

Books

BELUSHI: A BIOGRAPHY JUDITH BELUSHI PISANO & TANNER COLBY (RUGGED LAND BOOKS)

Beyond Bluto

If you want the gory details, read Bob Woodward's Belushi bio. But if you want to get to know the lovable lug behind the bedsheet, pick up his widow's new oral history.

By Kabir Hamid

Belushi: *A Biography*, a new oral history edited by the subject's widow, Judith Belushi Pisano, contains little of the detail that went into Bob Woodward's exhaustively researched 1984 bio *Wired: The Short Life and Fast Times of John Belushi*. A freewheeling compilation of stories and conjecture recounted by Belushi's friends, family, and colleagues—with a foreword by Dan Aykroyd—it lacks *Wired's* extensive contextual information on

Judith Belushi Pisano

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about a talented fuckup and showing instead a man who was as generous toward his friends as he was deleterious toward himself, as loved for his celebratory approach to living as he was doomed by his lack of self-control.

Woodward had never met Belushi, and was a showbiz outsider when he started researching his book. His introductory note is pensive. "What happened?" he asks. "Who was

responsible, if anyone? Could it have been different or better?... He made us laugh, and now he can make us think." For Woodward the meat of Belushi's story lay in his drug addiction, and he chronicled Belushi's prodigious cocaine use and the monstrous behavior it spawned with a fetishistic eye for detail. Belushi's comic talent and personal charm were at best ancillary concerns for the *Washington Post* reporter. Woodward saw the Belushi story as a spectacle, a car wreck that onlookers could observe with fascination.

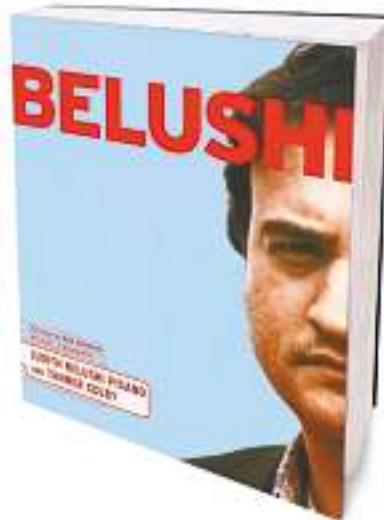
Judith Belushi Pisano and her coeditor, Tanner Colby, don't explicitly mention *Wired* in *Belushi*, but Pisano includes a pointed reference to Woodward in her introduction when, running through her reasons for embarking on another "Belushi project," she writes, "I once mistakenly gave the key to John's story to the wrong person, and this was a chance to get it right." *Belushi* "gets it right" by celebrating its subject rather than using him as fodder for a D.A.R.E. seminar. Of course, it's not all sunshine—the editors include criticism of Belushi and his bad behavior, especially when it was drug induced. The book's best moments show the symbiotic connection between Belushi the life force and Belushi the self-destroyer.

Pisano and Tanner collect anecdotes and insights from various

people and string them together with bits of narrative exposition. The story follows Belushi from his childhood in Humboldt Park and Wheaton and his time at Second City to New York, where he gets involved with *National Lampoon* and *Saturday Night Live*, and then to Hollywood, where he achieves true fame with *Animal House* and discovers the real pressures (and pleasures) of stardom.

The sillier, smaller stories along the way reveal the most. "Late one night we leave his place down in the Village around one or two in the morning," says Danny Kortchmar, a musician and friend. "We're walking down Bleeker, and it starts to rain, I mean a torrential downpour. But John and Danny [Aykroyd] don't want to go home. We keep wandering the streets of the Village and they start to sing all their favorite tunes, starting with 'Flip, Flop & Fly.' They just burst into song, snapping their fingers—and it's pouring. All of us are completely soaked to the bone, just dancing and singing in the rain in the middle of New York City. There's nobody else on the street. It was like something out of a movie." The immediacy of these stories gives a sense of Belushi and his crew that more polished prose can't capture.

As reminiscences pile up, Belushi's magnetism emerges—as a reader you can almost feel the warmth he exuded, the excitement he could muster in others,



the playfulness that extended beyond stage and screen. Tom Brokaw (of all people) points out that a good chunk of his appeal lay in his everyman persona; Belushi reminds you of that old pal of yours whom you can laugh with endlessly and who always seems to liven up the room. "Everybody knew somebody like him, or wanted to know somebody like him," Brokaw says. "John just raised it to an art form."

Many of the contributors are screenwriters, comedians, and directors, and they have a lot to say about the particulars of Belushi's comic style. His brother Jim traces the origins of his very physical comedy back to his childhood, when he communicated through gestures with their Albanian grandmother. Former *SNL* writer Alan Zweibel remembers Lorne Michaels watching Belushi do his irate weatherman character on "Weekend Update" and murmuring, "It's Gleason"—

seeing in Belushi a reincarnation of Jackie Gleason's archetypal prole, Ralph Kramden. Quite a few touch upon Belushi's ability to improvise on camera, a skill that gave his performances their critical—and hilarious—element of surprise. Says his *Animal House* costar James Widdoes, "During the scene on the cafeteria line, [director John] Landis was talking to Belushi all the way through it, and Belushi was just taking it one step further. What started out as Landis saying 'Okay, now grab the sandwich,' became, in John's hands, taking the sandwich, squeezing and bending it until it popped out of the cellophane, sucking it into his mouth, and then putting half the sandwich back. He would just go a little further each time."

Belushi includes some of the same unflattering drug stories as *Wired*—albeit in fuzzier form—but Belushi's friends have drawn such a vibrant portrait of him that they're harder to take. As a fan it's tough to hear, for instance, that Landis, who also directed *The Blues Brothers*, felt that Belushi's performance in that film would have been even better without the coke. Harold Ramis remembers Belushi at a party two weeks before he died. "He looked exhausted," says Ramis. "I said, 'How ya doing, John?' He just laid his head on my shoulder and said, 'Oh, Harold.' That was it. Oh, Harold."

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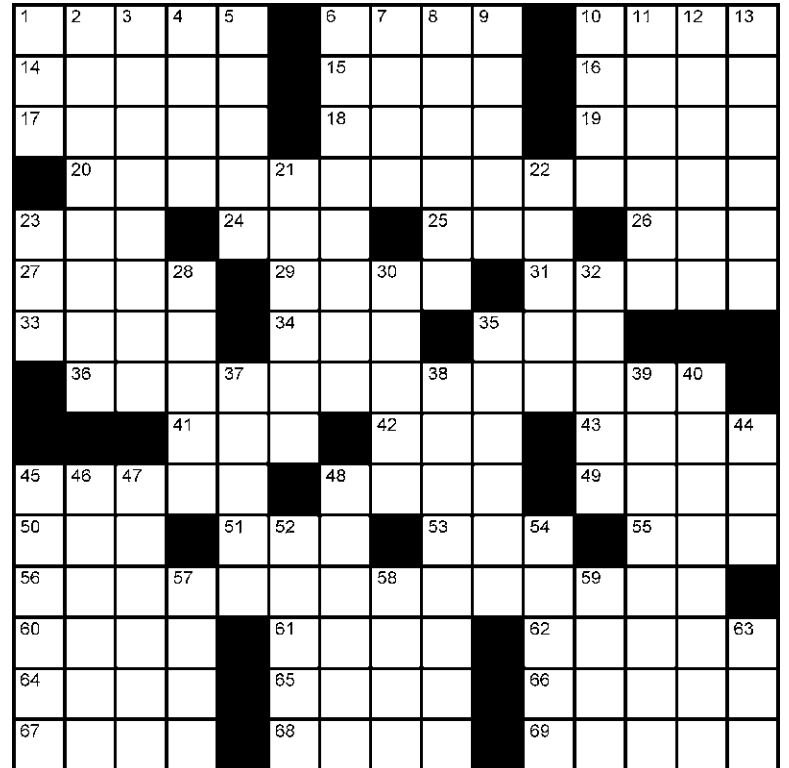
ACROSS

1. Player in a cast
6. It may be raw or processed
10. Gardner and others
14. *In a Metal Mood: No More Mr. Nice Guy* crooner Pat
15. They'll never fly
16. Give a ticket
17. Benjamin
18. Tora ____, Afghanistan
19. Running behind
20. Yom Kippur exchange?
23. Great, in bygone slang
24. Hot body
25. Bit of back talk
26. "Yay team!"
27. Blueswoman James
29. Dempster's opportunity
31. Ease up
33. One of 12, at some meetings
34. Trilogy finale
35. You's is
36. Observing Yom Kippur?

41. Camel qty.
42. Civic need?
43. Push
45. Full of Sparks, perhaps
48. Sushi wrapper
49. Note of resignation
50. Payment marker
51. Part of a GI's address
53. Observance through Oct.
55. DJ's bagful
56. Celebrate Yom Kippur?
60. Dance in a pit
61. Word before ghanoush or O'Riley
62. Homer's first episode
64. [I'm talking here . . .]
65. Warm pie perch
66. Crackers
67. All up in someone's business
68. Frequent fort locale
69. Solemn stretches

DOWN

1. *Desperate Housewives* shower
2. Parade pieces
3. More than necessary
4. Not fooled by
5. Winds, usually
6. Suave
7. Cupid
8. Long-living swimmer
9. Tokyo brewer
10. Patriot Act challenger
11. It may keep you up at night
12. To boot
13. Stew
21. Type of jazz or cuisine
22. Escher's genre
23. ____, Moines
28. Pavement pounder's adverb



30. Summer babe
32. Swains
35. Stockton statistic
37. This sucks
38. Home shopping channel?
39. One million million
40. Moussaka need
44. Codger's queries
45. Field with frequent firings?
46. Rum drinker's refrain
47. Racetrack prizes
48. "I got the smaller half!"
52. 1893 blue-ribbon winner
54. Govt. security
57. "Goodness gracious!"
58. Fit
59. Succulent houseplant
63. Bad start?

It was like he couldn't even articulate anything about his situation. I just sensed total despair."

More than one contributor speculates as to what—besides addiction—drove Belushi's drug use. One of the most convincing theories is that drugs were an integral part of living up to the hype that had been created around him, the life-of-the-party persona that he felt he had to maintain. Says Jann Wenner, editor and publisher of *Rolling Stone*, "He became a victim of it. He'd always have to come over and be the professional crazy guy, the dope guy, much like Hunter S. Thompson. If Hunter showed up, people wanted the Hunter S. Thompson Experience, and it was the same with John: let's get the drugs and party. And John was torn about it."

Belushi's structure makes a comprehensive biographical package impossible; you'll have to look elsewhere for minutiae. But the book presents something more interesting: a glimpse of the man under the samurai suit, the toga, and the Ray-Bans. While *Wired* invited you to peer into the smoldering wreck, *Belushi* shows you the friend who's bent on driving drunk and won't give you the keys. **B**

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