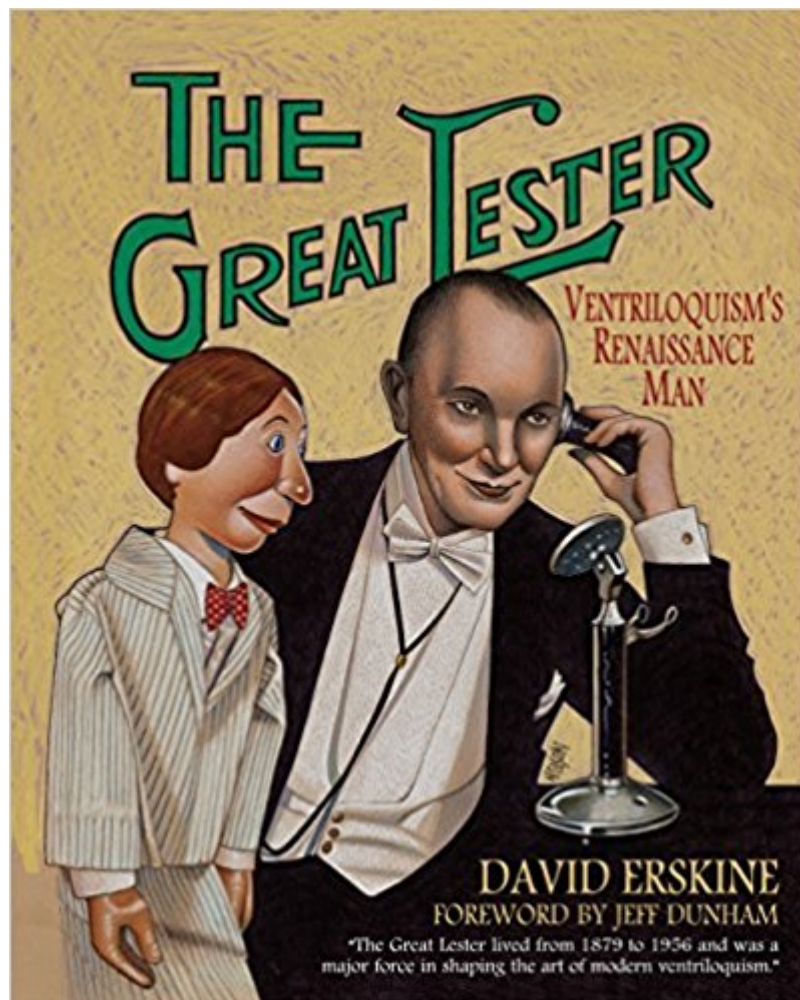




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# The Great Lester: Ventriloquism's Renaissance Man: By David Erskine Foreword By Jeff Dunham



## Synopsis

In this engrossing "fictional memoir" based on original sources, Harry Eugene Lester paints a rich picture of his life and times as the world's premiere ventriloquist in the heyday of vaudeville and beyond. Not only will "vents" and historians appreciate this book, but also, as it's a delight to read, anyone who likes to read personal reflections of a life well lived can enjoy *The Great Lester: Ventriloquism's Renaissance Man*. The Great Lester was a Renaissance man—•a free spirit—•a creative person who originated a ventriloquist act that both changed and enlightened American ventriloquism, even as he wrestled with the changing times and his own inner world. What makes that character different from the rest of us? What are the secrets of his talent? What is creative vision, and where does it come from? Based on original research, including access to newspaper and magazine accounts and previously unpublished correspondence, and primary source tape recordings made by Lester, *The Great Lester: Ventriloquism's Renaissance Man* presents the first fully integrated portrait of this American icon of ventriloquism. Few performers lived such a large and eventful life while transportation and electricity changed the world. Lester's early life was one of restless adventure going to new places following traveling entertainment—•first with the circus, then Dime Museums, and then American vaudeville and music halls in Europe. He traveled the world, becoming famous and wealthy, and then becoming penniless as the fashions in show business changed. Lester possessed an evangelical zeal to share his approaches regarding acquiring the art and craft of ventriloquism. His most famous student was Edgar Bergen, fresh from high school in 1922. Lester spent his last years teaching ventriloquism students one on one at his studio in Hollywood. Erskine brings Lester to life as never before. He also details parts of Lester's personality that cannot be easily understood—•his defiance of rules regarding his career and his inability to change with the fashions in show business.

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## Customer Reviews

David Erskine, a retired thru-freight conductor for the Union Pacific Railroad Co., is recognized as being an eclectic ventriloquial performer, historian, collector, author, and coach—as well as being a student of creativity and comedy. He has been on the entertainment scene since 1955 and has contributed stories to magazines, books, and websites. He has self-published histories of ventriloquists and ventriloquism. Additionally, in 2009 he wrote *Margaret's Music Is Her Life Story* as told to David Erskine. Margaret Kiwiet lived through one of the most horrifying times in modern history, but her story is filled with love and joy throughout. The book is available at [LuLu.com](#) and [.com](#). He is currently developing a CD, *The Collector's Voice by David Erskine*—a digital look at the folk art of collecting in the ventriloquists' world. He and his wife, Marie, a retired director of critical care nursing, live in Fort Worth, Texas. David Erskine gains great joy by "putting people on with a puppet." At a young age it seemed like a natural thing for him to do. Still it is always a special experience when his ventriloquial figure, Ronny Darnay, comes to life in Erskine's imagination and his right hand. Ronny resembles a McElroy figure named Ezry that was used by Rudy Vallee. This figure is now known as Jeff Dunham's Ollie, a name Erskine suggested to Jeff when he first saw the figure in 1984. At the Arlington Heights High School Reunion, Class of 1960, held October 16, 2010 in Fort Worth, Ronny Darnay was chosen as "The Least-Changed 1960 Graduate." AHHS is also Erskine's alma mater. Erskine also graduated from Texas Wesleyan College with a major in speech-drama and a minor in journalism.

*The Great Lester* by David Erskine is a great read. I could hardly put it down. The account was intriguing, fascinating, insightful and in some strange way--through Lester's deep struggles, great success, and numerous difficulties and disappointments--the book was very inspiring. Even though I read every book I could get on ventriloquism before becoming a professional ventriloquist over 30 years ago, Erskine's book gave me an insight into Lester and early show business I never had. I am delighted that he has provided this treasure of a book to fill in the history of modern ventriloquism, of how it came of age through Lester's dogged determination to perfect the craft, reinventing it with ingenious creativity.

I thought that as a work telling the story of a once nationally famous ventriloquist it passes muster adequately. But the manner in which Lester, the subject, veers off into mental health issues, bouts of depression and paranoia, and how he dealt with his several wives seemed rather disjointed and, frankly, odd. His meetings with famed vent Edgar Bergen are similarly rather odd and left me just a trifle unsettled. Still, it is worth it for the illustrations alone. In the end who am I to say if the work rises or falls--buy it and read it for yourself!

Terrific story of a somewhat neglected superstar of the vaudeville era. The style of writing makes for easy reading! Highly recommended!

This is a must have for any ventriloquist. It tells of the successes and failures of this great entertainer. a must read!

My thoughts after reading *The Great Lester* by David Erskine were "Wow" and "Awesome". I knew nothing of ventriloquism and never heard of *The Great Lester* until recently. I read a discussion of the topic on social media and became curious. I was even more intrigued after reading the "Foreword" by Jeff Dunham in which he comments, "In many ways, this man influenced and aided the big vent names of the last century. Edgar Bergen, Paul Winchell, Jimmy Nelson and countless others...". Consider that Harry Lester developed his talents and honed his skills during vaudeville and the age of silent films. It was a time well before the wonder of electronics that we all enjoy. There were no special effects, no smoke, no mirrors, and no surround sound - not as we know them today. There was only talent, raw unadulterated talent. There was only one man with a figure, his alter ego. The author, David Erskine, mentioned the year as around 1946 when Lester moved to Hollywood from San Francisco. Lester opened a studio where he taught both novice and professional ventriloquists. Edgar Bergen was one of Lester's students and probably the most well-known of all. The greatest praise I can offer is to say that I wish I had been there. I wish I could have seen his genius and witnessed the growth of his talents. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall as he mixed with many of the truly creative minds of his time. Lester excelled in, and possessed profound knowledge, or proficiency in more than one field. He was, in every sense of the word, a Renaissance man. His love, his passion, his skill and the knowledge that he poured into his life's work have transcended the generations. You absolutely must add *The Great Lester* to your library and count it among your favored reads.

Erskine grabs the reader's attention immediately in *The Great Lester* with his unique first person narrative of this fascinating entertainer's life. Anyone interested in the arts will be captivated to see how Lester, like performers in every generation and genre, lived constantly on the edge of fame and fortune, or failure. Erskine's deep and wide research into ventriloquism as an art form undergirds, but never detracts from, this true story filled in with liberal dashes of imagination and humor. I wanted to keep reading from the very first page.

I have been interested in the history of ventriloquism for many years, as a performer and as a fan of this magical art. There have been many articles about the Great Lester and it's about time that a book about him was written. The book may have some creative liberties about it, but it's an entertaining and enjoyable book about the man and those around him. This book is a must for ventriloquists and non performers that enjoy reading about old school entertainment, in other words fans of vaudeville and turn of the century live entertainment.

This is a must read book very informative and interesting. The author did an incredible job in his research. Many people do not realize that "The Great Lester" taught "Edgar Bergen"

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