



# Talent Let Loose

*John and Dennis Williams study the phenomenon of Richard Pryor*

## If I Stop I'll Die: The Comedy and Tragedy of Richard Pryor

By John Williams '50 and Dennis Williams  
234 pp. Thunder's Mouth Press. \$19.95.

On June 9, 1980, after a drug-related explosion in his home burned half of his body, Richard Pryor staggered through suburban Los Angeles streets. Before an ambulance arrived, a policeman implored Pryor to stop running. "If I stop I'll die," the comedian replied.

The quote serves as the title of a new biography of Pryor, in which the comedian is described, in his prime, as "weird, crazy, explosive, unpredictable; he was brilliant and a junkie; he was generous, vindictive, and insulting." Because events in Pryor's tumultuous life had been played out publicly in lurid headlines, his self-immolation came as no shock.

*If I Stop I'll Die* tackles a whirlwind life. The Pryor childhood was grim. Born in Peoria, Illinois, to a large family, Pryor later used the racism he endured—as well as his grandmother's management of whorehouses—as the basis of brutally frank stage acts in which no one, least of all himself, was spared.

Precociously funny, Pryor disrupted classes at school. An inspiring teacher, the authors write, took him in hand, channeling Pryor's "secret but awesome hunger for attention" into plays. Later, bored by school, he drifted into a gang and "came to know firsthand the characters who, full-blown, lusty and often obscene, would leap into prominence in his routines."

After a two-year hitch in the army, Pryor returned to Peoria. Longing to perform, he studied the preeminent black comedians of the day. The Williamses place those comedians and their antecedents in a detailed historical context, illustrating how each generation pushed further into the mainstream.

Pryor went on the road, playing nightclubs across the country and acquiring hard-won show business savvy. His big break came with a television appearance in 1964. At that point Pryor's comedy was G-rated, amiable, and tame. During a performance in Las Vegas some years later, Pryor's act evolved into the aggressive, expletive-laden street comedy that secured his fame.

The book attempts to sort out conflicting versions of this transformation, during which Pryor "... rejected the pap comedy he was doing to please white audiences ... chucked the routines of the past and walked off the stage in mid-performance. ... When he came back, he came back smoking, a new, dynamic, outrageous Richard Pryor."

Thus began Pryor's second incarnation as a smasher of taboos, free to

explore the African-American dilemma in a raw, vital style his forebears in black comedy never dared attempt. Elevated and intensified by his expert talents as an actor, mimic, and social critic, even Pryor's most caustic routines—in which rage and anger dissolve into spontaneous, irresistible laughter—were accessible to a vast multiracial audience.

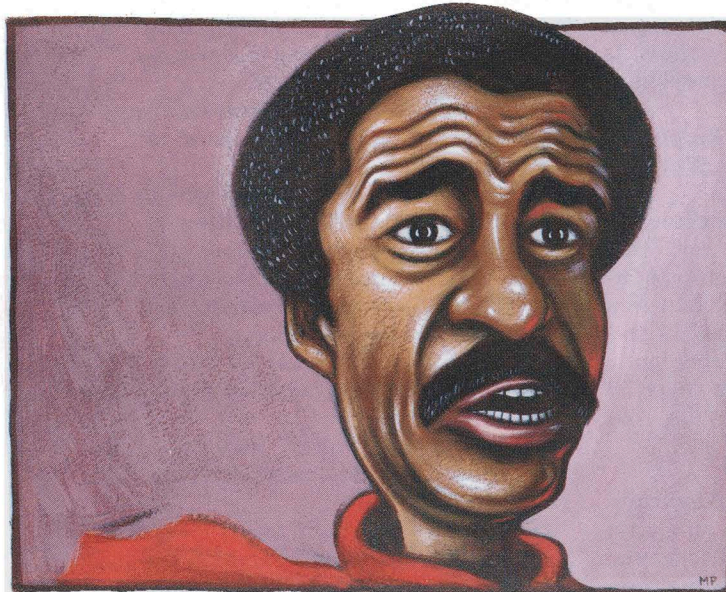
Despite a private life never less than chaotic—numerous girlfriends, wives, and children; incessant drug abuse; tax trouble; broken business partnerships; chafing under white-ruled Hollywood—this new Pryor soared to the top in the seventies.

His vulnerability and ordinary appearance, the authors suggest, allowed Pryor to succeed with a unique expression of searing, politically charged humor. "His eyebrows were fixed to fly upward in fear, surprise, or useless protest; his arms flailed in defeat. He was that lean-shanked, sensitive being to whom almost anything could happen," they write.

*If I Stop I'll Die* occasionally bogs down in the minutiae of Pryor's life, and includes no interviews with him. But the authors place Pryor's life and times in sharp historical contexts that clarify his position among African-American comedians and lend the biography unusual resonance.

John A. Williams '50, a graduate of the College of Arts and Sciences, is the author 12 novels and seven non-fiction books, including *The Man Who Cried I Am*, *Jacob's Ladder*, and *The Most Native of Sons: A Biography of Richard Wright*. His son and co-author, Dennis A. Williams, is a former *Newsweek* editor.

—GEORGE LOWERY



MICHAEL PRIZO

**The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History**  
 By David Charles Sloane G'78  
 293 pp. The Johns Hopkins University Press.  
 \$35.95.

Though cemeteries are largely business ventures today, they were once a place of sacred refuge. Sloane takes us back, illustrating the role of the cemetery in historic perspective and exploring "the fascinating and revealing transformation of the 'American way of death.'"

**Heat and Other Stories**  
 By Joyce Carol Oates '60  
 397 pp. Dutton/A William Abrahams Book.  
 \$21.95.

Oates's first collection of stories in five years includes three 1990 O. Henry Award winners. The title story involves twin sisters who are murdered. Another story explores hate and desire, while a third studies a man examining his disintegrating marriage while house-hunting.

**Breaking The Chains: African-American Slave Resistance**  
 By William Loren Katz '50  
 208 pp. Atheneum Publishers. \$14.95.

In his latest book, Katz provides evidence contradicting the assumption that African natives wore their chains of enslavement without fighting back. According to *Publisher's Weekly*, "This powerful and authentic collection will be welcomed by those seeking to reclaim the truth behind their heritage."

**Tar Beach**  
 By Richard Elman '55  
 250 pp. Sun & Moon Press. \$11.95.

Set in post-World War II Brooklyn, this novel creates a colorful picture of fortunes made and loves lost. Elman, a noted author of fiction, poetry, and journalism, uses Yiddish, Swahili, and Brooklynese to highlight his expressive story.

**Line of Fire**  
 By Jim Morin '75  
 250 pp. The Florida International University Press. \$29.95, cloth; \$14.95, paper.

This book is a collection of political cartoons by a former Pulitzer Prize finalist, who says, "Humor used as a means toward enlightening your audience and getting them to care about the world around them is a potent weapon."

Morin's cartoons appear daily in the *Miami Herald* and can be seen in other newspapers across the country.

**My Father's War and Other Stories**  
 By Barton Sutter G'75  
 258 pp. Viking. \$19.95.

This collection of six short stories and one novella illustrates how young men accept such fates as death and the boundaries of their masculinity. According to *Publisher's Weekly*, the book "lays bare the depths of human experience with economy and precision." Sutter is a graduate of SU's creative writing program.

**Shifting Gears**  
 By Carole Hyatt '56  
 271 pp. Simon and Schuster. \$18.95.

As indicated by the subtitle, "How To Master Career Change and Find the Work That's Right for You," this is a guidebook on jobs. According to the author, most people hold more than 10 different job positions and change their careers three times during adulthood. Step-by-step, Hyatt takes the reader

through the process of dealing with career change—both professionally and personally. Hyatt, co-author of *When Smart People Fail*, compiled the results of more than 300 interviews for this book.

**A Thinker's Guide to Living Well**  
 By Dennis E. Bradford '68  
 249pp. Open Court Publishing Co.  
 \$32.95, cloth; \$14.95, paper.

The unique strategy offered here by Bradford can be applied for success in one's entire life, whether it be work, health, or wealth. An associate professor of philosophy at SUNY Geneseo, Bradford is also the author of *The Concept of Existence* and *The Fundamental Ideas*.

**The Last Standing Man**  
 By Jim Wright '72  
 237 pp. Carroll & Graf Publishers. \$8.95.

A tension-filled thriller from the author of the acclaimed *The Last Frame*, this mystery novel takes place in the world of newspapers. A reporter at a suburban daily happens onto a murder story that will either clinch or kill his career.

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