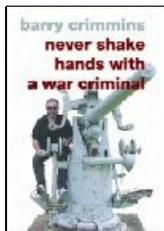


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Book Review
Never Shake Hands with a War Criminal
by [Barry Crimmins](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
Posted: October 3, 2005

Barry Crimmins is a political comedian who was a fixture on the comedy scene in Boston for years. I first heard him myself at a demonstration against the first Gulf War, where he referred to Kuwait as "a family-owned oil company with a flag." Now he's a writer for the Randi Rhodes show on Air America.

I found out a while ago that Crimmins grew up in Skaneateles, a town in the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. I grew up in Skaneateles myself. It's a very small place and I had never heard of anyone halfway famous who came from there. This had a lot to do with why I picked up *Never Shake Hands with a War Criminal*, but I found more than I expected.

Never Shake Hands is a collection of short pieces, many of which pack a strong punch. There are essays on subjects that range from Dennis Miller ("The Rushmore of Wrong-Headness") to flag-waving to corporate media to the title essay, about a sudden chilling encounter with Henry Kissinger. There are short bits, apparently taken from his stand-up act. And there are also more personal pieces: stories about being down and out in Cambridge and Skaneateles and about the death of a friend.

I've been out of touch with my old hometown for many years, so it's fascinating to read about it from the point of view of someone who's keeps going back and seeing how it's changed. Crimmins is more politically aware about the place than I ever was: Skaneateles, he says, is an Indian word meaning "beautiful lake surrounded by fascists." When I was growing up there I just took it for granted that everyone was a Republican. I became a grade-school Humphrey supporter just to be different.

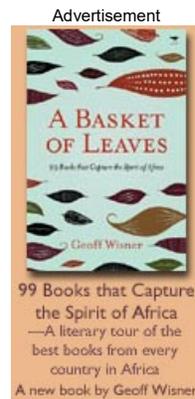
You don't have to come from Skaneateles to enjoy this book, though. It's full of fresh observations, satirical jabs, and some heartbreak: including the open letter to John Kerry that ends the book, written when we thought he was going to get us out of this mess.

About the Reviewer

Geoff Wisner is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.

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