

Top comic's confessional tales wow critics

Sarah Silverman has never been afraid of causing offence with her foul-mouthed stand-up routines. Now her frank autobiography has won plaudits from the most unlikely quarters

BY PAUL HARRIS
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Wetting the bed is not a topic about which many people feel comfortable talking in public. Indeed, even in private it is a source of embarrassment and shame, a dirty secret hidden in the dark and washed away with the sheets each morning.

But not for Sarah Silverman. Perhaps the most taboo-breaking comedian working in the US today, Silverman, 39, has not only confessed that she was a teenage bed wetter, but she has even made it the title of her new autobiography: *The Bedwetter: Stories of Courage, Redemption, and Pee*.

Maybe one should have expected nothing less from Silverman, whose combination of beauty, foul-mouthed stand-up routines and hit TV shows has made her one of the most successful comedians of her generation.

She has legions of fans who praise her ability to poke fun at ethnic, religious and sexual taboos; at the same time she outrages much of Middle America for exactly the same reasons. After all, this is a comedian whose TV show contained an episode in which she had a one-night stand with God. If that were not bad enough, she also made God a black man and her TV character rejected him the morning after and rudely kicked Him out of her apartment.

"Race and sex have been hot-button topics within the male-dominated comic world for decades. Silverman is cutting-edge because she is one of the few women to be openly offensive and make a name for themselves," said Ashley Dos Santos, a celebrity expert at Crosby Volmer International Communications.

But now Silverman has done, perhaps, the most unexpected and outrageous thing yet: she has written a heart-warming and revealing book that has critics swooning at its portrayal of the real Silverman behind the TV persona. It has also offered an intensely personal look at a comic who has zealously guarded her private life and revealed little about how her true personality differs from her potty-mouthed stage creation.

"Sarah Silverman has written a memoir that's sweet, funny, real and, dare I say it, occasionally even touching," wrote book reviewer Jim Higgins in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, a newspaper serving a slice of the Midwest that Silverman usually takes great pains to upset.

Reasons for that upset are not hard to find.

Silverman's career is littered with incidents that have provoked outrage, usually by skewering a sacred cow of race or sexism. One of the most famous was her use of the word "Chink" on the Conan O'Brien show in 2001. It prompted condemnation from Asian American groups and forced O'Brien and NBC into a hurried public apology. Silverman, however, did not say sorry. She also sparked more outrage in a 2005 documentary in which she deadpanned a joke about being raped by a prominent New York radio and television personality. Then, earlier this year, she engaged in a public battle over Twitter with the organizers of the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference in California. The conference is normally an event for tech visionaries and social pioneers to outline bold plans. But when Silverman included jokes about adopting a "retarded child," it provoked howls of outrage.

Clearly Silverman's humor is not for everyone and it seems obsessed with child-like insults over race, sex and bodily functions. But her point is not to lampoon race or sex but mock racists and sexists. Take the "Chink" gag on the O'Brien show. The joke was Silverman's character wanted to get out of jury service. A friend suggested she writes something offensive on the selection form, like "I hate Chinks." The punchline is that Silverman does not want to be seen as racist. "So I wrote, 'I love Chinks' — and who doesn't?" she

reveals with mock innocence.

Funny or not, the joke is clearly lampooning the racism of Silverman's character, not insulting Asian Americans.

Silverman's book explores both the fallout from her appearance on the O'Brien show and also her regrets about some of the things she has said, revealing someone who is occasionally mortified at having hurt people's feelings. "On the whole, comedians are vastly different in person than onstage," said celebrity interviewer Gayl Murphy and author of the book *Interview Tactics*.

Feeling bad is something that it seems Silverman knows a lot about. *The Bedwetter* is at times painfully honest about the troubles she had growing up, which later came to form the basis of much of her humor.

Silverman was a bed wetter until her high-school years. She also

plunged into clinical depression, joining the long ranks of comedians, such as Peter Sellers and Tony Hancock, whose private demons spurred their comedy. "Many comedians draw inspiration from a past that is troubled in some way," said Bobbie McDonald, host of the radio show *Inside the Mind*. The onset of her depression is something Silverman writes beautifully about. "It happened as fast as a cloud covering the sun. It was at once devastatingly real and terrifyingly intangible. I felt helpless, but not in the familiar bed-wetting sense. As quickly and casually as someone catches the flu, I caught depression, and it would last for the next three years," she writes. Silverman was also devastated by the suicide of her therapist when she was 13. She heard the news when a fellow doctor burst into the waiting room to say that his colleague had just hanged himself. Silverman describes the horror of the incident with mordant humor. "There needs to be some protocol, some set of standards, for how we tell depressed teenage girls that their shrinks have killed themselves," she writes.

But it is the bed-wetting — and overcoming it — that provides the most fascinating link between Silverman's private life and her public comedy. She was brought up in a loud and loving Jewish family in New Hampshire. It could have been idyllic, but being a bed wetter was clearly excruciating. She recounts an incident where she prepared to go on a school camp and her mother prepared a sleeping bag stuffed full of Pampers.

But one night she watched the *Tonight Show*, and saw an actress discussing her own bed-wetting problems. In a flash, Silverman realized she had to take ownership of her problems, not let them defeat her. She roots her fearless comic behavior in that teenage experience of overcoming intense shame. "My early trauma was a gift, it turned out, in a vocation where your best headspace is feeling that you have nothing to lose," she wrote.

Of course, there are other factors why Silverman has managed to carve out a career as a lampooner of social stereotypes. Silverman's rise up the ladder of the entertainment industry has exploited both her looks and ethnicity. The fact that she is Jewish allows her to get away with ethnic remarks more easily than if she were a white Protestant. The fact that she is a young, attractive woman allows her more leeway when talking about issues such as rape than a man would enjoy.

But Silverman can and does walk the edge.

While *The Bedwetter* paints a poignant portrait of a troubled woman finding a comic voice to overcome her problems, it also contains much of Silverman's trademark comic style that is still guaranteed to offend: it has an afterword, allegedly written by God, where he boasts of being proud of creating HIV and cancer.

The book also contains a savage indictment of the publishing world and the celebrities who feed it. "I'm not writing this book to share wisdom or inspire people," Silverman writes. "I'm writing this book because I am a famous comedian, which is how it works. If you're famous, you get to write a book, and not the other way around." At first glance, there is such arrogance in that statement. Then you reread it and see her point. Silverman is holding a painfully honest comic mirror to our world and pointing out that what it reflects can be pretty ugly. Bedwetting, as she found out, is the least of our problems.

SILVERMAN ON ...

... LAUGHING THROUGH THE TEARS

"I always want to laugh at the sad stuff. You don't need to laugh at other stuff. I'm not numb to these things. I still go into dark periods about 11 September. I think it's kind of like bullies. Bullies are just scared and thin-skinned, so they have to become bullies as a kind of survival tactic. I think comics are that way, too."

... WHY SOME ETHNIC GROUPS PRODUCE GREAT COMICS

"Look at the people who are kind of the funniest cultures, they're the cultures of the people who have been the most oppressed: black people and Jews. Not that they're the only funny people, but, culturally, it comes from the pain ..."

... IMPROVING RACE RELATIONS

"Relations between black and white would be greatly improved if we were more accepting of our fears and our feelings, and more vocal about it."

... BREAKING CULTURAL TABOOS THROUGH HUMOR

"I think you can make fun of anything as long as it's funny enough."

SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN

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