

# STEPHEN COLBERT

Stephen Colbert is the Emmy Award-winning host of “The Colbert Report,” a late-night cable news program. A one-time presidential candidate, he is also the author of *I Am America (And So Can You!)*, a book on American history and culture and the winner of the Stephen P. Colbert Award For The Literary Excellence. He spoke with the *Wag's Revue* editors at an American restaurant near his offices in New York.

***Will Guzzardi, Wag's Revue: Mr. Colbert, it's a pleasure to meet you.***

**SC: Doctor.**

***WG: I'm sorry?***

**SC: It's Doctor Colbert, please. D.F.A., Knox College. Look it up.**

***WG: Well, I'm sorry, Doctor Colbert. It's really an honor.***

**SC: Thank you. I'm sure it is.**

***WG: OK, well, we figured that since your political views are pretty widely known, we'd talk to you about literature for a bit. Despite your professed aversion to books, you often have guests on the show from the world of literature. In fact, David Shields, who we recently interviewed, was on your show shortly after we spoke with him.***

**SC: Yeah, you guys should get a nice Colbert bump out of that.**

***WG: How do you reconcile that, though?***

**SC:** Reconcile what? Having Shields on the show? I nailed Shields. You can go to the tape and see that. I mean, the guy's book is the equivalent of you guys putting clips from my show on your website and calling it "The Wag-bert Report." It's—basically, it's Wikipedia. A bunch of unattributed, slapped-together quotes. Mostly taken from Britannica.

**WG:** *No, I mean, you said on your very first episode, "I don't trust books. All fact, no heart." And yet, you interview all these authors. You wrote a book yourself.*

**SC:** First of all, I didn't write anything. I shouted that book into a tape recorder over a long weekend. That's why I have writers, to write down the things I say, after I say them. Second of all, my book is *all heart*. You read it, and tell me if you've "learned" anything, or if you've just felt it all. In your gut.

And then, why do I have authors on the show? Even O'Reilly has to have radical left-wingers on his show. Sharpton, Alan Colmes, Jon Stewart. That's what makes us fair and balanced. We have these people on to give an opposing view, and then we nail them for being wrong.

**WG:** *Let's talk about your book for a second. It's funny. There's humor right there in the title. I Am America (And So Can You!), I mean, it's totally ungrammatical.*

**SC:** I'm sorry, what's funny about it?

**WG:** *Well, it's—I am America, and so can you. It's bad parallelism. It should be something like, "I am America, and you can be too," or something, see what I'm saying?*

**SC:** Yeah, try selling that book. See how well that goes.

You're a poetry guy, right? When was the last time you read a poem that had good grammar? That's what I'm talking about, writing from the gut. You ever read "next to of course god america i"?

**WG:** *e. e. cummings?* Sure.

**SC:** That guy didn't play by the "rules" of some grammarista elite. He loved his country, and just put words on a page in whatever order they came to him. Then he went back, added a few line breaks, and boom, masterpiece. That's patriotic literature. That's what I did with my book.

*Will Litton, Wag's Revue: In the book, just as on the show, you play with different voices, which have different kinds of valences. You've got the main body of the book, and then the red marginalia there on the sides that has sardonic commentary on what's going on in the book. It's the same kind of technique you use in the segment "The Word" on the Report. And sometimes the comment is heightening the jokes in the main text, and sometimes it's undercutting them. Why do you use this technique, and what does it accomplish for you?*

**SC:** You know, I go back and watch my show several times a day, just to get an idea of what's going on in the world. And the "Word" segment, I'm pretty sure that was Jimmy writing that stuff. It doesn't make any sense. Obviously we cut that segment, and I don't think we pay Jimmy as much anymore.

As far as your book goes, a long-haired hippie like you might have bought a used copy at some anarchist bookstore run by a few of your comrades from Oberlin, and maybe the previous owner wrote in the margins.

There's no sardonic comment here, friend. There's the Truth, unvarnished, pure and simple, coming direct from the mouth of Me. That's all there is. Spin-free, completely un-spun. No English on these swinging eight-balls of truth. In fact, when we first started the show, I thought about calling the set the "No English Area," which worked, because a) we speak American here, and b) the Tea Partiers threw those gap-toothed Oscar-Wilde man-cuddlers out of here in 1776, a feat they still celebrate every year with the timeless motto, "No taxation without birth-certification."

You guys are ivory-tower pinkos, does Obama read your magazine?

*WG: Yes. I believe so.*

*SC: Good, that line was for him. Anyway, the "No English Area" was fine for a while, but then Richard Branson named an airplane after me just to get on the show, so I figured it was the least I could do for him. He'd been going through some really tough times.*

*Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: Okay, well, you have a reputation for being something of a trend-spotter, ahead of the curve, so we just wanted to ask you a few quick ones here on some controversial topics in literature and publishing. First of all, do you think the Internet represents a serious threat to*

**“No English on these  
swinging 8-balls  
of truth.”**

*the printed word as we know it, or will it supplement and increase the prevalence of print?*

SC: No.

[pause] WG: *Do you care to—*

SC: I thought you said these were quick ones! Let's go.

SA: *Okay, how about this. With the rise of things like the iBooks Store, do you think authors will soon be selling directly to their readers, or do you think there will always be a role for the traditional structure of agent, publisher, advertising, PR, et cetera?*

SC: Don't care. Every author I care about can sell his book on his nationally syndicated television show.

WL: *Did Herta Müller deserve the Nobel Prize last year?*

SC: I didn't win it, did I?

WG: *Do you believe Shakespeare's corpus was the work of one author or many?*

SC: That's a futile discussion that places undue emphasis on verifiable authorial identity. Although in my opinion, there's a pretty good case for Ben Jonson.

WL: *OK, iPad or Kindle?*

SC: iPad. Have you seen my suit?

WG: *Yeah, I saw that one.*

**SC:** You saw the suit pocket? Put a picture of the suit pocket in your magazine.



**SA:** Okay, one question we wanted to get a little deeper on. In your honor, we've been calling this issue of our magazine the "truthiness" issue. Just last week, you announced on your show that the word is now defined in the New Oxford American Dictionary.

**SC:** As I've said in the past, I don't normally trust words—I prefer emoticons ☺—but there are some words out there that I stand by. Most of them are from the Constitution, like "America," or "the right to bear arms." The rest are words I made up.

**SA:** Well, truthiness is a word that's been used in conjunction with the so-called memoir scandals of the last few years, James Frey and so forth. Are you proud to have your neologism tied to perpetrators of literary scandal?

**SC:** I have no problem with scandal; it rhymes with sandal, the preferred footwear of our Lord and Savior. And I don't have a problem with people writing down their life stories falsely. James Frey, Margaret Seltzer, Misha Defonesca, Miss Jane Pitman (yeah, nice try, Ernest J. Gaines) — it's all fine by me, as long as the point is to pay tribute to my word.

I think the reason why people get so upset about these memoir scandals is that they don't understand the world we're living in nowadays. All these Bolsheviks at the *New York Times Book Review* were too busy checking facts, and not busy enough checking their gut, which was probably filled with some kind of soy-based sandwich meat from Zen Palate. They're detached from wikiality.

**WG:** *Wikiality, another word you famously made up.*

**SC:** Yes, another word I have total faith in. Take the Misha Defonesca book. This little girl runs away from her abusive family, gets adopted by wolves, escapes the Warsaw ghetto, stabs a Nazi soldier with a pocket knife—this is the most American story that could possibly happen to a Belgian. Even Michiko Kakutani—who gave me a fake phone number at the Asian-American Film Festival—called it “humane and deeply affecting.” I think that's Michi's way of saying the book got her in the gut. It got millions of people, around the world, right here. [Punches himself in the gut.] Isn't that good enough for these literary types? Isn't that the point of a good book? No fact, all heart? But no. They have to start asking questions, checking the records, talking to “real” people.

For years, everything that happened in that book was totally true, because we all believed it. *That's* wikiality. If your magazine wants to publish something by, let's say, Dante,

# “Check the **Bible** and see what happened to **Doubting Thomas.**”

just go ahead and do it. Put his name in big letters right on the cover. Once enough people believe you, it'll become true. And if some doubting Thomas comes along with his notepad and suspenders, you tell him to check the Bible and see what happened to doubting Thomas. All those people who didn't read *Misha* because it wasn't true—they missed out on one of the best Holocaust stories of our time. That's their loss.

*WL: Do you think that you personally have anything to do with this trend? Or that you're implicated in it somehow? I mean, you play this character on the show, even in this interview, and it's a willful indulgence in 'truthiness.'*

**SC:** Yes, I've been told I'm quite the character. And I'm pretty sure every trend worth following starts with me.

*WL: OK, but seriously—I guess this question has to be directed at the 'real' Stephen Colbert. So can we talk to you out-of-character for a second?*

**SC:** How do you mean 'out-of-character'? Do you mean you want me to do something uncharacteristic of myself? Because I've never done anything out-of-character in my life—except for maybe *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*.

*WL: Sure, right. You're someone who's played a lot of characters—Phil Ken Sebben in Harvey Birdman, Attorney*



at Law; *Chuck Noblet in Strangers with Candy; to name a few of our favorites. But now you've added Stephen Colbert to your list of characters that you play. There's something very interesting going on there—that Stephen Colbert is playing the character Stephen Colbert. And you're obviously doing it to make a point.*

**SC:** My point? Sure. My performance of myself, I think, testifies to the omnipresence of art, inasmuch as the artistic gesture ultimately comes down to an intrusion into semblance—exposing, in its brute state, the gap of the real.

**WL:** *Uh, OK. Care to elaborate?*

**SC:** No.

**SA:** *Going back for a minute, then, is there a difference in your opinion between what a memoirist or essayist often does—affecting the “past” as they develop it into writing—and, say, a complete and utter literary hoax? You know, for instance, a lesser literary magazine might fabricate an interview with someone as famous as yourself for the sake of prestige, or to make an artistic statement about authorship and veracity.*

**SC:** Listen, I'm all for forgeries and hoaxes and everything, but if any magazine ever published a fake interview with me, my lawyers would bring the swift, justice-y hammer of litigation down on them so hard, they'd be publishing back issues of *Tek Jansen* for the next ten years.

**WL:** *Okay, our traditional last question: who's your favorite wag?*

**SC:** All time? I'd have to say *Posh Spice*.