

zling of Shostakovich's mea culpa, which exhibited, as Morrison puts it, "language evocative of an ill-behaved schoolchild stuck in detention, writing the same line ad infinitum on a chalkboard." (Shostakovich, Morrison further observes—in a telling epigram aimed at the moral pretensions of that composer's current mythomaniac worshippers—"had perfected the art of actively resenting, rather than actively resisting, a regime whose identity was wrapped up with his own.") A stroke in 1949, probably hastened by Zhdanov's antics, further sapped Prokofiev's powers. While he continued to compose, the results were watery compared to his earlier ebullient work.

As if to prove that his gift for bad timing stayed with him to the end, he died on the same day as Stalin: March 5, 1953. Not all his compatriots ignored the artistic loss amid the political upheaval: the sister of famous cellist Mstislav Rostropovich spent the whole day weeping. As Morrison relates, to all attempts at calming her, she responded with sobs, "protesting, after several hours of agony, 'Just leave me alone. I'm not weeping for Stalin, but Prokofiev.'"

May readers of *The People's Artist* also feel like weeping at the book's end. At times, it does not make for an easy read, partly because of its protagonist's depressing fate, partly because of its author's periodic tendency toward elaborate technical analysis without adequate notation. Transliterating eccentricity emerges now and then in Morrison's writing: "Bolshoy" rather than the conventional "Bolshoi" can at least be comprehended at a glance, but "Chaikovsky" rather than "Tchaikovsky" and "Potyomkin" rather than "Potemkin" seem foolish—we are mercifully spared the purists' demands that Prokofiev be spelt Prokof'yev. It is still a predominantly splendid tome and overdue homage to a composer of whom British critic Robert Layton rightly said, "He never lost his power to fascinate." ■

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[*Snark: It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation*, David Denby, Simon & Schuster, 144 pages]

## Sneer Tactics

By Peter Suderman

ANYONE WHO FOLLOWS gossip blogs and webby tabloids has probably read the term "snark"—but what exactly is it? Open to any page of David Denby's new book and you're likely to find an answer. Snark is "the bad kind of invective—low, teasing, snide, condescending, knowing." It plays on racial and gender stereotypes, but "is not the same as hate speech." Snark is "parasitic, referential, insinuating." It views the world as "a series of false appearances." It is "in general, not given to hard work." It "stinks up the air without liberating any laughter." It "serves not to break down walls of loneliness and fear, but to solidify them" and "stands for nothing and lets other people make fools of themselves." It "functions as the avant-garde of resentment." "Snark is not the same as irreverence or spoof," but instead displays "zero interest in civic virtue." It is the "expression of the alienated, of the ambitious, of the dispossessed." It relies on the "exhilaration of contempt," lacks a "coherent view of life," and fails to "honor the artistically and intellectually ambitious."

"I don't want to get caught in a thicket of definitions," Denby writes early on. His slim, scolding volume is, however, obsessed with defining its subject. Yet as his repeated attempts suggest, this is a slippery task. His concept is amorphous, and he knows it. The definitional battle is essentially surrendered on the book's jacket, which says of its title, "you know it when you see it."

Reading Denby flail in search of a suitable definition for snark is as painful as watching a stage actor repeatedly forget his lines, and twice as embarrassing. For Denby is a renowned journalist and staff critic at *The New Yorker*. And yet here

he is, writing a book on a subject he can't even define.

He might have saved himself considerable anxiety if he'd gone with a simpler, more straightforward explanation: snark is any sort of needling invective that he doesn't approve of, particularly anything that criticizes his friends and political allies.

He often refers to snark as a sort of anti-politics. He complains about any commentary that he deems insufficiently reverent toward his earnest liberalism. As he sees it, snark is a crime, and with this book, he intends to name and prosecute the guilty.

A crude comment about Hillary Clinton by comic-magician and libertarian debunker Penn Jillette is snark; so, too, is a racially charged insult hurled at Barack Obama by a former College Republican. Sneering anti-Hillary blog dribbles from *Weekly Standard* web editor Michael Goldfarb most certainly count, as do John McCain's sarcastic remarks about the cynical way advocates of legal abortion deploy health-of-the-mother exceptions. More often than not, Denby appears content to file snark under "mean comments made about Democrats."

Defenders of the Left, on the other hand, almost always get a pass—no matter how snide, cruel, or sharp-tongued. Keith Olbermann may use snark on occasion, Denby insists, but it is not his general mode. The faux news of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, who hurl rhetorical poisoned arrows at the Right, constitutes a valiant defense of "civic virtue."

Other examples are not political so much as tribal. Denby's long-time mentor, celebrated movie critic Pauline Kael, did not practice snark, but "criticism, blessed criticism." A full five pages are devoted to reprimanding Tom Wolfe for insufficient moral and political vision, particularly in "Radical Chic," his essay on fashionable New York liberals who party, ever so delicately, with fashionable leftist revolutionaries like the Black Panthers.

Denby grumbles that there was noth-

ing at stake for Wolfe. You might ask: What's at stake for Denby? Why, nothing less than the honor of the Manhattan's liberal-intellectual establishment.

In fairness, it should be noted that he devotes an entire chapter to *New York Times* political columnist Maureen Dowd, a liberal who makes much of the outsized rivalries, jealousies, and personalities that dominate American politics. Dowd's concern is psychological caricature rather than policy detail, and she was chiefly responsible for painting George W. Bush as a frat boy with daddy issues. Even here, however, Denby's fight is ideological. His problem with Dowd is not her wit or style, which he praises effusively. Instead, it is that she unfairly ridiculed Al Gore and Hillary Clinton, and, even worse, failed to mount a suitably strong and coherent case against George W. Bush.

This complaint gives Dowd too much credit and fundamentally misunderstands her brand of self-consciously shallow cocktail-party dish. Is Denby confused or just not paying attention? By the time he gets to charging the arch-cynics at the political gossip site *Wonkette*, the answer is both. After a derisive quote about Chelsea Clinton's education, Denby writes that the post in question "sounds like jealousy. *Wonkette* is written by young women who may have hated Chelsea's bland words as she went around the country supporting her mother's candidacy." As with Dowd, Denby seems incapable of appreciating *Wonkette*'s destroy-all-politics mission. Yet his criticism is even less effective because it is flatly wrong: the top editor on *Wonkette*'s masthead is not a young woman, but a man by the name of Ken Layne, and the post in question written by another male editor, Jim Newell.

The best point in Denby's favor is that he's attempting to defend against an onslaught of nihilism. Throughout the book, he insists that verbal sniping should be grounded in some higher purpose, something lasting and meaningful. There is a case to be made for placing a concern for virtue at the heart of

comedy and criticism. Yet a world that weeds out everything else would be insufferably idealistic.

That might be exactly what Denby wants, however. The explicitly partisan slant of his book suggests as much. All of its judgments are moral and political; Denby seems incapable of appreciating the aesthetic virtues of frivolity. *Wonkette*, for example, is wantonly cruel to nearly everyone. The breadth of its derision makes it harmless; the site hates everyone equally and practices creative vitriol as pop art. The scorn is performed for our amusement.

Denby is a professional film critic, but he is not, it seems, into anything so low-brow as amusement. What then is he after? He doesn't seem to know. His attempt to explain his purpose is worthy of a Dada manifesto:

I am not calling for a puritanism of language but, on the contrary, for a paganism of language in which every sensuous apprehension of the surfaces of life is filtered through a developed sense of how the surfaces and the interiors fit together, and what matters and what doesn't.

No doubt it would be possible to expend considerable effort trying to decipher what this means, but in the interest of "what matters and what doesn't," it seems reasonable to surmise that those words simply don't matter. Like the snarkists he claims to despise, Denby wants nothing to do with what he's for and everything to do with what he's against.

Is there a place for snark? Perhaps it is somewhat destructive, but bleak comic nihilism serves as a necessary balance to earnest utopianism. Perhaps, too, snark feeds into populist rage. But as an outlet for underclass grouching, it seems relatively harmless: better blogposts than shotguns and pitchforks.

Denby is no populist, though. He has little concern for those outside his class. The subtitle to his book is "It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation." That's only two-thirds right. To be

more accurate, snark is ruining *his* conversation. This book is literary NIMBY-ism for the commentariat, devoted to maintaining a pristine rhetorical space for Denby, his friends, and his political allies to converse as they please. It turns out that snark doesn't really mean anything. It's just the word David Denby shouts when he wants other people to shut up. ■

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## Netanyahu

*Continued from page 24*

process, with America serving as honest broker. And our economic problems certainly make it difficult for Washington to join the Israelis in new military adventures in the Middle East.

Some pundits are speculating that Netanyahu will do a "Nixon goes to China," recalling that late Israeli prime minister and Likud leader Menachem Begin signed a peace agreement with Egypt. Netanyahu is going to visit China at some point—but don't expect him to go through an ideological metamorphosis.

Instead, he will probably activate his old neocon troops, led by Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and joined by Republicans on Capitol Hill. He will ask them to launch a major offensive against the "appeaser" in the White House, hoping to bring political pressure first on the Democrats on Capitol Hill and then on President Obama to demonstrate that he has it in his "kishke" when it comes to Israel. Obama could surprise him by proving that he does have it in his gut—by saying no to Netanyahu, a move that would be a blessing to both Israel and the United States. ■

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# The Artist as a Kept Man

Quincy Jones, not content with having inflicted “We are the World” upon we of the world and withdrawing Peggy Lipton from circulation, has inspired a petition

campaign begging President Obama to hatch a Secretary of the Arts, presumably to oversee a U.S. Department of Culture.

The quick answer to this was provided by the painter John Sloan in 1944: “Sure, it would be fine to have a Ministry of the Fine Arts in this country. Then we’d know where the enemy is.”

We are in for at least four years of earnest middlebrow culture-vultures sucking up to the new president, whose reported tastes run from the exemplary (Marvin Gaye, Bob Dylan) to the execrable (Toni Morrison, Philip Roth) and include, as far as I can tell, not a single writer or musician from his native Hawaii. For shame, oh rootless one!

“A good writer,” said Ernest Hemingway, “will never like any government he lives under. His hand should be against it and its hand will always be against him.” His hand should not be extended state-ward reaching for alms. The Armenian-American writer and pacifist William Saroyan, who refused to shake FDR’s hand at a reception, had the right idea. So did William Faulkner, who turned down a gala at which President Kennedy was honoring Nobel Prize winners, explaining that the White House was “too far to go for dinner.”

It still is.

I wrote a good deal about government subsidy of the arts back in the early ’90s, when the National Endowment for the Arts was marinating in Andres Serrano’s urine. I did enjoy debating the subject: on my side were Faulkner, Hemingway,

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Edward Hopper, Ed Abbey, and Charles Bukowski; for the NEA were the listless ghosts of Archibald MacLeish, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Kitty Carlisle, who, to tell the truth, was the last lass to feel the lash of Thomas E. Dewey’s ‘stache.

The dirty little secret of the NEA—and the reason I fully expect the neoconservatives to embrace a Department of Culture and fill it with moles—is that it was sold as a Cold War propaganda agency. Endowment godfather Frank Thompson, the New Jersey congressman later imprisoned for his role in the Abscam sting, called it “a program of selling our culture to the uncommitted people of the world,” while President Kennedy lauded music as “part of our arsenal in the Cold War.” (Not that Kennedy went overboard for artsy stuff. After enduring the Bolshoi Ballet, he told an aide, “I don’t want my picture taken shaking hands with all those Russian fairies.”)

By some strike of lightning—probably conducted via the book-reader Laura—George W. Bush appointed one of our best poets, Dana Gioia, to chair the NEA. About halfway through his run, I was asked to serve on an NEA grants panel. What the hell. I did it, though to shut up the anarchist in my conscience muttering, “You gotta be kidding!” I donated the very modest stipend to local civic groups.

Maybe I should have taken as my model the great Gore Vidal, whom JFK appointed to the President’s Advisory

Council on the Arts. Vidal “made it a point never to attend a meeting” because “I didn’t believe that government—particularly one as philistine and corrupt as ours—should involve itself in the arts in any way. I am Darwinian in such matters: What cannot adapt dies out.”

The NEA staff impressed me. So did the other panelists. I liked them, and if we disagreed over the principle and practice of state subsidy of the arts, well ... life is short.

I requested a recorded vote on the panel’s recommendation and cast my negative on very lonely, localist, and libertarian grounds. Eight of the 15 agencies that made the final cut were based in either New York or California, confirming the enduring truth of Edward Banfield’s observation that “the real reason for the passage” of the NEA act “was, and is, to benefit ... the culture industry of New York City.”

New York senator Herbert Lehman, in arguing for art subsidies in the 1950s, looked out over the land of Chuck Berry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Eudora Welty and saw “an aesthetic dust bowl” whose aridity contrasted with Manhattan’s vibrant culture of Tin Pan Alley, *Time* magazine, and Ethel Merman. Impose MOMA on Oklahoma. After all, we are the world.

Thanks but no thanks, Quincy. A Secretary of the Arts would be to the arts as John Ashcroft, Alberto Gonzales, and Eric Holder are to justice. I’ll stick with Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Beauty will come not at the call of the legislature. ... It will come, as always, unannounced, and spring up between the feet of brave and earnest men.” Or as the punks used to say, DIY. Do it yourself. ■