



Age and Guile Beat Youth, Innocence, and a Bad Haircut
by P.J. O'Rourke
Vintage Canada



"How would you like the twaddle and blather you talked 25 years ago preserved in detail, set down in black-and-white, and still extant someplace?" So begins *Age and Guile Beat Youth, Innocence, and a Bad Haircut*, PJ O'Rourke's retrospective collection of 25 years of journalism.

O'Rourke is the high priest of forty-something, neo-conservative American humorists. He's the embodiment of a common sociological transition: 60s rebel turned reactionary. PJ may be one of the new old boys, but he's self-effacing, and more broad-minded than one might expect. He claims that his latest tome will enable readers to observe an interesting metamorphosis: "a leftist grub weaving itself into the pupa of satire and then emerging a resplendent conservative blowfly."

PJ was a pot-smoking, drug-ingesting hippie journalist; he now thinks that the 60s and 70s were a much too serious era. He's tired of leftist cant. He's happy to be a stalwart grownup who can, "indulge in plain stu-

pidity instead of the deep metaphysical kind."

PJ is certainly open about his biases, of which he has many, too many to mention. Let's just say that they fit a certain mold, that of a boy-man who unabashedly loves booze, women and the outdoors, and yet consistently abuses them.

If PJ's such a sexist, macho slob, why not bury him? Because his satire spares no one. He ridicules himself and his Yuppie crowd as much as so-called bleeding-heart Clintonites.

Most media types compare PJ to Hunter S. Thompson, the guru of gonzo journalism. As strange as it may seem, he reminds me of Camille Paglia, that wonderfully outspoken leftist, lesbian neo-pagan, a comparison PJ would not likely relish. Though the two are on opposite sides of the politico-sexist divide, they are similar in many ways: both are clever rabble-rousers, insulting and entertaining at the same time. Their writing is almost always paradoxical; they intrigue readers on one page, only to lose them on the next; make brilliant points in one paragraph, then lash out with left-right combinations of myopic diatribe in the next.

Be that as it may, PJ is worth the read. Just when you're ready to write him off as a windbag, he surprises you with insight and candour. He's especially effective when he lets his guard down after pages of macho bluster. He admits, for example, that he doesn't know what he's talking about when he goes on about women, and that Republicans are better at golf than governing. PJ's brand of neo-conservatism has its moments; he notes that excessive catering to special interest groups leads not to freedom, but to schism and dependency.

O'Rourke's stock in trade is undercutting sincerity with wit. Speaking of the benefits of a classical as opposed to modern, career-oriented education, he pontificates that, "education is not just a matter of learning things. There's a difference between information and knowledge." Then follows his trademark descent (or ascent, if you wish) to juvenility: "It's the difference between Christy Turlington's phone number and Christy Turlington."

Although it's easy to disagree with O'Rourke's views, it's hard to deny that he can write. Pieces which address mundane topics like cars and fishing are often

dressed in wonderful robes, PJ's Irish blarney flowing wildly: "The more I drove the EB110 the more hopelessly enamoured I became, and I'd been a regular Tristan to this vehicular Isolde since my first tug at its neat little self-centering gearshift."

PJ is less poetic but equally verbose at describing his generation: "The truth is our generation was spoiled from the start. We spent the entire 1950s on our butts in front of the television while Mom fed us Twinkies and Ring Dings." He continues: "Our much-vaunted rebellion against bourgeois values meant we didn't want to clean the bathroom. All our mystical enlightenments are now printed in Hallmark greeting cards."

Where will PJ's prose turn up next? Don't discount Hallmark cards.

ANDY POTTER

America and Other Poems

Jeff Bien
Quarry Press

Although it may appear comparable to liberal whining, *America...* actually has some insightful views on Americana. In his verses, Jeff Bien takes brutal shots at contrasts between the picket fences and the inner-city slums — what he might call the great divide between black and white.

Probably the best poem of the book, "America" reveals hypocrisies within nationalistic mind sets. He compares their constant policing of the world to "a love affair with madness" and is "horny with the idea of enlightenment." Bien contends that Americans "spin the bottle with their presidents" — who wants to play Spin-the-Bottle with Clinton or Dole?

In order to fully appreciate Bien's style, you have to be able to appreciate his grasp of the duplicities of human nature. In spite of this gift, he leaves himself open to the biggest paradox of all — he is a Canadian so bent on destroying another way of life he may be considered...well, American.

He criticizes the way Americans run their lives, while here we are in the 51st state, emulating them every chance we get. Remember what Donovan Bailey said about this nation? He may just run really fast for a living, but he does have a valid point. He who lives in glass nations...

ALAN LEBLANC

Once upon a distant war
William Prochnau
Vintage Books

ONCE UPON A DISTANT WAR

David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett—
Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles



For some, Vietnam was their greatest defeat. For others it made their career. *Once Upon A Distant War*, by William Prochnau, is the story of the war's first reporters, their struggles, and the way they changed modern reporting forever.

Basically, it's just a cool book. It opens in 1962, the year that America began "Project Beef-Up", the process of sending more

troops over to Vietnam — and violated international law. We meet the first reporters, some carry-overs from the earlier French Vietnam war, and some others who just happened to be there. Prochnau sets the scene for us, showing how naive the young reporters were when they arrived and how enamoured they were by the tiny, quaint country.

All that soon changes. The world's newspapers get a whiff of a story, and send in a batch of young reporters to cover the war against the Viet Cong. Among them: David Halberstam, a tall, lanky man with fierce determination; Neil Sheehan, an Irishman with his own demons to battle; and Peter Arnett, a brawler who is not afraid to stand up to anyone.

Soon the reporters learn that the "land of tigers and elephants" is not as quaint as they had once thought. The Viet Cong begin making some progress against the South Vietnamese army, but when the reporters try and write about it, they are faced with lies from American officials and resistance back home.

As America becomes more entangled in the war, the young correspondents begin to discover

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