



# The Life and Humor of Robin Williams: A Biography

By Jay David

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*The Life and Humor of Robin Williams* offers his millions of fans a lively, thorough account of Robin Williams's life and career. Chronicling the early years, from his supportive Chicago childhood to his first college improv class, the book goes on to describe the actor's rapid descent into Hollywood's fast lane. But Williams cleaned up his life and made a breakthrough into serious acting with his extraordinary performance in *The World According to Garp* and the steady climb ever since to his more recent, Oscar-winning triumph in *Good Will Hunting*.

For the countless fans of Robin Williams, this biography is a fascinating and comprehensive look at the star's inspiring history.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Kirkus Reviews

The thinnest of ``clip'' jobs, David's biography amounts to a rehash of profiles from mass-market magazines, not even arranged interestingly or spiced up in any way. Fans of the manic comedian craving information about his life would find it more entertaining to tune into an interview segment on a morning television talk show at least then they'd get the all-important cadence to Williams's punch lines. When David quotes the man in action, he gets down just a jumble of words. It's impossible to discern the pattern of the free associations Williams is known for, and that misses all the fun. Williams's life, luckily for David, is an above average Hollywood story. Williams had one of those mythic lonely childhoods that turned him into an artist, craving attention and not ever knowing how to control himself when he got it. He sped through the 70s crossing paths with all the legends of the comedy world, spinning out of control on cocaine and producing some inventive comedy (and also *Mork and Mindy*). Then, suddenly, the goofball emerged as a serious actor, garnering Academy Award nominations and box-office billions in films like *Dead Poets Society*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Good Will Hunting*. Yet David can't make anything of these details. He jumps from one story to another, merely quoting from news sources, and never gets into a narrative structure. He even makes Williams's final encounter with John Belushi seem bland. And that's not the worst of it. David adds his own analysis of Williams's comic style and his take on Williams's movies throughout the biography, which are neither astute nor pertinent. (8 b&w photos) -- *Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

#### About the Author

Jay David is the author of *Growing Up Black: From Slave Days to the Present--Twenty-Five African Americans Reveal the Trials and Triumphs of Their Childhoods* and *Growing Up Jewish: An Anthology*. He lives in New York City.

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In spite of his love for an occasional raunchy, off-color routine, and in spite of the fact that most comedians seem to come from the wrong side of the tracks, Robin Williams was born to affluence and gentility. He had no bruising struggle to better himself economically; he faced no arduous climb up the ladder to fame and fortune. He was born the quintessential WASP--white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant from the get-go.

How this offbeat, contradictory man became one of the great twentieth-century improvisationists is a story that breaks all the molds and challenges all the cliches about the typical performer's blood, sweat, and tears.

Robin Williams was born in Chicago on July 21, 1952. He was a late arrival for his mother and father, who each had been married before; this was the second marriage for both of them. Almost fifty years old at the time of his son's birth, Robert Williams played from the beginning a rather remote role in the young boy's life.

Robin had two half-brothers, but they were grown and had left home by the time of his arrival, so he was virtually an only child--the only child in the house, at any rate. The half-brother on his father's side was named Todd Williams; the half-brother on his mother's side was named McLaurin Smith, or sometimes Smith-Williams.

His father was vice president and midwestern regional manager of the Lincoln-Mercury Division of the Ford Motor Company--an imposing figure, and one to be treated with the utmost respect by any small fry in the

thirty-room house where the Williamses lived. That was a hard and fast rule: Robin addressed his father as "sir" most of the time. Later on, he would describe his father as "a very elegant man, like Lord Stokesbury, the viceroy of India."

Robin's mother was quite a different kind of person. A southerner, she was bubbling over with laughter, was full of fun, and led a very casual, almost totally carefree life. Laurie Williams has said that she and her son Robin were always close. As she put it: "His dad was a disciplinarian; I was the pal."

Funny though she was, she was not the only one who started Robin on his way toward being a comedian. Actually, she quoted him once as complaining that he had to leave home to get an honest laugh. Evidently, she was not completely attuned to his wacky humor. But she knew he was a very funny person.

For his part, Robin understood her humor and laughed at it, frequently calling her a "crazy southern belle." She spent some time with him; but when she was on her own, she socialized with her friends. In the evenings she went out to other peoples' homes and to parties. There weren't many hours that she spent with Robin.

When she was with him, though, "she was always funny," he recalled. "She had the jokes and the poems. Besides that, she played jokes on people.

She herself reminisced about an invitational dance she attended once at the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff (Illinois) Bath and Tennis Club. She wore a very stylish dress, every fold and crease in place, but she had obscured her two front teeth with Black Jack chewing gum, in the manner of a vaudeville comic. She remembered: "All the women were saying, You'd think someone who could afford clothes like that could afford to get her teeth fixed." Her motto in life was, "Man was put on earth to know great joy." And she was determined to support that idea in everything she did.

But, to repeat, she was not always around. Robin grew up lonely. Here he was, plopped down in a thirty-room house with a nanny to care for him, trying to be a little boy but with no other children anywhere in sight: "I was living on this huge estate. It was miles to the next kid."

What he did was agitate for toys, and the toys soon came. He had at least two thousand soldiers and a battlefield in the basement where he could stage wars and make one army overcome the other.

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