

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

by John Kenney (2012)

Comedy is a serious business. The best comedy is usually edgy and topical for the target audience. Young people frequent comedy clubs more often than people like me, who need to be in bed by 9:30 or else they turn into turnips. Therefore, the most popular stand-up comedians are usually of the generation the audience they play to most of the time. Obviously, good older ones persist but even the best often end up playing to audiences of their own vintage; Billy Connolly, Robin Williams and Dame Edna, I'm looking at you.

It's the same with books. Many authors start out writing funny, edgy stuff that gels perfectly with their peers in a coming-of-age type of scenario. Okay, not Dostoyevsky or Kafka, but many. Every generation has them and some are all time greats (F Scott Fitzgerald, J D Salinger, and Joseph Heller). Then, as they get older, they get less funny and more reflective; their hubris is the belief that people should value their insights on life. Think Nick Hornby. Critics describe those later books as witty, sardonic, mordant, trenchant, astringent, incisive, polemic... Pick a few and string them together until you get the word count up but, for me, that means "once was funny."

Generation X-er John Kenney's first book, "Truth in Advertising," is a case in point. There's a bit of Finbar Dolan in all of us, or once was. He's Holden Caulfield moved forward 60 years but much more amusing. He works at the broad sludgy base, rather than the pointy end, of the advertising industry: an anti-Don Draper. He's late thirties, he's just called off his wedding because of he can't commit, he's estranged from his father but the old man is now very ill and his siblings are shits. On Christmas Eve, as Fin is about to leave for a holiday in warmer climes, he gets his big break. He must create an iconic commercial for a biodegradable non-toxic diaper to be launched during the "Superbowl."

The big themes are guilt and forgiveness, love and like, fathers and sons, ambition and sloth. The clueless narrator says something hilarious on almost every page; I laughed out loud at times. The film rights have probably been sold with Owen Wilson, Ben Stiller or Adam Sandler (pick one) in the lead.

What I wonder is, where will Kenney go next? "Truth in Advertising" reminded me of the early works of another East Coast US writer of similar vintage: Jonathan Tropper. I'll quote a line from a review of his 2012 book, 'One Last Thing Before I Go.' Tropper "has a knack for combining flippant with rueful to achieve sharp and piercing." Pity he's not funny anymore. (Try 'The Book of Joe' or 'Everything Changes' instead.)

Four stars

Robert Hitchins March 2013

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