

# FEATURES

**Features Editor:**

 Lisa Toth  
 lisatoth@dailyemerald.com

Monday, October 15, 2001

## Byrne's book redefines sin

■ Forget the commandments; David Byrne's "The New Sins" outlines the 11 sins to avoid



David Byrne 'The New Sins'

By Aaron Shakra  
for the Emerald

I've only met David Byrne once. It was in Seattle in July, and he was autographing copies of his latest book, "The New Sins," in a small corner of the Elliott Bay Book Company. I waited in line and eventually reached the front. There, Byrne not only autographed the dedication page, but also wrote one word in large, capital letters below his signature: "CAREFUL."

"The New Sins" is the kind of book that begs for in-depth discussion. The content is a short 93 pages, but each one demands careful evaluation.

But I didn't know that at the time. I hadn't even had a chance to read the book. So I not only didn't catch his one-word joke, but also missed a once-in-a-lifetime chance to discuss such rich content material with the author himself.

Like Byrne's previous books, — "True Stories," "Strange Ritual" and "Your Action World" — "The New Sins" is hard to place within a specific genre. Emulating a small bible in appearance, it's compact and bound in maroon "pleather." It's bilingual and, according to Byrne's paper "Why I Had to Make This Book" (available on the publisher's Web site), was originally commissioned for an art biennial in Spain. Turn it around and the reader is presented with "Los Nuevos Pacados," a Spanish edition of the text.

To call the content specifically philosophical, humorous, ironic or erudite would be depriving a reader of the line it walks between all of these things. The immediate topic is sins, but the concept isn't nearly as focused or narrow as it seems. In fact, it's the opposite: The ideas presented can be applied universally, but they aren't shoved in the reader's face. At no point is there a specific statement like, "This is the way it is." Because the ideas manifest themselves in such tricky and clever ways, they can be viewed as either entertainment or philosophy or both; readers get to choose.

The book begins with an explanation that sins have been traditionally considered acts of "evil" that one should avoid at all costs. Dispelling this myth, Byrne places these acts in a broader, historical context by explaining that sins are constantly wavering and transient. This leads to a redefinition of sin: something encompassing both the darkness and light. Without one, the other can't exist. Explaining the fluid medium between these opposites, he writes,

"The difference between poison and medicine is in the dose."

Byrne applies his definition to all kinds of interesting topics. He writes, "Words were invented by people who never experienced them. Pride was invented by someone who never felt pride. Sin by someone who never sinned." This fascination with the lines between virtue and vice becomes a foundation for the text and a segue to the heart of the material — the new sins themselves.

One function of these sins is to free the reader from many of the common assumptions contained within everyday life. The concept of "Hope" is described in this fashion. Byrne writes, "Hope allows us to deceive ourselves into thinking that life is parceled into discrete chunks — that our lives are stories beginnings, middles, and ends. That there IS narrative, linearity, and not chaos, chance and luck."

"Cleanliness" is another new sin. Speaking to the anal compulsive in us all, Byrne writes the following passage: "Cleanliness is not next to Godliness. Cleanliness is an artificial concept, a state that does not actually exist. This in itself is not a sin, of course, but the striving for it is."

Each of the sins — there are 11 altogether — has a one to two page entry, and to describe the rest of them would deprive readers of much of the magic and surprise contained

within the book.

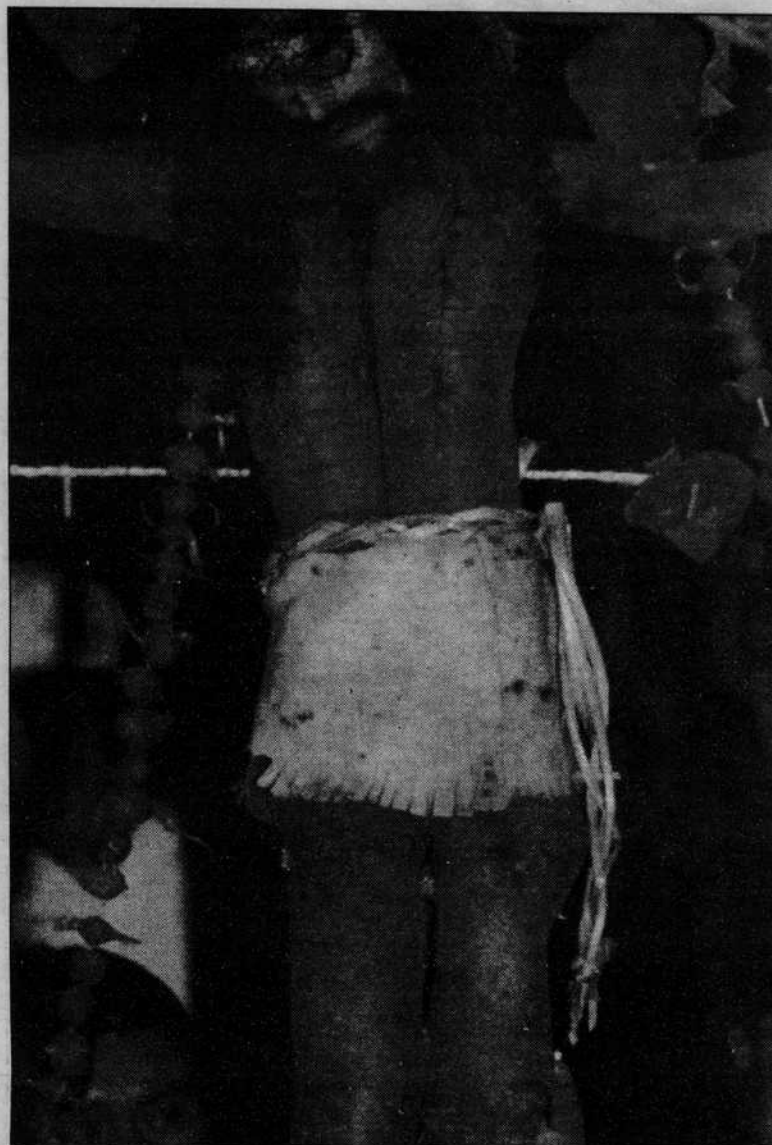
The text is complemented with Byrne's own photographs. These images are sometimes specific, sometimes abstract, but they're really best explained by Byrne himself. Describing them as necessary, he writes the following passage: "The pictures in this book will explain what the text obscures. The text is merely a distraction, a set of breaks, a device to get you to look at the pictures for longer than you would ordinarily."

Readers of "Los Nuevos Pacados" will find an alternate set of images in place of the English edition.

It's often hard to keep works such as these free of ego or pretension, but Byrne counters with a sense of humor aimed at chiding religious texts and "established" ideas. (With deft self-mockery, he also places himself in the fifth rung of his self-diagrammed circle of hell). Readers won't find his name on the cover, either. This is ironic, considering it's his largest piece of written prose, but it is necessary to keep the reader from identifying the ideas with any one person.

"The New Sins" certainly isn't perfect, but it's the most lucid work of Byrne's career. He eschewed the mainstream a long, long time ago to create works such as these: beautiful, obscure and thought-provoking. Read it twice, or more.

Aaron Shakra is a freelance reporter for the Oregon Daily Emerald.



Courtesy Photo

# 125th Ann BLOCK

## Thursday, Live Bands, 3:00

Join in and  
kickoff the  
Homecoming  
week  
celebration:  
Street Fair,  
good food,  
craft vendors

# Anniversary PARTY!

## October 18 —10:00 P.M.

Dr. C & Friends  
TV & The Networks  
The Stores  
Skye  
On the Rocks  
The Deb Cleveland Band

At the EMU Amphitheatre

# 125<sup>th</sup>

anniversary 1876-2001

pride · passion · promise

UNIVERSITY OF  
OREGON

