

BOOKS

Funny by association

Nothing new in Ellen's latest, but it's still a laugh riot

BY ELS DEBBAUT

Ellen DeGeneres has put a delightful spin on history quite a few times. In 1986 she was the first (and only) female comic on *The Tonight Show* who Johnny Carson asked to sit down with him after the performance, and in 1997 her character in *Ellen* was the first openly gay leading role in prime time. (Perhaps you heard about that.)

Many awards later, DeGeneres is chairing her own daytime talk show and kids and adults alike have adopted her *Finding Nemo* screen persona Dora's cheery anthem "just keep swimming, just keep swimming..."

Now the bona fide lesbian icon has published her second book, appropriately called *The Funny Thing Is...* (Simon & Schuster, 2003, \$23 hardcover).

The title, as the author explains, is designed to hook the everyday book buyer, and this took a lot of laborious thinking. She went from testing the concept of asking stores for a nameless book, to experimenting with simple one-word titles such as *funny!* (like, she notes, Madonna's sex), to finally deciding on *The Funny Thing Is...* because "when you hear it, you know you're going to hear an entertaining story. Perfect for essays written by a comic or even a book on the state of Social Security."

This latest Ellen-in-print is, like her performances, a collection of essays made up of keen observations on a number of mundane issues—spruced up with a whole lot of wit and imagination and served in DeGeneres' trademark style of endlessly wandering associations.

The book is not, she warns, for readers looking for "never-before-revealed insights into who I am.... If so, here's a good one for you, right off the bat: If anyone knows me at all, they know I enjoy the smell of a freshly washed monkey."

This is your first hint that you're not going to get the latest dish on her girlfriend, her show or whether she makes crank phone calls to Anne Heche. It's all about the next punch line.

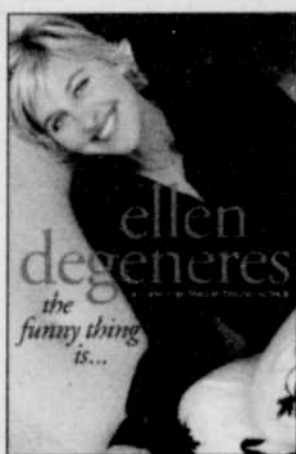
Chapters include guidelines on how to have brunch with Paula Abdul, Diane Sawyer, Gloria Steinem, Donatella Versace, Ed Begley Jr. and Eminem (all at the same time), ponderings on the ups of prison life (time to: collect pen pals, work out abs, get a Ph.D.), rescue tips for embarrassing moments like forgetting people's names or accidentally flipping off John Travolta, recollections of her fondue and Chablis afternoon with God and rantings about modern technology. ("Just try and find the start of that toilet paper roll.... You think, surely I've gone around once or twice by now.")

The cover does not lie: The book bursts with hilarious stories. Unfortunately, though, a lot of them are echoing the comic's latest live show. I was hoping for less déjà vu and more fresh.

I was also struck with the uncomfortable feeling of peeking into DeGeneres' manuscripts. The essays are clearly formatted for stage performance. Lines only really come into their full effect with the addition of DeGeneres' gestures, pauses, expressions, little dances and perfect intonation.

You can try to add these yourself as you make your way through the book, but why not just rent the next HBO special instead? Still, if you like to read more than watch, buy *The Funny Thing Is...* It's all a little predictable but still great fun. **JM**

ELS DEBBAUT is a Portland free-lance writer.



Deep in the heart of Chelsea

Comic achieves mixed results through use of extremes

BY LISA BRADSHAW

Welcome to the first collection of *Chelsea Boys* (Alyson, 2003, \$13.95 softcover), a collaboration between New York gay writers/illustrators Glen Hanson and Allan Neuwirth, who've been penning the strip since 1998.

Set in the Chelsea district of New York (and titled with a nod to Andy Warhol's famous film *The Chelsea Girls*), the narrative stories center around 40-something Nathan, a short, Jewish, Barbra-obsessed gay man, and his two roommates, the young, studly art student Sky (whose muscles are born of yoga, not bench presses) and Soiree, one of the area's prima queens.

Although it takes a little time to enjoy the company of these three and their array of extremely body-conscious, rather self-serving friends, slowly do Hanson and Neuwirth draw you past the facades and into their real worlds of crappy jobs, casual sex and love found and lost.

The drawings are fun to look at—exaggerated bodies of sliver-thin waists, gigantic chests and the strip's trademark swollen man-nipples poking through every knit shirt. It's a cartoon of extremes:

Everything—sex, muscles, sweatshops, corporate snobs and even the next-door lesbians—is magnified 100 times in the cartoon's quest to examine queer identity.

Which is part of *Chelsea Boys'* success—and part of its downfall. Plots going one way then jet so far the other, the reader winds up a little lost. And,

like an impatient television sitcom, ends are tied up pretty quickly, often with the use of cheesy, heavy-handed dialogue.

Still, the creators do a generally good job at poking fun at their own community while simultaneously paying homage to it, which is a difficult task at best. And they nail multicultural and multisexual issues and conflicts dead on without batting an eye.

The collection includes some stand-alone, color, fantasy cartoons of Soiree in *The Adventures of Super Diva* and a Soiree cutout paper doll, both of which are hilarious. (The other color strips are rather tasteless and pointless.)

Hanson and Neuwirth reportedly are working on an animated *Chelsea Boys* television show, which would be the first all-queer animated series. Should be pretty interesting considering all the graphic sex. **JM**

LISA BRADSHAW is the Arts & Culture Editor of Just Out.



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