

WHO'S THE BOSS?

BY DAVID BRUDNOY

"I've never fired anybody," Al Neuharth says. "Oh, I've moved people around, to make the best use of their talents, and, sure, some have *quit* on me. But I've never fired anybody."

The self-avowed S.O.B. (but a lovable one, he hastens to add) joined Gannett in 1963 and retired as CEO on his 65th birthday in 1989. Neuharth might have asked the board of directors to waive the mandatory retirement age; successful CEOs usually do. Instead, he retired with five years of eligibility left, as he had said he would do when he first took over Gannett 15 years earlier.

He left behind one of the greatest successes in the history of either business or journalism. Gannett grew from a relatively small, insignificant newspaper chain to a large media empire under Neuharth's stewardship. And its crown jewel, *USA Today*, is Neuharth's greatest creation.

These days, Neuharth is running the talk show and interview circuit, plugging his new book, *Confessions of an S.O.B.*, and defending the notion that "Only cream and S.O.B.s rise to the top." But that doesn't stop him from writing, "Living proof that nice guys can get to the top, too!" when he autographs my copy of his book.

Confessions is more than just Neuharth's own version of his life. His ex-wives and children each get chapters to tell their side of the Al Neuharth story. Lori Wilson, wife number two (1973-1982), writes: "Al Neuharth is a snake. He's cold-blooded. He's sneaky and slithers around and sheds his old skin as he grows....He's like a stalking animal. Once you're his target, professionally or personally, he'll do whatever it takes to get you. You might as well roll over and enjoy it....Al discards. He forgets you, writes you off as if you don't exist anymore. He never looks back. The past is history. He cares only about the future."

Loretta Neuharth, wife number one



Al Neuharth: irresistible, in person and in print

(1946-72), also damns Neuharth and praises him. And both get what no author ever gives those whom he's cast aside—an uncensored slot, ample in length, to air their grievances, unanswered by their former husband, in his own book. The S.O.B. plays fair.

If marriage to Neuharth is a mixed blessing, what is it like to work for him? An old buddy of mine, for four years a star columnist at *USA Today*, laughed when I recounted Neuharth's straight-faced answer—yes—when I asked whether the staff, like the boss, goes first class. I also asked Neuharth whether any *USA Today* writers make \$70,000 annually. Not all, of course, he said, but some. My pal harrumphed at that.

But clearly, Neuharth himself did go first class: a \$17-million Gulfstream IV jet (equipped with typewriters, television sets, and a shower) to fly him wherever he went and limousines at every destination. When Neuharth left Gannett, he took a \$5-million retirement bonus and a weekly column in *USA Today*. On his wrist, he wears a gold watch to make all others look like Swatches and on his finger, a jeweled ring that would shame the gaudiest pimp.

Living well suits Al Neuharth. He doesn't look a day over 50 as he sits hunched over my microphone, giving answers shorter than the typical *USA Today* paragraph. He has an I-dare-you smile on his face as he throws out his terse responses to my questions.

He is irresistible, in person and in print. "No-fun bosses make even good jobs dull," he emphasizes. Oh, the naysayers often thought their boss was crawling out on a limb. When Neuharth started *USA Today*, some pointed to it as proof of how crazy he was; there was no way to overcome all the obstacles facing the paper. Neuharth was indeed crazy.

Like a fox.

He is also high-spirited. He emphasizes having fun throughout his book. He never ever worries, he claims. Instead, he throws himself joyously into each new project. "When I'm involved in something, I want to touch it, hold it, massage it. When the boss puts his hands on something, everyone knows it's important." But when everything has been set up and things are running smoothly, "I step away and let others do the job." He used to drive his employees crazy, he says, being more hands-on than most bosses and then more hands-off.

He loves winning. A favorite biblical quotation is Psalms 72:9, "His enemies shall lick the dust." While his enemies licked dust, Neuharth marched to the top, "taking one smart step at a time. Managing, maneuvering, manipulating [my] way from one stepping stone to the next."

Who's in the way? Other S.O.B.s, of course. Some have what you want; others want what you have. Some can be stepped around gracefully; others must be stepped on. He liked best dealing with S.O.B.s who are likable and who enjoy the fight. But "when niceness alone doesn't work, a little nastiness must be applied. The right mix is the only sure way to the top."

THE LATERAL VIEW

Again, he quotes from the Bible (I Peter 5:8): "Be vigilant, because your adversary, the Devil, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."

But *Confessions* isn't just the story of Neuharth's rise to the top. The boss who did more than any other in publishing to integrate his company's staff—Gannett has the highest percentage of minorities and women in executive and reporting positions of any media conglomerate—sees opportunity everywhere in the USA. (Not America, he would caution. America refers to both continents; the USA is our country.) But he also finds a lack of will to maximize those opportunities.

He bemoans the complacency that he sees all around him. "We've lost some of the drive that made the USA great," he tells me. "We need leadership in government, in business, in education, and we're not getting it. And our tax structure is becoming a disincentive to success. Oh, I don't mind paying higher taxes, which usually means I've been making more money, but there's a point where a lot of people just stop striving since the taxes more or less punish them for succeeding."

Sure, many people will dismiss *Confessions* as McEgo and bristle at his dismissals of various people, places, newspapers, and ideas. They will focus on advice such as "Eat only when you're hungry. Drink only when you're thirsty. Sleep only when you're tired. Screw only when you're horny." They'll say Neuharth probably whipped up the book on a slow weekend.

But these people miss the point of Neuharth's message. *Confessions* is a call for leadership. Neuharth urges each of us to accept no limit imposed on us by others. In short, he, like Ayn Rand, advocates a sort of enlightened selfishness. *Confessions of an S.O.B.* is a laugh a page, a gossip-monger's dream come true, but it is also a serious, sober call to arms. It's joyful, shrewd and uncompromising. It would be foolish to ignore the book or the man.

Contributing editor David Brudnoy is WBZ Radio's late-night talk host and a film critic for the Tab newspaper chain in Boston. He's trying hard to be a lovable S.O.B.

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Theory Meets Practice

BY RICK MARIN

Nice Work, by David Lodge
New York: Viking, 277 pages, \$18.95



In Britain, his name ranks high enough on the literary roll to have been shortlisted twice for the coveted Booker Prize. In the United States, David Lodge remains a well-kept secret. That should change with the publication of *Nice Work*, his eighth novel and the second (after 1984's *Small World*) of his Booker nominees. Widely reviewed and broadly praised since its publication here this summer—"a writer of profound funniness," said *The New Yorker*—*Nice Work* is the most accessible and resonant of recent Lodge books. It's also one of the fullest, fairest portraits of the place invariably referred to as "Thatcher's England" to emerge from that country's ritually disaffected contemporary fiction.

Lodge is an academic. He taught at the University of Birmingham from 1960 to 1987, holds the title of honorary professor

of modern English literature there, and has published four books of criticism. His two best works of fiction to date, *Changing Places* (1975) and *Small World*, mocked with ingenious wit goings-on in the international ivory tower. *Nice Work* shares the same campus home base, a modern "plate-glass" university in the fictional Midlands city of Rummidge, and some familiar characters. But it ventures an important step beyond, into the soot and grime of that antique genre, the Industrial Novel.

Vic Wilcox runs a factory that turns molten metal into the internal organs of heavy machinery (gearbox casings, engine components, and the like). He's short, thick-set, and muscularly aggressive—Bob Hoskins, if you were casting a movie version. From working-class stock, he's now rich enough to drive a

Jaguar. Middle age is wearing him down at home, with a wife gone to seed and kids he doesn't understand, but it energizes him at work, where he is indisputably in charge.

Robyn Penrose is everything Vic is not: highly educated, a feminist, tall. Robyn lectures in the English department of Rummidge's university. By order of a bureaucratic PR scheme linking industry and academe, she is appointed Vic Wilcox's "shadow." At first, both parties detest this unsolicited intrusion into their daily routines. At first. By Lodge's contrivance, their differences ultimately drive the two together. Robyn, a dedicated practitioner of all the newest techniques of poststructuralist literary surgery, specializes in women's studies and the 19th-century novel. She knows Dickens inside and out but has never been inside a factory. Her knowledge is all theory, virgin thoughts both repelled and excited when rubbed up against Vic's hard, sweaty industrial praxis.

To his immense surprise Vic finds himself unaccountably turned on by Robyn's feisty independence and virtuoso book learning. She teaches him the difference between metaphor and metonymy, and how to deconstruct a billboard cigarette ad. He shows her how to stare down a competitor. Their protracted courtship is a mutual education.

For us, too. Lodge has clearly done his research. Rummidge is an "imaginary city," he archly explains in a note at the beginning of the book, "which occupies, for the purposes of fiction, the space where Birmingham is to be found on maps of the so-called real world." He knows the town well and has taken pains to learn the smokestack side of it better. The tour Vic gives Robyn of his foundry is Dickensian in its detail, if not in attitude. For not only does Lodge (in Vic's voice and his own) argue that the factory workers aren't exploited, he makes the

TIM TEEBKEN