

IN 1973, WHEN HE WAS 27 YEARS OLD, Henry Beard put out one of the most famous magazine covers of all time. A black-and-white dog sat face-forward, uneasily eyeing a revolver lodged against its temple. IF YOU DON'T BUY THIS MAGAZINE, the headline read, WE'LL KILL THIS DOG. Outrageous; disturbing; for the *National Lampoon*, relatively mild. The then-counterculture humor magazine, founded by Beard with two Harvard schoolmates in 1969, was more or less designed to offend, sometimes with sharp political satires ("The Vietnamese Baby Book"), and sometimes with simply blasphemous and/or obscene entertainments ("Son-O'-God Comics"). The *National*

THE ORIGINAL SMART-ALECKY WHITE GUY

BY NANCY JO SALES

"THE NATIONAL LAMPOON WAS WRITER BRUCE MCCALL. "HENRY

WASP SHTICK," SAYS ARTIST- WAS THE FIRST TO IDENTIFY IT."

Lampoon's sacred-cow slaughterhouse was a big hit with a certain crowd—which is to say, male baby-boomers. "We were always hearing things like, 'My God, you saved my life; I was headed for some Baptist Bible college and I left Texas to come to New York and now I'm a successful serial killer,'" Beard says now, perhaps joking.

Back in 1975, when David Letterman was just a goofy TV weatherman, Dave Barry was oozing primordial wit for his local paper, and Conan O'Brien was still playing with Sea-Monkeys, Henry Beard was working twelve hours a day conscientiously establishing what has become the dominant comic persona of the last quarter of the twentieth century: the smart-alecky white guy. "National Lampoon humor was Wasp shtick," says *New Yorker* artist-writer Bruce McCall. "It was Benchley-like, literate. It had never had an outlet before. Henry was the first to identify it."

It would have seemed a natural transition for Beard to move on to television, as did *Harvard* and *National Lampoon* alumni who went over to *Saturday Night Live* and later *Letterman* and *The Simpsons*, or to movies, like his *Lampoon* co-founder Doug Kenney, who wrote *Animal House* and *Caddyshack*. Henry Beard "would have changed the shape of humor in Hollywood," contends Emily Prager, the novelist and early *Lampoon* writer.

But instead, after putting out only 61 issues, Beard took a \$3 million buyout from the publisher and walked away. Then he disappeared. "He went *ka-boom*," recalls Sean Kelly, one of the *Lampoon's* first contributors. "A puff of blue smoke, and no more Henry."

Years passed; his colleagues heard little from him. Some grew bitter at what they saw as his abandonment, but they all wondered what Henry would do next. Beard was the one who would—if any of them could—create something on a par with the book he says inspired him to become a humor writer, *Catch-22*.

Instead, Henry Beard wrote *Sailing*, a 1981 book of yachting daffynitions. His friends were dumbstruck. "You can do anything in the world, and you're doing *this*?" one recalls thinking. "My God, *who cares*?"

But the thing is, it made Henry Beard a millionaire, again.

F SCOTT FITZGERALD MUST HAVE MADE HIS COMMENT about how there are no second acts in American lives only so it could be proved wrong again and again. In the two decades since he exited the *National Lampoon*, Beard has quietly established himself as one of the most popular humor-book writers in the country, rivaled only by Dave Barry and Erma Bombeck. His nine books for Random House's Villard (including *French for Cats* and *Advanced French for Exceptional Cats*) have sold more than 1.4 million copies, and his seven comic dictio-

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naries for Workman Publishing (*Fishing, Sailing, Golfing*) have sold 2.25 million—many of which have stayed in print years after publication, something almost unheard of in the flash-in-the-pan humor-book world. "Henry has a level of consistency that is unmatched," says his editor, Villard publisher David Rosenthal. "You just let him write and you sit back and count the money."

Beard's twenty-eighth humor book since 1981, *What's Wor-rying Gus? The True Story of a Big-City Bear*, an "as told to" auto-bear-ography of the famously depressed polar bear in the Central Park Zoo ("Listen, you want my opinion," says the bear, "this whole city is a zoo"), hit stores last week. The first printing is 100,000 copies. If the book does well enough, it would be the author's ninth best-seller, and his *third* in 1995. The other two are *O.J.'s Legal Pad* and *Leslie Nielsen's Stupid Little Golf Book*, which have sold a combined 450,000 copies.

"I offered to swap him one of my kids for a couple of million, straight up," says Kelly. "He didn't go for it." Others shake their heads at Beard's commercial canniness. "He has the Midas touch," says Sarah Durkee, a collaborator on *The Book of Sequels*. "He doesn't know how to fail."

If the books don't quite hit *National Lampoon* highs, they're still funny and smart. *Latin for All Occasions* shows a Perelmanesque penchant for finding silliness in sophistication. (Cocktail-Party Chat: "What do you think I paid for this watch?" = "*Quanto putas mihi stare hoc horologium manuale?*") And his dictionaries read something like Ambrose Bierce on Prozac, full of information delivered in a most affably weird manner. (From *Gardening*: "Toadstool: Ugly lawn

furniture preferred by amphibians." From *Golfing*: "Golf Glove: Unpleasant odor worn on the hand"). *O.J.'s Legal Pad* is more acerbic: "How Nicole Abused Me!: Wore annoyingly jangly bracelets . . . Said I snored—NO EVIDENCE! . . . Whiny 'hit me' voice."

A few laughs notwithstanding, some of Beard's friends wonder whether his success in the world of quickie-book writing doesn't amount to something of a loss. The chorus of bewilderment is nearly as resounding as the praise. "Why would Henry, who could do anything, do these books?" asks one friend. "Because it's easy?" "He's writing them in one night!" exclaims another old colleague. "He wakes up, looks out the window and sees it's raining and he can't get in eighteen holes of golf, so he writes *Gus the Polar Bear*." (Beard allows that he wrote *O.J.'s Legal Pad*, with partner John Boswell, in about three weeks.) Some former *Lampooners* say that Beard's humor books are like "one-page *Lampoon* pieces" stretched into volumes. "I'm sure he winces," says one writer.

His publisher dismisses such grumbling as "jealousy." "Are we waiting for him to write the great comic novel?" Rosenthal says. "Why should he?" And then: "Maybe he will."

"YOU JUST LET HENRY BEARD WRITE," SAYS VILLARD PUBLISHER DAVID ROSENTHAL.

IT'S AN ODD POSITION TO BE IN," BEARD ACKNOWLEDGES over fried-oyster sandwiches at Shelby, the casually elegant preppy restaurant on the Upper East Side. He still looks a lot like he did in his *Lampoon* days—endearingly disheveled, a bit tweedy. His woolly face is full of kindness; his eyes actually sparkle.

"There are people who'll say Aristophanes still leaves you rolling in the aisles, and don't we love Shakespeare's clowning in the early acts," he says. "But it's unusual that humor endures any appreciable passage of time. I don't think I've written anything that's likely to last the ages—with the possible exception of *Poetry for Cats*."

He's kidding. Though with Beard, it's not always easy to tell. He bears no signs of the "jumpiness and apprehension" Thurber said were characteristic of humor writers who "sit on the edge of the chair of Literature" feeling like they've "never taken off their overcoats." Tellingly, unlike Thurber—or Bombeck or Barry—Henry Beard does not write books about what it's like to be Henry Beard.

To understand the reticent sensibility that may have contributed to Beard's public disappearing act is to consider both the Upper East Side and southern gentility at work in his background. His father, a Yale and Wall Street accountant, moved north from Birmingham, Alabama. His great-grandfather John C. Breckinridge ran for president against Abraham Lincoln. And Beard grew up in the Westbury Hotel on 69th Street. "Those were the days," he recalls of the city in the fifties, "when the taxicabs were very large, the Pan Am building wasn't there, the subways reeked of ozone, and the Yankees always won."

Beard's intention with the *National Lampoon* seems to have been to re-create a life he'd discovered when he went away to Taft and started writing humor pieces for the school magazine. "Henry's Rosebuds were the dorm rooms at Taft and Harvard," Bruce McCall says. "His talent came bursting forth at Harvard," agrees *National Lampoon* co-founder Robert Hoffman, now a co-chairman of a Coca-Cola bottling company. "He did a junior tutorial on Dickens, but instead he wrote a parody called 'Hard Cheese,' and he got an A."

But becoming a humor writer was something Beard apparently regarded with ambivalence. "Henry never thought it was a decent way to make a living," says Brian McConnachie, another early *Lampoon* editor. "He would hold out these names of other people at Harvard he said were great writers and could have made it, but had become something like lawyers or stockbrokers." (Beard does mention that he believes his father, an editor of the *Yale Lit*, could have been a humor writer himself, but "in those days," he says, "you had to work for a living.")

Still, Beard quickly realized the potential for success in the humor-writing business. In 1965, he met Doug Kenney at the

Harvard Lampoon, the 119-year-old college humor magazine that has spawned Robert Benchley, John Updike, George Plimpton, and Conan O'Brien, among others. During Beard and Kenney's tenure there, the *Harvard Lampoon* produced slick, nationally distributed parodies of *Playboy* and *Time* that sold so well Beard said to himself, "Why can't we go on like this? I don't want to be a goddamn lawyer."

In the fall of 1969, while they were trying to get their new national humor magazine off the ground, Beard, Kenney, and Hoffman shared an apartment at Lexington Avenue and 83rd Street. There, dorm life continued. "Henry wore the same clothes to work every day," remembers Hoffman, "so one day I looked in his closet, and he had four identical oatmeal-colored turtle-necks."

In contrast, the *National Lampoon's* acidly funny and bitterly competitive writers—George Trow, Tony Hendra, the late Michael O'Donoghue, and Anne Beatts, in addition to those already mentioned—existed primarily to top one another's outrageousness. "It was like being part of a motorcycle gang, and we were going like hell," says writer McConnachie. Beard, the de facto editor-in-chief, became their unlikely leader. "He gave a remarkable performance," says Christopher Cerf, one of Beard's closer friends and a frequent collaborator today (*The Official Politically Correct Dictionary, The Official Sexually Correct Dictionary and Dating Guide*). "He never got enough credit."

Like everything about Beard, his connection to Kenney is enigmatic, but the two seemed to function for a time as each other's alter egos. Kenney, indisputably brilliant, was a lovable showman who popped in and out of his responsibilities, and the *Lampoon* offices as well. He wrote erratically, often with the aid of substances (Kenney died in 1980 in a fall off a Hawaiian cliff, an accident some say was drug-induced). Beard was the reliable one. "Henry did all the work and had the vision," says Hoffman. "But he gave Doug all the recognition—Doug was the guy they would always write about."

The *National Lampoon* was fun, if a bit insane, until it became pure insanity—and for Beard, it seems, unbearable. "Nobody ever did any work up there," McConnachie says. "We just played as if little elves would do our pieces, and then we'd go out drinking at Beef and Brew and regale each other some more with our wonderful ideas. Miraculously, the next morning it would all be done."

"There were boozers and there were dopers," says one *Lampoon* alumnus, "mainly boozers." But while Beard could be the last one on his way home after a night of many rounds (he had moved to an apartment in the Nineties on Central Park West), he never held forth about his personal life, and for all his colleagues knew, he always went home alone. "He never had a single date that I'm aware of until 1974," says Hoffman. Prager, on the other hand, remembers one spunky artist in Henry's past. If

"twentysomethings in the publishing world in Manhattan" (she was then an editor at *Harper's*), their first conversation was about how to make an atom bomb. "We were both reading John McPhee's *The Curve of Binding Energy*," she explains.

What Beard appears to have been doing in those "lost" years was becoming a fully turned-out human being—unlike his contemporaries, who have by and large remained in that state of perpetual adolescence most prized in comedy writing today. Beard has become a grown-up, and one with quite a nice life and a bagful of hale hobbies, from sailing to cooking to gardening to what has become one of the great passions of his life, golf. "His life is golf, golf, golf," says McCall. Beard plays nearly every day at the exclusive Atlantic Golf Club in Bridgehampton, but true to form, he never keeps score.

After leaving the *Lampoon*, Beard apparently dabbled in some real-estate investments, finally settling on his house in East Hampton, where he began to spend nearly all his time. He planted trees. He spent time getting to know Gwyneth Cravens and her daughter from a previous marriage. "He taught her to ride a bike," says Cravens. "He became her profound friend."

In the early eighties, Beard did make one foray into Hollywood. "Here's Henry Beard, the funniest writer in the English language," says TV writer (*Fresh Prince*, *Square Pegs*) Andy Borowitz, a *Harvard Lampoon* alumnus fifteen years Beard's junior who collaborated with him on two scripts, "and we would go into these meetings and some executive would say to him, 'I think what this script needs is a fat kid.'" Beard remained, Borowitz reports, "blissfully above it all. He would check into a hotel and do the work and then get out."

Beard still keeps his hand in, on an amateur basis. "Sometimes," Cravens says, "we'll be watching a stand-up comedian on TV, and Henry can finish the joke. And I'll say, 'Hey, Henry, you did that in 1975!' and he'll say, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'"

ON A HOT FALL DAY IN THE CENTRAL PARK ZOO, Henry Beard climbs the hill to visit Gus. "He's up here!" he says with the enthusiasm of a nineteenth-century explorer. "It's extraordinary, the constant media scrutiny," he says of the world's fascination with the polar bear (whose repetitive-pattern-swimming disorder was recently declared cured by an animal psychologist paid to treat him). "He can get any table he wants in the city," Beard marvels. "It's like Claus von Bülow before his trial. There's a certain something when he walks in the room. . . ."

Gus doesn't seem to be feeling very well today. He's keeled over heavily on the rocks, less like the victim of obsessive-compulsiveness than of a drive-by shooting. "Hang in there, Gus," Beard says, resting his forehead against the glass. "At least till publication date."

"Does he have enough room?" a child standing nearby asks his father. "He's probably got more closet space than we do," Beard mutters under his breath.

Gus suddenly rolls over on his back and thrusts a pillow-size paw toward the sky in a halfhearted gesture of defiance. The paw drops. Nobody in the little crowd can quite find the words.

"New York's a tough town," Beard says after a while, "and there's not a one of us who hasn't felt like that on some occasion in this great city." ■

"AND YOU SIT BACK AND COUNT THE MONEY."

he was married to anything, it was the *Lampoon*.

Though he usually arrived at noon, Beard managed to log in 90 methodical hours a week. Meanwhile, he had to play referee to his quarrelsome and libidinous staff, all in their twenties and early thirties; their constant crises would erupt over such things as whose-idea-was-what, who-was-supposed-to-be-paid-what, and whose-girlfriend-was-whose. "Henry put up with a great many egotistical, infantile personalities," McCall says. At one point, when O'Donoghue and Hendra weren't speaking over a woman, and the entire staff was forced to take sides, Beard began to feel he'd had enough. "He had to always smooth everything out," says Cerf.

The only staff member bearing any resemblance to an adult, Beard also bore the brunt of battles against production deadlines and bottom-line-minded *Lampoon* publishers Matty Simmons and Leonard Mogel. It was a job Beard detested. And so one day, as they used to say, he split. Beard, Kenney, and Hoffman sold their interest in the magazine to Simmons and Mogel soon after it hit a pre-agreed performance mark, for \$7.5 million (more than \$20 million in today's dollars), which they divvied up by a prior agreement. The day of his announcement, Beard told Hendra and Kelly: "I haven't felt this happy since the day I got out of the Army." (Beard left the Army Reserves in 1971.) They were stunned. "We ate together, we went everywhere together," Kelly says, "we finished each other's sentences. And all of a sudden, Henry wasn't there."

And yet, some *Lampooners* say that as close as they all were, they had never really known Beard. "It was always a great parlor game to analyze what makes him tick," McCall says. Beard dropped from sight after the buyout, sparking rumors that, in an effort to "find himself," he was building kitchen cabinets—part of awareness training in becoming a Sufi. "I've been goofy," Beard offers, while calling these tales "flatly untrue." He does admit to driving a taxicab for a while: research for a movie idea.

One possible explanation for what happened to Henry Beard: He fell in love. An old friend remembers that one day in the spring of 1974, "He came and confessed it to me with this loopy grin on his face: 'I'm in love.'"

Gwyneth Cravens, a novelist and Beard's companion of the past 21 years, says that when she and Beard met at a party for