

‘Face it, Writers are Narcissistic’

The Record speaks with Dave Hanson, a writer for *The Tonight Show*.

YR: Did you always want to be a comedy writer?

DH: I got into it fairly late. I always loved writing, but I didn't realize it was a way to make a living until my late twenties. Before I got into comedy writing, I worked in journalism and advertising. Then at 27, I sold an article to *National Lampoon*, and later they hired me full-time. It seems like now people are more aware of comedy writing as a career than they were when I was growing up. Then there were three television channels; Johnny Carson had a nightly monologue, there were stand-up comedians—and that was it. There are so many more outlets now: Letterman, Leno, Conan, Kilborn, the *Daily Show* and all the other cable shows.

YR: With all of those talk shows, do the writers have a system to prevent the repetition of jokes?

DH: There's no coordination. All of the writers are writing for their own show, and Jay picks his favorites of the day, Dave picks his favorites. There's no way to prevent some overlap. If Howard Dean makes an insane noise on national television, everybody's going to have a take on it. You just really have to be very aware of what the other guy said the night before. If Dave said something Tuesday that Jay says Wednesday, you'll be hearing about it on Thursday.

YR: What is the atmosphere like at *The Tonight Show*?

DH: People are relaxed. It has a lot to do with the fact that Jay is such a relaxed, accessible person. In all of the other jobs I've had, I've never known any one who loves his job as much as Jay does; he's the happiest person in the world because he just loves jokes. He has his jokes on little cards, it's like King Midas with gold coins. He radiates how much he loves his job, and it makes all of our jobs better.

YR: Is joke-writing at *The Tonight Show* an individual or group effort?

DH: About 80 percent of work on the monologue is individual. It's a tough job. There are eight monologue writers, and they sit in their offices all day with a newspaper and a computer. At the end of the day, when they've used up all their energy, they may pair up and work off each other. I work on sketches and bits, which are more of a group effort. Someone comes up with an idea, and the Head Writer says, "That's great, but what if..." But all of this is more independent than if you're working on a situation comedy.

YR: Why did you decide to write your novel, *Last Leg*?

DH: Working on a talk show is actually where I grew the urge to write a novel. As much as I enjoy the teamwork of a TV show, face it, writers are narcissistic, and I wanted to work on something that I had total responsibility for, that was completely mine. Because I work for a talk show, I'm always writing off of news items, and my life has a huge amount of un-farmed material. For the novel I can harvest things from my wife, my family, my cats—I use a whole different part of my brain in writing a novel than in writing for a talk show. This would not be the case if I worked on a sit-com. Sit-com writers strip-mine their lives every day. Any time you tell them a story, you can see them thinking, "How can I turn this into an episode?" Also, when you work in TV, you're always writing for some one else's voice. Writing a novel was like escaping to my own voice; it almost felt like I was returning to my native language.

YR: So the protagonist of the book is similar to you?

DH: Although I thrust the protagonist, Marl Trevicker, into comic situations, how he reacts to them is ultimately how I would react. And the relationships in the novel are reflections of all the relationships I've had, run through different situations. There's a lot of my wife in Marl's wife.

YR: Because you wrote so much from your own life, did you have problems finding material for your next novel?

DH: No, I never run out of material. Writing *Last Leg* took several years, so by the time I started the next one, I was a different person with different knowledge, different sensibility—it's a whole different world. And I put my characters in different situations.

YR: Do you have a deadline for your next novel?

DH: No, I never have a deadline for my novels, perhaps as a backlash against all of the deadlines I have during the day. Writing for television, I have to let go of things before I think they're ready—they have to go on-air. But writing a novel is more personal than that; I determine when the material is ready. It's done when I'm sick of it and just want to get it the hell off my desk.



YR: What advice do you have for aspiring comedy writers?

DH: Write no matter what mood you're in. Write whether you're somber, cheerful, anxious, or blind drunk. That's when you might find an interesting new facet of your voice or your character's voice. It's just like body builders, who work out every day whether they want to or not. You just have to push yourself into it, get yourself going—and then you're gone. That's the great thing about writing comedy: sometimes you start the day in a bad mood, but then you write a few jokes and cheer yourself up. It must suck to write for a soap opera—you go to work happy, then write a hospital death scene and make yourself miserable for the rest of the day.

YR: Do you have advice for those who want to work in the television industry?

DH: If you're going to work in TV, develop as thick a skin as you possibly can. There will always be between six and twenty people competing for a minute of airtime. There's a tremendous amount of material being produced, and only a microscopic amount of it ever sees daylight. If you take the rejection personally, you're dead. Also, start "low-budget." I started out in TV writing for a cable channel, where there were less people competing for more airtime. I think starting out at a network would be exhausting. More importantly, working for a cable channel is a better place to find your voice. The only way to learn what works is to see your stuff on-air—see what gets a big laugh and what just lays there. With as much competition as there is on a network show, you'll never gain a real understanding of your material. Basically, you have to choose between having a better apartment earlier in life or really learning about the business.

—Toole

Find the complete interview at www.yalerecord.com, and more info on Hanson's book at www.lastleg.net.