

## COMMENTARY

## Misery



In the spring of 2009 an important new book will appear from the New York publisher Abrams Image, arguably as influential as the advent of the Bible or the Complete Works of William Shakespeare: "11,002 Things To Be Miserable About."

Part of this book was made in my living room the other night, and to my dismay it did not include such entries as, "Opening the morning paper to discover that your favorite river (the Caloosahatchee) is one of the 10 most toxic streams in the United States."

Or, "Opening your morning paper to discover that the nearest big town (Cape Coral) is one of the least diverse in the United States."

Or how about "Opening your morning paper to discover that the Lee County manager (Don Stilwell), with a salary of roughly \$250,000 a year, may have lied through his teeth to the county commissioners, and invested in a highway real estate deal approved by those very commissioners?"

I had a hundred more at the ready, but none of them were applicable. For example, Fat jowly white men who own large tracts of land they call tomato farms, and who refuse to pay the people who pick those tomatoes — more than 10,000 of them — enough to live, and then claim it's "un-American" when the pickers ask for more money? (That's The Florida Tomato Growers Association of about 75 fat jowly landowners, which my wife, Amy Bennett Williams, sliced and diced in a recent story in The News-Press.)

Hard as it is to believe, there are more important

things than those parochial miseries, apparently. "The first thing on the list is death. The second thing is life, and it kind of goes from there," says co-author Nick Romeo.

Life and death pretty much wrap it up, I think. What else could there be, after that Alpha-and-Omega summation of Everyman's Guide To Living in the Real World? (That's my title, by the way, for any of you would-be authors who want it. It's a takeoff of the old Everyman's series, which you can still see on your parents' bookshelves, if they were readers.)

Well, clearly there are 11,000 more things. It's important, after all, to be precise and to draw distinctions. It's also important to suck the poison out of the snakebite with a potent injection of anti-venom.

"This is an antidote to the culture of raging optimism. The first book exemplifies that culture," Romeo explains.

What culture and what first book?

You may know them well. The culture that helped produce a best-seller about 20 years ago called, "14,000 Things To Be Happy About," by Barbara Ann Kipfer.

"Flannel sheets, strawberry ice cream. Making faces at monkeys in the zoo. Dog dishes that say 'good dog.' Carolers singing around a Norwegian spruce. Sun burning off the morning fog. Cabanas," reports an on-line advertiser of her book, which claims there are still 950,000 copies in print, but offers them for sale beginning at one penny.

Americans are not fools, obviously. Why pay more than a penny for that?

"The fluffiness of bunnies, the warm glow of clouds in sunsets — there are 14,000 of these things," says Nick, incredulously.

Unlike Don Stilwell, Lee County's manager, I have no problem admitting my connections right up front.

And unlike Stilwell probably believed, I never thought — and I won't — make any money from this book.

Nick Romeo is my nephew. He's a genius. So

is my niece, Lia Romeo, who is co-authoring the book. She's not only a genius, and a writer like Nick, but she's even a playwright (how many of those do you know), whose work has appeared on stage off Broadway in New York (that has a ring I like, whether you think it's redundant or not — on-stage-off-Broadway).

Her short plays have been produced by theatres in New Jersey, Alaska, Florida, Missouri, Washington, Oregon, Nebraska, and California, and this summer one of them is being developed by the Kennedy Center's Young Playwrights Program, in Washington, D.C.

More genius than either of them, by far, is Nick's girlfriend Rebecca Newman, who knows how to handle Nick and his entire family. She's living with Nick in New York City, where she was born and raised. They just spent the week with us, in Alva.

Here's how the book deal worked: Nick and his sister decided to do the book on a lark. They thought that the book might make them some money if it ever went anywhere.

They also thought that Barbara Ann Kipfer's rather Hallmarkian notion smacked of toy poodles, fake flowers, suburban shopping malls and chocolates in the afternoon, so — as people in their mid-twenties are want to do, sometimes — they looked for parody.

They came up with a couple hundred things, looked up the name of a reputable New York book agent, wrote him, and expected never to hear anything about it again.

The next day the agent called. About two days later, they had a book contract.

And now they have a deadline — Aug. 1 — which means that both Lia and Nick have to conceive of 60 things to be miserable about each day, between now and then, to meet the deadline.

How miserable can you get? Plenty miserable, apparently, even if you're a stable, smart, capable, relatively sanguine person, surrounded by your own youth and the opportunity of the world.

Which is where my set of Alvanians came in.

Nick walks around with a little notebook and a

pen and solicits ideas. Like Tom Sawyer, who once managed to convince everyone around him to paint the fence white, Nick has the whole world working for him.

He had 10 people sitting in my living room for an hour trying like hell to think of what make them miserable, and ranging in age from 6 to 70.

Here are just a few of the things we came up with:

- Death by killer African Bee.
  - People who grow to resemble their pets
  - People who have larynx cancer so they have to talk funny
  - Unshaved pubic hair in bikinis
  - Dog flatulence.
  - The demonization of uncertainty.
  - People who think the dawn of civilization dates to YouTube.
  - When you get your period on your wedding day.
  - When your daughter lets her Barbie dolls have pre-marital sex.
  - All the books you'll never read before you die.
  - The people who let the Chinese sell us toxic toys.
  - The sex lives of early puritans.
  - Pygmies who love basketball.
  - The year 1508, when Puerto Rican Indians decided to test the myth of the immortality of Spaniards by holding their heads under water.
  - Insufficiently crisp pickles.
  - When your wife prefers the newborn to you.
  - Capitalists playing with Marx action figures.
- "There are a lot of juxtapositions, like insufficiently crisp pickles and starving to death," Nick says. "So there's an element of social critique in the implied equivalence of certain items in the list, as if an insufficiently crisp pickle is just as bad as starving to death."
- "But our main project is not to critique those people, but to show that misery is a universal experience in which we can all delight."
- Right. God, I love the young, don't you?
- They can be so much more miserable than we can. ■

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