

# LITERARY LOGROLLING

P. J. O'Rourke reviews his pal Dave Barry's new book. In return, a grateful Dave Barry reviews his buddy P. J.'s new book. And the Cheese stands alone.

## DAVE BARRY SLEPT HERE

Dave Barry/Random House/192 pp. \$15.95

P. J. O'Rourke

Open a copy of *Dave Barry Slept Here* and Dave Barry's writing grabs you in the very first sentences of the introduction and if it grabs you like that again, when you hardly even know it, we think you should slap the stuff with a sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace lawsuit. Let's start over.

Pulitzer Prize-winning<sup>1</sup> *Miami Herald* columnist Dave Barry has written an important new history of the United States called *Dave Barry Slept Here*. You can tell it's important by the way it begins:

"WE THE PEOPLE." These are the words that begin the Declaration of Independence. Or maybe we are thinking of the Gettysburg Address. No matter. The point is, these words are written on an extremely historic yellowed document that we, as a nation, keep in a special vault in Washington, D.C., where, each working day, it is cherished by employees of the Document Cherishing Division of the Federal Bureau of Historic Yellowed Objects.

What's important here is that we have, at last, found a historian who actually knows less about American history than we do. Some of us, personally, didn't think this was possible because some of us spent our whole year in Mrs. Wilson's eighth-grade American history class drawing radically lowered '52 Mercury coupes in our three-ring binders. But Dave obviously spent his eighth-grade American history class drawing radically lowered '52 Mercury coupes and surreptitiously eating Pez and keeping a pet mouse in his desk and reading articles about Nazi girls in their underwear in copies of *True* magazine hidden inside his textbook.

But Dave's an American and the last four letters of the word "American" spell "eat me." And, although that's not what they spell at all, this just goes to show that we Americans are not the type to let some little thing like com-

<sup>1</sup>Really.

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plete ignorance of spelling and our entire national history stand in the way of telling everybody what's what. That's Dave all over the place, chronicling the American chronicle from salad to Sanka in a narrative worthy of the name narration.

*Dave Barry Slept Here* begins with that early epoch known as "The Dawn of Time/Life Books":

... the Mayans were constructing a culture down in Mexico featuring a calendar so advanced that it can still, to this very day, tell you where various celestial bodies such as Venus and the Moon will be at any given moment. *They will be out in space*, states the miraculous Mayan calendar.

And *D.B.S.H.* carries us right up to the 1988 presidential election, and it can just put us down this minute. Although it doesn't make us vote again, thank God, or we'd punch it.

This time the Republicans, determined to show the nation that they liked a joke as much as the next person, nominated George Bush, who selected as his running mate young "Dan" Quayle, a Vietnam-era veteran who had received the coveted Round Smiley Face decoration in recognition of the time he accidentally stapled his sleeve to the desk and was trapped for nearly two hours. Clearly this was a ticket that even the Democrats would have a difficult time losing to, but they worked at it and managed to come up with the ideal candidate in the form of "Mike" Dukakis, a man who, because of a tragic genetic defect, was limited to the same basic range of expressions as an iguana. He'd be making a speech, and he'd start to raise his voice, and it would look like there might be some actual emotion going on inside him, but then suddenly his tongue would flick out to snare a passing insect, and the whole effect would be ruined.

*Dave Barry Slept Here* is more highly informative than ordinary history books because ordinary history books are filled with facts which we immediately forget so we might as well not have read the ordinary history books, which most of us didn't. Not so with *D.B.S.H.* because it's impossible to forget what we don't know beans about, therefore we retain everything Dave tells us. For instance, we defy you to find a more highly informative description of how a bill becomes a law than this aptly titled section of Chapter Seven:

### How a Bill Becomes a Law

1. A Member of Congress notices that there is some problem afflicting the nation. For example, he might notice that the nation is not observing a sufficient quantity of idiot official days and weeks, such as National Tractor Mechanic Awareness Week, and so he introduces a bill to correct this problem.

2. The bill is referred to a committee, which forms a subcommittee for the purpose of going to Geneva, Switzerland, to see if there are any facts there that might be useful.

3. The bill is reported back to the committee, which holds hearings and receives testimony from interested parties such as the American Aspirin Bottle Manufacturers Association.

4. Needed amendments are attached to the bill, for example an amendment designed to protect the American consumer from the potential dangers of aspirin bottles manufactured by unfair foreign competitors.

5. The bill is reported out of committee.

6. Everybody goes on vacation for a couple of weeks.

7. The bill is reported back to committee.

8. The bill is reported to the police.

9. The Supreme Court declares the bill to be unconstitutional.

10. The Cheese stands alone.

Not only is *Dave Barry Slept Here* highly informative, it's also brimful of critical exegesis, whatever the word "exegesis" may mean. Note this analysis of the contribution of women and minority groups during the colonial era:

Another important fact that we just now remembered is that during the colonial era women and minority groups were making many contributions, which we are certain that they will continue to do at regularly spaced intervals throughout the course of this book.

There is only one serious flaw to *Dave Barry Slept Here*, although it is a very serious flaw indeed. And this serious flaw is that it's impossible to write a book review of *Dave Barry Slept Here* which is more amusing than the book. Why, the whole point of book reviewing is to write a book review which is more amusing than the book.

You see, here's how the book-reviewing racket works. A guy like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. spends years shuffling index cards in musty JFK memorial libraries. Then he spends more years wearing his pinkies to a nub on large, complicated word processor keyboards and more years yet compiling a huge, long index with all his friends' names in it. Meanwhile we book reviewers have been kicking back around the house watching *Emmanuelle III* on the VCR, drinking blue margaritas and betting the Pistons over the Lakers. Finally, after years and years and years of effort, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. publishes a great big book called something like *The American Circus Bear on the Unicycle of History*. Then we book reviewers sit down at the old Remington portable and, in three minutes flat, type out a book review reading, "Aw, get out of here, your mother's calling you."

True, that's not a very amusing book review but it's more amusing than an Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. book and shorter, too. But *Dave Barry Slept Here* is already pretty short, only 192 pages in big print with drawings. And Dave is so annoyingly and consistently more amusing than a book review that we book reviewers are reduced to the pathetic expedient of just quoting passages of his book verbatim—a technique which, when used anywhere except a book review, is called plagiarism:

When Lincoln assumed the presidency, he was clean-shaven, but one day he got a letter from a little girl suggesting that he grow a beard. So he did, and he thought it looked pretty good, so he decided to keep it. A short while later, he got another letter from the little girl, this time suggesting that he wear mascara and rouge and maybe a simple

string of pearls. Fortunately, just then the Civil War broke out.

... the Temperance Movement, led by Carrie Nation, who headed an organization called Scary-Looking Women with Hatchets. They would swoop down upon saloons and smash all the whiskey bottles, then go back to their headquarters, fire up reefer as big as Roman candles, and laugh until dawn. This resulted in so much social turmoil that in 1918 Congress decided to have a total prohibition on alcohol, which was approved early on a Saturday morning by a vote of 9-2, with 416 members unable to attend because of severe headaches.

The era immediately after World War I came to be known as the "Roaring Twenties," and with good reason: Each of the years had a "twenty" in it, as in 1923, 1925, and so forth.

As damaging as the revelations were, matters got even worse for Nixon when one of the tapes was found to contain, at a crucial juncture, an eighteen-minute gap where nothing could be heard except a hum. This was the last straw: The American public simply would not tolerate a president who would fritter away eighteen minutes humming during a crucial juncture.

Naturally by the time we book reviewers have selected and retyped a bunch of quotations such as these we have worked ourselves into an immense jealous snit, and this is the point at which we turn our heretofore remarkably fair and impartial review of *Dave Barry Slept Here* into a bitter, vicious *ad hominem* attack on Dave Barry. Boy, is Dave going to be sorry when he finds an *ad* of bitter, vicious *hominems* clawing their way through the jealousy windows of his Florida room.

To wit: Did you know that Dave Barry actually won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1988 but still cannot keep a part in his hair? We're not making this up. We visited Dave Barry at his hotel room in New Orleans during last year's Republican party convention and personally caught him having a can of male hair mousse in his bathroom. When Dave Barry doesn't use male hair mousse all his hair just falls straight forward the way the Beatles' hair used to before they got old and, in one case, dead.

Not only that but Dave Barry *drives a van*. We're not kidding. He drives a big van with custom windows with Levelor blinds in them and captain's chair-type swivel seats and a double-loud heavy metal tape cassette system with reverb. We bet Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. doesn't ride around in something with an "If it's rockin'—Don't come knockin'" bumper sticker. We bet Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. drives a Volvo that doesn't even have a nude babe on a Harley-Davidson painted on the side.

Furthermore, if Dave Barry doesn't quit writing important, amusing, and short books which fail to make book reviewers look important, amusing, and

tall by comparison, we are going to tell the Pulitzer Prize Committee the truth about Dave's "commentary." *He makes it all up*. That's right, just like Janet Cooke at the *Washington Post*. When Dave Barry writes something of this type—

... heavy industry started to rise, thanks to the work of heavy industrialists such as An-

drew "Dale" Carnegie, who made a fortune going around the country holding seminars in which he taught people how to win friends by making steel.

—*it isn't true*. So there, Dave Barry. You're going to have to give that Pulitzer Prize back to Roxanne Pulitzer now, and you're probably going to have to give her the van, too. □



## MODERN MANNERS: AN ETIQUETTE BOOK FOR RUDE PEOPLE

P. J. O'Rourke/Atlantic Monthly Press/300 pp. \$16.95

Dave Barry

I can't think of a person who's better qualified to write a book about manners than P. J. O'Rourke. Mr. O'Rourke happens to be a personal friend of mine, and I know for a fact that at the core of his being is a large natural wad of graciousness. He is the kind of man who, when it's time to settle the bar tab, is quick to say: "Here! Let my publisher pay for this! or your publisher!" Also he is discreet. If Mr. O'Rourke happens to be in your hotel bathroom because you have graciously allowed him to use your toilet after graciously allowing him to consume the vast majority of the little scotch bottles from your mini-bar, and he happens to notice, amongst your private and personal toiletry items, a small container of hair mousse that is certainly no business of his (although he could certainly use *some* kind of hair-grooming aid), then by God you can count on him not to mention this fact when he reviews a book that you have written. That is the kind of etiquette sensibility we are talking about here.

Which is why I strongly recommend *Modern Manners*. This is not some namby-pamby tome about irrelevant issues such as which knife you're supposed to use to butter your scone. This is etiquette for the *real world*, the world in which one is considered

*Dave Barry, author of Dave Barry Slept Here: A Short History of the United States, is a nationally syndicated columnist for the Miami Herald.*

a selfless public servant if one resigns from one's government post before one is indicted, and in which a typical Hollywood couple has to have at least four children together before they are considered to be seriously dating. To understand the rules of etiquette in such a world takes a rare individual, one who combines the acute social awareness of Miss Manners with the broad moral outlook of Darth Vader.

Such a person is P. J. O'Rourke, and what he has given us, in *Modern Manners*, is a set of "rules to live by in a world with no rules." He covers *everything*, starting with how you can develop an entirely new and interesting persona for yourself, complete with ancestors, to replace the boring and socially incorrect persona that you probably have now. He even has some thoughtful suggestions as to what you can do about your current, embarrass-

ing family—"tiresome Dad with his mailman shoes and his job selling wholesale something, and out-of-it Mom with her Mrs. George Bush hair and the pseudo-colonial ranch in Dayton Acres with a Chevrolet Celebrity in the attached garage." What does Mr. O'Rourke recommend? "The only possible thing you can do with a family like this," he writes, thoughtfully, "is kill them. You'll probably get out of the mental hospital in five or six years, and when you do there'll be a fat book contract waiting. Tell your ghostwriter, 'I did it because of the pole lamps.' Every sensitive person will understand."

Some of the other topics that are addressed by Mr. O'Rourke and no other etiquette expert in the known universe are:

- Being Insane
- The Proper Use of Self-Destruction
- Food Fights
- Regurgitation Courtesy
- Heroin
- When Should a Man Get an Erection?
- The Horrible Wedding
- Things to Say When Dying

Mr. O'Rourke offers just tons of sensitive advice on these and other topics, including:

- *The social advantages of claiming that you have at least one black ancestor*: "Up North, confess your bloodline freely. There's nothing a northerner likes better than a black person who is completely white."

- *When to wear hats*: "A hat should be taken off when you greet a lady and left off for the rest of your life. Nothing looks more stupid than a hat."

- *How to flatter your sex partner*: "Restrict quantitative compliments to men. 'You sure have a big ass' is not considered flattery by most women."

- *Group dancing*: "The purpose of the bunny hop, like the purpose of many group activities, is to do extensive damage that cannot be attributed to any one person."

- *Sportsmanship*: "A good winner always praises the efforts of his opponents. He says something like 'I'm sure you would have beaten me, Frank, if you weren't so fat.'"

Along the way Mr. O'Rourke provides many fascinating and possibly even true facts, such as that "the Weather Underground is now a softball team with games scheduled against the FBI and several grand juries." He also includes, as a bonus, a whole section on how to speak French without really learning anything about it, with many useful phrases such as "Vouz faire de hell out of here." In short, this is a highly authoritative, extremely useful book, and it would be very rude of you not to buy it. □

# THE NATION'S PULSE



## I'M A POLE WATCHER

by Thomas Swick

Standing with a group of Poles the first Saturday in June I thought to myself: there may be one or two here who dreamed that one day they would vote in a Polish election, but there cannot be any who imagined that their trip to the ballot box would begin in a parking lot of Lord & Taylor in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.

The bus was already parked near some trees at twenty minutes to nine when my wife, Hania (who is Polish), and I arrived with another couple, Damian and Iza, and their two young sons. Damian is an ophthalmologist, working at Temple University for a year, and his family had joined him only a week before. This meant that Iza's first excursion in the United States was going to be to her own consulate to vote. We were soon joined by acquaintances of theirs, Krzysztof and Urszula, both from Warsaw and now living, temporarily, in West Philadelphia, where Krzysztof has a two-year position at the Wistar Institute.

Gradually, more cars pulled up and families emerged, occasionally carrying thermoses and bags of supplies. (The sun was already warm in a cloudless sky.) It was easy to tell which children had been in America the longest: they wore the more extravagant hats. A boy of six or seven sported a green one designed to resemble a frog, with two eyes set at the front and a tongue inserted between the bifurcated visor. Damian's two boys, by contrast, wore soft, pliable, promotional hats that carried the name of their donor—*Głos Szczeciński* (The Szczecin Voice)—printed on the sides.

The organizer of the trip, Janusz, a regional economist at Penn, arrived with his wife and three children, all of whom (with the exception of Janusz) were dressed in T-shirts declaring: "Filadelfia głosuje na Solidarność" (Philadelphia votes for Solidarity). Turning around they displayed a computer print-out image of Lech Walesa, circa 1981. Our friends Leszek and

Joanna soon connected to the group, having left their two daughters with Leszek's mother, now visiting from Warsaw, and bringing along Joanna's brother, Marek, more recently arrived. Marek also works at Wistar, as a researcher in immunology, with Leszek virtually across the street, at the University of Pennsylvania hospital, where he has an appointment as a research assistant professor of physiology. Mirek, another Penn economist, appeared with his wife Marzena, who teaches in the Slavic department, their four-year-old daughter, Klaudina, and Marzena's mother, who had come for a few months from Gdansk.

Hania and I found seats in the middle of the bus, in front of Janusz's sister-in-law, Marysia, and her husband Grzegorz. Marysia wore a Solidarity T-shirt, with the red, familiar jumbled script painted black, and a smaller message printed beneath it: "Another

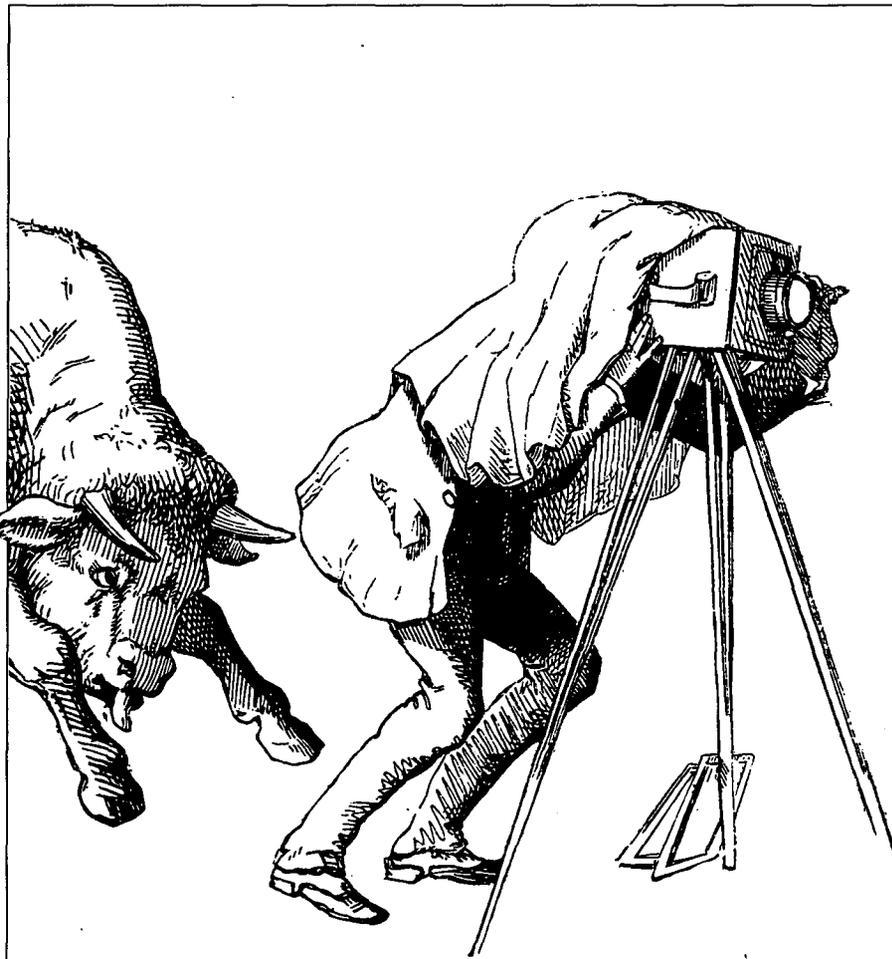
word for freedom." The children occupied the back. There were no empty seats. Shortly after nine the driver pulled out onto City Line Avenue and headed toward the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The atmosphere was vaguely reminiscent of a sports club outing: a couple of cloth calendars, one with a picture of Walesa, the other of the Pope, had been hung against some windows, and a bouquet of red and white carnations teetered precariously from the luggage rack. Hanna, Janusz's wife, took the microphone to sell her T-shirts: \$12 for adults, \$10 for children. "You can have your own picture instead of Walesa's," she advertised, to a chorus of laughter. "Or your mother-in-law's." Small red and white Polish flags sold better at \$1.25.

People moved freely up and down the aisles, exchanging news and

reading material. Solidarity's voting information sheets were distributed to every passenger. Thursday's issue of the *New York Times*, with a front-page story on the Soviet weightlifter denouncing the KGB, was eagerly passed around, as was the article by Timothy Garton Ash, "The End of Communism in Poland and Hungary," from the current issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Children appeared periodically from the back, wordlessly offering their cookies and crackers. Passengers not occupied with reading engaged in conversation. At one point I closed my eyes to listen to the din, expecting to detect a tangled undergrowth of *sz*'s and *cz*'s; though except for the occasional, salient susurrations, the collective sound seemed no different from that produced at any lively American cocktail party.

Once onto the New Jersey Turnpike, I got up to stretch my legs. Grzegorz behind me had finished with the *Times* and returned to Paul Fussell's *The Boy Scout Handbook*. "He's wonderful," he exclaimed to me with relish, "but mean!" Behind him Janusz's son Łukasz, older than the children but not yet interested in the adults, stared out the window. I heard a cheerful mother of three, formerly from Radom, now of Upper Darby, say that her daughter had stayed home to attend her first prom. A day of family milestones. Marek sat reading an article from the *Journal of Immunology*, while Janusz, standing in the aisle, debated voting strategy with Leszek and Joanna. Solidarity had urged its supporters to cross out the names of all the Party candidates who were running uncontested, but an older man, sitting one row from the back, objected to such a ploy, arguing that it would simply give the Party the opportunity to choose whomever it pleased. And some of its members, he insisted, were not as bad as others.

I introduced myself and took the seat beside him. He told me he was a doctor by training who had come to the States for a year and stayed fifteen. "I still haven't acclimated," he told me, in



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