

Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street (Book Review)

Reviewer:

Dale Erlandson

Graduate Student

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

University of Wisconsin-Madison

erlandsond@gmail.com

Textbook Details:

Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street

Michael Davis

2008, Viking, New York (<http://www.streetgangbook.com>)

ISBN 978-0670019960

18 chapters, 384 pages

For those people raised on Ernie, Bert and Oscar the Grouch, a witty, nostalgic return to the early days of *Sesame Street* is exactly what the 21st century has been missing. In *Street Gang*, Michael Davis attempts to weave together the professional and personal histories that launched a new era in children's television. While the bulk of Davis' narrative is framed by Jim Henson's all-too-short life, much of the action revolves around Joan Cooney, the driving force behind *Children's Television Workshop*.

After a brief look at the Henson funeral, Davis retreats to the 1930s to trace the childhood dreams that guided a handful of performers, educators and activists to the 1970 debut of *Sesame Street*. After a shaky (and bewilderingly *Captain Kangaroo*-focused) start, *Street Gang* reaches firmer ground when all the personalities, including the Muppets, come together through Cooney and the organizations behind *Sesame Street* – namely, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the United States Office of Education. Only after the book begins to refer back to information introduced in the first three chapters, can the reader begin to make sense of the multitude of personalities and projects Davis' whirlwind stirs up.

The book is the result of copious personal interviews with *Sesame Street*'s cast, creators and production crew, supplemented with newspaper and magazine commentary on the talent behind 1970s children's television. Unfortunately for the historian, the interviews are poorly cited and the footnotes are sparse. The citations are subject to minor faults, such as missing ellipses when sentences are dropped, but the number of sources referenced is impressive and Davis has clearly tried to amass enough viewpoints to get the story right.

It is a pity, then, that Davis' writing tends so much toward speculative-sounding detail. While minutia such as "streams of soft light on her pillow" (page 11) or the "feel [of] a solitary bead of perspiration run[ning] down his lower spine and trickl[ing] to his waist, a sweat spot developing on his blue Oxford cloth shirt, just above the belt line" (page 49) might pass in a novel, they are unnecessary for readers who will no doubt bring their own nostalgia. That being the case, Davis' unwavering forgiveness for the personality faults of those involved in *Sesame Street* seems gratuitous. So does his skimming over any unhappiness that may have arisen in production, at least until Henson's death in 1990. In fact, it is hard to know for whom Davis is writing – while always engaging, *Street Gang* has less narrative than typical popular, light reading; but it is too poorly sourced for the serious historian of communications or education.

The biggest weakness of the *Street Gang* is its scope. Davis introduces a new personality – along with a full personal history and accompanying anecdotes – every few pages. The narrative is replete with temporal jumps that are nearly impossible to follow, and the attempt to cater to *Sesame Street* aficionados with trivia is botched by Davis' insistence on inserting superfluous non sequiturs.

But for fans with the patience to simply ride along, it's all there: how the name *Sesame Street* was picked over *123 Avenue B*; how the street-scene with its Brownstone and front steps were conceived; the revulsion some felt for the excessive juvenile simplicity of the now-beloved theme song.

At his best, Davis does an excellent job of contextualizing the show in a tumultuous time. The planning stages, spanning the 1950s and 1960s, saw most of the major talent brush with war in Korea or Vietnam. While *Sesame Street* itself never dealt with war, much of the show's creative talent did find their professional lives interrupted and re-organized. For many who were originally hesitant about children's educational television, the era's social turbulence instilled a commitment to personal ideals and to the aims of *Children's Television Workshop*. The start talent of the planning stages broke the misogynistic norms of corporate culture. In its first two decades, *Sesame Street* was both a reaction to and a target of the turbulence that defined the movements for civil, women's, Hispanic and disabled rights. Davis deftly places the show's development in the contexts of television and education history, which both weathered rapid technological and philosophical evolutions in the 1970s and 1980s.

While Davis makes clear the cronyism that brought many of the shows performers and producers together, he also reveals how the upper-middle-class progressive New Yorkers of the time did not have to look far for the issues they felt quality children's television should address: writers worked in an actress' pregnancy to address sibling rivalry and breast feeding; a producer's son introduced both himself and Down syndrome to the neighborhood; and, all too soon, a spate of heart attacks, cancer and addiction forced *Sesame Street* residents, viewers and collaborators to cope with death.

The last third of *Street Gang* is a depressing downward spiral for *Children's Television Workshop*, beginning with the death of Sesame Street general store owner Mr. Hooper and ending with the sale of the Muppets to the Walt Disney Company. For those who loved the early days of *Sesame Street*, Davis provides a refreshingly scathing review of the corporate mentality that took over after the horrific rise of Barney crippled *Sesame Street* ratings. Far less satisfying is Davis' apparent satisfaction with the final result of the various revamp attempts that has left the show dominated by the gratingly high-pitched vapidities of Elmo and Zoe.

Davis' work iterates that Henson, along with most of the other creative minds behind the 1960s re-think of children's television, were dedicated to appealing to children and adults alike. The Muppets were to entertain parents as much (if not more) than they did children. As Davis suggests, *Avenue Q* – and not the overhauled *Sesame Street* – comes far closer to what Henson might have had in mind for the future of puppetry.