



## Master of Ceremonies: A Memoir

*Joel Grey*

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## Master of Ceremonies: A Memoir Joel Grey

Joel Grey, the Tony and Academy Award-winning Master of Ceremonies in Cabaret finally tells his remarkable life story. Born Joel David Katz to a wild and wooly Jewish American family in Cleveland, Ohio in 1932, Joel began his life in the theater at the age of 9, starting in children's theater and then moving to the main stage. He was hooked, and his seven decades long career charts the evolution of American entertainment - from Vaudeville performances with his father, Mickey Katz to the seedy gangster filled nightclubs of the forties, the bright lights of Broadway and dizzying glamour of Hollywood, to juggernaut musicals like *Cabaret*, *Chicago*, and *Wicked*.

*Master of Ceremonies* is a memoir of a life lived in and out of the limelight, but it is also the story of the man behind the stage makeup. Coming of age in a time when being yourself tended to be not only difficult but also dangerous, Joel has to act both on and off the stage. He spends his high school years sleeping with the girls-next-door while carrying on a scandalous affair with an older man. Romances with to-die-for Vegas Showgirls are balanced with late night liaisons with like-minded guys, until finally Joel falls in love and marries a talented and beautiful woman, starts a family, and has a pretty much picture perfect life. But 24 years later when the marriage dissolves, Joel has to once again find his place in a world that has radically changed.

Drawing back the curtain on a career filled with show-stopping numbers, larger-than-life stars and even singing in the shower with Bjork, *Master of Ceremonies* is also a portrait of an artist coming to terms with his evolving identity. When an actor plays a character, he has to find out what makes them who they are; their needs, dreams, and fears. It's a difficult thing to do, but sometimes the hardest role in an actor's life is that of himself. Deftly capturing the joy of performing as well as the pain and secrets of an era we have only just started to leave behind, Joel's story is one of love, loss, hard-won honesty, redemption, and success.

## Master of Ceremonies: A Memoir Details

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# From Reader Review Master of Ceremonies: A Memoir for online ebook

## Rosanne says

I've always enjoyed Joel Grey as a performer and his memoir is well written. He is very honest about his life, but I found his single minded determination to become a star at the expense of his wife's desires to achieve her goals to be a bit narcissistic. I'm sure it takes that kind of drive to "make it", but his star was a bit tarnished for me.

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## Marika says

Look elsewhere if you're looking for a salacious tell-all book. Joel Grey has always been an elegant, classy man and he stays true to himself in this book. He writes lovingly about his marriage and his children. He is what he is...a man who loves his family, but who happens to be gay. Perhaps if he had come of age in today's world his story would have been different. But it's not.

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## Sylvia says

What a selfish man! He did his wife a great disservice. He put an end to her career, made her wear clothing he chose over her own choices, insisted they have children before she actually wanted to, and is shocked when he can't understand why she isn't pleased when he admits to being gay all along (and cheating on her with other gay married men). It was always all about him and his career.

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## Meg Marie says

An interesting history not just of Joel Grey's life, but of the forces in society that kept him from expressing who he was - bold and brash in his acting, but hiding his Jewish heritage (Jennifer Grey wasn't the first one in the family to get a nose job) and his sexuality, not coming out as gay until his 80s, for fear of ruining his career or being thrown in prison.

I'd be interested to hear the perspective from his wife of 24 years about how their marriage was, because he talks very openly about basically forcing her to give up her career for their family (and his success) and then in the 1980s when he told her that he'd had experiences with men, she left very suddenly. (I realize it's his memoir, and people don't try to make themselves look bad, so just would be interested to see how she felt about it all.)

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## Richard says

I never knew a lot of details about this Broadway legend's personal life so I was eager to read his memoir. It

provides a framework of his life and details about the stage and movie versions of CABARET. It briefly touches on GOODTIME CHARLEY but essentially tells nothing at all about THE GRAND TOUR and WICKED. So it left this theatre nerd wanting more. It also makes me sad that he came of age at a time when you couldn't live openly as a gay man.

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### **Lori says**

I am a fan of Joel Grey. I have always wished I had the chance to see him on Broadway. I liked him in the movie Cabaret, so was interested in reading his memoir. Like most memoirs he writes of his childhood. For him it was in Cleveland Ohio. His father was a musician and mother a homemaker. His dad had a good sense of humor and used it in his act. Joel's mother was very harsh and critical rarely giving any emotional support. Joel was born Joel Katz. As a child he appeared in plays in Cleveland. The family moved to Los Angeles when Joel was 14 so his dad could join the Spike Jones band.

Joel Grey is honest about his sexual interests being to both girls and boys. He had to keep that secret. He continued to show talent in acting and performing. His dad including him in some acts he was doing and soon Joel Katz had a career of his own and became known as Joel Grey.

The author talks about ending up in New York and eventually on Broadway in the mid sixties. He writes about creating the part of the emcee in Cabaret. Bringing the play to life and his Tony Win. He went on to be in George M with Bernadette Peters. a couple years later he was in the movie Cabaret recreating his role. He wrote about the difficulty he had with Bob Fosse. he loved working with Liza Minnelli and the friendship he has with her.

He is honest about coming out as a gay man. his divorce from his wife of 25 years. My biggest disappointment is he does not write much about the plays he did in later years. Just briefly mentioning them in a couple sentences. I would have liked to read more about all the plays he was in on Broadway and the stars he worked with. He does mention his daughter Jennifer Grey. I liked this book for the most part. Just wished I could have read more about the musicals he was in over the years.

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### **Amy Rae says**

I've come to a point where, much as I enjoy a celebrity memoir (provided it's a celebrity I'm interested in, anyway), I groan a little inside when I see they had help from a ghostwriter. No matter how honest the celebrity sets out to be, having a professional ghostwriter involved flattens out their voice. Life stories often become biopics, with sign-posted themes and carefully broken paths navigating through the complexities of the subject's actual life.

And it doesn't help that, as interesting as many of Joel Grey's stories are, the book as a whole doesn't feel entirely honest. He speaks very little about his relationship with his children (to the point that I got to the picture insert and was scratching my head trying to remember who this James he was posing with was!); his discussions of life with his ex-wife are rife with after-the-fact explanations and apologies. I assume the intent there is a noble one, primarily to safeguard his family's privacy and reputation, but it left me with a sense of incompleteness. (And admittedly, given what a dick he admitted he was to his ex-wife, I wouldn't be surprised if he was also thinking about his rep, too.)

The book is worth reading nonetheless, if only because there just aren't that many memoirs about growing up Jewish in 1930s Cleveland out there. His early stories don't escape the obvious seeding of thematic material-

-primarily his ruminations on whether he was Bad with a capital B, in the eyes of God and his many aunts-- but I really enjoyed them nonetheless. Grey's insights in how he approached playing the Emcee in *Cabaret* are also pretty great. I love the backstory he developed for the character, and I'm choosing to imagine all of it is true next time I watch the movie. Those elements make it worth price of admission (especially for me, since I received my copy as a Christmas gift!), in my opinion.

Everything else is enjoyable, but blandly so. Personally, I'd rather read an imperfectly written memoir that feels like it was written in the voice of its author, and I'd rather read one that doesn't try to explain everything to me from the subject's decades-later POV. Tell me what happened, tell me what you felt, *maybe* tell me what you feel now, but don't let what you've learned overshadow what you did. Let me decide for myself what to think of your behavior. But for what it is, *Master of Ceremonies* is nowhere near the worst celebrity memoir I've read. Solidly middling, with moments of genuine interest.

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### **Linda says**

A brief synopsis of Joel Grey's life and coming to terms with who he is as a person. If you thought he was only the emcee in *Cabaret*, you would be wrong. He's been a working actor for over 50 years. Interesting read.

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### **Mark Ward says**

Joel Grey is an icon, of that there is no doubt. As the Master of Ceremonies, or Emcee, in *Cabaret*, he created that role with the writers that made his career, but the parallels go far deeper than just the role.

Well-written and engaging, this book charts Grey's life from his youth, when he was Joel Katz, and performed with his father, and then was a star of the nightclub scene, which he hated - since he always wanted to be seen as a serious actor.

That, and heterosexual. These desires; to become a world-renowned actor and to beat the homosexual feelings that had "plagued" him since he started fooling around with boys at the age of ten, are the main drive of the book. Whilst he achieves the former, he never manages to achieve the latter. The book is a document of a section of gay men a few generations ago who felt the crushing desire to conform and have a wife and kids - it should be noted that Grey seemed to desperately want a family of his own, independent of this conformity - and he stamped down his homosexuality as much as possible, which is very sad. However, interestingly, Grey doesn't veer away from his failings with his marriage to his wife, Jo. He browbeat her into marrying him, into having his child, and ultimately to give up her promising career (she was also an actor on Broadway) as HE was the star, not her - he couldn't deal with her having her own career and when they had their second child, Grey got his way and she gave up work.

There is much discussion of the Emcee and the notion that although he's smiling and inviting and asking you to come play, he is callous and soulless underneath and the parallel between Grey and the Emcee rings out loud and clear, in the way he treated his wife. They had happy times, sure, but I never got past the sense that his wife had to subsume herself to his career, his way, and that was that. And when, years later, he confessed that he had been with men years ago, this was the straw that broke the camel's back and she divorced him. Much like his Emcee, I found Grey utterly engaging although not at all sympathetic.

That is, until the end, when he says that after his divorce, now that he'd finally dealt with all of his guilt, shame and fear about being gay, that he hoped he would meet a man that he would have a connection with the way he did with Jo, but that that never happened. He concludes that he is a better family man, than a gay man. And despite his selfishness, there was a love between him and his wife, and now that he was free to be himself, I did hope that he'd find a little happiness but that appear to be the case.

A fascinating memoir, that at times flies by years and lingers over others (the book could've been longer in parts, more detailed in others), that is a portrait not only of a bygone era of nightclub acts, variety shows and the "golden age" of Broadway, but of a man who excels at being someone else because he could never truly be himself.

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### **Gary says**

What a life this man lead.....and who can not remember him in Cabaret?? Eh?

I started this this morning,and read the whole book today.....unputdownable.....

What a talent.

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### **Robert says**

I saw Grey as the MC in the original production of Cabaret and, of course, in the movie. He was amazing and frightening. And, as a gay man 10 years his junior, I was interested when he finally came out a few years ago. What was his journey and his story. Master of Ceremonies delivers on both and it is a well done narrative of his life as he sees it. He is honest and owns his faults and his struggles. What was missing for me was any compassion for anyone but himself. His mother, his wife, and others who couldn't relate to his drama come off as the villains of his life. Understandable, but unfortunate is a man of his age. Still, the backstage and background stories are interesting and Grey himself is a fascinating study in the self-absorption of the artist.

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### **Marianne Meyers says**

Such a lovely, classy man and a performer whose career arc started in the Yiddish theatre circuit and encompassed so much and so many people. There is sadness here as a gay man who never felt totally comfortable in the times and places he lived to be out and trust who he really was, much of this crisis due to his mother's reaction to him as a teenager and nasty dismissal. His talent and the timing of his career defines him, his opportunities and his awards, as well as his connection to his audiences.

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### **Judie says**

I have seen Joel Grey at least three times. The first times, he was Joel Katz and I had no idea who he was. I was a child and my mother took my brother and me to the Cleveland Play House to see some of the

children's plays. While I don't remember which ones or who was in them but it was during the mid-1940s and, since Joel was an active member of the Curtain Pullers, the children's division of the Play House at that time, he must have appeared in at least one of the shows I saw. That's when I discovered the magic of live theater.

The second time was when he was appearing in Cleveland as George M. Cohan. He had already made his mark on Broadway. In *MASTER OF CEREMONIES*, he says he was taught to never ad lib. In this particular performance, one of the dancers began to lose her skirt as she walked up the gangplank onto the ship. Joel noticed and started to laugh. He couldn't stop. He tried continuing from there but, after several attempts, realized he would not be able to stop laughing and went on to the next part of the play. He did not ad lib. But the audience loved watching live theater being, well, live theater.

The third time was last autumn. The Cleveland Play House was beginning its 100th year and had just received the Regional Theater Tony Award. Joel was part of the celebration and did a live interview with dialogue, films, and songs. He talked a little about his book that was soon to be published. *MASTER OF CEREMONIES* is that book. My husband and I were able to get seats in the center of the front row. *MASTER OF CEREMONIES* has basically three parts: His childhood; his career and marriage; his homosexuality.

In a brief prologue, Joel tells how he developed the character of Emcee in *Cabaret*. It was the result of watching numerous shows while his father, Mickey Katz, performed in the orchestra on-stage or in the pit. Emcee was his impression of a very poor vaudeville comedian. As he wrote later on, his personal life and observations were very important to finding his characters.

The book continues with the story of his family: His father, who was part of the Spike Jones Orchestra and became famous with his Yiddish parodies of popular songs, his mercurial mother and her dysfunctional family as well as his brother and his father's family.

He tells the story of when, in the 1940s, his father was playing on a pleasure boat on Lake Erie and witnessed a black couple being told they were not allowed to dance. He stopped the band and said, "If they can't dance, then I'm not playing."

He became more aware of the effects of being Jewish after learning about the St. Louis bringing European Jews to safety in the US during World War II and being sent back. To be Jewish was dangerous. His father's "zany Yiddishish songs were "an act of bravery" during World War II. There was a fear of being Jewish in the US. Successful Jews wanted to assimilate. Jews were not allowed in country clubs, law firms, hospitals. Yiddish was death. Katz breathed life back into it, inserting Jews into pop culture..

His family lived in a hotel for a number of years. It was there that he realized that he was attracted to men and boys, even though he was still a child. He also realized that he had to keep it a secret. "The disgust in the voices of my parents, their friends, and the kids on the block alerted me to a very real danger."

*MASTER OF CEREMONIES* moves to one of the biggest influences of his life: The Cleveland Play House. It is dedicated to K. Elmo Lowe, the artistic director at that time. Grey calls it the "One place where it seemed nothing bad could happen, a safe haven where I was free to let go of my caution." "In the acting company, I found a family of an entirely different sort. Here, you could say and feel whatever was inside you. Problems were solved and decisions were made by listening to different points of view. There was an exchange of ideas because no one way would satisfy." "Differences celebrated, contradictions used as creative fodder: The theater was a collective endeavor in which everybody had his or her part to play. The company was made up of so many types...."

He further explains: "Space to act out your dreams is arousing. That's why a lot of people have affairs with other cast members. With the line between pretend and real blurred, permission is freely given." He learned to become the character. "Learning to do things as if was a discovery that turned out to be an invaluable tool as an actor and as a person with secrets."

His family moved to California in the late 1940s. The book speaks briefly of his early years there and then goes into the beginnings of his career. Even though he really wanted to be a stage performer, he did various jobs in the field before that.

His big break onto Broadway happened with Cabaret. He says of his character: "The challenge was to seduce the audience into having a good time, just as Hitler excited the German people into genocide. The Emcee was grotesque and seductive. His mission at the beginning of Act II, after the shock at the end of Act I, was to get the audience laughing and having fun again." He then "Jammed in the second knife when he finished "If You Could See Her Through My Eyes." On opening night, there was "Not a sound, let alone a laugh." Until I read his analysis of that line, I hated it. It made me feel very uncomfortable. Now I understand it was supposed to make the audience squirm. The people who I heard laughing at it missed the entire point. Grey discusses other shows he was in then moves on to the effects of his coming out to his wife. Family was very important to him. He loved being a husband and thought he and Jo had a good marriage. She had given up her career for him. After he told her that he was gay, his relationship with her and his children changed drastically.

The book ends with his feelings and experiences after coming out including his role in "Next to Normal." "Now I was ready to honor who I was and all those who suffered so that people like us could have a sense of freedom, love, and acceptance,"

The story, typical of too many celebrity autobiographies, is full of unnecessary name dropping. When he meets a new agent or producer, etc., he mentions a lot of celebrities who are also their clients. I would have like more of Joel Grey and less of them. There is a little repetition: On page 123, he names the couple whose lent their apartment at the Dakota for his and Jo's wedding. On page 150, he repeats the information. He also talks about going horseback riding one afternoon with his synagogue's cantor at Will Rogers Park. On page 139, while getting a part in Billy the Kid on television, he writes "I never mentioned that I'd never ridden a horse before—I was scared of horses."

MASTER OF CEREMONIES kept moving and including some important information about Joel Grey, the entertainment industry, and homosexuality. It could have been better with some cutting.

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## **Ashley \*Hufflepuff Kitten\* says**

Started the new year off right with a book I knew I was going to love. I didn't know a whole lot about Joel Grey going into this book -- or I knew less than I thought I did. What I knew: He originated the role of the Emcee in Cabaret, for which he went on to win the Oscar and the Tony, and originated the role of the Wizard in Wicked. Also that he's the father of Jennifer Grey from Dirty Dancing.

This book delved into Joel's personal life and upbringing, where he grappled with his own identity from a very young age in a time when being gay in America was criminalized. LGBT people remain victims of hate crimes and other peoples' ignorance, but we've also come a long way since the 1950s, into a time when same-sex marriage is finally recognized as equal to that of heterosexual marriage, and people are more able to be themselves in today's world. Joel's story was hilarious and heartbreaking, but he stayed determined through it all, which left a big impression on me. I was also impressed by the fact that Joel owned up to what he did wrong as far as his marriage was concerned; not many people can step back and say "I was selfish, I was a jerk, I was a bully" but he does and it's refreshing.

I fell in love with his love for Cleveland and the Cleveland Playhouse; I wonder if he ever visits in his free time. His tumultuous family life, from childhood through marriage and divorce, struck a chord. I held my breath through his time on the nightclub circuit, where he started out with his dad's Yiddish troupe, as he wondered if he'd ever be able to make it in theatre instead of just as a nightclub act. The success of Cabaret was incredible; I'm planning on watching the movie again tonight.

I was a little disappointed he didn't say more than a few words about Wicked, but I suppose it was such a



smash and so recent to boot that there's not much that needs said about it. This was a wonderful look into the life of an incredibly resilient performer.

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## **Carol Taylor says**

This memoir by the man who initiated the role of the MC in Cabaret was only somewhat interesting. It deals mostly with Joel's acceptance that he is a gay man after a long-time marriage and two children. However, I didn't feel like I know him any better than I did before I read the book. If you're a huge Joel Grey fan or a Cabaret fan, you'll like the interesting tidbits he shares. I realized that I have seen very little of his work so I couldn't relate to the behind-the-scenes tales of the various plays and movies he's been in. Once I read about the inequities in Jo and Joel's marriage, I lost some respect for him. I like that he admits it but I didn't get the impression he's really sorry about that part of his life. There was no abuse - he was just a very controlling husband.

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