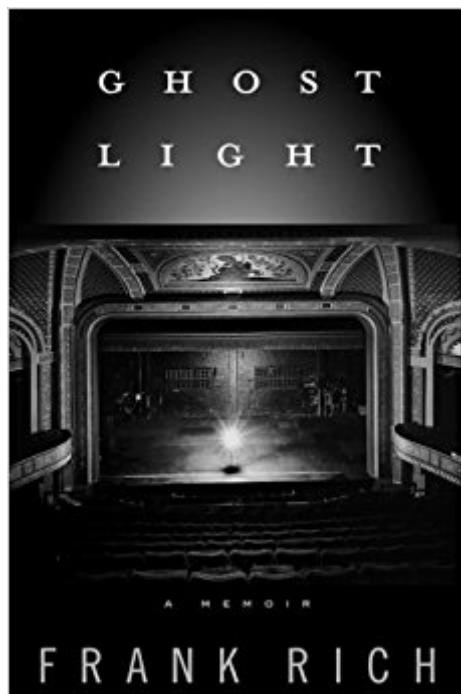


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# Ghost Light: A Memoir



## Synopsis

There is a superstition that if an emptied theater is ever left completely dark, a ghost will take up residence. To prevent this, a single "ghost light" is left burning at center stage after the audience and all of the actors and musicians have gone home. Frank Rich's eloquent and moving boyhood memoir reveals how theater itself became a ghost light and a beacon of security for a child finding his way in a tumultuous world. Rich grew up in the small-townish Washington, D.C., of the 1950s and early '60s, a place where conformity seemed the key to happiness for a young boy who always felt different. When Rich was seven years old, his parents separated--at a time when divorce was still tantamount to scandal--and thereafter he and his younger sister were labeled "children from a broken home." Bouncing from school to school and increasingly lonely, Rich became terrified of the dark and the uncertainty of his future. But there was one thing in his life that made him sublimely happy: the Broadway theater. Rich's parents were avid theatergoers, and in happier times they would listen to the brand-new recordings of *South Pacific*, *Damn Yankees*, and *The Pajama Game* over and over in their living room. When his mother's remarriage brought about turbulent changes, Rich took refuge in these same records, re-creating the shows in his imagination, scene by scene. He started collecting Playbills, studied fanatically the theater listings in *The New York Times* and *Variety*, and cut out ads to create his own miniature marques. He never imagined that one day he would be the *Times*'s chief theater critic. Eventually Rich found a second home at Washington's National Theatre, where as a teenager he was a ticket-taker and was introduced not only to the backstage magic he had dreamed of for so long but to a real-life cast of charismatic and eccentric players who would become his mentors and friends. With humor and eloquence, Rich tells the triumphant story of how the aspirations of a stagestruck young boy became a lifeline, propelling him toward the itinerant family of theater, whose romantic denizens welcomed him into the colorful fringes of Broadway during its last glamorous era. Every once in a while, a grand spectacle comes along that introduces its audiences to characters and scenes that will resound in their memories long after the curtain has gone down. *Ghost Light*, Frank Rich's beautifully crafted childhood memoir, is just such an event.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When Frank Rich was an anxious, unhappy kid marooned in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., the fact his parents were divorced was discussed "only in the whisper that Grandma Ross used when talking about being Jewish or having cancer." Like so many others who feel painfully different, Frank found refuge in the theater, particularly the classic musicals of Broadway's golden age. After an enchanted trip to see *Bells Are Ringing* in 1956 when he was 7, Rich writes, "I was now destined to trace my childhood almost exclusively through an accelerating progression of plays, good and bad, that would captivate and kidnap me." Many of the tickets came from his stepfather, who was sometimes generous and fun but often frighteningly abusive. Once again, the theater helped him cope: when Frank saw *Gypsy*, its portrait of troubled family relations "made me feel less lonely." Similarly, when chronicling his attendance at such legendary shows as *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, among many others, Rich concentrates on his responses rather than the productions themselves. What interests him most here is the theater's power to shape lives. Paying tribute to the men who both shared and cultivated his passion for the theater, Rich draws touching portraits of Scott Kirkpatrick, manager of Washington's National Theatre, who hired young Frank as a ticket taker, and of Clayton Coots, a company manager who befriended him. Those who admired (or excoriated) Rich's work as drama critic for *The New York Times* will find *Ghost Light* an intriguing look at the personal history that lies behind his critical judgments. --Wendy Smith

Two intertwined themes propel this evocative memoir of growing up in the 1950s and '60s by a former drama critic and current op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*. The first is the pain and confusion of being the child of divorced parents at a time when most families remained intact. The second is how the allure of theater softened that pain and gave the author a new way of understanding the world. Rich's world changed radically when his middle-class Jewish parents

divorced in 1956, and the comfortable everyday routine of The Mickey Mouse Club and family dinners disappeared. It was during this time that Rich's parents introduced him to Broadway musical comedies—*Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, *Most Happy Fella*—which became both a passion and a private imaginative world for him. Rich's prose can revel in nostalgia, as when he conjures up his anticipation of going to his first Broadway show or meeting Jack Benny in a restaurant. It can also be effectively frightening, as when he recounts physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his new stepfather. Rich offers some wonderful insights, for example when he realizes, upon seeing and reading *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, that the American theater is maturing along with him; or when he writes about how his older gay male mentor (who eventually died of AIDS) prepared him to face problems in his personal life as well as to embrace his life in the theater. In the end, Rich's story resonates with the pain and triumph of everyday life. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is an excellent memoir. Frank Rich, renowned theater critic, recounts his stormy childhood. Growing up in the 1950s, he was a child of divorce when divorce was rare and frowned upon. His mother remarries, and he and his sister endure the abuse their stepfather is already heaping on his own children. But, Frank discovers the escapism of theater at an early age, and while his stepfather is abusive, he also encourages Frank's love of theater and provides show tickets. As Frank grows into his teens, he is given the freedom to walk the theater districts in Wash. DC and NYC to buy his own show tickets and see whatever he wants. He collects playbills, and reconstructs theater sets using old shoeboxes so he can recreate and relive the plays. He has few friends, but the ones he has are important to his growth and maturity. For me, this is what a memoir should be. We learn about a person through his own experiences, gaining his insights into his life, finding out how he got from a shy, ostracized, abused child to a confident theater critic, making a living doing what he loved. I highly recommend this book.

Frank Rich's *GHOST LIGHT* is a marvelous memoir and the perfect read for any lover of theatre. I've always enjoyed Rich's *NEW YORK* column and this spring, upon the release of the Moss Hart Bio *ACT ONE* on Broadway, Rich wrote a wonderful ode to Hart's 1959 memoir and the important place it holds on theatre lovers. What I didn't know was that Rich wrote his own ode to the influence of theatre, a 2000 memoir named after the light that stays on in a darkened theatre. Rich grew up in the DC suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, the son of divorced middle-class Jews. Rich's adolescence, in the shadow of DC's National

Theatre, chronicles the memorable plays of the 1950s and 1960s, from DAMN YANKEES to THE ODD COUPLE and the impact that said theatre made on the impressionable Rich. At the center of the story is Rich's relationship with his violent, moody step-father, who encouraged his love of theatre while systematically physically, mentally and verbally abusing Rich into his late teens. On a happier note, Rich beautifully describes trips to Broadway, walking down Shubert Alley, watching shows open and close, the ghost light being the one constant. Rich's bio stops with college and never arrives at his prolific stint as the theatre critic for THE NEW YORK TIMES, leaving the reader with a satisfying, incomparable narrative.

I'm a fan of Mr. Rich's writing and sensibility, so I picked up Ghost Light intending to skim it to learn a little more about him and his background. However, the story and style was far too compelling to be glossed over and I was engrossed despite my best intentions. The story works on many levels. It's an insider's story of growing up in an American family that doesn't match the mid century TV depiction of what a family is and how it functions. It's also a vivid portrait of growing up during a turbulent period in US history. But what meant the most to me is how it depicted a child's journey from the confines of family out into the world at large - it's a story of the tension between fate and the choices we make while finding one's way. My daughter is graduating from high school this year and is so excited to be going to U Chicago in the fall; witnessing Mr. Rich's response to being admitted to Harvard helps me understand the sense of release and adventure that's so palpable for her right now. The experience of reading Mr. Rich's memoir provided me with a context for looking at my childhood, which trailed his by just a few years, and for seeing the difference in the world he and I came to age in and my daughter's experience of growing up. I'm glad I read it.

This autobiographical book from the longtime theatre critic for the New York Times will take you back to the good old days when American Theater was vital and exciting. Rich grew up in Washington DC, where I now live. It was great fun reading about my adopted home town before my time here. It was a different world then racially and politically. A child of divorce, Rich shares his feelings about his parents' lives and the impact their split had on him and his sibling sister. In many ways the book is bittersweet and it was easy to see how Rich found refuge in the make believe world of the theatre. If you love theatre or Washington, DC, you will want to read this book.

A childhood to college-departure memoir by one of the country's most gifted theater reviewers and columnists, Frank Rich. Rich captures each era's mood, linking it to iconic musical theater

productions, and his evolving sense of self and place in that industry. The mentor who ultimately sets Rich on the path to adulthood and future success will surprise the reader; as he contradicts a received wisdom about "life upon the wicked stage."

This is a beautifully written, sensitive memoir of a painful childhood and coming of age. Anyone who has ever listened to the original cast album of a Broadway show and been transported in their mind to a theatre will find a kindred spirit in Frank Rich. Rich grew up in a home which had an abundance of material goods but also contained an abundance of pain. His love of the theatre and some lovely people he met along the way helped him to endure until he went away to college and his adult life. Mr. Rich was for many years the very astute theatre critic for the New York Times. He now writes incisive OpEd pieces for the Times. This memoir is very courageous in light of the private pain that it reveals which helped to mold this public man.

My son had to read this for his college class, and when he described the book to me I decided I needed to read it, too. I couldn't put it down. Frank Rich knows how to tell a story, and this is a great one.

I loved this book and I have read it over and over countless times. For anyone into theater at all please check it out.

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