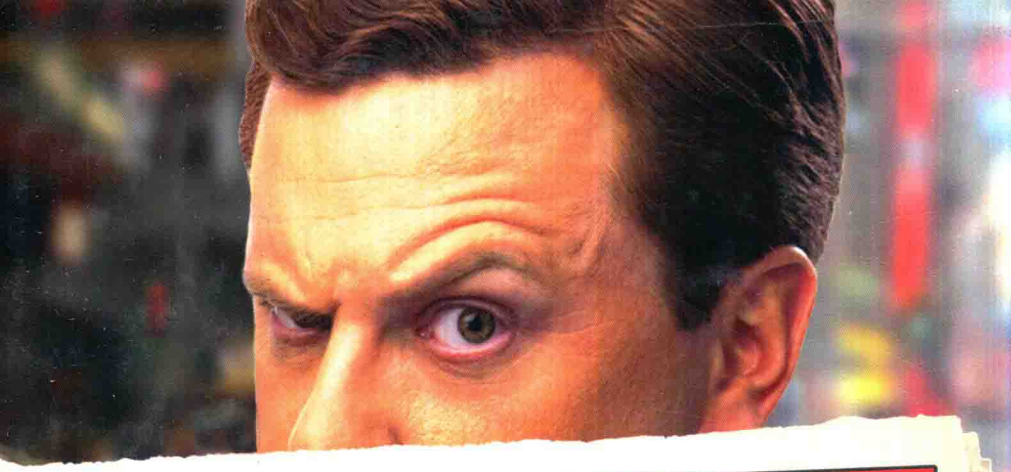


Willie GEIST

CO-HOST OF MSNBC'S *MORNING JOE*

AMERICAN FREAK SHOW

THE COMPLETELY FABRICATED STORIES OF OUR NEW NATIONAL TREASURES

TIGER in The Deep ROUGH

see page 3

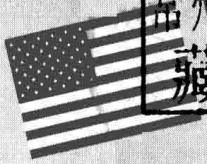
PALIN for PREZ? you Betcha!

SNOOKI'S Tanning Bed Ordeal

PAGE 18

AMERICAN FREAK SHOW

THE COMPLETELY FABRICATED STORIES OF OUR NEW NATIONAL TREASURES



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WILLIE GEIST

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AMERICAN
FREAK
SHOW

For Mom and Dad,
who taught me that the freaks are
always more interesting

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've always found the term *Acknowledgments* a little weak for a book's thank-you list. An "acknowledgment" is quite literally the recognition that someone or something exists. It's important to me that you know the following people exist in human form, but more importantly that I appreciate their support and guidance. In fact, let's go with *Appreciations.*

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To my friends Joe and Mika, for sucking me into the fantastic ongoing freak show that is *Morning Joe*.

And finally, to Jonas Salk for finding the polio vaccine. Just one less thing I have to worry about. Nice work, man.

INTRODUCTION

★

I was sitting on the set of *Morning Joe* one day talking to my friend and cohost Mike Barnicle during a commercial break when a loud, confident voice shot across the studio, interrupting our conversation: "Morning, fellas! I'm innocent of all charges!" You have to understand that very few of our guests on the show include a legal plea in their personal introduction, so it didn't take long to figure out who had arrived. Blago was in the building. We'd been expecting him.

Former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich was there to promote a book, but watching him move across the room, you would have thought he was running for third-floor fire warden in our building. He shook the hand of just about every member of our crew (and those of some confused foreign tourists who wondered why a strange, aggressively enthusiastic

man with odd hair was telling them he was innocent of an unspecified crime—was he part of their NBC tour?). After signing a couple of unsolicited autographs, Blago leapt onto the set and launched into what sounded like the dry run of an opening statement for his pending trial.

He warned us that a political smear campaign was under way in "the great state of Illinois." But this, he assured us, wasn't about one man and his reputation. It was about a perversion of the American justice system. It was about an audacious disregard for the basic principles of fairness, right there in the Land of Lincoln. Above all, though, it was about his new book, *The Governor,* available wherever fine books are sold.

In less than 60 seconds, Blago's performance already had exceeded our lofty expectations. We at *Morning Joe* had been steadfast, unapologetic Blago supporters, eschewing the disrespectful term *disgraced* that the rest of the media always seemed to use to preface his gubernatorial title. We preferred "*persecuted* former governor." Christlike persecution was a theme Blagojevich had been pushing, and we were happy to indulge the narrative of "Blago as martyred religious figure."

During our interview, Blagojevich explained that the Illinois state legislature removed him from office in something of a bloodless coup, reversing the will of the people simply because he was trying just a little too hard to bring health care to sweet little children whose families could not afford it. In Blago's telling, his only crime was having a heart too big. For that, he lost his job. We did not ask him to elaborate

on this point—details would have ruined the poetry of his argument.

After the interview, during which Blago confessed only to having used some foul language on an FBI wiretap (who among us has not?), I mentioned to the former governor that my mother is from Chicago and my dad from downstate Champaign, Illinois. My father, who covered the city for the *Chicago Tribune* in the 1970s, had recently come to appreciate Blagojevich's bullshit artistry and charming, old school Chicago (alleged) corruption. To my surprise, Blago suggested we give my dad a call. At home. Right then. "Now?" I asked. Blago assured me he was quite serious. He wanted to talk to my father.

I dutifully whipped out my BlackBerry and called my parents' home number. I wasn't quite sure what Blago had in mind, but it really didn't matter. When you're offered an audience with Blago, you don't ask a lot of questions. He's papal in that regard.

My mom answered. "Mom, put Dad on the phone. It's important," I said sternly. It *was* important. She sensed the urgency in my voice and summoned my dad to the telephone. I announced to my old man that the former governor of the great state of Illinois would like a word with him. I couldn't say why. Not because it was confidential, but because I genuinely could not provide a reason why the governor wanted to talk to my father. I handed the phone to Blago, stepped back, and watched a master at work. Some say Barack Obama is the greatest orator of our time. With due respect, I say he isn't even the best in Chicago.

Over the next two minutes, Blago performed an uninterrupted monologue that included several declarations of innocence, repeated promises not to let my father down, sincere thanks for his ongoing support during these difficult times, a solemn pledge to keep fighting for my dad and for *all* the people of Illinois who put him in the office to which he intended to return soon, and, naturally, high hopes that this would be, at long last, the year for those Cubbies.

After listening to that speech, how could my dad possibly break the news to Blago that he hasn't lived in Illinois since 1980? We just went with it. It seemed unlikely that my father would be called from New York City back to Cook County for jury duty on the Blagojevich trial, but my dad and I sure as hell weren't going to get between a man and his mission to personally heal the wounds of his state, one potential juror at a time.

Blago eventually said good-bye to my father and handed the phone back to me. He then asked for a pen to sign one more autograph, he posed for a couple of photographs, he proclaimed his innocence to an unwitting member of the cleaning staff, and then, just like that, he was gone. Our brush with Blago was over. He belonged to the world again, but for that brief, shining moment he was ours.

My dad had always held up the "Vote early, vote often" Mayor Daley as the gold standard for Chicago political characters, but he conceded to me after that phone call, "Okay, you're right: Blago is the best." It was an oddly poignant father-son moment. For better or worse, my dad has passed down to me

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an attraction to the American Freak Show. And there I was, rubbing elbows with one of the great freaks of our time. I mean that purely as a compliment, by the way.

My father, who has made a successful career of following strange people around the country and telling their stories, taught me not to waste time protesting the self-inflated showmen and bloviating bullshitters who populate our culture. It's more fun to marvel at them, to appreciate them, to be grateful for them, and to mock them relentlessly. I was taught to applaud audacity like that shown by an impeached Illinois governor who once said he could relate to "Mandela, Dr. King, and Gandhi." Come on, that's great shit. Self-righteously calling out Blago for being a cartoonish charlatan is like declaring loudly that cheeseburgers are bad for you. Of course they are. That's not the point. They're goddamn delicious. And the bigger, the better.

So I say, let others judge the (alleged) sins of Rod Blagojevich. I salute a man who proudly represents the new instant American celebrity—thrusting himself into our lives out of nowhere with an act of human frailty (or, you know, criminal wrongdoing) and then redeeming himself through the magic of reality television. Like most of the characters in this book, Blago came without warning, sent from the pop culture gods to entertain us briefly before inevitably evaporating into the ether, leaving behind only a thinly sourced Wikipedia page full of memories.

The stories you're about to read are made up, but the people are all quite real (except for John Edwards—it turns out he's

actually one of those security dummies people put in their passenger seats so they can ride in the HOV lane). You know the characters well, even if you've tried to avoid them. They are criminals and creeps, hypocrites and heathens, gluttons and Gooselins. Yes, they are freaks, but they're *our* freaks. So pull up a seat and enjoy the show.

AMERICAN
FREAK
SHOW

CONTENTS

★

Introduction xiii

1

President Palin: The Inauguration Address 1

2

I'm Tiger Woods . . . and I'm an Addict 9

3

"They Think He's Jesus":
Hillary's Private Campaign E-mails 21

4

Lindsay Lohan:
Twitter from a Santa Monica Jail 33

5

Obama vs. Cheney:
Late Night in the White House Kitchen 39

6

Cable News Cool:
The Hip-Hop Glossary 65

7

The Bachelorette: A Vote for Love 79

8

Blago: The Raw, Unedited FBI Tapes 89

9

The Longest Yard: Guantánamo Bay 101

10

Oprah Is God 111

11

Bernie Madoff: Welcome to Hell 123

12

Go-karts and Waterslides:
The George W. Bush Presidential Library 133

13

Parenting Magazine:
Five Questions with Kate Gosselin 141

14

The Kim Jong-il Celebrity Golf Tournament 147

15

The Neverland Ranch Yard Sale 159

16

Operation Pick 'n Pair:
The Way Forward in Afghanistan 167

17

Levi Johnston: The College Essay 177

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