

Stop Making Sense

BY JAMES PARKER

Nonsense—like fear, sex and heavy metal—is a principle in life. At the very top of things, above all the heaving and the straining, there is a permanent layer of bubbling superfluity, of pristine biological froth:

This is nonsense. Oddly, it can be quite hard to reach; there is no universal access to this layer. Anyone can be daft, or disruptive, or fitfully meaningless, but your real nonsense-maker has other, rarer qualities: He (mainly he, for reasons which may become clear) is possessed of a kind of manic sobriety, something between a pedant and an anarchist. Nonsense is not chaos; it doesn't wallow or thrash. On the contrary, it has a playful attraction to form, particularly rhyme and meter—in fact, the tighter the rules, and the more punctilious and arbitrary the enforcement, the happier nonsense is. Emotional repression is also useful: The two founding fathers of nonsense verse, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, were celibate Victorian Englishmen.

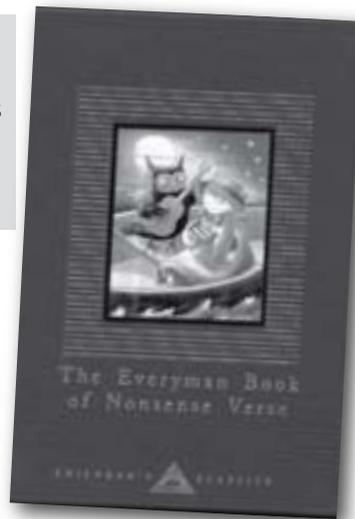
The lavish new *Everyman Book Of Nonsense Verse* is an exemplary anthology, covering the ground with thoroughness while also aggravating and enlarging the definition of its subject. All the canonical nonsense-masters are present—Lear, Carroll, G.K. Chesterton, Mervyn Peake—as well as cheerful moderns like Matthew Sweeney and Roger McGough. But it is in the inclusion of Wallace Stevens' "The Em-

Everyman Book of Nonsense Verse
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peror Of Ice Cream" and Ted Hughes' "Wodwo" that the editor, Louise Guinness, has distinguished herself.

Wallace Stevens, with a sound grasp of the nonsense-principle, declared in 1959 that "a poem need not have a meaning and, like most things in nature, often does not have." "The Emperor Of Ice Cream" was written in the '30s and he answered (or not) questions as to its meaning for the rest of his life, even fielding at one point an enquiry from something called the Amalgamated Ice Cream Association. The poem's most famous couplet—"Let be be finale of seem/ The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream"—can stand as a nonsense manifesto, a total flouting of the authority of reality. Stevens explained it thus: "... let being become the conclusion or denouement of appearing to be: In short, ice cream is an absolute good." Now *that's* nonsense.

Hughes' "Wodwo" is different, being composed of the reflections of some sort of shuf-



fling, sniffing half-beast unsure of its own nature: "But what shall I be called am I the first/ have I an owner what shape am I..." Hughes critic Ekbert Faas described the occluded seekings of the Wodwo as "a language of self-erasure which, emulating Nature's own cycle of creation and destruction, consistently obliterates its own traces."

Nonsense and nature go hand in hand. Edward Lear, a very lonely and suffocatingly closeted gay man, used nonsense as a sort of code, in which (as every biographer post-Freud has pointed out) too-tight shoes and overlarge noses were featured with dream-like repetitiveness, the

poet's pinched libido blooming fantastically into a procession of tender, proboscile, disappointed phalluses. As Lear grew older and his sadness deepened, he almost left nonsense behind, abandoning the darting whimsicality of his earlier verse for sub-Tennysonian broodings like "The Dong With The Luminous Nose": "When awful silence and darkness reign / Over the great Gromboolian plain ..." etc.

No one does *just* nonsense: That would be inhuman. It works best as a hobby, a sideline. Lear was a painter, Carroll a clergyman and mathematician. Mervyn Peake, with all the mental tonnage of his Gormenghast novels installed and pressurized in his head, seems to have fired out brilliant squibs of nonsense for relief: "Of fallow-land and pasture / And skies both pink and grey, / I made my statement last year / And have no more to say." Chesterton found the production of nonsense verse to be—literally—laughably easy: "To publish a book of my nonsense verses," he wrote to his fiancé, "seems to me exactly like summoning the whole of the people of Kensington to watch me smoke a cigarette." And Stevens said of "The Emperor Of Ice Cream": "I dislike niggling, and like letting myself go. This poem is an instance of letting myself go."

So how do we hit that dancing nonsense-layer? Drugs? On a highly organized mind, a mind (in Lear's words) "concrete and abstemious," the effects of drugs *can* produce nonsense. Oliver Wendell Holmes, for example, coming round from a dose of ether and convinced he had the secret of the Universe in his grip, described his revelation thus: "A strong sense of turpentine prevails throughout." Nonsense! The rest of us, however, must stay straight—if only for the sake of making no sense at all. ■

Frontier

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He continued fundraising at a fast clip, raising more than any other candidate for governor in Montana's history, despite refusing PAC money—another decision he credited to talking to people. He toured the state to find a lieutenant governor. In the process, he talked to dozens of Montanans, people who rarely get one-on-one time with a major candidate for governor. Most of them, he says, told him that they did not want to be lieutenant governor; they simply wanted to talk to someone who could change things.

Ultimately, Schweitzer's real choice for lieutenant governor made waves. When he tapped State Senator John Bohlinger, a Republican, the state GOP lashed out while Democrats around the state scratched their heads. Bohlinger is a progressively-minded Republican, a rare breed in national politics. In his hometown of Billings, Bohlinger was well known for his truly compassionate conservatism—delivering passionate speeches against the death penalty, hate crimes and sex trafficking. And while the decision raised hackles among some party stalwarts, the bipartisan ticket told many Montanans that this was a campaign uninterested in partisanship.

The *Montana Kaimin*, a daily college paper, editorialized that Schweitzer's decision "shook up Montana's all too partisan political infrastructure" and Chuck Johnson, the dean of Montana political journalism, referred to a TV ad emphasizing the bipartisan ticket as the most effective of the campaign year.

But Schweitzer's team never confused common sense with mealy-mouthing or bipartisanship with timidity. In the waning days of the election, the Republican Governors Association (RGA) hammered Schweitzer with an ad accusing him of bogus business deals. "The RGA had already been kicked out of other states for deceptive advertising," says Martin. "At the last minute, they ran an ad with a man who had tried to deceive money out of the Schweitzers, a wealthy landowner portraying herself as a destitute widow, and the cousin of the Republican nominee for Governor." The three Montanans alleged bad business activity on Schweitzer's part, but failed to disclose their own conflicts of interest.

The Montana Democrats hit back with an ad highlighting the fact that Schweitzer's accusers had felony criminal records, as well as family and business connections to the Republican candidate for governor. The attack ad fell flat on its face.

"We got a lot of positive feedback on that," Martin says. "Half of it was hitting home [Schweitzer's] populist message and half of it was exposing these people for who they were."

Ultimately, the hard work paid off. Schweitzer was elected as the first Democratic governor in 16 years. His approval rating is slowly marching upward, approaching 60 percent, while Bush has slumped to 53 percent approval in this red state.

Observers sometimes summarize the lessons learned as follows: Work hard for 10 years building a party; start the campaign early; find an outstanding, hard-working, telegenic, charismatic candidate; fundraise like mad; craft a great message; hammer the message; and pray. Even with this nearly perfect storm, Schweitzer won with just a 4 percent majority.

But other lessons are more concrete and there are some signs that Democrats are beginning to implement them nationally:

- *Fight everywhere*: Schweitzer didn't write off the rural areas of Montana that have recently become Republican strongholds. He campaigned statewide, winning two counties typically lost by Democrats and

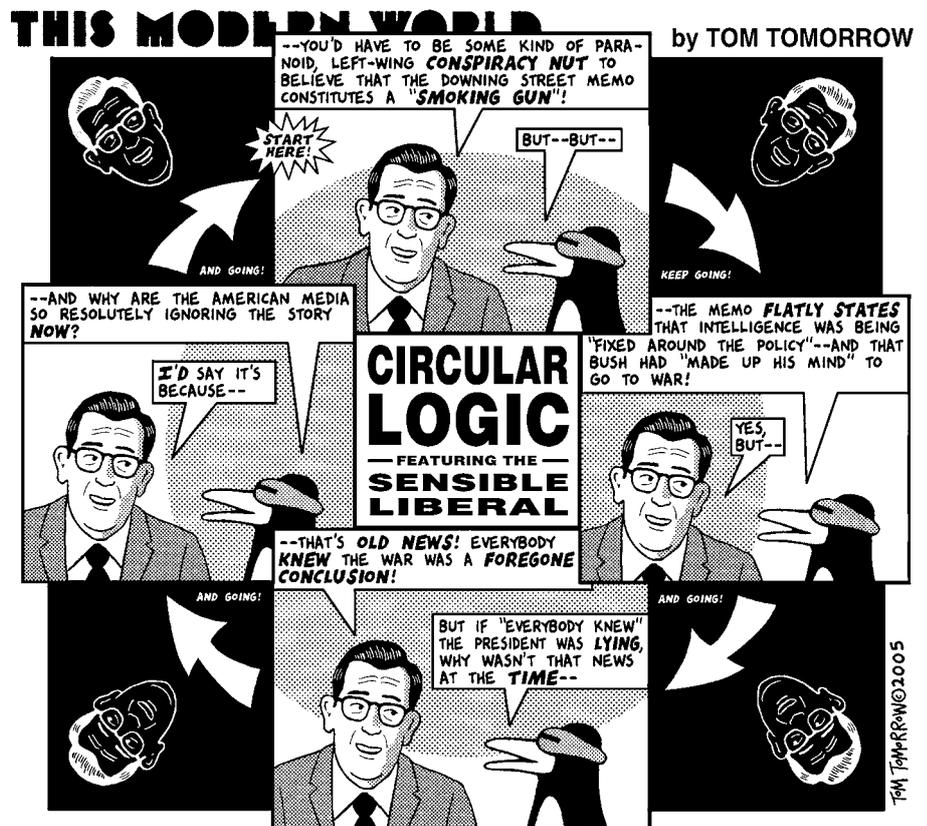
narrowing the margin in dozens of others.

- *Fight back*: When Schweitzer got "Swift Boated," his campaign staffers didn't sit silently. They hit back fast and hard. And in his first months in office, Schweitzer didn't refrain from criticizing the president who received more votes than he did. He aggressively criticized Bush on a number of fronts. Now he's more popular than the president among Montana voters.

- *Actions speak louder than words*: Unlike other Democrats who revel in meta-analysis or theorizing over values, Schweitzer simply did it. Rather than saying he was a real Montanan, he talked about his home-steading ancestors. Rather than talking about reclaiming the flag, Schweitzer just did it—prominently on his Web site and on pens the campaign distributed. And both Schweitzer and the Montana Democrats had plans. They just realized that having the plans was more important than talking about them non-stop.

If Democrats across the country learn these lessons, they'll be on the right road to winning America back. ■

MATT SINGER, an intern for PLAN, is a writer and activist in Montana.



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the line

Continued from back page

You must have known you'd get crazy responses when you drew Donald Rumsfeld masturbating to images of the bombing of Iraq.

It was one of those that I sent off and wondered if I'd be hearing back from papers that didn't want to run it. Some people may see that cartoon as "juvenile" or "offensive," but that is part of the point. I don't use imagery that may be seen as shocking or offensive gratuitously. I believe the "shock and awe" bombings were deeply offensive on a human and moral level. It felt like many people didn't see it that way.

They were more shocked by masturbation than murder.

Exactly! I also try to draw what I see as the truth in my cartoons. And I fully believe that Rumsfeld "gets off" on war, on violence, on power—just like many others in the Bush mob.

Your caricature of Bush has devolved over time. Pre-2000, you drew him with only slightly distorted features. But now your Dubya caricature is one of the most grotesque in the business, a creepy, squeaky, sniveling chimp-like man-doll.

The image manipulation of this administration is sinister. I wanted to do something to combat that.

It's been said that for a lie to exist there must be people willing to believe the lie. Bush and Co. do a good job of making people feel it is cool to believe the lie, with everything from the phony macho-man image of Bush, to the chest-pounding bullying of liberals. They make it more comfortable to believe the lie than to face the truth. But if the tide turns and it starts to become uncool to believe the lie anymore, then we are in business.

Can a caricature help that? I think it can. People don't want to be associated with the person everyone thinks is an idiot.

I'd like to see the public realize the emperor has no clothes. I really hope the Downing Street memo can gain traction. It took a long time for Watergate to gain traction. I'm hoping that can happen here. ■

MIKHAELA REID draws political cartoons for the Boston Phoenix. Her work, and Sutton's, appear regularly at www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/cartoons/. A longer version of this interview appears at www.inthesetimes.com.





drawing the line

BY MIKHAELA REID

Could a cartoon bring down the Bush administration? Maybe not, but that won't stop Ward Sutton from trying.

WARD SUTTON'S SATIRICAL ART HAS APPEARED IN mainstream venues such as *TV Guide*, *Rolling Stone* and *Time*. But his labor of love is the no-holds-barred comic strip he's been drawing for the *Village Voice* since 1998, now available in the full-color collection, *Sutton Impact: The Political Cartoons of Ward Sutton*. Sutton recently spoke to fellow cartoonist Mikhaela Reid from a farm in Bismarck, North Dakota, where he is taking a break from New York life to produce an animated short film.

You used to do a lot more cartoons about pop culture. But since 2000 your strip has become almost exclusively political. Why?

It was the first Gulf War that was the real tipping point for me,

politically. I thought the war, and the media coverage of it, was disgusting. I went to Washington, D.C. to march in protest and also marched in Seattle and in Minneapolis, where I got arrested for civil disobedience at the federal building.

I also drew cartoons on the war. But one day the powers that be told me, "The war isn't funny anymore."

Part of making a living as an illustrator is working in a way that appeals to editors and art directors. So in addition to my weekly strip, which was about politics but also social and pop-culture issues, I began doing all sorts of things: freelance illustration, rock posters. There is the work I do to pay the bills and the work I do to feed my soul. My weekly strip is something that has never paid much money at all, but it has allowed me to express what I really feel.

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