

What We Say

Director Mike Nichols compared one especially brilliant concert series by singer and actress Barbara Cook to Judy Garland's legendary Carnegie Hall shows. Having been there as well, I would heartily agree. One of the greats, with the Tony and Kennedy Center Honor to show for it, Cook is a peerless interpreter of the classic tunes from Rodgers and Hammerstein to of course Stephen Sondheim. Though effortlessly commanding on stage, Cook had a difficult life, from abandonment by her beloved father, to the controlling neediness of her probably unstable mother to alcoholism that plagued both Cook and her marvelous accompanist Wally Harper. She bares all in this memoir and ardent fans will surely savor the passages that deal with that famously challenging aria from "Candide" to her prickly friendship with Elaine Stritch. Cook is always hardest on herself as she charts her career. A "natural" singer who has studied and honed her craft to perfection, Cook is far from a natural raconteur, à la Stritch. Her memoir is baldly descriptive, often flat and honestly a bit of a slog for any but the most devoted of fans, myself among them. It's welcome as a hint to the complicated, challenging life she led. But her soul remains bared most beautifully on stage, in song. -- Michael Giltz