

INTERVIEW

I'm a fan of "Savage Love," but I know people who find it extremely offensive. Do you have a stock response for those people?

Different people find different shit offensive. If you don't like my column, if you find it offensive, then the simple solution is to not read my column. But I hear all the time from people who find my column totally offensive—without redeeming social importance—and yet read it every damn week. What's up with that?

A stock response? There are plenty of advice columns out there for folks who think I'm too rough. Don't like me? Read Ann, read Abbey. Read the *Playboy* Advisor.

I've always found your column to be informative, even if the presentation is—how shall I say—less than polite. Do you have any formal training as a counselor, and what kind of research do you do to keep abreast of the latest developments in sexology?

No formal training at all, actually. Far from disqualifying me from the advice gig, a lack of formal training would seem to put me in some very good company: My heroes and role models Ann Landers and Abigail van Buren have no formal training either. People sometimes forget that advice, according to my dictionary, is "an opinion about what could or should be done." People write, ask for my opinion, and I...let 'em have it. If they don't like it, or want another opinion, they can disregard my advice or seek out other advice, you know?

As for sex, as gay men, I think—if I may make a sweeping generalization—we know more about sex than straight people do. Sex is what makes us *not* straight people, after all, it's what sets us apart. So we tend to do more reading, thinking and *doing* about sex than your average straight person. I mean, if we don't come to some sort of informed understanding of sex—straight and gay—we can never fully understand who we are, and why we are. So that's why I, like a lot of gay men, am so knowledgeable about sex. Plus, well, I have a lot of sex. For research purposes.

I've only ever read "Savage Love" in straight-by-default media. Does it appear in any queer newspapers, or have you considered doing strictly queer columns?

You know, the column started out being an advice column for straight people by a gay person, and it was intended to run in only straight-by-default papers. (I like that phrase!) It gives the column a certain tension, know what I mean? Here's a gay man telling straight people what to do, how to have sex, and sometimes, why their full of shit. It's a great job, a *dream* job. I yell at straight people for a living!

So I don't think the column would work in gay newspapers, you know what I mean? I think what makes the column interesting is that it's this gay voice in straight newspapers addressing straight people about straight issues.

The subversive element, of course, is that I sometimes talk about gay issues; since straight people read my column, as it's usually about them, they will also—out of habit—read my

Advice is often hard to take, but giving it sure can be fun. Just ask Dan

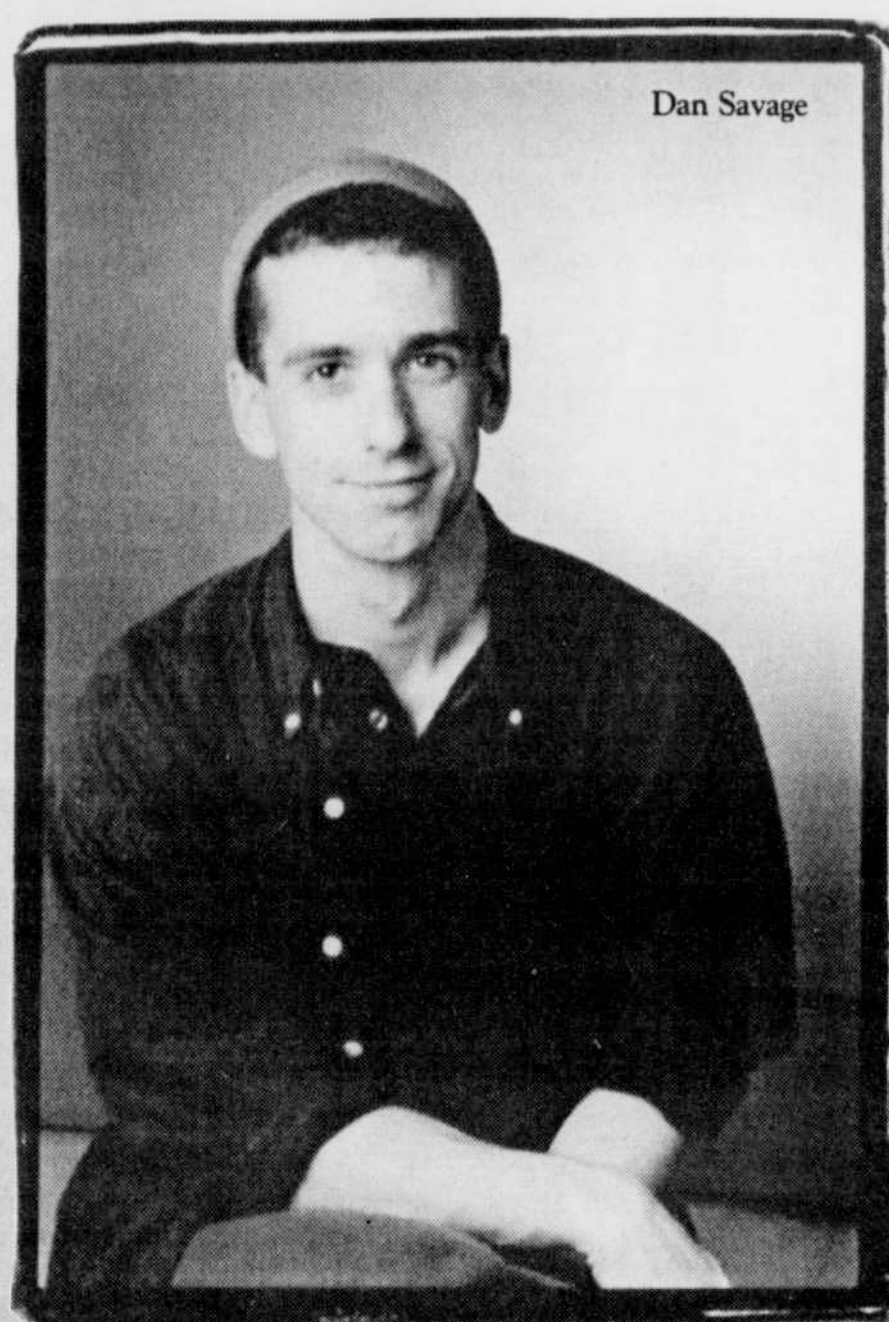
Savage, author of the syndicated column "Savage Love."

He is a gay man who gives advice—mostly about sex and mostly to heterosexuals.

His caustic wit and bluntness may at times offend, but it's a trademark that has earned him a loyal following.

Queer people should listen up, too, because Savage is subversive. He's chipping away at Puritanism, working for sexual liberation, bringing enlightenment to the ignorant.

Like a footsoldier in the war against bad sex, I support Savage's mission of education and am proud to be on his team. For the sake of all, I have tapped the font of wisdom known affectionately as Dear Faggot, and here's what it told me...



Dan Savage

PHOTO BY MARK VAN S

The noble Savage

Advice columnist Dan Savage shines a queer light on sex, a subject too often kept in the dark

BY CHRISTOPHER D. CUTTONE

column when it's about us. I can basically trick straight people into reading columns about gay marriage or AIDS issues or queer rights that they wouldn't read normally.

Your column seems to get a lot of ignorant questions, and your responses can be very harsh—more New York City than Northwest. Is it tedious to deal with the morons of the world or does it give you a power trip?

Well, the morons of the world are the ones who need the most help, you know? Super-smart attacks generally don't write in with questions about their problems, as they're smart enough to figure 'em out on their own. So, yes, a lot of the questions are ignorant—but that's what I'm here for, to help the ignorant.

But I do get smart letters from folks, and I like to print them too. Back-and-forths around complicated issues, like race or gender or AIDS.

As for power trips, well, I won't lie and tell you that being in charge of the column—what goes in, getting the last word—isn't fun. It is fun, and I guess that's a power trip!

What's your emotional response when you

read a letter from someone who's really confused and messed up?

Sometimes I do get letters that break my fucking heart. From a woman who's been raped, or a 14-year-old gay boy getting bashed every day in school. I often write these folks personally, and do use serious questions in the column from time to time. But, yeah, sometimes sitting down with the mail is a heartbreaker.

Everyone knows it's easier to solve other people's problems. What are some of your personal neuroses?

Well, I was a fat kid (which makes a person grow up funny and mean), so I'm not comfortable being naked. Never could go to bathhouses or sex clubs, and sometimes have a hard time showering in front of my boyfriend on those days I "feel" fat. It's dumb, I'm not heavy now, but it's hard to shake.

Other than that...well, I have an average share of mental problems I guess. There have been times when I've answered a relationship question, and a boyfriend came to me and said, "Why can't you take your own advice!?"

Physician-heal-thyself stuff. Sometimes I feel like a doctor who tells his patients they shouldn't smoke or eat crap food, but who goes out after work for a smoke and a cheeseburger.

Were you bossy as a child? Do you give advice to friends, or is it just a 9-5 thing?

You know, I was one of those little asexual types all through grade school and high school that all the other kids confided in. So I was an advice guy for a long time before I started doing it professionally.

And, yes, I give advice to friends...sometimes though, people on the street will ask me for advice, and that can be...troubling. Not because I don't like to give advice, or that I resent being asked in, say, the grocery store for advice, but sometimes I'm fresh out, you know? Sometimes I've given all the advice I can that day, and I'm just a zombie, and someone will ask me a long complicated relationship question, and all I'm thinking is, "Must go watch *Hard Copy* or Jerry Springer, need to veg out."

How long do you think you can keep doling out wisdom, and what are your future plans?

Well, my boyfriend and I just adopted a kid, so my immediate plans are changing diapers and preparing bottles of formula. (We decided not to breast feed.)

As for this gig, well, I've been doing it for seven years, I love it, and it's a blast. I still really enjoy it. When it's not fun anymore, I'll quit and run for Congress or something.

I'd say you're pretty famous but I don't think a lot of people know what you look like. How does it feel to be an invisible cultural icon? Do you meet glamorous people or get extra attention at restaurants? Do you hang out with other cultural icons, and have you ever met Dear Abby or Ask Isadora?

I've met Miss Isadora. We don't get along. She's a sourpuss, and she thinks I'm the devil.

I would kill to meet Ann or Abbey. Unfortunately, advice columnists are a lot like vampires—we don't hang out in packs. We're loners. So there are no conventions, no meeting for coffee to compare notes.

As for being a cultural icon, well, I don't feel like one. I'm in a position where I get to have a weekly 1200-word chat with folks about my favorite subject: sex. There's nothing glam about it. I would be having these conversations—talking about sex, giving advice—if I didn't write the column, so I'm just lucky that I get paid to do what I would do for free anyway.

And, while a lot of people don't know what I look like, they're about to find out. I have a column collection coming out this fall published by Dutton, and my picture is on the cover. So no more invisible.

■ DAN SAVAGE visits the Reed College Queer Alliance on Sunday, April 12, at 1 pm in Vollum Lecture Hall. The event is free. For more information, call 788-6692.

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