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Author sounds alarm: Beware of the 'snark'

By Vince Darcangelo, Special to the Rocky
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Some readers might be puzzled by the title of David Denby's new book, *Snark: It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation*.

What the heck is a "snark"? And why does it have to be so darn mean?

Regulars of the blogosphere and message boards should already be familiar with the term, but for the rest of us, a good working definition of snark comes from the word's etymology - a combination of "snide" and "remark."

Snarks are critical comments - sometimes outright malicious or, as Denby argues, so lacking in substance as to come across as mean-spirited - typically found in blogs, online discussion forums and even print and television media outlets. Gossiping about the intimate lives of celebrities, for example, can be snarky. So is dismissing Michelle Obama as Barack's "baby mama" or posting on a Web site where you can name and rate a sexual partner while remaining anonymous yourself.

Put another way: Snark is glorified bathroom graffiti.

Denby, a film critic for the *New Yorker* magazine and author of *Great Books*, describes snark as "the sour underside of a liberated media culture, bumper stickers for the electronic age." He delves into the muck and resurfaces with this extended essay, which mixes historical research with thoughtful criticism and entertaining writing. He explores how emerging media have changed the way we communicate and allowed snark to infiltrate traditional journalism.

"We are in a shaky moment, a moment of transition, and I think it's reasonable to ask: What are we doing to ourselves? What kind of journalistic culture do we want? What kind of Internet culture? What kind of national conversation?"

This is Denby at the top of his game. Anyone concerned with the future of the media should necessarily be concerned with content, and Denby lays out a solid argument that is a clarion call for journalistic integrity.

Most important, *Snark* is enjoyable to read. Filled with witty one-liners, pop-culture deconstruction and a fair amount of highbrow snark, Denby's strong narrative voice propels the reader through the text, and even turns a history lesson into entertainment as he traces the roots of snark back to the ancient Greeks. (That's right, those snarky ancient Greeks!)

Denby reserves his sharpest knives for dicing up *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd. He takes a few stabs at the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer early on, and then devotes an entire chapter to Dowd near the end of the book. He gives her props for her writing skills, in particular her talent for comedy. But as far as being a political writer, "she has not-as far as I can tell-a single political idea in her head." But as sass, not substance, is the name of the game, Denby concludes: "In brief, she's the most gifted writer of snark in the country."

While his chapter on Dowd is often amusing, it lacks the momentum of the previous chapters, and at times borders on personal vendetta. In fact, rather than advancing Denby's premise, it disrupts the narrative thread.

Same for the quick-hit finale. These closing chapters are interesting reads, but they feel tacked on.

That is not to say that these sections don't have anything to offer. Denby closes with a great anecdote about Stephen Colbert and the infamous White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2006, when the

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There are no recently emailed items

comedian skewered George Bush - but unlike the snarkers who take shots behind anonymous Internet handles and in faceless blogs, Colbert made his jokes in Bush's presence. (Denby is a staunch defender of the satirical comedy of Colbert and Jon Stewart.) This is a prime distinction between snark and non-snark, and Denby makes this clear throughout the book.

By no means is Denby calling for the end of criticism, or satire, comedy and irony. He is quick to point out that "Gentleness is not the antidote to snark."

The trouble with snark, for him, is that it's lazy. It's a way for less-talented critics to take shots at those with more talent. And for Denby, snark's detriment to conversation is not what it contributes, but rather what it doesn't: It is criticism without substance.

"The trouble with today's snarky pipsqueaks who break off a sentence or two, or who write a couple of mean paragraphs, is that they don't go far enough; they don't have a coherent view of life . . . they're mere opportunists without dedication, and they don't win any victories."

The biggest loser, though, is all of us. This breakdown of intelligent commentary is infecting what we read, what we think, what we say. Gentleness may not be the antidote, but Denby's book just might be.

Vince Darcangelo is a freelance writer living in Boulder.

Snark through the ages

While snark might be bigger than ever, due to the modern media culture, it isn't a new invention. Here's a look at some historical incidents of snark:

- * **Eighth century B.C.:** Snark possibly invented at a symposium, or wine party, in Athens, where men made jokes about one another in the knowing manner of snark. "The insults were offered in a kind of lewd code that blessed those men privileged enough to hear it."
- * **Democratic Era, Greece:** Snark enters the public domain, infiltrating speeches under the guise of iambic poems. "You didn't just drop your turds in the street if you wanted to be taken seriously," writes Denby. "The abuse was still what we might call snark, but it had to work formally."
- * **Fifth century B.C.:** Comic playwright Aristophanes lampoons the famous with fart jokes.
- * **First century A.D.:** The Roman poet Juvenal publishes a series of satirical works, filled with such snarky gems as: "Your shaggy limbs and the bristling hair on your forearms proclaim a fierce spirit; but the surgeon who lances your swollen piles breaks up at the sight of that well-smoothed passage."
- * **1743:** In *The Dunciad*, Alexander Pope deems his rival, the actor and poet laureate Colley Cibber, King of Dunces, writing, "Next, o'er his Books his eyes began to roll / In pleasing memory of all he stole / How here he sipp'd, how there he plunder'd snug / And suck'd all o'er, like an industrious Bug."
- * **1874:** Lewis Carroll pens *The Hunting of the Snark*, a nonsense poem that elevates the word "snark" into the public lexicon.
- * **1961:** British satirical magazine *Private Eye* debuts, taking shots at the British establishment, including this critique of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*: "Their latest L.P., *A Day in the Life of Ex-King Zog of Albania*, took over five years to make and includes combs on paper, the sound of the Cornish Riviera Express leaving Paddington Station, two million zithers, an electric hydrofoil and the massed strings of the Tel Aviv Police band."
- * **1970:** Tom Wolfe publishes "These Radical Chic Evenings," an article skewering a party thrown by white celebrities in honor of the Black Panthers. "Snark as a habit of contemptuous low wit brought Tom Wolfe out - or rather, it lured him into an unhappy, jeering corner that he has never since left."
- * **1986:** Satirical monthly magazine *Spy* debuts, a publication Denby calls "the center of American snark in the eighties." The magazine took shots at celebrities and epitomized the voice of the outsider wishing to become an insider.
- * **Present day:** Blogs, discussion boards and sites like Gawker have ushered in a new wave of writers relying on insult to garner attention. "Scratch a writer of snark," says Denby, "and you find a media-age conformist and an aesthetic nonentity."

Snark: It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation

* **By David Denby.** Simon & Schuster, 128 pages, \$15.95.

* **Grade: A**

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