

Cheap Thoughts

Fly-fishing is sexy, porn is not funny and Jack Handey is real.

BY CULLEN CURTISS

Jack Handey, a former *Saturday Night Live* staff writer, moved to Santa Fe full-time with his wife Marta in 2003. In addition to the character of Jack Handey—famous for his “Deep Thoughts” bits—Handey is also the mastermind behind the characters of Toonces, the cat who could drive a car—but not very well, and Unfrozen Caveman Lawyer. His book *What I'd Say to the Martians and Other Veiled Threats* will be published by Hyperion in April, 2008.

SFR: Assuming writing is your first passion, what's your second?

JH: I don't think writing is my first passion. It's something I do, periodically. I don't love the process of writing, and I'm suspicious of writers who say they love it. It keeps an order in your life, and otherwise you would drink more or lay around and take more naps.

SFR: To try to answer your question, I would say my second passion is fly-fishing. Marta tells me to slow down when we're getting close to the river. She calls it my fish fever. I don't have fish fever for writing.

Tell me more about your second passion.

I can't imagine someone trying fly-fishing and not loving it, but apparently that can happen. I know it's a cliché, but fly-fishing is one of those meditative things. If the fishing is good, and you're fishing hard, you can't think of anything else but the fishing. Adding to the allure is that usually you're in a beautiful outdoor spot, with flowing water. Also, you get to torture fish. Actually, I do feel guilty about that, but so far not enough to quit fishing.

Why did you decide to leave *Saturday Night Live*?

I would only do a one-year contract at a time with *Saturday Night Live* because it was so exhausting and stressful. Writers were producers; we wrote the pieces, we worked with the prop department, the set department and we went to rehearsals. We had to shepherd the piece all the way through. I would come back to Santa Fe for the summer and swear I wasn't going back. But then, after several weeks off and the offer of a pay raise, you go back, like some cheap whore—or fairly well-paid whore. I still love sketch-writing, but my first love has always mainly been writing for print. No money, but more control and your name's on it—for better or worse.

Why did you move to Santa Fe?

Mainly because my wife wanted to move here. Women love Santa Fe.

Also I was familiar with Santa Fe, having had a summer house here for years, and having worked as a reporter for *The New Mexican* in the early 1970s. I lived on Upper Canyon Road in a 150-year-old adobe that had been cut in half. Steve Martin, before he was famous, lived in the other half. He later hired me to write for him. Santa Fe is nice. A lot of the amenities of a big city, without the big-city hassles. It's just easier here.

According to the results of the poll on your Web site (“Is there a real Jack Handey?”), most people know you are real, but there is still clearly a mystique around you. How do you feel about that?

It's kind of funny and frustrating at the same time. It sounds like a joke name, so people think it's made up. I'll check into a hotel or something, and the clerk will say, “Hey, you've got the same name as that guy on *Saturday Night Live*.” And I'll say, “That's me.” And the guy will say, “Imagine that, the same name as that guy on *Saturday Night Live*.”

Do you feel love for your audience?

If you define love as figuring what someone thinks, then yes, I love my audience.

Does fame improve your sex appeal?

Probably. But since my fame and my sex appeal are both pretty low, I wouldn't really know.

You and Marta went to high school together, dated briefly, and then re-met after 10 years. What's it like to have her as your editor?

It's great. We've been together so long, and I've annoyed her with my stuff so much, she has no compunction telling me when something of mine stinks. It's hard to find someone who will tell you that. About your writing, anyway.

Are you passionate about being funny? Do you ever feel like you can just be the non-funny one?

I hope I'm not one of these comedy people who's always “on.” That can be tiresome. But sometimes I miss being around other comedy writers. You can put each other on, and the other writer knows you're putting him on, and he'll play along with the gag, until you both get tired of it. It's fun. Most people think they have a good sense of humor, but the truth is, they don't.

Tell me more about your friends.

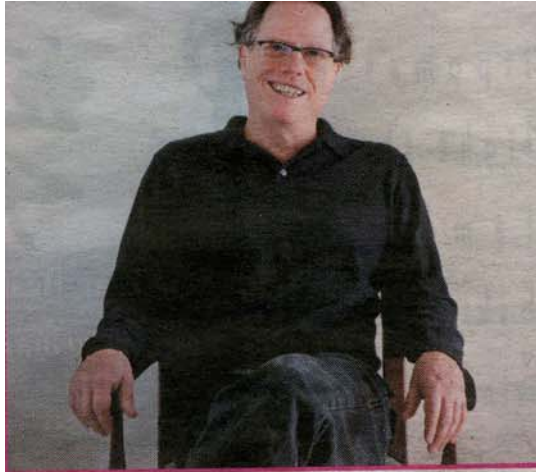
I talk to them on the phone, but it's not quite the same. I think the reason some guys are comedy writers is they like that fraternity, gathering around the table, and making wisecracks, and coming up with stuff. I miss friends who you can be funny with, that they know you are kidding them.

When you choose a subject to make fun of, is typically one you adore or hate?

I think probably the best comedy is about stuff you love. When you try to be funny about something you hate, it's

Things Santa Fe is Too Serious About

1. Politics
2. Healing
3. Adobe
4. How long you've lived in Santa Fe.
5. How close you live to the Plaza.
6. Over-pronouncing Spanish words.
7. Chile.
8. Bumper stickers.
9. What's better, Whole Foods or Trader Joe's?
10. Hitting each other over the head with frying pans.



Jack Handey has the same name as that guy from *Saturday Night Live*.

hard not to give it a bitterness. On *Saturday Night Live*, my favorite stuff to write about was little boy stuff: cow boys, dinosaurs, cave men, monsters, driving cats, etc. I like the kid-like stuff because you can disguise aggression; you can make it seem harmless or naïve. And of course, James Bond. Comedy writers love James Bond.

What would you never make fun of?

I would never make fun of the president. He's our president, and if you make fun of him, you're making fun of our country. And where does that leave you?

Obviously, I'm kidding. But in general, I would say that comedy writers will laugh hysterically at comedy ideas that most civilians would find appalling. Maybe part of the laughter comes from the fact that it's taboo. Conversely, comedy writers will not laugh at most of the hacky, corny, hokey shit that passes for humor in America. Like the stuff you get in those mass e-mails.

What are the differences between you and the Jack Handey character?

The character is sort of a dangerous psychotic who thinks he's normal, whereas I'm much nicer?

What is life like since Toonces the cat died?

Life without Toonces is, of course, meaningless. Toonce was a great cat, and probably our weirdest cat. Toonce used to like to bang his head against the wall occasionally. Seriously. That's a trait I share with him.

One of your essays for the New Yorker (Shouts and Murmurs, March 20, 2006: "Ideas for Paintings") suggests that Cameron Diaz be painted, "her tear-streak face lit by a candle, [gazing] wistfully at a photograph of me."

Cameron Diaz, I read someplace, actually has a cat named Jack Handey. So I like to mention her. I don't expect her to call me out of the blue and say, "Jack, let's run away to Tahiti together," but come on Cameron, Tahiti's nice.

George Costanza said the best thing in the world would be to have sex while eating a pastrami sandwich. What would you combine with sex for the ultimate experience?

Fly-fishing. I'd have to remember to use a barbless hook.

Is sex funny?

Great question. I don't really know. I don't think there ever been a funny porno movie. I keep looking and looking, but so far I haven't found one. ❤️