



Savage, Dan (b. 1964)

by Linda Rapp

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Best known for his internationally syndicated sex-advice column, Dan Savage is also the author of books chronicling his and his partner's experiences in adopting a child and dealing with the issue of same-sex marriage.

Dan Savage, born October 7, 1964, was the third of the four children of William and Judy Savage. While he was a boy, the family lived on the upper floor of a two-flat house in Chicago. His maternal grandparents and several aunts and uncles occupied the downstairs apartment. So many other relatives lived nearby, wrote Savage, that "I couldn't go anywhere without running into someone I was related to by blood or marriage."

This became problematic for Savage when, at fifteen, having realized that he was gay, he wanted to explore Chicago's gay areas but was apprehensive since he was not yet prepared to come out to his Catholic family. Nevertheless, he made occasional trips to a North Side bar, Berlin, where he could be "outrageously out."

Adding to his stress at the time was the ending of his parents' marriage. They divorced when he was seventeen.

At eighteen Savage disclosed his sexual orientation to his family, who, he stated, "became, after one rocky summer, aggressively supportive."

Despite his family's eventual acceptance of his homosexuality, Savage wanted to get away from Chicago; so he decided to attend the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana for college. He received a bachelor's degree in theater but said in 2002, "four years of studying acting in college made me never want to act again . . . I graduated not knowing what I wanted to do."

Savage was working in a video store in Madison, Wisconsin in 1991 when he met Tim Keck, one of the founders of the satirical paper *The Onion*, who was planning to move to Seattle and launch an alternative newspaper, *The Stranger*. At that point, Savage recalled, "I made an off-hand comment that forever altered my life: 'Make sure your paper has an advice column.'"

Keck asked him to write it, and he agreed to do so despite his lack of experience. "If you read the first couple of years of *Savage Love*," stated Savage in a 2006 interview, "it's pretty clear that I'd never written anything before in my life."

Savage's choice for the name of the column was *Hey, Faggot*. The editors rejected it, but Savage included it as the salutation to each letter, although some syndicators refused to print it. Eventually Savage dropped it.

Of his initial plan for the feature Savage said, "I just thought it would be funny for once if there was an



Dan Savage speaking at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois (2004). Photograph by Wikimedia Commons contributor blahedo. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.5 license.

advice column written by a gay person where straight people had to get slapped around or treated with contempt That humor vein lasted about a year, and then I realized that I was going to actually have to give advice and learn a little about heterosexual life."

Not all of Savage's correspondents are straight; he dispenses advice to queer readers as well. That advice is delivered with sarcastic humor and a vocabulary far removed from the genteel expression of traditional columnists like Ann Landers, whose desk Savage bought at an estate auction. The questions that Savage fields are distinctly unlike the standard fare in advice columns--or anywhere else--in "family newspapers," and he is blunt in discussing the wide variety of sexual activities.

Commenting on the 1998 compilation of Savage's columns, *Savage Love*, Guy Trebay observed, "Mouthy, obnoxious, rarely consoling, Dan Savage is at the same time a reliably funny dispenser of practical, funky home truths and a spirited reporter from the not-so-nether reaches of kink." Savage himself stated in 2002 that he saw his role as an advice columnist as "giving permission" to his correspondents to explore the sorts of sexual expression that appeal to them.

Some therapists have warned that Savage's approach is not the best for everyone. Malcolm McKay of the Seattle Institute for Sex Therapy praised Savage for making sex a topic that could be discussed openly and for providing accurate information, but commented, "What really fascinates me about Dan is how incredibly moralistic he is. If you're really confused and looking for a place to turn for help, Dan's not the place to go."

Savage's column proved extremely popular and is now internationally syndicated. For several years in the mid-1990s he also dispensed his individual brand of advice on a weekly late-night radio call-in show in Seattle.

Not everyone in the glbtq community has been enthusiastic about Savage's personal style. When *Savage Love* first appeared in a San Francisco alternative newspaper, activists protested, complaining that it perpetuated stereotypes of gay men as promiscuous. Savage also locked horns with Washington state activists in 1995 when he opposed the idea of putting a gay-rights proposal on the ballot because he believed that the initiative would have had no chance of passage and might set back the cause of achieving equality.

Although Savage's column was originally intended as a humorous source of sex advice, he has also used it to express his political opinions. An ardent foe of conservative Republicans, Savage nonetheless managed to be elected a Patrick Buchanan delegate to the King County Republican convention in 1996. He described his experiences in a barbed "GOP Journey" series of columns.

In 2000 Savage, who was covering the Iowa caucuses for the on-line magazine *Salon.com*, "masqueraded as a volunteer" at the headquarters of anti-gay Presidential candidate Gary Bauer, who had compared gay marriage to terrorism. In his *Salon* piece Savage, who was suffering from the flu at the time, claimed to have licked some doorknobs at Bauer's headquarters in an obviously silly attempt to infect the candidate.

More seriously, Savage reported that he had voted (for Alan Keyes, no friend of glbtq rights either) in the caucuses, having used the address of his hotel to register at an election site. After the article appeared, he was charged with a felony. In November 2000 he pleaded guilty to fraudulent voting in a caucus, for which he received a sentence of one year of probation, fifty hours of community service, and a fine of \$750.

In his column Savage has taken aim at other politicians inimical to glbtq rights, such as Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, who has called "defending marriage" (i.e., refusing legal recognition to the unions of gay men and lesbians) "the ultimate homeland security."

Despite his admitted lack of writing experience when he started as a columnist, Savage has produced work in a variety of genres.

Under the pseudonym Keenan Hollahan (a combination of his middle name and his grandmother's maiden name) he has written campy send-ups of plays such as *Electra* and *Macbeth*, the latter featuring a woman playing the title role and a man as Lady Macbeth. In 2001 he staged *Eggus*, a take-off on Peter Shaffer's *Equus* (1973), substituting chickens for horses as the teen-aged boy's obsession. The shows were produced in Seattle by the Greek Active theater troupe, which Savage founded.

Savage has also written two autobiographical books, *The Kid: What Happened When My Boyfriend and I Decided to Go Get Pregnant* (1999) and *The Commitment: Love, Sex, Marriage, and My Family* (2005). The first, for which he won the PEN USA West Award for creative non-fiction, chronicles the decision by Savage and his partner, Terry Miller, to become parents.

They chose open adoption--a process that involved meeting their child's birth mother and maintaining contact with her. The young woman who agreed to let the couple adopt her son was a drifter with a history of substance abuse.

The adoption tale is told with humor, but in *The Kid* Savage also writes movingly of the moment when he and Miller took the little boy as their own child. They named him Daryl (after Miller's father) Jude (the masculine form of the name of Savage's mother, Judy Sobiesk, who had remarried), and gave D.J., as they nicknamed him, his birth mother's surname.

About a year after the adoption, Savage and Miller met their son's biological father, who went by the street name Bacchus (real name Jacob) in a hotel near Bourbon Street in New Orleans. Shortly thereafter, the paternal grandfather called the adoptive couple to thank them for taking "good care of my grandson."

"The gay thing didn't appear to be an issue with Jacob or his father," wrote Savage in *The Commitment*. "It never came up."

To protest discriminatory marriage laws, Savage and a lesbian friend, Amy Jenniges, applied for and were granted a marriage license from the state of Washington in 2004. They held a wedding as a benefit for the Lambda Legal Foundation. At the reception they tore up the license instead of returning it to the county to have the marriage legally registered.

That summer Savage and Miller, with the tenth anniversary of their partnership approaching, considered marriage themselves. Savage stated, "Terry and I are fans of the traditional family--our family is more traditional than most." Nevertheless, he and Miller were at first not sure if they wanted to wed. In *The Commitment*, blending reflections on serious issues, reminiscences of touching personal moments, and often hilarious accounts of the wedding-planning process, Savage traced the route that led the couple to marry in Vancouver, British Columbia in February 2005.

Savage also combined humor with a discussion of social issues in *Skipping Towards Gomorrah: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Pursuit of Happiness in America* (2002), his answer to "virtuecrats" like William J. Bennett (a notorious gambler), Robert Bork (the rejected U.S. Supreme Court nominee and author of *Slouching toward Gomorrah*, alluded to in Savage's title), and Patrick Buchanan (the failed Presidential candidate), who, he wrote, have "convinced themselves that the pursuit of happiness by less virtuous Americans is both a personal and a political attack." The book won the Lambda Literary Award for Humor.

"To explore the lives of virtuous sinners" Savage traveled to such American "Gomorrah" as Dubuque, Iowa; Plano, Texas; and Buffalo Grove, Illinois, meeting gamblers, gluttons, and swingers, among others.

In the chapter on pride, Savage took on the San Francisco gay pride parade, charging that such events have become over-commercialized excuses for partying with abandon and do not, as supporters claim, give hope to glbtq youth nor honor the struggles of earlier generations of gay men and lesbians whose courageous stands paved the way and accomplished so much in the ongoing quest for equality.

Savage concluded, "While I can't stand the mush-brained pride rhetoric, the rainbow merchandise, and while I abhor the harm this rhetoric does to gay people and the confusion it sows among straights, what I can celebrate is the simple having of fun." Such comments have at times put Savage at odds with what he calls "the gay establishment."

Despite his acid critique, Savage did serve as a judge at the 2004 pride festival in Toronto, which he praised as "a more accurate reflection of gay life now." He also spoke at an associated event on gay parenting called "The Kids Are Alright."

Savage, who since 2001 has been the editor as well as a columnist for *The Stranger*, also writes commentaries for newspapers including the *New York Times*. In addition, he contributes to programs on National Public Radio, such as *Weekend Edition* and *This American Life*, and frequently appears as a guest on television news and talk shows, while also frequently touring the college lecture circuit.

In September 2010, moved by the suicide of Billy Lucas, a Greensburg, Indiana teenager who had been mercilessly bullied, Savage founded the "It Gets Better Project," a channel on YouTube that features videos of adult glbtq people who were bullied as teenagers reassuring young people that, however awful their predicament might seem at the time, "it gets better."

"I realized," Savage told a *New York Times* reporter, "that with things like YouTube and social media, we can talk directly to these kids. We can make an end run around the schools that don't protect them, from parents who want to keep gay kids isolated and churches that tell them that they are sinful or disordered."

The first video in the series features Savage and Miller, who were both bullied in high school, explaining how fulfilling life became after they left high school, met each other, and began their family.

Soon after its launch, the series went viral on the Internet and grew to include more than 100 videos. The urgency of the series was underlined by a rash of suicides by gay teenagers in September 2010.

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