



## PROFILE

### Clive James

**I hate Clive James. Smart arse, bald, self-obsessed, self-indulgent. Clive James. Be bitchy. Think about it. Well, he's fat and bald. No, that's not really bitchy. Not enough. OK, let's think about what he's done, then we can be really bitchy. Well...**

Well, he was the seminal television critic, the first person to review the crap; he reads difficult Russian novels in the original (does he avoid the easy ones?); he has written memoirs, novels, essays, collections of criticisms and, and then there's the TV. Chat shows, documentaries, interviews, schminterviews.

I'm beginning to think that being bitchy about what he's done isn't such a good idea. So look. Why do I hate him?

What's he remembered for? Laughing at stupid Japanese folk doing stupid things on stupid Japanese programs. Drinking 480 pints of water and not being allowed to have a piss. Pissing ourselves. Because it's funny. It may be a touch racist (I don't think it is, but there you go) but it's funny. Idiot television is idiot television and laughing at it is laughing at idiot television. Moaning about racism is simply missing the point.

We can probably get more mileage from the sexist angle. Those leering, lecherous things like '...and

the calendar girls' and '...meets Hugh Hefner' can be dismissed as an old man's fantasy easily enough. But if he spends every waking moment telling (yelling) about how smart he is, then, well, it's not really on.

Be honest. This I can cope with. Maybe I shouldn't, but I can. So I ask my friends. 'Clive James. What do you think?' And they all hate him. All of them. 'Oh, he's very clever', they say. But they all hate him.

There's that word. The key word. Clever. The smug, unctuous cleverness. Everyone else has a chat show and you know why the guests are there. It's a sales gig. Fine. Our Clive has a chat show and who does he have on? Chomsky, Sontag and Steiner. And why? Anything to sell? Yes, Clive's brain. They're there to sell him. And I keep seeing these



Photo: John Fairfax & Sons

large subtitles flashing (sneering) across the screen: 'I am very clever. I am cleverer than you. You are not very clever.'

The books. Take the first novel, *Beautiful Creatures* - can't imagine why it was called that. A fairly workman-like sub-Martin Amis-type effort. But are we content with that? No, we're not. Tacked on the end there's a month-long appendix telling you what it all means. Explaining all the references. Really. Who cares? But he's popular with the people who really count. The punters. Why? Is it something to do

with the way he looks? Be honest. He doesn't look good. He looks bald and fat. He doesn't sound good. He sounds smug and self-satisfied. But still, it's there. He's popular. So why?

Remember that Jane Fonda thing? Her sitting there (looking like she does) saying how age is kinder to men than women. Him sitting there (looking like he does) agreeing. An in-joke, a wry laugh. And who did we laugh with? We laughed with him because we all look like him. Not her.

The thing with Clive James is that, well, there are two things. The punters thing is that he's funny. He sets himself up and he entertains. They like him.

The writers/critics thing is that they want to be him. To write books and TV programs and really bad poems called things like Charles Charming something or other beginning with a 'c' (because it's always alliterative) and novels and all those other things. And they want to get away with it. Why him? Why does he get away with it? Why not me? He's fat and bald and ugly. I'm not.

So is that it? Everybody hates him because they want to be him? And everyone who doesn't hate him watches him. Is that it? (Forget the books. I honestly can't imagine who reads his books. Honestly.)

OK. Be bitchy. Let's try some of those oh-so-witty putdowns, like that famous one: he looks like a condom full of peanuts. No, I can't even do that. He'd do it better. But OK, let's try this. He's a fat, ugly bastard. We're really getting into this now. We could go for fat and bald in one almighty putdown. I hate Clive James. Smart arse, bald, self-obsessed, self-indulgent. And I haven't even mentioned the word jealous. Not once.

*Jeremy Novick.*  
(Courtesy Marxism Today.)