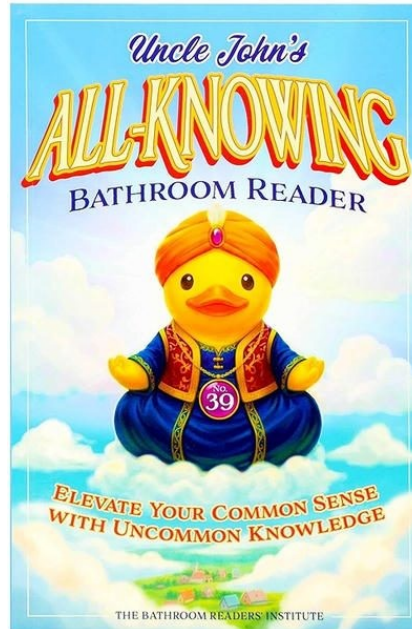


EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

The Internet Before the Internet

Brian Boone — the third Uncle John — on 39 years of bathroom lore, a Hail Mary in the mailroom, and why horses (and hit-by-pitches) still make the best reading on the throne.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Uncle John's All-Knowing Bathroom Reader — the 39th annual edition from the Bathroom Readers' Institute. Cover art courtesy Portable Press / Simon & Schuster.

Brian Boone still answers to Uncle John. He says it like an honorific, which is exactly what it is. Thirty-eight volumes after the original Uncle John — John Javna — got stranded in a friend's bathroom with nothing to read, the third man to wear the title is sitting with Paul Salfen, talking about a brand-new baby: *Uncle John's All-Knowing Bathroom Reader*, the 39th annual from the Bathroom Readers' Institute.

"It's the best gig in the world," Boone says, and he means it. "I love my job. It's a wonderful place to get to work and write and share and explore and discover." The book is already making the rounds in Salfen's family. That is the point. Company lore holds that Javna, stuck with nothing on the tank in 1988, decided other people must have the same problem. So he built a book with something for everybody — five minutes, ten minutes, any topic, any length. Boone is still making those books. They are bigger and more varied than ever.

It's the internet before the internet. It's a giant magazine.

— BRIAN BOONE

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Salfen wanted the origin, and Boone gave it without varnish. “Company lore says that our original Uncle John, John Javna, was stuck in the bathroom at a friend’s house one time, and there’s nothing there to read. And he said, other people must have this problem, so he set out to create a book that had something for everybody, no matter who was in the bathroom.” That was 1988. “Here we are. I’m the third Uncle John, and we’re still making these books.”

Where do the facts come from now that the internet exists? Boone does not pretend the web is irrelevant. He also does not pretend it replaced the work. The Institute still keeps a research library — books, magazines, folders of clippings. People send things. The team hunts primary sources when they have to. Then there is the other engine: Boone’s day. “Everything has a story, right? So I’ll just see something, I’m like, oh, I wonder what the origin of that is, or I’ll hear something on the radio, or I’ll hear a song, and I’m like, that’s a weird song, I wonder what the story behind that is. It’s just a constant flux of information.”

Salfen called it a curious mind. Boone did not dress it up. “I try to be curious. I love to be curious, and I love to seek it out, and the thrill of discovery is palpable and real, and then to get to share that with others is another jolt.”

Fans try to get in on the jolt. The operation stays mostly in-house, but the following is real and the mailbox is not empty. “People send us articles all the time, and we have a pretty robust fan following and an online presence, so we interact with those people a lot, and they’re always good for sending us new stuff.”

THE SUBLIME AND THE RIDICULOUS

Asked for favorites in the new book, Boone refused to pick a lane. He loves the big stories and the small ones in the same breath. The big one this year is an epic, multi-part argument that horses are the engine of civilization. He is not, by his own admission, a horse person. The piece converted him anyway.

“We wouldn’t be — humanity wouldn’t be what it is without horses,” he says. Horses were around for something like 100,000 years before people figured out how to domesticate them. After that came the spoked wheel, the plow, better agriculture, healthier populations, city-states, and then the roads between those city-states, carrying people and goods and ideas and religion. “Everything is because of horses.”

Then, without changing temperature, he drops into baseball. Hall of Famer Craig Biggio holds the record for being hit by pitches: 285 times in a career. “I just love those two extremes of the sublime and the ridiculous.”

That swing is the house style of the series. *All-Knowing* also promises the greatest movies that never got made, the chimp that saved TV news, remarkable undersea discoveries, hair metal’s greatest hits, the steel-house craze of the 1940s, the light-bulb cartel, and the U.S. states that almost happened — plus the recurring furniture readers come back for: Dumb Crooks, Oops!, Ironic Isn’t It, Robots in the News, Toilet Tech, Weird Canada, Myth-Conceptions, Forgotten Fads, You’re My Inspiration, Phrase Origins, Amazing Luck, and Odd Deaths. Quizzes. Jokes.

Lists. Goofy headlines. Short facts riding the bottom of every page. More than 350 pages. Twenty-five-plus categories. Portable Press put it on sale September 15, 2026.

The reaction, Boone says, is hunger on a calendar. “Our fans are really great, and they look forward to these, and I think we set them up to where a book should last you about one year, so around this time each year, people start to get hungry for the new stuff.”

THE HAIL MARY IN THE MAILROOM

Salfen’s co-host on the larger show is Drew Pearson — Dallas Cowboys, Hail Mary, Hall of Fame. The question that follows is the one Salfen asks when the tape is rolling and the guest has already proven they will tell the truth: What was the moment you just had to go for it?

Boone did not reach for a podium speech. He reached for the job posting.

“When I first got this job, I was out of college for a while, and I couldn’t find any writing jobs, and I was just like, do I... should I apply for this job? It was an editorial position. I was not qualified for it. So I’m just like, forget it, I’m gonna apply for this job. I’ve been reading these bathroom readers since I was 10 years old. Obsessed with trivia, always wanted to go on Jeopardy, always wanted to write for the bathroom reader, and this job came up, so I’m just gonna go for it.”

They interviewed him. They did not hire him for the job he wanted. They put him in the mailroom. “Back then, we used to package up books and envelopes, and mail them out from our little train master’s house in Ashland, Oregon.” He did not go away. “I was just like, hey, can I write something? Can I write something? Can I write something? And they’re like, fine, you can write something, and then they just never got rid of me.”

My life is full of Hail Mary passes. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

— BRIAN BOONE

He still cold-calls the work he grew up reading. “I’ll write for whoever I have a lot of interest, and I like to write for a lot of different stuff, and sometimes they say yes. Often they say yes. So, go for it.”

He even made it onto *Jeopardy!* He did not win. He is cheerful about it. “I ran the board, and then I blew it all on the Daily Double.” Salfen loved that. Boone shrugged. “What’re you gonna do?”

PATIENCE, AND VOLUME 41

Salfen asked about mindset — how you stay on the path when the project is a 350-page book that never really ends. Boone’s answer is almost anti-hustle. The work is a pleasure and a delight, and it is methodical. Gather. Assemble. Have patience with yourself. It takes about a year. Step by step, a book appears. It is a team sport. People lean on each other and pass stories across the table: this one is more suited to you; you take it.

Advice for anyone who wants a version of this life is even shorter. “Just be curious. Just be curious, write about it, write with enthusiasm and curiosity. Curiosity and enthusiasm in all things will get you anywhere you need to go.”

Volume 40 is already written and in edit. Boone is gathering for 41. Salfen wondered, half joking, whether they will ever run out. Boone has heard the question.

As long as human beings keep being stupid and brilliant at the same time, we will always have stuff to write about.

— BRIAN BOONE

The books, he says, are a mixture of grand human achievement and human frailty and error. Other people create. Other people mess up. That is an infinite beat. “If you can make people across the world laugh in the bathroom,” Salfen told him, “then you’re doing pretty good.” Boone allowed it. “It’s a great gig.”

He will keep answering to Uncle John. He is already thinking about next year. The rest of us can start the 39th volume now, and — if the Institute has calibrated the hunger correctly — finish it just in time to want number 40.

FIND BRIAN BOONE

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Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.