

U.K. journalist Veronica Mather interviews author George Anthony on STARRING BRIAN LINEHAN, his no-holds-barred biography of Canadian television's most celebrated celebrity interviewer.

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by VERONICA MATHER

VERONICA MATHER: *Starring Brian Linehan* is your first book. Were you surprised by the reaction to it?

GEORGE ANTHONY: Yes. Stunned.

V.M.: The reviews were overwhelmingly positive.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: You hadn't anticipated any of it?

G.A.: No. Not at all. I had no idea how people would react Especially critics.

V.M.: Why 'especially' critics?

G.A.: Because I'm not a member of the club anymore, not for years now. And neither was Brian, not ever. So ...

V.M.: The 'club'?

G.A.: Yes, the club, the media fraternity.

V.M.: You were a 'club' member when you wrote for the Toronto Sun.

G.A.: Yes, but for the last 15 years I hadn't written anything much longer than a memo.

V.M.: At the CBC, while you were winning all those

awards.

G.A.: I knew I liked you. (laughs) But no, seriously, I didn't win any awards.

V.M.: Your shows did.

G.A.: Yes, my shows did.

V.M.: More than 100 Gemini awards.

G.A.: So I'm told.

V.M.: You don't know?

G.A.: I stopped counting after the first 10 or 12. I didn't want to jinx it, didn't want to press my luck. I was lucky to work on all those shows.

V.M.: And you're still at CBC.

G.A.: Well, yes, but I only work on one show.

V.M.: *The Rick Mercer Report*.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: The number one show on the network.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: When Mercer accepted the Peter Ustinov Award at the Banff Festival a few years ago, he dedicated it to you.

G.A.: Ummm, I think he said he was going to share it with me. Which was an extraordinarily generous thing for him to do.

V.M.: You worked with Mercer on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

G.A.: Yes, and on *Made In Canada*, too. And all kinds of award shows.

V.M.: *Made In Canada* holds the record for Gemini nominations, doesn't it? One year it got more nominations than any of the big dramatic series.

G.A.: Wow. Are you doing Linehan? (laughs) Yes, I believe it still holds the record. I was so lucky to work on that show.

V.M.: But your friend Brian Linehan turned down a chance to be in it. And was very upset with Rick Mercer.

G.A.: Yes. He regretted it later. But, yes.

V.M.: That's all in your book, the incident with Mercer, the Woody Allen lawsuit – how much did Woody Allen sue him for?

G.A.: Six million dollars.

V.M.: And this is all in the book –

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: -- and you were still surprised when the reviews came out.

G.A.: Yes. I had no idea how they would respond.

V.M.: The Globe & Mail devoted a full page to it.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: The film critic for Maclean's, Brian D. Johnson, referred to it in his blog as a "guilty pleasure."

G.A.: Yes. (laughs) I loved that. I think he was surprised by the book. Maybe he expected a big puff piece extolling all of Brian's virtues. We bumped into each other at a screening and he was so generous. He said he'd expected it to be a book about Brian, which it was. "But it's so much more," he told me. "It's a book about friendship, it's a book about cancer, it's a book about show business in the '70s!" I suspect media expectations were generally low, so when they actually read the book, I think it was a bit of a revelation for them.

V.M.: Your research is formidable. Which was de rigeur, I suppose, as your friend Brian was so famous for his.

G.A.; Yes, unfortunately, because doing research is really not my thing. But somehow I ended up with this jigsaw puzzle – details, so many details! -- and I couldn't solve it until I found all the pieces.

V.M.: Personally, I think the detail in your book in some instances is very deceptive.

G.A.: Really? In what way?

V.M.: Because at times you seem to go off on these little digressions. Of course we didn't know Brian Linehan in Britain, but even so, I was quite wrapped up in his story, his rise and fall, as it were, and then you'd go on about some old MGM glamour girl, the lady from *Les Girls* –

G.A.: Taina Elg.

V.M.: -- yes, Taina Elg, and then later Brian and his partner sell their beautiful house, and you quite specifically mention who bought it, and I'm thinking, *why* do I need to know *who bought it!* ...

but then the first tragedy happens and you suddenly connect the dots and you see that you weren't really digressing at all, that there's very little extraneous material in the your book.

G.A.: Yeah, that's the jigsaw puzzle part of it. Which is why it was so hard to do.

V.M.: What was the best review you've received so far for *Starring Brian Linehan*?

G.A.: The best reviews almost always come from unexpected places. Soon after the book came out –

V.M.: September 2007?

G.A.: Yes, last fall – soon after it came out, a young producer, a guy I haven't worked with in years, knocked on my office door at CBC, held up his copy of the book and said, "This is the first book that ever made me cry!" Which really moved me. And then, this past summer, I caught a glimpse of Colin Mochrie across a crowded room in Montreal –

V.M.: Colin Mochrie from *Whose Line Is It Anyway*?

G.A.: Yes, among other things – we were at the 2008 Just For Laughs comedy festival, and when he saw me he made his way through the crowd to tell me he had just finished the book and how much he liked it. Which was so gracious of him.

V.M.: How did Linehan's friends react to the book?

G.A.: Well, they *said* they liked it. So many of them said they thought Brian would have loved it.

V.M.: Do you think he would have loved it?

G.A.: Gawd, no! ... well, yes and no.

Yes, because it's the sort of book he LOVED to read. I can almost hear him on the phone: "Listen to this, listen to this!" -- and then reading passages to me.

But, no, because in the book I tell a lot of tales out of school, take the lid off a lot of family secrets. And Brian had intended to take all those secrets to the grave. So no, I don't think he would have loved it. But he would love the fact that people are still talking about him, as we are right now, four years after he died.

V.M.: But his friends like it.

G.A.: Yes, they seem to. They say they do. But some of them still have reservations about it. So they like it, *but*.

V.M.: *But?*

G.A.: Yeah. "I loved it, *but* why did you have to tell that story about Brian in the hospital? ... *But* why did you have to include such intimate details? ... *But* why did you have to mention the shoplifting thing?"

Because they are his friends, and they are still being protective of him. As I was, for so long -- literally, as long as he lived. So I find that rather touching, that they love the book, and they recommend it to their friends, but they still don't really approve of me telling some of his secrets.

V.M.: You were his mentor.

G.A.: I suppose so, although I didn't think of it that way at the time. We were friends. We enjoyed each other's company. We had a lot of fun.

V.M.: Did you ever!

Are all those stories about you and Brian true?

G.A.: (*shrugs*) Well, the ones in the book are ...

V.M.: I mean, how is it possible that you didn't wind up in rehab?

G.A.: Oh, you know, we were young. (*laughs again*) After she read the book, Roger Ebert's wife Chaz asked me how come we didn't end up at AA meetings. The thing is, we worked very hard, harder than any of our colleagues –

V.M.: Your fellow junketeers –

G.A.: Oh, yes, *much* harder than they did! But we played much harder too.

V.M.: And neither one of you ever missed an interview. Or showed up hung over.

G.A.: (*rolling his eyes*) Well, we never missed an interview.

Recently I did a radio show with someone who said he had heard about Brian and me on junkets.

"You had quite a reputation," he told me.

I said, "Really? What did they say?"

And he said, "They said you were horrible!"

(*smothering a laugh*)

I think these stories get exaggerated over the years. I mean, I don't think we were *horrible*. Yes, we were the bad kids, the Canadian brats of Hollywood. But all the good kids wanted to sit with us, so we must have been doing something right.

V.M.: You interviewed all of Linehan's brothers and sisters for the book.

G.A.: Not all of them. All but one. The eldest in the family, his older brother, Ronnie, wasn't well. And he passed away before I could speak with him.

V.M.: Talking to his siblings, what was that like?

G.A.: Great for me, tough for them. They all wanted to speak with me, they were all more than willing to do so, but none of them really wanted to talk. The Linehans are very secretive. It's a family trait.

V.M.: Two of his sisters and one of his brothers came to your book launch.

G.A.: Yes, Connie and Carole were there, and Carole's husband Bruce, and Brian's youngest brother Mico – his name is really Jovan, which in Serbian is John. Brian's niece Lesley came too, and his aunt Connie, his mother's sister. I was very touched by their support.

V.M.: What do they think of the book?

G.A.: Honestly, I don't really know. Not one of them has spoken to me since the book came out. I think it must have been a real shock for them, learning so much about him from a stranger, lots of good things, yes, but lots of not-so-good things, too.

V.M.: Joan Rivers, who played a key role in Brian's life, didn't seem to know they existed.

G.A.: He simply never spoke of them to her. He had created a network of friends to replace his family. So he never told Joan anything about them. But then he was so secretive. Joan knew Brian for 10 years before she knew Zane existed.

V.M.: His partner Zane Wagman was a dentist.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: Who killed himself after Brian was diagnosed with cancer.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: Did anyone see it coming?

G.A.: No, not at the time ... wait, that's not true. Karen Kain was a great friend to both Brian and Zane, and she could see that Zane was in trouble, and tried to persuade him to get help. But of course he had already made up his mind.

V.M.: So when Zane killed himself, Brian's friends circled the wagons around him.

G.A.: Yes, exactly.

V.M.: Were you familiar with non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma before Brian was diagnosed with it?

G.A.: Not really, no. But I know a lot more about it now. Again, it was Karen who knew the most about it.

V.M.: Linehan was very close to Karen Kain and Joan Rivers.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: The prima ballerina and the comedienne -- did they have anything else in common beside Brian?

G.A.: Oh yes. They're both actresses. They're both stage animals. And Brian loved theatre. So to me it was completely logical that they would be his friends. Bea Arthur and Doris Roberts were friends of his too, and it was their roles on television that made them household names, but they too were stage actresses, raised and nurtured in the

theatre. So was Shirley MacLaine, before she became ... well ... SHIRLEY MacLAINE.

V.M.: Joan Rivers wrote the foreword for your book.

G.A.: Yes, Joan loved Brian.

V.M.: You introduced her to Brian one Oscar night, correct?

G.A.: Well, re-introduced her, yes, I think they had actually met once before, many years earlier.

V.M.: So you were friends with her before Brian knew her.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: And she was the first person you called after Brian told you that Zane had committed suicide.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: I want to read you a quote, one of the reviews for your book:

"Starring Brian Linehan is a full-blown, deeply researched, breezily written page-turner on the life of Brian Linehan who was, in his time, the Barbara Walters of Canada. Besides containing lots and lots of star dish (Shirley MacLaine, Warren Beatty, Bea Arthur, Steven Spielberg, etc, etc, etc), George Anthony ... discovered – and reveals– many secrets about Linehan that even his closest friends were never privy to ... "The portrait that Anthony gives us of Linehan is of a very complicated, public persona who dug deep into celebrities lives, but never let anybody into his."

V.M.: Do you recognize the quote?

G.A.: Yes, of course. Joan wrote it on her blog.

V.M.: Joan Rivers is a good friend of yours.

G.A.: Yes. A dear friend. She's very dear to me.

V.M.: And she loved Brian because ... ?

G.A.: Because he made her laugh, at a time when she most needed to, at a time when laughing was the hardest thing to do.

V.M.: When her husband Edgar killed himself.

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: Is it true that you've gone to some book clubs, small neighborhood gatherings?

G.A.: Yes.

V.M.: But you refuse to do readings.

G.A.: 'Refuse' is a strong word. I -- (*hesitates*)
-- I have *declined* to do readings.

V.M.: Why?

G.A.: It's too hard for me. It's too ... emotional. No one wants to hear an author snifle through his own prose. (*shrugs*) At least, I don't.

V.M.: There are a lot of laughs in *Starring Brian Linehan*. Maybe you could just read the funny parts.

G.A.: (*chuckles softly*) Yeah, maybe.

V.M.: Linehan died four years ago, your book came out a year ago, and you still can't read from it? It's still that close to the bone?

G.A.: (*shrugs*) Yes.

V.M.: It's powerful stuff, your book. Sad, and funny, and at times almost searingly honest. And constantly surprising.

G.A.: In what way?

V.M.: I wasn't expecting it to be so ... *candid*.

G.A.: Really? ... oh, I see -- you weren't expecting me to name names.

V.M.: In the book you cite a negative story by the Canadian writer Martin Knelman in *Toronto Life* magazine, just when Linehan was starting out --

G.A.: No, not when he was just starting out, it was about 10 years after that --

V.M.: -- which you say caused Linehan great grief and which you yourself found, is it fair to say, professionally unacceptable?

G.A.: That's fair to say, yes.

V.M.: What does Martin Knelman think of the book?

G.A.: I don't think he's read it.

V.M.: What about Moses Znaimer?

G.A.: What about him?

V.M.: Moses Znaimer hired Linehan and Moses Znaimer fired Linehan, and that section in the book is riveting. I can't believe he really said those things to you.

G.A.: Ah, but he did.

V.M.: Has Znaimer read your book?

G.A.: Moses told me he only read the parts about him. (*chuckles again*) I don't think he was all that interested in the rest of it.

V.M.: So he still speaks to you?

G.A.: Absolutely, yes.

V.M.: Is Martin Knelman still speaking to you?

G.A.: Yes, of course. (*shrugs again*) Honestly, I didn't expect Martin or Moses to be crazy about the book, because the roles they played in Brian's life were stormy. And clearly their roles are seen from Brian's point of view. AND mine. But I don't think either one of them question the accuracy of the reporting. What happened, happened.

V.M.: You've gone from journalism to film production to journalism to public relations to journalism to television to writing a book. Are there more books in the works?

G.A.: Maybe.

V.M.: More show business biographies?

G.A.: Maybe.

V.M.: Are you going back to journalism? That seems to be your pattern.

G.A.: I know, I know, I'm so predictable!

V.M.: So what's next?

G.A.: There are still a few things I want to try.

V.M.: Really? How many careers is this for you now?

G.A.: Oh I don't know. I haven't really counted them up. Because, you know, I don't –

V.M.: ... you don't want to press your luck.

G.A.: Exactly.

V.M.: Have you considered writing about your own life?

G.A.: Yes, but I only get as far as the title.

V.M.: What's the title?

G.A.: *Memoirs Of An Over-Privileged Child.*

V.M.: Really?

G.A.: Yes. (*laughs again*) No.

V.M.: Now that *Starring Brian Linehan* is in paperback, more people will be able to buy it, and more people will wish they could see him on television. Which is ironic, don't you think?

G.A.: It's all good. I think CTV, who owns some of the rights to his shows, may put out a DVD of his best interviews soon. At least, I hope they do.

V.M.: A lot of people, a new generation of people, never saw him on TV. Doesn't that make it more difficult for you to connect with younger readers?

G.A.: No, not really, because all you have to do is Google 'Brian Linehan' and all this stuff appears. You can watch clips from his interviews on YouTube, on the NSI (National Screen Institute) website, on the Canadian Film Centre website ... and I believe they still telecast some of his classic interviews, 'unedited and unabridged' as they say, on *Star! TV*.

V.M.: Why do you think Linehan was so successful?
What made his interviews so unique?

G.A.: Passion. Brian did what he did, all his research, all his interviews, with a passion for his subjects, a passion to connect the dots, to discover what decisions had made them the people they had become. In the process he created an amazing persona for himself, and he loved being Brian Linehan. It was the role he loved best, and he played it with passion until the day he died.