Dave Barry contrasts U.S. and Japan with truth and humor

DAVE BARRY DOES JAPAN
Written by Dave Barry, Random House, 213 pp., $18.
By John Jacobs

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s a South Florida native, I've been reading Dave Barry for years. He's a writer for the Miami Herald. Hell, I remember when all he wrote were slapstick booger jokes. Through a computer error, possibly, his column became syndicated and suddenly, booger jokes were being read in newspapers across the country. Dave acquired a small but fast-fading following. They encouraged him to write books. "It's America," they said. "Make yourself some money." Since then, his books have gained him national fame for his offbeat yet accurate perspectives. In 1988, the New York Times called him: "The funniest man in America." And then he was given a Pulitzer Prize. His latest book is Dave Barry Does Japan. The first thing I liked about the book is that I was able to lift it off the shelf. Dave Barry Does Japan weighs in at 213 pages, a worthy exception to my 200-page rule (If you said it in over 200 pages, you ran your mouth). Also, it has wide margins.

In his book, he covers sports in Japan, rock music in Japan, and of course, humor in Japan. "The way Americans see it, if the nations of the world were a high-school class, Japan would be the nerdy kid who always sat in front," Dave says. "We don't look to Japan for humor. Currently, only 0.8 percent of the humor consumed in the US is imported from Japan. ... But that's exactly the situation we were in with automobiles thirty years ago, and NOW look at us!" Will the Japanese put Dave Barry out on the street? Buy the book.

Dave doesn't profess to be an expert on Japan after a three week stay, but his observations contain enough truth to at least make us laugh out loud when skimming the book in quiet bookstores. He examines cultural differences and communication barriers, all the while not afraid to comment on our own culture, or lack thereof. He walks us through the American stereotypes of the Japanese throughout the century. Are they all kamikaze W.W.II fighters, or bad English lip-synchers fleeting "giant radioactive worms," or giant Sumo wrestlers "the size of five pre-SlimFast Tommy Lasorda?" Who are those easterners? Buy the book.

The chapter on Hiroshima surprised me as much as a veteran Barry reader. I had never seen his serious side. Dave was in Hiroshima on the 46th anniversary of the dropping of the bomb and was present at the ceremony. His observations on it are poignant. "For me," Dave tells us, "the most moving moment was the ritual offering of water by representatives of the victims' families. After the bomb blast, many of the dying cried out constantly for water—mizu—but there was none; now, finally, they receive it." How do the Japanese remember Hiroshima? As a quick end to a war that would have dragged on through millions more lives? Or as an unpredictable "dirty trick," on the same moral ground as Pearl Harbor? Buy the book.

Dave sometimes trips over himself in reaching for the extra laugh. The flow of the book is occasionally broken by predictable footnotes or parenthetical puns. No one's perfect, right? I give the book seven unagi sushi out of 10.

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