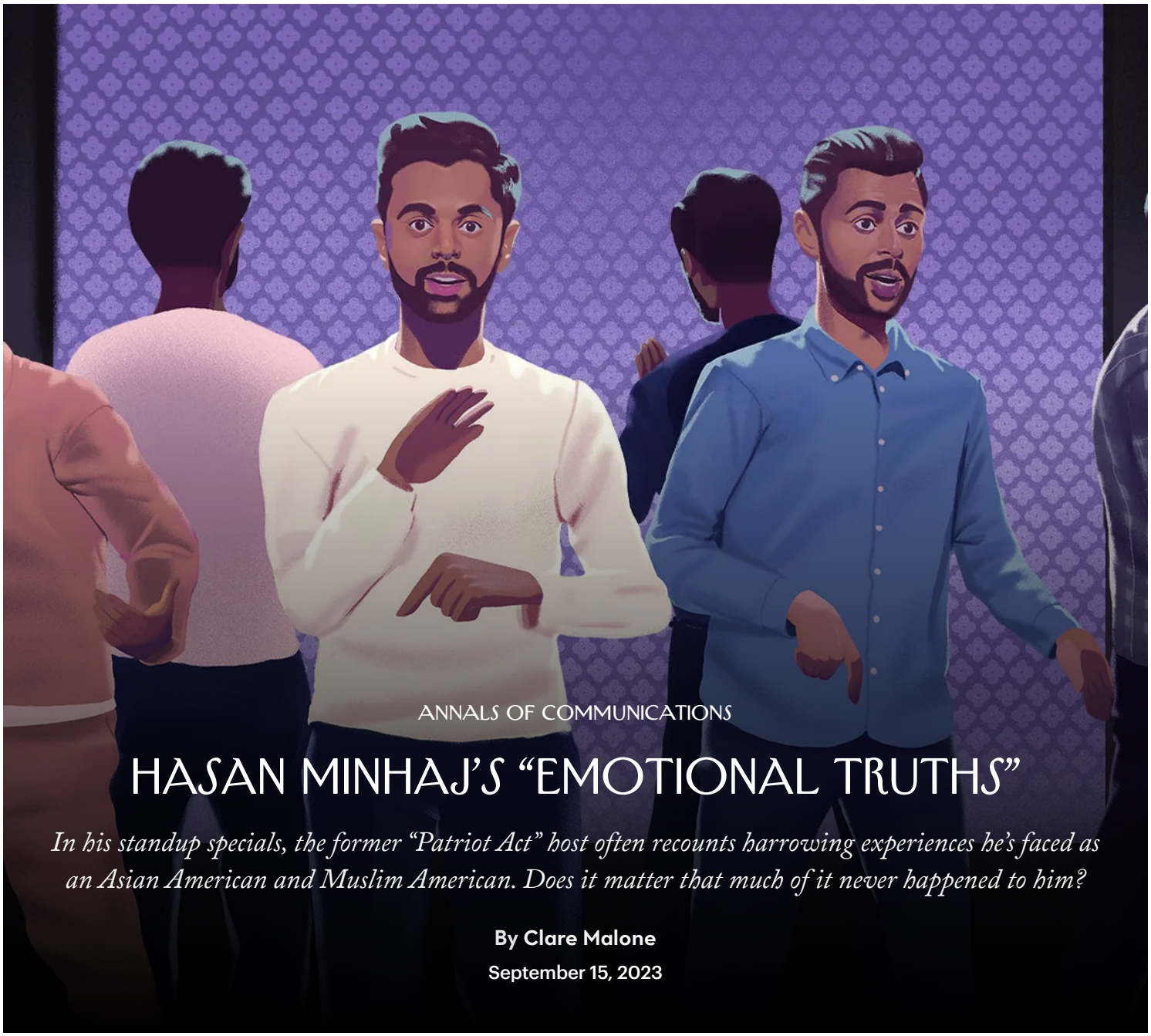

ANNALS OF COMMUNICATIONS

HASAN MINHAJ'S "EMOTIONAL TRUTHS"

In his standup specials, the former "Patriot Act" host often recounts harrowing experiences he's faced as an Asian American and Muslim American. Does it matter that much of it never happened to him?

By Clare Malone

September 15, 2023

Illustration by Richard Chance

Save this story

The comedian Hasan Minhaj came of age as a practicing Muslim in an Indian family in post-9/11 America. His Netflix series, "Patriot Act"—a comedy news show in the mold of "The Daily Show" and "Last Week Tonight"—was

named for the defining law of that era. The series won an Emmy and a Peabody Award during its two-year run. His stage work as a standup comic has led to two Netflix comedy specials, which have drawn plaudits for Minhaj's blend of autobiographical storytelling and social-justice commentary. He recently conducted a lengthy sit-down interview with Barack Obama and is a leading candidate to succeed Trevor Noah as the next host of "The Daily Show." In 2019, Minhaj was selected as one of *Time* magazine's most influential people. In an accompanying article, Noah wrote, "We've needed Hasan's voice since Donald Trump came down that golden escalator and turned immigrants and Muslims into his targets." Minhaj's "whip-smart commentary, charisma and sincerity," he went on, was "a consistent reminder that Hasan is America. And America is Hasan."

In Minhaj's approach to comedy, he leans heavily on his own experience as an Asian American and Muslim American, telling harrowing stories of law-enforcement entrapment and personal threats. For many of his fans, he has become an avatar for the power of representation in entertainment. But, after many weeks of trying, I had been unable to confirm some of the stories that he had told onstage. When we met on a recent afternoon, at a comedy club in the West Village, Minhaj acknowledged, for the first time, that many of the anecdotes he related in his Netflix specials were untrue. Still, he said that he stood by his work. "Every story in my style is built around a seed of truth," he said. "My comedy Arnold Palmer is seventy per cent emotional truth—this happened—and then thirty per cent hyperbole, exaggeration, fiction."

In Minhaj's 2022 Netflix standup special, "The King's Jester"—a biographical reflection on fame, vainglory, and Minhaj's obsession with social-media clout—he relays a story about an F.B.I. informant who infiltrated his family's Sacramento-area mosque, in 2002, when Minhaj was a junior in high school. As Minhaj tells it, Brother Eric, a muscle-bound white man who said he was a convert to Islam, gained the trust of the mosque community. He went to dinner at Minhaj's house, and even offered to teach weight training to the community's teen-age boys. But Minhaj had Brother Eric pegged from the beginning. Eventually, Brother Eric tried to entice the boys into talking about jihad. Minhaj decided to mess with Brother Eric, telling him that he wanted to get his pilot's license. Soon, the police were on the scene, slamming Minhaj against the hood of a car. Years later, while watching the news with his father, Minhaj saw a story about Craig Monteilh, who assumed the cover of a personal trainer when he became an F.B.I. informant in Muslim communities in Southern California. "Well, well, well, Papa, look who it is," Minhaj recalls telling his father. "It's our good friend Brother Eric."

Onstage, a large screen behind Minhaj flashes news footage from an Al Jazeera English report on Monteilh. Minhaj's teen-age hunch, it seems, was proved right. The moment is played for laughs, but the story underscores the threat that being Muslim in the United States carried during the early days of the war on terror. Minhaj segues to the case of Hamid Hayat, a young man from another Sacramento-area town who spent much of his adult life in prison based on a confession his attorneys say was coerced. "He just got out of prison this past June,"

Minhaj says, his tone turning defiant. "Man, he's my age—he's thirty-six. I think about Hamid all the time."

Later in the special, Minhaj speaks about the fallout from "Patriot Act" segments on the killing of Jamal Khashoggi and Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalism. The big screen displays threatening tweets that were sent to Minhaj. Most disturbing, he tells the story of a letter sent to his home which was filled with white powder. The contents accidentally spilled onto his young daughter. The child was rushed to the hospital. It turned out not to be anthrax, but it's a sobering reminder that Minhaj's comedic actions have real-world consequences. Later that night, his wife, in a fury, told him that she was pregnant with their second child. " 'You get to say whatever you want onstage, and we have to live with the consequences,' " Minhaj recalls her saying. " 'I don't give a shit that *Time* magazine thinks you're an "influencer." If you ever put my kids in danger again, I will leave you in a second.' "

Does it matter that neither of those things really happened to Minhaj?

Prior to my meeting with Minhaj, Monteilh, a.k.a. "Brother Eric," had told me that Minhaj's story is a fabrication. "I have no idea why he would do that," Monteilh said. Monteilh was in prison in 2002, and didn't begin to work for the F.B.I. on counterterrorism measures until 2006. Details of his undercover actions were catalogued in a legal case that has made its way to the Supreme Court. Monteilh said that he'd worked only in Southern California, not the Sacramento area.

The New York Police Department, which investigates incidents of possible *Bacillus anthracis*, has no record of an incident like the one Minhaj describes, nor do area hospitals. Front-desk and mailroom employees at Minhaj's former residence don't remember such an incident, nor do "Patriot Act" employees involved with the show's security or Minhaj's security guard from the time.

During our conversation, Minhaj admitted that his daughter had never been exposed to a white powder, and that she hadn't been hospitalized. He had opened up a letter delivered to his apartment, he said, and it had contained some sort of powder. Minhaj said that he had made a joke to his wife, saying, "Holy shit. What if this was anthrax?" He said that he'd never told anyone on the show about this letter, despite the fact that there were concerns for his security at the time and that Netflix had hired protection for Minhaj. The Brother Eric story, Minhaj said, was based on a hard foul he received during a game of pickup basketball in his youth. Minhaj and other teen-age Muslims played pickup games with middle-aged men whom the boys suspected were officers. One made a show of pushing Minhaj to the ground. Minhaj insisted that, though both stories were made up, they were based on "emotional truth." The broader points he was trying to make justified concocting stories in which to deliver them. "The punch line is worth the fictionalized premise," he said.

People don't necessarily go into standup shows expecting airtight truths. They expect laughs, perhaps some trenchant observation. On John Heilemann's podcast earlier this year, Minhaj described his work as "the dynamic range that theatre and storytelling and comedy allow you to explore." Does that mean audiences should expect his words onstage to stringently hew to the facts on the ground? The slipperiness of memoir finds a new dimension when it's played for laughs in front of a crowd.

During our meeting, Minhaj drew a hard line between his hosting duties on "Patriot Act" and his stage work. In his Netflix specials, he said, he was allowed to create characters and events in service of storytelling, to sharpen his social points. The "emotional truth," he told me, repeatedly, was more important. But in "Patriot Act," his comedic license took a back seat to the information being conveyed. He seemed to sidestep the possibility that most people likely don't parse which Hasan Minhaj they're watching at a given moment.

Minhaj has discussed the white-powder incident in interviews, without taking the opportunity to clarify that the events he describes onstage, including his daughter's hospitalization, didn't happen as told. "I remember in that moment going, oh shit, sometimes the envelope pushes back," he told the Daily Beast, in 2022. I asked him if he felt that he had manipulated his audience. "No, I don't think I'm manipulating," he told me. "I think they are coming for the emotional roller-coaster ride." He went on, "To the people that are, like, 'Yo, that is way too crazy to happen,' I don't care because yes, fuck yes—that's the point." But was his invention of a traumatic experience with his child or with law-enforcement entrapment distasteful, given the moral heft of those things, and the fact that other people have actually experienced them? "It's grounded in truth," Minhaj said.

"But it didn't happen to you," I replied.

"I think what I'm ultimately trying to do is highlight all of those stories," he said. "Building to what I think is a pointed argument," as opposed to a "pointless riff" of jokes.

Minhaj has elided or concocted other details in his stories, often to place himself more squarely at the center of the action. "I haven't talked about this publicly," Minhaj says in "The King's Jester," about his attempt to interview Mohammed bin Salman in 2018. The Saudi crown prince was doing a U.S. public-relations blitz, meeting with Michael Bloomberg and Oprah, among others, and Minhaj set up a meeting at the Saudi Embassy in D.C. to discuss the prospect of a sit-down with him. Minhaj's wife, he says, disapproved of his attempts to antagonize the Saudis, so he hid the visit from her. (A theme of the special is her resistance to his despot-baiting comedy stylings.) On Heilemann's podcast, Minhaj said that his comedy "put my marriage through a lot, and 'The King's Jester' is an exploration of how far I'm willing to take a joke."

During the special, Minhaj describes the meeting at the Saudi Embassy as vaguely hostile. The Saudis said that they didn't want to be ridiculed by a comedian and that they'd be watching him. Minhaj took a train back to New York, where, upon arrival, he recalls, "everybody at the office is texting me—'Are you O.K.?' 'Are you all right?' 'Are you watching the news?' " According to Minhaj, news had just broken about the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. "Thank God you didn't meet with the Saudis," his wife told him.

Minhaj admits to feeling guilty about not being more forthright with his wife—but he also loved the attention that "Patriot Act" received when it aired a well-timed episode soon after the murder. He was invited to the *Time* 100 Gala, where he says that he watched Jared Kushner enter the room and boorishly sit in a seat that had been ceremonially kept empty for an imprisoned Saudi activist. Minhaj admonished Donald Trump's son-in-law for his inaction on human rights. Minhaj's fame rose, threats proliferated, and eventually we hear about the anthrax episode.

But, according to a producer with knowledge of Minhaj's schedule, Minhaj's meeting at the Saudi Embassy happened at least a month before Khashoggi's murder, something an e-mail confirms. Minhaj said that he'd conflated the time lines as a storytelling device, to "make it feel the way it felt." His "day-to-day life is not very interesting or compelling," Minhaj said. "My comedy storytelling certainly has to be." And, although Minhaj did very publicly criticize Kushner at the *Time* 100 Gala for the Trump Administration's feeble response to Saudi human-rights violations, there was no ceremonial seat set aside for an activist, let alone one that Kushner sat in. Minhaj said that this was another fabrication that served to drive home the "emotional truth" of the moment.

There's a palpable discomfort among comedians when they are asked to comment on another person's art—a sort of code of *omertà*. But a number of writers and performers who spoke with me bristled at Minhaj's moralizing posture. "He

tonally presents himself as a person who was always taking down the despots and dictators of the world and always speaking truth to power," one former "Patriot Act" employee said. "That's grating." A comedy writer who has worked for "The Daily Show" said that most comics' acts wouldn't pass a rigorous fact-check, but, if a show is built on sharing something personal that's not necessarily laugh-out-loud funny, the invention of important details could make an audience feel justifiably cheated. "If he's lying about real people and real events, that's a problem," the writer said. "So much of the appeal of those stories is 'This really happened.' "

Minhaj's projects blur the lines between entertainment and opinion journalism. Jon Stewart, who popularized the mainstream format of comedic news, has always insisted that he is not a journalist, but it was impossible to deny that his "Daily Show" served up opinionated takes that informed the series' predominantly younger audience. John Oliver has also denied that he's a journalist, though each episode of his HBO show dives into a topic of public import—A.I., solitary confinement, tech monopolies. It's not *not* opinion journalism. Comedians might not be comfortable calling themselves anything but comedians, but a number of them, Minhaj included, have inserted themselves pointedly into political conversation. They've become the oddball public intellectuals of our time, and, in informing the public, they assume a certain status as moral arbiters. When fibs are told to prove a social point rather than to elicit an easy laugh, does their moral weight change?

Ismael Loutfi, a comedian who worked in the "Patriot Act" writers' room, defended Minhaj, particularly when it came to the F.B.I.-informant story. Loutfi, who grew up Muslim in Florida, mentioned stories he'd heard about Tampa-area mosques being infiltrated after 9/11. "Maybe it's just three or four facts he combined into one," Loutfi said. "Every standup you see who's telling any joke, there is an element of truth, but then the thing that provokes laughter is dishonest.

I can see how you would find it sort of disreputable, but at the same time I don't think that that's a story I've heard anyone talk about."

In fact, the president of the mosque that Minhaj attended while growing up remembered an incident in the post-9/11 era of a man coming to the mosque one Friday and acting suspiciously enough that the imam called a lawyer at the Council on American-Islamic Relations, who, in turn, called the F.B.I. The man never appeared at the mosque again, but it's easy to see how an incident like that would make an impression on Minhaj. When it came to the story about anthrax, Loutfi said that it had struck him as extraordinary when he'd watched "The King's Jester," but that it got at sincere feelings that Minhaj had experienced during "Patriot Act" 's run. "There definitely was real fear that was palpable," Loutfi said. Minhaj received death threats online, and, according to his security guard, a former N.Y.P.D. officer, a letter was sent to Netflix threatening Minhaj, but it didn't contain any powder. Minhaj also acknowledged to me that the threatening tweets displayed on the large screen during "The King's Jester" were not authentic but, rather, heightened for comedic effect.

"Patriot Act" was lauded for its comedy-with-a-purpose, and its cancellation during the pandemic was mourned by fans. "*Patriot Act* provided biting comedy and cultural analysis with an eye to the South Asian diaspora, a population that has historically suppressed such discourse," one eulogy for the show read. Many stories on the cancellation also mentioned a series of tweets from former female employees of color alluding to their poor work experience behind the scenes. A document reviewed by *The New Yorker* revealed that three women had hired an attorney and threatened litigation against Netflix and "Patriot Act" 's production company, alleging gender discrimination, sex-based harassment, and retaliation. Prashanth Venkataramanujam, Minhaj's creative partner and the show's co-creator, said that he had been "surprised" by the tweets. "Clearly, some people who worked at the show did not enjoy their experience, which is painful to hear," he said in a statement. "We tried very hard to make 'Patriot Act' one of the

most inclusive and diverse spaces in all of late-night, and it was." (The legal matter settled out of court.)

According to former "Patriot Act" employees, members of the research department felt that Minhaj could be dismissive of the fact-checking process. "[Minhaj] just assembled people around him to make him appear different and much smarter and more thoughtful," a female researcher said. "But those people—the smart people and hardworking people—were treated poorly for bringing the perspective that he is celebrated for." Like other comedy news shows, "Patriot Act" hired journalists to write briefing memos—based on reporting and research—that were meant to serve as the factual basis for twenty-five-minute episodes on topics such as Amazon, protests in Sudan, and corruption in cricket. In one instance, Minhaj grew frustrated that fact-checking was stymying the creative flow during a final rewrite, and a pair of female researchers were asked to leave the writers' room. They sat in the hall for more than an hour, listening to the meeting continue without them, and later had to scramble to insert factual revisions. Later in the show's run, researchers were no longer invited into the writers' room for rewrites—only the male head of the research department was allowed in. Women researchers said that they felt shunted to the side.Venkataramanujam said that the decision was meant to streamline the show's process and was not designed to exclude individual researchers. He also said that researchers being sent out of rewrites was standard practice and that the researchers chose to stay in the hall. "Fact-checking at Patriot Act was extremely rigorous," Minhaj said in a written statement. "A team of news producers fact-checked every line of every draft of every script at least 8-10 times before I ever said anything on camera."

Minhaj often talks about his immigrant upbringing and the social alienation that sometimes came with being a racial minority in his home town. The central story of his first Netflix special, "Homecoming King," which was released in 2017, is about his crush on a friend, a white girl with whom he shared a stolen kiss and who accepted his invitation to prom but later reneged in a humiliating fashion;

Minhaj showed up on her doorstep the night of the dance, only to see another boy putting a corsage on her wrist. Onstage, Minhaj says that his friend's parents didn't want their daughter to take pictures with a brown boy, because they were concerned about what their relatives might think. "I'd eaten off their plates," Minhaj says. "I'd kissed their daughter. I didn't know that people could be bigoted even as they were smiling at you."

But the woman disputed certain facts. She told me that she'd turned down Minhaj, who was then a close friend, in person, days before the dance. Minhaj acknowledged that this was correct, but he said that the two of them had long carried different understandings of her rejection. As a "brown kid in Davis, California," he said, he'd been conditioned to put his head down and "just take it, and I did." The "emotional truth" of the story he told onstage was resonant and justified the fabrication of details. "There are so many other kids who have had a similar sort of doorstep experience," he said.

The woman also said that she and her family had faced online threats and doxing for years because Minhaj had insufficiently disguised her identity, including the fact that she was engaged to an Indian American man. A source with knowledge of the production said that, during the show's Off Broadway run, Minhaj had used a real picture of the woman and her partner, with their faces blurred, projected behind him as he told the story.

The woman said that Minhaj had invited her and her husband to an Off Broadway performance. She had initially interpreted the invitation as an attempt to rekindle an old friendship, but she now believes the move was meant to humiliate her. Later, she said, when she confronted Minhaj about the online threats brought on by the Netflix special—"I spent years trying to get threads taken down," she told me—Minhaj shrugged off her concerns. Minhaj said that he didn't recall that interaction, and pointed to the fact that he had been in touch with her prior to the airing of the special, recommending she scrub social-media

posts that might indicate her relationship to him. Minhaj also noted that the tone of their texts and e-mails was always friendly.

What is the truth in this instance? "Homecoming King" offers a broader observation about the often insidious nature of racism in American suburbs. But what duty does the storyteller have to the real person who is on the other side of his tale, whether it be a high-school crush or a felon turned F.B.I. informant? (Minhaj said that he owed nothing to Monteilh, based on his behavior toward the Muslim community.) The nature of storytelling, let alone comedic storytelling, is inventive; its primary aim is to make an impression, to amuse or to engage. But the stakes appear to change when entertainers fabricate anecdotes about current events and issues of social injustice. In 2015, the comedian Steve Rannazzisi, who appeared on all seven seasons of FX's "The League," admitted that he had lied about evacuating from the Twin Towers on the morning of 9/11, narrowly escaping death when the second plane hit. In interviews, he had used the story to explain his motivation for abandoning a corporate job in Manhattan to pursue an entertainment career in Hollywood, a trajectory that would have seemed remarkable enough without any embellishment. The writer and monologuist Mike Daisey faced blowback for making up details in his story for "This American Life" about Apple's Foxconn plant in China, but his point about poor working conditions was an important one to make. In a blog post titled "Some Thoughts After the Storm," Daisey wrote, "When I said onstage that I had personally experienced things I in fact did not, I failed to honor the contract I'd established with my audiences over many years and many shows."

When Minhaj appeared on the comedian Marc Maron's podcast, in 2021, the two had a conversation about how comedians portray themselves and their emotional lives onstage. The comedian, Minhaj said, must guide the audience to a particular emotional takeaway: "Bring it home, what is the point?" Maron seemed to raise the idea that, in "Homecoming King," Minhaj had constructed an onstage emotional history that wasn't entirely honest. "Your show was tight, it was effective, it had a message, the punch line at the end was very clever. It was good,

the story was good—you lucked out with these life things and you organize them," he said. "I'm not criticizing that. I'm just saying that there is a big difference between what you put out in the world and who you are personally." He went on, "When you talk about your father or that woman that jilted you in high school or whatever, you're going to have to weigh the repercussions. Either you respect them or you don't. And then you have to balance that out. At what point is this disrespectful, and at what point do I not give a shit anymore?"

Minhaj seems unconflicted about his choices. "You have got to take the shots you are given in life, even if they're built on a lie," Minhaj says during a bit in "The King's Jester." When we spoke, I asked, were he to get "The Daily Show" hosting job, if his fabrications could put him in a compromised position when commenting on someone such as George Santos. Minhaj brushed the question off. "I think, when George Santos says he's on the volleyball team, it's a pointless story," he responded. Minhaj's "fiction" was always in service to a bigger point, putting him in a different moral category than Santos. He appeared unwilling to engage with the idea that his position in the comedic landscape is unique, or that the host of a comedy news show might be held to more stringent standards of accuracy across his body of work. When it came to his stage shows, he told me, "the emotional truth is first. The factual truth is secondary." ♦

- The day the dinosaurs died.
- Fiction by Amy Tan: "Immortal Heart"

Sign up for our daily newsletter to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Clare Malone is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering the media business, journalism, and politics.

More: Hasan Minhaj Comedians Comedy Political Comedy Storytelling Standup

READ MORE

2023 IN REVIEW

The Top Twenty-five *New Yorker* Stories of 2023

The articles that sustained the longest hold on readers during a year when many avoided the news.

By Michael Luo

DAILY SHOUTS

Algorithm Recommendations Since Having Kids

Disney+: You have watched every episode of "Bluey" more than fifty times and nothing else. We recommend more "Bluey."

By Laura Lane

2023 IN REVIEW

The Best Jokes of 2023

A Spice Girl fighting the class war, Kendall Roy making a last stand, and more of the year's comic relief.

By Ian Crouch

BOOKS

The Forgotten Giant of Yiddish Fiction

Though his younger brother Isaac Bashevis Singer eventually eclipsed him, Israel Joshua Singer excelled at showing characters buffeted by the tides of history.

By Adam Kirsch