

American Splendor

(Comedy / Drama) (2003)

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Major Characters

- Harvey Pekar.....Paul Giamatti
A frustrated and somewhat depressed twice-divorced man who works as a file clerk in a Cleveland, Ohio hospital. He discovers he has a real talent for writing, and with the help of some artist friends, he becomes well known for writing a comic book called *American Splendor*, which is about the struggles of his own ordinary life.
- Joyce Brabner.....Hope Davis
A politically active and often clinically-depressed young woman from the state of Delaware who is a fan of Harvey's comic book, who comes out to Cleveland to meet him, and who soon becomes his 3rd wife.
- Robert Crumb.....James Urbaniak
A semi-famous comic book writer who is a good friend of Harvey's (In real life, Crumb is best known for making the first X-rated cartoon, *Fritz the Cat*, in the early 1970s).
- Toby Radloff.....Judah Friedlander
A friend of Harvey's who works at the same hospital, who is a classic "nerd," and a socially awkward young man who may also be autistic.
- Mr. Boats.....Earl Billings
Another co-worker and friend of Harvey's at the hospital.
- Fred.....James McCaffrey
One of the artists who helps draw Harvey's comic book.
- Danielle.....Madylin Sweeten
Fred's 10 year old daughter.
- David Letterman.....David Letterman
A famous TV talk show host who had the real Harvey Pekar on his show several times in the 1980s.

Plot Summary

This film is a true story, based on the life of the comic book writer Harvey Pekar, who became well-known by writing *American Splendor*. This is a comic book that follows Pekar's own life as a struggling file clerk in a Cleveland hospital, and because the real Harvey Pekar is seen discussing the making of this very film

within the movie, in some ways this is a movie about a writer within a comic book within a movie. This makes it occasionally confusing, but it's always interesting and an excellent look at those Americans who are constantly trying to balance their boring but necessary jobs with their desires to do something more creative and exciting with their lives.

It follows Pekar's life from his childhood in Cleveland after World War 2 until the 1960s, when he becomes a file clerk and occasional jazz record collector and reviewer, and then on to the 1970s, 80s and beyond. Eventually, he marries twice, divorces twice, and then finally settles down with his third and final wife, Joyce, who was one of his early fans and read *American Splendor* faithfully ("Splendor" is a good word for elegance, grace or magnificence).

Along the way, he becomes friends with the comic book writer Bob Crumb, who would go on to become one of the most famous comic book writers ever, and he appears frequently on the *Late Night* TV show with David Letterman, which makes Harvey a bit more famous than he would have been. Of course, life is still always a struggle for Harvey, his job remains as boring as ever, he faces a bad year of fighting against cancer, and there is always something difficult because "ordinary life is complex stuff." Still, with Joyce's love and help, he manages to survive, at least until the making of this very movie.

Some Words and Expressions that You May not Know

Harvey faces life without his second wife....and without his voice.

Trick or treat!

The words used by children who go door to door for candy on Halloween night (October 31st). A "trick" is something designed to fool a person, and a "treat" is something delicious to eat (or possibly a gift).

All the superheroes on our porch! Ain't that cute!

A "superhero" is an idealized comic book character like Superman.

A "porch" is the covered outdoor entrance to a house (Never say "ain't"!).

Superman, Batman and his sidekick Robin.

A "sidekick" is a person closely associated with a better known or more powerful partner (Batman and Robin are famous comic book characters who also had a well known TV show in the 1960s).

I'm a character in a celebrated underground comic book. [written]

If a piece of art is "celebrated," it is widely praised or admired.

If art is "underground," it is enjoyed by a small subculture of people and not by the great majority.

If you're wondering how a nobody guy like me **ended up** with so many incarnations, pay attention.

To "end up" in a certain way is to finish that way. "Incarnations" are different forms or states of being or existence, often associated with different characteristics such as goodness or evil.

Although he's a pretty scholarly cat, he never got much of a formal education.

"Scholarly" refers to academic or serious book studying or research. A "cat" is a ridiculously slangy way of referring to a person and "formal education" refers to schooling, especially at the university level.

For the most part, he lived in shit neighborhoods, held shit jobs, and is now knee deep in a disastrous second marriage.

Note that "shit" can be used as a vulgar adjective meaning very bad or lousy. If someone is "knee deep" in something, they are deeply involved in it. "Disastrous" is a powerful adjective meaning catastrophic or totally horrible, often to the point where something is destroyed or ruined.

If you're the kind of person looking for romance or escapism, or some fantasy figure to save the day, guess what!

"Escapism" is any kind of entertainment that lets you escape the hardships of everyday life, such as a comic book or science fiction movie. A "fantasy figure" is a character that is greater than possible in real life, such as the superheroes from the comics, like Superman or Batman.

OK, you got four takes. You ought to be able to patch one together from there.

In the movie business, a "take" is an attempt to put a scene on film (often it requires several takes to film a scene that can be used). "To patch together" two or more things is to put them together in a way that will work well (A "patch" is a piece of cloth that is sewn over a hole).

Let's go to the next sequence.

A sequence is any part of a greater series of events. Here, a sequence in a film is one of many scenes that form a part of the larger story.

Orange soda is alright.

"Soda" is a common word for a soft drink, such as coke. As an adjective, "alright" means fine or OK.

Did you actually read the script?

A "script" refers to the words that are said in a movie, usually memorized by the actors before filming starts.

Do you feel weird saying this stuff?

"Weird" is an excellent adjective meaning strange, odd or bizarre. "Stuff" is another word for things in general, or in this case, words.

I don't know how well my voice is going to hold out.
 In this context, "to hold out" means to last or survive.

Doc, you gotta help me, man.
 "Doc" is a slangy way of addressing a doctor. Note that in rapid speech, "have got to" ---> "gotta," and that "man" is a very slangy and common filler word that's used to express emotions such as frustration.

My old lady's dumping me because I can't talk.
 "Old lady" is a slangy and dated expression for a wife (or possibly mom).
 "To dump" a person is to break up with them or leave them after having been involved with them romantically. (It literally means to throw away).

Now that she's got a Ph.D., she's some hot shit academic star.
 A Ph.D. is the highest degree offered by a university. As an adjective, "hot shit" is a crude and colloquial way of saying excellent or impressive.
 "Academic" refers to school, and more specifically, a university.

My being a file clerk was fine when I was signing the damn checks for her tuition.
 A "file clerk" is one who helps organize papers in an office (A file is a group of related papers or documents). "Tuition" is the cost of classes at a college or university.

First I got marital problems, and now you're telling me I got cancer. For Christ's sake, man.
 "Marital" is an adjective that refers to anything related to marriage.
 "For Christ's sake" is a common way of expressing emotion such as anger or frustration (It's used by all types of people, including the non-religious).

You've got a nodule in your vocal chords, probably from screaming and yelling so much.
 A "nodule" is a small bump, and a person's vocal chords are the organs that produce sound. "To scream" and "yell" both mean to shout.

His vow of silence begins. [written]
 A "vow of silence" is a sacred promise to not speak or make any sounds,

Hey come on, what is this?
 The most versatile phrasal verb in all of English, here meaning "be serious," or "stop being silly."

This plebian lifestyle just isn't working for me anymore.
 "Plebian" is a sad adjective which means poor and struggling (It is named after the Plebes who lived during the Roman empire). "Lifestyle" is an important word that refers to the general way a person lives their life, or possibly to how they follow their basic values or beliefs.

So, it's a few months later and I'm working my funky file clerk gig at the VA hospital.

"Flunky" means poor, trivial or unimportant. A "gig" is a very slangy word for a job or a concert for a musician. The "VA" refers to the Veterans Administration, which is the government division which takes care of former soldiers.

Lesbian? Where the hell did she get that shit, man?

A "lesbian" is a female homosexual. Note that "the hell" is added to WH questions to show emotion such as anger or surprise. In this case, "shit" is a vulgar noun that refers to lies or other nonsense.

Shun the polluted flock, live like that stoic bird.

"To shun" a person is to avoid or stay away from them. A "flock" is the name for a group of birds. If a person is "stoic," they are able to survive well without material comforts like a nice place to live or good food.

It means stay away from the crowds of ordinary people and do your own thing.

A colloquial way of saying "do what you like (or want)."

It means don't compromise yourself for women.

"To compromise yourself" is to do something that is against your own values or beliefs, just to get something you want.

Probably listening to all that loud rock stuff. It's all junk.

Another word for trash or garbage.

Mr. Boats didn't like any blues or anything like that.

A type of music about life's struggles, first created by African-Americans.

Prior to that, I collected comic books.

"Prior to" means before (in time).

I was always a collector; I admit having an obsessive-compulsive quality in me.

If a person is "obsessive-compulsive," they have an uncontrollable psychological need to do something, usually over and over again.

With the encouragement of Crumb, Harvey becomes a comic book writer.

You go to thrift shops and garage sales because you think you're going to find something really rare.

A "thrift shop" sells used clothes and other goods for poor people.

A "garage sale" is the sale of various goods that a person has collected in their own house over the years, such as furniture and books.

Once in a while you'll **come up with** something that will whet your appetite.
 "To come up with" something is to think of it for the first time. "To whet a person's appetite" is to give them just a little bit of something so that they'll soon want more of it.

I was with some buddies at a junk sale looking for some choice sides, when I met this sly retiring cat from Philadelphia named Bob Crumb.
 A "buddy" is a friend. A "junk sale" is a rarely used term for a garage sale. "Choice sides" refers to old records with jazz music. If a person is "sly," they are clever in a subtle way, and if they're "retiring," they're shy, though this is rarely used. A "cat" is silly and dated word for a guy.

You know the guy, Fritz the Cat.
 A famous movie that is considered the first pornographic or X-rated cartoon, created by Bob Crumb. It came out in the early 1970s.

You are a cheap bastard, Harvey. :: I know I'm tight, man, I live on a government wage.
 "A cheap bastard" is a crude and insulting way of referring to a person who doesn't like to spend money. "Tight" is another way of saying cheap or stingy with money. A "wage" is another word for salary (Government workers have a lot of job security but they are usually not paid well).

Most of my records are back in Philly.
 A slangy way of referring to the city of Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania.

That's cool.
 A very common colloquial word for good, excellent, fine, etc.

You should see his comics, Harvey. They're out of sight.
 A dated but fun way of saying excellent, or more colloquially, totally cool.

I'm into comics myself.
 To be "into" something is to be really interested in it.

This is terrific. I really dig your work, man.
 "Terrific" is a good alternative to excellent or great. "To dig" something is to really like it, though this is very old-fashioned slang.

Can I get good bread for it? :: Not yet.
 A dated slang word for money. Common in this film, but no longer in real life.

It's more than just an exercise. It's breaking ground, man! There's some wild shit in here, Bob!
 In this case, an "exercise" is the practice of something that is common and well known. "To break ground" is to do something different, that has not been done before. "Some wild shit" is a vulgar and slangy way of referring to something that is crazy and different.

Crumb and I **hung out** a lot back then.

“To hang out” with a person is to pass time with them.

Check it out, man.

One way of telling a person to look at something carefully.

Pretty scary. :: You don't know the half of it.

A way of telling a person they don't realize how amazing (or good or bad) something is that they're discussing.

Eventually, people got hip to Crumb's art work, and he started hanging out with the Bohemian crowd.

“To get hip to” a person is to start to appreciate and like them (though this is dated). A “Bohemian crowd” referred to hippies, beatniks and other members of society who hung out in cafes and discussed philosophy and listened to jazz while avoiding mainstream American life.

He got sick of greeting cards and moved to San Francisco, where he got the whole underground comic scene off the ground.

“Greeting cards” are cards for birthdays, anniversaries, etc. The “underground comic scene” refers to the subculture of young people who were very interested in comic books. “To get a social movement off the ground” is to get it started so that it grows and becomes more popular.

It's not like I tried to keep her captive.

“To keep a person captive” is to hold them physically against their will, as if they were in a prison.

Don't think I'm buying any of this growth crap.

In this case, “to buy” something means to believe it, and here, “growth” refers to spiritual growth, or perhaps the process of becoming more mature through experience. “Crap” is an excellent and vulgar word for lies, nonsense or bullshit.

Everybody is always talking how bad experiences can help you to grow and all that clichéd stuff.

If something is “cliché,” it is said so often that it becomes tiresome.

I got to see this chick in New York.

A dated but still used slang word for a young woman or teen girl.

I'm just getting sick of the whole scene.

Here, “the scene” refers to the subculture of comic books and their fans.

When you croak, man, you're going to leave something behind.

“To croak” is a slangy way of saying to die (It is also the sound a frog makes). Harvey is telling his friend Crumb that his comics will still be read after he is no longer alive.

It sure beats a gig like mine, being a nobody flunky and selling records on the side for a buck.

In this context, “to beat” means to be better than. A “gig” is very slangy for a job, and a “nobody flunky” is Harvey’s way of referring to an unimportant person. A “buck” is a common colloquial word for a dollar.

Picking the right check-out line is an art.

The “check-out line” is the line of people waiting to pay for food at a grocery store. Note people often debate whether something is an art (a form of expression) or a science (an act of critical observation).

Frank, I need a price-check.

A common noun at stores when a cashier needs to find out the price of a product before selling it.

I’m a Yid myself, and women in my family are like that, but I never get used to it.

“Yid” is a racist word to describe Jewish people. “To get used to something” is to become comfortable with it after experiencing it a lot.

I may be cheap, but I got limits, man.

A person who is “cheap” does not like to spend money.

Wake up! You’re whole life is being eaten away by this kind of crap!

Again, a vulgar but good alternative to bullshit, lies or nonsense.

Is this all a working stiff like you can expect?

A “working stiff” is a working class person who struggles to make enough money (Stiff means rigid or not easily bent).

Are you going to suffer in silence...or are you going to make a move?

Here, “to make a move” means to do something dramatic that will change life fundamentally.

I figure the guy’s who are doing animal comics and superhero stuff, they’re really limited.

“To figure” means to think (or possibly to guess). This is Harvey’s way of saying the more traditional comic book writers are not very imaginative.

Underground stuff like yours has been really subversive, and it’s opened up things politically.

If something is “subversive,” it works to weaken or even overthrow the dominant or powerful classes or forces in society. “To open up” something is to change it in such a way that lots of people begin to talk about it, or think about it in a different way.

Stuff that the everyman has gotta deal with.

One way of referring to everyday, common people.

You've turned yourself into a comic hero. :: Sort of, but there's no idealized shit.
If something is "idealized," it is made to look better or more impressive than it really is. This is Harvey's way of saying that the way he describes himself in his comics is realistic or true.

There's no phony bullshit. This is the real thing, man.
If something is "phony," it is fake or intended to deceive or mislead.
"Bullshit" refers to lies, half-truths or nonsense. Crude but very useful!
"The real thing" refers to that which is totally true or genuine.

Ordinary life is pretty complex stuff.
If something is "ordinary," it is commonplace, and if it is "complex," it is complicated. "Stuff" of course, refers to things in general. This is one of the great lines in this movie.

Can I take them home and illustrate them?
"To illustrate" a scene is to draw or paint it.

What's up with your voice? All of a sudden you sound fine. :: I guess you conned me.
"What's up with" is a common and colloquial way of asking what is going on with a particular situation, especially if surprising or unexpected things are happening. "To con" a person is to fool or trick them.

Dishwashing has always been my Achilles heel. [written]
A person's "Achilles heel" is their weakest point or feature. It is based on a myth from ancient Greek mythology, in which the God Achilles was covered all in gold except for his heel, on the bottom of his foot.

A little glue should get the coat through one more winter. [written]
"Glue" is a sticky white liquid that keeps two things stuck together, and to "get through" a winter is to be able to survive it.

I'm desperately lonely and horny as hell.
"Horny" is a useful colloquial word for a person who strongly desires to have sex, and "as hell" is slangy filler that adds emphasis (and thus it means "very," although it comes after the adjective).

Now there's a reliable disappointment. [written]
If something is a "disappointment," it is not as good as expected (This is a clever line since Harvey's looking in the mirror when he says it).

I guess he's about average. :: Average is dumb.
An important word meaning commonplace or typical.

Fuck that. :: That's my stories by yours truly.
Note that "fuck" can be used as a transitive verb to express disgust or anger. "Yours truly" is an interesting and colloquial way of saying "myself."

Hot off the presses!

A well known line that refers to newspapers that are published with new and exciting news (A press is the machine a newspaper is printed on).

We have a regular Hemingway here.

Ernst Hemingway is considered one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century.

I don't go in for any of that macho crap.

"To go in for" something is to really enjoy or like it. "Macho" is a Spanish word that means super manly, or perhaps strong and muscular.

You're in there. Take it easy, for Christ's sake.

If you tell a person to "take it easy," you're telling them to relax. "For Christ's sake" is a way of expressing emotion such as anger or frustration.

A buddy of mine and some of his friends did the art work.

Another word for friend or pal.

It's not polite to grab things.

"Polite" means considerate, friendly and well behaved. "To grab" something is to take or seize it quickly or with great force.

They love it. They can't get enough of it.

If you "can't get enough of" something, you always want more of it.

Harvey looks to other women, and Toby offers some spiritual advice.

A brand new decade, same old bullshit.

A "decade" is a period of 10 years, such as the 1960s, 1990s, etc...

Sure, he gets lots of recognition for his writing now.

"Recognition" is formal acknowledgment or even admiration for having done or accomplished something, usually which is positive.

His comics are praised by all the important media types telling people what to think, but **so what?**

"To praise" a book is to express a positive or favorable opinion of it. In this case, "media types" refers to writers for newspapers and magazines. Asking "so what?" is a way of suggesting something is not important.

He can't go and quit his day job or nothing.

The regular job of a person which pays expenses, while they try to become successful as an artist or working on some other type of goal.

Who am I kidding? Truth is, I'd be lost without my work routine.

"To kid" a person is to fool or mislead them (If a person *is* kidding, they're joking around or not talking seriously). A "routine" is the act of doing the same thing day after day, such as going to work, which can give emotional stability to many people.

Want three gourmet jellybeans? :: I gave up sweets for lent.

If a food is "gourmet," it is of a very high quality and delicious. "Jellybeans" are a type of candy. "To give up" a food is to decide to no longer eat it, often for health reasons. "Lent" refers to a period of 40 days when some Christians fast, or do not eat any food, at least during the day.

I recommend the pina colodas. They're excellent and very authentic tasting.

"Pina colada" is a drink made with pineapple and coconut and rum. If something is "authentic tasting," it tastes like the real food (fresh pineapples), as opposed to artificial flavors.

Can you eat lentils during lent?

"Lentils" are a type of popular bean.

Sister Mary Fred? She sounds kind of mannish, but who the hell am I to be picky?

"Mannish" means masculine, or resembling a man, but this word is rarely used. "The hell" is added to Wh questions to express emotions such as anger, or in this case, skepticism (non-belief). If a person is "picky," they are not easily satisfied and only like certain specific foods, clothes, etc.

She became a nun because she had a higher calling.

A "nun" is a Catholic woman who chooses to devote her life to God. If a person says they have a "higher calling," they mean they are doing something because they believe God wants them to do it.

Higher calling?! What a crock of shit!

An excellent alternative way of referring to nonsense or bullshit (A crock is a large container, pot or jar, usually made of clay).

I enjoy the ritual and I'm a very spiritual person.

A "ritual" is a ceremony such as a wedding or funeral, or any type of spiritual act that has been done for many generations, or by one person for a long time, such as sleeping under the stars on the longest day of the year. If a person is "spiritual," they value things beyond the physical world, such as religion, or perhaps nature or even the greater community.

You should try believing in something bigger than yourself; It might cheer you up.

"To cheer up" a person is to make them happy. This is Toby's way of telling Harvey to be more spiritual.

One is cherry and one is cinnamon. :: You can tell that just by looking at them?
 “Cinnamon” is a type of sweet spice or flavoring. Note that “to tell” can mean to see, or here, to see the difference between two similar things.

How do you cope with loneliness, Harvey?
 “To cope” with a problem is to learn to live or deal with it or to survive it.

You read, you write, you draw your stick figures.
 Drawings of people that are made with simple lines, the way little children often draw people.

The short weekend begins with longing. . . . two crullers, a jelly donut with powdered sugar. Got any of that day-old bread?
 “Longing” is a strong desire for what you do not have. A “cruller” is a type of donut, and “day-old bread” is bread that is sold super cheap.

Yeah, we had a couple of lit classes together.
 You disappeared after two semesters.
 In universities, “lit” is short for literature. A “semester” is a period of instruction for classes, often lasting for two to four months.

There was that required math class hanging over my head. Eventually, the pressure got to be too much.
 If something is “hanging over your head,” it is constantly bothering you because you have to deal with it but you’re not sure how.

Meanwhile, I got my degree and I’m just a plain old wife and mother.
 A “degree” is a certificate from a university, such as a B.A. or Ph.D. In this case, “plain old” means typical or average.

My second wife divorced me and I work a dead-end job as a file clerk.
 A “dead-end job” is usually a low-paying job with no real future.

Sometimes I hang out with the guys, but most of the time I just stay at home by myself and read.
 “To hang out” with people is to pass time with them.

Between my husband and my kids, it’s impossible for me to curl up with a good book.
 “To curl up” is to get into the position of a baby in your mother’s womb, lying on your side with your knees close to your chest.

I hope that book don’t end up like so many of those novels, with somebody getting crushed to death by forces they can’t control.
 If a person is “crushed to death,” they are killed by being squeezed so tightly that they are overwhelmed by physical weight or pressure.

Can I give you a lift somewhere?
 A “lift” is the act of being transported in a car. One way of saying a ride.

Sure, Lester, the main character, croaks in the end, but at least he's old and dies a natural, dignified death.

"To croak" is a slangy word meaning to die. If a person's death is "dignified," it takes place without horrible pain or destruction of the body.

In my sleep, I'd feel a body next to me, like an amputee feels a phantom limb.

An "amputee" is a person whose arm or leg has been removed.

A "phantom limb" is the false feeling that an amputees sometimes has, that they can still feel the limb that is no longer there (A phantom is a ghost and a limb is an arm or leg).

Just keep on working and something is bound to turn up.

In this case, to "turn up" is to appear by surprise, or unexpectedly.

I put one aside for myself next to the register.

The "register" is the machine that adds up the price of goods that have been bought.

I'm going to hustle before the vibe in here gets any worse. You can just hang.

The words of a person who speaks only in slang!; "To hustle" is to work hard, or in this case, to move quickly. A "vibe" is a vibration, or a word that refers to the general emotional feeling between two or more people (In physics, a vibration is a wave that travels through the air). To "hang" is short for "hang out," or to pass time doing nothing in particular.

*Joyce enters Harvey's life and soon they are married,
and Toby reveals the pride of being a nerd.*

Greetings from the second smallest state in the union. An endless plastics and nylon plantation controlled by giant chemical corporations.

"Greetings" is another way of saying hello. Note that Delaware is both the second smallest state and the official home of many big corporations.

"Nylon" is the material used to make women's leg stockings.

To make matters more dismal, there are no decent comic book stores in my town, which is why my partner and I opened one ourselves.

Here, "matters" means the situation. "Dismal" is an excellent word for dark and depressing. "Decent" means satisfactory or OK, but not great.

Despite our steadily faltering business, my partner managed to sell the last copy of *American Splendor* number eight, out from under me.

If a business is "faltering," it is struggling just to survive. If a person "sells a book out from under you," they sell it without your permission and without you even knowing about it.

Man, she's got **good-looking** handwriting.

An excellent word for pretty, sexy or physically attractive, but note here it's used to describe hand-writing and not a person.

Anybody in the room ever done any creative writing of any sort?

"Creative writing" can refer to poetry, short stories, novels, etc. "Of any sort" is another way of saying of any type.

I'm a sometimes activist and I teach writing to prisoners.

An "activist" is a person who becomes politically involved in various causes, such as fighting against poverty, war or racism.

I try to help them build an interior life, and make art out of their monotonous, suffocating routine.

A person's "interior life" is Joyce's way of referring to a person's emotional or spiritual well-being. If a job is "monotonous," it is boring because it involves the same thing, over and over. A "suffocating routine" is a boring and even destructive way of living that involves doing the same thing over and over.

Despite the way my comics read, I got a lot of redeeming characteristics.

If a person has "redeeming characteristics," they have admirable or positive qualities, such as kindness or great intelligence.

Don't worry, I'm not gonna put no moves on you.

"To put the moves" on a person is to try and attract or seduce them into a romantic or sexual relationship.

The way Crumb draws you, you look like a hairy ape, with all those wavy, stinky lines, undulating off you body.

If a line is "wavy," it is curved, or rising and falling, like a wave. If a wave is "undulating," it is moving in a wavy, rising and falling motion.

I'll try to be anyone you want me to be. ∴ That's a dangerous offer. I'm a notorious reformer.

If a person is "notorious," they are famous in a negative way for having done something bad or having bad or irritating characteristics. A "reformer" is a person who tries to change people or improve society.

Look, before we get started with any of this, you might as well know right off the bat. I had a vasectomy.

To learn something "right off the bat" is to learn about it immediately or right away. A "vasectomy" is an operation that makes men infertile or unable to be a father, by cutting off the tube that carries sperm.

What difference does it make?

One way of asking "Why is this important?"

I support and identify with groups like PETA, but unfortunately, I'm a self-diagnosed anemic.

PETA is an animal rights organization (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). If a disease is "self-diagnosed," a person studies their own body and concludes they have it, without going to a doctor. If a person is "anemic," they are often weak or without vitality because they don't have enough red blood cells.

I have all these food allergies to vegetables which give me serious intestinal distress.

An "allergy" is a condition in which people get easily sick if they are exposed to certain foods, animals or other things. A person's "intestines" are the part of the stomach where food is stored and eliminated from the body. "Distress" is another word for pain and suffering.

I guess I have a lot of borderline health disorders that limit me politically when it comes to eating.

If a condition is "borderline," it is not completely that way, but almost (A person with borderline diabetes has a very weak case of diabetes, but it could get worse). A "disorder" is an abnormal physical or mental condition. This is Joyce's way of saying she supports animal rights, but her fragile health means she is dependent on the use of animals for food.

Everyone in my family has some sort of degenerative illness.

A "degenerative illness" is a disease that slowly but steadily weakens and then destroys the body over time.

I was going to clean up, but why should I give you any false notions?

A "notion" is another word for an idea or belief.

I'm sorry if my dating skills are a little rusty.

"Dating" is the act of going out with somebody you might be romantically interested in, perhaps to a movie or dinner. If a person's skills are "rusty," they are a bit weak or slow from not having practiced in a long time (If a nail is rusty, it has turned a red-orange color).

That last one turned out to be a real nasty bitch.

"Nasty" means mean or abusive, and a "bitch" is a strong insult word for a mean, abusive or extremely disagreeable woman.

Don't make people repeat themselves. That's annoying.

A good alternative word for irritating.

I think that yuppie food did me in.

A "yuppie" is a slang word for a young professional person who makes a lot of money. If food "does you in," it makes you sick.

Chamomile tea?...I thought you drink soda pop for breakfast.

"Chamomile" is a popular herb, and "soda pop" is a soft drink, like coke.

The girl at the food coop—She picked me out all kinds of herbal stuff.

A “food coop” is a market that is owned by the people who work there, or perhaps by the customers. An “herb” is a plant that can act as medicine.

I think we should skip the whole courtship thing and just get married.

“To skip” something is to pass by or over it, without notice or mention.

“Courtship” is the act of dating and getting to know each other romantically over a period of time.

I’m glad I talked you into coming up here.

“Glad” means happy or pleased, and “to talk a person into” doing something is to convince or persuade them to do it.

Any more time alone, I really might have lost it.

In this context, “to lose it” means to become very upset emotionally, or perhaps to have a nervous breakdown.

Can I have a fry?

A reference to a single French fry (French *fries* are almost always plural).

I’m not going to be eating dinner until late, and this has got to hold me over.

If food has to “hold you over” until a certain time, it has to help you survive until then, since you won’t be getting any more food before then.

What have you got? A church function?

A social event, such as a party or breakfast, held at, or by, a church.

The chick I’m marrying is from Washington, plus I got to help her move her stuff back here.

A dated but still used slang word for a young woman or teen girl.

What movie could possibly be worth driving 260 miles roundtrip for? ∴ It’s a new film called Revenge of the Nerds.

“Revenge” is the act of hurting a person after they have hurt you.

A “nerd” is an unfashionable, unattractive or socially awkward person, especially one who is devoted to school subjects such as math.

It’s about a group of nerd college students who are being picked on all the time by jocks.

“To pick on” a person is to constantly threaten, annoy or harass them. A “jock” is a very athletic and usually muscular young man.

So what you’re saying is that you identify with these nerds.

“To identify with” a person is to feel as if you’re just like them.

I consider myself a nerd and this movie has uplifted me.

“To uplift” a person is to make them feel good or inspired.

There's this one scene where a nerd grabs a microphone during a pep rally and announces that he is a nerd and proud of it....

A "microphone" is a device that makes one's voice louder when speaking to a crowd. A "pep rally" is a meeting of a large crowd to get them excited for a particular cause, such as a sports team or political candidate.

....and he stands up for the rights of other nerds. :: Right on!

"To stand up for" a person is to speak for them or in support of them.

"Right on" is a very old-fashioned way of expressing energetic approval.

You got this movie and I'm getting hitched. We both had a good month.

"To get hitched" is a slangy way of saying to get married

(To hitch one thing to another is to hook them together).

Is it a good flick? :: Depends on the girl; What kind of girl is your new bride?

A "flick" is a movie. A person's "bride" is the woman they're marrying.

I think I portray her fairly.

"To portray" a person is to describe, draw or present them in a certain way. "Fairly" means with fairness, justly, or in an unbiased manner

(Note that the noun form of the verb is a *portrayal*, with an 'al' at the end).

You always say "misery loves company."

A famous expression which means that people who are unhappy prefer to be with other unhappy or miserable people rather than be alone.

I'm such a gloomy guy. That's all.

If a person is "gloomy," they have a dark, sad and depressing view of life.

It's my perspective; Gloom and doom.

A person's "perspective" is the way they view things in general. If a person is "doomed," they're in danger of being killed or seriously hurt, so a gloom and doom perspective is an outlook filled with darkness and fear.

I guess I fooled you.

"To fool" a person is to trick or mislead them.

You missed the whole point of the movie!

The "point of" a movie or book refers to what exactly it is trying to say.

I think it's a story about hope and tolerance. :: Yes, it's about time the people who get picked on get to be all the heroes.

"Tolerance" is acceptance of people who are different from oneself or opinions that are different from one's own. To be "picked on" is to be harassed or even threatened by others, usually who are stronger.

They live with their parents in a big house in the suburbs.

The outer part of a city, often filled with middle class houses.

Use your inner voice, please.

A Buddhist or perhaps hippie's way of referring to what you really feel inside.

They're not 28 year old file clerks who live with their grandmother in an ethnic ghetto.

An "ethnic ghetto" is usually a poor part of a city where most people are of the same background, such as African-Americans or Irish-Americans.

They didn't get their computers the way you did, by trading in a bunch of box tops and \$49.95 at a supermarket.

A "box top" is literally the top of a box of food that is sometimes shown as proof of having bought that food, in order to get a reward or prize.

It's Hollywood bullshit, Toby!

This is Harvey's way of saying real life is very different from what happens in the movies.

I was transported to another time in my life.

To be "transported" somewhere is to be physically taken there, though here it means to be powerfully reminded of a different time in one's life.

It's the same as the "I have a Dream" speech.

A very famous speech by Martin Luther King Jr., made in 1963, in which he calls out for racial equality and justice.

Maybe I was being so harsh on Toby on account of my own problems.

"Harsh" is a strong adjective meaning overly critical or disagreeable.

"On account of" is another way of saying "because of..."

I wasn't even married a month and my old lady was already showing signs of trouble.

A ridiculous way of referring to one's wife. Don't use it!

Granted, I tend to get married fast because

I'll take any woman that will have me.

"Granted" is an interesting way of saying "I admit that..." If a person "tends to" do something, they generally do it a lot over time. In this case, "to have" a person means to accept them as a husband or life partner.

By this time, I really met my match.

If a person "meets their match," they have met somebody who will be a real challenge for them, or equal to them in some area, such as a particular skill or talent like baseball or painting.

I ain't getting rid of my 78s.

"To get rid of" something is to eliminate it, throw it away, or in this case, to sell it (A '78' is a type of musical record that was made until the 1960s).

I don't want to hear that psycho-babble crap!

A fun expression that refers to words that are popular in modern psychology but don't make any sense, or sound ridiculous to normal people who haven't studied it.

You are the poster child for DSM III.

A "poster child for" a disease is someone who is completely associated or linked with that illness by the general public. The "DSM III" is a famous book for psychologists on the various mental diseases.

I'll have you know that I came from a very dysfunctional family, Harvey. I can spot a personality disorder miles away.

A "dysfunctional family" is one that can not function normally, usually because so many of the members within it have such bad or unhealthy relationships with each other. "To spot" a problem is to see it or notice it. A "personality disorder" is another way of referring to a psychological problem, such as extreme shyness or uncontrolled anger.

Borderline autistic.

"Autism" is a psychological state in which people have trouble forming normal relationships or communicating with others, and if a person is "borderline autistic," they have a weak or subtle form of this condition.

Paranoid personality disorder.

If a person is "paranoid," they are convinced the world in general, or other people in particular, are trying to always hurt or kill them.

Polymorphously perverse.

An expression invented by the psychologist Sigmund Freud to refer to uncontrolled sexual desire (If a person is *perverted*, or a *pervert*, they are considered sexually sick by most of society).

Delusions of grandeur.

A psychological term for a person who believes that they are much greater or more important than they really are ("Delusions" are misperceptions, and "grandeur" refers to greatness).

God only knows how I'll feel when I see this movie.

One possible way of saying "nobody knows..."

Variety called me "The Blue Collar Mark Twain," and Doubleday was interested in publishing an anthology of *American Splendor*.

Variety is a well known magazine for the film industry. A "blue collar" person usually works doing physical labor, or perhaps doing boring work in an office. Mark Twain was a great and funny 19th century American writer. *Doubleday* is a big book publisher and an "anthology" is a collection of stories that is put together in one book.

I've got to shell out 30 **bucks** for a command.

"To shell out" money is to spend it. Very slangy.

A "buck" is a very common way of saying a dollar.

[It] figures. That lucky yuppie is going to get to the bus in time.

"It figures" is an interesting way of expressing the opinion that what just happened is wrong, but not unexpected. A "yuppie" is a young professional who makes a lot of money.

Goddamn yuppies get everything.

A crude filler term that's used to express emotion such as anger.

I said vasectomies are reversible.

If an operation is "reversible," the body could be put back the way it was before (So in this case, a man would still be able to father a child).

I came clean about my vasectomy the first time I set eyes on you.

"To come clean" about something is to be totally honest about it.

I got a review due tomorrow.

A "review" of a film, play or record is a piece of writing in which a person explains why they did or did not like it.

It happens to be Saturday, you selfish son of a bitch.

"It happens to be" is used as a stylistic way of emphasizing what is being said. "Son of a bitch" is a vulgar insult word for a mean or abusive person.

It's your whole screwed up life; The least you can do is allow me to live here in my own way.

If something is "screwed up," it isn't working well, and if a person's entire life is screwed up, they are probably very unhappy how things are going.

Joyce diagnosed herself as clinically depressed.

"To diagnose" a medical condition is to determine what it is. "Clinical depression" is a psychological term for a person who is so sad or depressed that they can't function normally in life.

I didn't know what the hell she is going through, but it was sure taking its toll on me.

If a person is "going through" something difficult, they are experiencing it over time. If a situation "takes its toll on" somebody, it makes them weak or even sick because it is so tiring or harmful.

*Harvey becomes a star on the Letterman show,
but he still has to keep his job as a file clerk.*

I'm a producer with Late Night with David Letterman.
The name of Letterman's talk show in the
1980s, which was broadcast around midnight.

I'd like to talk to you about you coming on the show to plug your comics.
"To plug" a book is a colloquial way of saying to talk about it in
public so that it will become better known and sell more copies.

Joyce finally got off the futon.
A type of couch with a metal frame that can also function as a bed.

Come on, who the hell cares?! Jesus Christ!
"Who the hell cares?" is one way of saying "nobody cares!" Remember
that "Jesus Christ" is used to express emotion such as frustration or anger,
by both religious and non-religious people of all ages.

What the hell are you doing?! :: Merchandizing.
As a verb, "to merchandise" means to promote or get
publicity for the products and goods you are trying to sell.

Late Night Thrill Cam. [written]
If something is "a thrill," it is very exciting and unusual, and a "cam" is a
small movie camera, which is popular today for making home movies.

You got something to eat, because my stomach is growling.
If your stomach is "growling," it is making a deep low
noise, like a lion makes when it opens its mouth wide.

What do you mean calling me 'curious'?
In this context, "curious" means a bit strange, odd or different than most.

I meant 'curious' in a fascinating way. A man who
has the presence of one who is quite fascinating.
A person's "presence" is the way they behave or seem around others.
This is Letterman's way of trying to be diplomatic or polite to Harvey, by
telling him he meant to say Harvey was more interesting than strange.

I thought I might be nursing a viper in my bosom.
"To nurse" is to breast feed milk, a "viper" is a snake or perhaps a bad or
evil person, and a woman's "bosom" are her breasts, though some people
use it poetically to refer to a person's chest (male or female).

You're a little defensive about this. :: Yeah,
I am. I'm waiting for those Cleveland jokes.
To be "defensive" about something is to be overly sensitive
about it, or easily hurt by people's comments about it.

Settle down, Harvey, settle down.
An alternative way of telling a person to calm down or be quiet.

You could probably get by on what you make selling your work.

“To get by on” a certain amount of money is to be able to survive and live on it.

People are after you to write other things. :: What people? Where the hell do you get this stuff?

If a person is “after you to do something,” they are trying to convince you to do it. The last sentence is a slangy way of saying “You do not know what you are talking about!”

I’m no show-biz phony! I’m telling the truth!

“Show-biz” is a common abbreviation for show business, which refers to the movie and music industries. A “phony” is a person who acts in a way that is not truly what they are like, or claims to be things that are not true.

At least he’s keeping up with Letterman. :: Pandering is more like it.

“To keep up with” a person is to stay equal to them in some way, in this case by being as funny and pleasing to the audience. “To pander” to a person is to do and say things that you know will please them.

I’m trying to get some news. There’s a big story about to break about the US selling arms to Iran and the Contras.

If a news story is about “to break,” it is about to become known to the general public. “Arms” is another word for weapons, such as guns and missiles (The Contras were rebels who fought in Nicaragua in the 1980s).

Am I giving you a hard time?

“To give someone a hard time” is to strongly criticize them, or make their life difficult.

What do these go for? :: 34 bucks.

If a book “goes for” 34 dollars, that’s how much it costs.

Such brilliant repartee.

A “repartee” (pronounced “re-par-tay”) is a French word used in English to mean a clever response to something that was just said.

What do you think? :: Megalomaniac.

A “megalomaniac” is a person who thinks they are extremely important and great and that all the world spins around them.

Letterman was an OK guy; Let him take potshots at me.

“To take potshots” at somebody is to make a series of perhaps funny but critical or harsh remarks about them.

You look like every police artist sketch I have ever seen.

A “police artist sketch” is a drawing of a criminal that is made from the descriptions of people who saw the person commit the crime.

Funny thing is, something about me and Letterman clicked for the viewers.

If a person “clicks” with an audience, they like or feel comfortable with them (To click is to also make the sound of a switch turning on and off).

It’s slow going; I still have the same job.

If a situation is “slow going,” it is evolving or changing very slowly.

But see Harvey, you’re the embodiment of the American dream.

If a person is the “embodiment of” something, they are the very symbol of it, or their lives have come to be associated with it in the public mind.

“The American dream” is the idea that any American can become rich, or at least own a home and be comfortably middle class, if they work hard.

As a result of my appearance on Letterman, my buddy

Toby Randolff landed a gig extolling the virtues of MTV.

A “buddy” is a friend, and to “land a gig” is to get a good or fun job. “To extol the virtues” of something means to talk very positively about its good qualities (A virtue can be anything that is considered of high moral or ethical standards). MTV is a TV station which plays music videos.

Yo! Watch where you’re going. :: All right, you fucking yuppie freak.

“Yo” is a Spanish word, used in English to mean pay attention. “Watch where you’re going” is what you can say to a person who has just accidentally run into you. Note that “fucking” can be used as a vulgar adverb, and a “freak” is any very strange or bizarre person.

Who the fuck is this on my set?

“The fuck” is added to Wh questions to express emotion such as anger, but note that this is much more vulgar than “the hell”! The “set” of a TV show or movie is where it is filmed.

This is my new do for the MTV generation.

“Do” can be short for “hairdo,” which is a person’s hair style.

Toby’s a genuine nerd and he doesn’t care if you have a problem with that.

“Genuine” is a good word for true, real or authentic. A “nerd” is an unfashionable, unattractive or socially awkward person, especially one who is devoted to school subjects such as math and science. “To have a problem with” something is to not like it.

As you know, many hip people, including a lot of college students, are going to be heading for spring break.

If a person is “hip,” they are considered fashionable, socially talented, or more colloquially, cool, by their friends and others. “Spring break” refers to the one week stopping of school when many college students go to places like Florida beaches to have lots of parties and drink lots of beer.

That day, I had an epiphany. It seemed like real salt-of-the-earth people like Toby and me were being co-opted by these huge corporations.

An “epiphany” is a sudden realization or important idea. People who are “salt-of-the-earth” are generally poor and struggle to survive. If a person has been “co-opted by” big companies, they have had their art, which may have been very politically radical or critical, repackaged and sold by those companies in such a way that the art just becomes part of the system that it had been criticizing.

We were being held up and ridiculed as losers in the system.

If a person is “held up and ridiculed,” they are made fun of in front of lots of other people, perhaps because of things they say or believe.

This is Toby Randall, genuine Spring Break party nerd, signing off.

If a person “signs off,” they are saying goodbye to the audience.

That’s so excellent. You and stupid pet tricks are a riot.

“Stupid pet tricks” was a popular part of the Letterman show in which Dave got cats, dogs and other animals to do ridiculous things. In this context, if a person is “a riot,” they are extremely funny.

Later, Harvey Pekar. :: What an asshole.

“Later” is a way of saying goodbye. “Asshole” is a very crude but common insult word.

I don’t give a damn about the Letterman show.

To “not give a damn” about something is to not care about it.

You know I only go on the show for the extra bread.

“Bread” is a very old-fashioned word for money.

Maybe if you got your lazy ass up and got yourself a job, I could do something that matters, too!

This is Harvey’s angry way of telling Joyce he wants her to make some money so that he can do the artistic things that he wants to do.

Sure I was happy for her, but I was still upset for me.

If a person is “upset,” they are worried, angry or agitated.

Harvey faces cancer, and Joyce concludes that the best way to deal with it is to turn it into a comic book.

It was later that night when I first found the lump.

A small piece of bodily tissue, which is often round and feels abnormal (A lump can be a sign of cancer).

I was determined to put it out of my mind
until Joyce got back. Easier said than done.

To put something “out of your mind” is to not think about it. “Easier said than done” is a widely used expression which means that it is sometimes easier to say you’re going to do something than it is to actually do it.

How often do we have to go through the same shit?

“How often do we have to talk about the same disagreeable subject?”

Just give me the fucking charts!

In a medical context, “charts” refer to the print out or drawings of a person’s bodily functions, such as their blood pressure or heart rate.

Are you all set?

In this context, to be “set” means to be ready. Very common.

I was starting to lose it. Between the lump, the loneliness,
I felt like everything was starting to close in on me.

“To lose it” means to become very emotionally upset or overwhelmed, perhaps even to the point of a nervous breakdown. If things start to “close in on” a person, they start to make him feel trapped or caged.

And with Joyce over there saving the world,
I never felt more like a sell-out hack in my life.

If an artist is a “sell out,” they decide to do work that is popular and sells well, even though they’d prefer to be doing something closer to the type of art they really believe in. A “hack” is a very negative word for an artist who works only to make money, and not for artistic reasons.

You know folks, if it really is true that misery loves company,
our next guess must always have a full house of people.

“Folks” is another word for parents, or more generally, people.

“Misery loves company” means very unhappy people like to be with other people who are miserable and unhappy.

OK asshole, you’re gonna pay for that one.

This is Harvey’s vulgar way of saying that Dave will be hurt or punished for treating people so badly on his show.

Harvey, this is not the forum. This is not Meet the Press.

A “forum” is a place where views of public issues are discussed. “Meet the Press” is a famous TV talk show where politicians are interviewed.

You just want to talk about simple-minded bullshit,

David, but I ain’t co-opted like you. I have things to say.

“Simple-minded bullshit” is a crude way of referring to subjects that are silly and unimportant. If a person has been “co-opted,” they have been paid to create art that is conservative and doesn’t challenge the most powerful people in society.

For instance, I want to talk to you about a conflict of interest situation. You know, like GE owning this network, NBC.

A "conflict of interest" is a situation where a person or company is expected to act in a way that could be against their own interests or desires. GE is the General Electric Company, and NBC is the National Broadcasting Corporation, which is a big TV network. In the 1980s, GE bought NBC.

Can we get the singing Schizu back here?

A funny looking type of small dog.

You think NBC news is gonna cover what they do fairly?

Note that "going to"---> "gonna" in rapid speech. If the press "covers" a story, they investigate and report on it.

Just shut up man, don't push me. I'm doing my own thing.

"To do your own thing" is a slangy way of saying that you are doing exactly what you want to, even if other disapprove of it.

It's not what you're saying Harvey. It's about your choice of venue.

A venue is another word for forum, or a place where meetings for the discussion of public issues is discussed (such as a TV talk show).

Joe, come check this out.

To "check out" a TV show is to take a look at it or watch it.

You sulk and complain and promote your comic book, and you really haven't been very appreciative.

"To sulk" is to stay quiet while angry and upset, like a bitter young child.

"To promote" a book is to try and get publicity for it so it will sell more.

I've always been a file clerk, and it's no thanks to you or your goddamn pathetic audience, man.

A very negative adjective which means pitiful, or so bad, weak, ridiculous, etc. that people show a mix of sympathy and contempt.

And the show winds up in chaos. [written]

If a show "winds up," it finishes. "Chaos" is an excellent word for extreme disorder, anarchy and perhaps uncontrolled violence.

If you go away again, I'm going to lose it. :: Harvey, this is not up for discussion.

Here, "to lose it" is to become extremely upset or even have a nervous breakdown. If something is "not up for discussion," it can no longer be discussed or debated.

Does tumor mean the same as cancer? :: We know the growth's malignant.

A "tumor" is a lump or growth in the body. If it is "malignant" it is cancerous, if it is *benign*, it is not dangerous.

What we don't know is how far it may have spread. :: Once we have the results, we can make more informed decisions about treatment.

If cancer "spreads," it grows outward from one part of the body to another. "Treatment" refers to the actions that are taken to stop or even cure a person who is suffering from a disease.

My cousin Norman died of lymphoma. He was a brilliant oncologist.

"Lymphoma" is a type of very dangerous cancer that spreads throughout the body. An "oncologist" is a doctor who treats cancer patients.

Look at me and focus!; We're going to get through this.

"To focus" is to concentrate on one particular thing.

"To get through" a difficult period is to survive it.

I understand illness! I know how to handle these things!

"Illness" is another word for disease. "To handle" a difficult situation is to deal with it, or learn to effectively fight against it.

You'll document every detail. And that way you'll remove yourself from the experience until it's over.

"To document" an experience is to write down everything about it.

A "detail" is a small part of a whole, or generally, any fact, big or small.

He's going to work until next week, when he starts chemo.

Short for "chemotherapy," which is a very serious way to treat cancer, in which radiation is used on the body in hopes of killing the cancer cells.

Once he's stuck here, I know he'll take over.

If a person is "stuck" in a place, they can't physically leave. "To take over" a house is to become the dominant and most powerful person within it.

Fucking idiot!

A common and excellent word for a stupid person, moron or jerk.

Here's some of the ideas we've been batting around.

"To bat around" an idea is to talk about it from different points of view.

There's too many words in these frames.

In a comic strip, a "frame" is one square in the series of drawings.

My ex-wife is supposed to take her, but I

don't have much faith in her showing up.

"To show up" is a very common phrasal verb meaning to arrive.

Am I a guy who writes about himself in a comic book, or am I just a character in that book?

An interesting question by Harvey on the meaning of his life.

If I die, will that character keep going, or will he just **fade away**?
 If a person “fades away,” they slowly become less and less visible until they are no longer around and nobody sees them.

This filled me with curiosity; How can there be three people with such an unusual name in the world, let alone in one city?
 “Let alone” is an interesting expression that emphasizes the fact that what is being discussed is even more specific than the general statement.

She pointed out an obituary notice in the newspaper for a man named Harvey Pekar.
 An “obituary notice” is an official announcement of the death of a person, which usually has a brief biography and list of surviving family members.

Somehow I made it through the treatment and the doctors are optimistic.
 “To make it through” medical treatment is to survive it.

We published the thing as a graphic novel, our first collection, and ended up with rave reviews.
 A “graphic” novel is a book that is told with drawings or pictures. A “rave review” of a book is a very enthusiastic and positive essay or critique.

We even won a couple national book awards. **Go figure**.
 A funny little expression which basically means “unexpected, but true.”

Harvey and Joyce survive his disease and grow as a real family, but life, as always, remains a struggle.

That was the doctor. He says it’s all clear.
 If a condition is “all clear,” there is no longer a threat or problem, which in this case means Harvey’s cancer appears to be completely gone.

The **weirdest** thing that came out of my illness was Danielle.
 “Weird” is an excellent adjective that means strange or bizarre, though in this case it also seems to mean totally unexpected.

With her real mother running around God knows where and seeing how well Joyce and Danielle got on, Fred decided she’d have a better life with us.
 “God knows where” is a way of saying nobody knows where. If two people “get on,” they get along well (this is more British than American).

I thought, what the hell, she’s a good kid. So we ended up taking her and raising her as our own.
 In this context, “what the hell” is a way of expressing acceptance of the situation. “To raise” a child is to take care of them until they are an adult.

I know I'm not as interesting as The Little Mermaid and all that magical crap.
A well known children's story (A "mermaid" is usually a very pretty young woman with the body of a fish).

No Harvey, it's just when you hold my hand, you squeeze it too hard.
"To squeeze" something is to press on it tightly from opposite sides.

Joyce is right; You are obsessive-compulsive.
A person who has an uncontrollable need to do something, over and over again (such as taking a bath ten times a day).

The kid's got A.D.D. and is a real handful.
A.D.D. stands for "attention deficit disorder," which is a psychological condition that became much discussed in the 1990s, in which children are unable to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes. If a child is "a real handful," it takes a lot of time and energy to take care of them since they're so often getting into trouble.

My life is total chaos.
An excellent word for total disorder and lack of organization.

The golden years, right?
An expression that refers to the years after a person retires (i.e....old age!).

Between my pension and the chunk of change I get for this film, I should be able to swing something.
A "pension" is the monthly amount of money that an employee receives from their employer after they retire. A "chunk of change" is Harvey's way of referring to a relatively large amount of money (A "chunk" is a thick piece or lump). Here, "to swing something" is a slangy way of saying to do or accomplish something interesting.

Sure, I'll lose the war eventually, but the goal is to win a few skirmishes along the way, right?
A "skirmish" is a small gun fight or battle in a bigger war.

For he's a jolly good fellow which nobody can deny! [song]
A "jolly good fellow" is very old English for a good guy.
"To deny" something is to claim it isn't true.

American Splendor

Possible Topics for ESL Class Discussion

1. Do you ever read comic books? Are they popular in your culture?
2. Could somebody like Harvey ever be really happy?
3. Even if Harvey were rich, would he still need his job for the routine and stability it brings him, as he says in the movie?
4. Is it true that ordinary life is pretty complex stuff?
Is life a constant struggle for most people? Is it for you?
5. Do you think Harvey and Joyce are a good couple?
6. Did you like this movie? Why or why not?

American Splendor

Possible Topics for ESL Class Discussion

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.