

## Celebrity interviewer Brian Linehan interesting, indeed

Contributed by Randall King  
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By George Anthony

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Reviewed by Randall King

IT may be the ultimate tribute to the late TV uber-interviewer Brian Linehan that his biography was written by a print reporter.

Actually, George Anthony was a former print reporter who went on to be director of special projects of the CBC. But the two became friends living the high life on the movie junket circuit in the '70s while Anthony scribbled for the Toronto Sun and Linehan conducted his famously in-depth interviews for Toronto's then-upstart independent station City-TV.

Many print reporters used to, and still do, slag their broadcast brethren, because -- we might tell ourselves -- they were in the business of the quickie sound bite while we had the resources to go more in depth.

But at his peak, Linehan gave the lie to that claim. In terms of his famous research, and in the department of establishing rapport with his subjects, Linehan was better than, well, almost everybody.

At times, he was so very good, he might attract attention away from his subjects, who would break out of the typical Q&A patterns and demand of Linehan: "How the hell did you know about that?"

One would hope Anthony would supply an answer for that question in the biography Starring Brian Linehan. Anthony says Linehan kept massive files on celebrities, but he doesn't offer much insight into the guts of Linehan's process, except perhaps in cataloging all the publicists Linehan called friends. (Never underestimate the resource potential of a seasoned publicist.)

The urbane, brilliantly witty, sometime diva-ish Linehan appeared from the most unlikely of breeding grounds, the blue collar burg of Hamilton, where just about everyone on Northcote Street, including most of Linehan's six siblings, either worked at the Dofasco steel plant, or would work at the Dofasco steel plant.

Instead, the movie-mad Brian moved to Toronto, where he became an executive trainee for Odeon Theatres Ltd., and "was in heaven" screening more than 1,000 feature films in his five-year tenure.

His career took off, and Linehan earned the devotion of many of the celebrities he interviewed -- particular Joan Rivers, who wrote the introduction to this book -- and the enmity of media competitors, such as the Toronto Star's Martin Knelman, Linehan's own City-TV boss Moses Znaimer, and the occasional celeb such as Woody Allen, who famously but unsuccessfully sued Linehan because his interview with Allen ran on New York City airwaves, contrary to a verbal agreement between Allen and Linehan.

Equally fascinating is Linehan's private life with his companion, dentist Zane Wagman, who took his own life a couple of years before Linehan himself died of cancer in 2004 a few weeks shy of 60.

It is bizarre to discover that Linehan's sex life was virtually non-existent given that he was something of an icon among

gay Torontonians of the time, celebrated for his wit, style and transparent celebrity addiction.

Wagman, by contrast, was apparently a self-loathing homosexual who hardly allowed displays of affection, let alone sexual contact.

Anthony knows his audience for this book, and drops names by the score, in addition to the requisite amount of pure dish.

But Linehan would probably approve. The research is sound, and while Anthony confirms Linehan could be -- as one publicist has said -- "a big pain in the ass," his portrait of his friend is also quite moving, especially in the final chapters devoted to Linehan's struggle with Wagman's suicide and his own losing battle with non-Hodgkins lymphoma.

Certainly, Anthony confirms the observation of Peter O'Toole who, in mid-interview, told Linehan: "You're a very interesting man."

Indeed.

Free Press film reporter Randall King is winding up his annual stint at the Toronto International Film Festival.