



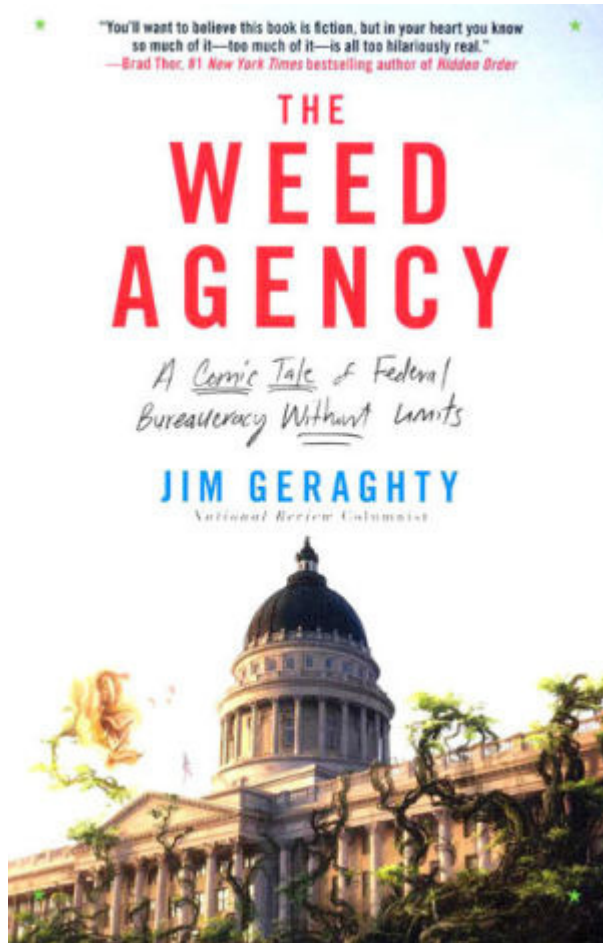
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DAILY NEWS

'Weed' offers seductive humor

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"The Weed Agency: A Comic Tale of Federal Bureaucracy Without Limits," by Jim Geraghty. New York, N.Y.: Crown Forum, an imprint of Random House, 2014. 262 pages, \$13.



"A careful review of the Federal Register for the past 30 years will reveal that the U.S. Department of Agriculture Agency of Invasive Species does not, technically, exist," Jim Geraghty explains at the beginning of *"The Weed Agency: A Comic Tale of Federal Bureaucracy Without Limits,"* his new novel on the unintended yet often painfully hilarious consequences of unbridled bureaucratic growth.

"However," he continues, "the Federal Interagency Committee for the Management of Noxious and Exotic Weeds, the Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force, and the Federal Interagency Committee on Invasive Terrestrial Animals and Pathogens are very real."

As far as I am concerned, *"The Weed Agency"* ranks right up there with the best satirical, reality-based fiction ever produced. And even though the book is a relatively easy read, I was nonetheless struck at the poignancy of Geraghty's literary style. Regardless of where you fall on the political spectrum, it is difficult not to smile – and sometimes laugh out loud – at the truths the author lays bare at virtually every twist and turn in this quirky yarn.

The story begins in February 1981, shortly after the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as the 40th president of the United States, and ends in December 2012, just after the re-election of Barack Obama, the 44th president. In the 31 years between these two seminal events in our nation's history, Geraghty weaves a tale that often too closely mirrors reality. The central theme of the novel revolves around the notion our federal government is spinning out of control as it works feverishly to gain even more control over virtually every aspect of our lives. But before you jump to the seemingly obvious conclusion that the primary protagonists in the book are Democrats, (spoiler alert) several episodes in the storyline will no doubt cause you to seriously reconsider that assumption. In the final analysis, the author is probably more critical of the Republicans, who he sees as complicit in creating the surreal and patently absurd circumstances that have come to dominate our legislative process during the past three decades.

The main character in the book is Adam Humphrey, administrative director of the Agency of Invasive Species, an imaginary unit of the U.S. Department of Agriculture supposedly established by Jimmy Carter during the late 1970s. The antics he and his cohorts engage in as this fictional governmental entity continues to flourish from one decade to the next is as illuminating as it is cautionary. Geraghty uses a variety of literary devices as he develops his characters – and the situations they confront – throughout the book. The cast includes both well-known political players as well as those who come directly from the mind of the author. I challenge you to read the following passage about Lisa Bloom, one of the main characters in the book, without at least chuckling to yourself. In this excerpt, she has just arrived at the agency as a new communications office staffer:

“As a political science major and College Democrat at the University of Maryland, Lisa had checked all the boxes of the young and politically minded, like protesting the Gulf War as another Vietnam and emphasizing the importance of a president familiar with the latest developments in supermarket checkout technology. But what had most bugged her was how government itself had become this distant, out-of-touch entity. Under President George H.W. Bush, the federal government was a bunch of guys in wire-rimmed glasses whose sole purpose was to publicize drug war seizures and to complain about sitcom storylines. With the end of the Cold War, government could finally serve the people the way it was meant to, and that meant communicating more directly, more effectively, and more openly. Even about weeds.”

One feature of the book I found especially effective was Geraghty’s notation at the beginning of several chapters of the current level of the national debt as well as the equally-expanding budget of the Agency of Invasive Species. For example, at the beginning of the first chapter (February 1981), the federal deficit was only \$950 billion, while the allocation for the agency was just a little over \$20 million. By the beginning of the final chapter (March 2011), the national debt had grown to \$14.2 trillion, while the agency boasted a budget of \$430 million – a truly remarkable accomplishment especially since every administration subsequent to its creation had, at one time or another, marked the agency for extinction.

Geraghty has been a contributing editor at National Review since 2004. Since beginning his career as a reporter for the Dallas Morning News, he has written for the Washington Post, Boston Globe, Denver Post, Detroit Free Press and the Bergen (N.J.) Record. A truly versatile voice, he appears regularly on Fox News, MSNBC and CNN. This is his second book, his first being “Voting to Kill: How 9/11 Launched the Era of Republican Leadership,” which was published in 2006.

Although I am not a huge fan of fiction, I readily admit I thoroughly enjoyed “The Weed Agency.” It reminded me of the kind of absurd yet intimately seductive humor that made “Saturday Night Live” such a juggernaut for the first five years it aired. Geraghty has the somewhat rare yet undeniable ability to speak truth to power on many levels by merely describing situations so patently inappropriate they immediately disarm any attempt to challenge their efficacy.

So if you occasionally get tired of the endless bickering, finger-pointing and posturing that has come to epitomize the nightly “news” shows, take a break. Head to Splash Lagoon at Beech Bend Park, put on plenty of sunscreen and curl up with “The Weed Agency.” There is something to the old adage that humor is indeed the best medicine.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*