



Report:
Vegas Valley Book Festival
by Tod Goldberg

from *Post Road 12*

Selected by Jami Attenberg, author of *The Kept Man* and *Instant Love*.

One of the few perks of being an author (and there are seriously only like five of them, I think, and sadly none of them are "buy yourself a house without a down payment just by showing your author photo") is being invited to participate in literary festivals across the country. Well, it's only a perk if they fly you out there and feed you and give you a place to stay. And if it's somewhere warm. And if the other authors participating are cool. Vegas Valley Book Festival in Las Vegas (which I participated in a few years back) has all of these things, and yet, as Tod Goldberg notes hilariously in his usual dry, sly fashion, something is amiss in the American West. – JA.

There are two great mysteries regarding the city of Las Vegas. The first, and perhaps most perplexing, is figuring out what exactly constitutes the allure of drinking a souvenir football filled with beer. Beer is tasty and football is a fine American sport, and I don't mind the two things existing together, I'm just not sure if they need to exist inside each

other. But on the Fremont Street Experience of downtown Las Vegas, the beer filled football is the great class equalizer. Where else in America can one find teen-aged hookers, cereal box gangsters, mullet-festooned men and the women who love their Camaros, good old boys, good old girls, misguided Asian tourists, and men who look like hunters, except that they're not hunting anything but a good time, ya here! all enjoying the same beverage and good cheer? (And by good cheer, I mean, you know, the sense that you're about 5 minutes away, at all times, from a massive gang brawl.) But still. I simply don't get it. I further do not understand the allure of the football filled with a daiquiri.

The second great mystery about Las Vegas is whether or not there exists any culture in America's piss filled petrie dish. Having lived there for two years in the late 90s, I can tell you: eh, not so much. A little. As much as any other suburb, but with the added addition of Air Supply for five nights at the Orleans or a stage show "starring" Rick Springfield. Enter then the annual Vegas Valley Book Festival. I've gone every year of the festival's existence and every year there's a great line-up of authors and every year the people of the city opt for the proverbial beer in a football instead. I always have a great time, even when, like this year, the authors were housed in downtown Las Vegas, which is the part of Las Vegas the board of tourism would actually like for you to take home with you and share. The hotel in question was the 4 Queens, notable for the large amount of fecal matter on the bed spreads and the fantastic service provided by my server Mao at the 4 Queens coffee shop:

Me: Do you have milkshakes?

Mao: No.

Me: Ice cream?

Mao: No.

Me: Rootbeer floats?

Mao: No.

Me: Do you know what a rootbeer float is?

Mao: No.

The festival itself was held at the Las Vegas Library, which is located Billy Goat Gruff style just under a freeway overpass. It's a nice library, actually, and there seemed to be lots of people hanging around the place. Unfortunately, a great many of the people milling about were there for the boxes of free Top Ramen left out in front on top of the garbage bin, but with a handy sign that said, "Free, But Only Take One," and for the handsome corners and nooks where, if you're a junkie, you're allowed to fix without incident. What the homeless folks could have been doing instead was hearing a bunch of notable authors talking about books. Aside from your trusty reporter, the festival also included Rob Roberge, Steve Almond, Jeremy Schaap, Neil Pollack, Chris Epting, Glenn Gaslin, Steve Erickson, Francois Camoin, another guy named Francois whose name

escapes me, Joe Queenan, James McManus, Geoff Schumacher and many, many others (even poets!). Alas. It was poorly attended. . .and, as usual, many of those who did attend were seemingly placed there to piss me off. When a panel I was moderating on books to film with Jeremy Schaap, John Shirley and Michael Reeves was combined with a panel on, uh, well, I'm not sure what the other panel was on, but the writers were the incredible H. Lee Barnes, Brian Rouff and Jay McClarty, the audience doubled from ten people to 20 and the festivities began with, for no apparent reason, since I was moderating and thus asking the questions, a loud and angry question from a woman of about 80 sitting in the front row and taking fastidious notes. We'll pick up the show as it happened. . . to my right is the dulcet toned ESPN anchor and reporter turned author Jeremy Schaap. . .to my left is Brian Rouff. . .and let us begin. . .

Me: . . .and I'm your moderator, Tod Goldberg, the author of the books. . .

Old Woman: Excuse me, excuse me...

Me: Please, go right ahead, I wasn't doing anything here on the stage. . .

Old Woman: Why is there so much profanity on TV? You can't change the channel without seeing depravity! It's awful!

Me: Well, I have no fucking clue. But what the fuck. Let's just talk about that shit.

Old Woman: [glares at me]

Panelists begin discussing this. . .and by panelists, I mean Michael Reeves and John Shirley. Schaap get busy on his blackberry. I'm interjecting obscenities at every opportunity. H. Lee Barnes, perhaps the scariest ex-Green Beret, ex-cop, ex-bounty hunter, ex-blackjack dealer turned author of brilliant short fiction you'd ever want to meet, and the nicest guy to boot, finally smacks the Old Woman down by telling her, essentially, to take her conservatism and shove it up her ass and, in addition, ma'am, turn the fucking channel if you don't like what's on or move your ass to Russia. He says this with the veins in his neck exposed.

Me: Okay, let's move on and actually discuss books. . .

Other Panelist: Actually, this is a fascinating subject that we really should continue discussing. . .

Me: Well, when you get to moderate your own panel, you can, but we're moving on.

A discussion where I mostly talk to Jeremy Schaap ensues because, well, I'm a big fan of his work on ESPN and quite liked his book *Cinderella Man*, and because I force him to say my name as though I'm actually him and he's on TV reporting some breaking sports news story ("I'm Tahhhd Goldburr, ES. . .P. . .N") and it's awesome and the day is coming to a close and I'm hungry and a little angry about the turnout and I'm trying to figure out how to make Rob Roberge giggle, since he's sitting in the audience. Finally, I open the floor to questions:

Old Woman: How do you get an agent? I heard from my neighbor that you don't need an agent for your first novel; you just need one for the next ones.

Followed by:

Old Woman: How do you do research?

Me: Are you at all interested in learning how to get that cool copyright symbol on your manuscript, because I can talk about that for days.

Old Woman: Yes, can we talk about copyright?

Later, Jay McClarty talks about the difficulty in writing series fiction, which is followed by the question:

Old Woman: Why would you want to write books like that awful Danielle Steele? A series just seems terrible to me. And all that sex. It's just smut.

Me: Then don't read those books.

Old Woman: I don't.

Me: Then how do you know they're filled with smut?

The shame, really, is that there were so many really interesting writers at the festival and I know there are people in Las Vegas who'd probably enjoy hearing them speak—I just can't fathom why they don't come, unless it's strictly a location issue. In previous years,

the festival has featured a veritable who's who of American fiction, covering all the genres, and including the likes of John Irving, Tom Robbins, Carolyn See, Aimee Bender, Thomas Perry, Scott Phillips, Mary Yukari Waters, Roger Simon and, naturally, Clifford The Big Red Dog, easily the most popular fictional character for miles. And the result is that I know way more about the man inside the Clifford The Big Red Dog costume than I know about myself and that, in four years, I've sold a grand total of 25 books.

As is often the case with any book festival, the joy of the event can't be measured in book sales, or wretched personal experience, or even the sense that culture is dying around you and you're Charlton Heston extolling those damn dirty apes. You take it for what it is: a chance to meet people you admire if only to learn that they are cool and decent people; but then you meet people you've never heard of in your life and, to your horror, learn that they are, for no apparent reason, enormous dicks. And then you meet people who you think will be dicks and then you spend the rest of the day trying to figure out if they really are dicks, or if you're a dick, and then you decide that you love you and that the other person, who apparently does not love you as much as the person loves loving him/herself and loving those who love him/herself is, well, a dick.

It's a simple existential angst, I suppose, and if I were a lesser man I might find my answer in the bottom of a football filled with beer. The lesson here is that we can't all be Clifford The Big Red Dog and that you can build a book festival but you can't make people care about it.

Tod Goldberg is the author of the novels *Living Dead Girl*, a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and *Fake Liar Cheat*. His most recent book, *Simplify*, is a collection of short stories. He teaches creative writing at the UCLA Extension Writers' Program and lives in La Quinta, CA with his wife Wendy.