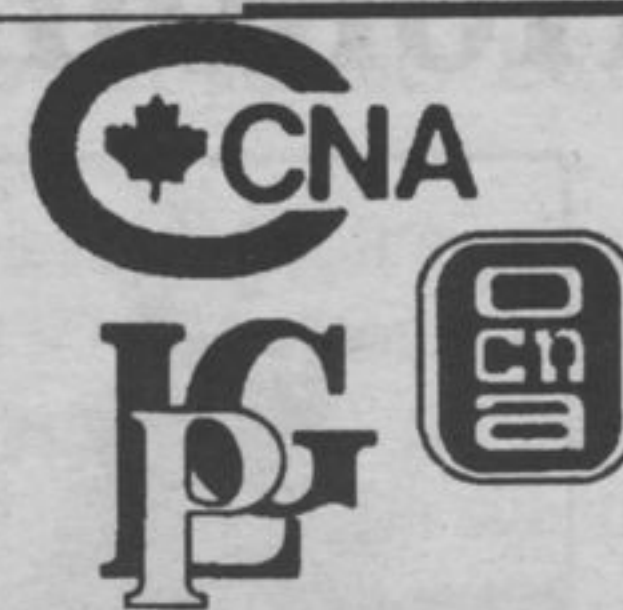


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In this case, better a loveless marriage than an ugly divorce

Speaking as someone who really does try to understand and accommodate Quebec, it must be said that sometimes they're hard to like, let alone love. The french-only sign law—all of Bill 101 for that matter—is a good example of this. Banning my language in any way, shape or form, in what's supposed to be a bilingual country is, well, not friendly. And I've seen pictures of Quebec separatists gleefully burning the Canadian flag. That's not friendly either.

The Economist, a widely respected English magazine, says that at least on the part of French Canada, the English-French marriage is a loveless one. That's a painfully true statement. For a reputedly passionate people, French Canada feel very little passion for us. In fact, they don't even seem to hate us anymore, at least not like they did in the 1970s. Basically, they're indifferent to us personally, and hostile to our language generally.

But, like many couples, most Quebecers prefer the Canadian devil they do know to the independent devil they don't. And while that's not very flattering to the rest of us, there's no need for us to kick them out of bed by voting 'no' in the referendum.

First of all, while some English Canadians do feel passionate about Quebec and its place in Canada, many don't. In fact, there are those would like to see all Quebecers forced to learn English, and are ready to criticize Quebec at the drop of a hat, or whenever they get a government contract. So the loveless marriage bit is far from a one-sided situation.

More importantly, there's our own self-interest, and by 'our', I mean English Canada. We've have quite enough economic problems without exacerbating them with a 'no' vote. If that is the result Oct. 26, the dollar will drop, foreign investment will dry up, and all kinds of agreements and deals will be up in the air.

And any divorce is going to get messy, no matter how much some people want to think it wouldn't be. Just ask Woody Allen or Mia Farrow, rent War of the Roses, or take a trip to Bosnia for a rough idea of what it would be like. Dividing up things such as federal assets, the national debt, military forces, etc. would be incredibly complex, and tempers on both sides would be frayed.

There's also the issue of land. Some English Canadians argue that Quebec is only entitled to about 1/3 of the land it currently has. I regularly get unsolicited mail from a group called the Alliance for the Preservation of English in Canada (APEC), a group who claims, among other things, that there's a national conspiracy afoot to force everyone in Canada to learn french. And they also promote the idea that much of Quebec really belongs to Canada and would remain with us in the event of separation. They even have books to 'prove' what they are saying.

After separation, who knows who will be in control in Canada, and what they would be willing to do to get land they say is not part of Quebec. Just because Canadians are generally peace-loving doesn't mean it will always be that way. Especially with fringe groups like APEC on the loose.

So, as we head into the referendum campaign, Canadians would do well to realize just how high the stakes really are. We are locked in a loveless marriage with Quebec, but fortunately, that's only a metaphor. Countries are not people, and a cold union is preferable to a hot separation. The unity deal is far from perfect, but it preserves the essence of a country with a strong centre. If that's not passionate enough for you, I can give you a list of brand new—albeit war-torn—countries who are quite passionate about their nation.

And besides, no one can tell when a relationship is really dead, and when it's just waiting for a chance to blossom again.



Books do nothing but shovel dirt

There's a new book out about one of my comedy heroes. It's called *The Great One: The Life and Legend of Jackie Gleason*. It's written by a Time magazine critic with the near-monarchical name of William A. Henry III. I won't be reading it.

I won't be reading it because I know too much of what's between the covers already. Thanks to book reviews in the *Globe and Mail* and various news magazines I'm already aware that Mister Henry's book reveals that Jackie Gleason was:

A drunk. A bully. And a slob.

According to the book, even Gleason's grasp of comedy was limited. It claims he was a lousy stand-up comic and a frequently awful actor.

The only thing he was good at was 'sketch' comedy—such as Ralph Kramden, the klutzy, bulbous, bufoonish bus-driving schlemiel in *The Honeymooners*.

But as Ralph Kramden, Jackie Gleason was in a class by himself.

Which is why I won't be buying the book. Because that's the Jackie Gleason I knew and loved and wish to remember—as Ralph Kramden. I don't really care to meet the other Not So Great One who screamed at his colleagues, tyrannized writers and drank like a thirst-crazed camel.

I know enough of those creeps in real life.

And anyway, I'm getting weary of these "clay foot" books—the ones that take as their theme "so you think Joe Bloggs is heroic, eh? Well, here's the real dirt."

I have no problem with books that tell the truth about people. What bugs me are books that set out to deliberately trash their subject, with no pretense of objectivity or even elementary fairness.

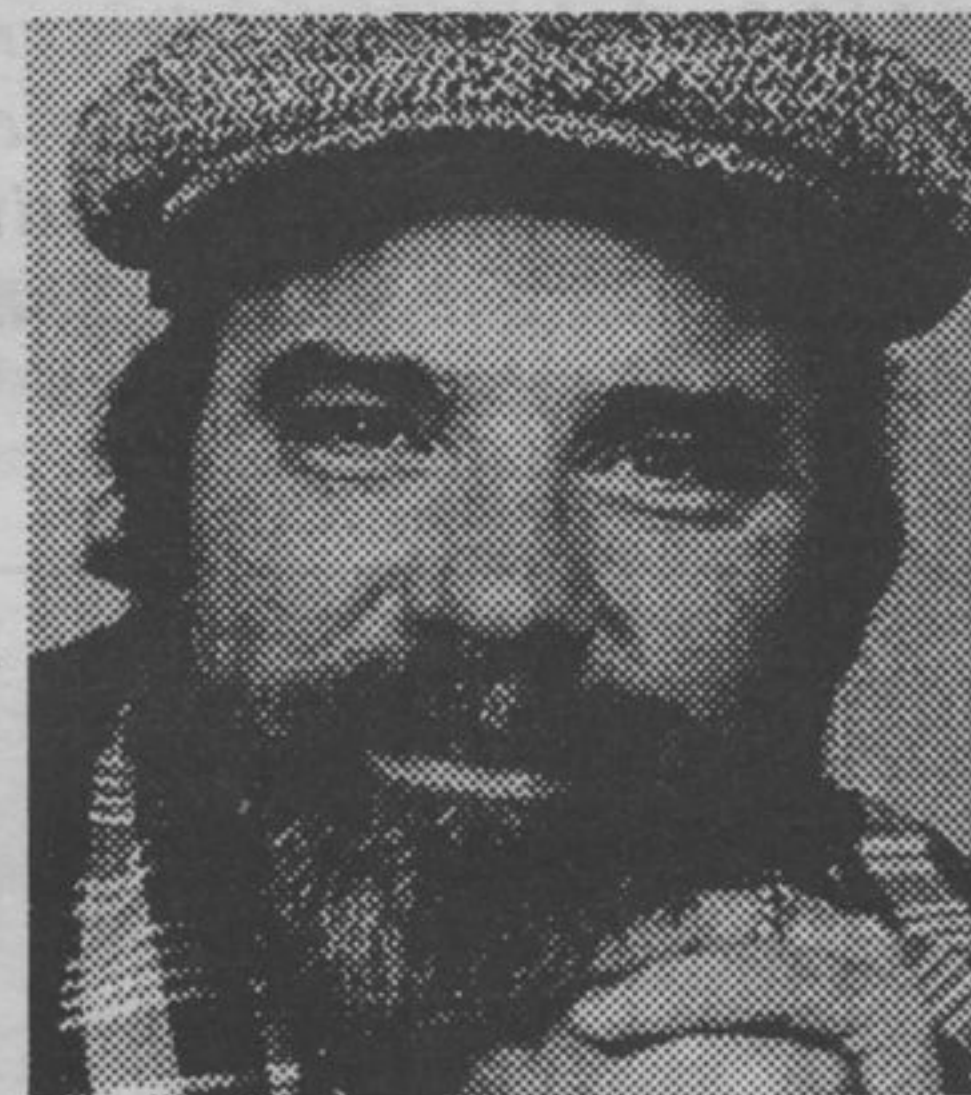
In the last little while we've seen such books disembowel Nancy Reagan, Chuck and Di, Frank Sinatra and a pantheon of lesser luminaries too numerous to mention.

Back a few years ago I made the mistake of reading the very worst of the genre—a best-selling piece of poison penmanship called

Elvis: The Last 24 Hours by Albert Goldman.

I don't know what Elvis ever did to Albert Goldman, but it must have been pretty nasty, because when it came to demolishing the myths surrounding the King of Rock and Roll, Goldman's book left no sewer tile unturned.

He details every illegal pill and potion Presley popped. Goldman gloated over Presley's abuse of colleagues, his grotesque diet, his weight problems and his often awful stage performances.



Arthur Black

Make no mistake about it—Elvis Aaron Presley was several light years shy of St. Francis of Assisi. We are talking about a semi-literate, red neck Tennessee truck driver who became, virtually overnight, the most famous human being on the planet. A career move like that can do powerful things to your head.

But the Elvis Goldman describes is some kind of

subhuman monster, a greasy-haired, foul-mouthed, swollen-bellied mutant who comes on like a cross between Dracula, Don Cherry and *Predator III*.

Is there nothing good that could be said about Elvis Presley? You won't find it in Albert Goldman's book.

Which is what makes Albert Goldman's book a piece of crap. No one is that unbelievably bad. Goldman's grinding a large and ugly axe. You can hear Goldman's heavy breathing on every page.

Elvis was definitely a bit of a creep. But he sure could rock and roll. I'd rather listen to his music than sniff his dirty linen.

And Jackie Gleason? When I was a kid, Ralph Kramden made me laugh until I cried. I still catch the odd *Honeymooners* re-run on late-night TV. They still make me laugh, nearly 40 years later.

I'm sure they'll be making me laugh long after *The Great One: The Life and Legend of Jackie Gleason* is just a dusty leftover in the Coles remainder bin.