

by Arthur Salm - CNS

"The Insanity Defense: Collected Prose" by Woody Allen; Random House; 342 pages; \$16.

"Scholars will recall that several years ago a shepherd, wandering in the Gulf of Aqaba, stumbled upon a cave containing several large clay jars and also two tickets to the ice show. Inside the jars were discovered six parchment scrolls with ancient incomprehensible writing which the shepherd, in his ignorance, sold to the museum for \$750,000 apiece."

VINTAGE WOODY - 'Insanity' is not required to appreciate vintage Woody (but it helps). CNS Photo. Those are the opening lines from Woody Allen's essay "The Scrolls," which appears in "The Insanity Defense: Collected Prose," an indispensable omnibus containing his essays (many of which first appeared in The New Yorker) from the best-selling collections "Getting Even," "Side Effects" and "Without Feathers."

I selected the excerpt from "The Scrolls" not only because the Dead Sea Scrolls are on tour across the U.S., but because it gives me an excuse to go further into the essay and pick out this line: "The authenticity of the scrolls is currently in great doubt, particularly since the word 'Oldsmobile' appears several times in the text."

But you can mine almost any of these pieces and score. A pastoral reflection: "Of all the wonders of nature, a tree in summer is perhaps the most remarkable, with the possible exception of a moose singing 'Embraceable You' in spats." On UFOs: "The Question is: Is anything out there? And if so, do they have ray guns?"

Much of Allen's shtick follows a formula he more or less concocted himself: Existential dread tripped up by quotidian vexation. "Eternal nothingness is OK if you're dressed for it." "Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends."

But there are hilariously extended flights of giddy madness as well, as in "The Gossage-Vardebedian

Papers," a chess game conducted through an exchange of letters, in which one of the participants grows increasingly fanciful in his efforts to, in a word, cheat; or a piece perfectly titled "The Whore of Mensa," narrated by a private detective who tracks down a ring of call girl coeds who provide literary conversation for men whose wives don't satisfy them between the book jackets: "She was barely nineteen years old, but already she had developed the hardened facility of the pseudo-intellectual. She rattled off her ideas glibly, but it was all mechanical."

Allen still contributes to *The New Yorker* occasionally, but for years now his byline alone has elicited dread and vexation. "The Insanity Defense" was published in conjunction with his more recent writings, "Mere Anarchy" (Random House, 160 pages, \$22), 18 pieces in which there are some laughs. But not many.

His ideas have stagnated; "Calisthenics, Poison Ivy, Final Cut," an exchange of threatening letters between a cinema camp owner and the father of a prodigy, arguing over percentages and distribution rights, will send you scurrying back to "The Gossage-Vardebedian Papers," weeping. And who would have imagined that Woody Allen would someday choose as a subject for a comic essay the problems that come with remodeling? Or preschool rejection?

Although he can still bat out an Allen-esque zinger ("My book, in which a man travels back in time and hides in King George's wig, thus hastening the Stamp Act, obviously ruffled establishment feathers with its bite"), his expository language has become rococo, almost gothic, sometimes all but impenetrable. It does have the virtue, however, of highlighting the crisp economy of his earlier work. So pick up "The Insanity Defense."

And rent "Take the Money and Run" while you're at it.

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