Sean Leary's stated goal for The Dingo – the new humor magazine that he debuted last week – is to be the print equivalent of Saturday Night Live. (He has wisely specified the show in its early years.)

And to large degree he's succeeded: Just like *SNL*, *The Dingo* is uneven and without any real guiding principle beyond trying to be funny.

That sounds harsh, but it's as much a description as a judgment. Leary's MO seems to be that if he thought it was funny, it got in, no matter the style or subject matter. So amateurish top-10 lists mingle with the political humor of Scott Morschhauser, and far too many references to Anna Nicole Smith mix with a rim-shot-filled story by Wes Swietek.

Leary, the entertainment editor of the *Rock Island Argus* and the *Dispatch* and the editor and publisher of *The Dingo*, plans to produce the magazine twice a year.

The first edition has more than 40 pieces in just over 100 pages, in a bound trade paperback. The decision to print in book (rather than magazine or newsprint) form is a strange one, considering that much of the humor is of-the-moment and disposable. In five years, I hope nobody will remember Anna Nicole, *American Idol*, or *Are You Hot?* .

But the choice makes some sense. As the only local outlet for humor writing – and most of the contributors to the first issue live in the Quad Cities or have ties to the area – *The Dingo* can stand as a document of the local comedy-writing community with its more-durable format.

The anthology gets off to a rough start – so rough that I began to dread the rest of *The Dingo*. But persistence pays off, and the first issue improves greatly at page 15 or so.

Fake letters (from Leary to Gwyneth Paltrow, and from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush) kick off the volume, and they hit the wrong notes: They're obvious, juvenile, and self-satisfied. "I guess if it'll make you feel better, we can continue to have no-strings-attached sex on a regular basis," Leary writes in his introductory letter to Gwyneth. "After all, why should I let Nicole Kidman and Naomi Watts do that and not add you to list?" The Clinton letter, meanwhile, is the millionth tired attempt to mock Horny Bill.

Here's where I have to acknowledge that humor is perhaps the most subjective of art forms. There's little craftsmanship to judge, and what you're left with is whether you – the reader, the audience – find something funny. And I allow that what I don't find funny might have a lot of other people in stitches. I laughed once during *There's Something About Mary*, after all.

I laughed considerably more at *The Dingo*. Several pieces are especially sharp, combining both humor and intelligence.

Paul Curtis' "Bush: Exhaling Speeds Global Warming" starts with a clever concept – the president chastising anti-war protesters for being environmentally irresponsible – and uses it to

make light of the silent majority.

Leary's "Whatever Gets You Through the Night" walks the fine line between reality and absurdity, imagining (I think, I hope) Deadheads latching on to John Tesh following the death of Jerry Garcia.

"Fear & Loathing at the Post Office" by Dan O'Shea doesn't keep a straight face as well, but it gooses some dead joke fodder back to life, plunging the narrator into a nightmare of drinking and debauchery with some postal workers.

In a less-silly vein, Shayla Thiel offers an interesting conspiracy theory about Generation X being stifled by jealous Baby Boomers, mixing sharply drawn details with a hypothesis that seems shockingly plausible. The piece proves that often the best path to effective comedy is to nail the little things.

That's shown, too, in Mandy Crane's "Just Back from Europe," a dialogue that understands long-standing friendship as well as the idiosyncrasies that open us up to painful shots from our companions.

The volume's diversity is its chief strength. Even when the pieces didn't work for me, I appreciated the range of forms and approaches – from a silly poem to an observational essay to broad farce. There weren't a lot of laugh-out-loud moments for me in *The Dingo*, but it shows an impressive array of writing talent from the Quad Cities and offers a strong foundation on which Leary can build.

Book-signings for The Dingo *are scheduled at various venues over the few weeks: April 5 from 1 to 3 p.m. at Barnes & Noble in Northpark Mall, April 12 from 1 to 3 p.m. at Waldenbooks in Southpark Mall, and April 16 from 1 to 3 p.m. at Brentano's in Northpark Mall. The book is available for $12 at area bookstores. For more information on The Dingo or submission guidelines, e-mail (ferris@qconline.com).*