

# Franken Out To Harpoon Rush For Fun, Profit; Writer-Comedian Making Hometown Book-Signing Stop

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Born and bred in the land of nice, Al Franken has hit it big with 271 pages of Rush-is-fat jokes.

OK, OK; as Franken might say, every page isn't about the girth, the tonnage, the sheer immensity of America's premiere right-wing talk-show host.

But the title of Franken's best-selling book, "Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations," and the fact that the index contains only references to the central theme - "blimp, Limbaugh size of (see also dirigible)" - clues the reader that Franken is not out for highbrow, Citizens League debate here.

"I'm interested in politics for all the wrong reasons - I'm interested in the sport, the entertainment value of it," said Franken, 44, a St. Louis Park kid who wrote and performed for "Saturday Night Live" before branching off into movies, publishing and political mudslinging.

He is in town today for speeches, interviews and book signings. This week, he expects his book to eclipse "It Takes a Village," by Hillary Rodham Clinton, and move from second to first place on the New York Times nonfiction bestseller list. Proving that if Rush can info-tain his way to fame and fortune on the right side of the spectrum, there may be room for a potty-mouthed debunker on the left.

"There's a difference, though," Franken said in a telephone interview from Los Angeles, where he was in full book-tour mode. "He's dishonest, and I'm not."

Franken went to Blake School and Harvard, performing with Dudley Riggs and catching on at the beginning of "Saturday Night Live." Behind the camera during much of his SNL career, he developed one of the show's most enduring and bankable characters, the multiphobic Stuart Smalley.

His latest book is a series of short send-ups of the Republican right and its core theology, beginning with Limbaugh and Reaganomics and veering into the darker recesses of Pat Robertson's brain and the screeds of the Montana Militia. He mixes his real political shenanigans with imagined encounters with Limbaugh's fact-checker. He employed a fact-checker of his own to call think tanks and rummage through computer libraries for salient tidbits.

A literal-minded Minnesotan might wonder where the real Al ends and the comic Al takes over. But he assured this reporter that the exchange of letters opening the book, in which Franken complains that Jeane Kirkpatrick's scathing review of his book was prompted by their torrid affair while she was U.N. ambassador, never really made it into the New York Times Book Review.

Too bad - it's a great bit.

The fact is, Franken does have a passion for politics beyond entertainment. He is genuinely angry at what he feels are the distorted premises of the right-wing agenda, and names Limbaugh as the chief purveyor. Much of this ground has been covered before - Rush-debunking is, after all, is a popular liberal pastime - but Al can match Rush shameless barb for shameless barb, stooping to a level that makes most liberals squirm.

"Man, oh, man, are these dittoheads yelping," Franken said. "They call in when we are on talk shows, make idiots of themselves. And I taunt them."

Not that the right can't laugh at themselves.

The book is filled with up-close-and-personal encounters with the enemy, whom Franken often finds engaging, intelligent, and downright nice. He was on Oliver North's talk show last week, and the host had read Franken's story about North leading a cadre of hawkish Republicans into battle in 'Nam.

"He thought it was hilarious," Franken said.

We all know Franken thinks Limbaugh is wrong - and fat - but what does he think of Rush's sense of humor? Is Rush funny?

"Every once in a while, he can be funny," Franken said. "But from the standpoint of humor as a craft, he's not really very good." Limbaugh's joke construction, Franken said, is "conceptually weak."

Not every bit in Franken's book is a winner, either. And readers who pay \$22 may not want to hear Franken's explanations for why he couldn't spend more time on it.

But, as Stuart Smalley might say, Al is successful, and that's OK. Stuart, in fact, took the phone from Al at one point during the interview and offered this analysis of Al's harsh treatment of Rush.

"I think Al's being a little judgmental," Stuart said. "But you know, he's angry, and it's OK. It's better to do something about it, to do something with your anger. It's better than to stuff it."

"I used to stuff my anger and I'd stuff my face. I think that's what Rush is doing, actually."

## ON TOUR

Al Franken will speak and sign books at 2 p.m. at the Bell Museum Auditorium on the University of Minnesota campus. The talk is free. After a sold-out, 7 p.m. talk at Macalester College, he will sign books after that speech at the Hungry Mind bookstore.