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PJ O'Rourke: a hellraiser who had to slow down

PJ O'Rourke, America's favourite living wit, talks to Philip Sherwell about drugs, cars and his recent brush with cancer

By Philip Sherwell

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The first subject raised by PJ O'Rourke, the political satirist and renowned hell-raiser, is the offer of a drink – albeit not the kind of alcoholic libation his reputation might suggest. “Can I make you a coffee?” the 61-year old asks attentively when we arrive at his New England hideaway on a glorious autumnal afternoon.

He then reaches for his current “drug” of choice – Nicorette gum – before settling down on his office porch, with views across the forests and mountains of southern New Hampshire (state motto: “Live Free or Die”) where he lives with his wife, Tina, their three children, three dogs and, of course, his car collection.



PJ O'Rourke: 'I survived the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties largely thanks to a poor constitution. If I got drunk and stoned, I couldn't do it the next day' Photo: David Howells

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The best-selling author has recently published his 14th book, *Driving Like Crazy*, a celebration of just about any creation on

four- or two-wheels that guzzles gas. It is a rollicking ride through three decades of O'Rourke's car journalism, combining classic articles and new material with his trademark merciless skewering of liberal niceties and political correctness at every turn. As well as recording America's obsession with the automobile, he traces his own path from fast-living youth (although not quite as fast-living as he once claimed) to his current incarnation as an SUV-driving, cancer-surviving father-of-three.

The timing of the book is not coincidental. He and his publisher had long discussed an anthology of his writings about cars, but the collapse of the American motor industry gave the mission topicality.

As a fervent foe of "big government", he reluctantly accepts the need for the bank bail-out to prevent the entire financial system grinding to a halt. But he has no truck with the attempt to keep afloat the motor industry, most notably General Motors. "Saving GM was folly," he says. "Millions of investors around the world were looking at GM and all agreed it was worthless. Then a guy who's a lawyer with an Ivy League liberal arts education [Obama] comes along and tells me that my tax dollars are going to bail out GM. If I had wanted to own part of GM, I'd have a stockbroker."

He looks across the Atlantic for evidence of where this policy will lead. "We have the British motor industry as a role model for what happens when you try to save an industrial dinosaur. Britain was the first country to industrialise and the first to de-industrialise. We should learn from this."

O'Rourke's new book is also a personal journey. The collection kicks off with his 1979 epic, and unforgettably entitled *How to Drive Fast on Drugs While Getting Your Wing-Wang Squeezed and not Spill Your Drink*, which originally appeared in the American humour magazine *National Lampoon*. The essay features a series of driving tips that do not, suffice to say, appear in the Highway Code, and extols the virtues of young girls, fast cars and plenty of drugs.

But in a new essay, *How to Drive Fast When the Drugs are Mostly Lipitor* (a reference to a popular cholesterol-lowering medication), he acknowledges that there was as much embellishment as youthful excess about the original three-decade old piece.

"I survived the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties largely thanks to a poor constitution," he says now. "If I got drunk and stoned one night, I couldn't get up and do it all again the next day. I was saved by not having the constitution of John Belushi," a reference to his friend, the hard-living actor and comedian who died after injecting a "speedball" of cocaine and heroin.

For all his rebellious ways, O'Rourke never adopted the outfit of the outcast and still favours the "preppie" uniform of dress shirt, chinos and loafers. His boyish looks, searing blue eyes and a mop of hair that falls across his forehead are also constants. Nowadays, a wild night involves a glass of scotch and possibly a cigar. Yet it is not just age and belated parenthood that have tamed him: in summer 2008, he was diagnosed with anal cancer.

"I mean, how embarrassing. Thank goodness poor Farah Fawcett distracted everyone's attention from my ass," he says, referring to the former *Charlie's Angels* actress who recently died from a much more virulent form of the same cancer.

After a course of radiation and chemotherapy, he was given the all-clear earlier this year. He has, typically, even concluded that cancer has been good for the health of a lifelong smoker and drinker. "The chemotherapy probably blasted a lot of the bad stuff that was in there. And all sorts of green leafy things, which I suspect have names like kale and even kelp, are now showing up on my dinner plate, thanks to my wife."

Patrick Jake O'Rourke was born into a family of Irish-American car dealers from Toledo, Ohio, and hails from good Republican stock. To his relief, he was never a wishy-washy liberal, but did go through a short-lived revolutionary communist phase at college, before he was confronted by the horrors of making a living and seeing his pay-cheque denuded by the taxman. That may have driven him back to his natural place on the political Right, but he was very much of a libertarian, anti-government hue rather than a social conservative.

After college, he wrote for local newspapers before joining *National Lampoon* at 26. He then moved on to a lengthy stint as a roaming foreign correspondent for *Rolling Stone* magazine. Books such as *Holidays in Hell* and *Give War a Chance* established his credentials as a leading exponent of the first-person "gonzo journalism" that was most famously practised

by Hunter S Thompson.

From his free-wheeling conservative perspective, he has developed a reputation for trenchant, biting and hilarious commentary. Yet in person, he is somewhat less scathing than in print. To Barack Obama, for example, he gives mixed marks. "I'm not sure that anyone else would have done a better job as president. With a financial crisis of the scale of 2008, whoever is in power would have been blamed and whoever replaced them would have felt obliged to be seen doing something. Doing nothing was not an option."

O'Rourke and his friends did much to shape modern political satire at National Lampoon. Surveying the impact three decades later, he notes: "We may have fostered it a little too well as I'm told now that a majority of young people get their news from The Daily Show [a topical comedy programme]. Or maybe I'm just jealous as there's only room for so much humour, so my share might be reduced."

Still, he criticises the smugness and self-importance that he feels has crept into some political satire – not surprisingly, a trait he sees more on the Left than on the Right. "It does not do for a political humourist to be smug. We're not offering policy alternatives; we're pointing out political absurdities. We're the ones switching on the kitchen lights and watching the cockroaches scamper. But we're not going in there to stamp on them. That shouldn't be our role."

His slew of witty one-liners has earned him the status of the most quoted living writer in The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Humorous Quotations. "Note the emphasis on the living. The moment I die, I'll drop way down the list."

As for his own favourite, he opts for an observation he made in 1993 that is enjoying a new lease of life today: "If you think health care is expensive now, wait until you see what it costs when it's free," he famously opined at a gala dinner for the libertarian Cato Institute as the then First Lady Hillary Clinton pursued her doomed efforts to reform the health care system.

"It's very flattering to invent a catchphrase that sticks around and hear those words being quoted again," he says, 16 years later. "They probably stand up to analysis and time because they're true."

* 'Driving Like Crazy' by P J O'Rourke is available from Telegraph Books for £15.99 plus £1.25 p+p. To order, call 0844 871 1516, or visit www.books.telegraph.co.uk

The wit and wisdom of PJ O'Rourke

"Giving money and power to government is like giving whisky and car keys to teenage boys."

"Everybody knows how to raise children, except the people who have them."

"You can't get rid of poverty by giving people money."

"There are a number of mechanical devices which increase sexual arousal, particularly in women. Chief among these is the Mercedes-Benz 380SL convertible."

"It's not gay marriage that should be outlawed, it's first marriages."

"Earnestness is stupidity sent to college."

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