

BALD AS I WANNA BE



More wisdom from the author of *PUMPING IRONY*

TONY KORNHEISER

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BALD AS I WANNA BE

*For Jake and Anita;
Laz and Julie*

Introduction

This is my second collection of columns, coming on the heels of the critically acclaimed *Pumping Irony*.

Well, perhaps critically acclaimed is an overstatement.

I did fabulously well in the overseas press. The reviewer in *Hola Argentina* called me “*un pedazo de pescado asqueroso*,” which I’m fairly certain means I’m a humor god in Buenos Aires.*

The bad news is that I was reviewed in only one place in English.

The good news is that it was in *The New York Times*.

The New York Times!

Not every book gets reviewed in *The New York Times*, which is so august it only has room to comment on the very, very best books—and, of course, every word ever written about important pre-Raphaelite sculptors. So I was very proud that the *Times* would review me. And I was very hopeful that it would be a glowing review, because I had been a reporter at the *Times*, and I had made friends among those few people in the Sunday book section who were actually still alive when they worked there reviewing books. (My writing at the *Times* had been considered quite avant-garde, because I wasn’t slavishly observant of the *Times* stylebook. For example, I once violated official *Times*

* Actually, I’m wrong—it’s a disgustingly smelly piece of fish.

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style by referring to “a small cylindrical object designated to surround and transport products or goods” as “a box.”)

To review my book the *Times* assigned a woman of such importance that she had three names: Ruth Bayard Smith.

Here are the very words she wrote about my collected columns:

They're sophomoric: what's special about the first spring day when the ice cream man shows up? It “coincides with the first day women resume wearing halter tops.” They're offensive: on an objection by math teachers that the Barbie doll was programmed to say that math is tough, he writes, “Girls are—how shall I put this sensitively—stupid in math.” The best piece in the book is a candid and humorous account of a course Mr. Kornheiser took to combat his fear of flying. But not much else in *Pumping Irony* is as sincere or rings as true, unless some readers see honesty in his account of cleaning his ears with a Q-tip.

(That Q-tip thing was one of my best, by the way. You should have seen the gunk that came out of my ears. It came out in one big, furry ball that was about the size of one of those arrowhead erasers. I feared it was alive. I didn't know whether to step on it or put it on a leash.)

At first I was hurt by this unrelenting, vicious, personal attack by a babe with three names who, for all I know, looks like a sow in a halter top. But then I was able to pull out some key words that I thought would help sales:

“Special! Best! Humorous! Sincere! True! Ears!”—*The New York Times*.

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Some writers might be devastated by such a review, and might never write again. (Not me. I have no shame whatsoever.) But the more I thought about it, the more I realized “sophomoric” and “offensive” were pretty much what I was aiming for. So I felt pretty good about it. I felt like those high school toughs in the opening scene of the film *Broadcast News* who beat up the valedictorian on graduation day. And then the valedictorian picks himself up and wipes the blood off his nose and yells scathingly at his tormentors, “Just remember this. You can beat me up now, but years from now, when I’m a famous reporter and I come back to this poor, pathetic hovel in triumph, you’ll all still be working at the meat plant, making nineteen thousand dollars a year.” And the young toughs look at each other and say, “Nineteen thousand, huh? Not bad.”

Sophomoric, huh? Not bad. At least I got through freshman year.

Anyway, it is with some trepidation that I release this book. I wanted to write something Ruth Bayard Smith would like, something profound, something serious, something with gravitas. But I couldn’t come up with enough columns on the deconstruction of the American socioeconomic infrastructure to make a whole book. So I threw in some of the usual crap.

Ruthie, this one’s for you.

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**IT'S A
JUNGLE
OUT THERE**

Coffee, Tea, Or . . . ?

It's not easy being a famous, beloved columnist. The world is a carnival of events and activities, and deciding which to write about can be an ordeal. Take this week, for example. I had two logical choices:

1. "Worldwide Tensions Simmer as UN Celebrates Fiftieth Anniversary." While ethnic violence still rages in Bosnia, while a shaky peace is still threatened by flare-ups in the Middle East, while war-crimes tribunals convene in Rwanda and human-rights violations continue in China, leaders from 137 nations gathered in New York to see if the United Nations retains viability as a structure for global peace and understanding as it enters an uncertain middle age.

2. "Airline Passenger Poops on Food-Service Cart."

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

You can stop calling now, I think we've got a winner.

First-class passenger Gerard Finneran, fifty-eight, president of an investment banking company, allegedly got so drunk and abusive on a recent flight from Buenos Aires to New York, and so steamed that he would not be served additional drinks, that he climbed atop the service cart like an orangutan, dropped his pants, and

(Note to copy desk: Please insert some classy euphemism here, so we don't lose any additional readers.)

... delivered a cruller.

Talk about being three sheets to the wind: Finneran then allegedly used the first-class linen napkins to, um, tidy up afterward. How's that for a coup de gross? Lucky he wasn't in coach, with those paper napkins the texture of acoustic tile.

Think back to your school days, about the most embarrassing thing you ever did while drunk. In my case it was puking on my girlfriend's parents' chiffonier. Compared with what this guy allegedly did, puking on a chiffonier is like being ordained an archbishop.

Hoo boy, I'll bet the other passengers were ticked. Out of concern for possible contamination, the captain cut off all food and beverage service—with four hours left in the flight. Wow. You've got to go four more hours with the Count of Caca, and you can't get so much as a shot of Scotch and a bagel with a schmear? So to speak.

(Note to copy desk: Whaddaya think? Is ANYONE still reading this?)

(Possibly some guys in a grunge band, Tony.)

(Note to copy desk: Let me take care of that right now.)

How drunk was this guy?

STINKING drunk. Hahahahaha.

(Okay, good work, Tony. We're down to zero now. Um, do WE have to keep reading?)

Actually, I don't care how drunk he was. How could someone do something like this? All I can think of is that he hated the bathrooms in planes as much as I do. I'm terrified to be in an airplane bathroom. It's tiny, and it's cramped, and it bounces and rattles like a box of elbow macaroni on a Tilt-A-Whirl. I feel as if it's been Super-Glued onto the plane. And my fear—and the fear of any sane person—is that it will detach from the plane. My idea of a nightmare is plummeting thirty thousand feet to my death over Kansas with my pants around my ankles while seated on an aluminum pooper the size of a flowerpot.

Anyway, this guy is the president of an investment banking firm! (He's fifty-eight. He works on Wall Street. I didn't think guys like that even *mooned* anybody.) Can you imagine any worse news for a company than for its president to do this? Let me put it this way: They're even laughing at this around the water cooler at Tylenol!

What toast did Finneran offer before his last drink? Bottoms up?

I'm wondering how it went when the board of directors of his company asked President Finneran exactly what happened on that plane.

I imagine he had a series of explanation strategies prepared.

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

Strategy No. 1: "I have never even flown on an airplane. At the time of the alleged incident I was practicing sand shots in my backyard."

No. 2: (Oh, wow. No. 2, get it?)

No. 3: "I have no recall of doing anything like this at this particular time. I suppose it's possible, in a theoretical sense, that I could have done this. But it doesn't sound like something I would have done."

(I read a story about this incident, and a friend of Finneran was quoted saying, "It seems so out of character for him." Who the hell *doesn't* it seem out of character for?)

I'm thinking ahead a few years, when the, uh, aroma of this incident fades and Finneran is back in the investment game—maybe flying to Zurich for a meeting. Maybe the airlines will have put his picture up in every galley with a note: DO NOT SERVE THIS MAN A DRINK. AND FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE DO NOT LET HIM NEAR THE LINENS.

Some of us were talking about what would possibly be worse than being stuck in a plane with this guy for four hours, and somebody suggested being stuck in an elevator. Someone else, a smarter person, said a bathysphere.

The one circumstance we could agree would be worse than being on this plane with Finneran would be if we were in a space capsule with him, two days into a six-day mission. Because of the zero-gravity thing.

I'm Tony. Buy Me.

This space available:

Yes, I am selling out.

If Mario Cuomo and Ann Richards can sell corn chips, and if Michael Jordan can lend his name to a McDonald's *bacon cheeseburger*—I mean, give *me* a break today!

It's just a matter of time before we have the Merrill Lynch State of the Union address. Any day now I expect Al

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

D'Amato to endorse Odor-Eaters, and the copy will say, "As a guy who puts my foot in my mouth . . ."

Everybody's selling out.

And now so am I. You can buy space in this column.

Let me take the trouble of anticipating your questions:

Q. Why should I buy space in your column, Tony?

A. Because I am a very influential journalist in the most important media outlet in the most important city in the United States. In all humility, I'm No. 1 in the capital of the Free World! So getting me on your side is crucial to the success of your corporate venture.

Q. Why you, though, and not some other big-shot columnist, like George F. Will?

A. Because I have the common touch; I use words that can be understood without placing a person-to-person call to William F. Buckley. And because I'll endorse *anything*! I'd endorse an impotency clinic and claim I'm a satisfied customer. I'd endorse Kaopectate one week and toilet paper the next. I have no shame. But back to me and Will. Let's say your firm wants a trusted, important journalist to say something nice about E-Z Cheez. I've actually tasted the product. I've sprayed it on crackers, and I've sprayed it on my index finger and licked it clean. Does George F. Will strike you as the kind of man who sprays cheese?

Q. What do you charge for your services?

A. Good question! I have three advertising packages available: The first, silver, costs \$5,000. This makes you "a friend of Tony." The next, gold, costs \$10,000. It makes