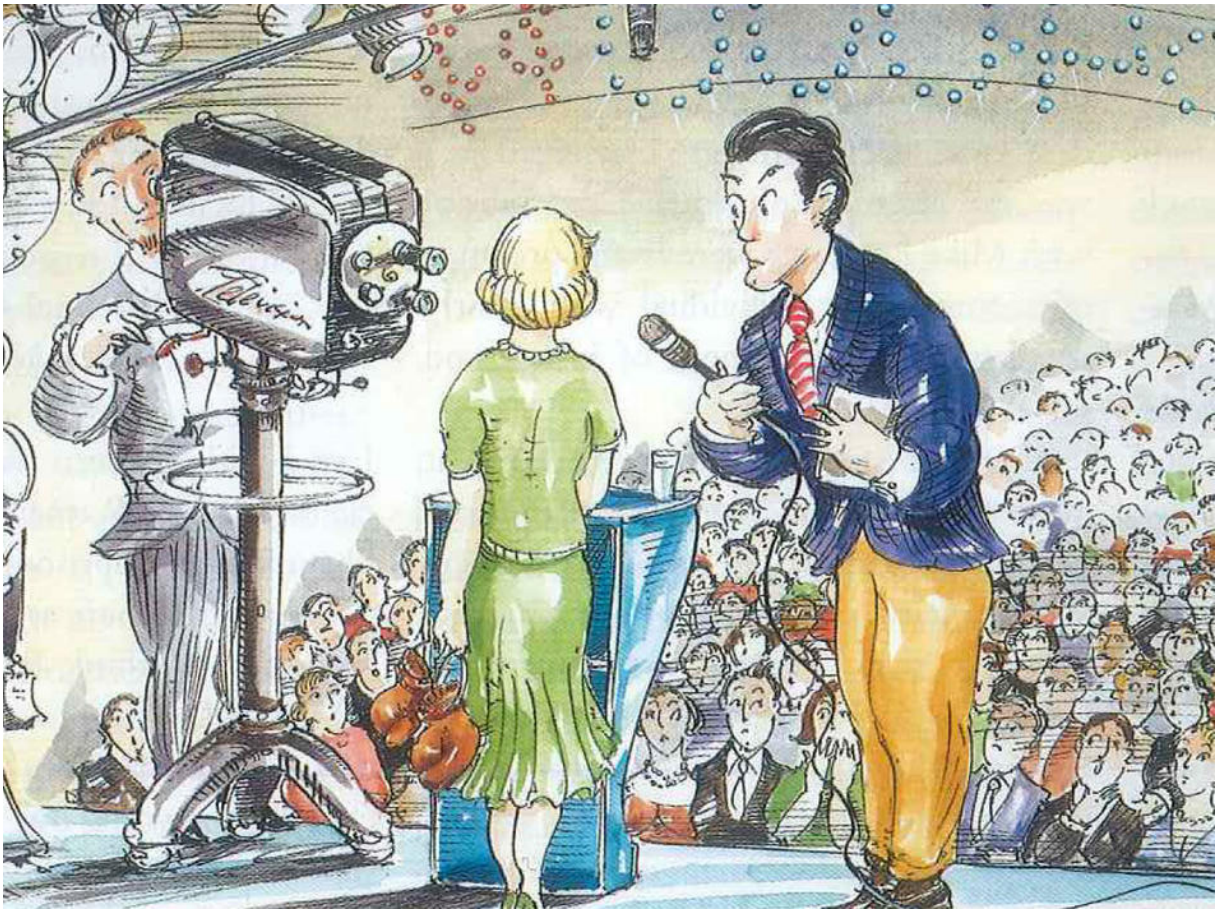
Arts & Humanities

Blonde Knockout

Dr. Joyce Brothers '53GSAS wins big.

By
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|
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Okay, contestants. For $64,000: What distinguished Columbian won big on a 1950s quiz show and has been a famous public figure ever since?

Did someone say Charles Van Doren? The dashing Columbia English teacher and scion of New England literary royalty, who became the fair-haired boy of television and landed on the cover of *Time*? Let's check with our judges.

Bzzz! I'm sorry. Mr. Van Doren was, of course, a big winner on *Twenty One* in the winter of 1956–57, but after admitting to Congress and a stunned nation that he was involved in the rigging of that ill-fated show, he withdrew to his books and can no longer be called a public figure.

What's that, ma'am? Vivienne Nearing? The Greenwich Village attorney who defeated Van Doren on March 11, 1957, before an audience of millions? Well, not defeated , exactly — Van Doren took a dive on the orders of the show's producers, who had promised him a cushy gig on *The Today Show*. Judges?

Bzzz! I'm sorry. Vivienne Nearing is incorrect. You lose all your money, of course, but you will receive the new Encyclopedia Britannica. Thanks for playing! Okay, contestants, here's your final set of clues: The show was *The $64,000 Question*; the contestant, like Mr. Van Doren, taught at Columbia, and was, like Ms. Nearing, a petite and telegenic blonde. And the time, ladies and gentlemen, was 1955 — a year before Van Doren's scripted victory on *Twenty One* over eventual whistleblower Herb Stempel, and four years before the "whole mess," as President Eisenhower called it, was brought before the House Committee on Legislative Oversight. Anyone? No?

Why, it's Dr. Joyce Brothers, of course! And here she is!

(Applause)

Dr. Brothers, thank you for taking time out from your incredibly busy schedule to talk to us. You look fantastic. Now, most people don't know this, but you yourself were nearly victimized by an early specimen of quiz-show chicanery. There you were, a young married woman, struggling financially, looking to make some extra money —

"Yes, but I wasn't counting on winning $64,000. You see, if you lost, you still got a new Cadillac as a consolation prize. So my husband and I thought we'd just sell the car and live on that for a while."

A wise plan, Doctor. But first you had to get yourself on the show. Given that the producers preferred dramatic contrasts — the Marine officer whose subject is cooking, say, or the shoemaker who knows opera — you decided to invent yourself as the female psychologist who is an expert, of all things, on boxing. How did you do that?

“My husband and I went to the publisher of *Ring* magazine and got every issue they’d ever printed. Then we went to the producer of the *Great Fights of the Century* films, and he lent us the reels. The show gave me six weeks to study, and I just read everything.”

You certainly must have, because at one point, the show’s producers tried to knock you out with a sucker punch. Can you explain?

“Well, the show’s sponsor was Revlon, which was headed by Charles Revson. And Revson wanted me to wear makeup on the air. But I didn’t wear makeup. I didn’t want to wear makeup. So when I got to $16,000, Revson told the producers, ‘Get that bitch off the show.’”

(Laughter)

Good heavens, Doctor! You couldn’t say that on TV in 1955! So what happened?

“Suddenly the questions got a lot harder. Everything was aimed at getting rid of me. At one point, instead of asking me about boxers, they asked me a question about referees. And I got it right.”

Ah! Talk about a counterpunch!

“Then they called some sportswriters and asked each of them to come up with six questions that no one could answer. The actual $64,000 question had 16 parts! The show ran over its scheduled time, into *Heidi*. But I won.”

Fantastic!

“Yes, but then I was told that I’d have to wait a few weeks for the money. Apparently the show didn’t have it — they had counted on my not winning. I was very nervous. So I waited. Then I got a call telling me to come down to the bank. There, I was presented with the money and one of those big, oversize checks, which I gave to my mother. She kept it on the wall above her bed till the day she died.”

Extraordinary. And the real check? What did you do with it?

“I bought my mother a dishwasher, I bought my mother-in-law a dishwasher, and I bought my sister-in-law a dishwasher. Then I bought myself a dishwasher. With the rest, my husband was able to open his practice.”

Quite an auspicious beginning, Doctor!

“I became famous overnight from winning that show, and I’ve been on the air every day since.”

Indeed you have — including 90 appearances on *The Tonight Show*, and continued regular appearances in television, radio, film, and print. As I often say, without you, Dr. Brothers, there’d be no Dr. Phil.

So there you have it, ladies and gentlemen — a real American success story. Thank you, contestants, and thank you, Dr. Brothers.

(Applause)

Oh, and by the way, Doctor. What man refereed the comeback attempt of an ex-champ against Jack Johnson at Reno, Nevada?

“Tex Rickard.”

You’re right!

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