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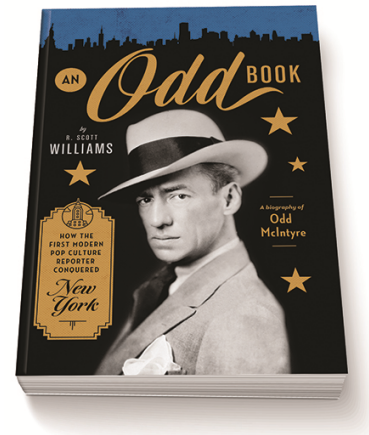
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Q & A with R. Scott Williams, Author of 'An Odd Book.'



How did you get started writing about history?

I've loved history my entire life. Several years ago, I worked for Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc. at Graceland. I was at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., where I work now, to participate in the opening of an Elvis exhibit. During the same time, they also had an exhibit based on James Swanson's book "Manhunt." I almost missed my plane because I spent so much time in the exhibit. I took the time to run to the Newseum's gift shop to buy the book and I devoured the whole thing on the plane headed back to Memphis. I've probably read it 20 times since then. Because of that exhibit and book, I began researching the Civil War and my own family ancestry, and posting the information to a website and a blog. One thing led to another, and I ended up writing my first book, "The Forgotten Adventures of Richard Halliburton: A High-Flying Life from Tennessee to Timbuktu" for the History Press. That book was about an explorer and writer who was from my hometown of Haywood County, in Tennessee. I loved the whole research and writing experience, so when it was over, I began thinking about another book.

Tell me a little about this current project about Odd McIntyre.

"An Odd Book: How the First Modern Pop Culture Reporter Conquered New York" will be released April 1, 2017. By the time he died in 1938, Odd was the highest-paid and most-read columnist in the country. He wrote about books, movies, theater, sports, politics, fashion, food and pretty much everything you can think of that was happening in the early 20th century. This was during a time when newspapers were the primary way people got their news and entertainment, so the circulation numbers were huge compared to today. Some reporters and editors, like Odd, became well-known celebrities.

Was his name really Odd?

Yes. He was named Oscar Odd McIntyre after his mother's brother. However, the actual pronunciation of his uncle's name was "Udd." I asked several people who knew Maybelle, Odd's wife, and they confirmed that she did pronounce it "Odd." Professionally, he used "O. O. McIntyre." In many ways, his behavior was very unusual, so his name did fit his personality. He and Walter Winchell had a bit of a feud going on for several years and Winchell publically called him "The Very Odd McIntyre" or "Odd Mctiresome."

What made you want to write about Odd?

I ran across something Odd had written about Richard Halliburton while I was researching that book. I liked Odd's style and the topics he wrote about, so I went searching for more of his work to read. There was actually very little published, so I had to read old columns on Newspapers.com and back issues of

magazines like *Cosmopolitan* at the Library of Congress. I had a very interesting Saturday with a cart loaded with every *Cosmopolitan* from 1922 to 1938. Months went by and I couldn't shake my curiosity about his story. I was trying to figure out what to write about next, and I had a few ideas that I was considering — including a book about Elvis, Colonel Parker and the media — but I kept returning to Odd. I ended up going to Gallipolis, Ohio, where he was raised by his grandmother, and found the two things that make it fun for me — lots of great research material that very few have seen before, and a community of really nice people who were excited about the idea of a book about their hometown celebrity.

Why write about Odd instead of someone more famous, like Elvis?

For me, writing a biography is like reading a good book from the inside out. It really consumes you and takes an incredible amount of time, so you better really love the story you are telling and the people you are writing about. Elvis is the king, but Odd's story was compelling to me for a number of reasons. First, even though he's been completely forgotten today, many of the things he was pioneering a century ago, we're still doing now in advertising, public relations and media. His style of writing is so much like the blogs and tweets of today, he would be right at home online in 2017. His life story is also very inspiring. He began his career as a high-school dropout and, although he struggled with spelling and grammar and wrote "by ear," he wanted to work in the newspaper business so badly, he just made it happen. He was fired many times and just kept getting knocked down. His ideas and submissions were repeatedly rejected and it seemed he was going to end up being a huge failure. Eventually, he became the highest-paid, most-read newspaper columnist of his time, so he showed them, didn't he?

His wife was a big part of that success, wasn't she?

Maybelle should actually get all the credit for his success. If it hadn't been for her, I don't think he would have been as successful as he was. That really stands out when you research his life. She never gave up on him, and she just kept looking for ways he could do what he loved. There were a few people like Maybelle who saw something in Odd that was apparently not evident to others. Another was the iconic magazine publisher Ray Long. It was Ray who recruited Odd to work at *The Cincinnati Post* during the days of muckraking and then to New York to work for Hampton's Magazine. But it was Maybelle who right there at his side through it all. Interestingly, her middle name was Hope. As it turned out, that was the perfect name for her because she had hope when there really was nothing much to back it up. The nice thing was, Odd knew it and always gave her the credit. It was Maybelle who bought a mimeograph machine and started sending out his column from their cheap hotel room to newspapers around the country. She was the one who handled their business affairs and negotiated his lucrative contracts. At the end, he couldn't even write if she wasn't in the room, and he would have panic attacks if she left their apartment. His last spoken words before he died were to her. He said, "Turn your face toward me so I can see you."

What surprised you most from your research?

That's easy. The fact that he was very sick throughout his career but he and his wife kept it a secret from everyone except their closest friends. Although they lived at the Ritz-Carlton, rode around town in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce, and he was known for wearing the loudest, trendiest men's fashions from Paris, he was actually painfully shy, suffered from social anxiety and depression and dealt with a number of physical problems from which he eventually died.

Did he write about his illness at all?

Rarely. And when he did, it was in a funny way, making light of some of his “quirks.” In his unpublished autobiography, he wrote about having to deal with periods of “melancholia.” Of course, I can’t be certain, but I really think he was suffering from undiagnosed pernicious anemia. Simply put, that’s a vitamin B12 deficiency that causes a lack of red blood cells. Over a period of time, it greatly impacts the brain and nervous system. It’s been eradicated today because it’s so easily treatable, but back in Odd’s time, they knew very little about it. Dr. John G. Sotos recently wrote a book, “The Mary Lincoln Mind-Body Sourcebook,” in which he makes a very solid case that Mary Lincoln was actually suffering from the same disease. The physical symptoms were bad enough — exhaustion, fever, weakness, lesions, weight loss and headaches — but the way the disease attacked the brain was especially harsh. Symptoms included depression, obsessive-compulsive tendencies and hallucinations. At times, Odd stayed in bed for weeks at a time, unable to function. He spent tens of thousands of dollars on clothes and accessories he never wore but stored “just in case.” He struggled with a variety of other social anxiety issues, including a fear of open spaces, people slapping him on the back or picking lint off his suit, and he had a constant fear of dying. Some of his fears and compulsions would come and go. As an example, for a while he was obsessed with not speaking to someone the second time they met until they spoke to him first. To make matters worse, and in yet another bit of irony, Odd and Maybelle were followers of Christian Science, which discourages seeking traditional medical treatment. They just learned to live and work around his illnesses. Toward the end of his life — he died at just 54 — he was so incapacitated, he could only leave his apartment at night and only to ride around the streets of New York observing the theater openings and action in the streets from the back seat of his limo.

And the public was completely unaware of this?

If you read the columns and the articles he wrote in magazines, you get the feeling he is having a blast. Looking back, Odd and Maybelle came across like Nick and Nora Charles from the old “Thin Man” movies. Odd knew everybody, went to every party, read every book and saw every play, concert and silent film. They didn’t just go on vacation to Paris. They hung out with Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald at the infamous Harry’s New York Bar. He didn’t just write about the movies. He became one of Rudolph Valentino’s best friends and was close to other stars like Charlie Chaplin and Will Rogers. Odd and Maybelle’s late-night parties in their suite at the Ritz-Carlton often included entertainers like their friend George Gershwin, a famous pianist. Odd worked for a while as a publicist for Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. and helped Leo Feist promote the music coming out of Tin Pan Alley. He was on the front lines as the world was going through a period of significant change brought about by new technologies in communication, very similar to us today.

Was there interest in what he was writing about outside New York?

That’s what is so fascinating about his columns. Because he was syndicated around the country and was so popular, he was reaching around 100 million people every single day in his newspaper column alone. As a comparison, the week ending Feb. 19, 2017, CBS’s “Late Show” with Stephen Colbert averaged 3 million viewers, NBC’s “Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon,” averaged 2.71 million and ABC’s “Jimmy Kimmel Live” finished third for the week with 2.11 million. What Odd wrote then, before radio and television, reads a lot like those late-night talk shows today. Odd and Maybelle always called his column “the letter,” and he thought of it as a way to share with his friends and family back in Gallipolis, Ohio what was happening in New York and Hollywood. Coming from the Midwest, he was able to “report home” about this fascinating era in a way that appealed to readers who would never get close to New York. I love what a reporter for *The New York Times* included in Odd’s obituary. He wrote, “His greatest

stock-in-trade was his incarnate rapture at the glories of a New York recognizable to none but himself. To him the towers of Manhattan were studded with minarets and the neon lights of Broadway flickered like jewels." I think that really sums up his writing. You can tell he truly loved what he did and had a passion for sharing with others the things he personally enjoyed.

What was the biggest challenge in writing about Odd?

One of the criticisms of Odd at the time was that some of the things he wrote were positioned as fact, when they were actually only intended to entertain and may not have actually happened. In order to separate actual facts from the things he wrote to entertain, I had to spend a lot of time looking for other sources of information to corroborate his writing. I read every single daily column he wrote from 1917 to 1938 — more than 3,000. I also read all his monthly columns that appeared in every issue of *Cosmopolitan* from 1922 to 1938. After a while, I began to get a sense for when he was writing truthfully and when he was writing creatively to entertain his readers. For a couple so outrageously public and a writer who produced such a huge amount of work, they managed to keep their personal lives very private, so it took a lot of digging to find clues to fill in the blanks. Interestingly, she also went amazingly quiet after he died. She lived until 1985 and died at age 101 in a nursing home. There were a few articles in the newspaper in Gallipolis about her, and she returned there for a few months each year, but she spent most of her later years in New York or traveling around the world.

Did the fact that you work at the Newseum influence the book in anyway?

Absolutely. Every day I get to work with some of the most talented researchers and exhibit writers in the business. Much of our focus today is on contemporary First Amendment issues like religious liberty, how news is created and distributed, and the impact of technology on communication. However, the history of journalism and the men and women who came before us is the foundation on which our work today is built. While Odd McIntyre was buzzing around in my head, I was working in a building with historic items from print journalism history, like reporter Nelly Bly's satchel, front pages from historic moments like the plane crash that killed one of Odd's closest friends Will Rogers, and artifacts that tell the story of how news in Odd's time transitioned from newspaper to radio. Although I see the names of the iconic giants of media history like Edward W. Scripps, Roy Howard, William Randolph Hearst, Arthur Brisbane and Joseph Pulitzer nearly every day somewhere at the Newseum, they actually came to life for me while researching the book. There's a part of me that feels a real connection to their stories now that I didn't have before.

You're self-publishing this book rather than going through a traditional publisher?

Yes. First of all, Odd McIntyre is not Harry Potter, and I'm obviously not Stephen King, so the "traditional" publishers weren't beating down my door. In fact, one agent I spoke with asked why I thought anyone would want to buy a book about a person everyone has forgotten. My answer was I wanted to write his story specifically *because* everyone has forgotten. Of course, she meant the book was not "marketable" in today's traditional publishing world. And she was right. Today, publishers need to know a book will sell a lot of copies in order for them to invest their resources in it. But that doesn't mean those with a story to tell can't publish a book. Just like the business model for music, movies and news has been turned on its head in the last decade, book publishing has rapidly evolved to the point a writer doesn't need to have a publisher in order to get their work directly to readers. Using "print on demand" tools like Amazon's CreateSpace, IngramSpark for libraries and bookstores, and Kindle Direct Publishing for e-books, getting a book in the hands of readers has never been easier. Writers no longer have to be put in the position of having to get past a gatekeeper. I found a whole sub-culture of writers who are

mastering these new technologies and then sharing what they're learning with others through podcasts, blogs, videos and message boards. This was my first time trying it, so there was a great deal of trial and error — and still is — but I'm glad now I went this way instead of having agents and publishers shoot rejection letters at me until I gave up. It really is a publishing revolution and I'm really excited about it. I've had so many people telling me about the book they want to write, that I wrote a little post on LinkedIn about what I've learned so far. Hopefully, that will help some folks get their books out of their head and onto Amazon.

You mentioned Odd and social media. Have you been sharing information about your book that way?

Odd is the perfect subject for a social media campaign. On Oddstagram (the Odd puns are too easy to pass up) I've been sharing images of the people, places and things Odd wrote about. Of course, I stick to pre-1923 and public domain images. Every Friday, I post a short excerpt from Odd's column on a weekly blog so people can get a sense of what it was like to read his writing in a contemporary setting. Those posts also go on Odd's Facebook page. A few times a day, a tweet from Odd goes out from his Twitter account. I actually load many week's worth of social content months ahead of time so it's automatically shared. I follow all the book's social media from my own personal social media accounts so it sometimes still surprises me when I see a tweet or image from Odd. It's remarkable how much of what he wrote still seems relevant and entertaining nearly a century after he wrote it.

What do you think he would think if he were around today?

Odd wrote that he never believed his words would live beyond a week or so after they were published, and that he just wanted to "entertain people a little each day." There were times when I was reading his columns that I literally laughed out loud. And you aren't supposed to laugh out loud at the Library of Congress. I think Odd would be pleased to know what he wrote way back in the Roaring Twenties still has the power to entertain today. He knew he wasn't the best writer and there was really no logical reason why he achieved such success, other than the fact that he never gave up. I think he would be pleased to know the book focuses on that part of his story. Hopefully, Odd's life can inspire someone today to continue pursuing a dream that may seem unrealistic, or it can remind people it's not how many times you get knocked down that matters. It's how many times you get back up. That's really what his story is about and that's what I think he would want future generations to remember about him.