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Opening Extract from...

Anger Management

For Beginners

Written by Giles Coren

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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ANGER MANAGEMENT

FOR BEGINNERS

GILES COREN

A Self-Help Course in 70 Lessons

HODDER & STOUGHTON

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For Esther

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e-Rage

'Don't make me angry. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry . . .'
Dr Bruce Banner – aka, The Hulk

On the morning of Saturday 5 April 2008, I woke up full of the joys of spring. I threw open the curtains of my north London bedroom and all but greeted the blue sky and tinkling buds with a burst of song. While my girlfriend set about boiling the kettle for tea and digging in the fridge for a suitably weekendy breakfast (oh, please let there be sausages), I shuffled into a pair of jeans and a holey old jumper and headed off down the road, as I do each morning, to buy the papers.

I waved to a couple of neighbours, nodded to a happy drunk on the traffic island as I crossed the main road at the bottom of my quiet residential street, and then ducked into the newsagent to pick up, as I always do, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and whichever red top has the nakedest girl on the front.

On the way back up my road I stopped to stroke at least two cats, and to be buoyed by the warm growl as they wound round my calves. I chatted to Bill, the retired sparks who still lives next door to my old flat across the road, and helped Millicent, from number 46, to load her son onto his seat at the back of her bicycle.

When I walked through my front door, ten minutes after I had left, the house smelled of coffee and the juices of a good sausage, just beginning to caramelise on the base of an enamelled pan.

I poured myself a coffee at the kitchen table, had a quick ogle at Lindsay Lohan on the front of the *Mirror*, tossed *The Guardian* onto a windowsill (nobody in our house reads it – we

just get it in case vegans arrive unexpectedly for lunch and need something to read on the loo), and cracked open *The Times* for a read of my favourite columnist, me.

It's what I love best about Saturdays, reading myself. Not in a smug or arrogant way (although I may not be the best judge of that). Nor because I think I am a better writer than any of the others, or funnier or more incisive. It's just that, of all columnists, I am the one who most reliably addresses the exact issues about which I care most. My opinion column in the Comment pages always chimes exactly with what I have been thinking about the week's news myself. And the restaurant review always seems, by some miracle, to be of somewhere I have recently been – so that I am in a great position to compare my own memories with the view of the critic.

And it was to my restaurant review that I turned first, wrenching open the plastic bag, watching the pitter-patter of flyers, ads and CD giveaways falling to the floor like multi-coloured rain, and then flicking hurriedly through the fresh, shiny pages to my review.

Café Boheme, bla bla bla, long boring intro as usual, sort of wish I had done it different but a bit late now, now for the food, set up final (excellent) joke about getting a nosh in Soho and . . . wait. What's this? Oh no.

And my morning fell apart.

Upstairs I rushed to my computer, hit the power button (generally the computer stays off all weekend, it's pretty much a golden rule), and then paced the floor of my study waiting for it to fire up – Come on! Come on! Suddenly the scent of coffee was gone from my nostrils and all I could smell was shit and sulphur, hellfire and brimstone.

Jesus H. Christ, heads will roll for this.

HEADS WILL FUCKING ROLL!!!

The screen flickered into life, I put in the addresses of as many *Times* Magazine sub-editorial staff as I could think of, and began to type, fast and hard and without looking back.

Chaps, [I wrote, because I wanted to start gently]

I am mightily pissed off. I have addressed this to Owen, Amanda and Ben because I don't know who i am supposed to be pissed off with (i'm assuming owen, but i filed to amanda and ben so it's only fair), and also to Tony, who wasn't here - if he had been I'm guessing it wouldn't have happened. [Tony is my editor – I would never speak to him like this.]

I don't really like people tinkering with my copy for the sake of tinkering. I do not enjoy the suggestion that you have a better ear or eye for how I want my words to read than I do. Owen, we discussed your turning three of my long sentences into six short ones in a single piece, and how that wasn't going to happen anymore, so I'm really hoping it wasn't you that fucked up my review on saturday. [Looking at it now I hate myself for sounding so pompous – 'we discussed . . .' – but the frothing, badly punctuated sentences only remind me how much I actually wanted to kill this man, genuinely wanted to hit him with a brick, and hit him and hit him and hit him until he died, and his mother wept, and his whole street turned out to watch a coffin covered with white flowers woven into the word 'Owen' proceed slowly towards the cemetery on the back of a horse-drawn hearse.]

It was the final sentence. Final sentences are very, very important. A piece builds to them, they are the little jingle that the reader takes with him into the weekend. [That was going to come back and haunt me, in a massive way. But it's true, I tell you. If you are a writer yourself, and you give the slightest toss about your work, then you know it's true.]

I wrote: 'I can't think of a nicer place to sit this spring over a glass of rosé and watch the boys and girls in the street outside smiling gaily to each other, and wondering where to go for a nosh.'

It appeared as: 'I can't think of a nicer place to sit this spring over a glass of rosé and watch the boys and girls in the street outside smiling gaily to each other, and wondering where to go for nosh.'

There is no length issue. This is someone thinking 'I'll just remove this indefinite article because Coren is an illiterate cunt and i know best'.

Well, you fucking don't.

This was shit, shit sub-editing for three reasons.

1) 'Nosh', as I'm sure you fluent Yiddish speakers know, is a noun formed from a bastardisation of the German 'naschen'. [Classic furious fake intellectualism coming up now, but it's pretty damn convincing.] **It is a verb, and can be construed into two distinct nouns. One, 'nosh', means simply 'food'. You have decided that this is what i meant and removed the 'a'. I am insulted enough that you think you have a better ear for English than me. But a better ear for Yiddish? I doubt it. Because the other noun, 'nosh' means 'a session of eating' - in this sense you might think of its dual valency as being similar to that of 'scoff'. you can go for a scoff. or you can buy some scoff. the sentence you left me with is shit, and is not what i meant. Why would you change a sentnece aso that it meant something i didn't mean?** [Look how angry I was! Look at the standard of typing. Jesus, I clearly didn't even glance over it once before I sent it.] **I don't know, but you risk doing it every time you change something. And the way you avoid this kind of fuck up is by not changing a word of my copy without asking me, okay? it's easy. Not. A. Word. Ever.**

2) I will now explain why your error is even more shit than it looks. You see, i was making a joke. I do that sometimes. I have set up the street as 'sexually-charged'. I have described the shenanigans across the road at G.A.Y.. I have used the word 'gaily' as a gentle nudge. And 'looking for a nosh' has a secondary meaning of looking for a blowjob. Not specifically gay, for this is soho, and there are plenty of girls there who take money for noshing boys. 'looking for nosh' does not have that ambiguity. the joke is gone. I only wrote that sodding paragraph to make that joke. And you've fucking stripped it out like a pissed Irish plasterer restoring a renaissance fresco and thinking jesus looks

shit with a bear so plastering over it. You might as well have removed the whole paragraph. I mean, fucking christ, don't you read the copy? [The mystery of this sentence – which baffled and entranced thousands of people – can be resolved when you learn that, in my furious key-hammering I accidentally failed to type the 'd' on the end of 'beard'. It was Jesus's beard I was imagining the plasterer leaving off. Though a number of correspondents later assumed I was referring to a little known Italian Renaissance tradition of picturing the Son of Man in close proximity to a bear, much as St Peter, say, is often seen with a lion.]

3) **And worst of all. Dumbest, deafest, shittest of all, you have removed the unstressed 'a' so that the stress that should have fallen on 'nosh' is lost, and my piece ends on an unstressed syllable. When you're winding up a piece of prose, metre is crucial. Can't you hear? Can't you hear that it is wrong? It's not fucking rocket science. It's fucking pre-GCSE scansion. I have written 350 restaurant reviews for The Times and i have never ended on an unstressed syllable. Fuck. fuck, fuck, fuck.**

I am sorry if this looks petty (last time i mailed a Times sub about the change of a single word i got in all sorts of trouble) but i care deeply about my work and i [all these uncapitalised 'i's, by the way, testify to the fact that I typed straight into an email – and I have grown so used to Word's automatic capitalising of that pronoun that I have lost the habit of doing it myself] **hate to have it fucked up by shit subbing. I have been away, you've been subbing joe and hugo and maybe they just file and fuck off and think 'hey ho, it's tomorrow's fish and chips' - well, not me. I will not sleep now for several days. Possible more. weird, maybe. but that's how it is.**

It strips me of all confidence in writing for the magazine [note the implied threat of resignation without ever coming close to actually doing it – for even in the froth of monstrous ire I know who pays the bills]**. No exaggeration. i've got a review to write this morning and i really don't feel like doing it, for fear that**

some nuance is going to be removed from the final line, the pay-off, and i'm going to have another weekend ruined for me.

I've been writing for The Times for 15 years and i have never asked this before - i have never asked it of anyone i have written for - but I must insist, from now on, that i am sent a proof of every review i do, in pdf format, so i can check it for fuck-ups. and i must be sent it in good time in case changes are needed. It is the only way i can carry on in the job.

And, just out of interest, I'd like whoever made that change to email me and tell me why. Tell me the exact reasoning which led you to remove that word from my copy. [Nobody ever did.]

Right,

Sorry to go on. Anger, real steaming fucking anger can make a man verbose [note the anger starting to wear off already].

All the best [see what a reasonable, no-grudges-held sort of fellow I am],

Giles

And then I hit 'send', and went back downstairs, where my sausages were still steaming on the plate and my coffee was not yet cold.

By Monday morning my phone was ringing off the hook with *Times* people wanting to get to the bottom of things.

Bottom of what?

'This scandalous email.'

What scandalous email?

'The one you sent to Owen and Amanda and Ben.'

Have they complained?

'No.'

Then how come you've seen it?

'Everyone's seen it!'

Wretched Internet. By Tuesday, websites were full of what a terrible, terrible bastard I was, which made me awfully sad. Because it was only a rocket to fellow professionals who had

done their job poorly and in the normal course of events it would never have got out into the world, nor would anyone have cared.

But media blogs and all sorts of forums for nameless losers whose inarticulate bitterness and lunacy would, in a pre-Internet world, have found no outlet, were suddenly saying I was a violent rapist, child murderer and bully for attacking my underlings like that. But they were not my underlings, they were just colleagues. I have no rank on *The Times* at all. I am not above anybody.

They were saying that it just goes to show what happens when someone goes on television and gets all up himself and arrogant. But it had nothing to do with being on telly. I've always been like that. Just look at my school reports.

The thing went 'viral'. People in offices with nothing to do and lonely onanists leaning back in their armchairs between YouPorn sessions, waiting for their juices to replenish, dug up my humble tirade and passed it on, and on and on.

Soon there were comedians singing songs about me on YouTube and then a film scene from Hitler's bunker was posted, in which the subtitles had been changed to make his loss of temper appear to be with the sub-editors who had bollixed my copy. And that was fair enough. I am sure, had he been around to see it, that the Führer would have been as enraged as I was.

On the plus side, my inbox was soon jamming with messages of support, hundreds of them. Mostly from fellow writers, including some top heroes of mine – Michael Atherton, Stephen Fry, David Baddiel – all of them hinting that my email expressed what they had always thought but had never dared to express – the awfulness of subs, the horror of what they do to our copy, and our impotence when it comes to doing anything about it.

How could great men like Athers and Fry not 'dare' to express their anger? What's so wrong with letting off a bit of steam?

Plenty, according to *The Guardian*, which by the end of the week had me on the front page – the front page! – with a photo

of me looking all angry (but pretty damn saturnine and cool) and the headline 'Is this the maddest email ever?'

They actually saw my mild little reproach to a wayward colleague as evidence of mental illness. And by flagging the two-page piece on the front page they clearly thought it was going to help them sell newspapers. I was flattered. My own paper, *The Times*, never puts me on the front page. I was desperately hoping our editor would see it, and see what a big deal I was.

Inside, *The Guardian*, our great liberal upholder of free speech, old-fashioned news-gathering values, non-sensational, even-handed and, let's face it, really rather dreary journalism, had reprinted my email *in full*.

And not only that. It had dug out a previous email to *The Times* subs as well, the one rather naively hinted at in the more recent one. It was years old, sent way back in August 2002 – although *The Guardian* was using it as more evidence of my current insanity – and so I got a first chance to read it over again. It went as follows.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. how fucking difficult is that? it's the sentence that bestrides the fucking book i reviewed for you. it is the sentence i wrote first in my fucking review. it is 35 fucking letters long, which is why i wrote that it was. and so some useless cunt subeditor decides to change it to 'jumps over A lazy dog' can you fucking count? can you see that that makes it a 33 letter sentence? so it looks as if i can't count, and the cunting author of the book, poor mr dunn, cannot count. the whole bastard book turns on the sentence being as i fucking wrote it. and that it is exactly 35 letters long. why do you meddle. what do you think you achieve with that kind of dumb-witted smart-arsery? why do you change things you do not understand without consulting. why do you believe you know best when you know fuck all. jack shit.

that is as bad as editing can be. fuck, i hope you're proud. it will be small relief for the author that nobody reads your poxy

magazine.never ever ask me to write something for you. and don't pay me. i'd rather take £400 quid for assassinating a crack whore's only child in a revenge killing for a busted drug deal - my integrity would be less compromised.

jesus fucking wept i don't know what else to say.

Blimey, now that was a corker. Much better, much more succinct than the new one. I was delighted that it was finally seeing the light of day. And then – what was this? – they had found yet another, this time not sent to my subs at *The Times* but to the restaurant critic of the (now defunct – heh, heh, heh) *londonpaper*.

feargus,

I'm emailing to say that your review of osteria emilia, in most ways perfectly fine and good and spot on, pissed me off. i booked, as ever, under a pseudonym, that over made up italian bird did not have a fucking clue who i was (or even who baddiel was, who i ate with because he lives, like me, round the corner). Nor were there any kitchen staff peeking out of any porthole. i appreciate that you have to keep your column as lively as possible - and name dropping david i guess might be exciting for your readers (i'll certainly be doing it in my column) - but in your froth to show how folksy and incognito you are, you did your readers and the restaurant an immense disservice: you suggested that i got some special dispensation in eating a la carte. But if you'd spent a bit more time looking at your lunch menu, and a bit less gawping at me, you'd have noticed that it said, 'dishes from the evening a la carte menu are available at lunchtime, with some exceptions'.

You said 'i didn't have the brass neck to demand anything off the unavailable a la carte'. it makes you sound like an utter tit. you are not only a chippy fuck but a lazy journalist. 'brass neck'. learn to write, and take your head out of your arse, you fucking twat.

all the best

giles coren

Perfectly sound and normal for the most part, that one, becoming almost boring . . . and then POW! The foul-mouthed denouement comes in at the last to save the day. I was particularly fond of that one.

In total, *The Guardian* had published 2,000 words of mine without it costing them a penny. Now, I know that, with the exception of three or four very brilliant columnists, *The Guardian* is famously short on laughs, and that funny writers do not come cheap, but it still seemed, if not a monstrous liberty, then certainly a misdirecting of revenue streams.

Surely, I thought, it should be I, and not this *bien-pensant* bumrag of a paper, who gathers together all my apparently fascinating rage and madness and makes a literary point of it, and adds a sultry photo and charges an entry fee.

But 2,000 words wasn't really going to be enough for a whole book. If only I had written more emails like that. I could just bundle them up and – presto!

But I haven't. Well, actually I have. Loads. To building firms and garages and restaurants and shops and airlines and rail companies and taxi firms and schools and parking departments and police stations and pubs and dry cleaners and . . . they have all had their fall-outs and upshots and, one way or another, results. But I haven't kept them. I never thought of them as literary artefacts. Anger is a transitory thing: it wells up, it explodes, and then it is gone. And thank God for that. The last thing I wanted was to keep its evidence hanging around.

A number of publishers got in touch, suggesting that I should compile a book of pretend emails to people, written 'as if' I were really angry.

But anger is one thing – maybe the only thing – that cannot be faked. It is easy to tell someone you love them when you don't mean it. But it's practically impossible to tell them you hate them with any conviction, if you really don't.

And then I thought I could have a look back at some of the

stuff I've written before, and see if there was anything angry there. I doubted there would be. Because I just never thought of myself as an angry person.

Wrong. Practically every column is a gut-slobbering yodel of rage and bile at some – on reflection – perfectly inoffensive person, animal, inanimate object, fashion, law, plant . . .

And what is it with Nazis, fat people and *The Guardian*? I'm on about them all the time. I never give them a moment off, even though they have practically nothing to do with my life, and are extremely popular with some people, I'm sure. Why does my unconscious bleed such anger about them? Was I raped as a child by a fat Gestapo officer wearing socks and sandals?

What was (is) wrong with me? Are other people this angry? Are you? Is it healthy? Is it better out than in? I've heard that suppressing it gives you cancer. Or am I thinking of barbecued meat? Should I calm down? Should I take pills? Or just deep breaths? Should I really be in therapy? Or in a straitjacket?

I honestly don't know. But just in case you've ever been told by an angry wife or husband (your own or somebody else's) or girlfriend or boyfriend, parent, sibling, social worker, casualty nurse, traffic cop, best pal or parole officer, after a bit of a tiff, that 'what you need is anger management', well, here it is.