

TALK

A NOVEL

Also by Michael Smerconish:

Morning Drive: Things I Wish I Knew Before I Started Talking
(The Lyons Press, 2009)

Instinct: The Man Who Stopped the 20th Hijacker
(The Lyons Press, 2009)

Murdered by Mumia: A Life Sentence of Loss, Pain and Injustice
(The Lyons Press, 2007)

Muzzled: From T-ball to Terrorism—True Stories That Should Be Fiction
(Thomas Nelson, 2006)

*Flying Blind: How Political Correctness Continues to
Compromise Airline Safety Post 9/11*
(Running Press, 2004)

Praise for *Talk*:

“If you’ve ever wondered what one of those hyperventilating, ‘Look-out! The sky is falling!’ radio leatherlungs is really thinking, here is a bracing dose of candor, offered by one of the medium’s most insightful figures. It’s a gift to his listeners that Michael does not practice what his character screeches . . . and a gift to his readers that he renders this world so compellingly.”

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EMMY-WINNING TV CORRESPONDENT

“What a rollicking, romping, rip-roaring read! Smerconish manages to compress into one book all the horrors, humor, and humiliations of both modern-day politics and talk radio. It may be fiction, but for those of us who have lived in those worlds, *Talk* hits awfully close to the bone.”

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BUSH, COFOUNDER OF NO LABELS

“Whether you love or hate talk radio—and no one’s neutral on this one—you will devour *Talk*. It’s scintillating, sexy and smart. It also makes a powerful point you will love or hate, but can’t ignore. Read *Talk* and talk about it.”

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“You want a preview of how we will pick our next president? Read this compelling first novel by Michael Smerconish. I couldn’t put it down. *Talk* is the fascinating behind-the-scenes story of how big-time politics and the big-time media are on a daily collision course. The resulting police report: careers are made, lives are destroyed and somebody ends up standing at the presidential podium.”

—SAL PAOLANTONIO, NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT, ESPN

“Look at them: The guy stuck in traffic alongside you, the woman behind you, both glaring at the cars stalled in front of them, enemies attacking their day. And what are they doing? Listening to talk radio. Listening and deciding what nuggets—bizarre or rational, thoughtful or borderline crazy—they’ll ponder as they navigate through the politics that affect every American life. In his first novel, Michael Smerconish, a guy who actually brings rational, thoughtful opinion and insight daily to the national stage, has drawn back the curtain on a two universes—politics and talk radio—that have dominated so much of the discourse around the direction of the country. Who knew? Smerconish writes as well as he talks. Buy the book. Learn a lot.”

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Morning Joe ON MSNBC

“For years, people have said that Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* would make a great Secretary of State. After reading *Talk*, I have a better idea: Michael Smerconish as White House Communications Director. Because the president should have a guy who knows how things actually work. *Talk* is funny, insightful and scary. It says ‘novel’ on the cover but I’m not so sure.”

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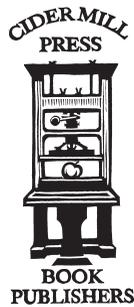
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—JAMES C. HUMES, FORMER SPEECHWRITER FOR PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN AND LADY MARGARET THATCHER, AND AUTHOR OF *Speak Like Churchill, Stand Like Lincoln* AND *The Wit and Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln*

TALK

A NOVEL

by
MICHAEL SMERCONISH



Kennebunkport, Maine

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Talk: A Novel

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CHAPTER 1

“Fire, tits, and sharks are TV gold. But on radio you need to make ‘em hot the harder way. Through the ears.”

Welcome to the media world according to Phil Dean. The new year had just begun, we’d only been connected for five minutes, and already he was on a roll.

I’d called him on my iPhone just as soon as I’d cleared the shitty mobile reception of the underground lot at Whiting and Ashley beneath the radio station where I work in downtown Tampa. It was our first skull session since before Christmas break, but there was no holiday rust apparent in his rapid-fire delivery. So far his advice for the coming year sounded pretty much the same as ever. My hunch was that he was about to hit me with his 3C mantra, and sure enough, it came in his next sentence.

“Remember Stan, the three C’s are still king....”

I finished the sentence for him, pulling his chain.

“Compelling, compelling, compelling.”

“*Conservative*, consistent, and compelling,” he quickly corrected, stressing c-o-n-s-e-r-v-a-t-i-v-e, just as he had

in virtually every conversation we'd had in the several years prior.

There was a certain routine to these chats which were always scheduled for weekday mornings after my air shift. As usual, I'd pulled out of the parking lot and given my customary nod to the tall, 60-something, short-sleeved black guy fishing in MacDill Park on the Riverwalk with ear buds, beneath an enormous piece of red modern art that I could never figure out. (Just what were those intersecting pieces of metal? They reminded me of the game of pick up sticks.) He was there every day, probably looking for snook or red fish. We didn't know one another and we'd never chatted, but we crossed paths here each day.

He could be a listener for all I know. I've got tens of thousands of them, but even if he was, I doubt he'd know who I am by sight. Then again, with some of my recent cable TV appearances, he just might.

Northbound on Ashley, I headed for 275 South, passing the big beer-can better known as the Sykes building and spying a billboard that said, "Retire Worry Free." Not me. Not yet. But maybe someday if Phil's advice paid off. With his three C's still echoing in my head, I steered my car down my familiar path toward Clearwater Beach and home.

Phil believed that compelling radio conversation should primarily come from conservative politics. And there were many successful talk radio personalities across the country who were practitioners of his advice. He'd always held the names of his star pupils close to the vest, but I could recognize his weapons in the arsenals of the biggest names in the business. This morning's call was one of his standard tutorials.

"Remember Stan, you need red meat for the troops."

That was another of his staples.

“And add an occasional slice-of-life segment. Sprinkle in some *Seinfeld* shit.”

For the latter, he was forever imploring me to look outside the normal mix of newspapers and cable TV shows for my program content. He believed that too many talk radio hosts didn’t balance the hard news of the day with whatever might command attention at workplace water coolers and coffee machines across the nation. Phil paused, maybe needing to catch his breath in the thin desert air of New Mexico. “If listeners aren’t using your stuff for stupid talk with people they barely know, then you didn’t nail it on air, Powers.”

What he said made professional sense to me and I usually followed his advice, but I’d heard some of it more times than I could stomach. The thing with Phil was this: about 90 percent of his advice was repetitive or irrelevant bullshit, but the other 10 percent was radio gold. Sifting through all the crap could make a career, and right now, I was counting on him to make mine. Of course, finding talk radio gold wasn’t always easy.

Like the time when in the middle of some abstract history lesson about the marketing failure of New Coke, Phil told me that a good talk show host should be able to go the length of an entire program without taking a single call from a listener. He actually challenged me to do it on my next program. That tutorial was a keeper.

“But isn’t that the purpose of a talk radio program—for the host and the listeners to talk?” I’d naively asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Powers. The purpose of a talk program is the same as the guy talkin’ on a fucking CB—to get people to listen. It’s all entertainment.”

And then he said something I’ve never forgotten.

“Nobody is listening to your show, or any other talk radio show, because of the callers. They listen for the host. You will

never meet a listener who tunes into your program because of your callers. They are listening to hear you, Stan. And if you don't entertain them, they won't listen at all. No matter who your callers are, or what horseshit they have to say."

Until then, it hadn't occurred to me, but he was right. Not once had anyone ever emailed my web site or spoken to me directly about something a caller said on the air. For better or worse, all the feedback was about me.

These mid-morning chats were never "conversations," because truth-be-told, Phil did most of the talking. Which is kind of funny given that between the two of us, I was the one who got paid to speak for a living. Now, however, I was getting paid by the suits in management to listen. Which was fine, when I was decompressing on the drive home after my show.

I'm usually spent and in need of a nap by the time I reach the end of a morning shift, especially if I've been out carousing the night before. I get up in the middle of the night and arrive to work before most breakfast cooks are out of bed. The program is four hours long, with four six-minute breaks per hour for commercials, news and PSAs. During those commercial breaks I am usually obligated to read live spots, which leaves little time to even take a piss. So there is really no stopping once the "on air" light goes on, and by the time it turns off at 9 a.m., I've got very little to say. Which is why on this, my first work day of the new year, I was content to listen and drive.

Twenty minutes after I pulled away from WRGT, Phil was fully cranked as my Lexus IS convertible crossed the scenic 14-mile stretch of the Courtney Campbell Causeway: two lanes headed each way with majestic water on both sides. High up above were military jets from nearby MacDill Air Force Base, flying to far-off places in support of the war on terror. And by the time I passed the sign saying "Welcome to Clearwater,

spring home of the Phillies” and the original Hooters (“Since 1983, delightfully tacky, yet unrefined”), I could almost smell suntan lotion as I neared the beach.

All along my drive on 60 West were the types of businesses that paid my salary. Car dealers, pawn shops, pizza joints and assorted honkytonks—these were my lifeblood, the sort of entrepreneurs who were advertisers on my station. I tried not to lose sight of the fact that the people who walked through their doors were the ones who allowed me to live a pretty damn comfortable life. By the time I could see the Fort Harrison Hotel on my right shoulder, better known as the HQ of Scientology, I was about to cross over the Clearwater Memorial Bridge from which I could see the outline of the beachfront high-rises in Sand Key off in the distance. The distinctive, sleek shapes of the Glanoe, the Meridian and the Ultimar formed the skyline of Tampa/St. Petersburg’s most expensive addresses, including mine. Not bad for a former slacker.

On this particular day the sun was shining but my car roof was closed because I wanted to hear every word Phil had to say. If I had been the type to make New Year’s resolutions, I would definitely have set national radio syndication as my number-one goal for the coming year. I could already taste that next level of radio, but to get there, I had to keep trusting Phil Dean. Yes, he’d been a pain in my ass for the last several years, but professionally speaking, he hadn’t led me astray. Even though following his advice made me increasingly uncomfortable, there was no question that it worked. The ratings didn’t lie. And for a year now, we’d been specifically strategizing as to how to take advantage of the political calendar that was about to unfold. My listeners were concentrated in the I-4 corridor, the stretch between Tampa and Orlando, and they had been known to tip the scales in more than one presidential race. As the top-rated

talk host in a mid-sized but hotly contested market, I could very well find myself at the political epicenter of the upcoming election. The stage was set for my career to really pop, and I didn't want to blow my shot. My only concern was whether I'd be able to reach my goal with some shred of dignity intact. That wasn't looking likely.

“Did you ever hear of David Ogilvy, Powers?”

I had a vague awareness of the legendary adman to whom Phil was now referring.

“He's the genius who came up with the slogan, ‘At 60 miles an hour, the loudest noise in the Rolls Royce comes from the clock,’” he went on.

As was often the case, I didn't get the connection to talk radio. Phil proceeded to explain that the advertising guru had solved a concern about an old-style clock in what was then the fanciest car of its time.

“The sweeping hand-style clock didn't seem to fit the swanky new car. But instead of running from it, Ogilvy made it the focus. What was a subject of concern now became the chief attribute. Talk about shit from shinola, Powers, this guy took a complaint about a product and turned it into an asset.”

Good story, but I still didn't understand the relevance. Nor did I interrupt. This, I quickly decided, was part of the 90 percent bullshit.

I'd worked with a handful of media consultants over the years, and Phil was easily the best of the lot. Hell, he was legendary. I'm naturally suspect of the entire group of them. I mean, if these guys knew how to do my job, I'd always wondered, why weren't they *doing* it? True, some didn't have the requisite melodious voice, or as we say in radio, “the pipes.” But many of them did have great pitch, far better than mine, which only fueled my suspicion about their advice. Usually, if

any of these clowns had ever actually worked in a radio station, it was on the other side of the glass—the production side, doing technical work with the other folks who at one time ran their high school’s filmstrip projector.

“A good talk host hangs up on at least two callers per air shift,” was typical of the shitty advice you got from Phil’s competitors. I’d actually heard that pearl of wisdom during a panel discussion at a convention sponsored by *Yakkers Magazine*, the print bible of our industry. In front of a room full of blowhards like me, three consultants sat on their asses and traded wit like that. I never understood the thinking. Exactly which callers was I supposed to hang up on, and why? But I could see the rest of the room rapt with attention, taking notes, and eager to get back to some daytimer in Bumblefuck and hang up on some poor sap who took the time to call.

I once heard a caller say to a host, “If you really think that, you should run for office yourself.”

To which the host said, for no apparent reason, “You’re a crumb bum.”

And then—click. He cut him off.

Listening somewhere, I’ll bet some B-level consultant got a chubby.

But Phil was different. He didn’t throw out lines just to be provocative. He meant everything he said, even the crazy shit. And I was inclined to listen to him because unlike the rest, he *had* been there and done that. Not as a talk host, but in the format where I’d started, as a classic rock DJ. He’d earned his stripes as one of the true progressive rock pioneers, a young guy back in the early 1970s breaking bands like Genesis (before Phil Collins took over for Peter Gabriel), or Emerson, Lake and Palmer (in the era of *Brain Salad Surgery*). When it came to the future of rock music, they used to say that Phil could see around corners.

“Phil Dean gave good ear,” was the way my agent, Jules DelGado, put it. I love that expression. High praise.

Phil Dean had been the top DJ in a big market, Los Angeles, and he’d had it all before flaming out on a combination of drugs and booze. He had been a small step from superstardom—one level below Sterndom—when it all came crashing down. The end came from a missed morning shift after a bender at a strip joint the night before, which not only got him fired in LA but also blacklisted by program directors coast to coast. There’s no such thing as being late for work when you are the namesake of a radio program. And in his case, not even a string of more rehab stays than Lindsay Lohan could convince program directors, or PDs, to take a chance on giving him back his own slot.

The story would have ended there for most, but in his case, it really was the best thing that could have happened to him. While no PD was willing to hire him for shift work, they all still wanted his expertise. He became the guy who programmers would solicit before determining their talent and playlists, calling upon the intuitive talents that he’d employed for years. Eventually that work expanded beyond classic rock to other formats, including talk. Which explains why now, at the crack of dawn from a home studio somewhere near Taos, New Mexico, a 65ish Phil was wired to a headset, philosophizing to me about the world of talk radio. He was being paid big bucks to sit on his ass and critique snippets of radio for a select number of jerkoffs across the country, including me. The word on the street was that he had developed a new addiction—food—and tipped the scales at 400 lbs. I couldn’t say for sure because I’d never set eyes on him; my vision of him was based on a 20-year-old promotional shot from when he was still on top and wearing some fucking Hawaiian shirt. Which kinda fits our business, one where apart from the biggest

names, the audience never sees the talent and is left to conjure up an image of what the host looks like. In my experience, that's in everyone's best interest because based on the personalities I've met over the years, their physical appearance rarely matches their pipes. There's a reason why people talk about a "face for radio."

When I'd first arrived in Tampa to do mornings, Phil had come with the territory. Ours was a shotgun marriage if there ever was one. I'd agreed to spend time on the phone with him on a weekly basis as a concession to my new employer, a Christian conglomerate that had just bought the radio station where I worked. I'd been hired to host a music show and had no experience in the talk format, but after my role was recast, I'd been told that Phil would show me the ropes. Coincidentally, Jules had once repped Phil pre-crash.

"You're a perfect match," he'd told me. "He's fuckin' nuts, like you, but he has flashes of brilliance." Then he'd hurried off the phone to speak to another client.

Jules was a big mahoff based in New York City who often wound up on Page Six when movie deals got made. He represented all sorts of entertainers in Hollywood and New York, and a few he hoped were up-and-comers like me, a radio guy in Tampa who was probably his smallest client. I was forever fighting for his attention, but I stuck with him because he was wired like no one else, and it had not surprised me to learn that he had once been Phil's agent.

These days there was so much mystique about Phil's client list that I was proud just to be on it, even if I didn't positively know who else was. Although his clients were all said to be in radio, his opinions extended to all forms of communication—print, TV, and Internet. And I frequently received more than a few of those opinions myself.

What I'd never admit to the suits was that I'd actually come to look forward to these calls. They were a bit cathartic, high on entertainment value, and better than any of the 40 or so stations of crap on the terrestrial radio band, especially talk radio. I may be a radio host, but it doesn't mean I want to listen, especially to the format for which my station is known. For the past three years, WRGT had been offering four different hosts during daylight hours, including me, each kicking the shit out of President Summers on account of what we called his "radical socialism." The only thing that ever changed was the voices and the guests; the message was always the same. Boring? Monotonous? Well, it worked. And it was pretty much the same at every other talk radio station across the country that had the usual mouthpieces. And if the stations didn't feature the biggest names in talk, they employed a B-team of even worse imitators. You'd think it would wear thin, but our P1s—that's radiospeak for our most ardent listeners—couldn't get enough. They may comprise a relatively small segment of society, but there are no more faithful radio listeners than fans of conservative talk. Which is another reason why I needed Phil Dean whispering in my ear. Because the sort of thing they wanted to hear from a guy like me was not exactly the message I was naturally inclined to offer. I suspected that Phil knew my personal politics were not those that he had me spouting, but he didn't seem to care, so long as I towed a consistently conservative line on air.

"It's not what you want to say, Stan, it's what they want to hear. Always remember that."

Years ago, Phil had seen the whole right-wing thing coming. And I'm talking even before Rush Limbaugh capitalized on the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1991 and went on to dominate the medium. See, prior to Limbaugh, there weren't

really national talk players, and the stations that carried talk had more diversity of hosts and political viewpoints than you would find anywhere today. It didn't matter if you were left or right. All that mattered was whether you could sustain a good conversation. Personality was king, not ideology. Guys like Irv Homer in Philly. You know what he did before he was a talk host? He was a bartender. Perfect training for that era. Because any good bartender knows both how to initiate a conversation and how to cut off a barfly who, like a caller, stays too long.

Phil was just getting back on his feet as a consultant after another round of detox when a station out in San Diego called and said it was contemplating a flip from talk to classic rock. Phil's job was to recommend some jocks and then establish the playlist. Pretty standard stuff. But before the switchover, he found himself listening to talk, the format he would be abandoning. He tuned in to the station 24/7 for a few weeks' time while driving around in a rental car before finally advising the owner to keep the format and let him change the lineup.

"Fire the food and wine guy, can the real estate show, and replace both of them and your two liberals with some angry white conservative guys," he told them.

Naturally the station resisted, in part because it was fearful of losing the revenue from the weekend specialty programming—always a ratings loser but a money generator. Also because the two liberals were old timers and they feared a discrimination lawsuit. But when Phil outlined his reasoning, it made such perfect sense that the brass decided the downside of any litigation was outweighed by the financial upside.

"Talk radio is a clubhouse for conservatives," Phil had explained. "It's an intimate place where people on the right can go and be with likeminded folk while having their opinions reinforced. Without talk, they are homeless in the media."

Remember, this was pre-Internet and before the explosion of cable TV channels, including the advent of Fox News in 1996. The media landscape back then was Rush-free, Hannity-free and Beck-free, and consisted mainly of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the big three networks: NBC, ABC, and CBS. Americans got their news from the likes of Sam Donaldson and *60 Minutes*, and in the post-Watergate era, the slant was decidedly liberal. A whole generation of reporters had cut their teeth trying to be the next Woodward or Bernstein by bagging an elephant, and this had created a void. Talk radio, Phil recognized, could be a place where conservatives got the red-carpet treatment. But first the welcome mat had to be extended. Well, he rolled it out. The rest is history. And after his advice created big business on the right, a similar model took hold on the left, albeit with less success.

Phil's motives were strictly financial, not political. I figured he could just as easily have programmed the opposite end of the ideological spectrum; in fact, my hunch was that he was personally more into ganja than government. Never in our hundreds of conversations had we ever discussed his personal view of the world. And I could sometimes sense that he was humored by his ability to create a political groundswell. He enjoyed guiding the puppeteers who manipulated the marionettes, and drew perverse pleasure from the way the audience reacted to every movement of a limb.

Now he reiterated one more time, "This could be your year, Stan, so long as you remember to always be..."

"Yeah, I know," I told him. "Conservative, consistent, and compelling."

That was Phil's blueprint, and it had certainly worked for me so far. But as he monitored me from the New Mexico desert, he was quick to pick up on any deviance from this media menu, or any intonation in my voice that suggested my heart wasn't in it.

Like when the whole illegal immigration debate had kicked in after Arizona passed a law to get tough on those crossing the border. Naturally that was big on my program.

“Our Mexican border is wide open because the feds have been derelict in their duty,” I’d said.

So far, so good.

But Phil didn’t like what came out of my mouth next.

“Arizona had to act, but by drafting their law so broadly, I think they have left their police vulnerable to claims of unconstitutional traffic stops.”

When he heard that, he pounced.

“You’re not teaching law school, Powers. Stop confusing the audience with your nuanced bullshit. Praise Arizona; condemn the fucking feds. Like everything else, make it the failure of the federal government.”

When it came to colorful opinions, Phil had no interest in shades of gray. Just black and white.

“The audience will think you’re a pussy, Powers. And pussies don’t get nationally syndicated.”

That statement was usually enough to right my way of thinking. Especially where there was no mistake about whether his counsel worked. The ratings for my program, *Morning Power*, proved it did. The more I followed his advice, the more I saw a spike in the numbers.

“Stan, let me repeat for you a lesson from ‘Talk Radio and Cable TV 101,’” Phil often told me. “There is no political middle. It doesn’t exist on radio. You will never get anywhere saying anything moderate or mushy. Either you offer a consistent conservative view, or you’re not getting traction.”

My idiotic response: “Well, isn’t democracy based on an exchange of ideas, not just one point of view?”

“Fuck democracy, Stan. You’re not a Founding Father, you’re a talk show host. This business is all about ratings, not governing. And here is the secret. Ratings are driven by passion, not population. They are not controlled by general acceptance.”

“Three extremists are worth more than ten moderates,” was yet another favorite Phil-ism on this point.

Now, as I drove past Sand Key Park, he ranted, “When it comes to cable TV, Powers, you show America a woman in Borneo who is topless, getting eaten by a shark with her house on fire, and they could never turn it off!”

Oh boy. I was almost home and Phil was finally circling back to “fire, tits, and sharks.” So far, in this, our first conversation of the new year, I hadn’t heard any of his aforementioned brilliance. All he had for me was an idea for a TV show where some naked chick was getting eaten by a shark in her pool while the roof burned. And I’m not even sure her radio was playing.

The call had now run longer than a half hour. I was finally turning onto my street when my iPhone hummed and alerted me to another incoming call, one from the “212” area code, which I hoped was a cable TV booker. Either that, or it was Jules, which would be unusual because most often I had to call him, not vice versa. I gave Phil the hook and answered the phone just as I pulled up to the gate outside my building.

Was I willing to go on TV that night and debate the construction of a 2,000-mile-long moat along the Mexican border as a means of stemming the tide of illegal immigration?

Hell yes.

“The bastards are breaking into our country!” I barked to the twentysomething TV producer using a paint-by-numbers kit to arrange the evening broadcast.

“Good. We will see you tonight.”