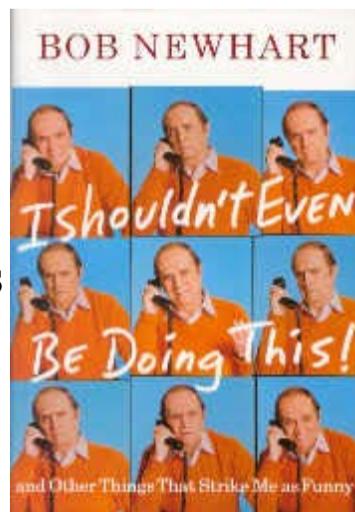


A READER'S JOURNAL

I Shouldn't Even Be Doing This and Other Things That Strike Me as Funny

by
Bob Newhart



Published by Hyperion/NY in 2006

Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2007

One night I watched the David Letterman show, a rarity for me, but my favorite comedian, Bob Newhart, was on. I remember his early comedy albums in the 1960s, the TV skits which followed, and most of all our anchor for Saturday nights in Foxborough, Massachusetts, the Bob Newhart Show. We never missed one of them and loved them all. Jerry the dentist with his Mr. Tooth, Carol the zany receptionist, Howard the airline navigator and pop-in neighbor, Emily the loving but independent wife, and Bob who tied them all together. I wanted to see what Bob looked like in 2007 and what he was up to. Wrote a book. This book. Usually I don't buy a book by comedians, but I felt that I owed Bob a lot for all the years he'd made me laugh plus I had never bought an album or anything else of his, so it was about time. In addition he gave me two jokes for my monthly Digest.

Each month I publish a Cajun joke, and if I don't hear one during the month, my ears perk up for one that I might be able to convert into a Cajun joke. Here is the eponymous joke which Bob told David. I laughed aloud, and decided it was a must have for this month's [Digest](#).

Boudreaux's grandpa was a private in the army during World War II. He served as a clerk, and was sent to deliver a package to the General's house one day. The General's wife came to the door in a skimpy, silk robe. She took the package, invited him in for a drink, and soon the two were having passionate sex in her bed upstairs.

Suddenly she cried out, "Boudreaux! Kiss me!"

Boudreaux opened his eyes and said, "Kiss you! Ah shouldn't even be doin' dis!"

Bob thought this was funny and so did I. So I bought his book as a way to say, Thanks, Bob! And I got a chance to enjoy a different side of Bob, the side that reflects on the work he's devoted his life to, which is the serious business of making people laugh, instead of actually making people laugh. But sometimes he fails in this book and does *both*!

On the reflective side, I wondered why I was strange. No one else seemed to be bothered by the oddities of life which stand out for me. Then Bob announces right on page 5 that is a sure sign of a comedian. Why did he wait so long to tell me? I suppose it's a trade secret, so you have to wait until you're so old, you don't care how much competition you get from beginners.

[page 5] Comedians are innately programmed to pick up oddities like mispronounced

words, upside-down books on a shelf, and generally undetectable mistakes in every day life.

Bob was a stammerer by his own admission. It wasn't something he practiced as part of his act; it was part of his life. But he can make it sound funny when he reflects upon it.

[page 6] When I first performed, I didn't study all the working comedians and say, "There is nobody stammering out there . . . What a great opportunity." In interviews throughout my career, I've often been asked if my stammer was natural. My stock response: "Have you been listening to my answers?" Truly, that's . . . the . . . way I talk.

Bob admits that wife always tells him that he has a dark side to his humor. I cannot recall anything like that from the Bob Newhart Show. He saves it for friends and family apparently. Mr. Sensitive apparently likes to secretly play the totally insensitive person.

[page 13] There are people out there who are totally insensitive to human feelings. These jokes are my private stock. They're just for me and my family and friends to enjoy, like a family winery that saves a rare vintage for its own holiday table.

With a best friend like Don Rickles, Bob must get a lot of lessons in being insensitive, as that is Don's forté during his stand-up routines. I saw Don live in the 1960s when he was doing the 2 AM lounge show nestled between the topless dancers. I was in line waiting for his comedy routine to finish and watched him badger the usher at the door until he let somebody come in. He attacked everybody mercilessly. After his show was over, I sat at the counter to wait for the next show to start. Things were quiet and I happened to overhear this guy talking to a friend of his. I glanced back and noticed it was Juliet Prowse, a dancer who was starring in Vegas at the time, and the guy was Don Rickles. His soft voice asked her how her kids were and they talked like two neighbors hanging over a fence. So Don apparently has a light side and Bob has a dark side. They must learn from each other.

Bob gives us a list of the dark sides of comedians:

- 1) Comedians are sadistic.**
- 2) Comedians are self-absorbed.**
- 3) Comedians have multiple personalities.**
- 4) Comedians have a perverse sense of humor.**
- 5) Comedians can bury a joke like your uncle.**
- 6) Comedians can teach you something.**
- 7) Some comedians can't tell a joke.**
- 8) All comedians are thin-skinned.**
- 9) On the other hand, ventriloquists are downright crazy.**

[page 19] Dick Martin knew a ventriloquist named Pat Patrick who committed suicide by throwing himself from a plane. Pat Patrick left a note that read, "The dummy pushed me."

Bob was drafted in 1952 and was due to be sent to Korea during the war as a field wireman. That was not a long-lived occupation. "The North Koreans sharpened their aim by taking out the field wiremen." (Page 36) So Bob was asked if he had a degree. Yes, in management. Factory or personnel? Thinking quickly Bob says, "Personnel." He is delighted to hear the following loophole which he stumbled into:

[page 36] "You're lucky because it takes a direct order from the Secretary of the Army to send you overseas to Korea," he explained. "You have what's called an M. O. S., a military occupational specialty designation 1290."

He was made part of a group traveling the West Coast auditing personnel records at military bases. He admits that there was a curious pattern of problems that they uncovered. All the exciting places to visit like Tacoma and Los Angeles had lots of problems which took them several days to fix, but hot, desolate bases in the middle of the desert had few problems. Plus they managed to upgrade their lodging systematically by a clever ruse:

[page 37] When our team arrived at a new base, we explained to the officer in charge that we were carrying top secret material and therefore needed a lock on our door. So instead of sleeping in the barracks on cots, we were each given our own room in the non-commissioned officers' quarters.

Looks like Bob put his college degree to good use in the Army. Then he got into accounting. At the Glidden Co. he was in charge of petty cash. That meant he would be stuck in the office till 8 pm some nights trying to balance a dollar or two at most. So he tried a new tack. If the petty cash was short a dollar or so, he'd replace it with his own money, if it was over a dollar or two, he pocketed it. Saved him hours a day and on the average he took out what he put back. But his boss assured him that it was not sound accounting practice and continued to pay him six dollars an hour to spend 3 hours looking for \$1.48 on a typical day. That drove him batty, so he would swap stories on the telephone with his friend Ed Gallagher in advertising. Here's one where he called Ed saying that he was a plant manager at a yeast factory. You can hear the beginning of his famous telephone monologues here. All thanks to sound accounting practices.

[page 42] "Sir, it's Mr Tompkins and we have a problem at your yeast factory. There's a fire . . . Hold on, sir. I have to put you on hold while I run up another floor. The yeast is rising . . . Sir, are you still there? The firefighters are on-site trying to contain the blaze . . . Hold on, sir. I have to run up another flight of stairs . . ."

Once Bob appeared on a show where he was interviewed as the writer of a children's book about Court, a cocker spaniel who got lost. As Bob is telling the story, the punch line is that he becomes so emotional about the lost dog, that the interview ends before we find out if he ever found the dog. They received the only mail for the whole series of fake interviews about this one. The writer wanted to know where he could buy the book about Court so he could find out what happened to the dog. (page 90, 91)

Bob didn't drive a car. He lived in Chicago and took the El everywhere or got a ride with friends or took a cab. When he wrote this now famous routine about the driving instructor, Bob had never been alone behind the wheel of an automobile in his life. When he got married, he couldn't bear the thought of the bride in her gown driving away from the church, so he drove the car for two blocks before letting his bride drive the rest of the way. Later, at age 33, he studied and passed his driver's test and began to drive. Oh, the inspiration for this routine came from the standard ad appearing in the newspaper every week for Driving Instructors. Bob figured it was a high turnover job and pondered why that might be . . .

[page 62, the Driver Instructor, a morsel] "How do you do, Mrs. Webb. I see you have had one lesson already. Who was the instructor on that, Mrs. Webb? . . . Mr. Adams . . . I'm sorry. Here it is . . . Just let me read ahead here and kind of familiarize myself with the case . . . How fast were you going when Mr. Adams jumped from the car? . . . Seventy-five. And where was that? . . . In your driveway. How far had Mr. Adams gotten in the lesson? . . . Backing out. I see. You were backing out at seventy-five and that's when he jumped. . . ."

Bob credits Don Adams for jump-starting his stand-up comedian career. Adams did it by stealing a piece that Bob wrote for him after turning it down and refusing to pay for it. Don subsequently used the bit on the *Steve Allen Show*, word for word. Here's how Bob dealt with the insult.

[page 68] I was furious. To put it mildly, I felt that Don was not a very stand-up stand-up. However, I reasoned that if other comedians were going to steal my routines, I had

better perform them myself or I would never be paid for any of my material.

Another comedian, Bill Daily, borrowed Bob's routine on the no-frills airline that eliminated such frills as navigational instruments and maintenance. Later when Bob was putting together a comedy album, he asked Bill if he could take it back. "But that's my strongest bit," he protested feebly. Bill returned the routine and in return he later ended up playing Howard, an airline navigator, on the successful Bob Newhart Show for 6 years. The difference between Don Adams and Bill Daily is that Adams was a primary thief (stealer of another's primary property, namely, one's thoughts and ideas) and Daily was a moral person who became a friend.

Richard Pryor admitted to Bob that he had stolen one of Bob's albums. Bob couldn't believe that the great Richard Pryor had stolen his material. He was honored and stunned, right up to the punch line where Richard told him, "In Peoria, I went into the record store and I put it under my jacket and I walked out." Recovering quickly, Bob said, "Richard, I get a quarter royalty on every album." Richard took out a quarter and gave it to Bob. Was it true or was it a practical joke? With humor the truth is often funnier than fiction.

I never watched the *Newhart Show* — by the time it appeared, I had outgrown situation comedies. But I did get to watch the amazing ending to the last episode of Newhart on an anniversary special. Bob reveals in this book that his wife, Ginnie, was the one who came up with this brilliant idea. I imagine she had dreams of Bob with other women a lot. She spent many years watching him supposedly married to Emily and then to another actress. Bob reveals that once Ginnie woke up mad at him and when he asked her what's wrong, she said:

[page 112] "I had a dream that we went to a party and you spent the entire party talking to this beautiful young lady."

"Honey," I protested. "That was a dream."

"Yeah, but it's just the kind of thing you would do."

Once Ginnie came up with the idea to end the last episode of *Newhart*, everyone kept the ending secret. They even built the set of the Bob Newhart bedroom and hid it from the studio audience until the final scene started, at which time, it moved into view, showing Emily and Bob lying in bed:

[page 227] "Honey, honey, wake up," Bob Hartley implores Emily. "You won't believe the dream I just had."

Emily switches on the light. "All right, Bob. What is it?"

"I was an innkeeper in this crazy little town in Vermont. The maid was an heiress; the husband talked in alliteration; the handyman kept missing the point of things, and then there were these three woodsmen."

"That settles it," Emily replies. "No more Japanese food before you go to bed."

"I was married to a beautiful blonde . . ."

"Go back to sleep, Bob," Emily says, switching off her light.

"Good night, Emily," I say, switching off mine.

"What do you mean beautiful blonde?" she says, switching her light back on."

What a wonderful way to end two great sitcoms by blending both of them together in one final crescendo! Thank you, Ginnie! Thank you, Bob! Keep those observations of oddities and funny bits coming. Like the earthquake joke you heard a couple of days after the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake, "The traffic is stopped, but the freeways are moving."

