

They had a Ball!

Star's close pal sheds new light on queen of comedy

By TRIPP WHETSELL

Is there anything we don't already know about Lucille Ball?

The adulation hasn't stopped in the 12 years since the comedian's death on April 26, 1989. Lovingly, she has become a cottage industry, with enough memorabilia, merchandise and books to make a landfill overflow.

Last Monday, "I Love Lucy" celebrated its 50th anniversary on television, and CBS will air a two-hour tribute to the classic sitcom Nov. 11.

Lee Tannen, author of "I Loved Lucy: My Friendship With Lucille Ball" (St. Martin's, 228 pages, \$25.95), Ball's closest confidante in New York during the last 10 years of her life, has written a poignant memoir that manages to shed new light on America's queen of comedy.

Lucy was the most unforgettable character I ever met, and my memories are very private, so I was grappling with the idea of writing this book for a long time," says the 67-year-old Tannen, a Manhattan-based freelance writer and theatrical director.

But when I channeled my anger and asked her what she would have thought if she were around, I decided that she would have wanted to be perceived as a regular person, warts and all, and I think that is what this book does. Lucy didn't want to be known as an icon. She was never comfortable with that."



Lucille Ball (above, on the "I Love Lucy" set) was the "most unforgettable character," says friend Lee Tannen (below), who wrote a memoir about the star.

Tannen, a distant relative of Ball's second husband, the late comedian Gary Morton, knows better than just about anyone else. The two met in 1961 when he was 11 years old, and, despite a 40-year age difference, formed an on-again, off-again friendship that lasted more than 30 years.

After corresponding briefly during the 1970s, they were reunited in 1980 while she was in New York on a press tour for NBC. Over the next decade, Tannen became Ball's closest companion in New York, Beverly Hills, Palm Springs and Aspen, traveling with her, playing backgammon (they averaged 50 to 60 games a day) and sharing the most intimate details of her life.

"It just seemed to be the

right time for both of us," Tannen says. "I was exploring new paths and goals in my life, and Lucy no longer had an empire to run. We were both very accepting of one another because I could be a good surrogate son and vice versa."

For the most part, Tannen waxes nostalgic about the highs and lows of their relationship, from a brief



N.Y. Post: Jennifer Weisbord

estrangement in 1984 to the time they shared a rundown motel room in Fayetteville, N.C. (much like the place where the Ricardos and the Mertzes stayed on their road trip to California). In Fayetteville, Ball performed on an army base with Bob Hope in 1987.

"It was hysterical," he recalls. "We flew down

there on this little plane and there was Lucy, thanking the flight attendants for serving us this awful food and standing in the airport in her sable coat waiting for her eight pieces of monogrammed luggage."

Tannen chronicles their relationship in a lively, conversational style, which he cleverly describes as "episodes" in the titles that preface each of the book's nine chapters.

He also includes some great trivia that even the most seasoned Lucy buff might not know. Some of Ball's favorite foods were Jell-O with Kraft mayonnaise and a cherry on top, caviar and Spam. Her favorite TV shows were "Roseanne," "Jeopardy" and "Three's Company."

As telling as it is, however, the book doesn't contain any lascivious gossip. One of Tannen's biggest reasons for writing it, he explains, was to correct a lot of the Lucy myths.

"The other books on Lucy had a lot of mistakes, and I wanted to set the record straight about certain things," he says.

As for Tannen himself, who affectionately refers to Ball as his real-life Auntie Mame: "She was mad-dening and larger than life, and there isn't a day that goes by when I don't remember her with love. She was the most incredible woman I ever met. There's everyone else, and then there's Lucy."