



The Strip Club

by Judy Bachrach

NATURALLY I WAS HAPPY TO LEARN that Christopher Buckley had just written a new novel, this one called *Losing Mum and Pup*—the story, I assumed, of a mute and careless veterinarian.

However, here I was completely wrong. *Losing Mum and Pup*, as it turns out, although nominally about the famous conservative William F. Buckley Jr. and his sociable socialite wife, Pat, is really about their son, Chris Buckley. Or as his father called him, Christo.

It is also about how he, Christo, suffered. Not simply because of the reasons that might immediately spring to mind on reading the book: after a few pops at the dinner table Pat Buckley was evidently so rude and offensive that Christo felt compelled to tell her—on her deathbed—“I forgive you” (a promise he instantly rescinds by rattling off practically every lousy thing “vinous” Pat ever did); autocratic Bill also offended by perpetually hogging the remote to the apparatus Christo likes to call “the telly.”

As becomes clear quickly enough, the reason young Buckley needed to write his memoir was that within a year of each other, both of his parents, figures who really are described in the book as “larger than life,” had the temerity to die. This, their wealthy only child observes, left him, at 55, “an orphan.” And he isn’t joking. The word “orphan” is repeated with such tireless frequency throughout the book that we can only be astonished he didn’t call it “The Story of O.”

“Orphanhood,” the author explains on page three, is “one of the biggies, running through most of Melville, among others, and right down the middle of the great American novel *Adventures of Huck Finn*.” In other words, this isn’t some tell-all sleaze bucket of a book. It has a fine old literary lineage.

But I like to look at young Buckley’s book in another way. Namely as the latest entry in a certain modern genre: the youngest, spunkiest, and probably

thinnest volume on the cramped shelf of rival confessional books. The spawn of Dickens and Oprah. I wish I could say I am amused or even repelled by the gusto with which the middle-aged children of this century share with the rest of the world the secrets of their flawed parents and their own errant selves. Or that I find something compelling or even singular in any of their portraits.

But the truth of it is—at heart, they’re all the same. Well written or ungrammatical, fleshy or spare, candid or cagey, they’re all the literary equivalent of the strip joint. Writers need not apply. I don’t, for instance, see a lot of difference between Pat Buckley, who, as Chris informs us, liked to produce whoppers for the unsuspecting by detailing imaginary visits paid to her ancestral Canadian home by the British royal family—and say, Jeannette Walls’s recollection in her memoir *The Glass Castle* of her own mother, a ragged, sometimes homeless indigent who devours chocolate bars under a ratty blanket while little Jeannette goes hungry. Upper-crust or without a crust, these ladies are two of a kind: Grendelmoms to literary blabbermouths with smart laptops and itchy palms, and if you suspect a touch of hypersensitivity here, you betcha. What happened to Mum can happen to anyone.



LET US TAKE STOCK OF how this all came about. Personally, I place the blame squarely on Augusten Burroughs. In 2002, breathless and panting, his book, called *Running with Scissors*, emerged. It was about (tell me if I've left anything out here) the author's bizarre mother who packs 12-year-old Augusten off to live with her peculiar shrink and the shrink's homosexual son, who first sodomizes the teenage Burroughs and then forms a relationship with him; this ends only when Burroughs leaves the shrink's family fold with the homosexual's sister. Although Burroughs assured readers that every syllable of *Running with Scissors* was true, when a lawsuit threatened to slow its gait, the word "memoirs" vanished from the author's notes.

In hot pursuit, one year later came *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, a purported druggie memoir that packed a punch by flaunting more warts than Kermit. Misery, sinfulness, backsliding, redemption—these, as we all know, are the very elements a literary endeavor needs to get a big plug from Oprah. And, predictably, America's most beloved television hostess not only made it a selection of her book club, but famously observed on her show that the work was "like nothing you've ever read before." More to the point, as it turned out: it was like nothing the author had ever lived before.

Thanks to its Teutonic charm (all Frey nouns—be they Cop, Priest, Criminal, Hell, Nurse, Addict, Businessman, Entrance, Lawyer, or House—are first knighted with a capital and then drop-kicked into some very puzzling sentences), the book sold 2.4 million copies. Literary agents begged their authors to emulate its remarkable style. It was only when the investigative website *thesmokinggun.com* tried to find out whether anything in the book had actually occurred that things became, paradoxically, far less clear. Because Frey lied so consistently and effectively, we will, sadly, never really know for certain whether or not he kicked a Parisian priest in the groin a total of 15 times after the cleric grabbed his crotch. Or how many times in his life he vomited. Or whether or not some girl snorted coke off his, um...lap.

Oprah was devastated. His publisher felt betrayed.

And yet, why? one wonders. What do any of us really care about any of this? Gospel or fictional, surely the point of all these narratives is not really their credibility but their buy-ability. Their terribility. The more abasing and revolting the ordeals, the more we love them—especially if all the misfortunes chronicled happened to be the writer's own damn fault. And

if, perchance, the author can't quite make it to the big leagues—as say, Buckley *files*, owing to his plump bank balance and fondness for accuracy, cannot—then it is up to him to unearth other means to compel our pity. Orphanhood, for instance. Or Pup's disappearing act during college graduation. Or the e-mail in which Pup cruelly panned his kid's latest novel.

"Sorry," was Pup's last word. (I share his pain.)

IN THE YEARS SINCE THE FREY DISASTER, certain confessional writers have wised up. David Carr, the journalist whose recently published *The Night of the Gun* bears the blue-ribbon subtitle "A Reporter Investigates the Darkest Story of His Life. His Own." is probably the smartest of the bunch. Chronicling his own tale of addiction and recovery, and recognizing perhaps that we've heard this all before, the book launches forthrightly with the very issue Frey never troubled to address. Namely, who can trust the story of a cokehead written by a cokehead?

But within a paragraph the author attempts to right himself, arriving at the essential point of all stripper stories: "The meme of abasement followed by salvation is a durable device in literature..." Carr notes. "There was That Guy, a dynamo of hilarity and then misery, and there is This Guy, the one with a family, a house, and a good job as a reporter and columnist for the *New York Times*."

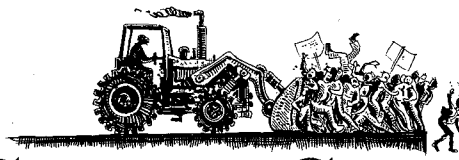
Carr wants us to believe that connecting That Guy, the old sad, bad, drugged-to-the-gills Ur-Guy who starts the book, to This Guy, a new, improved, polished, and published version who touches down about a paragraph before the Acknowledgments, "will take a lot more than typing."

But basically typing is all it takes. All that we ask of our literary strippers. Typing and hyping. Peeling and telling. ❄

Judy Bachrach is a contributing editor of *Vanity Fair*.

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Center Stage

Republican primary voters must decide whether to play it moderately safe.

by W. James Antle III

SEN. JOHN CORNYN'S FACEBOOK FRIENDS aren't in a very friendly mood. The Texas Republican's page on the popular social networking website has been filled with comments like this one from a Florida real estate broker: "As soon as I read of your endorsement of Charlie Crist, I sent in a donation to the Marco Rubio campaign."

A new Facebook group has since cropped up challenging members to give "not one penny" to the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC), of which Cornyn is chairman. The online group's description says: "First they supported Chafee. Then they supported Specter. Now they support Crist." Its organizer and "admin" is Erick Erickson of the popular conservative blog RedState.

This isn't just a story of how cutting-edge technologies can cut both ways. Cornyn has found himself caught up in the struggle between conservatives and moderates over the Republican Party's future. Several primaries in upcoming races will feature party-backed moderate candidates facing off against strong conservative challengers. The showdown brewing between Florida Gov. Charlie Crist and former state House Speaker Marco Rubio for Republican Mel Martinez's U.S. Senate seat is just the latest front in this ongoing battle.

Cornyn's decision to weigh in on behalf of Crist can be explained by a headline that appeared in *The Hill* in February: "Florida Senate poll shows Crist annihilating field." The numbers haven't changed much since then. A Mason-Dixon poll taken in May shows Crist leading Democratic Rep. Kendrick Meek 55 percent to 24 percent and Democratic state Sen. Dan Gelber 57 percent to 22 percent. Rep. Ron Klein, a Democrat who has twice won in a Republican-leaning district, is considered somewhat less likely to run. Crist last led him by 34 points

Rubio doesn't fare much better than the Democrats. Mason-Dixon shows Crist clobbering him 53

percent to 18 percent, with 29 percent undecided. But head-to-head matchups show Rubio would be competitive if he managed to make it to the general election. "Rubio could win but he'd need our help," says a Senate Republican staffer. "Crist would be the overwhelming favorite and we wouldn't have to lift a finger." The idea is to keep the Florida Senate seat safe while Republicans—already a beleaguered minority—have to defend more ground than the Democrats.

Except that the GOP also needs to repair its image and offer a bold contrast. Many conservatives believe that a Senator Rubio would do that more effectively than a Senator Crist. "Rubio is everything older Republicans like Crist should be encouraging," argued Dan McLaughlin on RedState. "He's young but already experienced as a leader, he's telegenic and a good speaker, he's conservative, and yes, he's Latino, a demographic that a more inclusive Republican party would be reaching out to, not spurning."

The conservative Hispanic Leadership Fund had a similar reaction. "We are highly disappointed that the Republican establishment would slam the door on Marco Rubio, who is the kind of candidate that the GOP should be eagerly supporting," read a statement from the group. "We have heard a lot of talk about how the party wants to find qualified Hispanic candidates to run for office but in the end we see once again that this is nothing but lip-service."

Conservatives have gotten angry with the NRSC before. Despite the recent focus on the Club for Growth, the NRSC has intervened in competitive Republican primaries and helped rescue moderate-to-liberal incumbents from conservative challengers. The NRSC—along with then Sen. Rick Santorum and then President George W. Bush—came to the aid of Sen. Arlen Specter in Pennsylvania five years ago, helping him narrowly beat back a strong primary challenge from Pat Toomey. When it looked like they would be unable to defeat Toomey a second time,