



Richard O Smith with his book *The Man with His Head in the Clouds* and a mug showing the Robert Brothers' balloon

Life on the funny side

A character particular to Shakespeare's plays is the clown with a philosophical turn of phrase and a sardonic wit.

One man who recognises such a character is surely Richard O Smith, whose latest book *Town and Clown* is mostly an anthology of his features published in *Limited Edition's* Oxford Examined column (found today on page 137).

Not all Richard's books are Oxford based but it is good that the city can be portrayed as a place of comic relief as well as a hot-bed of fictional murders.

And as well as writing for magazines, he writes jokes for programmes like *The Now Show* on Radio 4 and has recently turned his hand to script writing.

Oxford's clown he may be but his story did not begin here. Let's take a look at where it started and what lessons there are to be learned.

"I was born in 1964 in Boston: the original Boston. The Boston that imprisoned the Pilgrim Fathers.

"After a few weeks they sailed for Holland but were betrayed by the ship's captain. Eventually they set off in the *Mayflower* from Plymouth. Arriving with a chance to start afresh in this brand new original land, they

Sylvia Vetta asks Richard O Smith, comedian, script-writer and author of *Town and Clown*, whether Oxford offers a particularly fertile ground for a comic writer and what he'd take with him to the mythical island of Oxtopia

came up with imaginative new names for their new settlements – Boston and Plymouth!" said Richard.

"My parents Eve and Jim were school teachers. They met through teaching and remained teachers all their professional life.

"From my mother's side I have some Dutch ancestry. The Lincolnshire fens which lie below sea level are windswept, uncompromisingly flat, with no trees or hedgerows to divert the eye from the huge skies. The Dutch in the 18th century were expert in engineering as Holland is below sea level. They drained the fens and I am descended from one of them."

Lesson number one to become a comic genius: have a lonely childhood.

"As a child I spent a lot of time by myself because we lived outside of the town. I couldn't see another house from my bedroom window and my school was miles away," said Richard.

Lesson number two: experience rejection. "My nearest neighbour about half a mile away was a girl named Charlotte. She seemed exotically attractive to me as she came from London.

"Fate would have it that we waited together for the school bus. One day I plucked up the courage to ask her out. She looked at me. Then, in slow motion, she turned her gaze downwards to peer at her shoes and turned around without dignifying my request with a response.

"Soon after this a For Sale sign went up on her house. The next time I saw her, she was a competitor on *Blankety Blank* on BBC1 and on the receiving end of a humiliation, with six raspberry sounds. Her fellow contestants turned away in silence. It felt like karma."

Lesson number three: grow up in a home which doesn't rate contemporary comedy.

"*The Young Ones*, the comic equivalent to

Richard's books

- Oxford Examined: Town & Clown
- The Man with His Head in the Clouds
- The Unbeatables
- As Thick as Thieves: Foolish Felons & Loopy Laws
- Britain's Most Eccentric Sports
- Oxford Student Pranks: A History of Mischief & Mayhem

What they say about Richard's books

Countdown lexicographer **Susie Dent** describes Town and Clown as "The wittiest, zaniest, and most truthful guide to a city you'll read."

Richard's friend and fellow writer on BBC Radio4 comedy shows, **Hugh Dennis** said of *Stupid Criminals: As Thick as Thieves*, which documents true criminal ineptitude: "Made me think I should have considered a life of crime."

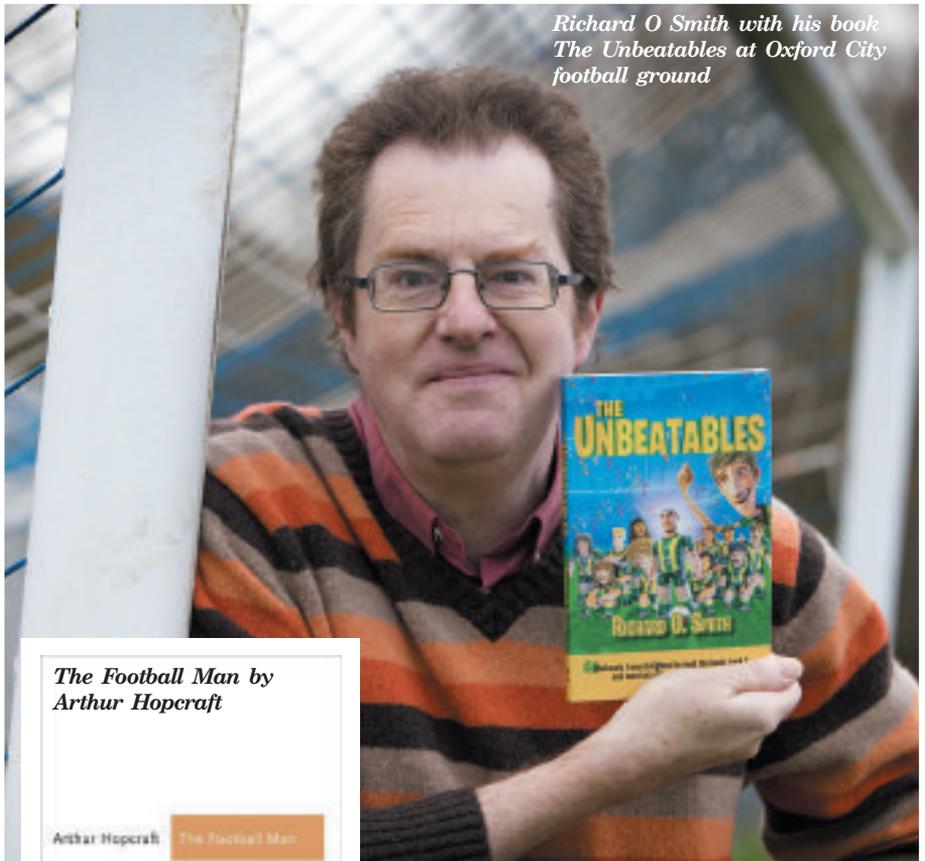
Another comedian who Richard has worked with is **Henning Wehn**. His endorsement of *Britain's Most Eccentric Sports* is: "Better than all 26 days of a cricket match."

Comic **Lucy Porter** called *The Man with His Head in the Clouds*: "Very, very funny" and **Dr Lucy Worsley** described *Oxford Student Pranks* as "a jam-packed jamboree of jollity".

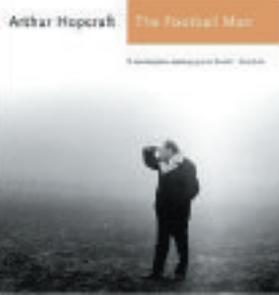
Richard O Smith at Oxford City football ground in Marston

Picture: Damian Halliwell

Richard O Smith with his book The Unbeatables at Oxford City football ground



The Football Man by Arthur Hopcraft



punk, smashed into my consciousness with a spirit of anarchy.

"I went to Boston Grammar School but left with no qualifications whatsoever. I can't put all the responsibility on the school so I was surprised when last year they asked me to go back and present the prizes at speech day! It is a much better school now than when I was a pupil there."

Lesson number four: timing is everything – in life as well as in comedy.

After leaving school, Richard's first writing job was for *The Lincolnshire Standard*.

"Two weeks into spicing the village news with jokes they moved me to obituaries. On my 20th birthday I left for the livelier life of London.

"After work on my admin day job I indulged my real passion – football writing. I had arrived in the vanguard of the football fanzine movement."

A fanzine, a blend of fan and magazine, is a publication produced by enthusiasts in an irreverent manner.

"Just as punk was bursting past the gatekeepers of music, this was the new thing in journalism. Football writing in 1984 consisted of *Shoot* magazine for kids and badly ghost written auto-biographies. The style was condescending. Football is and was so huge in British culture that I asked myself why there wasn't anything written for discerning adults."

1988 saw a new magazine *When Saturday Comes* and Richard contributed humorous pieces for it.

"Examples of my features were Great Own Goals of Our Time and Great Sendings Off."

They became popular and his talent as a writer was noticed. In 1992, Richard was presented with the award for National Football Writer of the Year.

"Winning that award brought me a commission to write for *The Independent*," says Richard. "It was about this time that I moved to Oxford and it is one of the better things I have done."

He took an administrative post in an actuarial firm and, 20 years ago, met his wife Catherine, a tour bus guide.

Richard started to write for Dara O'Briain and various other comedians.

"I heard Lucy Porter before she was famous and I liked the way she didn't try to hide her intelligence and was a female comic not trying to be a man. In the late nineties comedy was more chauvinistic," says Richard.

He wrote additional material for Lucy and met and worked with lots of other comics including Henning Wehn.

"I am the guy who wrote for them before they were funny," he says wittily.

Then came regular work on BBC Radio 4's 6.30pm slots starting with *The News Quiz*.

"Early in 2000 *The Now Show* contacted me," says Richard. "They had seen some comedy sketches I had written and asked me to work with them.

"It involves a meeting on Tuesday with the cast. They divide you up and suggest topics. It is anxiety inducing because you have to file the results by the same evening.

"Doing a series of gags and jokes in isolation won't work. You have to have emotional investment in the piece. That is what one of my favourite comics, David Sedaris is so good at."

Lesson number five: be a good cook, have a thick skin and don't expect to make much money.

"The core skill with comedy writing is knowing what is funny in the same way that a good chef knows what tastes good," says Richard. "I am amazed at the vitriol some listeners can pour forth when a joke isn't to their own individual taste. But I am far too over-sensitive."

He is often asked "how do you become a comedy writer?"

"My answer goes down like a lead balloon: be prepared to work for free for 10 years," says Richard, who also does stand-up comedy and after-dinner speaking.

"Comedy writing pays less than journalism because there are so many people who want to be comedy writers. It has particular challenges. If you write the lyrics of a song you can perform that song over and over again and nobody minds. That doesn't apply to jokes. The burn up rate for comic material is huge. You have to keep coming up with fresh material. The reactions to comedy can be extreme. The audience either love it or hate it. I'm too sensitive to write sitcom. I stick to the jokes."

In 2012, Richard was made redundant from his day job and is now writing full-time, adding scriptwriting to his repertoire with *The Unbeatables*, the British version of Argentinian animated film *Metegol*. Oxfordshire writer

Richard with Rob Brydon



Michael Smith did the initial translation of the screenplay and Oxford-based producer Victor Glynn asked Richard to add his hallmark humour and synchronise the words with the animation.

It starred the vocal talents of Rupert Grint, Ralph Little, Alistair McGowan and Rob Brydon and is now available as a DVD. On the back of it he has written a novel called *The Unbeatables*.

Football remains a great love and Richard chose Oxford City football ground for his photo-shoot.

"It is Oxford's oldest club," he says. "When it moved from Grandpont to Marston, it took the Lucy-made wrought iron gates with them and they must be a desert island choice."

Richard showed me another favourite possession, a shaving mug with an illustration of the French Robert brothers' balloon. They were the first men to fly in a hydrogen balloon in 1783.

But the book he wants to take to Oxtopia is not about ballooning or one of his own but *The Football Man* by Arthur Hopcroft.

"He was a journalist on *The Observer* in the sixties and in my opinion the first to write an intelligent football book as social commentary. Reading it is like travelling back in a time machine to another football culture."

The Man with His Head in the Clouds

This book is not only the story of James Sadler, the son of an Oxford pastry cook and the first Englishman to fly, but it is also the story of how Richard conquered his crippling fear of heights and succeeded in going up in a Sadler type balloon.

His championing of Sadler may even contribute to a new Oxford tourist attraction.

Richard says: "Last year Oxford received nine million visitors but is small for a world famous city. It needs other attractions as well as the dreaming spires. Two Oxford businessmen have made a replica of Sadler's balloon and they want to tether it possibly in Oxpens and give visitors a great view of the spires from a unique vantage point and honour James Sadler."

