

[Mobile book] Laughter's Gentle Soul: The Life of Robert Benchley

## Laughter's Gentle Soul: The Life of Robert Benchley

*Billy Altman*

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**Billy Altman : Laughter's Gentle Soul: The Life of Robert Benchley** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Laughter's Gentle Soul: The Life of Robert Benchley:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. I needed some reading that was not so strenuous. By Reginald O. Schulz I think the author did a good job of walking through the career of Robert Benchley. The book was relaxing, some places funny, some places poignant. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Keeps You Reading Until the End. By babyboomerlarry I'd prefer to give it a 4.5 out of 5. the author wastes too many pages giving background

detail on the people Benchley hung out with in his lifetime. Still, the author does best when he gives a lot of info on his later years when he did the shorts and movie stunts. Unfortunately, it was only about the last 20% of the material. As for Benchley himself, his talent stands above him as a person. He foolishly drank himself to death as well as looked to pick fights. He also made a lousy husband but provided much money to the family so they didn't seem too upset. An interesting read on an interesting guy. 6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. And it was Robert Benchley that earned the star. By A Customer How delighted I was that I stumbled across this biography of America's original humorist, Robert Benchley. And how disappointed I was when I finished it. Benchley lived a fascinating life, and Altman managed to make it dry as dust. What did we learn of Benchley thanks to Altman's hard work? We learned that he was devastated by the loss of his older brother in a war; we learned that he had an unusual relationship with an older, spiteful woman who funded his Harvard education and asked him for repayment when he was a famous writer; we learned that he was almost universally beloved as a wit and as a loyal friend; we learned that he had a loveless marriage and some affairs later in life; and we learn that he went from teetotaler to alcoholic, which ultimately contributed to the end of his life. What we never learn from Altman is how any of these things affected Benchley's life, or contributed to the making of the man. The book earns one star, however, and that is because it assembles a handful of the ur-Benchley essays and short films. The few genuine chuckles -- and not coincidentally, the few moments of insight -- came from Benchley's own mouth, not Altman's. The episode at the end of Benchley's Vanity Fair career, when Benchley risks his career for his friends, including Dorothy Parker, was probably the only true insight into the man with which I walked away from the book. And the best guffaw I had out of the book was Benchley's later Life magazine review of Billie Burke's performance. That was the only nutritious morsel from a book I had hopes of being a feast. I am still hungry.

The definitive biography of Robert Benchley: humorist, actor, and leading man of the Algonquin Round Table. Few American writers have ever achieved the widespread acclaim and multidimensional popularity attained by Robert Benchley (1889-1945) during the first half of this century. A charter member, along with close friends Dorothy Parker, Robert Sherwood, and Harold Ross, of the notorious "Vicious Circle" that held court at the Algonquin Hotel in the Roaring Twenties, Benchley was many things to many people: a best-selling author of hilarious books chronicling the comic futility of the human condition, a sharp-witted theater critic whose reviews graced the pages of the original Life and The New Yorker for nearly two decades, and a much sought-after radio personality and feature film actor who starred in his own series of classic comedy shorts. In this sympathetic and witty biography, Billy Altman explores the man behind the mirth as he chronicles Benchley's journey from the glittering lights of Broadway and the dim ones in the rollicking speakeasies of New York during prohibition, to the infamous Garden of Allah apartments and the glamorously decadent Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s.

.com While he lived, Robert Benchley was a household name--writer, actor, critic, and wit, Benchley was lionized in the pages of the New Yorker, Vanity Fair, and the New York Tribune and appeared in countless Hollywood films, some of which he wrote himself. Fifty years after his death, Benchley has become something of a footnote to the likes of Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woollcott, and other luminaries of the Algonquin Hotel Round Table. Most of Benchley's books are out of print, as are the two previous biographies about him. Thus, Billy Altman's *Laughter's Gentle Soul* comes at a good time to reawaken interest in this forgotten funnyman. Altman's biography chronicles Benchley's life from his birth in Worcester, Massachusetts, his schooling at Harvard, and early writing career in New York through the heady days of Hollywood and the Algonquin Hotel to his untimely death from cirrhosis in 1945. The stories are all here: Benchley's practical jokes, his legendary drinking, his strict separation of suburban family life and urban adultery. What is not in *Laughter's Gentle Soul* is any critical analysis of the stories, the writing, or the reasons for Benchley's self-destruction. Why, for example, was Benchley so admired by fellow humorists? Why did he not drink until the age of 31 and then apparently fall immediately into incurable alcoholism? Fans of Robert Benchley won't find anything in *Laughter's Gentle Soul* that they haven't read before; for those who are unfamiliar with the man, however, Altman's book provides a good first introduction. From Library Journal With his work for Tribune Magazine, Vanity Fair, Life, and, eventually, the fledgling New Yorker, where he was the theater critic for nearly two decades, Benchley (1889-1945) saw his brand of humor--featuring the everyday man confused by life's endless tangents--begin to succeed. Along the way, he developed friendships with Dorothy Parker, Robert Sherwood, Alexander Woollcott, Marc Connelly, and George S. Kaufman--who with Benchley all became members of the Round Table (the Vicious Table, according to some) at the Algonquin Hotel. Hollywood beckoned, but there the drinking, which led to his death, and the womanizing that had begun in New York's prohibition speakeasies began to get out of hand. Journalist Altman has written an entertaining and valuable study which poignantly shows that despite Benchley's failings as an absent father and husband, his humor remained gently deprecating; this alone makes the biography worth reading. Highly recommended. Robert Kelly, Fort Wayne Community Schs., Ind. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist Benchley (1889-1945) was a highly original American humorist with, to quote Altman, a "flair for the absurd." A witty, irreverent, and uncompromising drama critic for Life and the New Yorker, Benchley also logged

some now legendary time at Vanity Fair, along with his equally waggish pals, Dorothy Parker and Robert Sherwood, all three charter members of the viciously funny Algonquin Round Table. Altman's unaffected affection and admiration for his subject give a rosy glow to what must, in reality, have been an extremely complicated, driven, and ultimately destructive life (Benchley died at age 56 from cirrhosis of the liver), but his presentation of Benchley as an empathic, energetic, modest, and well-meaning fellow is certainly convincing, and his take on Benchley's accomplishments is quite captivating. Benchley was a great improviser and an irresistible talent in print (penning 12 books of essays), on the radio, and on the silver screen, appearing in 40 feature films as well as in award-winning short works of his own creation. Thanks to Altman, Benchley will now be remembered in all his brilliantly preposterous glory. Donna Seaman