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Comic Duo: Mike Albo & Virginia Heffernan

By Boris Kachka



(Photo credit: Jeremy Liebman)

Performance artist Mike Albo and his partner, Virginia Heffernan, just published a comic novel about a classic New York phenomenon: a pseudo-friend—the underminer of the book’s title—whose backhanded compliments destroy the hero’s self-confidence. Boris Kachka met with the writers for some undermining conversation.

### So what exactly is an Underminer?

**Mike Albo:** It’s someone you let into your life a long time ago who knows everything about you and knows how to dismantle your psychology—but it’s too late to split off from him or her.

### It’s a cute idea. Did you just put it together in one day?

**Virginia Heffernan:** It was mostly in an afternoon. And we came back to it after dinner.

### Does having a lot of friends in media help in promotion?

**V.H.:** Okay, stop!

**M.A.:** Your undermining comments are so natural, I can’t tell if you’re real or not.

### Well, I guess there’s no real answer to that. What’s the worst way someone can undermine you?

**M.A.:** The worst way is about my love life, when someone says, “Maybe you’re just attracting the wrong sorts of people.” Like your soul is damaged. What am I supposed to do, go eat some sort of plant?

### Was it hard to keep that one joke going?

**V.H.:** Nope, we never got tired of it. We’re like Chevy Chase

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with *Fletch*.

**I've heard that the underminer in the book was originally male.**

**M.A.:** I've always tried to keep it gender-neutral. The very first time we came up with the idea, I was living with Virginia, and she told me a female friend of hers had just undermined her: "She told me, 'You know, I don't really want to be in this war between—'"

**V.H.:** "Between you and Sofia and those guys." I didn't realize that all these forces were marshaled against me! And she was passing it off as being really careful. So I just cried myself to sleep that night.

**Are there other underminers?**

**V.H.:** We think the underminer voice floats through all of us, including Mike and me. We wrote down things that we said to other people, too.

**So if you were self-help gurus, how would you advise people to shut off the underminer?**

**V.H.:** One thing the underminer does is set up plausible deniability. I don't think confrontations work. They'd say they're kidding. Sometimes in the book the victim resists, and it only tightens the knot.

**I've heard one underminer takes credit for Mike's original sketch.**

**M.A.:** Yes.

**What's his name?**

**M.A.:** I'm not going to say. But he has said, "Wow, this book is doing really well. I guess you kind of owe your career to me."

### **The Underminer**

By Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan  
Bloomsbury; \$19.95

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