Antonin Scalia is not a rock star. But he is the most famous member of the Supremes. Whether he's reading an opinion from the bench or lecturing on a college campus, journalist Margaret Talbot has pointed out, he is likely "to offer the jurisprudential equivalent of smashing a guitar on stage."

Appointed to the Supreme Court by Ronald Reagan in 1986, Scalia has had a profound impact on American law. He has defended "originalism" — the proposition that the Constitution should be interpreted as it was understood in 1789 and not to fit the changing needs of society — with what one critic calls "splenetic flamboyance." He has insisted that judges look at the text of laws rather than at reports of Congressional committees or other artifacts of the legislative process. And he has pressed for an expansive view of the powers of the president vis-à-vis Congress. With a conservative majority now on the Court, Joan Biskupic reminds us, he may well be "at the apex of his influence."

The legal affairs correspondent for USA Today and the author of a biography of Sandra Day O'Connor, Biskupic draws on more than 100 interviews with family, friends, colleagues, critics and Scalia himself, as well as careful readings of dozens of opinions, to take the full measure of the man. A gifted storyteller, she begins with Scalia's childhood in a first generation Italian-Catholic home, describes his formative political experience in the Nixon and Ford administrations, and brings us almost to yesterday.

A portrait of a colorful jurist with a penchant for wading into troubled waters, "whether with a Sicilian chin flick at a photographer or a defense of torture," the biography also serves as a recent history of the Supreme Court on issues ranging from abortion and affirmative action to the rights on criminals, evangelicals and homosexuals.

Biskupic is tough but fair. She does not accept Scalia's claims that he has no agenda and that his Catholicism is irrelevant to his rulings. She finds some of his opinions, including Bush v. Gore, inconsistent with his philosophy that the federal government should defer to the prerogatives of states. But she allows Scalia to explain himself in his own words.

An anthem for critics of American culture and American courts, his language is, very often, compelling, contemptuous and clever. "It doesn't prove anything that everyone thinks you're wrong," he scoffs. And he seems to mean it.

At age 73, Scalia remains full of piss and vinegar. If you want to know where he's likely to take his colleagues — and when they'll refuse to go along with him — pick up "American Original." Don't wait for a court order.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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