

Clowns to the Left of Me, Jokers to the Right: American Life in Columns

Michael Smerconish

Temple University Press (Jun 18, 2018)

Hardcover \$30.00 (400pp)

978-1-4399-1635-3

Michael Smerconish's collection is compelling and entertaining—not as a filtering of daily news through a predictable ideological lens, but as a group of insightful entries into conversations about current events and issues. Although written for Philadelphia publications from the period between September 11, 2001, and the election of Donald Trump, Smerconish's subjects—sometimes whimsical, most at least touching on the political—will be appreciated by Americans on the right, left, and center.

With national television commentary credits and long stints as a host of radio talk shows, Smerconish is never shy of expressing opinions. His columns aim to clarify the news, right injustices, discuss subtleties, or propose solutions.

One early piece, an argument against tort reform, could serve as a model position paper in a university writing class. A more recent column based on his keynote address to a convention of radio broadcasters proposes that talk radio, which “gives voice to the extremes while ignoring the middle,” is in part responsible for America's polarized political climate, and suggests that network executives can and should be part of the solution.

Smerconish's many profiles of notable public figures shine a light on their qualities or shortcomings. A tribute to a university professor who, with his beard, “looked like Marx while speaking like Lincoln” stresses the man's ability to stimulate academic curiosity. Another column honors “Smokin' Joe” Frazier, showing the largely unheralded champion boxer to be a man of commitment and dignity.

Each column in the collection is followed up with an afterword that provides context, updates, and at times a change of opinion or an apology. Reflecting on a column about one of his favorite entertainers, Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens), Smerconish expresses regret over defending a government decision (based on an alleged connection to terrorism) to deny the man's entry into the US.

This sampling of Smerconish's columns exemplifies the kind of discourse, based on reason and evidence, that makes a newspaper, in print or online, indispensable to citizens of democracy.

JOE TAYLOR (May/June 2018)

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