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Nathaniel M. Cerf  
*The University of Montana*

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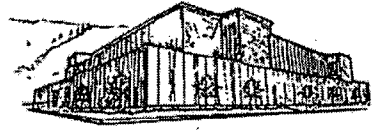
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"I AM NOT MAKING THIS UP!":  
ANALYZING DAVE BARRY'S WRITING, HIS INFLUENCES  
AND THE TRAITS HE SHARES WITH THE PAST CENTURY'S  
NEWSPAPER HUMORISTS

by

Nathaniel M. Cerf

B.A. The University of Montana, 1994

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

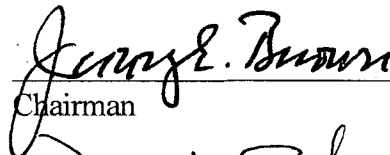
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2003

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**“I am not making this up!”: Analyzing Dave Barry’s writing, his influences and the traits he shares with the past century’s newspaper humorists (69 pages)**

Chairman: Jerry Brown 

Dave Barry is the foremost newspaper humorist of the Baby Boom generation. In 20 years, his weekly column’s circulation has grown to more than 520 newspapers and Web sites, reaching approximately 26 million readers. Yet, despite his success, few, if any, have analyzed his style.

This thesis explores how Barry’s modern humor is rooted in comic traditions that are, in some cases, millennia old. Using what literary expert Joseph Shipley defines as “old comedy” and “new comedy” Barry tackles the zeitgeist and issues of the past 20 years in his writing. He keeps his loyal “alert” readers coming back for more by wrapping everything from current events to day-to-day life around classic comic techniques, such as satire, spoof and hyperbole.

How Barry developed his sense of humor is a question many have asked, only to get guarded answers. Yet, in researching dozens of past interviews, it becomes clear Barry came from a troubled home. His father was an alcoholic. His mother was clinically depressed. His sister became a schizophrenic, and a brother became an alcoholic. Barry explains what a powerful coping mechanism laughter was for his family. Furthermore, Barry also claims a passion for the writings of Robert Benchley. An analysis of both writers’ works reveals remarkable similarities. The influence of his parents’ humor and Benchley’s humor left a distinct impression on Barry’s writing style.

Finally, this thesis briefly looks at the techniques Barry shares with the top newspaper humorists from the past century: Ambrose Bierce, Art Buchwald and Erma Bombeck. Common techniques of humor writing can be found in all of their writing – capturing the general zeitgeist of their respective eras. Although the distinction between Barry and these three authors is clear, it seems almost incredible how the same humor writing tools have been employed for more than 100 years.

## Author's note

When at all possible, I have tried to give each humor column's publication date. Unfortunately, most of the columns used for examples in this thesis come from sources that do not note the work's original date of publication.

— Nathaniel M. Cerf, 12/11/2003

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## Chapter 1

## I Am Not Making This Up! Analyzing the Humor of Dave Barry

It was a wine that I would describe as yellow in color, and everybody at my table agreed it was awful. “Much too woody,” said one person. “Heavily oxidized,” said another. “Bat urine,” I offered. The others felt this was a tad harsh. I was the only one who finished my glass. (1)

Self effacing. An unsophisticated commoner who has a sharp, intelligent wit and an often twisted way of looking at life. Perhaps this is the most simple way to sum up the work of Dave Barry.

Barry is the foremost newspaper humorist of the Baby Boom generation. According to Tribune Media Services, Barry’s syndicate, his once-a-week columns are published by 520 newspapers and Web sites every week, reaching approximately 26 million readers. He has written 25 books; many are best sellers. One of his novels became a hit movie. For five years, a successful TV show, “Dave’s World,” was named after him and based loosely on his work. On the lecture circuit, he gets up to \$30,000 per speech.

It has been 20 years since Barry began writing humor for the Miami Herald. Yet, despite his success, few, if any, have ever analyzed his style.

Humor is one of the most challenging things to write. On his deathbed, actor Edmund Gwenn is said to have explained that, “Dying is easy, comedy is difficult.” (2)

Barry, himself, explains how tough it is for him to write his weekly columns: “The hardest part is starting them; the second-hardest part is ending them. The middles



aren't so easy either." (3)

One of the most trying aspects about humor writing is the fact that the author, unlike a stand-up comic or even a playwright, has no immediate link to the audience's reaction to his or her jokes. Playwright Neil Simon would open his shows in cities other than New York and rewrite the lines in the play every night to maximize the reaction and laughs he wanted from the audience. (4) By the time he opened many of his plays in New York they seemed to be instant successes.

Barry does not have that same opportunity. He has one shot to get it right. Although he gets a lot of mail from his readers, he cannot redo a column for more laughs. Remaining consistently funny for more than 20 years is a remarkable feat. So it seems odd that no one has tried to explain Barry's writing style and his success with it.

It is possible that literary analysts are reluctant to delve deeply into the work of a humor columnist because they agree with E.B. White's philosophy: "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." (4)

Or perhaps comedy is not important enough. Even critics are generally content to laugh at or pan a comic endeavor and save the analysis for "deeper" writing. Barry encourages this lack of inquiry into his humor by explaining time and again in interviews that he intends no deep meaning.

While there may be no deeper meaning, what appears to be artless booger jokes and personal anecdotes is, in truth, a highly skilled craft.

What are Barry's literary techniques? How does he develop his jokes? What are the elements that make them funny? What is the tradition that helped create Barry? This thesis answers these questions, without (one hopes) making the autopsied remains of

humor look too grotesque.

### Old tricks, new dog

So, just how has Barry made so many millions of people laugh, every week, for the last 20 years?

At the heart of it all is Barry's philosophy about where humor comes from.

A "sense of humor" is basically a measurement of the extent to which you understand that you are trapped in an insane, illogical, unfair world that will, sooner or later, kill you and everybody you love. "Humor" is how you cope with this knowledge. "Laughter" is how you release the tension this knowledge makes you feel. But really, there's more to it than that. Sometimes things are funny because they're silly, and it has nothing to do with death.

Why?

I DON'T KNOW. (3)

In 1854, Henry Read created the modern definition of humor in his book, "Lectures in English Literature." He defined humor as "the happy compound of pathos and playfulness." (5) The definition fits Barry's lighthearted trips into the realm of the absurd and chaotic.

[On singing Aretha Franklin tunes while driving in heavy traffic]

My technique is to grip the steering wheel with both hands and lift myself halfway out of the seat so that I can give full vocal expression to the emotion that Aretha and I are feeling, which is a mixture of joyous hope and bittersweet longing and the horror of realizing that the driver of the cement truck three feet away is starring at me, at which point I pretend that I am having a coughing seizure while Aretha finishes the song on her own. (6)

The foundation Dave Barry sets for a great deal of the humor in his columns is rooted in what Joseph Shipley defines as classic comedy: "The spirit of classic comedy, whether Greek or Roman, Old or New, tends to take a definite philosophic position, subordinating the good of the individual to the good of the community in which he lives."

(5)

Barry frequently takes day-to-day social, personal or political events and wraps them around a common sense perspective to highlight the lunacy of the event, as he does with irritating television ads, his son's ear piercing and the energy crisis of the 1970s. "What the government did in this particular crisis was declare, in 1974, a National Pretend Speed Limit of 55. This has been strictly observed everywhere except on the actual roads ..." (7)

What Shipley classifies as Old Comedy is based on the work of Greek playwright Aristophanes whose plays were more narrative in form and filled with personal invective. "Aristophanes attacked the institutions and individuals of which he disapproved because he felt that they were antagonistic to the best ideals of human society," Shipley writes.(5)

Barry does this too, but usually on less grave issues. Barry is more likely to pursue quarry that is inconsequential, like Supreme Court justices endorsing "Beano," an anti-gas product, or people following the trend of spelling "shop" as "shoppe." However, the invective is there, and it sharpens the humor — regardless of the subject's frivolous nature.

[on Beano and Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens]

But until I got Justice Stevens' letter, I had not realized that this was a matter of concern in the highest levels of government. When you see the Supreme Court justices, they always appear very solemn, if not deceased. It never occurs to you that, under those robes, *they have digestive systems, too.* (6)

Barry's invective is particularly aggressive in his hatred for extra "e's" in "Ye Olde Humor Columne."

We need to do something about this national tendency to try to make new things look like they are old.

First off, we should enact an "e" tax. Government agents would roam the country looking for stores whose names contained any word that ended in an unnecessary "e," such as "shoppe" or "olde," and the owners of these stores

would be taxed at a flat rate of \$50,000 per year per “e.” We should also consider an additional \$50,000 “ye” tax, so that the owner of a store called “Ye Olde Shoppe” would have to fork over \$150,000 a year. In extreme cases, such as “Ye Olde Barne Shoppe,” the owner would simply be taken outside and shot. (1)

Barry’s use of New Comedy is just as prevalent as his use of Old Comedy.

Whereas Old Comedy is more narrative, Shipley writes, New Comedy devotes itself to the relations between fallible human beings. Barry works in New Comedy by bringing characters into his columns. These characters, whether real or made up, play off each other and get laughs when Barry gives them dialogue.

[Discussing his teenage son Rob’s sleeping habits, or lack thereof]

“Rob,” I tell him, as he is eating his breakfast in extreme slow motion with his eyes completely closed, so that he sometimes accidentally puts food in his ear, “I want you to go to sleep earlier.”

“DAD,” he says, using the tone of voice you might use when attempting explain an abstract intellectual concept to an oyster, “you DON’T UNDERSTAND. I am NOT tired. I am ... SLOOSH” (sound of my son passing out facedown in his Cracklin’ Oat Bran.) (6)

Sometimes he plays characters off each other through his own narrative style, without any dialogue. Here’s an example from his wedding season column:

Unfortunately, the bride reaches this state [total insanity] just when she is turning her attention to the most abused victim in America: bridesmaids. If you’ve ever wondered why you see so many weddings where the bridesmaids are unrecognizable, the answer is that these poor women were following the fashion orders of a crazed bride who wants all her bridesmaids, regardless of their physical nature, to have exactly the same “look,” because otherwise her Special Day would be RUINED RUINED RUINED. (March 2, 2003)

## **Elements of Laughter**

### **Parody**

Shipley defines parodies as “Using the words, thoughts, or style of an author, but by a slight change adapting them to a new purpose or ridiculously inappropriate subject;

the imitation or exaggeration of traits of style so as to make them appear ludicrous.” (5)

From songs to journalistic exposés, Barry enjoys the art of parody. According to one of his columns, “Bang the Tupperware Slowly,” (1) he even sang a parody of Muddy Waters’ blues. Barry wrote the blues parody about Tupperware and performed it with his backup band, The Urban Professionals, before a crowd of 1,000 Tupperware distributors. He provides a sample verse in his column “The Plastic, Fantastic Cover.”

*Some folks use waxed paper  
Some folks use the Reynolds Wrap  
Some folks use the Plastic Baggie  
To try to cover up the gap  
You can use most anything  
To keep your goodies from the air  
But nothing works as well  
As that good old Tupperware*

(Chorus)

*'Cause it's here  
Whooaaa  
Take a look at what we got  
If you don't try some and buy some  
Don't blame me when your turnips rot. (1)*

“The Space Odyssey” is another example of Barry parodying a writing style. (6) It was written in the style of conspiracy-laden investigative reports and was about the UFO sightings in Gulf Breeze, Fla., in 1988. The story is filled with subheads and reports of Barry’s interviews with witnesses, experts and local journalists. He probes the story thoroughly and ultimately, and humorously, debunks it.

On January 26, 2003, in his standard column size (700 to 750 words), Barry parodied the film “The Lord of the Rings.” He essentially rewrites the film in about 700 words so that potential viewers won’t be compelled to see the movie and sit through all three hours of it.

**LORD ARAGORN:** But enough explanatory dialogue. It's time for one of the estimated 17 big sword-clanging battles we have in this movie with hideous computer-generated monsters who always outnumber us by the thousands, although we defeat them every time, because we are courageous heroes!

**LEGOLAS:** Also, they have the hand-to-hand-combat skills of alfalfa.

**MONSTERS:** Arrrrrr

**SWORDS:** CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

## **Spoofs**

According to Shipley, spoofs are similar to parodies; however, they don't rely on following after a different author's specific style. Instead, a spoof mocks a genre or style. For example, Barry spoofs United States history in his book "Dave Barry Slept Here: A Sort of History of the United States." Barry doesn't try to emulate the style of any individual writer; rather he pokes fun at the style and format of history textbooks in general. Barry is just writing history as he sees it, by turning it on its ear.

The Revolutionary War: "Battles in those days took longer than they do today. First off, it took a while for the British to form into strict military formations, which, when viewed from the air, spelled out nationalistic slogans such as GO BRITS!" (8)

Barry's columns are often spoofs on traditional newspaper writing. In them he investigates real news that is unusual and humorous. In this example Barry has learned from a newspaper story that a man in Texas has a toilet that mysteriously produces Paper Mate pens. In two years the man has fished out 75 ball-point pens from his toilet. Barry interviews him for a follow-up story.

"What's the status of the toilet," I asked

"It's still a mystery," he said. He said he hadn't found any new pens since the newspaper story, but that he has become something of a celebrity. This is understandable. People naturally gravitate to a man who has a Mystery Toilet.

"Everywhere I go," he said, "people say to me, 'Hey, you got a pen?'"

I asked him if the pens still write, and he said they did.  
 “Paper Mate ought to make a commercial out of this,” he said. “The slogan could be, ‘We come from all over and write anywhere.’” (6)

## Satire

Barry rarely writes an entire column as satire, but he will frequently pepper many of his columns with it. Shipley states that satire is difficult to explain precisely because the term seems to evolve over time. However, “certain characteristics have remained constant: satire as attack to expose folly or vice, dullness or evil — or even to advance some amoral position ... or an immoral stance ... — whether by gentle rebuke or scarifying verbal onslaught, by ridicule or invective...” (5)

Barry’s satire, while pointed, usually avoids attacks on one specific individual, aiming at broader, safer targets – targets by which few readers will be offended or hurt if attacked. Thus taxes, congressional pork or even small town life are fair game.

- Taxes: “There are a number (23,968,847) of significant differences between this year’s tax form and last year’s, ...”(1)
- Pork: “... certain congresspersons ... would cheerfully vote to spend millions on a program to develop a working artificial hemorrhoid, as long as the money was spent in their districts.” (6)
- Small town life: “It is not even in the same time zone as Miami. Miami is in the Eastern Time Zone, and Gulf Breeze is in about 1958.” (6)

Of course he does make the occasional direct attack on a specific subject, but the subject must be fair game, well exposed to public criticism, and the attack reflect mainstream opinion, such as his piece about the Office of Homeland *In*security during his column “2002 in Review.” Although the attack directly affronts a specific government body, it is a safe target, where Barry’s opinion closely mirrors that of the general public.

He also attacked Oliver North and the journalists covering the Iran-Contra scandal

hearings in the 1987. The hearings were a media circus. By the time Barry wrote about the subject, most people were getting fed up with North, the trial and the way most of the people indicted seemed to have a difficult time remembering anything about their actions. “A Boldfaced Lie” was Barry’s satire on the hearings. Subsequently, this column helped Barry win the Pulitzer Prize. In the column, Barry intentionally sets certain words in bold type.

... **Lt. Col. Oliver North** (Secret Code Name “**Manhood Testicle**”), who with his loyal staff, **Fawn Hall**, who has been offered \$500,000 by **Penthouse Magazine** to pose **Naked**, occupied an office in the **White House**, but was in no way whatsoever connected with **Anybody Higher Up**, because of course it is a **Common Practice for Totally Random Unofficial People** such as **Insurance Agents** and **Accordion Teachers** to have **White House Offices**, and thus it was that **Col. North**, acting completely on his **Own**, decided to divert **Money** to the **Contras** ... (9)

This column also exemplifies the newspaper version of sight gags. Often Barry will use bold-face fonts, capital letters and italics to accentuate a joke. It helps to add punch that standard punctuation cannot do alone.

## **Repetition**

Running gags (repetitious jokes used in a single column or series of columns) are crucial to generating laughter in much of Barry’s work. In fact, one of his running gags has been trotting along for years. It is the oft used “<blank> would be a great name for a rock ’n’ roll band.” His Web site (9) lists dozens of names that he’s made up over the years. This isn’t surprising, given the fact that he used to play guitar in several horribly named rock bands like “The Federal Duck” and “The Phlegmtones.” The following are a brief sampling of some of the “bands” listed on his Web site: Flaming Squirrels, Rodent Passion, Crab Shrapnel, Mosquito Hunter and the Unreliable Pollinators, and Pinot Noir and his Nuances of Toast. (9)

Outside of naming rock bands, Barry usually confines a running gag to only one



column. In those columns he uses running jokes to help pace himself and punch up the humor a notch between other jokes. It is difficult to give examples of running jokes because most of them out of context lose their magic. However, the running gag about weapons being found in Diet Pepsi cans from his 1993 year in review stands out:

JULY 1 — A consumer in Detroit reports finding a switchblade knife in a can of Diet Pepsi.

SEPTEMBER 1 — A consumer in Boston reports finding an AK-47 assault rifle in a can of Diet Pepsi.

5 — In a move strongly opposed by the National Rifle Association, the California State Legislature passes a law requiring a five-day "cooling-off" period on purchases of Diet Pepsi.

OCTOBER 1 — A consumer in Phoenix reports finding a nuclear submarine in a can of Diet Pepsi.

DECEMBER 1 — A consumer in Orlando reports finding the Ark of the Covenant in a can of Diet Pepsi.

Yet Barry's use of repetition as a tool is not limited to running gags. Often he will use the repetition of a single word or subject in a paragraph to set up a punch line. In one of his columns, "Weight loss through anti-gravity," Barry explains scientific research that states that the Earth's weight increases by 25 tons each day due to space debris. The remainder of his column is about how the redistribution of this weight affects our lives, making us gain weight, making turtles too heavy for seagulls to carry and subsequently breaking car windows as the seagulls drop them, and, finally, how golf balls will soon be so big and heavy that a golfer will need to take dozens of strokes just to make the ball roll a foot. (7)

## **Innuendo**

Because his columns are published in what many consider to be family-based

newspapers, Barry takes care with jokes about sex. Instead, when he wants to make a dirty joke, he must do so with innuendo — both veiled and blatant.

Two newspapers, *The Oregonian* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, refused to print his “Beano” column on the grounds that it was tasteless and offensive. So several weeks later, when Barry decided to write about circumcisions, in an effort not to offend sensitive readers he renamed male anatomy after these papers. “This is a common medical procedure that involves — and here, in the interest of tastefulness, I am going to use code names — taking a hold of a guy’s *Oregonian* and snipping his *Post-Dispatch* right off.”(6)

In a more subtle use of innuendo, Barry discusses puberty: “And I am not even going to mention here that for several years my hands were covered in warts.” (1)

### **Comic Hyperbole**

Comic hyperbole is used in most of his columns. Here is just one example from his wedding column, which describes the number of bobby pins used to hold up a bridesmaid’s hairdo: “She had enough steel in her head to make a Cadillac Escalade. Her hairdo was interfering with aircraft compasses.” (March 2, 2003)

Similes that are hyperbolic allow Barry to accentuate a punch line. Sometimes the simile itself is the punch line. “Whereas with snowboarding, all you get is one board, which is shaped like a giant tongue depressor.” (7) Or while describing a left-handed president’s signature, which gets smeared by the very act of writing, “This looks like somebody killed a spider on the Federal Highway Authorization Act.” (6)

### **Verbal Kung-fu**

Among the more literary terms for the techniques Barry uses to create humor, he also has some terms of his own. What scholars call lateral thought (Barry’s self proclaimed favorite comic technique), Barry calls Judo. Barry explains it best in an

interview with the author, “One technique I use a lot I call ‘Judo’ — getting the reader to assume I’m about to make one point (the logical one) and then giving him instead something absurd.” (3)

Although he doesn’t call it Judo, outdoors humorist Patrick McManus explains this concept in his book on humor writing, “Deer on a Bicycle.” “Reader anticipation and surprise are important elements in humor, and both depend upon just the right timing. The idea is to lead readers to anticipate one thing and then surprise them with another.” (10)

Judo chop: “... if he wants to drive 55, he should do it in a more appropriate place, such as the waiting room of a dental office.” (1)

Judo chop: “Californians are constantly voting on things. They have repealed gravity several times.” (August 24, 2003)

Judo chop: “They know that if she had to choose between catching a fly ball and saving an infant’s life ... she would probably elect to save the infant’s life, without even considering whether there were men on base.” (1)

Another quintessential part of Barry’s humor repertoire is what he calls The Voice of Authority. The Voice of Authority is commanding, all knowing and according to Barry, always wrong. The Voice of Authority is a spoof on the academics, intelligencia and trivia experts in general. He uses the technique frequently and the wrong answers he espouses are always Judo chops. In the following quote, the parenthesis are Barry’s: “Sometimes I add some seasoning to the sauce, to give it a dash of what the Italians call ‘joie de vivre’ (literally, ‘ingredients’).” (7)

Barry said that another technique he uses in writing comedy is making the end of the joke the funniest part. Making the funniest part of the joke come at the end is a part

of the old vaudevillian comic tradition that performers and writers called toppers. In an interview with Larry Wilde, comedy writer Jack Douglas explains this effective and simple way to get laughs.

“You write the joke. Then you write another joke to top the first joke. Then you write still another funny line to top the second one. ... I don’t know (why it works). But that seems to be a formula that works for a lot of comedians. It’s a magic thing.” (4)

Douglas ought to know, he wrote for Bob Hope — one of the all-time kings of toppers.

Dave Barry uses toppers frequently.

[On “Living Smart”]

Suppose that two people — call them Person A and Person B — are late for appointments in New York City and need to cross a street. Person A rushes into the street without looking; he is instantly struck by a taxi going 146 miles per hour (this taxi has engine trouble; otherwise it would be going much faster). But Person B — even though he’s in an equally big hurry — pauses on the sidewalk and looks both ways. While he is doing this, he is severely beaten by muggers. (7)

There is one last significant element to Barry’s humor. “Sometimes things are funny because they are silly, ...” Barry said in a personal interview. (3) Take, for example, his references to the first President Bush as President Snailsucker and then Vice President Dan Quayle as Vice President Dootbrain.

Patrick McManus does this, too. He believes that comic character names help authors describe someone without having to go into any great detail, wasting words and space. (10).

## **Subject matters**

### **Every day life for Barry**

Comic writers such as Mel Brooks and Neil Simon say that some of the best

comedy comes from observations of everyday life. (4) It is the easiest comedy because it plays on experiences almost everyone has had. This might help explain the subject matter of so many of Dave Barry's columns. It also explains why so many of Barry's stories and anecdotes start with his catch phrase, "I'm not making this up."

The majority of Barry's columns can be divided into two subject groups: life and news. The first is about his day-to-day life, observations and parenting. The second, which we have touched on briefly while discussing spoofs, is about news and oddball facts usually sent in by "alert readers." (i.e. Barry's fans)

The first group is easy to identify because they are usually written in the first person point of view. The subject matter of the actual columns varies all of the time, but the columns will be fraught with Barry's opinions and skewed observations crafted for the reader's amusement: "I think Congress ought to require the cigarette manufacturers to put [explosive] loads in, say, one out of every 250 cigarettes." (1)

He writes many of his opinions and observations of everyday life using his mastery of lateral thought. Essentially, in the literary sense, he'll throw a breaking pitch. The ball/logic appears to be heading in a straight line, and then curves when the batter/reader least expects it to. In Barry's terms, this is where he will use his Judo the most. "I had been led to believe, by countless public-television nature shows, that ants are very organized, with the colony divided into specialized jobs such as drones, workers, fighters, bakers, consultants, etc." (6)

In another example, Barry explains: "Then, young professional couples began to realize their lives were missing something: a sense of stability, of companionship, of responsibility for another life. So they got Labrador retrievers." (6)

His observations are similar in structure. His average reader might see and

interpret a “normal” event one way, but Barry sees it in another, usually more humorous, way.

I have studied American eating preferences for years, and believe me, this is what people want. They don't want to go into an unfamiliar restaurant, because they don't know whether the food will be very bad, or very good, or what. They want to go into a restaurant that advertises on national television, where they know the food will be mediocre. (1)

These topics are so broad based that most people have seen or experienced what he's writing about. Because most of his readers can relate to the subject, Barry does not need to spend extra time explaining it to his readers. Many of his subjects range from potty training his 2-year-old daughter to experiences he (and his readers) have driving to and from work.

[On potty training]

“Sophie wants to be a ballerina, and we have told her, repeatedly, that if you want to get anywhere in the field of ballet, the No. 1 prerequisite, insisted upon by every major dance academy here and abroad, is that you be potty-trained.” (February 9, 2003)

[On what to do to slow drivers getting in his way]

“... I'm proposing that we go to the next logical step: nuclear weapons.” (6)

Also in this type of column, Barry isn't afraid of taking a few shots at himself. Daniel Wickberg defines humor at one's own expense as self objectification. (11) It helps keep Barry humble in the eyes of his readers. Sometimes one's own follies are more entertaining than others', and readers can usually relate to the kinds of events about which Barry writes. “As a professional journalist, I am always looking for new ways to get paid for being motionless, ...” (7)

### **All the news that's fit to print?**

Based on the cliché that truth is stranger than fiction, Barry will often take a bizarre news story and expound upon it to make it a full humor column. Most of the

oddball news stories are first mailed to Barry from his alert readers. Then he investigates the story. He will compile as many details and interviews as he can over the phone. Then he writes his column. Fairly early in the column he introduces the unusual news item by stating, "I'm not making this up," and then he describes the event as a reporter would a news story, adding his own opinions and witticisms.

In "Tarts Afire" (6) Barry begins explaining how he received a newspaper article from an alert reader in Ohio. The article stated that a house caught fire when a Kellogg's Pop-Tart got caught in a toaster. Barry called the town's fire department and interviewed a fireman about the fire. The fireman explained the experiments the department did to study how Pop-Tarts burn. Barry then went out and performs his own scientific backyard experiment on Pop-Tarts and comically comes to the same findings about blazing Pop-Tarts.

While the truth of the unusual news is in itself funny, Barry's added reporting keeps his readers laughing after the initial joke.

The range and scope of the unusual news varies. Sometimes it is as simple as Spanish villagers hoisting a goat up the side of a church steeple by its horns, while other times it might deal with people dynamiting rotting, beached whales. Barry himself was part of a news story when a town in North Dakota (a state he's quick to poke fun at) decided to name its new sewage treatment facility after him.

The advantage in writing this kind of humor column is that Barry needn't write the first joke, which is the news event itself. Therefore, Barry can build upon the initial joke with a series of jokes like toppers. While he must work hard to cull new laughs and keep pushing the subject matter, reality takes the first step for him.

Similarly, Barry sometimes writes about the letters he gets from fans. In these

cases, a fan is sharing a bit of wisdom or philosophy about life. Barry then builds on and around that subject. For example, he wrote a column, “Dirty Thoughts Could Lead to Cleaner Clothes,” about a woman who has revealed the secret of getting her husband to do all of the dirty work around the house for her.

I have here a shocking letter from a person named “Julia,” who openly admits to being a woman. It concerns laundry. ... In her letter, she reveals that she has developed a shocking tactic — a tactic that threatens to undermine the very fabric that underlies the foundation for the infrastructure of our way of life as we know it in terms of metaphors. This tactic is so disgusting that, to prevent young readers from being exposed to it, I am going to use a secret code to tell you how “Julia” gets her husband to do laundry:

She uses S-E-X. (February 16, 2003)

The news and shared-letter columns allow Barry and his fans to interact, and they endear them to him. Plus he connects with his readers on a more personal level with these columns. In doing so, Barry isn’t speaking from some high pedestal, as did Ambrose Bierce, an acerbic, yet often humorous, columnist writing more than 90 years ago. Barry’s one of the people, a person who will work with you to help get a laugh.

This is a trait he shares with the late Erma Bombeck, who frequently interacted with her readers through her columns, which were circulated in more than 900 newspapers.

Mike Steele, who maintains a Web site ([home.earthlink.net/~mesteele/dbarry/](http://home.earthlink.net/~mesteele/dbarry/)) that has been devoted to Barry for 10 years, credits his own love of Barry’s columns to Barry’s fan interactions.

“I think that’s part of what got me hooked in the first place,” Steele said in a personal interview.

### **List-based columns**

Less frequent, but extremely popular, are Barry’s list-based columns. These



specialty pieces are usually 4,500 to 7,500 words long (his regular columns average 750 words each) and are published annually during the holiday season. Barry usually publishes his gift guide during the last weekend of November or on the first weekend of December. Then, at the end of the year he publishes his year in review.

The gift guide draws from the complete Barry repertoire, but most heavily from oddball news. Alert readers point out most of the gifts to Barry, who in return credits the fan by giving both the fan's name and hometown.

And like Barry's unusual news stories, all of these unusual gifts are strange but true, like brain gum, the bumper dumper (a toilet seat for the car) and the remote-controlled flatulence machine.

Additionally, Barry writes his own description of each gift, giving his insight about each item's potential. "Nori, The Original Nasal Passage Cleaner ... You read that correctly: The water goes into one nostril and comes out the other. So this is not just a hygiene device: It also would make a great 'ice-breaker' at formal dinner parties." (9, 2000)

Barry unleashes his Judo in most all of the descriptions:

- The Titanic Coloring Book: "We don't know about you, but whenever we think of carefree fun for children, the historic incident that comes into our mind is the sinking of the Titanic." (9, 2001)
- Personal Cooling System: "We can all agree that there is nothing in the entire world worse than having to leave an air-conditioned building on a sweltering hot summer day. So just imagine what it would be like if you could step out onto the sidewalk wearing an actual air conditioner around your neck!  
It would be very unpleasant, because air conditioners weigh hundreds of pounds. (9, 1999)
- Exotic Cologne Scents: "And here's a festive scent for the holidays: 'Funeral Home.'" (9, 2000)

Not wanting to hog all of the laughs for himself, Barry will make up characters to help describe the gifts in use or for reactions to receiving a gift like the “Reptile Sampler” on Christmas morning:

**PERSON ONE:** The snake is chewier than the turtle.

**PERSON TWO:** No, the turtle is chewier than the snake.

**PERSON ONE:** Yes, but a snake can EAT a turtle. (9, 2000)

Barry’s gift guide is a spoof of the traditional gift guides produced during the holiday season. However, there are many sub-spoofs within the main one, like the use of research and statistics to sell goods. “Here’s an important fact for everybody who is concerned about crime: According to FBI statistics, not one person in the United States has ever been assaulted while under the protection of a bear.” (9, 1999)

Barry’s year-in-review columns generally satirize the major news stories of the year. Because Barry rarely writes about news in his weekly columns, the year in review is where he takes most of his shots at the government, politicians and national events.

January 16, 1987: “In his first press conference since 1952, President Reagan, asked by reporters to comment on persistent allegations that he is ‘out of touch,’ responds: ‘Thanks, but I just had breakfast.’” (1)

Barry breaks up the lengthier assaults on politicians and news makers by throwing in one-liners about celebrities who have died:

- February, 1987 “Andy Warhol goes to the Big Soup Can in the Sky.”
- October, 1998 “Gene Autry joins Roy for a duet.”
- June, 2002 “Ann Landers dies, but continues to dispense common-sense advice.”

Barry writes about each year in chronological order, starting first with his overview introduction, which is followed by a month-by-month breakdown from January

to December. By maintaining a strict structure, Barry cultivates certain running gags and plays jokes off of that structure, like the weapons found in Diet Pepsi cans listed earlier. In his 2002 column, he lists the monthly terror alert color given by the Department of Homeland Insecurity: tangerine, burnt umber and peach (just to name a few).

Although the general voice and style of these columns is similar to his weekly columns, the year in review has a much sharper edge and pulls fewer punches.

[January, 2002]

In other executive action, the nation gets a scare when President Bush chokes on a pretzel, which is immediately wrestled to the floor by Secret Service agents. The president is unconscious for about 30 seconds, during which time Vice President Cheney appoints 173 federal judges.

In other terrorist news, American Taliban fighter John Walker Lindh is hired as a marketing consultant by Major League Baseball.

He peppers a bit of his unusual facts and news stories throughout the piece.

May, 1993: “True Item: Just-released government documents reveal that Walt Disney was an informant for the FBI.” He follows that up with a gag, “Just-released government documents reveal that from 1948 through 1951 Donald Duck was a member of the Communist Party. Also, ‘Mickey’ Mouse is a woman.”

The year’s pop culture is also fair game. Celebrities, films, fashions, music and sports provide fodder for Barry’s barrage of satire:

- November 2002 — “Michael Jackson takes time out from his busy schedule of being an oppressed humanitarian to demonstrate the correct method for displaying an infant to a crowd from a fifth-floor balcony.”
- April 1987 — “The National Basketball Association grants Miami a franchise. The new team will be named The Enormous Bloodsucking Insects.”
- December 1998 — “In sports, the Nevada Athletic Commission issues a boxing license to Charles Manson.”

## Mister Language Person

Finally, the last substantial subject of Barry's humor columns is Mister Language Person. "Ask Mister Language Person ... answers your questions about grammar, vocabulary and those little whaddyacallemmarks." (6) (Judo chop)

These columns are written in a question and answer format, creating a comic dialogue using Barry's favorite tools: Judo and The Voice of Authority. The Voice of Authority is more prevalent in these columns because they are advice columns, and as Barry has said, "the Voice of Authority is always wrong." (3)

Be glad your high school English teacher didn't give you advice like this:

**Q:** I have a question about the correct pronunciation of the word "aunt." I say it's pronounced "aunt," but my husband insists that it's "aunt." We argue about this all the time!

**A:** According to the American Association of English Professors of English, the correct pronunciation is "nuclear." (June 8, 2003)

Since there is virtually no truth to any of these style of columns, Barry is free to use as much Judo as he wants without having to set up a joke.

He also tends to use toppers to a much greater extent:

**Q: What are the rules regarding capital letters?**

**A:** Capital letters are used in three grammatical situations:

**1.** At the beginning of proper and formal nouns.

**EXAMPLES:** Capitalize "Queen," "Tea Party" and "Rental Tuxedo." Do NOT capitalize "dude," "cha-cha" or "boogerhead."

**2.** To indicate a situation of great military importance.

**EXAMPLE:** "Get on the TELSAT and tell STAFCON that COMWIMP wants some BBQ ASAP."

**3.** To indicate that the subject of the sentence has been bitten by a badger.

**EXAMPLE:** "I'll just stick my hand in here and OUCH!" (6)

Another feature we see in the pure, zany, silliness of Mister Language Person is the use of non sequiturs. These are nonsense statements frequently used to add a kick to

Barry's Judo. A good example of these non sequiturs come from the last quote where "improper" nouns are defined as "dude," "cha-cha," and "boogerhead."

Mister Language Person hasn't seen a lot of action recently. Although he made an appearance this summer, he had not been seen since the December of 2001.

If you were to look for a rhyme or reason in the way Barry organizes the use of these different subjects for humor columns — don't! With the exception of his annual gift guide and year in review, Barry said that there is no grand strategy for choosing to write about these various subjects. "It's not that conscious. I repeat certain themes because the readers respond to them. And I vary my columns to keep the readers from getting bored. But my approach is a lot more practical than philosophical." (3)

## Chapter 2

## Coping and Joking: Dave Barry's Influences in Humor

The voice in Dave Barry's columns is that of an everyday, suburban, middle-class guy. He portrays an average baby boomer who happens to find humor in the plight of the human race. In his columns he boasts of no highfalutin academic pedigree (although he discusses his college antics), no political party affiliation, no power trip. It is fitting, then, that he claims few substantial influences on his writing — mostly his parents and his favorite humor writer: Robert Benchley.

For as open as Dave Barry seems to be about his life in his columns, it is difficult to uncover specific details of his past. He will use broad brush strokes to describe his childhood. His father was an alcoholic. His mother was chronically depressed. His sister is schizophrenic. One of his two brothers is an alcoholic.

As intimate as those details appear, he refuses to elaborate further. He rarely colors in the specifics on the canvas of his life. He has said that he is not covering anything up; he just does not believe his private life should be all that significant to the public. He hates celebrity worship.

Barry explains during an interview with *Playboy*:

If I could push a button and never have anyone recognize me in public, I would. ... I'm not afraid or embarrassed to talk about my life. But I guess I don't quite understand why my life should be more important than anyone else's. It troubles me that because I write a humor column, people would care more about the fact that my sister is schizophrenic than the fact that the mailman's sister is a schizophrenic, when the problem is essentially the same. That's the American celebrity obsession. (12)

When interviewers push the topic about his childhood, why he and his family

members are the way they are (or were), he is evasive. Barry often states that despite his family's problems he had a good childhood, he was never abused and his parents were very funny and loving people. Period.

It appears, in interviews he has given, that Barry was closest to his mother, and he occasionally sheds a little more light on what both of their lives were like when he was younger. In Barry's Playboy interview he elaborates on his mother's depression: "She was a clinically depressed person who needed pills just to get out of bed and face the day." She committed suicide in 1987, and, in a rare moment, Barry opened up to his audience and wrote about that experience. It was one of four columns that earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

Unlike a traditional biography, fraught with the events that mold a child into an famous humorist, Barry's background is filled with more holes than hard facts. Regardless, Barry has given, in the past 20 years of interviews, a glimpse of how his past influences have shaped his current comedy.

## **Roots**

Dave Barry was born on July 3, 1947, in the New York suburb of Armonk. Some of the most revealing details about his childhood come out when he is asked to describe the origins of his sense of humor. First and foremost, Barry always credits his parents.

His parents had a unique blend of humor styles. Barry said that his father, David W. Barry — a Presbyterian minister who worked with inner-city youth, the poor, the Civil Rights Movement and set up several alcohol abuse programs in New York City — had a quick but traditional sense of humor. His mother, Marian — a housewife — had a darker edge. Although Barry generally preferred his mother's dark humor, he said, "My father was also funny but in a more conventional, upbeat, happy kind of way — a

congenitally happy, positive person.” (12)

Barry’s mother’s humor was not only the opposite; he describes her in *Convene* magazine as being the atypical boomer mother:

My mother was really funny in a really dark, edgy way, especially to be a housewife in the ’40s, ’50s and ’60s. ... she was so far from June Cleaver. There was nothing my mother wouldn’t make fun of — death, disease, nothing was safe in our house. I just grew up thinking that was normal. (13)

In a different interview Barry adds, “I didn’t realize it until I was already grown up that other people’s mothers were, in comparison, extremely normal.” (12)

Barry gave examples of his mother’s humor in an interview in the *New York Times Magazine*. He said, “My brothers and I would say, ‘We’re going swimming,’ and she’d put on a June Cleaver voice and say, ‘Don’t drown!’” (14)

When *Writer’s Digest* asked Barry where his writing technique comes from he said it mostly comes “from my mom.” (15) He elaborated in *Playboy*, “She wrote letters that read a lot like my columns.” (12)

It is easier to see his mother’s darker humor in Barry’s early writing than his current material. His columns had a more morbid edge to them during the 1980s and early ’90s. One example is in a column about having the flu titled “Molecular Homicide.” “The main symptom is that you wish you had another setting on the electric blanket, up past ‘HIGH,’ that said: ‘ELECTROCUTION.’” (1)

Column titles alone let readers know some dark humor is headed their way: “Dead Whale Removal,” “Electromaggots” and “Shark treatment.”

Humor meant much more in the Barry household than the occasional laugh. Although Barry does not come out directly and say it, humor was a big coping mechanism utilized by his family to deal with the hardships of their lives. “In my family, you got



points for being really funny in a serious situation,” Barry said. (13)

The best example Barry has given about this comes from him describing the 1984 death of his father to the New York Times Magazine:

This is going to sound almost grim, but the day we buried my father, which was a devastating time for all of us ... we went to the cemetery and were walking up to the hole where we were going to bury him. I have my arm around my mother, and she’s got her’s around me, and she looks down and sees the name of another person buried there, and she says, “So that’s why we never see him around any more.” (14)

One can see Barry using that coping skill in his own writing as he discusses his son’s near fatal bicycle accident:

I’m sorry. This was supposed to be a hilarious column about how Beth [then his wife] and I were getting ready to go out for a nice dinner at 6 p.m. and wound up eating lukewarm cheeseburgers at 11 p.m. on a table in the Miami Children’s Hospital emergency room; and how Rob [his son], after politely thanking a very nice nurse for helping him sit up, threw up on her; and other comical events. But this is how the column turned out. Next week I promise to return to Booger Journalism. (6)

Although Barry may have begun to develop his sense of humor in early childhood, he fine tuned it in high school. He has said in several interviews that he would joke around in high school as a way to fight against being unpopular. He got so good at making his peers laugh that they elected him Class Clown of Pleasantville High School in 1965. Barry told Playboy: “It often got to the point where, if I made one more joke, (A) the class would really crack up and (B) I was going to be thrown out of school — and I’d make the joke anyway! I couldn’t help myself.” (12)

Barry was also quite the partier in high school. Drinking at a school dance earned him his only actual suspension. Barry explained to the New York Times: “That’s what it should have said under my high school yearbook picture: ‘He drank a lot of scotch, but he never threw up.’” (14)

Yet, most of Barry's high school antics were much more light-hearted and fun. New York Times reporter Peter Richmond noted, "He was old enough to enjoy the delirium of the national upheaval, and too young to let more serious dogma get in the way of the fun — hence his penchant for leading Dada-esque sit-down strikes at his suburban high school, protesting such injustices as the existence of fruit." (14)

Although he could even make the teachers laugh, they warned him about always being a clown: "In school, I was often getting singled out," he said. "I was told many times 'That's very funny, David, but you can't joke your way through life.' Which turned out not to be true. You can in fact joke your way through life." (13)

### **Influential Benchmark**

Even though Barry earned his bachelor's degree in English at Haverford College in Pennsylvania, he does not acknowledge many classic influences on his writing. He says his biggest influence is humorist Robert Benchley:

My boyhood idol was Robert Benchley. My father was a big fan and had all of Benchley's books. When I discovered them, I was stunned that a grown man could write that way — irresponsible, uninterested in informing anybody, violating all the rules about sticking to the point — and other grownups would like it. I thought only a kid would think that way. Then and there I decided that's what I wanted to be — a silly and useless person — as a grown-up. ... And I think I've achieved that." (16)

Benchley's work is quite different from Barry's in several ways. Benchley was not a newspaper columnist but an essayist in magazines. Benchley wrote humor for big New York magazines like the "New Yorker," "Vanity Fair" and "Life" (a humor magazine in the 1920s before it was bought out and remade as a photo magazine) in the 1920s, '30s and '40s.

Benchley was a member of the Algonquin Round Table, which featured some of the top wits and humorists in the country. The lunchtime crowd feasted on trading barbs

and telling jokes. Its members ranged from Dorothy Parker to Arthur Marx (more popularly known as Harpo, the silent Marx brother. Although he never made it through junior high, Marx had no trouble keeping up with and amusing his Algonquin compatriots.).

Benchley's humor was usually more intellectual than Barry's and directed at more elite circles, yet it never was designed to be exclusionary. To fully grasp it, it helps to have a college education or a strong background in literature and academic writing. Benchley also carried himself with more high-brow sophistication — in spite of some stumbling — than Barry does. Most cartoon renderings depict him in evening clothes or other fine suits.

Another major difference is that Benchley's columns are usually much longer than Barry's. Benchley tends to start columns with a dry academic-style introduction before he starts bringing in the jokes and building his essay into a comic frenzy. Barry, on the other hand, doesn't waste time or space setting up his columns, he starts by cracking a joke in the first or second paragraph.

Despite these differences, Benchley's influence on Barry is resoundingly obvious. Both use lateral thinking, or what Barry calls "Judo," and the use of a "Voice of Authority" that is always wrong. While Benchley probably never equated these humor devices with martial arts, he employed these tactics heavily for laughs.

In "Gardening Notes" Benchley employs a swift judo chop while explaining the detested chore of tilling soil to start a garden. "In preparing the soil for planting, you will need several tools. Dynamite would be a beautiful thing to use, but it would have a tendency to get dirt into the front-hall and track up the stairs." (17)

Barry's use of "Judo" and dark humor is similar in "The Elements of Elegance."

If your supermarket doesn't carry grouse, your best bet is to go into the woods and tramp around the underbrush until you hear something rustling, then cut loose with a 30-second burst from an automatic weapon until all rustling ceases. Then you merely squat down and scoop up anything that looks like a grouse or protein-based life form. (1)

Benchley's "Voice of Authority" essays were written as pseudo-academic reports or bureaucratic reports. Frequently he would write entire essays using the "Voice of Authority."

The following quote is about experimenting on animals in "Penguin Psychology." "And, since human beings are to be the final beneficiaries of all these experiments, why not take an animal which has more human characteristics than any other next to the monkey — the penguin?" (17)

Barry is apt to make authoritative observations in the same vein: "But our *piece de résistance* (French, meaning "piece of resistance") was our living room furniture, ..." (1)

Benchley also used a great deal of what Shipley defines as spoof, satire and parody to develop his humor.

"He could be a deft parodist, a satirist, a writer of glorious nonsense ...," explains Neil Grauer in *American Heritage* magazine. (18)

Stanley Harrison elaborates on this further in "Journalism History" and describes another trait Benchley shared with Barry. "Benchley's satire was tempered with gentle wit. Unlike H.L. Mencken's scalding attacks ..., Benchley avoided partisan politics and personal attacks." (19)

Barry also has a "gentle wit," and his columns are devoid of partisan politics and Mencken-esque personal attacks. Barry will attack taxes, big government, bureaucracies and even his own book tours, but he does not maliciously go after individuals.

To better grasp Benchley's "Judo" and "Voice of Authority," it is important to note that many of his essays are satires on academic lectures or bureaucratic speeches. Within each of these satires is a spoof upon particular topics. Among them are scientific studies ranging from polyps in the ocean to atomic particles. His most famous satire/spoof is "The Treasurer's Report." It has been reprinted many times; Benchley performed it on Broadway for nine, practically sold-out, months and for 10 weeks on a vaudeville tour; he performed it for a hit movie short in the late 1920s; and he also performed it on radio.

Those of you who contributed so generously last year to the floating hospital have probably wondered what became of the money. I was speaking on this subject only last week at our up-town branch, and, after the meeting, a dear little old lady, dressed all in lavender, came up to the platform, and, laying her hand on my arm, said: "Mr. So-and-So (calling me by name) Mr. So-and-So, what the hell did you do with all the money we gave you last year?" Well, I just laughed and pushed her off the platform, but it has occurred to the committee that perhaps some of you, like that little old lady, would be interested in knowing the disposition of the funds. (17)

Benchley goes on to explain that the committee collected almost four thousand dollars for the floating hospital and spent \$416,546.75 (mostly on unaccounted-for entertainment) and that the rest of the group was expected to chip in a little extra to help pay off the debt.

Barry doesn't have the space to develop columns as long as "The Treasurer's Report," but he will take a stab at institutions that he considers ridiculous and satirize or spoof the way they operate. Instead of adopting a character as Benchley does in his essays, Barry makes his attacks while using his own voice. One example comes from Barry's "Hot Books and Hot Coals."

First, I am pleased to report that millions of units of new literature will soon be arriving at bookstores near you. I know this because I recently went to

San Francisco to attend the American Booksellers Association's annual convention, at which all the big publishing companies reveal their fall literary lines. And on hand were a number of top authors such as Mister T, who was there to stress to the young people of America that they should read a lot of books or he will break all the bones in their faces; and Mary Lou Retton, who discussed a new book she has written about (get ready!) physical fitness. This is certainly a topic we need a lot more books on, because at present we have only enough fitness books to cover the Midwest to a depth of 60,000 feet. (1)

Similar to Barry's use of strange news and odd facts, Benchley wrote pseudo-academic essays about science as in "Chemists' Sporting Extra! Big Revolutionary Discovery Upsetting Everything."

To appreciate the rapid strides which the science of chemistry has made in the last fifty years all one has to do is to think back on the days when we all, like a lot of poor saps, believed that the molecule was the smallest division into which you could divide matter. Then someone came along and proved that the molecule itself could be divided into something called atoms. Well, the relief we felt at this announcement! Everyone went out and got drunk. (17)

Barry, while trying not to sound academic, gives science a twist of his own. In the mid-1990s Barry had a fascination with bacteria and wrote several columns about the subject. "The Hot Seat" is an example of Barry mixing facts about bacteria with one of his favorite topics — toilets. In "The Hot Seat" Barry interviews a scientist named Chuck Gerba who specifically studies toilet bacteria.

**Toilet Fact No. 4** — Every toilet user leaves a unique bacterial pattern; we know this thanks to a breakthrough technology Gerba developed called (I am not making any of this up) the Commode-A-Graph.

"If there's ever a crime committed on a toilet," Gerba said, "I can tell you who did it." (7)

Characters are important to both Barry and Benchley. Benchley would frequently write an essay either while in character, like the treasurer, or about characters. Sometimes his characters carry the piece or just participate in a little dialogue to help move the piece and the laughs along. In "When Genius Remained Your Humble Servant" Benchley uses

characters to promote his parody of letter writing through the ages. This segment of the essay illustrates Benchley's perceptions of female letter writers in 18th and 19th century England where letter writing was apparently more important than saving one's self from marauding pirates.

Dearest Anna: — Now, indeed, it is evident, my best, old friend, that I am face to face with the bitterest of fates. You will remember that in my last letter I spoke to you of a party of unprincipled knaves who were invading my apartment. And now do I find that they have, in furtherance of their inexcusable plans, set fire to that portion of the house which lies directly behind this, so that as I put pen to paper the flames are creeping, like hungry creatures of some sort, through the partitions and into this very room, so that did I esteem my safety more than my correspondence with you, my precious companion, I should at once be making preparations for immediate departure. O my dear! To be thus seized, as I am at this very instant, by the unscrupulous leader of the band and carried, by brute force, down the stairway through the butler's pantry and into the servants' hall, writing as I go, resting my poor paper on the shoulder of my detested abductor, is truly, you will agree, my sweet Anna, a pitiable episode.(17)

Benchley includes six other examples of period letter writing and their "academic" explanation in the same essay.

A favorite regular character of Barry's is his small "back-up" dog Zippy, who was never known for being brilliant. The columnist, who is deathly afraid of snakes, relates an example of how Zippy protects the home from a slithering beast that happened into his yard one day. Zippy was completely oblivious and trotted right by it. "Of course, if the snake had been something harmless the dogs would have spotted it instantly. Zippy, for example, goes into a violent barking rage when ever he notices the swimming-pool chlorine dispenser." (6)

A character's dialogue is also vital to both of these humorists' columns. Again, Benchley has more room to develop characters and dialogue, but it is essential to the laughs in his diatribe against the use of Roman numerals. In "When Not in Rome, Why

Do As the Romans Did?” Benchley first argues that it’s ridiculous to put Roman numerals on the cornerstone of a building and furthers his point by expressing why society no longer uses Roman numerals for anything else, like a train schedule, highlighted here in this conversation between a wife and husband.

“Hello, dear! I think I’ll come in town for lunch. What trains can I get?”

“Just a minute — I’ll look them up. Hold the wire. ... Let’s see, here’s one at XII:LVIII, that’s twelve, and L is a thousand and V is five and three I’s are three; that makes it 12: one thousand ... that can’t be right. ... now XII is certainly twelve, and L ... what does L stand for? ... I say, what—does—L—stand—for? ... Well, ask Herma ... What does she say? ... Fifty? ... Sure, that makes it come out all right ... 12:58 ... What time is it now? ... 1 O’clock? ... Well, the next one leaves Oakam at I:XLIV ... that’s ...” (17)

Barry’s characters have dialogue that is just as funny. In “The Pilgrims Were Turkeys” he recreates the first Thanksgiving with a spoof dialogue.

**First Pilgrim:** Well, this looks like a barren area with poor soil and harsh winters, offering little chance for our survival.

**Other Pilgrims:** Perfect! ...

**Second Pilgrim:** Look! A Native American!

**Native American:** Fortunately, I speak English. My name is Squanto.

**Fourth Pilgrim:** ‘Squanto’? What kind of name is ‘Squanto’?

**Second Pilgrim:** It sounds nasty! It sounds like, ‘Mom! The dog made Squanto on the linoleum!’

**First Pilgrim:** What’s ‘linoleum’?

**Second Pilgrim:** I have no idea.

**Squanto:** I’m going to show you how to plant maize and beans using alewives, shad, or menhaden as fertilizer.

**Fourth Pilgrim:** ‘Alewives’?

**Squanto:** That’s what it says in the encyclopedia. ... (7)

Repetition, especially the use of toppers, is another important trait the writers share. In the same Roman numerals essay, Benchley plays toppers upon joke after joke lasting for five pages. Benchley starts by joking about how long it takes to decipher the letter-numerals and what the decoded letters mean (L = Licorice), he moves on to the



above mentioned train schedule, which he takes to the next level by using a graphic to describe the letter-numerals used in baseball “CLVB BATTING RECORDS.” Finally, with a fourth topper, he jokes about how stonecutters use “V” to substitute for “U” and how, if they were going for simplicity, the stonecutters ought to substitute a bunch of other letters, too. He closes it with the inscription: “EKEATEW IZ MXIXLXIXLXXII LY THE XNLIEZY OF AEXA ZNL ELAFTX.” According to Benchley this means, “Erected in 1897 by the Society of Arts and Grafts.”

Barry’s toppers come more quickly over the course of a few sentences instead of several pages. This example comes from “TV or Not TV.”

We newspaper guys generally have hair that looks like we trim it by burning the ends with Bic lighters. We like to stand around and snicker at the TV guys, whose hair all goes the same direction and looks as though it’s full bodied and soft, but which in fact has been permeated with hardened petrochemical substances to the point where it could deflect small-caliber bullets. We newspaper guys think these substances have actually penetrated the skulls and attacked the brain cells of the TV guys, which we believe explains why their concept of a really major journalistic achievement is to interview Mr. T. (1)

Since Benchley’s writing appeared in several monthly and weekly magazines, he had a more difficult time assuming a regular audience and using a running gag like Barry’s naming of rock bands. However, he does have a running topic from which to extract jokes — Prohibition. Benchley, a notoriously heavy drinker, was opposed both to Prohibition and the poor quality of booze that most bootleggers were selling. In “Penguin Psychology” he and a penguin named Col. MacKenzie discuss the sorry state of scotch during Prohibition. In “Hockey Tonight!” the down side of the ice on the hockey rink is that it can’t be used in high balls. And so it goes.

Both Benchley and Barry are masters of comic hyperbole. Benchley could use it to help set up nonsensical extremes for his spoofs or in simple descriptions. “Evolution

Sidelights” spoofs Darwin’s theory with a hyperbolic extreme about sheep: “Thus we learn that our present-day sheep, from whose warm blanket our silk socks are made, was once, in the early, early days of the earth, a member of the hermit crab family.” (17)

While writing about a suburban ice skating adventure with his son, Benchley noted that putting on skates made him feel extremely tall: “I looked to the right, expecting to see Long Island Sound over the tree-tops, but the day was not clear enough.” (17)

Barry uses comic hyperbole in an attack on fashion mavens selling the used jeans of actual cowboys: “Meanwhile your fashion visionaries such as Mr. Ralph ‘Hombre’ Lauren — people who truly understand the spirit of the West — have made so much money in recent years selling designer lines of Pretend Cowboy clothing that they can afford to build large tasteful pretend ranch estates with color-coordinated sage brush.” (6)

These two authors also share some subjects for their humor, the most common being child rearing. For more than 20 years Barry has written directly about the experiences of raising his son Robert and more recently his daughter Sophie. One of Barry’s more recent columns about child rearing is about potty training his daughter:

I have to painstakingly construct, using 200 linear feet of toilet paper, an elaborate protective seating barrier for my daughter. When I’m done, I put her on the seat, where she produces, after a dramatic pause sometimes lasting 10 minutes, a total of four peepee molecules. Which I am of course required to be joyful about. (February 9, 2003)

Benchley had several approaches for writing about child rearing. He was less apt to discuss his children by name and subsequently less likely to embarrass them in later life when their friends go looking for past writings about their friend learning to pee in a toilet. In fact, he made up names for family members. Only rarely would he write about his children by name. However, one of his columns was supposedly written by his son Robert Jr. Either talent was genetic in the Benchley household, or one might be led to

believe Junior's father ghost wrote the article, a parody of Admiral Byrd's polar expedition. In this case Benchley, his son, and Benchley's play-going friend Marc Connelly were headed into the darkest heart of Manhattan by bicycle:

North White Plains, N.Y. — When we left Scarsdale on the second dash to the pole my father told me that he would write the account of our trip and that I should sign my name to it, as every expedition has to have a little boy along who writes a book about it later.

“You write it and I sign it?” I asked him.

“That's right, Bobby,” he said. “Daddy writes it and Bobby signs it and Bobby gets all of the publicity.”

“Publicity my eye,” was my reply. “If I sign it, I write it. I'll take no responsibility for your drivel. ...”

... The trouble with the expedition so far is that my father and Lieutenant Commander Connelly get winded so soon. They can't pump up even a little hill without having to get off at the top and rest. We're lucky to be at North White Plains, let alone the North Pole. (20)

Benchley and Barry share one last major similarity in how they write. Each is a proponent for mid-afternoon naps. Barry said in an interview with Walt Durka that naps were a part of his daily routine.

“I tell my wife I'm going to think up some jokes, and I go lie down,” he said. “I never wake up with any joke, but I'm sure I was thinking of some.” (21)

Benchley had a similar routine. He named his couch “the track” and when he wanted to go take a nap he'd tell people he was going to go take a few laps around the track. (20)

### **One last observation**

No analysis of a humor writer would be complete without trying to tie the author's influences back to the dawn of time. However, Barry tries to break that connection. Noting that most researchers can tie every modern humorist back to Geoffrey Chaucer, this author asked Barry about his personal connection to the famous

English writer. Barry's response undoubtedly comes as shock to many high school English teachers across America.

"I never read one word of Chaucer," Barry said. "And I am fine with that." (3)

## Chapter 3

## The Killer B's: A Century of American Humorists and the Tools of Their Trade

One writer's unique approach to comedy may not be passed down to the next generation of writers, but as with master craftsmen, their tools get passed down. And the tools that work best continue to be passed down. Ambrose Bierce, Art Buchwald, Erma Bombeck and Dave Barry all have instantly recognizable styles. Few would ever misidentify an essay by Bierce as one penned by Bombeck. What Dave Barry classifies as his "Booger Journalism" may not have been considered appropriate by the general readership in Ambrose Bierce's time. However, Bierce's blistering rants and razor-sharp witticisms do not appear to be what most readers want today. Regardless, all four columnists use the same tools, or techniques, to generate laughter from their audiences: lateral thought (Judo), satire, spoof, parody, repetition, comic hyperbole and comic dialogue.

What makes these writers stand out is how they used these techniques and captured the zeitgeist of their respective generations. In the case of Bierce, his humor did not always make him well liked during the tumultuous times in which he wrote. However, he wasn't trying to be popular; he was trying to make a point, often fighting corruption or nincompoopery. Laughter was a weapon. Buchwald, too, used humor as a weapon but more gently. The best selling humor columnists since him have been even more gentle. Laughter became more of a release from stressful lives than a weapon of political debate.

The goal of this chapter is to explore how these writers used the same humor

writing techniques to capture the attention of their readers over the course of more than 100 years.

### **Ambrose Bierce: Pistol Packin' Penman**

To say that Ambrose Bierce was loved by his audience would be grossly inaccurate. He was read by many from the 1870s to 1913, but most readers were not enamored of him. In print, Bierce attacked just about anybody and everybody he could. Readers occasionally threatened him with violence, and he took to carrying a pistol – in downtown San Francisco.

Many consider Bierce's best work to have been done during what Mark Twain referred to as the Gilded Age. America was in flux and trying to define itself. Industrialism was altering the business landscape and redefining the class system in America. The nation was still licking its wounds from the Civil War. Reconstruction of the South was a failure. Greed and corruption dominated politics unlike ever before in American history. Corporations were monopolizing entire industries. Science was progressing at alarming rates. Millions began immigrating to the United States. Poverty ran rampant from the slums of New York to the war-ravaged South. The rich were amassing unheard of fortunes. It was also the time of yellow journalism. Sensationalism sold millions of newspapers. There were more newspapers per city back then, and journalists often were expected to take stands on a variety of issues. Readers expected it; often they wanted it. And caught up in the thick of it was the witty, caustic and often controversial Bierce.

Nearly 90 years after his disappearance in Mexico, around 1913 or '14 (when he died is still a mystery), Ambrose Bierce has been raised to a mythical and legendary status in American history. He worked for an abolitionist newspaper as a teen. He was a

Civil War hero who fought in some of the bloodiest battles of the war including Shiloh and Chickamauga; he was shot in the head at Kennesaw Mountain. After the war he scouted the West for the Army and wound up in San Francisco where he began writing and editing for newspapers. Though he spent time in London, England (writing humor) and the Dakota Territory (mining), San Francisco was his home and where he developed his scathing, satirical columns: “Town Crier,” “Prattler” and “Prattle.”

Bierce took pessimism and cynicism to great heights. He attacked mercilessly everything he opposed. Among his favorite topics were corrupt politicians and companies, religion, democracy, bad literature and the ignorant. Biographer Joseph Epstein wrote in *The New Yorker* that, “Believing that the lot of human beings could not be improved didn’t prevent him (Bierce) from staying on the attack against those who he thought were out to make it still worse.” (22)

Bierce was not so much a humorist as he was a social/political critic. His humor is based on Old Comedy, attacking the institutions and ideals antagonistic to the best ideals of human society, as Joseph Shipley explains it. Unlike Barry, Bierce’s primary objective was to make a serious statement about a topic rather than simply make people laugh. Using sharp wit and stinging satire, Bierce’s words were weapons. However, his caustic attacks were not without humor.

“Humor is the best tool to use when you want to get your point across,” explains Carl Hiaasen, the *Miami Herald*’s acerbic environmental and social columnist known nationally for his humorous crime novels. “Politicians don’t care about being preached to. They get that all the time. They hate being made fun of.” (23)

Bierce explored that sentiment by using various forms of humor to ridicule those who irritated him most — and no one was safe. He lashed out at President William

McKinley in a number of columns for William Randolph Hearst's San Francisco Examiner. He often did so by mixing satire and comic dialogues using McKinley and Secretary of State John Hay or Vice President Theodore Roosevelt as his main characters.

In this first example, McKinley is bumbling along and trying to get the Turks to pay the United States or else face Admiral Dewey's navy, all in an effort to keep McKinley looking tough just before the presidential election.

McKinley — And did he say that he would advise his august what-does-he-call-him to pay on the nail?

Hay — I am pained to say he did not. He said that he would see you in Helfurst.

McKinley — Where is that? — it sounds Dutch.

Hay — Yes; it is a town in Pennsylvania.

McKinley — Well, I'll meet him there and talk it over if you think the character of our ultimatum permits. (24)

Bierce even uses some lateral thought, or Judo as Barry calls it, with the line about Helfurst, Penn.

In the second example Bierce spoofs Vice President Roosevelt's zeal, ambition and apparent lust for power.

McKinley — Then I understand that in the guidance and direction of this administration you have the goodness to care to be the Whole Thing?

Roosevelt — You do me the greatest injustice (lifting his eyes to the sky and reverently pointing in the same direction). There is a greater than I. (24)

The use of characters and dialogue to help make a column funny is a popular technique used by Buchwald, Bombeck and Barry more than 100 years later. Though it should be noted that Barry rarely uses political personalities to get laughs, and he does make an occasional political point in his columns. Bombeck purposely avoided politics



altogether.

Of course, one did not have to be a supreme authority or political figure to draw fire in Bierce's columns. In an early "Town Crier" column an ignorant lecturer was roasted:

The Rev. Eli Corwin, in his lecture a few evenings since, said it was "unaccountable to us how Jupiter, a swifter and vastly larger planet than the earth, should spin erect like a top, while the earth was whirling with what the children designate a wobbling motion." The wobbling motion of the earth is certainly not due to the weight of the Rev. Eli Corwin's brain upon the California side. (25)

At the height of his power, near the turn of the last century, Bierce was credited with helping to bring down the railroad corporations that corrupted California politics and cheated the U.S. government. He attacked so voraciously that the railroad owners tried to bribe him into silence. Epstein wrote in *The New Yorker*:

Huntington (Collis P. Huntington of the Southern Pacific Railroad), it is said, once asked Bierce to name his price to leave him alone. "My price is \$75 million dollars," Bierce responded, referring to the railroad's public indebtedness, which Huntington and his lobbyists were attempting to avoid. "If, when you are ready to pay, I happen to be out of town, you may hand it over to my friend, the Treasurer of the United States." (22)

Bierce is even, though wrongly, said to have inspired the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 with a simple quatrain published in the *New York Journal*:

The bullet that pierced Goebel's breast  
 Cannot be found in all the West  
 Good reason, it is speeding here  
 To stretch McKinley on his bier. (26)

Barry does not write with such heavy-handed commentary. He occasionally takes a stand on easy issues, like telemarketing or getting kids to wear bicycle helmets, but he has often stated that the vast majority of his columns have no point to make or hidden

meaning: “I think I sort of stake out the silliness end of the spectrum of American humor, in the sense that my main goal is just, well, I almost never have a point. I’m not really saying anything.” (27)

Politically, Bierce did not favor Democrats or Republicans. He was actually against democracy as a whole and would have preferred there to be a professionally trained ruling class similar to an aristocracy. Shirley Wagstaff wrote in her master’s thesis in 1931 that, “His main quarrel with the democratic system of government is that its root lies in the assumed honesty and intelligence of the majority, ‘the masses,’ who are really neither honest nor intelligent.” (28)

To Bierce, the only thing worse than allowing the masses to have the right to vote was allowing more of the masses to vote. Naturally, he was very much against the women’s suffrage movement. He predated Rush Limbaugh’s feminist bashing (“Femi-Nazis”) by calling suffragettes “femininnies.”

Puritanism was another favorite target. Even though he was a direct descendant of Puritans, Bierce had no patience for the control and influence Christian reformers had on American society. He once went so far as to parody the lyrics of “My Country ’Tis of Thee” to pursue his quarry:

My country ’tis of thee,  
Sweet land of felony,  
Of thee I sing.  
Land where my fathers fried  
Young witches and applied  
Whips to the Quaker’s hide  
And made him spring. (26)

Hyperbole in word play was one of Bierce’s favorite uses of wit. Whether referring to corrupt railroad owners as “rail-rogues” or altering the names of said owners to fit their crimes (rail-rogue Leland Stanford became Stealand Standfirm in Bierce’s

writings) (26), Bierce's clever turn of phrase often causes one to smile with each stab from his pen.

In fact, his sharp wit in word play is probably what he is best known for today. Bierce's collection of epigrams in "The Devil's Dictionary" is still in print. "The Devil's Dictionary" relies on what Barry would call Judo and the Voice of Authority. It is also a distant cousin to Barry's fictional English teacher, Mister Language Person. Here are a few sample definitions from "The Devil's Dictionary":

***Dentist***, n. A prestidigitator who, putting metal into your mouth, pulls coins out of your pocket.

***Infidel***, n. In New York, one who does not believe in the Christian religion; in Constantinople, one who does. ...

***Misdemeanor***, n. An infraction of the law having less dignity than a felony and constituting no claim to admittance into the best of criminal society. ...

***Miss***, n. A title with which we brand unmarried women to indicate that they are in the market. ...

***Un-American***, adj. Wicked, intolerable, heathenish. (29)

Some things never change.

Repetition is the one major comic tool that Bierce seldom used. That may have had a lot to do with his goals in column writing. He was not writing primarily to make people laugh. To differentiate Bierce's work from popular modern humorists, one must remember that despite all of Bierce's humorous quips, witticisms and sarcasm, the majority of his columns were filled with salvos unleashed at those he was attacking. And attacking issues about which he often had something serious to say was the purpose of the column itself — not to create laughter for the sake of laughing. Though he may have repeatedly written about the same topic, such as his quest to help bring down corrupt

railroad owners, he was not focusing on comic repetition – like running gags.

### **Art Buchwald: The Gentle Satirist**

Art Buchwald's career as a columnist began in the fall of 1948 while he was an ex-G.I. living in Paris. Living off the G.I. Bill, he was working as a stringer for *Variety* when he essentially conned his way into writing a column for the *New York Herald Tribune's* European edition, an English language newspaper read throughout the Continent.

Buchwald's column, "Paris After Dark," was a review of nightclubs and restaurants, written primarily for Americans who were looking for something to do when they completed a hard day of sight seeing. His twice-a-week columns were often humorous. After the column became a success, he was offered a second column in 1951. This column was titled "Mostly About People," and it featured interviews with celebrities in Paris.

These columns were soon fused into "Europe's Lighter Side" and syndicated back in the United States. However, it wasn't until he moved back to the States in 1962 that he began writing the political satire that made him famous. Although his circulation is down to approximately 300 newspapers, at the height of his career – after winning the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1982 – his columns were syndicated in more than 500 newspapers around the world. Buchwald has been extremely prolific. Not counting his 14 years in Europe, Buchwald has written more than 5,000 columns and more than 30 books. From 1962 to 1985 he wrote three columns a week. Being in his late 70s and having suffered a major stroke that left him in a coma for two-and-a-half months hasn't slowed him down. He still writes two columns a week, many of which are sharp and humorous.

Buchwald's core audience is the generation that survived the Great Depression

and fought World War II. Buchwald wrote during the Cold War – from its start to its finish. (In the 1950s, he even rode in a chauffeured limousine from Paris to Moscow. He wrote a column about each stop and gave the world a first-hand view of life behind the Iron Curtain.) In addition, his writing career has covered many controversial events and people: Vietnam, Nixon, recession and his last favorite target Ronald Reagan. In explaining his own (and his generation's) perspective, Buchwald writes in his autobiography "Leaving Home": "As a child of Franklin Roosevelt I was interested in the plight of poor people, had compassion for the minorities, believed in unions, eyed management of any kind with suspicion, and was certain that the power structure of the country was only out for itself." (30)

Buchwald's style makes a clean break from Bierce. Though he often writes from a first-person perspective, he rarely pontificates. He wants people to laugh, and if he can make some kind of moral point, so much the better. Newsweek once described Buchwald as an "elaborately naive analyst who takes complex woes of the world and reduces them to their logical absurdities." (4)

In his column "A Cork, a Cook and a Book," he writes about the implications of Martha Stewart lying about selling her Imclone stock with insider knowledge. He uses a comic dialogue involving an irate Stewart fan (Most likely a fictional fan, since the vast majority of the people he writes about are fictional):

"Why are people so excited about her criminal indictment?" I asked Mary Jo.

"Because if she lied about her stock transactions, how do we know that she hasn't lied about her chocolate chip cookies?" (31)

Though he often makes very poignant points in his columns, he does it gently. Times have changed and few readers appear to be interested in an onslaught of harsh

verbal assaults. In an interview with Larry Wilde, Buchwald explains his written attacks: "... I don't go for the jugular, and, if I do, I try to sugarcoat it ... I'm a little more subversive about it." (4)

Buchwald derives the majority of his columns from the news. Though he is most famous for his political columns, Buchwald has said in interviews that he tries to break up his subject matter into 50 percent political and 50 percent other news and life in general. "People are far more interested in things that have nothing to do with politics," Buchwald told Larry Wilde. (4) Buchwald added that most of the reader responses he gets are about his nonpolitical columns.

Erma Bombeck and Barry capitalize on the tendency of people to react more to nonpolitical humor. However, unlike Bombeck and Barry, Buchwald usually has a current event news peg for each of his columns, regardless of whether or not it is political. Buchwald says that almost all of his column ideas are derived from stories he has read in a newspaper.

I'll give you an example of one I did. I read in the paper that Mrs. Rose Kennedy had called up Senator (Everett) Dirksen after Dirksen had attacked Teddy Kennedy in the Senate. She wanted to thank him for being so moderate and generous about Teddy. Well, Dirksen was flabbergasted. What can you say when a mother compliments you on attacking her son? I filed this away. I didn't have any use for it at that moment. Then (Strom) Thurmond attacked Teddy Kennedy about five days later in the Senate, and it was a very tough exchange. So I thought to myself, what will happen when Rose Kennedy calls up Thurmond? So I did a fantasy article about a telephone call from Rose Kennedy to Thurmond thanking him for being so kind to Teddy. And at the end of the article, he calls up Dirksen and says, "We've been had!" (4)

Dave Barry also uses news items as inspiration. However, Barry usually picks already zany or ludicrous news stories and either reports on them or expounds about them to make the stories seem even funnier. Only rarely will he take a serious news

story and reduce it to its “logical absurdity.”

In regard to style, Buchwald said, he enjoys using dialogue in his columns both to generate laughs and to make a point:

I like dialogue. I prefer to do it in forms of skits. I like the reader to use his mind — his imagination. Like I might say, “I went to the Pentagon’s department of keeping costs up ...” Then it’s an interview with the man in that department in the Pentagon. I might describe his office or something. Now the reader is with me. He’s at the actual spot where it is taking place, which gives a reality to a fantasy thing. People laugh, and they know it’s true, and they know it’s not true. Now that kind of formula works best for me. Sometimes I might do straight commentary, which works, but I find that the ones that have a skit work best for me.” (4)

In the column “Hurts Rent a Gun,” Buchwald uses comic dialogue to satiric effect. Buchwald wrote the piece after the Senate drained a gun-control bill of its power and essentially promoted gun ownership. The quote picks up with Buchwald responding to a buddy who has decided to open a chain of gun rental agencies:

“A lot of people would want to rent a gun for a domestic quarrel,” I said.

“Right. Say a jealous husband suspects there is someone at home with his wife. He rents a pistol from us and tries to catch them in the act. If he discovers his wife is alone, he isn’t out the eighty dollars it would have cost him to buy a gun.”

“Don’t forget about kids who want to play Russian roulette. They could pool their allowances and rent a gun for a couple of hours,” I said.

“Our market surveys indicate,” Hurts said, “that there are also a lot of kids who claim their parents don’t listen to them. If they could rent a gun, they feel they could arrive at an understanding with their folks in no time.” (32)

Buchwald is best known for his political satire about American politics. He has written about every president from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush. He admits in any number of interviews that his favorite targets over the years have been Lyndon Baines Johnson, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

The following satire is about LBJ’s policy in Vietnam, “Indoctrination.”

Buchwald uses Judo and comic hyperbole to play on the stereotype of a typical sergeant in the military.

The Honolulu meeting was a turning point for the war in Vietnam. President Johnson and Premier Ky spelled out the goals of our commitment there, and these are now being transmitted to our soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen. But the indoctrination is going rather slowly, and the sergeants are having a hard time explaining the new policy.

“All right, you meat heads. We are now going to discuss why we’re fighting in Vietnam. Rosenbloom, why do you think we’re fighting in Vietnam?”

“To beat the hell out of the blankety-blank Viet Cong, Sergeant.”

“No, Rosenbloom, you’re wrong. It’s to bring social and economic reforms to the freedom-loving people of South Vietnam. Now, Petrosanni, how will we achieve this goal?”

“By killing every blankety-blank Viet Cong we can find.”

“I’m surprised at you Petrosanni. We will achieve this goal by winning over the natives through public works, education and good deeds. You had your hand up, Reilly?”

“What do we do with these mortars and flamethrowers?” ... (32)

His column “Nixon Talks to God” is one of many satires Buchwald wrote decrying the Watergate scandal. In this piece, God tells Nixon that he (God) had been trying to warn Nixon for months about the corrupt men Nixon had hired and the evil deeds they had done:

(God:) “Then I sent you a telegram saying it was urgent that you contact me.”

(Nixon:) “The only telegrams I read during that period were those in support of my bombing North Vietnam.”

“Finally, Richard, I made one last effort. I showed up at a prayer meeting one Sunday at the White House, and after the sermon I came up to you and said there were men among you who would betray you. Do you know what you did, Richard? You introduced me to Pat and then you gave me a ball-point pen.” (32)

When it turned out that Nixon had an official enemies list, Buchwald was very disappointed that he was left off it. He even wrote a column about suing the president to get on to his enemies list.



President Reagan was Buchwald's other favorite target. Several collections of his columns are based around the Reagan administration. In "No Law is Good Law," from the collection "While Reagan Slept," Buchwald converses with a character from the Justice Department about just what exactly the Justice Department was up to now that Reagan was president — especially in regard to protecting the environment. Again, satire is the main tool, but the punch line, as in the previous example, is a fine demonstration of Buchwald's use of lateral thought.

(Bureaucrat:) "Oh, we're very much into environmental protection laws. If we find anyone violating them, we write a stiff letter telling them that if they don't desist we'll be very upset. It's actually a form letter, but they don't know it."  
 (Buchwald:) "And if they ignore the letter?"  
 "That's it. The Justice Department is not in the business of harassing people." (33)

Buchwald uses repetition in some of his columns to drive home a point in his satires and spoofs. One example of his use of repetition comes from his spoof on Nixon's overuse of superlatives:

The President, whether he likes it or not, is the trend setter in this country, and when he speaks in superlatives, it is no surprise that everyone starts picking up the habit...

For example, the other night, just as our family sat down to dinner my wife announced, "I hope everyone has washed his hands because I have cooked the greatest meal ever served in the Western Hemisphere."

"That's good," I said, "because I've had the hardest day anyone has ever had since Gutenberg invented the printing press."

My fifteen-year-old daughter said, "We had the worst test in school today since the Spanish Inquisition." (32)

In his nonpolitical columns, Buchwald often uses spoof and parody. One such spoof mocks the publishing industry for trying to make every book have more sex appeal:

"Subtitles for Old Books"

What I object to is the publishers making nonpornographic books pornographic by putting half-naked women on the covers of good books and printing descriptions of the contents, which give an entirely different idea of the plot.

If the trend continues, here is how our paperback publishers will soon describe books familiar to all of us (just 3 samples):

“Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” — The story of a ravishing blonde virgin who was held captive by seven deformed men, all with different lusts.

“Alice in Wonderland” — A young girl’s search for happiness in a weird depraved world of animal desires. Can she even return to a normal happy life after falling so far.

“Treasure Island” — The crew of a ship bent on rape and plunder land on an island inhabited by sex-crazed cannibals. An innocent boy finds the secret to growing up. (32)

When the Federal Trade Commission attacked the American Medical

Association’s refusal to let its members advertise, Buchwald satirized the FTC by

writing parodies of T. V. ads – in this case for the medical profession:

... It’s Dr. Adolph Fremluck, America’s favorite psychiatrist. Yes, folks, everyone is switching to Dr. Fremluck, not only for the quality of his work but for his low fees. If you are depressed, paranoid, schizoid, or just plain neurotic, Dr. Fremluck has a cure for you. He’s open every night until ten, and if you take advantage of his special January blues rates, he will give you absolutely free a set of Walt Disney coffee mugs with Mickey and Minnie, Donald Duck, and all the other characters that made your childhood so miserable. Don’t delay. If you’re sick in the head, Fremluck wants to hear from you today. (32)

Buchwald shows no sign of retiring from writing his twice weekly columns.

Additionally, he has just begun writing novels. His first, “Stella in Heaven,” came out in 2000. It is a humorous story about an elderly man whose wife dies and goes to heaven, except she still gets to talk to him and visit. After a while she starts feeling sorry for him for being so lonely and encourages him to start dating – until she gets jealous.

## **Erma Bombeck: Laughing at the Pits of the Second Oldest Profession**

The most successful American newspaper humor columnist to date is Erma Bombeck. By some counts, she maintained a circulation of greater than 900 newspapers. She wrote more than 4,000 columns, scripted her own T.V. show, and appeared twice a week for almost 10 years on the "Today Show." She also wrote twelve books independent of her newspaper column. Most of them became best sellers.

She even began her career as a humor columnist about 10 years before Art Buchwald. Of course she was 12 and writing for her junior high school newspaper, but even then, humor writing was in her blood. At the time she was also singing and tap dancing in a radio program in Dayton, Ohio. She gave up the song and dance but continued writing humor columns through college.

To help pay for college she worked as a copygirl at the Dayton Herald. After graduating in 1949, she began reporting for the paper full time. The only problem, she recalled in a 1984 Time interview, was that she was a bad reporter. "I was terrible at straight items. When I wrote obituaries, my mother said the only thing I ever got them to do was die in alphabetical order." (34)

She quit in 1953 to start a family. Twelve years later, motherhood was overwhelming her and she needed to do something other than housework: "I was too old for a paper route, too young for Social Security and too tired for an affair," she said in the Time interview. (34) So, she started writing humor columns again.

Her column was first published as "Zone 59" (based on her postal code) in Dayton's suburban weekly the Kettering-Oakwood Times. The editor paid her \$3 a week. The editor at the Dayton Journal Herald read it and hired Bombeck shortly thereafter.

“The editor of the Herald liked the column and soon bought it for his op-ed page,” said Bombeck in an interview with “Editor and Publisher” in 1988. “I was writing two columns a week and making \$20 a column and thinking I had it made. Then within three weeks, he sold the column to a syndicate (Newsday) and there I was writing three columns a week.” (35)

The column was renamed “At Wit’s End,” and the thrice weekly pace, which she started at in 1965, continued for nearly thirty more years.

More incredible than her capacity to write consistently funny columns three times a week (she did take summers off) was her general popularity. Bombeck’s column ranks third in the circulation records, just behind Dear Abby and Anne Landers. To gain such appeal, Bombeck broke from the traditional humor column mode.

She didn’t write about politics. She didn’t write about current events that would polarize an audience. She didn’t unleash salvo after salvo against philosophies, religion, or the idiotic — unless, of course, she was the idiotic.

She wrote about the chaos of being a mother and the lunacy of everyday life. Her column instantly appealed to the millions of suburban stay-at-home mothers of the baby boomers. Furthermore, her column evolved with age and followed the lives of these women into retirement.

Bombeck’s style is light and breezy. One-liners seem to flow throughout her writing. The wit and the satire are sharp. Her columns are often seamless, the transitions are smooth.

That can be said for Bierce and Buchwald, too. But Bombeck did two things they didn’t: She made fun of herself or some aspect of her life, often in a way that most of her readers easily could identify, in almost every column. “Confirmed Shouter,” published

March 5, 1969, is a classic example of Bombeck laughing at her own life:

No one is born a shrew. I used to watch women getting flushed and angry while they chewed out their children and I'd say to myself, "My goodness, that woman is going to have a heart attack. No one should discipline a child in anger." (I was five at the time and being flogged with a yardstick by my mother.) (36)

The other thing she did was interact directly with her readers by writing about her correspondence with them, sharing in their crazy lives. Unlike Barry, she does not name the letter writer or identify what town the writer is from. However, she often reprinted tidbits of letters from women from around the country and based entire columns on them. The topics ranged from girdles to the sex lives of clothes hangers. The following is an example of the latter, "Coat Hangers," published on September 18, 1984:

With sexual promiscuity running rampant, I could not believe a letter I received from a woman this week who said she could not get her coat hangers to reproduce.

"I know how much success you've had and wondered how you did it," she said. "I've tried everything from hanging Burt Reynolds on the wall to spraying sexy perfume to hanging a nightie from Frederick's of Hollywood on a hanger. Nothing. Since you are obviously a sex therapist for inanimate objects, maybe you can tell me your secret. The future of my closet hangs on your answer." (36)

The resulting piece was a parody of a sex advice column in which Bombeck played Dr. Ruth with clothes hangers in the closet scene. No doubt the advice could save a dry cleaning company a fortune in new hangers.

Barry is well known today for using self effacement and fan interaction in his weekly column.

Another technique Barry shares with Bombeck, and a multitude of other humorists, is the running gag. While Barry constantly names fictional rock bands, Bombeck was forever at war with her washer and dryer, which always ate one sock from every pair in the Bombeck household:

(“Socks Lost in Washer,” May 28, 1969)

Don't tell me about the scientific advances of the twentieth century.  
 So men are planning a trip to the moon. So computers run every large  
 industry in America. So body organs are being transplanted like perennials.  
 Big deal! You show me a washer that will launder a pair of socks and  
 return them to you as a pair, and I'll light a firecracker. (36)

Furthermore, her fans loved these columns and reacted by writing in their  
 experiences with the missing sock phenomena. Many went so far as to mail more than  
 just letters. (“Socks Still Lost in Washer,” April 1, 1973.)

I haven't said anything lately about my washer that eats socks. To tell  
 you the truth, I've been afraid to. After my last column on it, several things  
 transpired.

First a half-crazed woman in Minneapolis sent me 36 single socks left in  
 her washer in the hopes of finding a match in my washer.

Then an inventor from Cleveland sent me little chains to bind two socks  
 together while being laundered. The chains disappeared after the first rinse.

And I was approached by a national health organization to pose with my  
 head caught in a washer lid as their poster child. (36)

Like Bierce, Buchwald and later Barry, Bombeck often writes using characters and  
 comic dialogue. She has explained in many interviews that her children want a quarter for  
 every time Bombeck has picked on them and made them the primary characters in a  
 column. But her husband of more than 40 years, Bill, bears the brunt of the burden in  
 print. Here is just one example titled “Men Have a Six-Word Limit” from July 23, 1969.  
 In it she explains that her husband only speaks six words to her every day:

Monday:	Me: “Say something.”
	Him: “What ya want me to say?” (6)
Tuesday:	Me: “What kind of day did you have?”
	Him: “Don't aggravate me. You wouldn't believe.” (6)
Wednesday:	Me: “Try me.”
	Him: “Where's the rest of the paper?” (6)
Thursday:	Me: “We had a crisis here today.”
	Him: “The dog isn't lost, is he?” (6)

- Friday: Me: "Guess what? Know who called today? And is coming to dinner? And is bringing her new husband with her? And can't wait to talk your arm off? Are you ready?"  
Him: "No. No. No. No. No. No." (6)
- Saturday: Me: "I'll be out for a while. I've got some errands to do at the shopping center."  
Him: "Admit it. My chattering gets on your nerves." (8)
- Sunday: Me: "Do you know you spoke eight words to me yesterday? I wouldn't be surprised if you were starting a new trend."  
Him: "Don't count on it." (4)
- (36)

Although they are used the most frequently, her family members weren't the only targets of Bombeck's humor. Anyone that entered into her daily life, from appliance repairmen to her neighbors, were fair targets. In her column about being a shouter, she specifically hates her next door neighbor who never screams or shouts at the kids. The neighbor always seems to smile and speak quietly and the children all listen and do what she says. It drives Erma to distraction until one of her sons and some neighbor kids start bouncing a baseball off of the quiet woman's house:

... she appeared like an apparition at the door, gestured to them and said softly, "Boys, would you-all come here for a moment?"

I watched her gesturing, talking and smiling. When she finished the boys disbanded.

I pounced on my son. "What did that mealy-mouthed little frail have to say to you boys?"

"She said if we broke her windows, she'd break our faces!"

From that day forward I forgave her for her quietness. What she lacked in volume she made up for in content. What class! (36)

In writing about so many people and experiences – often hapless – from her life Bombeck furthered her bond with her readers – mostly women in a similar situation.

Bombeck's satire attacked that which she deemed wasn't normal human behavior.

For instance – women who enjoy ironing:

I hadn't thought about Mrs. Breck in years. She was an antiseptic old

broad who used to live two houses down from me. She had an annoying habit of putting her ironing board up on Tuesdays and putting it away again at the end of the day. (What can you expect from a woman who ironed belt buckles?) (36)

That quote further illustrates how Bombeck wrote Groucho Marx-esque asides to her audience in parentheses. Often her parenthesis marks showcased her lateral thought/Judo in classic one-liners. In another example, she discusses her husband's driving habits. "He's one of those 'logical drivers' who doesn't believe garbage cans are out to get you (even the sober ones)." (36)

Unlike those other humor columnists, Bombeck's pieces were short. She packed in all of the laughs she could in about 450 words at a shot. Unlike Bierce, she didn't have space to develop long-winded jokes or satires. She managed to squeeze in laughs, a plot and a point using 250 words fewer than Dave Barry. Given how tightly she'd have to write, Bombeck said that most of her columns would be rewritten three or four times and that she spent 8 to 10 hours every day just writing.

Often times the most difficult part was finding a topic to fit her formula: "Basically I have to come up with something that has universal appeal, doesn't offend anyone and is funny — and do it three times a week. No problem, right?" (35)

She prided herself on never missing a deadline. One of her favorite compliments came from an editor she had never met in Detroit. He said, "I never read you, but by God you're on time!" (34)

Bombeck took risks with her writing later in her career. She wrote the only eight episodes for her failed sitcom "Maggie" in 1980. It got decent reviews, but the sitcom failed to catch on with the audience. Some critics said that the visual aspect of television softened Bombeck's wit and weakened the crisp humor traditionally seen in her columns. She also wrote two books that had some humorous passages, but weren't about being



funny. They were “Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession” and “I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise: Children Surviving Cancer.” The former comprises mostly funny stories with a few sad ones thrown in; the second is about the power of children with cancer and how they persevere. The profits from the latter book went to fighting cancer. Both books were successful, despite Bombeck’s departure from her usual writing format.

Bombeck’s career ended abruptly. She had struggled with a life-long kidney disease and died in 1996 after a transplanted kidney failed. She was 69.

### **Dave Barry: A Few Closing Remarks**

Given the continued success of his column, Barry has branched out more and more.

“Dave’s World,” a T.V. show that ran from 1993 to 1997, was supposed to have been based on his writings. Barry, despite a one-time cameo appearance, didn’t write a single word for the show. He said, “... it could just as well been called ‘Mike’s World’.” (27) Barry even notes on his Web site that the sitcom writers changed his then one son and two dogs to two sons and one dog. (9)

In the past fifteen years he has been hitting the public speaking circuit. Because his sister is schizophrenic, he started out by giving a lot of free speeches for mental health fund-raisers. He is now represented by at least three agencies for lecture circuits, and some of his speaking fees are as high as \$30,000 an appearance.

Barry also plays lead guitar for a band named the Rock Bottom Remainders, which is comprised of famous authors who are mostly looking to goof off in public while raising money to promote literacy. Musical talent is not a prerequisite for joining, and, like many rock bands, there is high membership turnover. Yet, some of the most notable

band mates have been Stephen King, Roy Blount Jr., and Amy Tan.

In 1999, Barry became a novelist. His first novel, “Big Trouble,” was published by G.P. Putnam’s Sons. It is a fast-paced, comic mystery, and became a New York Times bestseller in 1999. It later became a hit movie for Touchstone starring Tim Allen and Rene Russo. His follow-up book, “Tricky Business,” was published in 2002 by G.P. Putnam’s Sons.

Unlike his columns and “nonfiction” books, Barry’s novels are not told from the first person point of view. He writes them using a third-person narrative and fills them with unique, often hilarious, characters loosed upon a ludicrous plot. The writing style draws from those of Elmore Leonard and Barry’s friend Carl Hiaasen, who also writes twisted, humorous mysteries set in South Florida.

Most recently, Barry joined up with several other writers to help put together the 2003 Academy Awards, hosted by Steve Martin. It was his first time writing for television, and it provided fodder for one of his weekly columns.

As for Barry’s future, he says he wants to keep writing for as long as he’s alive and maybe even longer. When a reporter Walt Duka asked him if he was planning to follow his own trend and write “Dave Barry at 60,” “... at 70,” “... at 80,” Barry responded, “... who knows, maybe there’ll even be a ‘Dave Barry Kicks the Bucket.’”

(21)

## Appendix

Transcript of the e-mail interview between  
Nathaniel Cerf and Dave Barry  
2/10/2003

**CERF:** From a literary standpoint, in your column, what are some of your favorite techniques to get a laugh, and how did you develop them?

**BARRY:** Well, I don't think of these as being "literary," but: One technique I use a lot I call "Judo" — getting the reader to assume I'm about to make one point (the logical one) and then giving him instead something absurd. This is often accompanied by another technique — the Voice of Authority, which is always wrong. And then there are the standard rules of written humor, the main one being: Always make the funniest part come at the end.

But I think most of my humor, and most written humor, comes less from technique than from having a funny observation to make. And it truly beats the hell out of me where funny observations come from. I can go days without having one.

**CERF:** Do you have any rules for writing your columns? (i.e. ways you won't structure it, topics you won't touch, difficult techniques you force yourself to explore and attempt)

**BARRY:** There are certain topics I won't write about — the Holocaust, for example. Or child molestation. That doesn't mean I won't make a joke about Nazis; it just means the joke won't be that there was something funny about the Holocaust. But I don't think

there are any column structures I won't use, or techniques I force myself to attempt.

**CERF:** What's the hardest part about writing a humor column? How long does it take you to write one?

**BARRY:** The hardest part is starting them; the second-hardest part is ending them. The middles aren't so easy, either. I usually take two days from blank screen to SEND.

**CERF:** Many humorists have stated that rhythm and word choice are crucial to humor writing. Could you please explain how you use it to set up your jokes and the flow of your column?

**BARRY:** Not really, though I agree with the assertion. The right wording is critical to humor writing, just as the right timing is critical to standup comedy. But explain it? Not me. Some ways are just funnier, is all.

**CERF:** Mel Brooks thinks comedy is an expansion of truth formed into fantastic shapes; Max Eastman once wrote that humor is derived from pain; and Freud believes comedy comes from hostility. Where do you think comedy comes from?

**BARRY:** MANNNN ... There is no answer to that. The closest I come to humor theory is this: A "sense of humor" is basically a measurement of the extent to which you understand that you are trapped in an insane, illogical, unfair world that will, sooner or later, kill you and everybody you love. "Humor" is how you cope with this knowledge.

“Laughter” is how you release the tension this knowledge makes you feel. But really, there’s more to it than that. Sometimes things are funny because they’re silly, and it has nothing to do with death.

Why? I DON’T KNOW.

**CERF:** What is your motivation as a writer?

**BARRY:** To make people like me and [to] avoid hard work.

**CERF:** When you write things about yourself and your past in your columns and books — how much of it is true?

**BARRY:** If I write about me, it’s usually true, at least on some basic level.

**CERF:** Sense of character is very important to comedians. Men like Jack Benny and Danny Kaye have very recognizable stage personae from which they rarely deviated during performances and public appearances, but privately they were much different. (In real life Jack Benny was friendly and always paid top dollar for his cast and crew, unlike his miserly stage character.) Your columns and books (except for “Big Trouble” and “Tricky Business”) are all written with the same voice. Is that your “character” or just everyday Dave Barry? Why did you choose this method of writing?

**BARRY:** That’s pretty much me, but so is “Big Trouble,” so is “Tricky Business.”

People are complicated. I think my column presents the part of me that's mainly shallow and trivial and interested in being liked. It's definitely real, but it's definitely not all there is to me. I can be very serious and gloomy and sometimes a total asshole.

**CERF:** Using that same voice, you have developed subjects within your traditional style. Many of your columns are written about day-to-day life and parenting, others are list-based like the year in review or Christmas gift guide, others are based on news and oddball facts and finally there is the classic Mister Language Person. Can you please tell me a little about how these "subjects" all came about and your approach to them philosophically and stylistically?

**BARRY:** It's not that conscious. I repeat certain themes because the readers respond to them. And I vary my columns to keep the readers from getting bored. But my approach to this is a lot more practical than philosophical.

**CERF:** You have written more than 1,000 humor columns and are famous the world over, yet do you feel that cramps your style — in more ways than one? Mark Twain is said to have felt penned in as a humorist and grew upset with the public when they refused to take him seriously even though he was a very serious man who spoke and wrote about any number of subjects only to get laughs because that was what the audience expected. Do you see that reflected in your life, and if so, how do you deal with it? Do you have a harder time selling fiction because it is not written in the traditional manner that the audience expects? As a humorist, do you have a difficult time getting people to take you seriously as a writer, as a person? Do you have any

desire to write anything that is not primarily humorous? (OK, so I guess that's more than one question. Sorry.)

**BARRY:** A LOT more, you slimebag. I don't feel hemmed in; I like writing lightweight humor and don't aspire to much more. My novels were darker, and some readers — maybe a lot — were upset by the different tone. But I'm not all that troubled by that.

**CERF:** Switching gears a bit here ... With the growth of TV and Internet news services, it appears that newspapers are dying out. One need only look at the number of papers either folding or losing circulation across the country, yet it appears that your popularity continues to grow in the face of it. How do you explain that?

**BARRY:** People like to be amused.

**CERF:** A very strong argument could be made that given the current decline of “the newspaper” you may be the very last well known and read humor columnist. What are your thoughts on that?

**BARRY:** I don't know. I do know, though, that there are fewer newspapers, with less space, and more terrified editors, so the odds against a kickass humor writer getting into a newspaper today are worse than when I started.

**CERF:** I couldn't resist asking this one. In all of my volumes of research, every literary critique I've ever read about a writer somehow ties that writer back to Geoffrey Chaucer.

Was Chaucer a big influence for you? Did you know him in a former life? So far, all I've come up with is that you most likely read "The Canterbury Tales" while earning your B.A. in English, you are the same race and you both speak/spoke English — however, you are a much better speller. What's your take on that?

**BARRY:** I never read one word of Chaucer. And I'm fine with that.



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