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STYLE

O'Rourke's barbs cut both ways

By Mike McPhee
The Denver Post

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Nothing is sacred to P.J. O'Rourke, not the Democrats, not the Republicans and certainly not the health care reform debacle in Congress.

But he manages to find humor in all of it, good humor that brings up deep belly laughs.

"Not only has no one in Washington read the health care bill. I'm not even sure if anyone there is capable of reading it," he said recently in an interview from his home on 15 acres in southern New Hampshire.

O'Rourke will be in town April 9 to receive the Denver Press Club's prestigious Damon Runyon Award, given annually to the person the club considers to be the most influential journalist of the year.



P.J. O'Rourke (|)

O'Rourke is about to release his 14th book, "Don't Vote, It Only Encourages the Bastards," just in time for this fall's rancorous elections. He says the title is borrowed from his good friend, Dick Tuck, the master of political tricks. Tuck, after losing a race for California state Senate, was quoted as saying, "The people have spoken. The bastards."

O'Rourke's books have given him great success, with some reaching No. 1 on The New York Times' best-seller list. Their titles, laughable on their own, give a peek into the window of his satirical mind — "Eat the Rich," "Parliament of Whores," "Give War a Chance."

A profile of him on CBS's "60 Minutes," noted he is considered "the most quoted living human," not just for his humor but for his searing, sometimes painful, accuracy on the folly of current events. An example is his oft-quoted "Giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys."

Now 62, he grew up in modest circumstances on a steady diet of Mad magazine. "There wasn't a lot of college in my family," he said. But he enrolled at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. "When I saw in the course catalog that I could major in English, I figured how hard can that be, I already speak it."

He got a fellowship for a master's degree at Johns Hopkins University but afterward couldn't find a job teaching. He was headed for a career of bad academic writing and "incomprehensible poetry" when a grown-up, hipper version of Mad magazine — National Lampoon — was launched in April 1970. The Lampoon not only published his earliest pieces, it hired him, and soon he rose to managing editor. His work there contributed to the off-Broadway Woodstock parody "Lemmings," which helped launch the careers of John Belushi, Chevy Chase and Christopher Guest, and led to the movie "Animal House."

He did a long stint at Rolling Stone, including war reporting from Lebanon, the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the genocide in Bosnia, which he called the "unspeakables killing the unpronounceables."

On America's never-ending war campaigns, he said, "Certainly we don't want either al-Qaeda or the Taliban around, but I don't know if it's necessary to kill all their wives and children."

He compares President Barack Obama to a "bad grad student-assistant lecturing to an enormous class of freshmen . . . deadly boring."

On health care insurance, he says, "People shouldn't lose their house because of health care. For that reason, insurance is the answer, but not for free. We don't want people paying a pound of flesh, maybe just losing their fingernails."

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He's freelanced everywhere important, including The Atlantic Monthly, The Weekly Standard, Vanity Fair, Playboy, Car & Driver, "Real Time with Bill Maher" and National Public Radio's "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me." He also is the H.L. Mencken Research Fellow at the Cato Institute.

He's fond of the Denver Press Club, having pitched his book "Driving Like Crazy" there last year. "It was vicious weather, but there was a surprisingly good turnout considering," he said. "I was very flattered when I learned I had won the Damon Runyon Award."

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Tickets to O'Rourke

Tickets to the Damon Runyon Award Banquet, \$100 per person, may be purchased through Blacktie-Colorado.com

The deadline for purchasing them is Monday, April 5.

The banquet will be at the Denver Marriott City Center, 1701 California St., on April 9. Doors open at 6 p.m., dinner will be served at 7 p.m.

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