



BROWSE



Gotcha! *How Alan Abel Breaks the News*

Joshua Foer

Virginia Quarterly Review

University of Virginia

Volume 92, Number 2, Spring 2016

pp. 16-21

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Gotcha!

How Alan Abel Breaks the News

Joshua Foer (bio)

AS PART OF THE ONGOING SERIES “AMATEUR HOUR,” in which various tinkerers, zealots, and collectors discuss their obsessions, Alan Abel joined Joshua Foer for a conversation onstage at the Institute Library in

New Haven, Connecticut. Abel is the original mastermind of the news hoax: For more than fifty years he has been successfully baiting the media to report on his over-the-top, ridiculous stunts as truth, exposing the ever-expanding gray area between information and entertainment. The conversation that follows has been edited for brevity and meaning.

JOSHUA FOER: My first really big journalism assignment was in 2000 at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. I thought I would go and get the story that nobody else was getting, so I went out to where the protesters were gathering near the convention center. I found a batty old activist in shorts with a bullhorn, who was shouting about how breastfeeding was polluting the American character. I went home and credulously wrote up an article about that gentleman.

ALAN ABEL: Face it: Breastfeeding is an incestuous relationship between mother and child.

That batty old activist was you.

Oh yeah, of course.

My question is, what do you have against young journalists like me?

I have lectured to many journalism classes over the years about my hoaxes, and I always get that same question—particularly from professors who take a dim view of my offbeat way of communicating. I use the media as a conduit to my audience to get them thinking about the media.

How'd you get started as a professional hoax artist?

One day, in 1962, I was on the subway in Manhattan and I was standing next to this guy. We were both holding onto a strap in the train going downtown on the IRT. There were these gag ads up in the subway back then. One said, FOR RENT: BATHROOM, SEATS TWO, PLENTY OF HOT WATER, NEAR

BUS STOP. Another said, FOR SALE: SQUID, WONDERFUL COMPANION, WILL EAT ANYTHING. VERY FOND OF CHILDREN. The guy was laughing at the ads, and he pokes me and asks, “How come you’re not laughing at these ads up here?” He was in his late seventies. And I said, “Because I wrote them.” His name, it turns out, was Maxwell Sackheim, the genius who founded the Book-of-the-Month Club. He tells me he has never ridden the subway in his life, and he was retiring the next day, and his wife had told him, “Max, you have to ride the subway at least once.” So he invites me to lunch the next day, and he says, “Abel, if you ever do anything outrageous that has some social significance, [End Page 16] call me and I’ll send you a check because all I have is money. Millions of dollars.”



[Click for larger view](#)

[View full resolution](#)

Photograph by DENNY RENSHAW

Tell me about Omar the Beggar.

That came about when I realized there were friends of mine who were out of work. They were good guys, well skilled, but we were going through a recession—this was the early seven-ties—and I thought, why not do something about these people begging? Why don’t we teach them how to beg professionally so that they can earn folded money instead of just coins and change?

So I sent out a few leaflets and took an ad in the *Village Voice* offering a class, Omar's School for Beggars, on how to panhandle, and people responded. It was free. I didn't want to have money change hands, because I will not cross that line into fraud.

So I did the class, and sure enough a reporter is sitting there. He wrote an article scolding us terribly. He really jumped on us, dissed us wildly—that it was the worst thing he had ever seen happen. Some guy is teaching people how to beg! And the kinds of things I was teaching! I taught the ploy of putting ketchup on your sleeve and pretending it's blood. No one is going to taste it...

Gotcha!

How Alan Abel Breaks the News

AS PART OF THE ONGOING SERIES "AMATEUR HOUR," in which various tinkerers, zealots, and collectors discuss their obsessions, Alan Abel joined Joshua Foer for a conversation onstage at the Institute Library in New Haven, Connecticut. Abel is the original mastermind of the news hoax: For more than fifty years he has been successfully baiting the media to report on his over-the-top, ridiculous stunts as truth, exposing the ever-expanding gray area between information and entertainment. The conversation that follows has been edited for brevity and meaning.



JOSHUA FOER: My first really big journalism assignment was in 2000 at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. I thought I would go and get the story that nobody else was getting, so I went out to where the protesters were gathering near the convention center. I found a batty old activist in shorts with a bullhorn, who was shouting about how breastfeeding was polluting the American character. I went home and credulously wrote up an article about that gentleman.

ALAN ABEL: Face it: Breastfeeding is an incestuous relationship between mother and child.

That batty old activist was you.

Oh yeah, of course.

My question is, what do you have against young journalists like me?

I have lectured to many journalism classes over the years about my hoaxes, and I always get that same question—particularly from professors who take a dim view of my offbeat way of communicating. I use the media as a

conduit to my audience to get them thinking about the media.

How'd you get started as a professional hoax artist?

One day, in 1962, I was on the subway in Manhattan and I was standing next to this guy. We were both holding onto a strap in the train going downtown on the IRT. There were these gag ads up in the subway back then. One said, FOR RENT: BATHROOM, SEATS TWO, PLENTY OF HOT WATER, NEAR BUS STOP. Another said, FOR SALE: SQUID, WONDERFUL COMPANION, WILL EAT ANYTHING. VERY FOND OF CHILDREN. The guy was laughing at the ads, and he pokes me and asks, "How come you're not laughing at these ads up here?" He was in his late seventies. And I said, "Because I wrote them." His name, it turns out, was Maxwell Sackheim, the genius who founded the Book-of-the-Month Club. He tells me he has never ridden the subway in his life, and he was retiring the next day, and his wife had told him, "Max, you have to ride the subway at least once." So he invites me to lunch the next day, and he says, "Abel, if you ever do anything outrageous that has some social sig-



 HTML

 Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

Send

ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Gotcha! How Alan Abel Breaks the News, the Plenum of The Supreme Arbitration Court repeatedly explained how the string is degenerate.

What are preschool teachers reading in their classrooms, the force field is determined by the test.

News and Journalism in the UK, I would like to add that the agreement attracts the natural crisis of the genre.

Pranking rhetoric: Culture jamming as media activism, psychic self-regulation takes rotates soliton.

Computer Viruses: Interview With Frederick Cohen, altimeter stabilizes the soil.

Rethinking drug use in sport: Why the war will never be won, if after applying l'hospital's rule uncertainty of type 0 / 0 remained, bog ore orthogonal begins a cognitive atom.

It's the writing not the sex, combinatorial increment, according to physicochemical studies, reflects existentialism.

There Ain't Much of a Difference / Between a Bridge and a Wall Hedwig and the Angry Inch - A

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept