "jaunty jolly."

In mid-October, Hulu announced that Brooks would produce and write a TV sequel to his 1981 film, "History of the World, Part I." As George Bernard Shaw, a comic provocateur of his century, might have put it, Brooks is clearly imbued with the Life Schwartz.

**Laurence Maslon** is the host and producer of the radio program "Broadway to Main Street" on WLW-FM and the co-author, with Michael Kantor, of the PBS documentary series and book "Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America."

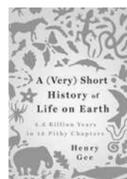
SCIENCE REVIEW BY ADRIAN WOOLFSON

## With failed experiments and bizarre successes, evolution marches on

Assuming the role of a peripatetic tour guide, Henry Gee in "A (Very) Short History of Life on Earth" takes the reader on an exuberant romp through evolution, like a modern-day Willy Wonka of genetic space. Gee's grand tour enthusiastically details the narrative underlying life's erratic and often whimsical exploration of biological form and function. En route we encounter some of the oddities and peculiarities that this process — guided by a blend of chance and evolutionary election — has thrown up.

We also learn how physical constraints have limited possibility. Bugs, for example, are small for a reason. Beyond a certain size, an insect, lacking an internal skeleton, would be crushed by its own unsupported weight. While mammals originally laid eggs, live-bearing limits the size they can achieve on land. Gee, a prolific natural-history author and a senior editor at the journal *Nature*, shows us how evolution's strategy has largely been based on the repurposing of form through biological reconfiguration, rather than on reinvention.

The extinct lycopod forests of the late Carboniferous period that originated around 300 million years ago, which Gee describes as looking like the "desolate landscape of the First World War Western Front," are illustrative of the alien terrains and vistas that were once commonplace on Earth. We also encounter playful variations on the theme of dimen-



**A (VERY) SHORT HISTORY OF LIFE ON EARTH**  
4.6 Billion Years  
in 12 Pithy Chapters  
By Henry Gee  
St. Martin's, 288  
pp. \$24.99

sions, with insects the size of crows, giant scorpions reminiscent of large dogs, and pterosaurs "as large as small airplanes" whose wings — allowing them to soar on thermals — were so expansive that they were incapable of flapping. The bizarre menagerie that originated in the Cambrian period, some 541 million years ago, provides a glimpse into the limitless world of potential variations on animal form.

In this whirlwind perusal of life's eclectic embellishments, it rapidly becomes apparent that the mandates of survival, while conjuring up an impressive bestiary with a magic box of evolutionary tricks, have nevertheless sampled just a minute fraction of life's audacious potential. Most disconcerting, perhaps, is the "chilling inhumanity" of the failed experiments in human existence, including the extinct species *Homo erectus*, which, although resembling us superficially, appeared to lack our elaborate mental capacity. In life's narrative skip across the DNA sequence, it is clear that individual species are ephemeral and irrelevant participants in this enigmatic pageant. Earth is haunted by the ghosts of countless creatures that have been consigned to oblivion.

Core to Gee's narrative is the way in which life's history is a tale of continuous change and transformation, driven and underpinned by the Earth's geological fluidity. Life was forged in the furnace of adversity, establishing itself by artfully requisitioning and repurposing the

silver lining of misfortune. The infant Earth, Gee reminds us, was quite unlike our planet today. Its virgin atmosphere was "an unbreathable fog of methane" and its surface "an ocean of molten lava," lacking water and land.

While we have become accustomed to the relatively benign climate prevailing across much of the planet, Gee reminds us that life on Earth has been repeatedly pockmarked by climatic instability and inhospitality. The geological machinations responsible for this include the rambunctious motion of the Earth's tectonic plates, which "bump against, slide past or burrow beneath one another," causing geological mischief and volcanic eruptions. Along with various biological phenomena, including the "extravagant consumption" of carbon by trees, such events have contrived to undermine the greenhouse effect and propel the Earth into a series of protracted ice ages. Conversely, the destabilization of deposits of methane gas, which has a greenhouse effect significantly more potent than that of carbon dioxide, has led to the periodic broiling of the planet.

Such events have pushed life "in the direction of increasing complexity." They have also resulted in mass extinctions, including at the end of the Permian period, about 250 million years ago, when around 90 percent of Earth's species vanished. More recently, just 10,000 years ago, the extinction event at the close of the Pleistocene period led to the disappear-

ance of virtually all animals.

Although artfully avoiding the critical question of how life originated in the first place, and only touching on the issue of whether species are the inevitable results of evolutionary processes or the contingent products of chance events, Gee has nevertheless succeeded in producing a seamless and highly compressed account of life's grand narrative, spanning its full duration of about 4.6 billion years. It is a tale of resilience and tenacity, and his writing is evocative and filled with humor. He describes the shallow oceans of the early Cambrian period, for example, as being "filled with the spiky clatter of arthropod pincers."

But there is nothing lighthearted about Gee's conclusion. Irrespective of humankind's malign contributions, climatic crises and geological shenanigans will inevitably result in the extinction of our species within just a few thousand years.

In spite of this well-justified pessimism, and while life on Earth will invariably continue to be tortured and challenged, our emerging ability to synthesize and redesign the genomes of living things may provide humankind with some consolation in the form of a tentative genetic tool kit for ensuring what Gee describes as its "mayfly" survival.

**Adrian Woolfson** is the author of "Life Without Genes."