

## SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS

## It Wasn't Easy Being Green

I can imagine a world without Brian Mulroney. I can bear to live without Alice Cooper or Jerry Falwell. But what on earth are we going to do without Jim Henson?

On May 16, Jim Henson, the apparently hale, fit, relatively young (53) creator of Miss Piggy and Cookie Monster and Kermit the Frog died "from a sudden massive bacterial infection". Whatever that turns out to be, we've lost one of our healthiest minds, and my hero.

Those of you who are wondering at the influence of this Yankee Muppeteer around here should just look back to our first issue, when we paid homage to Kermit by using the title of his hit duet with Lena Horne, "It's Not Easy Bein' Green", for our first cover line. And you obviously haven't spent hundreds of mornings book-ended by ruffle-headed toddlers in their sleepers watching "Sesame Street", as Ernie gives Bert, the world's most boring guy, more guff about his paper clip collection, as the debate over the existence of Mr. Snuffleupagus carries on, as the two-headed monster gets into a furious argument with himself and then makes up, as Guy Smiley hosts yet another dumb game show based on the Letter of the Day, or as SuperGrover fails to save yet another purple or green damsel in distress. Not to mention Telly, Oscar the Grouch, Barkley the dog, or that seven-foot shining icon of essential Muppet goodness, Big Bird.

And if you want Canadian content, how about "Fraggle Rock", a joint Henson/CBC-TV project that aired in the '80s? Henson's Fraggles got us exactly right, neurotic but artistically inclined little beings who live in natural isolation (underground), perpetually beset by moods and hand-wringing dilemmas, unable to comprehend the Doozers, a neighboring race of compulsive builders. The Fraggles are afraid to venture out into the wide world, and with good reason, because right next door lives a giant, thoughtless, innately cruel species that likes to keep Fraggles as pets. Sound familiar? In fact, the only intrepid Fraggles is Uncle Traveling Matt, who sends back hilarious postcards of his adventures, hilarious because they misinterpret the rest of the world from the hopelessly myopic perspective of a denizen of Leamington, Ontario. As a reflection of the Canadian psyche (and as



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entertainment), "Fraggle Rock" beat "The Beachcombers" hollow.

The basis of Henson's appeal was his attitude. You hear that word thrown around a lot these days, and it doesn't mean much. But Henson's creatures exposed an imagination with a sparkling, teasing, good-hearted wit that sent up the entire spectrum of human pretentiousness. Downright un-American, or perhaps the right kind of American—empathetic, egalitarian, as easy to take as a sunny day in June. In rare supply and universally useful. Mr. Snuffleupagus, Grover, and Cookie Monster saved "Sesame Street" from a powerful inclination to be earnest. Saved it for me and my kids. The real miracle is that despite a 30-year gap in age, we both laughed at the same stuff.

Not only was Henson good, he was rich, too. At its peak, the "Muppet Show", which starred the Tracy and Hepburn of the stuffed set, Kermit and Miss Piggy, was the most widely seen television show in history, 235 million viewers each week in more than 100 countries, and became a stalking horse for a whole line of Muppet stuff—toothbrushes, lunchboxes, placemats, T-shirts, shampoo, cartoons, and magazines. More filthy lucre fell in Henson's lap this year when he sold himself and his muppetworks to Disney for a rumored \$100 million. That's a lot of money for a bunch of puppets. It's easy to be cynical about the commercial qualities of the Muppet menagerie, but Henson took care to endow them with soul, and even Disney's Marketeers can't sell it off.

Thomas Merton, the great Catholic mystic of this century, wrote that God keeps this evil, violent, exhausted world going for just a few marvellous people, who intercede on behalf of the rest of us. Sometimes you have to look around and wonder if there are enough of them, but people like Henson make it tough to zap the planet. He was a good influence—it's hard to stay ugly when exposed to Miss Piggy or Fozzie Bear. You can feel the hope of redemption in the presence of Meryl Sheep. It's distinctly possible that God has been stalling apocalypse on a day-by-day basis only because he's been waiting to see what Jim Henson came up with next. Now that he's gone, there's an ominous lack of chuckling from above. ♦