

On the subject of...

The Limbs of Lemon Trees

by Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

The Aberdeen Advocate

Editor's note: If you are a dedicated Democrat, you will probably find some of the following opinion to be vile and irreverent. Nevertheless, I urge you to buck up and read on. This is not a hate piece about Hillary Clinton, but rather it is intended to call your attention to the potential for disaster that comes from mixing the irresistible intoxicant of power with certain human frailties. It applies to Aberdeen, Mississippi in frightening ways and is, therefore, included here.

Over the course of a recent weekend, I found myself reading several online commentaries concerning Democrat presidential hopeful Hillary Rodham Clinton. Reading about anything Clintonian generally gives me a headache. When it comes to my fears about the political aspirations of the former first lady turned New York Senator, I try to leave it all up to God. Every day I pray that the people of the United States will not again fall

prey to the Clinton juggernaut as they did TWICE in the 1990's. The books causing the Internet buzz this week certainly give me hope.

Next month, two biographies about Clinton, *Her Way*, by reporters Jeff Gerth and Don Van Nata and *A Woman in Charge* written by Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame, seem to have the Clinton camp circling the wagons. (Always a good sign that something unflattering is about to happen.) Bits and pieces of the books turned up on the Clinton website on Friday, May 25th – a move almost certainly made to get the ugliness into the open while America was outdoors enjoying the long Memorial Day weekend. This is a wise political move—it is best to let this sort of thing fly when others are occupied elsewhere.

The third book, released in

May and written by political pundit Bay Buchanan (sister of the ultra-conservative former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan) brings news most interesting to me. In her newly released *The Extreme Makeover of Hillary (Rodham) Clinton*, Buchanan paints the Junior Senator from New York as a neurotic narcissist without character who is incapable of original thought.

Buchanan gives us a laundry list of symptoms for a disorder commonly known as clinical narcissism and ascribes them all to Clinton. According to the American Psychiatric Association, individuals beset by this condition are driven by unreasonable feelings of superiority, self-importance and fantasies of unlimited success, fame and/or power. These folks

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An Open Letter to Billy Crews, Chairman and CEO of the Journal Publishing Company

By Contributing Editor Don Rowe

Last week, I sent you a package containing tear sheets from the *Aberdeen Examiner* and *The Amory Advertiser*, along with other information – including issues of *The Aberdeen Advocate* in which I have been very critical of the advertising, news and sports departments at both newspapers. These tear sheets date back to June of 2005 and are proof positive of just how embarrassing your newspapers have become here in Monroe County.

The *Aberdeen Examiner* and *The Amory Advertiser* are owned by the Journal Publishing Company, Inc., which, in turn, is

owned by the nonprofit CRE-ATE Foundation formed by the late George McLean. Many years ago, McLean wrote an article entitled, “*The Good Newspaper*,” in which 11 of the 12 paragraphs in McLean’s story start with the following words: “The good newspaper.”

I won’t bore you by reprinting the entire article, but I will quote the ninth paragraph in which McLean writes: “*The good newspaper....should try to maintain the integrity of its ads as it does that of news stories.*”

In another McLean article entitled, “*A Locally Owned Newspaper Dedicated to the Service of God and Mankind*,” he stated the following: “*We believe that the greatness of a newspaper should be judged not by the size of its profitability, but by the quality of its news and advertising....*”

In addition to his two impressive articles, McLean also outlined 10 principals which supposedly guide your company in its service to the community, several of which are as follows:

“*Human resources are our*

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The Limbs of Lemon Trees

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tell you whatever you want to hear as long as it serves their selfish purposes and embellishes their delusions of superhuman importance. Does any of this sound familiar to you, Aberdeen? It ought to.

Buchanan's book points to several scandals in which Mrs. Clinton and her husband might have saved the nation considerable embarrassment if they had merely bit the bullet and told the truth in the beginning. Instead the Clintons chose to withhold information and stonewall the public. According to Buchanan, it is this habit of Mrs. Clinton's—this viewing of herself to be superior to mere mortals - that often bites her in the backside. Interestingly, the same kinds of consequences play out right here in Aberdeen on a similar scale. (Yes. The world is more interested in Presidents than it is in Aldermen, but no matter how trivial or unimportant the problem might seem in global terms, a lie is a still a lie and a cover-up is a cover-up no matter how large or small the deed.)

Back in my days as a rental property manager, tenants would ask me how clean the rental unit would need to be in order to ensure the return of the cleaning deposit. I always saw it as a very silly question, but I would reply in the only way possible. "In order to redeem your cleaning deposit, the house must be clean. When I say clean I mean *the absence of dirt.*"

Now that I am a student of local politics, my quest is for a different kind of clean. I'm looking for transparency in government. I want to be able to see straight through everything which gets done. I want there to be no secrets. No secret meetings. No secret telephone conference calls. No concealment of anything except personnel and medical records. In my book, any other thing which clouds my view or obstructs my observations is cause for alarm.

Here's an example of how lack of transparency can harm an entire community. Once upon a time, a woman sued the town in which she lived for hiring a person to fill a position even though other applicants were more qualified for the job. As lawsuits go, depositions were eventually taken. In case you've never been deposed it is part of the discovery process and is, essentially, an opportunity for lawyers for both sides to question potential witnesses under oath. It is designed to get all of the information on

the table in order to proceed toward settlement of the matter. In this case, at least one of the city's representatives is alleged to have perjured himself by stating *under oath* that all of the applicants for the vacant position were interviewed.

Now, it may come as a surprise to you, but when the settlement agreement was finally reached, part of the deal was to keep the whole mess under wraps. Names were not to be named and the testimony remained (for the most part) hidden away.

Because the taxpayers would ultimately be forced to pay the bill, the proceedings should have been part of public record but instead were held behind closed doors. It is one thing to protect the privacy of the plaintiff, but it was the defendants (the taxpayers) who were hoodwinked in the end. Had the rest of the community been able to be present at the depositions or had access to the transcripts, a handful of people (the other applicants) would have caught on to the fact that somebody told a big, fat lie. The nice little town's taxpayers not only had to pay the price for poor leadership in heavy settlement costs, but was also left with the kind of leader who would swear an oath to God Almighty, lie through his teeth, then use his power to keep the dirty details out of public sight.

Now, I have no idea how the man in this little example could sleep at night. If it were I, the rest of my days would be spent in dread over the impending lightning bolt from Heaven. I could also tell you that the man in the story claims to be a minister, but that would be too difficult for nice folks like my reader friends to even imagine. (One of my favorite acquaintances reminds me the answer lies in fruit. He says, "This man can call himself an apple tree all day long, but if he's making lemons you *know* the truth already.")

I suspect that the man in our story has Hilliaria (rhymes with malaria) a debilitating and usually fatal disease I just invented. Hilliaria creates in its sufferer delusions of grandeur. Like alcoholism, there is no known cure for Hilliaria. One might eventually persuade the Hilliariac to leave his powerful position, usually, but not always, accomplished by showing him the election results. (Guys like Al Gore take a little more convincing.) The afflicted individual will always have the silly idea he is not

bound by the same rules the rest of us must follow. This malady is, as it turns out, highly contagious. The carrier will cause all good systems with which he comes into contact to crumble. Furthermore, he will infect all of those around him with the dangerous ideas that the law and the system can be beaten without consequence. Eventually, as in the case of all fatal diseases, the carrier, the system, and the people his decisions have touched will all collapse into a putrid heap.

Character counts folks. As you meet and question candidates for office in the coming months, look a little deeper. Look carefully to see what kind of fruit the candidates bear - don't ever take them at their word. I urge you to practice these observations diligently in the upcoming county election. After all, practice makes perfect, and you must all be excellent discerners by the time you choose your next municipal leaders in just under 12 months. We have made far too many bad choices in the past. We can no longer leave our future hanging on the limbs of lemon trees.

Your Municipal Officials

Honorable Cecil Belle, Mayor
125 West Commerce, Aberdeen
369-4165

Ward 1 Alderman Alonzo Sykes
1113 Elk Circle, Aberdeen
369-7705

Ward 2 Alderman Cloyd Garth
310 James Street, Aberdeen
369-5734

Ward 5 Alderman Willie Cook
505 South Matubba, Aberdeen
369-9156

Ward 4 Alderman Brunson Odom
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An Open Letter to Billy Crews

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most vital assets. Without good people you cannot build a good business." (Can you honestly say that "good people" are in place here in Monroe County? Why does the *Aberdeen Examiner* have just one writer, while the *Advertiser* has two, plus Robby Byrd – the so-called editor?)

"The Journal has the special responsibility of...expressing the honest convictions of its editor and publisher without fear or favor." (What editor, what publisher and since when did a "commentary" page take the place of an "editorial" page?)

"The Journal believes that informed, enlightened and active citizens constitute the only sure foundation of a democracy. Therefore, the Journal seeks to become one of the best NEWSpapers in America in cities of comparable size." (Is either weekly paper what McLean would identify as one of the "best NEWSpapers" in the area?)

"Unless a newspaper is read by the people it cannot effectively serve its community." (The *Examiner* used to be one of the largest weeklies in the state, both in terms of column inches and circulation. Have you checked the paper's size or the circulation numbers lately?)

With no disrespect intended, I'm positive that Mr. McLean, in light of his penchant

for having a "good newspaper," would be turning over in his grave had he the opportunity to view the articles you currently have before you.

Charlotte Wolfe, head of the weekly newspaper division, has been aware of these problems for years, yet she has done nothing to correct them. Incredibly, she *has* promoted Byrd no less than three times as if to tell the locals: "I run the weekly division and Byrd stays because I don't care about the mistakes just as long as deadlines are met and the profits keep flowing to Tupelo."

(It took me a while, but I've finally figured out Byrd's problem. It came to me when I read his column in the *Examiner* last summer when he had a so-called "vacation epiphany," after which he wrote: "I realized not everything has to be like work. We're not graded on everything that we do and we don't have to be the best at everything we do – sometimes it's okay just to do something for the sake of doing something." That philosophy is apparent every time I pick up the paper, so he must have his vacation philosophy mixed up with his work philosophy! What say you?)

In years past, you could perhaps afford to sweep things under the rug. Now, thanks to *The Aberdeen Advocate*, your dirty laundry has been exposed to the public here in Aberdeen. I am truly sorry that it has come to this, but after more than a few letters to Wolfe over the past 24 months failed to generate any improvement, I thought it was time to take a new approach.

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As chairman and CEO of the Journal Publishing Company, you are among the "movers and shakers" in Tupelo. Because of your position, you are held in high esteem throughout Northeast Mississippi and by the employees at the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* as well. We who have worked in the weekly division don't necessarily share those same sentiments, however, because we felt as if you and the rest of the Journal Publishing management team considered the weeklies to be the "red-headed step-child" of the organization. As a result, you have also been either oblivious to the content published by your weekly division because of your detachment from the day-to-day operations at the weeklies, or you have dispassionately looked the other way because (unlike McLean) *profitability* has indeed become more important than *quality*.

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An Open Letter to Billy Crews

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What's even more distressing than what has been published, however, is what the readers miss, particularly here in Aberdeen. For example, compare the Railroad Festival tab (Amory) with the Pilgrimage tab (Aberdeen). Better yet, compare the graduation editions included in both papers this year. Aberdeen has used the same bare-bones tab format since at least the mid-90s, with only a color cover featuring members of Aberdeen's Hall of Fame and Hamilton's top students along with head-and-shoulder shots of the graduates in a 12-page tab which included no less than five pages of advertising but nothing else.

The Amory paper, on the other hand, had not only the mug shots for Amory (in color on the cover and then again on the inside), but stories on the commencement exercises for Amory, Hatley and Smithville, pictures of scholarship and award winners, and rosters of the graduating classes which took up approximately 16 broadsheet pages.

In another example of how Aberdeen gets shortchanged, in the summer of 2005, Aberdeen residents waited to see the tests results which were released by the Mississippi Department of Education. So what did we get from the *Aberdeen Examiner*? We got a 30-column inch reprint of a "regional" story by Mack Spencer straight from the pages of the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* which featured a 30-line opening paragraph, a second paragraph of 40 lines and a third of 36 lines – a total of 106 lines and only three paragraphs.

In the ultimate slight to Aberdeen, not once was any mention made of Aberdeen's test scores, nor were there any quotes from either school superintendent Lavon Fluker-Reed or any of her principals. Instead, we got extensive quotes from principals from five schools scattered throughout Northeast Mississippi.

In addition, various test results from Vardaman, Houston, Wheeler, Tupelo. Lee County, Okolona and Benton County were mentioned, but again, not the first word about Aberdeen or the Monroe County Schools (which, I'm sure, was a relief to Reed).

Then there are the layout problems. For example, there was the story of a local *Aberdeen* restaurant owned and operated by an *Aberdeen* brother-sister duo which dominated *The Amory Advertiser* front page, complete with a three-column color picture. But in the *Examiner*, the story is relegated to one column, almost an afterthought, while a poetry reading picture with no story (which, by the way, attracted a total of "approximately eight people") got center stage. Maybe you can explain the logic here, but it's my guess that's what we get when the paper is laid out in Tupelo by people who don't care.

As for the sports section, North Monroe County athletic accomplishments for division foes Amory, Nettleton, etc., are far too often trumpeted in the Aberdeen newspaper when the local residents don't really care nor do they want to read stories of their rivals' successful seasons (not when Aberdeen has trouble winning more than a couple of games in any given sport). Aberdeen readers have also been subjected to weekly updates of former Amory and Nettleton baseball players at Mississippi State and USM, but not one mention has been made of the Rebels' ace pitcher Will Kline, whose parents were raised in Aberdeen and whose grandmother still lives here.

Too, Amory readers were treated to a glowing and somewhat misleading story about a local football player who was no more than a blip on the radar screen as far as his NFL career was concerned, but the story of a real NFL veteran player from Aberdeen who has been a starter for most of his career has been virtually ignored. Also, there are other stories of Aberdeen sports heroes such as our former All-American running



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back who is now an assistant strength coach in the NFL which haven't received any coverage at all.

In summary, this isn't the first time you or members of your staff (Charlotte Wolfe) have received a package or letter like this, but in the past you chose to ignore the problems and do nothing. So, I really don't expect any problems will be fixed or any changes will be made this time either, but maybe you'll prove me wrong.

P.S. The town of Aberdeen really appreciated being left out of the *Journal's* graduation tab!

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The Aberdeen Advocate

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