

SHELL SHOCKED

The Humor Review Board

By Art Stevens

I was summoned last week by the executive editor of this newspaper. My column has been running for more than twenty-five years and I assumed I'd be getting a pat on the back for a job well done. Instead, I was greeted by a sour, grim looking panel of four people behind a desk.

One of them asked me to take a seat facing the group and began to speak. "Mr. Stevens, we're the Humor Review Board and it's time for your annual review. Our job is to assess the humor content of your columns and determine if our readers are being well served."

I looked from one face to the next. I couldn't imagine anything striking any one of them as being funny except possibly a surprise blow to my solar plexus. I tried to loosen them up. "Did you hear what the Mexican couple named their new set of twins? Jose and Hose-B." Whereupon I fell to the floor laughing and waited for the raucous laughter I was sure would follow.

Nada. The only sound I heard was the gritting of teeth. The same spokesperson, whom I assumed was the chairperson of the Humor Review Board, continued as though I hadn't said a thing.

"Mr. Stevens, we have prepared for this meeting by reading every one of your columns this past week."

And as though they had collectively been gorging themselves on cod liver oil, the four of them let out a low groan in unison. My columns did not exactly seem to send their humor quotient meter through the ceiling.

"We've come to the conclusion that your humor leans too far to the left and can be defined as being rabble rousing. We run a conservative newspaper here and don't want to give our readers the wrong impression."

I was dumbfounded, a state of mind I seem to be constantly in. "Too far to the left? I don't understand. My columns aren't political in nature."

"Mr. Stevens, your columns incite, provoke and undermine. Do you deny this?"

"Yes, I most vehemently do."

The members of the panel gave each other familiar looks which when translated meant who does this boob think he's fooling.

The chairperson continued. "Mr. Stevens, you wrote a column recently on Sanibel's alligator population which encouraged them to organize and demonstrate against our existing government. Do you deny that you wrote this column?"

"For heaven's sake," I shouted. "It was make believe. I was only trying to be funny."

The spokesperson eyed me sternly. "Trying to be funny. Do you realize that as a result of your column alligators on Sanibel have been taking liberties they normally wouldn't dare risk? Several of them took over the toll booth on the causeway and denied entry to several hundred cars."

I was flabbergasted, which is one degree higher than dumbfounded. "You're kidding," I said.

"No, we're not kidding. And you did a column once suggesting that Donald Trump should be named mayor of Sanibel. Our real mayor was so upset that he declared martial law on the island. He threatened to close down our paper until we convinced him that you just made the whole thing up, that it was just a figment of your imagination."

"I had no idea." I said.

"The column you did on a cat that carried on a conversation with his master resulted in a mass demonstration in front of our editorial offices of 2,000 children who wanted to meet and play with this talking cat."

I was beginning to get the picture.

"Now wait just a moment, Madam Chairman," I stammered. "I'm a humor columnist. My columns aren't to be taken seriously. I take a lot of literary license and simply pull subjects out of the air. Surely your readers can distinguish between humor and straightforward news."

The chairperson produced a gavel and banged it on the wooden table. "Silence, Mr. Stevens. This Humor Review Board has already reached its verdict. We find you guilty of too vivid an imagination. We find you guilty of using your bizarre sense of humor to divert readers from the real issues of the day – red algae, blackened fish, turtle nesting and manatees."

"Guilty," I cried. "I confess. The real issues are too overwhelming. I can't deal with them. What shall I do?"

The panel members nodded to each other. I appeared to be sufficiently contrite. The chairperson gazed steadily at me and finally spoke to me in a softer tone. "Your humor must be toned down. No more inciting. No more provoking. No more controversy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes," I shouted. "I'll be good." And I ran out of there eager to write a column about a truly non- controversial subject - - the pending bill on constructing a baseball stadium in Sanibel.
