**Robin Williams obituary**

Actor and comedian who made his television breakthrough with Mork & Mindy and went on to star in films such as Good Morning, Vietnam, Dead Poets Society and Mrs Doubtfire

• [Robin Williams found dead at 63](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/11/robin-williams-found-dead-suicide)
• [Peter Bradshaw: 'A big heart and a staggering talent'](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/12/robin-williams-mercurial-talent-tinged-with-sadness)
• [Robin Williams: what did he mean to you?](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/12/what-did-robin-williams-mean-to-you)
• [Decca Aitkenhead meets Robin Williams in 2010](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/the-g2-interview%2Bfilm/robin-williams)

[Ryan Gilbey](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/ryangilbey)

When the notion of getting in touch with one's inner child entered popular currency, the standup comedian and actor [Robin Williams](https://www.theguardian.com/film/robin-williams), who has died aged 63 in a suspected suicide, was ripe to be its poster-boy. Partly it was his limitless energy and floodlight smile, or the frantic chatter that made it sound as if he were constantly interrupting himself or speaking in tongues. But he also resembled strongly a hirsute toddler who had broken out of the playpen to make whoopee.

Many of his most popular performances were as child-men rampaging through the prissy adult world. His breakthrough came as the naïve extra-terrestrial [Mork](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQx4--L0TdY) in the US sitcom Mork & Mindy, which ran from 1978 to 1982. For that part, the red-and-silver costume that he donned for a monologue at the end of each episode even resembled an infant's romper suit. In Good Morning, Vietnam (1987), he played the real-life DJ [Adrian Cronauer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adrian_Cronauer), whose [wackiness](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Erf2iFHG44M) in the face of war made him a hit with American troops. A swerve into straighter acting, as the [literature teacher who challenges convention](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrBk780aOis) at a stuffy school in the late-1950s in Dead Poets Society (1989), did not upset this trend. Instead, he transferred deftly his comic skills into a dramatic setting as his character liberated pupils formerly rigid with obedience.

Williams did not need to be visible on screen to continue his campaign of disinhibition: some of his most pure and untamed work was as the voice of the Genie in Disney's Aladdin (1992), for which he improvised the lion's share of his dialogue while the animators worked around his ad-libs. Any magic that film exudes is largely down to him. It was with a certain inevitability that Williams was cast as the boy who was supposed never to grow up, but did, in Steven Spielberg's Peter Pan sequel Hook (1992), and as a child with an ageing disorder that made him appear to be an adult in Francis Ford Coppola's Jack (1996).

Had these movies been better, or more beloved, they might have been known as Williams's signature roles. That status should go instead to his deranged, emotionally naked (and sometimes physically naked) performance in Terry Gilliam's The Fisher King (1991) as a homeless man whose search for the Holy Grail is born out of trauma. He was Oscar-nominated for that, as well as for Good Morning, Vietnam and Dead Poets Society; he finally won for playing a bereaved therapist in Good Will Hunting (1997).

But no performer who had been through the extreme addictions and depression that Williams had (and about which he was candid in his standup routines and interviews) could fail to be aware of his own capacity for darkness. It was this that he gradually began to draw on in a run of serious and even abrasive parts which made the latter stages of his career arguably the most interesting (if the least amusing). Chief among these was Christopher Nolan's Insomnia (2002), in which he played a suspected murderer hunted by a cop (played by Al Pacino). In the same year, he also starred as a children's entertainer driven to madness when he is usurped by a younger rival in the bitter comedy Death to Smoochy, and as a lonely photo-counter employee who develops an unhealthy obsession with a family in the thriller One Hour Photo. Though he had not forsaken lighter material altogether, the impression was unmistakably that of a clown wiping off his makeup to show the tears underneath.

Williams was born in Chicago, Illinois, to Laura, a fashion model, and Robert, a senior executive at Ford Motor Company. He endured a lonely childhood in which he played mostly on his own in the large family home and was bullied at school for being overweight. The family moved to Marin County, California, when Williams was 16. He was then educated at Claremont Men's College, where he studied political science and also took improvisation acting classes. He went on to study acting, first at the [College of Marin](http://www.marin.edu/) and later at the Juilliard School, New York, from which he graduated in 1976. He auditioned for acting jobs but was forced to earn money instead working as a bartender and in an ice-cream parlour.

After he began working the standup circuit in Los Angeles, he got early breaks on TV shows including The Richard Pryor Show and in a small part in the sex comedy Can I Do It 'Til I Need Glasses (1977). His zany audition for the small role of Mork in two episodes of the long-running sitcom Happy Days led the producer [Garry Marshall](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/garry-marshall) to remark that Williams was the only alien to try out for the part: "I will never forget the day I met him and he stood on his head in my office chair and pretended to drink a glass of water using his finger like a straw."

His instant popularity guaranteed a spin-off series in which he muddled through earthly life with the help of a sympathetic housemate played by Pam Dawber. "The first season of Mork & Mindy I knew immediately that a three-camera format would not be enough to capture Robin and his genius talent," said Marshall. "So I hired a fourth camera operator and he just followed Robin. Only Robin. Looking back, four cameras weren't enough. I should have hired a fifth camera to follow him too." The show was a ratings hit, and Mork's nonsensical utterings, including his greeting "Nanu-nanu", became unlikely catchphrases. It was here that the child-like persona on which Williams's career was founded began to take shape.

The actor's first major film role was as the lead in [Robert Altman'](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/nov/22/guardianobituaries.filmnews)s live-action version of Popeye (1980). Despite being financed by Disney, this oddball musical was very much an Altman movie, throwing caution and sometimes coherence to the wind. But Williams, bearing engorged prosthetic forearms and sounding unintelligible at times with a pipe lodged in the corner of his mouth, was both perfect and hypnotically strange in the part, opposite Shelley Duvall as Olive Oyl. In later films, he would be the eyecatching main attraction, ceding the spotlight to no one. Here, he was just one among many outlandish elements.

In the pictures that immediately followed, he was positively restrained, as though not yet confident that his Morkishness could work in movies. He was the unassuming hero of an adaptation of John Irving's novel The World According to Garp (1982) and the least wacky participant in the desert-island comedy Club Paradise (1986). But he showed, as a newly fired executive who averts a robbery in The Survivors (1983) and as a Russian saxophonist defecting to the US in Moscow on the Hudson (1984), that his unpredictable but essentially comforting persona was flexible enough to work in a variety of settings. His first hit movie, Good Morning, Vietnam, followed soon after, cementing for cinemagoers an image of Williams to rival the one TV audiences had enjoyed in Mork. The film could be mawkish, as could Williams himself, but this was tempered by its authentic irreverence.

The same could not be said of all Williams's later films. There had always been a needy aspect to even his most scabrous standup routines, and he was never a dangerous comic: inflammatory material was rendered essentially fireproof by those love-me eyes, that gurning grin. Cinema, with its aggrandising close-ups and urging, saccharine scores, could sometimes be his worst enemy. Dead Poets Society had its share of sappiness, not least in the climax in which the students climb onto their desks and salute Williams with Walt Whitman's line "O Captain! My Captain!" The star, to his credit, underplayed admirably.

This was not the case in those films that earned him a reputation as a sentimentalist. He twinkled unstoppably throughout Awakenings (1990), in which he played Dr Malcolm Sayer, based loosely on Dr Oliver Sacks, and in Toys (1992), where he was the pure-hearted saviour of a toy factory. Mrs Doubtfire (1993) provided an opportunity for Williams to let rip anarchically as a father bonding with his estranged children by posing as their Scottish nanny. That also gave him another smash-hit. But he was pimping for tears and goosebumps again as a man exploring the afterlife in What Dreams May Come, as a doctor trying to prove that laughter is the best medicine in Patch Adams (both 1998), as a simpering android in Bicentennial Man and as a Jewish shopkeeper fostering hope in the ghettoes of Nazi-occupied Poland in Jakob the Liar (both 1999).

Williams had also been forging a separate career as a pillar of family entertainment in adventures such as Jumanji (1995) and Flubber (1997). This continued when he played Teddy Roosevelt in two Night at the Museum films (2006 and 2009); a third, in which he also appears, is due for release later this year.

His decision to branch out into more challenging material in the early 2000s came directly after a stretch of ingratiating parts. But unlike, say, Bill Murray's transformation into an indie icon after Lost in Translation, Williams's work in films such as Insomnia felt for all its sincerity like a graft that did not take. His image as a human teddy-bear persisted even after he made World's Greatest Dad (2009), a film he admired greatly, in which he played a father who fabricates his son's diaries after the boy dies in an auto-erotic accident. Williams's attempts to kill off his cutesy persona were very much of the one-step-forward, two-steps-back variety. For every World's Greatest Dad or One Hour Photo, there were many more like the lacklustre comedies RV: Runaway Vacation (2006) or Old Dogs (2009). He was, however, a surprising addition to the cast of The Butler (2013), in which he played Eisenhower.

Williams's work-rate in the last decade was arrested by health problems and by occasional relapses into addiction, the most recent of which incurred a spell in rehab. He had returned to standup in 2008 with a show entitled [Weapons of Self-Destruction](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiCxqbT2Ru8), though this was interrupted briefly by surgery to replace an aortic valve. "You appreciate little things," he said after that procedure, "like walks on the beach with a defibrillator."

He is survived by his third wife, Susan Schneider, whom he married in 2011; his son Zachary, from his first marriage, to Valerie Velardi, which ended in divorce; and by his daughter, Zelda, and son, Cody, from his second marriage, to Marsha Garces, which ended in divorce.