



The Columnist

Jeffrey Frank

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In Brandon Sladder, author Jeffrey Frank has created one of the most memorable rogues in contemporary fiction. A prominent Washington columnist, Sladder has known just about everyone of importance. He has spoken on intimate terms with world leaders, been a witness to enormous change, and expressed weighty opinions on important matters of state. When former President Bush encourages him to write his memoirs, Sladder believes that his life story could add much more than a footnote to our age and attempts to burnish his image for posterity. What emerges instead is the story of an irresistibly loathsome man and the misadventures that got him to the top. Self-important, social climbing, and dangerously oblivious, Brandon Sladder is the type of character everyone loves to hate.

By turns hilarious and dismaying, *The Columnist* is a dead-on, elegantly written portrait of the media and politics of the second half of the twentieth century.

The Columnist Details

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Author : Jeffrey Frank

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From Reader Review *The Columnist* for online ebook

Frederick Bingham says

This is the story of Brandon Sladder, a news analyst who covers the major stories of the day starting in the mid-1960's and continues until the mid-1990's. It is his fictional memoirs. It describes a life of selfishness, licentiousness, back-stabbing, luxury and lust. Probably a reasonably good accounting of what it is like to be in such a position.

Joseph says

If you're a frequent reader of liberal bloggers like Atrios or Digby, you've probably heard the phrases "The Village" or "The Kewl Kids". As you may have guessed, these are pejorative terms for the chattering classes, the coterie of elite pundits that opine in print and on TV about the "issues". I put issues in quotes because they rarely talk policy or even politics, unless your idea of politics is limited to inane discussions of image, vile rumor-mongering and endless horserace speculation of polls and public opinion. Chief offenders: Chris Matthews and Tim Russert on TV and David Brooks, Maureen Dowd, and Joe Klein in print.

Enter *The Columnist*, a scathing satire on the above that grows more relevant by the day. Brandon Sladder is an utterly amoral careerist, a print columnist who worms his way into TV punditry. I found Brandon's particular mix of self-importance, pomposity and phony "average man" act a dead-ringer for Brooks, but I'm not sure who the actual model was. A withering portrait leavened by a terrific sense of humor, *The Columnist* is like an extended version of Jon Stewart's appearance on *Crossfire* and a terrific antidote to the cancer on democracy that is our lovely corporate media.

David Allen says

The fictional memoir of a glib, shallow Washington pundit who ruins lives, including his own. Brandon Sladder has no self-awareness ("My chief flaw is an inability to recognize my other flaws"), yet Frank is able to make us see what his protagonist can't, a tricky thing to pull off. Very funny, and a little sad.

Peter Orvetti says

I adore this slim, good-natured satire of Beltway insiderdom. I've read it three times over the years, and it's always good for a chuckle. This is not a deep or cynical work; it's closer in spirit to the Capitol Steps than to "Veep." But anyone who follows the goings-on of #ThisTown will find it fun.

The novel is the self-serving memoir of fatheaded columnist Brandon Sladder, a man so oblivious to the size of his own ego and how he tramples on everyone around him that it is hard to hate him. Frank says little about why Sladder turned out this way; the book starts with Sladder at an Amherst-like college and advances through his career as a Buffalo beat reporter, Washington columnist, syndicated writer, and television personality. Frank gets the most laughs by playing up Sladder's obliviousness -- things his protagonist writes

of with pride are really to his shame.

One criticism: Frank has Sladder get more and more odious as the story advances, and in tandem with that, he gets more and more conservative. I am a liberal myself, but this implication that Sladder's toadishness and his shift to the right are one in the same is lazy and simplistic.

Jenny says

well, here's a good humor story about a jerky journalist. not only does it take place in buffalo, it also has an index!

Marie says

Well...the voice was consistent, if consistently shallow.

And while in part that was intentional—after all, it's positioned as a satire—the quality of the humor had no depth or sophistication. *The Columnist* has no more to say than the narrator does, and that's not much. While I suspected I wouldn't be impressed by the jacket flap, I liked the idea of a fictional author revealing more than he intended. Unfortunately, the narrator here is dumber than a rock; he not only lacks the slightest self-awareness, but he can't even fake intelligence or a personality even to the people who know him. And all of those people just ignore that because...?

But the prose is serviceable, and occasionally the commentary is amusing, but the narrator is tiresome and it could be a good 100 pages shorter—although since this is supposed to be the narrator's memoir, it shouldn't be much shorter than 500.

Pooch says

I finished reading *The Columnist* by Jeffrey Frank. It is a satirical account of a pompous journalist who becomes a Washington columnist and "talking head" on cable news channels. He is a composite of several self-important journalists that often pop up on cable news. Written in the voice of the lead character as he pens his memoirs, the name dropping and anecdotes are self-serving, witty, and pathetic. A quick read, this book left me feeling very sad for the lonely character of Brandon Sladder.

Ron Charles says

Jeffrey Frank's new novel puts Washington columnists on the horns of a dilemma. They could sue him for defamation, but first they'd have to admit that they see themselves as the pompous windbag at the center of his dark comedy.

Then again, Frank shouldn't worry. Notoriety is the coin of our age. If "*The Columnist*" garners enough fame, contestants on *The McLaughlin Group* will brag that they were his inspiration.

At the opening of this fictionalized memoir, Brandon Sladder claims that George Bush (the elder) encouraged him to write down the details of his remarkable life. "Haunted by the former President's suggestion," he complies for the sake of history, but we should thank him for the sake of comedy. The result is a classic satire of egotism.

"Even as a young man," Sladder begins, "I was frustrated by the smallness of my surroundings and a shortage of serious people." It's a challenge he never outgrows, along with the opposition of "strangers who unaccountably wanted to hurt me."

This obliviousness remains the staple of his life, a way of crashing over others without having to acknowledge the validity of their objections.

When he steals information from his father's business to write exposes in the local paper, his father is "inexplicably" upset. When he goes behind his editor's back, his editor is "mysteriously" ticked off. When he blackmails his boss, his boss develops an "irrational" hatred of him.

Every time another victim snarls at him, Sladder is "puzzled by this attitude," but he remains a prince of graciousness, wishing everyone well as he stomps on their heads to the next dinner party.

With an insatiable appetite for fame and sex, he uses a series of women for information. A blend of sycophancy, glibness, and ruthlessness raises him from a small Buffalo paper to a spunky opinion magazine just a few blocks from the White House (No, not The New Republic). From there, he leaps to a syndicated column, a spot on a PBS talk show, and finally a contract with NBC.

His commentary, heavily laced with quotations from other great writers and baseball metaphors (nothing personal, Mr. Will), is meant to shed light in the halls of power and in the golden fields of the heartland.

There may be nothing original about this bow-tied character (calm down, Mr. Schlesinger), but the precision of Frank's tone is relentlessly funny. Sladder waxes eloquent in phrases that are drenched in grandiosity, hackneyed metaphors, and sentimental clichés. "As a people, we Americans have come far from our sturdy frontier past," he notes. During his first year in D.C., "even the cherry blossoms that spring had a special glow."

His memoir becomes a chance to twist the knife in the bodies of past victims ("I had no real reason to doubt his commitment to heterosexuality....") and exaggerate his acquaintance with famous people (a perfunctory conversation with Kennedy becomes a warm friendship). He's the kind of infuriating jerk who skewers himself with every brag-filled line.

But as his life races along, "the center cannot hold," as Bill Yeats once told me. Tempted by his own thirst for influence, he begins writing speeches for a lecherous senator and then praising the senator's wisdom in his own widely syndicated column (nothing personal, Mr. Blumenthal).

When his professional life suddenly collapses, his personal life sinks even deeper into depravity. The descent is brutal and lurid, almost enough to elicit a little sympathy for this swinish man.

But no, that temptation passes the moment he rises again, reborn as a talking head on the nation's cable news shows. "I feel as if I'm everywhere at once," he writes, "talking into camera after camera about the world of today and yesterday, unblinking, my eyebrows perpetually raised."

The buzz around this book started months ago. A senior editor at The New Yorker, Frank is the sort of author who can count on help from a frequent contributor who's also the son of a real Washington columnist (Yes you, Mr. Buckley). He penned a puffy blurb for the dust jacket and then ran a rave review in the Washington Monthly. How better to market a book about the corruption of influence?

But I'll let more peevish critics mention that.

Frank has created a character that deserves to jump outside the Beltway and enter the language like "Uncle Tom," "Peter Pan," or "Scrooge." From now on, any ambitious windbag might hear the murmur in his wake: "There goes a real Sladder."

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0607/p1...>

Ashley Rice says

This book was a great read. However, one I got 3/4 of the way through the book I was ready for it to be done. Still a good read but it loses its luster after a while.

Jennifer says

I read this book because David Sedaris recommended it at a reading I attended. I found it to be every bit as amusing as Sedaris promised. However, a friend who read it after me hated it. I don't think she realized it was supposed to be funny and that you are NOT supposed to like the narrator.

Heather says

Read this after having it on my list forever after hearing David Sedaris recommend it. Turns out I didn't like it so much. About a fictional DC journo writing his memoirs who turns out to be quite the cad and dick. Weirdly, I didn't realize at first that he was supposed to be a cad or a dick; the main evidence about that was that he basically reports never getting along with bosses or any coworkers and most people not liking him. Also he never speaks to his parents at all and he's a pretty shameless climber, who I guess when you think about it throws people over regularly for climbing opportunities, but manages to keep falling up. The problem with this might not be my inability to add up the clues (although it very well might), but rather that it's hard to get that someone is a huge dick when the story is told from his POV, and our inclination isn't to say we are assholes, it's to romanticize how awesome we are. It's up to the reader to start going, huh, everyone hates him, huh, that thing that he's rationalizing seems kind of dickish, etc. etc. etc. until you realize he sucks. I guess.

Anyhow, long story short, it was kind of wry and humorous here and there, but ultimately I didn't care enough about him so I stopped reading. Ho hum.

Bill says

An Imagined Life

Frank, J. (2001). *The Columnist*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Brandon Sladder is a rising journalistic star in Washington, D.C., in this imaginary autobiography. The first-person narrator describes, with unintentionally humorous false modesty, his career. It is an excellent, if obvious exercise in presenting an unreliable narrator. Sladder is full of pride, while the reader increasingly realizes what a buffoon he is.

He describes with disingenuous offhandedness how he met JFK, and even once gave advice to LBJ on the phone. The latter president called during a Sladder dinner party and Brandon had to be pulled away from the table to answer. How embarrassing! Especially since Ed Muskie and his wife were in attendance at the party but Brandon could not, ethically, disclose the nature of the conversation. Such scenes deliciously parody the Washington memoir.

He marries for social status but sleeps with any live female, and in turn, suffers snubs, indignities, infidelities, and humiliations. There are good mini-dramas that reflect the tumultuous and opportunistic career of a journalist, as newspapers and other periodicals are closed, taken over, and overhauled repeatedly. We see, reflected through skillful descriptions of his friends' comments and behavior, that while he imagines he is an "objective" analyst of the political scene, he is unknowingly a shill for government policy makers.

This is all very Washington-insider stuff, but it is funny, often in exceedingly subtle ways, as Brandon pontificates in well-chosen literary and historical allusions and quotations. The whole thing is written at a fairly high level of diction that makes it even more enjoyable. Further, the author is a NYC editor, and has skills that show. The writing is extremely tight and a pleasure for that. Nevertheless, the story is episodic and repetitive and soon becomes tedious. A first-person novel must have a very strong plot, in my opinion, because no individual voice can hold our attention long. Everybody is boring, once you get to know them.

James says

A wonderfully satirical look at journalism, Washington D.C. culture, social climbing, sex, and social-climbing sex. The cherry on the sundae is the "Index," best appreciated like a good dessert after the meal of the memoir.

If you can get your hands on a copy of this, read it. The novel paints a brilliant picture of where our country headed off the cliff, and why you're now reading book reviews from unqualified strangers.

Betsy Ellis says

This is a very unusual book because it is a fictional memoir, if there is such a term. But that's what makes it fascinating. As you read you think your mind is playing tricks on you because this person and the people around him are so real. I loved this book because it was so incredibly clever and so different from the usual genre that I read.

Jennifer says

Good book, I liked it a lot. The main character is a self-absorbed, social-climbing journalist. The book starts in Buffalo, which is amusing, as the author lives on Cleveland Avenue then in Allentown.

David Sedaris spoke about this book when he spoke at UB a few years back. Glad I picked it back up and read it in full.
