

Book Review: Being Henry: The Fonz ... and Beyond
By Henry Winkler

What do you do when you've reached the top of the mountain, and done so rapidly, and at a relatively early point in your career?

Then suddenly that mountain is gone.

That's what actor Henry Winkler grappled with when TV's "Happy Days" concluded its 11-year run in 1984, and with it, Winkler's iconic portrayal of the Fonz. He shares the frustrations of the years following "Happy Days," and his battle with dyslexia in a warm and inspiring memoir, "Being Henry: The Fonz ... and Beyond."

Watching Winkler command the screen during the "Happy Days" years, it's hard to imagine he's the same person who talks openly about anxiety, insecurity, and the challenges of auditioning from scripts that he could barely read. He candidly admits that "worrying is my favorite indoor sport," and describes himself as "a short Jew from New York City with a unibrow and hair down to my shoulders, confident about next to nothing in my life."

The success of "Happy Days" and Winkler's meteoric rise to stardom as the Fonz brought with it decades of frustration. He loved the character he portrayed for more than a decade, but found himself typecast. People looked at him and saw the Fonz. That was a red flag for producers and casting directors.

"I was terrified of being a flash in the pan. A one-hit wonder," Winkler writes.

And his own brutal honesty is reflected back in detailed paragraphs from his wife, Stacey. "It took me a long time to understand that the need that makes someone choose

to be an actor, to put themselves out there, meant that his life, our life, constantly depended upon people – strangers – liking what he did. It wasn't always easy.”

To his credit, Winkler persevered. He had periodic guest spots in TV shows including “Arrested Development,” “Royal Pains” and “Parks and Recreation,” and got behind the camera to direct numerous projects. He also teamed with Lin Oliver to produce a 28-book series about Hank Zipzer, a young boy who overcomes many learning challenges, that was based on Winkler’s own experiences with dyslexia. And in 2018 received his first primetime Emmy for the HBO show “Barry.”

But what perhaps had the greatest impact on Winkler are the inspirational talks he gives to parents of children with learning challenges. Reflecting on those talks, Winkler writes: “My lack of self, not knowing where I really fit on earth as Henry, made me unable to enjoy (compliments about being the Fonz). But these challenged kids gave me a warmth that felt so different than what I usually have gotten in my life, a gift that led me so much closer to understanding my real place in the world.”

The blurb on the inside of the book’s front cover states, “Being Henry is a memoir about so much more than a life in Hollywood and the curse of stardom. It is a meaningful testament to the power of sharing truth and kindness and of finding fulfillment within yourself.”

I agree. “Being Henry” is everything you’d want in a memoir. It’s raw and honest, but also warm and inspirational as Winkler shares his most vulnerable thoughts and feelings. I highly recommend it.

I give “Being Henry: The Fonz ... and Beyond” 5 out of 5 stars. And as always, I welcome your feedback.