In She Always Knew How, her wonderful new biography of legendary actress Mae West, acclaimed biographer Charlotte Chandler draws on a series of interviews she conducted with the star just months before her death in 1980. From their first meeting, where West held out a diamond-covered hand in greeting and lamented her interviewers lack of jewels, to their farewell, where the star was still gamely offering advice on how to attract men, Mae West and Charlotte Chandler developed a warm rapport that glows on every page of this biography. Actress, playwright, screenwriter, and iconic sex symbol Mae West was born in New York in 1893. She created a scandal -- and a sensation -- on Broadway with her play Sex in 1926. Convicted of obscenity, she was sentenced to ten days in prison. She went to jail a convict and emerged a star. Her next play, Diamond Lil, was a smash, and she would play the role of Diamond Lil in different variations for virtually her entire film career. In Hollywood she played opposite George Raft, Cary Grant (in one of his first starring roles), and W. C. Fields, among others. She was the number one box-office attraction during the 1930s and saved Paramount Studios from bankruptcy. Her films included some notorious one-liners -- which she wrote herself -- that have become part of Hollywood lore: from too much of a good thing can be wonderful to When Im good, Im very good. When Im bad, Im better. Her risqué remarks got her banned from radio for a dozen years, but behind the clever quips was Maes deep desire, decades before the word feminism was in the news, to see women treated equally with men. She saw through the double standard of the time that permitted men to do things that women would be ruined for doing. Her cause was sexual equality, and she was shrewd enough to know that it was perhaps the ultimate battleground, the most difficult cause of all. In addition to her extensive interviews of Mae West, Chandler also spoke with actors and directors who worked with and knew the star, the man with whom she lived for the last twenty-seven years of her life, as well as her closest assistant.
at the end of her life. Their comments and insights enrich this fascinating book. She Always Knew How captures the voice and spirit of this unique actress as no other biography ever has.

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My Personal Review:
Somewhere up there Miss Mae West is smiling. And our thanks go out to Charlotte Chandler - celebrity interviewer/author of eight previous books - for giving us this thoroughly enjoyable new look at one of America's most original and enduring icons of the stage and screen.

Built around interviews taped during the last year of West's life, this new publication offers us the opportunity to "hear" her words exactly as she spoke them, and at a time in her life from which no other such interviews exist. The value of this gift for West fans cannot be overestimated. If you want to hear the "Sin-sational" Miss Mae West tell the final version of her life story, as she would want you to know it - from birth in Brooklyn in 1893, to the heights of Hollywood fame and beyond - HERE SHE IS! And it just does not get any better than this, short of having been able to spend time in the Ravenswood with her!

Except for her mother and sister, women were not usually Miss West's first choice for company - and certainly not younger women doing interviews. The idea for Chandler's meetings, however, had been irresistibly suggested to West by director George Cukor, with whom she still hoped to make a film. It took a leap of faith for West to put her words into another woman's hands, but her trust has now been repaid ten fold. In this narrative, which reflects nearly the full 87 years of her life, Mae West's unaltered "voice" and personality, placed once again in her favorite place - "the spotlight", come through "alive" and brilliantly clear.

Additionally, Chandler's own personal gift for humor makes this book especially fun to read. Her interactions with Miss West, and descriptions of their time together, are bound to have the reader smiling, at the very least!

Did Miss West experience suffering in her life? Was she ever sad, frightened, lonely, or in doubt? Yes, I think we can be sure of that, but she did not believe in dwelling on the "negative". That was just not like "Mae West". And so, instead of stories of despair in this book, there are stories about Elvis Presley, Groucho Marx, Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe, Bette Davis, Beverly Sills, and many others - stories that West told about them, and stories they told about her. It's wonderful!

West, who neither smoked nor drank, LOVED men... and mirrors, limousines and diamonds, spiritualists and séances, "chop suey, sex, and my career", she said. She was kind, thoughtful, and often very generous to people, but above all else, she loved her "self" - her "creation" , which
remained the unwavering focus of all her attention and lifetime of work. "I had to be prepared for the best that could happen.", she told Chandler. And she loved her fans, to whom she always - at least by mail - remained accessible, and for whom she personally signed each autograph requested. They were her "audience", and her love for them never diminished - yet she was also an intensely private person, carefully choosing her small circle of close friends. Mae West is a MYSTERY. That is the woman we learn about and meet here - unknowingly at the end of a very long life, but still positive and planning for more. How much of her story is her own "embroidery" is up to the reader to ponder. It is part of the puzzle, and part of her charm.

As you read this beautiful book, which I HIGHLY recommend, be prepared to fall in love with the eternal Miss West. Exposure to her makes that inevitable. "She Always Knew How - Mae West, a Personal Biography" is unlike any other window we have been given into the "world" of this legendary star. The subject was elusive, but the interviewer/author is "magic"! How fortunate for us.

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