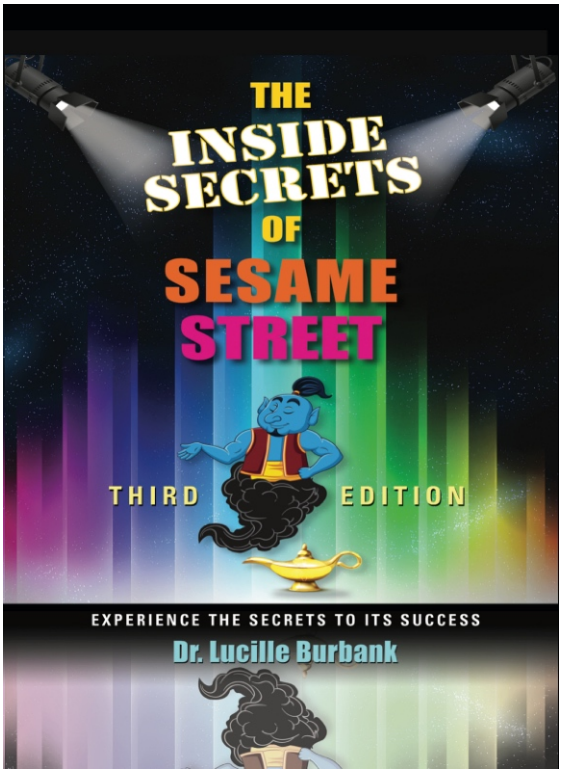

Sesame Street has aired on PBS for 45 years. Let's discover the secrets to its success.

The Inside Secrets of Sesame Street Third Edition (2021)

By Dr. Lucille Burbank

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THE INSIDE SECRETS OF SESAME STREET

THIRD EDITION

EXPERIENCE THE SECRETS TO ITS SUCCESS

Dr. Lucille Burbank

Praise for
Secrets from Sesame Street's Pioneers
and The Inside Secrets of Sesame Street

This book was reviewed at the 22nd Annual Writer's Digest Self-Published Book Awards. The judge rated the following areas "outstanding:" structure, organization, pacing, spelling, punctuation, grammar, voice, and writing style. Here is an excerpt from the judge's commentary.

THIS BOOK contains an enormous amount of background information on *Sesame Street*, doubtless one of the most successful children's shows in broadcasting history. The show is over 45 years old. The focus is placed on the pioneers of the show and how they came up with the concept and all the research involved. One can also read about performers, puppeteers, writers, directors, etc. Personalities like Jim Henson and other key figures provide enlightening nuggets. The creation and development of such familiar characters as the Muppets, Kermit the Frog, and Big Bird is particularly interesting. Chapters detail how the educational role of the show was sustained as well as its fantasy element. The material also covers the writing element, how to keep the show fresh, seeking new material and subjects, and judging audience reactions. One section covers the production of the popular show in other countries including Russia. There are also references about the show including advice to parents on allocation of TV viewing time [for] children and material on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*…

ISBN: 978-1-64718-525-1

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Burbank, Dr. Lucille
The Inside Secrets of Sesame Street by Dr. Lucille Burbank
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020908722

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2021 Third Edition

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CHAPTER 4

Jim Henson's Muppets

Reflecting on Sesame Street's success, Dave Connell, executive producer, said, "My answer would be because it is a good television show, but is it good just because of the Muppets? No. The Muppets are important. The Muppets are the stars, and we designed this show not to have any star and it did."

JOAN COONEY, co-founder of *Sesame Street*, had called for puppets in her proposal, and she wanted Jim Henson, but felt unsure of how to get him since he was so busy and successful. Jon Stone, however, having worked with Henson on some other projects, was able to help Cooney out (Kamp, 2020). Finally, Jim Henson came and presented his puppets, which he had copyrighted as Muppets. **Upon seeing Henson's creative display, "Connell, Gibbon, and Stone all guessed that the variety, charm and vitality of these Muppets would provide the writers with a wide field for their imaginations. In addition, some…of the Muppet characters...seemed to have great potential for presenting educational content in an entertaining manner"** (Lesser, 1974, p. 38).

As we all know, Connell, Gibbon, and Stone, the producers, were more than right when they guessed the Muppets would work. Not only did they work, but also as Dave Connell said they became the star.

In my interview with Connell, I asked him the value of puppets, and he said, "Puppets are sort of two dimensional in a sense, and you can make them cartoonish, if you will. There are many characters you want to portray on the show, but you have to be careful how you do that, and puppets allow you that freedom. [For example], you can have a character like Cookie Monster who would sell his soul to the devil for a cookie. You can't do that with a human being, especially on a show like *Sesame Street* where you want positive role models. You can have these really strange kinds of characters, and [behavior like that is] acceptable, and you can't do that with people."

Intrigued by Connell's explanation about the functionality of puppets, I decided to ask Sam Gibbon the same question: "What is the value of puppets?" To which he simply replied, "Kids love them."

Then Gibbon added, "Puppets express emotions or relationships in a heightened and 'crystallized' manner that is non-threatening to the child viewer." Gibbon also believed puppets can provide strong modeling elements for children. For example, he suggested, "Big Bird embodies many aspects of childhood, and some modeling is more successful with the puppets as opposed to either a child actor or [adults]."

Fascinated by the use of Henson's puppets, I asked Jon Stone why he believed in their lasting impact on *Sesame Street*. "Well, we knew that to begin with, from our early research, that children love puppets. I love the possibility of puppets. They can do things that human beings simply can't do. For one thing you can get quite violent with puppets, and it doesn't hurt anybody. And I think violence—channeled violence—is perfectly all right in a children's show. It's part of life, and I am not talking, you know, machine guns or car chases or anything like that. But one puppet can really mash another one, and it just bounces right back again like a cartoon. They are, in many ways, much more versatile than people for those reasons and others."

Stone continued, "Puppets don't have to be humanoid or even monsteroid as Grover and Cookie Monster are monsteroids, and Ernie and Bert are sort of little humanoids. But we have talking loaves of bread and abstract fuzz balls that kind of bounce around and things like that [and] they're just wonderful things to work with. Puppets seem to be an excellent vehicle for bringing abstract things to life in a way that is meaningful to children. It's just practically limitless! It's limited only by your imagination what you can do with puppets that you simply cannot do with real people."

In David Borgenicht's book *Sesame Street Unpaved* (Children's Television Workshop, 1998), there is a chapter titled, "The Anything Muppets," which beautifully illustrates Stone's comment about puppets being limited only by your imagination. Some of the Anything Muppets shown are Slimy the Worm, Barkley the Dog, the Twiddlebugs, The Honkers and the Dingers, plus Baby Bear. Also, talking vegetables are featured along with Gladys the Cow, and Roosevelt Franklin, a young purple Anything Muppet who attends Roosevelt Franklin Elementary School.

Upon seeing Roosevelt Franklin, I am immediately reminded of my interview with Matt Robinson. Robinson, who was a producer and not an actor in the early days of *Sesame Street,* was asked to play Gordon until a suitable actor could be found. During this time, he was also the voice of Roosevelt Franklin. In my interview with him, I asked his opinion about using the Muppets. Robinson answered my question by talking about what he called "a very unique method" of actors and Muppets on the Street together:

"There was a very unique method used where they integrated the Muppets with the live people so, you'd talk to them just like they were people. It gave a particular aura to the show that really couldn't be matched. I remember when I first learned how to work with the Muppets you had to forget that they were puppets and just use them as people. It was fascinating because you dealt with the Muppets in a very different way than you would deal with ordinary puppets."

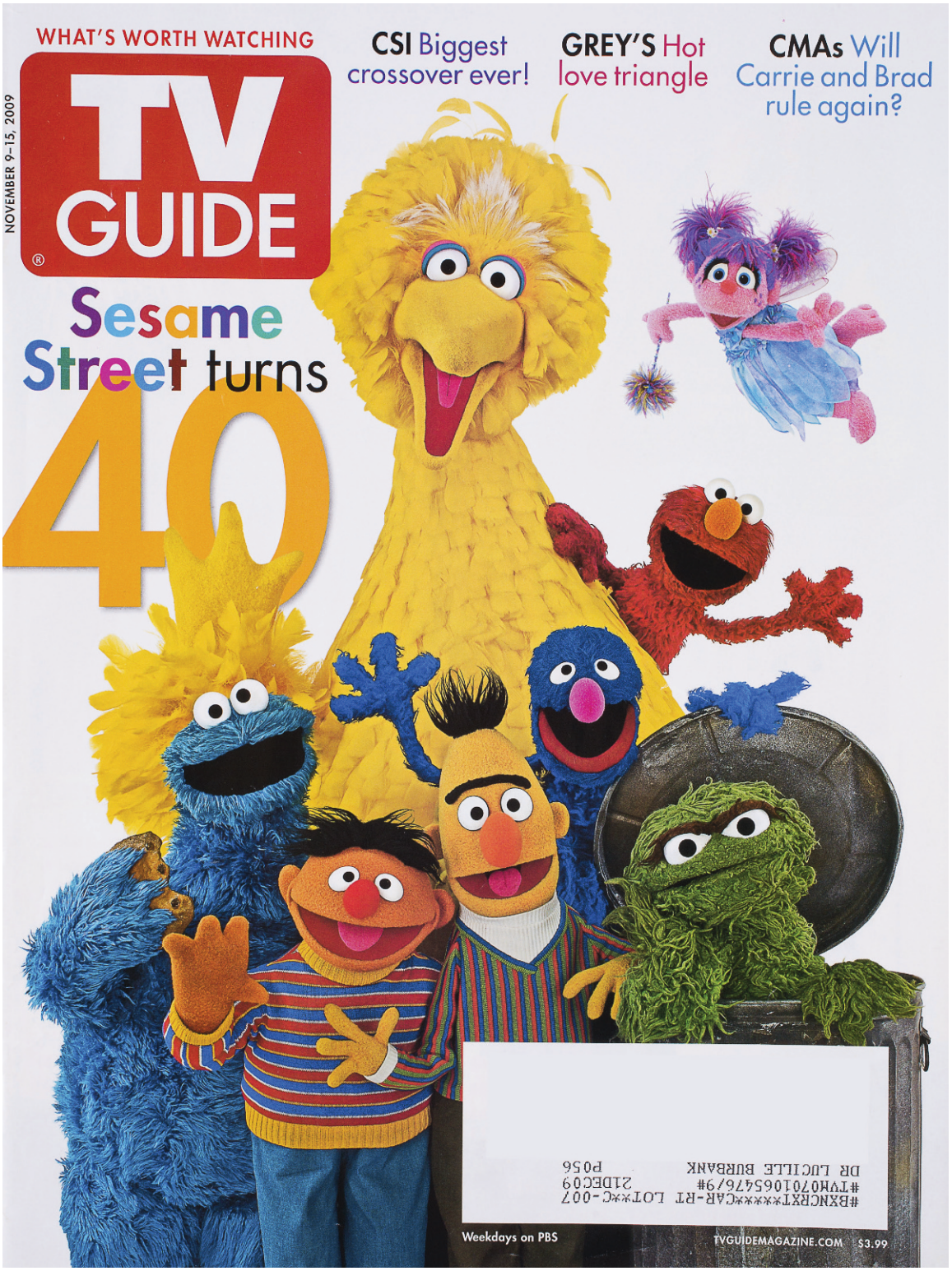
Robinson also told me the Muppets lent a feeling of fantasy to the show, and when the Muppets were treated more like people (rather than puppets) you had a wonderful world in which children could relate. "They [the kids] never ask why an eight-foot bird or a Snuffleupagus is walking down the Street. Things [were done] from the kids' point of view, and I think the Muppets serve that purpose."

Additionally, I inquired whether the Muppets could do things that adults could not. "Well, they

can be very, very independent," said Robinson. "They can be independent characters like the Count who just likes to count. You can't imagine a human being doing that role. You couldn't imagine a human being doing the Cookie Monster role. There are limitations in human beings that just don't apply to puppets."

When I asked Jane Henson, wife and creative partner of Jim Henson, about the Muppets she said, "We always felt that puppets could be anything. The puppets could be all shapes, sizes, and colors, and be called 'monsters.' Life is made up of everything—all different creatures acting in all different ways, and certainly [we were] hoping to help children who were in the ghettos, who had to encounter all different things all the time. But they had their imaginations to draw on."

While I was thinking over Henson's point of view, I remembered how the use of puppets on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was so different than on *Sesame Street*. *So*, I mentioned this to Henson, and she responded, "We [do] have a different feeling about fantasy than *Mister Rogers*. For instance, Fred Rogers is very careful to separate reality and fantasy, to not confuse children; he is very, very careful about that. Whereas our feeling is the great fun of life and of children is [having] fantasy and reality all sort of mixed up in one big bag, and we want to help children appreciate that."



In 2009, *Sesame Street* celebrated 40 years on PBS

CHAPTER 5

Big Bird's Experiences

Big Bird portrays an intelligent preschooler—far from the beginning days of Sesame Street when he was a goofy, yokel bird. For a long time now, he has displayed a consistency in demeanor and educational level—an evolvement that was necessary.

"WE HAVE learned [on *Sesame Street*] that puppets are able to compete very favorably with animation," said Caroll Spinney.

Then Spinney spoke about the evolution of Big Bird's appearance. "[Originally,] Jim Henson wanted Big Bird to talk and sound like Mortimer Snerd," (a comic dummy or puppet created by Edgar Bergen). "Henson's choice of making Big Bird so funky was because he envisioned the Bird to be very un-bright and funny."

While I understood what Henson was aiming for, I asked Spinney if the country-yokel type was a bit too goofy.

"Yes, it turned out that Big Bird had to be less goofy and more like a child just learning about things," said Spinney. "So, Kermit Love added more feathers until Big Bird looked a little smarter—just a little modification from Jim's original vision because Jim is an incredible genius."

Spinney also pointed out that Big Bird could be likened to a porpoise. "Although, porpoises look like they are always smiling, the neat thing is I can hold the Bird in such a way as to make him appear to smile or be happy. [In addition,] the combination, of how I angle his head, where I hold the mouth, how wide, etc., and where his eyelids are, gives Big Bird the ability to appear to be thinking and realizing life because he looks like he is aware."

Reading into a puppet like Big Bird, reminds me of what Gus Allegretti, puppeteer and actor on *Captain Kangaroo*, told me. "When I was hired to be on *Captain Kangaroo*, I told them I didn't make puppets, and they said they knew and got someone to do the job. So, I met with the puppet maker, and he made these baldheads with no expression on the face. I was not use to this because the previous children's show where I worked used puppets, and the puppet maker use to make those

puppets with eyes that moved sideways and ears that wagged and eyebrows that went up and down and jaws that worked."

I asked Allegretti how he responded to this change, and he told me that he finally asked the new puppet maker about his puppets. "The puppet maker said he always made puppets simply, and then he let the child put the expression on the face. He explained when creating a puppet, the creator should always make a neutral mouth line, and then the child will make it smile or grimace or frown."

"In fact, [this wisdom] applied to Mister Moose [on *Captain Kangaroo*]," recalled Allegretti. "People had come to me and sworn, 'Oh, I love that bit where Mister Moose's eyes closed and [he] went to sleep,' and I'd say, 'His eyes don't close.' 'Oh, yes they do! I remember his eyes closing.' And I'd say, 'His eyes don't close.'"

I couldn't believe the confidence of the show's viewers, and I mentioned this to Allegretti, who replied, "That's again what the puppets do for the children. It's a 'tabula rasa' for the child on which to write what they want to. It's a wonderful lesson. I think the art of [puppetry] is [expressed through] the child [as] the final provider of the emotion. The puppet makes the suggestion, but the child finishes it up."

Hearing this from Allegretti, I decided to ask Spinney his opinion about puppets, and why they are used on *Sesame Street*. Spinney said, "I think they have a tremendous advantage in that we try to reach all children—all shades of people. The fact is children recognize other children that are like them. For example, children with Down syndrome will notice other children with Down just as Black children identify with other Black children. But puppets don't have any race; they are all different colors and so all children can deal with them."

Based on what Spinney told me, it seemed like he wanted the children who watch *Sesame Street* to feel close to the Muppets as if they are human beings made up of all racial, cultural, and special-needs differences. Spinney agreed, "Yes, because children identify more with puppets. I think it's just natural. For one thing, look at the popularity of stuffed animals. You know if your stuffed animal that's sitting there could suddenly perform for you, you'd really be enchanted. On *Sesame Street* that's what you have—a bunch of stuffed animals that are alive!"

"It's almost like magic!" *No, to them it is magic*, I quietly corrected myself.

Following this, Spinney told me he needed to get "something off his chest." He said that before Jim Henson died Henson was interviewed, and the interviewer wrote in an article that Henson said the magic comes from him. Spinney exclaimed, "I said, 'No, Jim didn't say that!' It seems like the interviewer read something into what Jim said. I just don't believe Jim to be that bold to brag that much and say, 'Oh, we do magic.' If there is some [magic], we're delighted there's something in the drama and the performance that can create that. [Like] the puppets for the children can create the magic. And that's probably what [Jim] was saying."

Then Spinney declared, "Puppets can go where no man can walk, you know!"

Agreeing with him, we decided to take a short break from the interview. My mind wandered. I thought about *how Sesame Street blurs the line between fantasy and reality (which is a Henson creation), and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, another show for preschoolers, does not. Then, I remembered a good story*:

Spinney was invited to be Big Bird on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Fred Rogers, creator of this show, always made sure there was a clear division between reality and fantasy. Because of this separation,

Rogers told Spinney that at one point in the show he wanted him to take off part of his Big Bird costume and reveal himself as being dressed up.

Perhaps, Spinney would have granted Rogers' request if what had happened in the past did not happen: Years ago, Big Bird was preparing to shoot a scene when a Klieg light, weighing a hundred pounds, fell and crashed a foot away from Big Bird throwing out broken glass and burning chunks of asbestos everywhere. Spinney then saw flames coming up the interior of the bird and yelled, "I'm on fire!" And there wasn't a fire extinguisher in sight! However, Richie King, a cameraman, slapped the flames out with his hand and saved Spinney's life. In addition, *Look* magazine was there doing a photo shoot!

Later on, Jim Henson, being Spinney's boss, saw a picture of his head sticking out of Big Bird's body in a photo in *Look* magazine and advised him that he should never be seen on television this way—with part of his Big Bird suit on. Henson felt this would destroy the image of what Big Bird is to the children, and a partial costume would ruin the fantasy aspect of the puppet. Spinney agreed with Henson. So, when Rogers asked him to take off part of his Big Bird costume, showing the child audience he was dressed up, an argument ensued between them.

"Imagine having an argument with Fred Rogers!" Spinney said to me. "Rogers booked me to go on his show one year and then suddenly he had to cancel because he got the mumps. Two years later once again we got the request, and Rogers sent me a script. The script had me walking into his little house and Rogers would chat a bit with the bird. Then he would say, 'What's it like in there, Caroll? Take it off and show us how it works.'"

There was no way Spinney could do what Rogers requested of him, and Rogers said that it was necessary in order to teach the children. He explained how the *Neighborhood* works, "We keep it separate, that's why we have the trolley which goes to make-believe land. We point out it is make-believe, and it's not real; it's make-believe. But reality is here; we have Brown's puppets on, and we show how they work and everything."

To which Spinney replied, "That's fine. Those are marionettes, but they are not as realistic [as the Muppets]." Spinney told me he was on the phone with Rogers for twenty minutes, and Fred continued to suggest Big Bird couldn't be on the show.

"[Finally] I proposed, 'Let's change the script!'"

So, Rogers took Spinney out of the house and only had him as a guest in make-believe land. Intrigued by this, I asked if he was fine with this change, and he was, but added, "But then, you might as well not teach your children about Santa Claus because they are going to be a little disappointed."

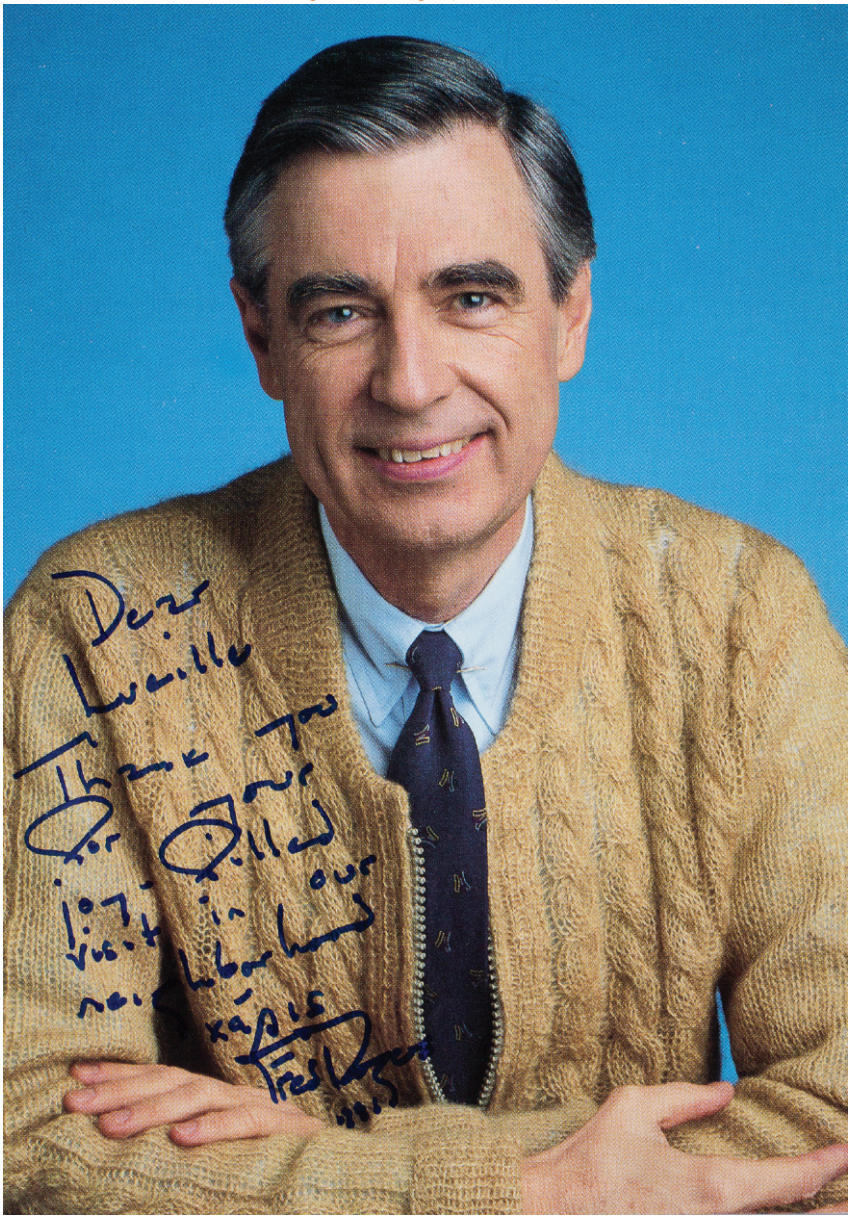
Imagine having an argument with Mister Rogers, I repeated to myself. To really understand this phenomenon, you will want to become familiar with this man: In the 2000th Issue Commemorative Edition of *TV Guide*, Rogers was aptly characterized as, "What You See Is What You Get" (July 27, 1991, p. 44). I can say from my personal experience of interviewing him that he was the same person on and off the television screen. That is, sitting across from Rogers was like watching him on TV. For me, Rogers possessed a gentle strength and a sincerity that allowed him to communicate to every child they are special.

But sometimes people thought that Rogers was too sincere—that he couldn't laugh at himself. This image of him was finally dispelled. In the Commemorative Edition of *TV Guide*, the author wrote that one day in the studio Rogers' crew played a practical joke on him. Every episode of his show used to

open with Rogers singing the song, "Please Won't You Be My Neighbor." As he sang, Rogers took off his suit jacket (indicating he was changing into play clothes) and went to the closet to hang it up and in turn put on a casual sweater and sneakers. One time, Rogers went to the closet and out popped a "scantily clad inflatable doll." At first, he jumped back surprised and startled, but then got the joke and waltzed around the studio with it—laughing all the way! "Mister Rogers, a Presbyterian minister who talks sweetly to children, has a nice sense of humor," the article concluded (*TV Guide*, July 27, 1991, p. 44).

Unfortunately, on February 27, 2003, Fred Rogers died of stomach cancer.

Fred Rogers autographed his picture.



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