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How do you write satire in the age of bleach injections? It isn't easy, but it's necessary.

President Trump speaks at a campaign event in Greenville, N.C., on Thursday. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

By **Michael Bennett**
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Just after the 2016 election, I thought I had a great idea for a novel. The new president, so impressed by an alt-right pundit who keeps popping up on conservative cable news, decides to hire him as "thought czar," to show all the departments and agencies in Washington how to think. I envisioned the main character as a cross between Laura Ingraham and Malcolm Tucker.

I got as far as an outline of the story before I realized the flaw in my plan. Although the new administration seemed at first like a target-rich environment for satire — with nepotism, narcissism and incompetence all in great abundance — there was no way my imagination could compete with the real thing.

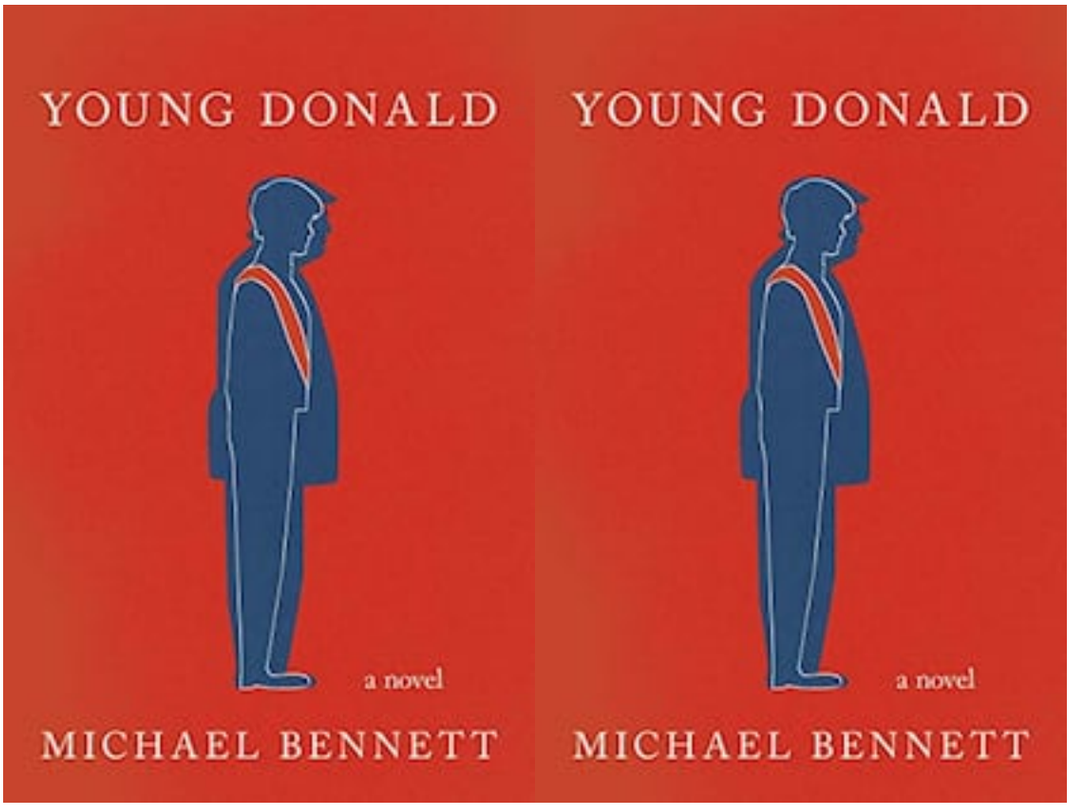
Satire is all about finding the sweet spot between reality and absurdity. But that presupposes there's a gap between those two poles. Once the ostensibly pro-life president receives experimental treatment — tested on cells derived from fetal tissue — for the disease, reality and absurdity merge, severely squeezing the space for satire.

At the same time, good political satire should be imbued with the spirit of speaking truth to power. But what does that concept mean when the powerful are impervious to truth telling? It's hard to expect a novel to pack a punch when even facts, stated clearly and directly at an impeachment hearing, have no impact. And besides, pointing out that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes doesn't have much value when the emperor himself is swinging his swollen belly at the crowd and yelling, "Hey, everybody, look at me!"

There's also the challenge of speed. The president could one-up any story line with a single tweet.

Writing political satire in such an environment seemed like a doomed endeavor. So I put down my outline and consoled myself by imagining that Jonathan Swift would have stopped writing "A Modest Proposal" if King George II had suddenly announced that henceforth the poor would be burned for fuel.
But, as the tragic consequences of the last election became clearer — as Trump went from a goofy, orange distraction to an authoritarian who puts immigrant children in cages — I became determined not to let the absurdity of the moment dissuade me from writing. The president could lower our standing in the world, shake our faith in democratic institutions and draw the country into a dual economic and public health disaster, but he couldn't steal my right to use humor

as a tool of political criticism. That was one thing that was within my control. I just needed to find a different angle.



(Inkshares)

The search for that angle merged with the question we have all faced over the past three-and-a-half years: How did we get here? My look back led me deeper into history than I expected. I went past his time as a reality TV star of the 2000s and Page Six headliner of the 1980s and ’90s and landed at Trump as a high-schooler in the 1960s. A search for the origin of our problem became an origin story.

Most of my novel, “Young Donald,” takes place in October 1963, a turbulent time in our history. A few months before the story begins, Dr. King, John Lewis and others spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington. A month later, Kennedy is killed in Dallas. The conflict in Vietnam is beginning to intensify, and monks are burning themselves on the streets of Saigon.

The upheaval of this era produced some of our most powerful works of political satire, like “Catch-22,” “Dr. Strangelove” and the stand-up of Lenny Bruce. And

yet, the lessons inherent in those works remain unlearned. Six elapsed decades do little to hide the sad parallels between then and now. The protest in Harlem in the summer of 1964 sparked by the police killing of James Powell is an eerie forebear of the demonstrations we have seen after the killings of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks and too many others. Barry Goldwater's campaign events that same year in the South, where he stood in front of Confederate flags talking about the need to restore law and order in our cities, could have been rehearsals for Trump rallies (except, of course, for all of Goldwater's railing against the Russians).

The similarities are so strong that it's hard to feel we have learned anything at all. The Civil Rights Act didn't lead to racial equality or even to equal access to the ballot box. The disastrous war in Vietnam didn't put an end to American imperialism or our patience for endless wars, as 20 years of news from Afghanistan proves. The free love movement did not produce a more tolerant society.

General Ripper's paranoia in "Dr. Strangelove" that all women were after his essence is reminiscent of Mike Pence's aversion to being alone with women who aren't his wife. And the famous line from "Catch-22" — that it requires no brains at all to turn thievery into honor, brutality into patriotism and sadism into justice, it merely requires no character — could practically be the slogan of the current administration.

Trump's rise to power was predicated on his ability to prey on divisions still remaining from the 1960s, and our failure to heed the warnings of the past. Although he has mastered the art of unintentional self-mockery and revels in our divisions to a degree that can seem farcical at times, the tragedies he causes are very real. His absurdity hasn't eliminated the need for satire. In fact, it made the case for it even more pressing.

Michael Bennett *is the author of "Young Donald."*