Book recounts the dramas, personal and professional, of Cosby’s eventful life

In 1962, just before he headed to New York City for a gig at The Gaslight Café, Bill Cosby had an epiphany.

As he waited for his meal at a Chinese restaurant, Cosby, who was then a student at Temple University, watched a tableful of people listen and laugh as a man told stories and acted them out. Mesmerized, Cosby decided that he wanted to be a humorist with a distinctive voice, like Mark Twain, and be acclaimed as the funniest guy in the world.

In a career that has spanned more than 50 years, Cosby has come pretty darned close. And, as journalist Mark Whitaker demonstrates in the first full-length biography of Cosby, he has been a lot more than a comedy icon. With “I Spy” (1965-1968), an adventure series shot on location around the world, Cosby became the first African-American to co-star in a prime-time television series.

In the 1980s, “The Cosby Show,” one of the most popular situation comedies in television history, gave viewers a model of a strong, two parent African-American household and a tutorial of sorts on black history and culture. In recent years, Cosby has been a controversial critic of what he regards as dysfunctional values within Black families.

Defends Cosby
Whitaker, who conducted extensive interviews with Cosby, clearly admires his subject. He refers to Cosby’s emotional volatility, but only in passing. And he defends Cosby against virtually all of his critics.

Cosby was tough on writers, Whitaker suggests, because “he considered himself, one too.”

More importantly, Whitaker acknowledges that Cosby’s impromptu rant at Black youth during a black tie dinner commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education in Washington, D.C., was “inartful and sometimes cruel,” only to add, “particularly when quoted out of context.”

Comedian Bill Cosby speaks during the celebration of the 55th anniversary of a Washington institution, Ben’s Chili Bowl on Aug. 22, 2013 in Washington, D.C. (OLIVIER DOULIERT/ABACA PRESS/MCT)
of context.” And he insists that far from failing to understand “aimless, undisciplined” African-American youngsters, he knew them “all too well.”

On racism, equality

Like Cosby, Whitaker appears to believe that discipline and close attention by parents are “the keys to salvation for his entire race.” Neither of them, however, has adequately engaged critics who claim that Cosby has not sufficiently factored in crime, poverty, poor-quality schools, and persistent racism in inner-city neighborhoods.

In essence, he invites Whites to conclude that Blacks are largely responsible for their social conditions, and have no legitimate right to demand special legal protection and government social welfare programs.

That said, Whitaker does get at the essence of a complicated man, as he recounts the dramas, personal and professional, of an eventful life.

Remembering Ennis

His narrative of Cosby’s relationship with his only son, who was diagnosed, later than he should have been, as learning disabled, and his reaction to Ennis’ murder by an 18-year-old Ukrainian immigrant who may have targeted his victim because he was Black, is powerful and poignant. After the interment, Whitaker writes, the mourners prayed in silence and then told funny stories about Ennis.

When Cosby proposed putting up a pine tree in his memory, Ennis’ sisters listed so many dates on which they’d light it that Bill promised his dead son that “just to celebrate” the lights would be turned off on his birthday.

The quip and the service itself, which kept everyone laughing and crying into the night, were vintage Cosby. As was his response, a moment later, to his brother’s comment that he felt a “strange” feeling of lightness. “Yeah,” Dr. Cosby, the educator and idealist replied, “we went down this hill feeling like slaves and we’re coming back up feeling like free people.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this book review for the Florida Courier.