

Satirist wanted; no experience is necessary

In the early 2nd century A.D., Juvenal peered around at the grotesqueries of wealth and abject poverty in imperial Rome. What he saw turned him into a satirist. His satires are packed with vivid images of the exotic creature comforts of the staggeringly rich and the extreme sufferings of the urban poor. Those poor included many down-sized old Roman



citizen-farmer types whose solid and now neglected virtues had made Rome great. Their reward is to be shoved aside daily in the streets to make way for the well-to-do.

Juvenal's nouveaux-richest and decadent anciens-richest travel in the Roman equivalent of Mercedes SUVs. They wear the prototypes of Armani suits and Rolex watches. One such manipulator of money flashes a bejeweled ring. It is a "summer-weight" ring specially designed so his finger does not become sweaty in the urban heat from the strain of lifting a heavier ring. In another vivid vignette, we meet a struggling common Joe named Cordus. Cordus lives in a tiny walk-up apartment. He owns a few papyrus book scrolls and a cheap bust of the centaur Chiron — for inspiration. He scrapes by day to day, keeping his head down, his nose clean and his heart pure — and dodging SUVs. Meanwhile, philistine rats in Cordus' fire-trap apartment building nibble away at the bindings of his papyri. Juvenal declares: "He has nothing. Who could deny that?" And yet he loses what Juvenal calls "his portfolio of nothing," when the fire-trap finally goes up in flames. Cordus is left with the cheap toga on his back. No one cares. But when a Roman real-estate developer's villa burns down, a public emergency is declared. Rich cronies redirect public resources to rebuild his home on a grander scale.

The great Samuel Johnson transformed Juvenal's third satire into an acerbic indictment of similarly misplaced social values in 18th-century London. Our times now cry out for a 21st-century American update. A few attempts, such as Tom Wolfe's "The Bonfire of the Vanities" and Bret Easton Ellis' "American Psycho," were made to satirize the excesses of unharnessed capitalism and narcissistic consumerism in the last quarter of the 20th century. But Wolfe settles for tweaking the antics and insecurities of the rich and

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comfortable, like a "Philadelphia Story" slightly heated up. Ellis' satire is more scathing, but it is a one-trick apocalypse of consumer psychosis. Neither the books nor the movies made from them have the mordant power and all-encompassing sweep of Juvenal's "everyman" commentary on vanishing virtues and rampant vices.

Austin's own John Kelso might seem a good candidate for the assignment. He uses a suitable "South-Austin good-old-boy persona." But Kelso's pieces are suffused with gentle humor and lack the "Old-Testament-prophet" bite of Juvenal.

I hereby post an open want ad for a modern Juvenal who can do justice to the contemporary scene. No prior training is necessary. Juvenal makes that clear. Even if you have no literary talents whatsoever, just absorb what you see and *facit indignatio versum*: "Your moral outrage will write the satire for you."

Are you skeptical?

Just consider the UT associate athletic director for external affairs — a title that makes it seem as if the \$52.5 million-a-year sports conglomerate ensconced in the sky-box-laden Royal Memorial coliseum has its own cabinet ministry. When asked about a \$22 million cash-and-merchandise-for-advertising deal, he replies, "I'm not sure I consider that commercialization."

A colleague of mine deadpanned, "Maybe it will be commercialization when they mount a burnt orange 'swoosh-logo' atop the UT Tower." But he showed no signs of moral outrage.

Nor did Sports Illustrated writer Steve Rushin commenting on NCAA rule 2.15 stipulating that postseason competition shall be controlled to protect student-athletes from commercial exploitation: "With the exception, one presumes, of the Thrifty Car Rental Federal Express Poulan Weedeater Tough-Actin Tinactin Ty-D-bol bowls."

Applicants for my position, please send proof of indignation. Salary: none. Virtue is its own reward, and, in the times in which we live, had better be.

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INSIGHT

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