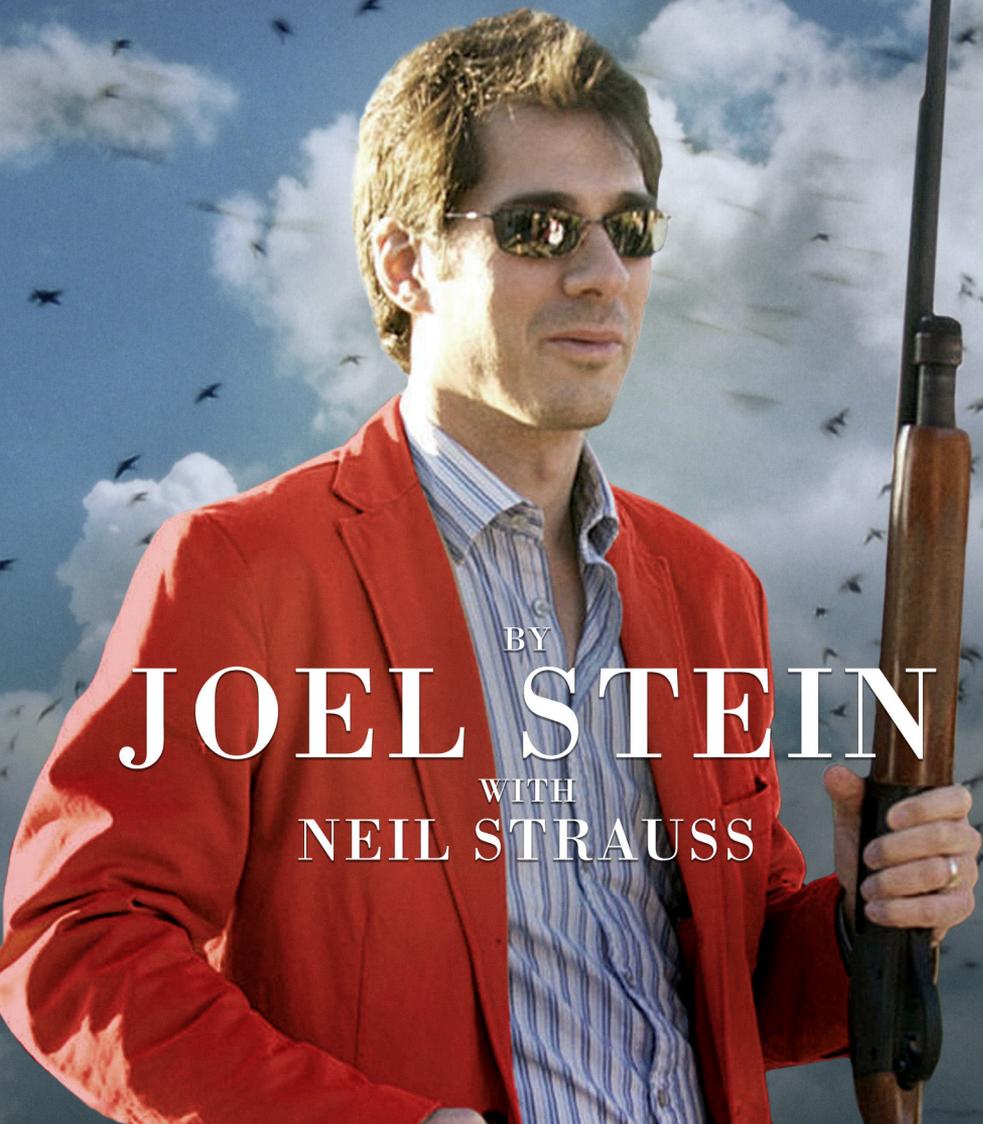


ROGUE JOURNALIST

An Even More American Life



BY
JOEL STEIN
WITH
NEIL STRAUSS



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JOURNALIST**
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DESIGN : TODD GALLOPO @ MEAT AND POTATOES, INC.

To protect the innocent, the names and identifying details of a small number of individuals have been changed, unless they're famous, in which case it's worth the risk.

To my son, Laszlo. Don't do most of this.
Especially marrying your mom.

“Stop wasting my time.”

—Neil Strauss, highly paid author

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CHAPTER 1



CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

I was 14 when I first told the barber to leave my hair long in the back.

It was another six years before I let another barber touch the back.

I would have what people have come to call a mullet.

But that was never my plan. I wanted to be a hippie.

I just got it wrong.

The barbershop was a small, sterile room in Edison, N.J., run by two Italians named Nick and Al. I'm not sure they even liked each other. Al seemed to be the more serious of the two, so my mom pushed me toward him because she thought he'd give me a good haircut. So I blame Al's New Jersey Italian upbringing. And my own confusion.

I liked the Grateful Dead. I'd seen them live. I even tie-dyed my bedsheets with my friend Mike, who was just a little beneath me on the social pecking order because of his crutches. He had a great sense of humor, but because he was so shy, I could simply repeat his jokes and get all the credit—something I've continued to do to this day.

But more than the Grateful Dead, I liked the Who, who were most distinctly not hippies. They were loud, brash and rebellious. Which was how I wanted to be. To a certain point.

The problem was that I wanted to be rebellious. But I didn't want to suffer any consequences for it. So I could be smart-ass enough to get kicked out of class but not criminal enough to get kicked out of school. I remember asking my parents if Hebrew-school grades counted for college, and when they said no, I thought, Game over. I can do whatever I want there.

So growing my hair long, but only in the back, where no one could see it, seemed like the perfect compromise.

By 11th grade, it had grown to Cher length. I was wearing, at the time, my dad's old Army jacket, sweatpants, large brown-framed spectacles and a gold chain, so that I looked like a cross between Dylan Klebold and the other kid (if he wore David Koresh glasses). Sadly, the most havoc I could ever work up the guts to wreak was throwing a dried apricot

at Tommy Reynolds, for which I was suspended. Of course, I did this only after I had been accepted to college.

When I was suspended, I asked the principal what the consequences would be.

"You can't come to school tomorrow," he informed me.

"Will it count as an absence?" I asked, because I was allowed only 12 a year and I wanted 12 extra beach days. Even though I hated the beach, girls went there. And I could stare at them all day.

"No," he replied. "We consider it a privilege to come to school."

After another 15 minutes, once I had established that there were no negative consequences to the suspension, I allowed them to revoke that privilege for a day.

So Tommy took an absence that day and came over to my house, where we played Atari 2600 games and I threw dried apricots at him with impunity.

Amazingly, despite the mullet, girls still talked to me. The first person I kissed was Jackie Tudor. At a party, we were shoved into a dark room, where we lay on the bed and made out. I assumed she'd done this often, especially since she'd dated my friend Scott Katz, who looked like a Mexican soap-opera star. But it turned out she'd never kissed anyone before, which made me feel superior to Scott for the rest of

school and possibly life. She continued to see me afterward and went on to explain the clitoris to me, a concept I still don't exactly understand.

As the mullet continued to grow, so too did the breasts on the women I dated. Until by my sophomore year of college, at Stanford, my hair was halfway down my back and my girlfriend Heather was a C cup. She was a tall blonde from Oregon who was smarter, older and more emotional than I was. I had started hanging out with her because she lived in my dorm. But, much like Scott Katz, I was too scared to kiss her. Since I was part of dorm government, the whole dormitory pitched in and decided to host a giant sleepover party in the hills next to the Dish (an enormous satellite designed for Stanford scientists to communicate with aliens and get the Spice Channel free) solely so I could cross the physical divide with her.

That night, as we lay in sleeping bags together, I stroked her hair and rubbed my fingers around her lips. She opened her mouth and began sucking on my finger. That's when I knew: I was in love.

Now that I had succeeded in my goal of kissing Heather, I quit dorm government. We dated for the rest of the school year. The following summer, I found a job working for the *Paradise Post*, a small newspaper in northern California. She

had graduated and was working as a paralegal¹ in Palo Alto. I'd drive three hours every weekend to see her. She kept accusing me of cheating on her. Despite having a mullet, I actually did have opportunities to cheat, though I never did because she had sucked my finger and I was in love. I would protest my innocence for hours. I didn't know where these accusations were coming from. I thought it was a sign of how much she cared about me. I should have known, however, that it was a sign she was cheating herself.

The next year, while I was in school, she showed up in my dorm room—wearing her lawyer skirt-suit—and dumped me. For months afterward, we'd hang out, and I'd try to figure out what I'd done wrong and if, one day, we could date again if I could fix whatever was wrong with me. My mother and father were divorcing at the time. She always accused him of being a rock, devoid of emotion, and I worried that maybe I was the same: that I couldn't give Heather the warmth and love and emotional connection she needed. It wasn't until years later that she told me what the problem was: she was sleeping with someone else.

Once I realized there was no way to recover the relationship, I went into a depression for several weeks. I stopped eating, skipped classes, played *Chicago XIV* a lot and didn't talk about anything else with my friends, a few of whom

¹ She's now a bigshot lawyer in Los Angeles and hopefully still feels bad enough about dumping me not to sue me for what follows.

I ended up fooling around with. That was when I realized that being emotionally shattered wasn't all that bad a thing. I was actually able to step outside myself and think, Wow, so this is what it's like in all the songs and books and romantic English poems I make fun of. Obviously, I'd led an incredibly sheltered life up to this point.

On one of my rare trips into the sunlight, I went to Super-cuts. One of the barbers there was a petite woman with short, dark hair. I asked her to cut a little off the back, so that no one would confuse me with Loretta Lynn. To this day, I still feel I owe her a thank-you note. Because she accidentally cut too much off. Or at least claimed it was an accident.

"What do you want to do?" she asked afterward, with what I could swear was a trace of a smile.

Since I had no attachment to myself or what I looked like for the first time in perhaps my whole life, I told her, "Go ahead. Whatever you think is best."

So she did what she thought was best.

When I looked at myself in the mirror afterward, I felt exposed and vulnerable. Not only could I no longer hide behind my hair, but I no longer had my hair to give me an identity. I wasn't a hippie. I wasn't a rebel. I wasn't a sarcastic, nerdy Jersey guy with a lot of attitude. I was me.

However, I still had my gold chain.

CHAPTER 2



TURNING POINT THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

His name was Andrew Berkowitz. He wrote a humor column for the *Stanford Daily*. And every Friday, when his articles came out, people would read about his experiences driving the Wienermobile for Oscar Mayer or whatever else he had screwed up that week and talk about him as if he were some sort of deity.

I wasn't talented enough to be in the marching band, let alone be a rock star. And I wasn't athletic enough to play golf, let alone be the quarterback on the Stanford football team. But after reading Berkowitz's columns, I realized that writing was something a wimpy smart-aleck Jewish kid could do. After all, no one would have to look at me.

I'd always been a fan of humor writers like Dave Barry and Roy Blount Jr. and had even written a letter to *The David Letterman Show* that they'd actually read on the air. So far, that had been the highlight of my life. It was the fifth letter I'd written to the show. With the first four, I'd tried to be funny. This time, I'd realized that the key was to try to be funny but simply to give Letterman a setup for his own joke. Even then I was trying to crack the code that would get me a laugh and attention.

As part of my Stanford application, I'd actually written a Letterman-style top 10 list. Years later, I found the admissions officers' notes on my application. They'd written: "Thinks he's funnier than he is. He could be very annoying."

They had me nailed.

At the beginning of one semester, when I knew no one would be in the office of the *Stanford Daily*, I dropped a column I had written in the paper's inbox. The story was a Dave Barry rip-off about fruit flies and was based on something I had read in the *San Jose Mercury News*. Even though it wasn't very good, I had studied the *Stanford Daily* and figured out how many words were in a column. So I wrote it exactly to the paper's specifications.

A couple of days later, the editor of the opinion section, a brash Long Island control freak named Mara, called me.

"We're considering this," she said. "We have a couple of candidates, so we're asking the top applicants to submit a second column."

The phone call surprised me, not just because the newspaper was actually interested in my writing, but because it was so formal and businesslike. I'd never had to sound professional on the phone before.

I began racking my brain to think of something good to write. When that didn't work, I went where everyone goes to find good ideas: other people's writing. In the *Stanford Daily*, I found a small ad for donors for a sperm bank. They were offering \$30, which was \$30 more than the *Stanford Daily* would be paying me for the column.

So I brought my friend Patty to the sperm bank. She'd volunteered to help extract the sample, even though she'd never even seen me naked before, let alone sucked on my finger. I filled out paperwork in which I was asked questions about my ethnicity and my college-entrance examinations. Outside of the SAT scores, which I'd never known were genetic before that point, I felt as though I was an unworthy specimen, that I wasn't blonde, blue-eyed or tall enough to replicate.

Fortunately, they let me slide by. But unfortunately, they wouldn't let Patty be my fluffer. I guess that would

have made the whole procedure entertainment instead of medicine. They led me alone into what looked like a doctor's examination room and handed me a specimen cup to deposit my sperm in. On a shelf were black binders smooth enough to clean jizz off, each one containing a different magazine. Rather than simply stocking soft-core like *Playboy*, some scientist had gone out and purchased fetish material of every race, nationality and kink imaginable, from shaved Asian dominatrixes to elderly people engaged in water sports.

As I looked through the collection, I realized two things. The first was that even though I was a guy willing to masturbate in a cup for a column, there were still people out there who were more pathetic than I was. The second realization was that there would be consequences. What if someone got my sperm and had a child, and 18 years later some angsty, half-nerdy-Jewish teenager came looking for me? And what if I got married to Heather or someone, had a daughter, and somehow she hooked up with my sperm-donor son and they had some sort of deformed child? It wasn't worth destroying three generations just for the joke of an article.

But if I didn't go through with it, I wouldn't have a very good story. And I wouldn't get a column in the *Stanford Daily*.

So I stood there in the room, staring at the best pornography collection known to man, and, as with most things in

my life, chickened out.

It just wasn't worth it. I'd masturbated in some weird, pathetic places in my life, but this one I'd have to admit to in print.

I returned to the reception desk with the empty cup and told them, "I'm sorry. I changed my mind."

The receptionist looked at me and gave me a sympathetic smile, as if to say, It's okay. Not everyone can get it up.

I wanted to tell her the truth, but instead I trudged back to the dorm room with Patty, dejected. I didn't have anything to write about, and the column was due the following day.

"I totally failed," I told my friend Shawn.

"No, you didn't," he responded. "You just told me a really funny story."

So I took his advice. It was embarrassing to talk about masturbating in the school paper, and for precisely that reason I got the columnist job. From that experience, I learned to grow a callus over the natural shame that has been innate in human beings since the moment Adam first covered up his nuts. If I could take control over a story and explain the entire thought process behind whatever humiliating experience I'd just been subjected to, it somehow felt okay to disclose.

In fact, when I graduated, that was the only thing people remembered about me. I may not have been a rock star. I

may not have been the quarterback. But at least I was the
“sperm-donation guy.”

CHAPTER 3



RISE AGAINST THE ODDS

After graduating, while panicking about what to do in real life, I went to a local bookstore called Kepler's and copied the address out of every magazine. I wrote to each one, begging for a job.

Eventually, the editor of *Martha Stewart Living* called me back. Actually, she called my dad, because I didn't have my own phone at the time. I'd chosen not to stay with my mom, because last time I'd visited there was a guy named Mike living there whom, unbeknownst to me, she had started dating at some point while I was in college.

Martha Stewart Omnimedia sent me to Danbury, Conn., and put me up in a Days Inn Hotel, which was much cleaner

and more spacious than my dorm room. And I didn't have to make my own bed.

I started writing for *The Martha Stewart Show*. Six weeks into the job, Martha Stewart fired me so she could hire her best friend. On the bright side, a woman I was dating named Lorelei drove to the motel that night to give me pity sex.

Twelve hours later, Martha Stewart rehired me. Evidently, before firing me, she'd forgotten to ask my replacement if she wanted the job. I planned to confront Stewart about this flagrant lack of respect, but I chickened out.²

I was fired again 10 months later.

I was discouraged, and figured that if a career in writing didn't work out, I could go to law school, which my father had been pushing on me since I was 12 years old. A tough vending-business owner from the Bronx, he always regretted having raised a wimp whose younger sister was far tougher than he was. By the time I was 17, he'd basically given up on me after noticing that I refused to swallow pills because I was afraid they'd get caught in my throat; got a black eye in a fight because I didn't have the guts to actually hit the guy back; and fainted at the sight of blood, ruling out the possibility of medical school.

Law school, however, didn't seem like all that bad an option, because at least one day I could become Heather's

boss and then she'd have sex with me.

But, just in the nick of time, a friend who'd been a production manager at *Martha Stewart Living* was hired at *Time Out New York* magazine and recommended me for a job there as sports editor. In my 23 years, I'd been to half a professional football game. I'd also been to several college basketball games as favors to my roommate, who was on the team, though I usually read Nietzsche the whole time.

So *Time Out* hired me, which goes to show it's not how talented you are, it's whom you know.

I watched SportsCenter nonstop to prepare for the job, but fortunately the magazine soon allowed me to write for other sections. One afternoon, an editor from *Time* magazine named Josh Ramo called. I was used to editors from major publications calling to ask for my sources for stories, and then stealing them, so I was rude to him at first.

But then he said, "I like your writing—I have a story idea for you," and I got a lot nicer.

Excitement ran through me, followed closely by crippling fear and self-doubt. As with everything else in life so far, every time I got close to something I wanted, I tended to think I couldn't handle it and got stomachaches.

Ramo wanted me to find the best video-game player in the world and write a mock-serious *Sports Illustrated*-style

² So, Martha Stewart, if you're reading this, consider yourself confronted.

profile of him or her.³

So I called Nintendo and asked who the best video-game player in the world was. Then I took a week of vacation, because *Time Out* didn't allow its writers to freelance, and flew to Kansas City, Kans., to meet the regional video-game champion. His specialties were fighting games and driving games. He was 13. He'd grown up poor and referred to magazines as "books."

We went to the local game shop, where he hung out since he couldn't afford the gaming consoles himself. I suggested playing *Mortal Kombat* together since I thought it would be a funny moment in the story when he crucified me in the game. So I just randomly pressed buttons—and beat him.

That was when I started to get worried about the article.

A few days later, I went to the Mall of America to watch him compete in *Crash Bandicoot*. He got knocked out in the first round by some rich white kid who could afford his own gaming system.

I returned to my hotel room, panicked because the story was due the next day and the kid was a loser. I sat at the desk for two hours, unable to come up with a single meaningful word. I'd never had a problem writing stories for *Time Out*, but now the stakes were higher. I imagined millions of serious, older, well-dressed people who believed in Jesus

reading the story, and I didn't know how to speak to them. We had nothing in common.

Finally I left the room and took a drive to clear my head. Half an hour later, I found myself in a suburb and pulled into a White Castle drive-thru for caffeine.

"Can I help you?" a woman's voice crackled in the loudspeaker.

For some reason, I heard the words "I just need to talk" come out of my mouth. I guess the woman seemed friendly, and female, like the barber at Supercuts. I actually pictured her as looking like that woman.

"What's the matter?" she asked. It must have been a slow night.

"Listen, I got hired by *Time* magazine to write this article ..."

I spelled the whole story out to her, in what would have been excruciating detail for her if she were a bartender, a waitress or my mother.

"They wouldn't have hired you if they didn't know you could do it," she said. It was a perceptive thing to say, and much cheaper than therapy. In fact, it was even cheaper than McDonald's.

She gave me a three-minute pep talk, during which I not only gained confidence but also started to imagine her

³ Obviously it would be a him. I just don't want to appear sexist, which I'm not. Obviously.

as my soulmate.

I then drove to the window to pick up my iced tea and was crestfallen to discover that there was no chemistry.

I raced back to the hotel and pounded out the story that night. The editors at the magazine liked it enough to assign me another story that involved meeting a woman who ran an online cemetery for pets and a man who took pictures of celebrities' driveways.

It was the beginning of my tenure as the weird guy at *Time*.

CHAPTER 4



CELEBRITY NAME-DROPPING

Put down your pen. There's no need to stop reading this and start writing that fan letter. No need, because Robert Goulet beat you to it. During the highest point of my tenure at *Time*, he sent me a letter saying that I am "a sheer delight."

He then added, "Can we meet, and can you just let me hang out and listen and observe?"

For those of you who have never gotten a mash note from a Broadway star, let me inform you that Goulet letters are not sent through the U.S. mail but are inserted into FedEx envelopes. Somebody sold more *Man of La Mancha* albums than we thought.

Although it was not my policy to answer fan mail, this

policy had never been tested, so I reversed it and wrote Goulet, asking him to be my celebrity pen pal.

“I really don’t need a pen pal!” he wrote on the back of my first Goulet Christmas card, on the front of which I was introduced, twice, to a pleasantly revealing picture of his wife Vera.

“What I need is a buddy! Will you be my buddy???” Underneath, he drew an angry alien.

I decided it was best to call. After I listened to some Goulet tunes while on hold, Goulet picked up, talking loudly and frequently calling me “the kid.”

Our relationship flourished over the next year, with letters, free Goulet CDs and voice-mail critiques of my columns: “Armpit-smelling? There’s something wrong with you, kid.”

When I called to tell him I was coming to Vegas, he invited me to dinner and drinks at the maison de Goulet. This would be a celebrity who was meeting me not to get his or her ego stroked (or shattered) in a story but because he wanted to be my friend. If a celebrity treated me as if I were famous, I thought, then maybe I actually was famous. And my father and grandmother were big Goulet fans, so perhaps they’d finally respect my career choice. Unfortunately, Heather had no idea who Robert Goulet was and still

wouldn’t sleep with me.

After passing the guard in Goulet’s gated community, I had trouble locating his house, until I spotted the man himself running down a circular driveway toward my car. He grabbed my shoulder, slapped me across the face, and yelled, “How are you, kid?!”

He and Vera gave me a tour of their huge house, which contained several thrones and swords from Camelot, an oil painting of Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn in *On a Golden Pond* and a hallway of pictures of Goulet with famous people, most of whose names none of us could remember. He reads four newspapers a day and all the newsmagazines, from which he clips his favorite articles. That, plus the slapping and his habit of breaking into song, and he reminded me a bit of a dangerous homeless man, only better-looking.

He pulled out a file and asked me questions about my columns, most of which were either about my parents or women, who Heather always thought were her and then chewed me out about. Then he gave a dramatic reading of Maureen Dowd’s *New York Times* column, which he’d gone over with a highlighter and on which he’d used a ballpoint pen to mark down “Wow.” He gave more *wows* to Dowd than Michael Douglas ever did.

We went to Picasso, a restaurant where diners are surrounded by real Picassos. None got as much attention as Goulet, who told jokes and flirted with the waitstaff (where-in *flirting* means “grabbing ass”). I learned much, like that Sinatra called him for singing advice and that “zemelheimer” is his euphemism for an erection. He was the biggest person I’d ever met—an Ali in a sea of Wayne Newtons.

If Maureen Dowd has an ounce of sense in her chad-addled head, she’ll grab the next flight to Vegas. I later sent Dowd a case of wine to apologize for making the Michael Douglas joke in an article I wrote.

She sent it back to me.

Years afterward, I wrote about my feud with Dowd in the Los Angeles *Times* and said a few nice words about her new book. She sent me a thank-you note and a bottle of wine—the exact same California chardonnay I’d originally sent her. That’s when I learned that what makes a writer happy is not gifts or apologies. It’s telling them they’re a good writer.

CHAPTER 5



**HITTING
ROCK BOTTOM**

I got cheated out of an Emmy. It's a long story. Suffice it to say, I had trouble sleeping that night.

CHAPTER 6
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

REDEMPTION
AND RECOVERY

On April 29, 2009, my son Laszlo was born. I thought about Robert Goulet and my grandfather, and how they both would have loved to have seen him. But they were both dead.

And one day, I will be too.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been an arduous and costly journey to bring this book into the world. It would not have been possible without a few people who stood by me in my darkest hours. I would like to thank, first and foremost, my wife Cassandra, who put up with my violent mood swings during the creation of this book. I'm sorry I wasn't there to see Laszlo grow from five months, five days and a morning old to five months, five days and an afternoon old. I can only hope this does not leave any permanent scars on his delicate psyche. Laszlo, I did it for you. One day I hope you'll understand.

I would also like to thank my editors at *Time*, Josh Tyrangiel and Rick Stengel, who gave me a leave of absence to put this memoir together. And thanks to Todd Gallopo of Meat and Potatoes for designing this book in the hour before his flight to Las Vegas. May your honey-roasted peanuts be free.

Finally, I would like to thank God, even though I don't believe in him. I just don't want to alienate religious people so much that they won't buy this book.

JOEL STEIN has 834,945 followers on Twitter and regularly Googles himself. He also writes for *Time* magazine; has appeared on HBO, VH1, and E!; and has written for several TV shows that were either canceled or never aired. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and son.

