



PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM BARNES

Robert Inman's Latest Success

The journalist, novelist, screenwriter, and playwright continues to give audiences new stories to cherish.



above: Ever modest, Robert Inman (on the stool at right) quickly credits others for his successes. "It may be 'my' script, but it's 'our' play," says Robert, who

He's compared notes with fellow anchorman Walter Cronkite and covered the opening of Russia to the United States. He's earned countless awards and kudos for his four novels and one nonfiction book. A screenwriter, he's hobnobbed on sets with actors James Woods and Neil Patrick Harris. Now, with the production of his musical *Crossroads*, he's blowing away audiences as a playwright. Yet Robert Inman remains a modest small-town boy, genuinely excited about his next story—whatever format that tale might take.

Robert, or Bob as he is better known, remembers exactly what prompted him to write *Crossroads*. "I heard about a train wreck near Salisbury, North Carolina, in the early part of the last century involving Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show," he explains. His storytelling imagination was captured by "the thought of this

quiet, little backwater community where nothing much goes on." The story of *Crossroads* revolves around an offstage train wreck and the on-stage chaos it causes the small town. A stranger from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show prompts folks to dust off long-buried dreams.

A Little Help From Friends

The "play with music" debuted this summer at the Blowing Rock Stage Company. Directed by Kenneth Kay, Blowing Rock's producing artistic director, the cast consists of six actors and four musicians, an unprecedented large group for the small professional theater.

During the creation of *Crossroads*, Kenneth helped Bob revise the play and then staged the unproven work. Ed Pilkington, a retired professor of theater at Appalachian State University (ASU), and William Harbison,

took to heart suggestions from the cast, staff, and other trusted theater veterans. "I hope I've earned whatever has happened to me, but I've been real lucky," he continues. "I am way, way ahead of the law of averages."

the dean of ASU's School of Music, also advised Bob. The run of 26 performances from June 12 to July 6 smashed the theater company's 18-year box office record, with the last two weeks completely selling out.

One Journalist's Beginnings

As a precocious fifth grader in his hometown of Elba, Alabama, Bob walked into the local newspaper office and asked for a job. The cigar-smoking editor turned him down but told the neophyte to come back in a couple of years. Undaunted, young Bob returned as a seventh grader and landed his first journalism job, setting

type, and then writing about local events. "When I opened the paper and saw my byline over this dinky little story, it was like I had written a Pulitzer Prize winner," he says.

In high school, Bob moved from newspaper reporter to radio disc jockey. After earning a bachelor's degree in radio and TV from the University of Alabama, he accepted a job at a TV station in Montgomery. In that city, he met Paulette Strong.

"Sparks struck," Bob says. "We had our first date on the Saturday night after Thanksgiving, we got engaged on Groundhog Day, and we

married on April 15," he rattles off confidently. Together for 36 years, Bob says, "We're very much partners." The couple has two adult daughters, Larkin and Lee.

Telling Tales

"I had always thought of journalism as telling stories," Bob says. "They were true stories about real people, but it was still telling stories."

In 1970 the family moved to North Carolina, and Bob became an anchor at Charlotte station WBTB. "We just fell in love with this state. It has so much going for it," he says, citing

the state's progressive economic, social, and educational positions. "You've got the mountains and the seashore and everything in between. It was a great place to raise our kids."

When he got "an itch" to write a novel, the family returned to the University of Alabama long enough for Bob to obtain an M.F.A. They came back to Charlotte where Bob

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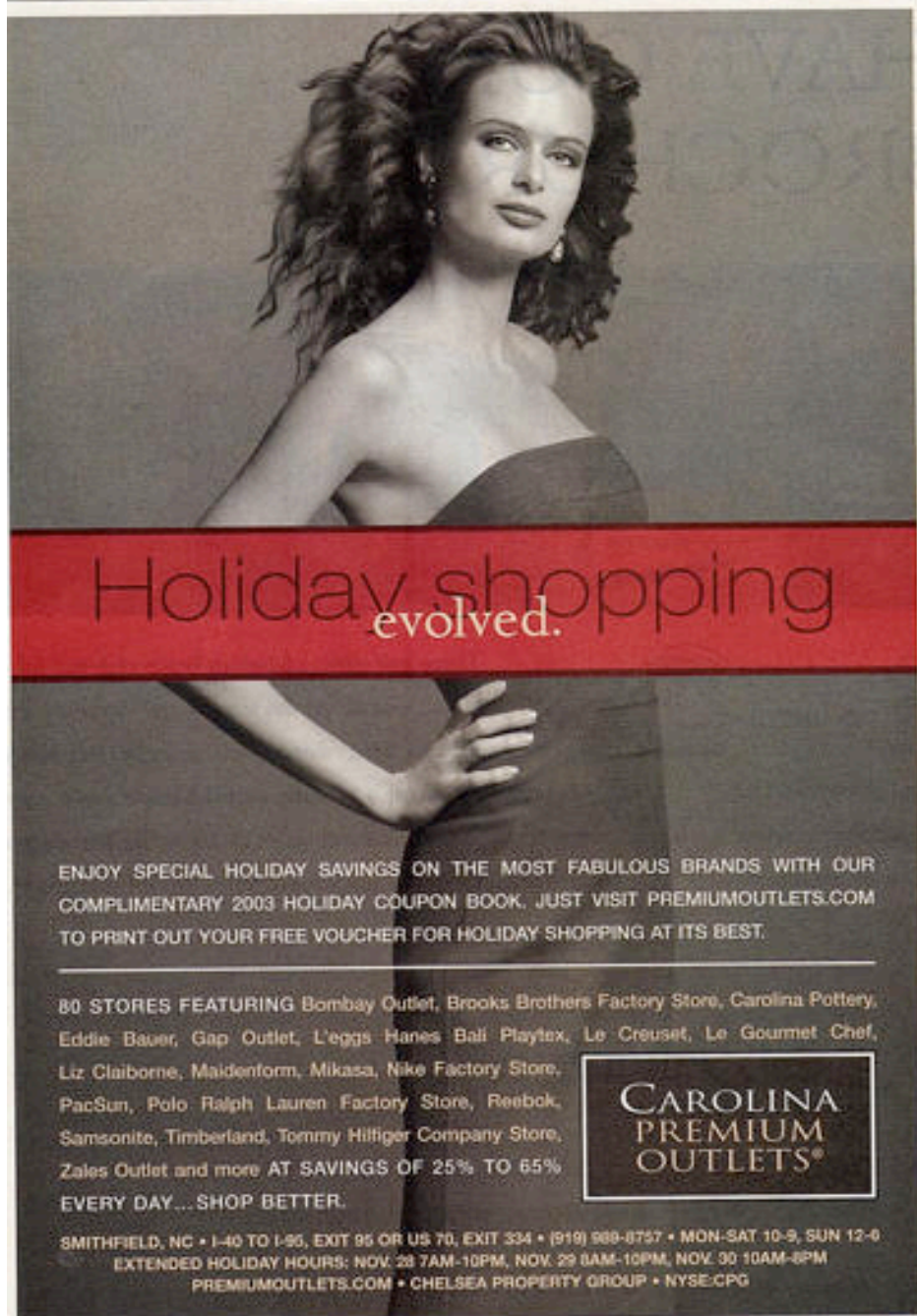
Bob Inman

resumed his nighttime anchor job at the same TV station. Each day, before his 3 p.m.-to-midnight shift, he'd work on his novels, producing *Home Fires Burning* in 1987 and *Old Dogs and Children* in 1995. He retired from the TV station in 1996 to devote all his time to writing. *Dairy Queen Days* came out a year later, and his most recent novel, *Captain Saturday*, was released in 2002. Little, Brown and Company published all of the novels, and each book remains in print. Bob also penned 20 screenplays, 6 of them produced for television.

"I don't care if you write a screenplay or an article or a novel or a play," says the man who has done it all, "it's all storytelling. And all stories are about people."

Then he laughs and adds, "My secret ambition is to be a Wal-Mart greeter." He jokes, "I'd say, 'Welcome to Wal-Mart. Step over here, and let me find out who you are.'" He smiles and says, "Boy! I'd have *more* stories." NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

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