By Miles Raymer

One of the only fan letters I’ve ever written was to cartoonist Tony Millionaire. I wanted a bird tattoo, and he draws some of the best birds ever, especially crows in thick, black ink that hang somewhere between John James Audubon’s nature studies and Ralph Steadman’s expressionist nightmares. During a slow shift at Kinko’s I e-mailed Millionaire, asking him to draw one special for me. He was game, as long as I’d agree to a tattoo of his drunk, suicidal Drinky Crow character as well. I wimped out on that deal, but we kept up a short correspondence after that about the best cheap beers. He recommended ice beers for their high alcohol content and low price. It was good advice at the time.

The Tony Millionaire who gives out drinking advice to his fans is the creator of *Maakies*, a strip that appears among other places in the *Reader* and has a huge Internet fan base. Each week’s installment usually ends tragically for the heroes—Drinky and a monkey named Uncle Gabby—due to their own ineptitude and drunkenness. It’s full of poop jokes, minority stereotypes, poetry, and endings that mock Henny Youngman-style punch lines as much as they revel in them. I keep a hardbound collection of strips on my coffee table, and visitors tend to read it front to back when they pick it up.

But there’s another Tony Millionaire, who draws award-winning children’s comics with Drinky and Gabby recast as stuffed animals having mild (but surrealistic) misadventures around the household of the little girl who owns them. These stories usually wind up with hugs rather than with violence by handgun.

Millionaire does his best work when—as in his *Sock Monkey* comics—he lets his profane and sentimental selves cohabit. And his new graphic novel, *Billy Hazelnuts*, may be the best he’s done yet.

Becky is a prepubescent astronomer and inventor in pigtails, a pragmatic, science-minded girl who can’t stand poetry but has no problem navigating a dreamlike world populated by talking sheep and talking meteors. *Billy Hazelnuts* is a golemlike creature with a head full of houseflies, crafted by the mice in Becky’s cellar out of garbage and treacle to murder Becky’s mother, a tyrant who keeps them from the family’s cheese. Billy’s birth is weirdly menacing—he rises instead of sitting up as a roomful of mice chant “Get alive! Get alive!”—but he doesn’t turn out to be much of an assassin. Instead he hides out in the barn after an epic battle with a house cat. When Becky finds him there, she cleans him up and replaces the flies in his eye socks with hazelnuts, so he can see. They become fast friends, and before long they’re off on a quest to find the secret hiding spot the moon goes to when it sets.

Millionaire’s drawings are like scrimshaw, with their deliberate, etched look and sense of high action frozen in place, but the ethereal, nonlinear way the pictures flow—landscapes that shift from New England mountains to southwestern desert rock formations, flocks of bats drifting through the corner of a panel—is even more indebted to Winsor McCay’s early-20th-century *Little Nemo* strips. Like Nemo, Becky and Billy find not just danger—in the form of a robotic alligator man built by the crushed-out poet Becky has spurned—but danger that follows the slippery logic of dreams. When the flying boat commanded by the gator man crashes with a broken wing, he simply rears the
ship back onto its long, buckle-shoed legs and continues the chase "on foot."

As Billy and Becky travel further into the unreal, Millionaire draws the reader closer to the story's heart. As the action piles up in increasingly fantastic ways (peaking in a battle on the open sea, one of Millionaire's favorite subjects), Billy's relationship with Becky, and with humanity itself, comes under attack. When the smoke clears and Billy finds himself lost, alone, and blinded, it's hard not to feel more sympathy for a gross little trash man than you'd have thought possible.

Though *Little Nemo*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* echo throughout *Billy Hazelnuts*, odds are there won't be many kids reading it. It's not bloody, but it's harsh and unlikely to become a staple of contemporary kids' lit. And though Tony Millionaire may deserve the love of children, most of his followers are adult comics geeks. But when they find themselves caught up in Millionaire's gorgeously deep dreaming, they'll probably forget that they're grown.

**HOSTILE TAKEOVER: HOW BIG MONEY & CORRUPTION CONQUERED OUR GOVERNMENT—AND HOW WE TAKE IT BACK**

*David Sirota* (Crown)

Three new books dig toward the roots of the mess we're in today.
WHERE Borders, INFo
Sat 5/13, WHEN Jim Derych
3909 2 PM
Derych | FORMER DITTOHEAD
CONFESSIONS OF A memoir of his postadolescent Dittohead, is an unpretentious
illustration of how to try and get you get it and nobody else does.
On several layers of right-wing ideology he was worse than a dittohead; he
was an insider,” Derych explains. “Like the handle ‘advisorjim’ since
he was a fanatical ‘dittiot.” In his
In his own repeated collisions with facts, Derych confesses that
illusions peddled by talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh (whose fol-
Laden, then flummoxed by headlines), and how those illu-
sions slowly crumbled after his
that Limbaugh and other right-wing radio commentators have
pointed to a weakness that may
question. His new book,
Confessions of a Former Dittohead, is an unpretentious memoir of his postadolescent
inflation with the comforting illusions peddled by talk-radio
came out swinging, mercilessly bitch-slaressing poor Bob Woodward for his curious silence during much
of the Valerie Plame investigation, of instances in which the press,
employs meticulous analytic and
demonstrated the collapse of the fourth estate over the past six years and forecast the
disastrous consequences the ensuing sinkhole holds for democracy.
Limbaugh’s rise of ABC’s
language with finesse, Boehlert
maintaining a constant level of
he has come straight from
Lapdogs: How the Press Rolled Over for Bush
Eric Boehlert | When Stephen Colbert punked George W. Bush at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner last month, he reserved no small amount of scorn for the national press corps in whose honor is the dinner thrown. “Over the last five years you people were as good a part of the assembled media elite. “Over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. When Americans didn’t want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out.”
That line could have come straight from Lapdogs, the new book by Eric Boehlert. A contributing editor at Rolling Stone, former Salon columnist, and frequent Huffington Poster, Boehlert employs metacritic analytic and research skills to demonstrate the
collapse of the fourth estate over the past six years and forecast the
disastrous consequences the ensuing sinkhole holds for democracy.
He comes out swinging, mercilessly bitch-slaressing poor Bob Woodward for his curious silence during much
of the Valerie Plame investigation, and continues on through a litany of instances in which the press,
through either complicity or vil-
unmoored. abandoned its post: the Swift Boat mess,
the White House Correspondents’ dinner gives it undue power. “The
ship gives it undue power. “The
pull of the Gang of 500? The Note.” Other
of the Gang of 500 may set the nation’s
power brokers known as the Gang
of 500? The Note.” Other
reporters on the media’s
disagreement, at least over the
headquarters of major news
organizations and for the press
as a whole, is growing daily. One chapter charts the rise of ABC’s
daily online tip sheet, the Note, from an internal memo for the net-
work’s news staff to an agenda-set-
ting must-read for the journalists, lobbyists, politicians, and other
power brokers known as the Gang of 500. The Note’s popularity, he
points out, lies in how it reflects the concerns of the right-wing-leaning
Beltway readership— but the fun-house nature of this relation-
ship gives it undue power. The
Gang of 500 may set the nation’s
political agenda, he writes, “but who helps set the agenda for the
Gang of 500? The Note.” Other
BUSH...
quarry include pundit-provoca-
teurs like Michelle Malkin and
Ann Coulter, whose “toxic rhetoric”
and bullheaded scorn for facts
Boehlert holds responsible for a
large part of the mainstream
media’s fearful passivity, and blog-
gers on right-wing sites like Free
Republic and Power Line, who
played a major role in pushing
Terri Schiavo to the front page and
keeping her there at the expense of
coverage of, oh, Iraq. But incisive
as his case may be, Boehlert is
preaching to the choir and, frankly,
it’s only engaging reading for so
long. As George W. Bush knows so
well, funny will often get the mes-
sage across better than facts and
fury, and Colbert’s 24 minutes of
video convey the gist of Boehlert’s
critique more effectively than these
296 pages of print.
—Martha Bayne