



# ON THE CONTRARY

The greatest essayist in the English language. An unhinged drunk. A courageous humanitarian who's kept faith with the Enlightenment values the Left traded in for vapid postmodernism. A war-mongering reactionary seduced by fame, wealth and access to the powerful. About the only thing the many friends and foes of the world's most famous contrarian agree on is that, as Ian McEwan once observed, "If Hitchens didn't exist, we wouldn't be able to invent him."

There has been a hitch in *GQ*'s plan to speak to the Hitch. I'm sitting in the bar of the Sebel Pier One, where Christopher Hitchens is staying while in town for the Sydney Writers' Festival. I have been allotted the 4.45-5.45pm slot in the great man's heavily booked schedule but it's now almost 6pm and Hitch, as he prefers to be addressed, is a no-show. His publicist keeps ringing to apologise, seeking to assure me that one of the world's most famous thinkers — and drinkers — will be along shortly. He is currently detained, "having a drink" elsewhere.

Like many high-functioning alcoholics, Hitchens is much given to proclaiming that his drinking doesn't interfere with his professional responsibilities. "There was a time when I could reckon to outperform all but the most hardened imbibers, but I now drink relatively carefully... I have never missed a deadline... and have never been late for an engagement or shown up the worse for the wear," he boasts in his memoir *Hitch 22*, which he's touring the Anglosphere to promote.

Of Hitchens' many passions, his love of booze is perhaps the most enduring. "Alcohol makes other people less tedious, and food less bland, and can provide what the Greeks called *entheos*, or the slight buzz of inspiration when reading or writing," he observes in his memoir, helpfully going on to offer some sage advice for young players: "Cheap booze is a false economy. It's not true that you shouldn't drink alone: these can be the happiest glasses you ever drain... avoid all narcotics: these make you more boring rather than less and are not designed — as are the grape and grain — to enliven company. Be careful about upgrading too far to single malt Scotch: when you are voyaging in rough countries it won't be easily available."

Just as I'm about to give up waiting, Hitchens, in the trademark beige suit that makes him look like a dissolute antihero who's stepped out of the pages of a Graham Greene novel, materialises beside me. He proceeds to castigate himself at length about his lack of professionalism before disappearing to his room to grab a large glass of Scotch. Upon his return, he apologises some more as we grab a table in the open air, where he can chain smoke unmolested. (Up until a few years ago, Hitchens used to smoke even while showering.) He's certainly late for this engagement but gives little sign — apart from a certain languidness of movement and slight ponderousness of speech — of being the worse for wear. Scotch in one hand and Marlboro in the other, he signals he's ready for conversational combat.

**W**here to start? *Hitch 22* details the kind of epic life people just don't seem to have anymore. The abridged version runs something like this: bright boy of relatively humble origins fulfils his socially ambitious mother's dreams by making it to Oxford and seems destined to become part of Britain's ruling class. Unfortunately for Mrs Hitchens, this is the late '60s and her son is far more interested in being a Trotskyite radical by day and a "polymorphously perverse" pantsman by night — among many others, he nails one of fellow student Bill Clinton's bisexual girlfriends and two (male) future ministers in the Thatcher government. After graduating it's off to Fleet Street for the duration of the '70s, where the coming man carves out a place in Britain's literary-journalistic establishment

and trots the globe reporting on IRA bombers, third-world revolutionaries, Middle Eastern freedom fighters and Eastern European dissidents, in between long lunches with the likes of Kingsley and Martin Amis, Clive James, Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie. As the '80s arrive and England grows ever more claustrophobic, America's siren call can be resisted no longer. For the next two decades, the waspish Brit is the thinking man's Michael Moore, that rarest of all beasts — a left-wing intellectual capable of engaging with and entertaining a mainstream audience. Hitch, descended from a long line of military men, establishes a reputation as the Left's fiercest ideological warrior. Ronald Reagan is "a cruel and stupid lizard... as dumb as a stump", Henry Kissinger a "liar, murderer, war criminal, pseudo-academic, bore", and Bill Clinton "someone who is a war criminal, a taker of bribes from foreign dictatorships, almost certainly a rapist... [and] executed a black man who was so mentally retarded he was unable to plead or understand the charges."

His bloodlust unsated by the demolition of elected officials, Hitchens also goes after the most venerated of sacred cows. He pens an article describing Princess Di as "a disco-loving airhead". He passes judgement on Mother Teresa — to a Catholic interviewer, no less — thus: "The woman was a fanatic and a fundamentalist and a fraud, and millions of people are much worse off because of her life, and it's a shame there is no hell for your bitch to go to." And Mother Teresa's supervisor? Well, that capricious dilettante can go and get fucked too: "If Jesus could heal a blind person he happened to meet, then why not heal blindness?"

Then comes September 11 and the Great Apostasy. Dismayed with his erstwhile comrades' America-had-it-coming attitude and lack of enthusiasm for getting rid of dictator Saddam Hussein, the one-time scourge of American imperialism becomes the most strident of barrackers for the Coalition of the Willing's invasion of Iraq.

The old lion's latest and presumably last crusade? Ridding the world of religion.

Do I ask Hitchens about any of this? Not initially. I'm an Australian journalist and it's standard operating procedure to start ▶



**Above: Hitchens with one of the few public figures even he can't find fault with – Nelson Mandela. Right: Hitchens at a Cuban work camp for young revolutionaries in 1968.**



measures.' I thought to myself, Which of us is the reactionary here? Surely the little police informer who shouldn't be in the bar business is the conservative, not me. A baby curmudgeon. Actually, it wouldn't have mattered if she was 60 rather than 16, or whatever the fuck she was. And I said, 'No, screw you, I'm not being talked to like that.' And I was pleased to find that I'm still pissed off by obvious stupidity

and I don't think, Oh, just let it go. Try and do something every day to bugger them around."

Fortunately for young bar staff obliged to enforce responsible service of alcohol laws, contrarianism remains an unusual philosophical stance. And despite having written a book — *Letters to a Young Contrarian* — advocating it, Hitchens seems relieved there isn't too much of it around. "It would be very boring if

everyone was [contrarian]. I remember thinking about Oscar Wilde when I was writing the book. If everyone was like him, then life would be absolutely unbearable. It would be impossible to go to a cocktail party and have a conversation. And that prompts the thought: how serious is it? Those who just strike attitudes of opposition are very useful, very necessary, but they can

mention — he devotes an entire chapter to his long-simmering bromance with novelist Martin Amis. This has never quite become sexual, though Hitchens does wonder if there's "anything remotely subliminal" in what he's doing when he seduces Amis's sister "who had rather the same colouring as the brother I was beginning to adore".



**I** ask Hitchens if he's developed a pithy list of rules for relationships to pass down to his three children, whom he confesses to have neglected. "The one thing that does not transmit across the generations is advice about love and marriage. Everyone has to find out by making their own ridiculous blunders. No, if that sort of advice could be transmitted generationally, we would have evolved incredibly fast. It can't be, and advice of that sort isn't taken anyway, even if it's good. My father told me, 'Beware of girls with thin lips' and 'Never let them see you with just your socks on'. That turned out to be smart. But I think I could have worked that out for myself."

Hitchens also fails the curmudgeon test by failing to be disappointed by Young People Today. "I am very impressed by how thoughtful

any interview with a visiting foreigner by providing an opportunity for them to lavish praise on my country. Surprisingly, Hitchens is conventionally complimentary. "Without ever coming here, I always had a sense of Australia, a feeling for it," he tells me before enumerating his Australian friends, a list that includes the likes of Clive James, Robert Hughes, Richard Neville, Geoffrey Robertson and Kathy Lette. "I have family here, and some cousins. I had lunch with them today. It's nice to have that Oz connection. You come to Sydney and it's like San Francisco and New York, you feel at home here. It's a very nice version of that kind of youthful, cosmopolitan, urban stuff."



**P**leasantries out of the way, I ask Hitchens if he can remember when and why he became such a shit-stirrer. "I would have been 14 when I realised there were a lot of people who were conservatives but who were, in a sense, being conned by the Conservative Party, by conservative interests. They had a loyalty to people who didn't feel any loyalty to them. And I found that pathetic. I resented it. People who are deferential get taken for granted. And I thought, No, this is silly. It's pointless to be lower-middle class in that way."

Hitchens has maintained the contrarian faith for almost half a century, though even he's starting to wonder whether, at age 62, he's now more curmudgeon than contrarian. When I raise this, Hitchens launches into an anecdote that fails to clear up the matter for me, but which he seems to believe demonstrates that he is still on the side of the angels.

"I'll give you an example. Last night I came back here and went to the bar and I asked for a glass of wine. I said, 'Just fill it all the way up.' And the woman at the bar told the young man serving, 'No, you can't fill it up. You have to give it to him in two glasses, two

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be a pain in the arse. What you want is to adopt a principle that you feel it would be better if everyone else adopted. If everyone adopted the principles of the democratic republic, the secular state, the Enlightenment, free enquiry and so on, it wouldn't be conformism, it wouldn't be boring. That would actually be a good society to live in."

If Hitchens is a curmudgeon he's a most unusual one. For example, it's hard to imagine any of the hawkish neo-cons who have latterly embraced him writing, as he does in *Hitch 22*, with wit and tenderness about the same-sex encounters — and indeed love affairs — they enjoyed at boarding school and university. "I thought I ought to put that in (a) to be truthful about myself and (b) as a kind of gesture of solidarity because there are people who want this to be thought of as a treatable disease or psychopathic condition. And I think the world would be better if all the heterosexuals came out and admitted that actually everyone is somewhat gay. Or almost everyone is. I think that would clear the air a lot."

While Hitchens fails to go into any detail about his heterosexual dalliances in his memoir — his first wife and famous former girlfriends such as Anna Wintour aren't referred to at all, while his current wife merits only a passing

and tough-minded they mostly are. I don't envy them, I wouldn't want to be young now. When I went to teach at the University of Pittsburgh, an old [academic] friend from the '60s said to me, 'You may find some of them, they won't show it, but they secretly hate you. Because they hear us going on about the brave old days of the '60s and they think, Thanks a lot — all we got from that was political correctness and safe sex!' So I am always very careful not to go on about the old days."

The most poignant section of *Hitch 22* is all about the kind of young people whom Hitch now most admires — those who volunteer to join the armed forces. Lieutenant Mark Daily, 23, was an upper-middle class, college-educated, left-leaning Californian, who initially had deep reservations about the Iraq war but came to be convinced of its righteousness, his family was quoted as saying in a *Los Angeles Times* article, because, "Writings by author and columnist Christopher Hitchens on the moral case for the war deeply influenced him." Daily joined up to serve in Iraq, and did so with some distinction, until being killed on January 15, 2007 when his Humvee rolled over a buried mine. To his credit, after reading the *Los Angeles Times* piece, Hitchens got in touch with Daily's family; to theirs, they invited him to be a part

of the grieving process for their son, even asking him to be involved in a memorial service.

Getting Hitchens started on the righteousness of the Iraq War is, to deploy the kind of classical allusion he might indulge in, like asking Cato the Elder whether Carthage must be destroyed. I try and avoid the boilerplate lecture by asking Hitchens to explain what he thinks has to happen in Iraq to justify the blood sacrifice of Daily and so many others, not least the tens of thousands of dead Iraqi men, women and children who never signed up to enter a war zone.

"I've been going to Iraq since the '70s and it was very clear by the first decade of this century, at least, if not the one before, that whatever was going to happen in Iraq, a lot of people were going to die. Whilst Saddam was still in power and the UN sanctions were still in place — and remember these were imposed by the organisation that all the peaceniks pretend to respect — people would come up to me all the time and say: 'The sanctions are killing 100,000 Iraqi children a year'. I thought some of those estimates were exaggerated, but let's say many tens of thousands were dying needlessly because of those sanctions.

"So, you tell me there were all these civilian casualties without a war? Well, that's easy, we can prevent that right now — remove the regime that necessitates the sanctions. And they would say, in effect, 'We don't hate the sanctions that much'. That's bad faith, right there. The point they were implicitly making was there's a ruined and maimed and traumatised Iraq in our future either way. The shortest way out of that is make Iraq not any longer the private property of a psychopathic crime family. And that was the decision I decided was the right one. And, of course, that involves casualties too, but nobody now says there are 100,000 babies dying in Iraq every year. On the contrary, the society has recovered its pulse to some extent. It has elections, a constitution, a supreme court and a parliament.

"Of course I wish it had come at a lower price, but the price was extracted by the crime family. There's no really important person in the anti-war movement who I haven't debated with. And I've never had an answer to those challenges and I don't expect one now. They don't care about the people in Iraq at all. To them it's just another excuse to bang on about American imperialism."



**Hitch 22** is, by Hitchens' own account, "essentially a book about the battle of ideas and how minds change and what experiences do to you". I ask him what it is about utopian visions that so appeals to young men, be it the establishment of a socialist paradise in his own case, or helping to create a democratic Iraq in Daily's. Or, it might be added, the imposition of a worldwide caliphate in the case of an Islamic

suicide bomber. After upbraiding me for suggesting there could ever be anything utopian about a caliphate, Hitchens muses: "Well, it would be a terrible thing if young people didn't feel that they knew everything at a certain point in their lives. It really would be because life would be very dull. Great things have been achieved by people who, if they had known they were young and ignorant, wouldn't have had the courage to go to the barricades. I never want to sneer at people like that because they are a great engine of history. If that sort of energy dried up, it would be a very dreary world. What people do when they look back at their younger self is think, 'He was a bit of a naïve simpleton' or they think, 'I wish I was as brave now as I was then.' It should be a bit of both, I feel. Even if you become curmudgeonly, you musn't become condescending."

Hitchens, obviously some way off lapsing into a state of resigned docility himself, is presently attempting to convince billions of the faithful that their value systems are based on arrant nonsense. And, unlike the live-and-let-live atheism of yore, the Hitchens variety is determined to hold the world's clerics to account for their sins.

Hitchens, in partnership with fellow militant atheist Richard Dawkins, has engaged the services of his friend, barrister Geoffrey Robertson, to take legal action against the Pope over his alleged role in the cover-up of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church when he visits Britain later this year. "It's a perfectly simple question, that I decided to answer by trying it on," he says, when I query the likelihood of any judge or politician signing off on the arrest warrant of a spiritual leader with one billion followers. "Why is this not a legal matter? Why do the newspapers keep asking when will the Catholic Church clean up its act? Do they have their own courts? Do they have their own law? Are they arranging to forgive themselves again? It's not their job, it's within the compass of the law. There's very clear evidence that there was an arrangement made to deliver children to people who would rape them. And there was an arrangement to obstruct justice if anyone wanted to complain about it. Well, excuse me, but where is the Attorney-General, the Department of Public Prosecutions, here? Why is it being left to private individuals?"

I ask the author of *God Is Not Great – How Religion Poisons Everything* if going up against the Supreme Being will be the last great battle of his public life.

"My first one, actually, was that discovery that I don't believe in the supernatural and I don't want to be told by humans who claim there is one what to do," he replies. "You haven't freed yourself mentally until you have confronted that question. For me, that's the essential confrontation and the original one, because either there's one book that tells you the whole truth and is basically all that you need, or everything is risky and you have to keep thinking for yourself. So now I'm identified with a group, a current of opinion, that really takes its stand on philosophical doubt. And, yeah, I think I can happily live the rest of my life looking upon that as a positive



**Top left:** Hitchens with Western Saharan guerrilla fighters. **Top right:** Hitchens with Ugandan soldiers. **Right:** Hitchens lecturing Bush Snr about Nicaragua in 1984. **Left:** Appearing at the Sydney Writers' Festival.

commitment and a repudiation of anything totalitarian, absolutist or faith-based. It's not so much religion, as the willingness to take things on faith. Waste of mind to do that."

And with that, Hitchens and his brilliant mind stagger into the night, in search of the next drink, argument, noble cause, unspeakable outrage, convivial friend or worthy enemy. Playing the interview tape back later, I discover Hitchens has murmured, "Death is coming, death is coming" during a break when I rushed off to relieve my beer-bloated bladder. I can't tell whether this is Hitchens being deliberately mischievous, or the in vino veritas self-talk of a man all too aware that his end will soon be nigh. Either way, I hope death doesn't come too soon for Hitch. The world will be a far more tedious, bland and uninspiring place once he's gone.

**Postscript:** As *GQ* went to press, Hitchens announced he had cancer of the oesophagus.

Hitch 22, *Allen and Unwin*, \$35.