Al Franken Has Been Sitting on Jokes for a Decade. Now He’s Ready to Tell Them.

**AL FRANKEN, GIANT OF THE SENATE**   
By Al Franken   
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Once upon a time, Al Franken was funny. But then he became a senator. Now, in a new memoir, he is ready to tell all the jokes he has been sitting on for the last 10 years.

Franken, the comedy wunderkind, a founding writer on “Saturday Night Live” and the author of such subtly partisan humor books as “Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot,” has always been an irrepressible jokester by nature. As he tells it, the impulse to be funny took hold in early childhood and never let go. But when, a decade ago, Franken heard his country calling and embarked on a political career, he had to make the comedian’s ultimate Faustian bargain: To get and stay elected, he had to suppress his sense of humor and project an air of utmost seriousness. The people of Minnesota, after all, were not interested in being represented in Washington by a clown — a truth revealed to the candidate in multiple focus groups with Minnesota voters.

The act worked: Franken won his 2008 campaign against an incumbent Republican by the squeakiest of squeakers, finally taking office after an 8-month recount in 2009. He has kept up the charade ever since, avoiding the national spotlight and rarely making so much as a quip in public, determined to convince his constituents back in Anoka and Bemidji that Hollywood Al was a thing of the past.

But now that he’s been comfortably re-elected — in 2014, a dismal year for Democrats, he won by a 10-point margin — Franken can finally drop the mask. In “Al Franken, Giant of the Senate” (the title may be the book’s best joke), Franken admits the truth: His inner clown never went away. It just got suppressed, forcibly and with great effort.

“Al Franken, Giant of the Senate” is, in part, the story of how Franken became a giant phony — how he pretended to be a serious person in public even as his inner comic monologue never stopped running. He recalls that during the 2008 campaign, he was attacked for such transgressions as a late-night writers’-room joke about raping Lesley Stahl, and a 2000 Playboy article entitled “Porn-o-Rama.” Franken didn’t think he should have to apologize for the cracks, which his opponents were taking out of context. “To say I was sorry for writing a joke was to sell out my career, to sell out who I’d been my entire life,” he writes. “And I wasn’t sorry that I had written Porn-o-Rama or pitched that stupid Lesley Stahl joke at 2 in the morning. I was just doing my job.”

But as the attacks caused Franken to bleed support from women voters, he saw that his explanations weren’t working. “I learned that campaigns have their own rules, their own laws of physics, and that if I wasn’t willing to accept that, I would never get to be a senator.” And so Franken took a deep breath and told a little white lie: “I’m sorry.”

Being in the Senate soon delivered another lesson in the perils of political comedy. Early on, while presiding over the body, Franken rolled his eyes at a speech Mitch McConnell, then the minority leader, was giving, which he found “awful, awful.” McConnell spotted the eyeroll — a serious breach of Senate protocol — and retorted, “This isn’t ‘Saturday Night Live,’ Al.” Franken realized the incident would become fodder for a political press “itching to write something about Senator Yuk-Yuk,” and swiftly delivered an abject handwritten apology to McConnell, who graciously accepted it.

In the Senate, Franken notes, jokes tend to get taken the wrong way, as when he elbowed his way past a line of visitors muttering quietly, for his own amusement, “More important than you, more important than you.” This did not amuse the Yankee first baseman Mark Teixeira, who tweeted, “@AlFranken let me know ‘He is more important than me.’” At another point, Franken dearly wanted to issue a statement calling a dissent by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia “very gay.” “My staff said no,” he writes. “But they didn’t say I couldn’t put it in a book someday!”

Franken’s staff, as he tells it, has been his best ally in stifling his funny side, sternly responding “O.K., that’s for inside the car” to his quips, and nixing his hilariously offensive responses to constituent letters. (He once composed a 110th birthday note to Ruth Anderson of Marshall, Minn., that read simply, “You have a bright future.”) They ruthlessly edit out his efforts to “slip in The Funny during speeches,” as when he attempted to state, in a nuclear-disarmament speech, “A wise man once said, ‘Trust but verify.’ That man was quoting Ronald Reagan.” Franken’s press secretary once threatened to write her own campaign memoir, entitled “‘Oh, C’mon!’ Said Franken.”

Still, Franken’s clever asides can’t always salvage his stale recitations of liberal talking points, which seem likely to persuade precisely no one who isn’t already a member of the choir. (Even with jokes, is anyone buying this book because he wants to read a seven-page argument against media consolidation?) In the end, this is a book your liberal aunt will love and your Republican neighbor will never pick up, much less enjoy. It’s not as funny as the best humor books, including Franken’s — but it’s a whole lot funnier than your average political memoir.

There’s surprisingly little here about the current president; Franken presumably began writing the book when Donald Trump wasn’t expected to win the election. In one chapter, he notes that he, too, is a former entertainer who’s had tax issues and been accused of degrading comments about women — making the case, of course, that Trump’s example is far worse. Another chapter is devoted to a faintly pathetic attempt to convince progressives they shouldn’t lose hope and can still make a difference.

More interesting than Franken’s political points is his description of the value of humor as a force for bringing people together. He devotes a lot of space to his friendly relationships with Senate Republicans, from the cranky Kansan Pat Roberts to Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, “the funniest Republican in the Senate.” (Informed that Franken is taking a vacation in Puerto Rico, Graham deadpans, “Do two fund-raisers: one with the folks for statehood, one with the folks against statehood. They never talk to each other.”)

He’s found common ground with such staunch conservatives as David Vitter of Louisiana, considers the present attorney general, Jeff Sessions, a personal friend and once wrote a country song with the Utah senator Orrin Hatch. He’s made McConnell laugh out loud: “Try to imagine what that looks and sounds like! You can’t!” After years of railing against George W. Bush while he was in office, Franken even manages to share a laugh with the former president when they run into each other. Maybe, he implies, we’d all be better off if we could dial back the partisan outrage and learn to take a joke.

Being in the Senate, Franken admits, has softened his own partisanship, though not everyone is treated gently. “I like Ted Cruz more than most of my other colleagues like Ted Cruz,” Franken writes. “And I hate Ted Cruz.” In the chapter on Cruz, entitled “Sophistry,” Franken describes him as “an absolutely toxic co-worker,” “singularly dishonest” and a “sociopath.”

The publication of “Al Franken, Giant of the Senate” marks a major break with Franken’s previous political persona, one that is sure to stoke speculation about his future in a party that is desperately bereft of future prospects. Up to now, as Franken observes, his dogged unfunniness has been the default angle of every article about his political career, to wit: “No Joke: Franken Running for Senate.” The cliché has become so pervasive, Franken wryly notes, that when he dies, his obituary will surely be titled “No Joke: Former Three-Term Dead at 93.”

And yet it somehow never gets old: Just a couple of months ago, a column in National Journal was headlined “No Joke: Al Franken for President?” Now that would be hilarious.