



An Improvised Life: A Memoir

Alan Arkin

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Alan Arkin knew he was going to be an actor from the age of five: "Every film I saw, every play, every piece of music fed an unquenchable need to turn myself into something other than what I was." *An Improvised Life* is the Oscar winner's wise and unpretentious recollection of the process--artistic and personal--of becoming an actor, and a revealing look into the creative mind of one of the best practitioners on stage or screen. In a manner that is direct, down-to-earth, accessible, and articulate, Arkin reveals insights not only about himself (and his audience and students), but also truths for the rest of us about work, relationships, and sense of self.

An Improvised Life: A Memoir Details

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From Reader Review *An Improvised Life: A Memoir* for online ebook

Patrick McGrady says

I like Alan Arkin. I thought his narration of the book was great.

This book was mostly about acting, improvisation, methods, etc. I'm sure it would be riveting for aspiring actors but not for me.

Jason Koivu says

This focused mostly on Arkin's acting, spending many pages on his preferred improvisational style. When a book is autobiographical or written by a comedian, I like to hear the author read his work, so I go with the audiobook whenever available. That wasn't the greatest of choices this time around. Arkin's voice is monotone, and for an actor, surprisingly lacking in inflection. But hey, that's the way he delivers his lines. I get it. Still, it made for a dry listen. As for the material itself, he regales the reader with some interesting anecdotes throughout. I even teared up a moment or two. In the end though, I'd say other actors would get the most out of this book, rather than just fans of the man. Maybe his acting insights wouldn't impress actors. They may have heard it all before, but I thought some of it was interesting and would be helpful to at least the novice.

Bednarzterry says

I listened to this book on audioCD.. read by the author. If you enjoy hearing about the craft of acting, you'll enjoy this insight into what it means to Mr. Arkin and how he approaches the job. I enjoyed most of this.. especially read in his rich , warm distinctive voice.. some of the "advice" was a little too "out there" for me personally.. but I enjoyed all the parts about his own insights into his life and the joys and challenges of the acting profession.

Guy says

Mostly about using improvisational acting exercises as a means of self-discovery, this book may be a useful tool for actors, but it's not likely to endear anyone to Arkin. His voice as author is overbearing and self-congratulatory. The reason for the "I know everything" aspect may be that the book is not really about Arkin, it's about what Arkin does as a vocation. A memoir requires a certain degree of humility to endear the reader to its subject, but Arkin remains aloof - even a little snobbish.

Arkin indicates he is protective and reserved about his personal life, and even appears not to want to share much about his film work. There is no mention of awards he was nominated for or won, and very little about his work with other artists, so I wonder why he chose to wrap this "how to" about acting in the guise of a book about Alan Arkin? In doing so, he kinds shot himself in the foot on both counts because he comes

across as too know-it-all and distant to be likeable, but too self-engrossed to be credible as an instructor. I think this would have been more effective with the few crumbs of biography stripped out of the book.

Nick Jordan says

I'm pretty sure that I would've given this 5 stars if I were an actor, particularly an improvisational one. But I came wanting more stories of relationships with other actors, directors, and artists, and that is simply not this book. To be clear, it wasn't intended to be that book.

Joni says

This book was not what I expected; maybe I should have read the review or write-up first. This memoir covers Mr. Arkin's professional life of which the most interesting to me was his talking about his experiences at Second City in Chicago. Maybe if I were an actor I would have enjoyed his diatribes about acting. I felt Mr. Arkin was, at times, angry and at best, arrogant. His tone was borderline arrogant. Of course, this is just my opinion and if I were in the acting field might feel differently. I wish there had been more about his family (he does mention them, but more as a matter of fact than anecdotal) and the people with whom he worked rather than their method acting, etc..

Kar says

This is one of the very best books on creativity and living as an artist I have ever read. It's funny, moving, interesting and deeply insightful. Mr. Arkin writes with a completely unique style. One of the best books I ever read - and I have read MANY books.

Krista says

At the beginning of *An Improvised Life*, Alan Arkin relates a conversation he once had with Madeline Kahn. As this was an audio book, I'll just paraphrase it:

Having long admired Madeline Kahn and her many talents, Arkin asks her which of these gifts was her primary focus. After thinking for a while, she couldn't really say.

"Well," he asks, "what did you start out wanting to do? Was your first impulse acting?"

"No," she replies.

"Singing?"

"No."

"Playing the piano?"

"No."

"Being a comedienne?"

"No."

"What was the first thing you thought of doing?"

"Well," she said, "I used to listen to a lot of music when I was a little girl. And that's what I wanted to be."

The *music*."

For a memoir, this is a short book, but as it's read by Alan Arkin himself, it's entertaining and sometimes thought provoking. I haven't seen that many of his movies, so my mental image is stuck pretty much at Little Miss Sunshine, and as that's about the age he was when he wrote this book, I suppose it's fitting. So, as I walked and listened, this grandfatherly figure shared some stories about how he got into acting, the struggles and sacrifices that entails, some very few stories about fellow celebrities, and quite a bit about his acting process and how he arrived at it.

I'm no actress, let alone an artist of *any* stripe, but I am interested in how art is created and Arkin lifts the curtain on this mystery somewhat; that strong acting is when you *are* the character, not just acting *like* the character; that, like Madeline Kahn, you *become* the music.

Jan C says

I guess this is actually ★★ ★ 1\2.

I listened to this book and who could read it better than Alan Arkin himself? No one I'm thinking. Partly memoir, partly teaching platform.

At some point, after undergoing psychoanalysis, Arkin started doing improv/acting seminars. There were several moving tales here. One was at a college on a Native American reservation and no one was cooperating. Finally, he has one of them being a Native who had run away and was now back, with the assistance of a couple of social workers. It was very interesting. Another involved a woman meeting her ex-husband with a request for money. He browbeats her and she shoots him in the middle of the restaurant. They play the scene through to its logical conclusion of spending the rest of her life in jail. Eventually they re-play the first scene and the woman chooses another way.

Much of the book covers how he got into acting and the parts he played. Totally against the celebrity worship that seems to be going on. He asks the question: why do people care whether he is having a good time acting? If it's a play, he probably isn't because he doesn't like to be locked in and writers kind of insist that he stick to the lines written.

Early in his career, he was asked to come to Chicago. At that point Chicago wasn't well known for theater. The Compass Players/Second City was starting out. He discussed the backstage view of this famed troupe. Amy Poehler did too in her memoir, although she came along much later.

One of his most stressful times was doing a play with his son who went into the project unsure of himself and whether he wanted to continue as an actor. By the end, he saw his son didn't need him anymore. He had become a man before his eyes. Probably a version of best/worst day.

Rich Baker says

I cannot say enough good about this book. The honest and extremely well told account of a man who has grown and learned and changed over an extraordinary lifetime. As an improviser/actor this book is invaluable. But even for a person who has never stepped on a stage, I believe it is an amazing read. So many things to take away from this book. I plan on rereading it very soon. BTW, I listened to the audio book as read by the author and I cannot recommend that version enough.

KC says

A great brief background on this award winning actor discussing his path, technique, and career as an artist, director, comedian, father, and Second City improv pioneer.

Koren says

I saw Alan Arkin on TCM being interviewed by Robert Osborne and thought it sounded like he led a very interesting life. I had this book on my shelf so I grabbed it and began reading. The beginning of the book was interesting when he talks about his childhood. After that it is all downhill. There is almost no biographical information after his first marriage. He apparently had two marriages after that but each wife is mentioned by name once and you're left thinking "Oh, he must have gotten married again". He mentions a few of the movies he's been in but I was disappointed that my favorite movie "The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter" didn't even get a mention. Most of the book is (taken from the back cover) "reflecting on the acting process and the life lessons that can be gleaned from improvisational theater". If this is what you are looking for than it is a very good book. For me it was a yawner. It is a short book and I read it in one day. Otherwise, I don't think I would have finished it.

John says

This would probably be better off read than listened to in the car, but the self-narration made a huge difference. Arkin's acting workshop experiences make for very entertaining stories, all from a man who cares very much about his craft.

"Emergency! Everybody to get from street!"

Barry Hammond says

Whether you know Alan Arkin from the 1960's and 70's in films like *The Russians Are Coming*, *The Russians Are Coming or Wait Until Dark*, or more recent films like *Argo* or *Little Miss Sunshine*, his performances are always special and original. In this memoir he discusses his arc as an actor, especially in regard to improvisation, which has been central to his method. Like his performances, his writing is full of surprises and takes directions different than one would expect from a standard actor's memoir. My only criticism is that I wanted it to be longer, so I could spend more time in the company of this compellingly original man. - BH.

William Koon says

I have admired Arkin since before he was an actor with the Tarriers. I think he is a brilliant actor. However, he dismisses his musical career and pays faint attention to his acting career in this thin volume. There is little about his roles or films, more about his Broadway experience. Instead he writes mostly about improvisation and his career in rather bland terms. Once again, trust art, not artists.
