

UNCOMMON THREADS

Reading and Writing about Contemporary America

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HEROES AND OUTSIDERS

We can be Heroes just for one day.

David Bowie

- Who are heroes? How do you know?
- Who are outsiders? How do you know?
- Who are rebels, or antiheroes? How do you know?
- Can outsiders be antiheroes?
- Are antiheroes outsiders?

Why discuss heroes and outsiders together? Traditionally, they are opposites. The hero embodies the ideals of a community and protects it; the outsider places it in jeopardy. But we often forge our definitions through the use of oppositions, understanding things by knowing what they are not. We tend, for example, to define what is good through what is bad—good is *not* lying, *not* stealing. Traditionally, heroes are associated with what is moral and good; outsiders, with what is immoral and bad. In popular culture, however, the line between the two is often blurred—heroes can be outsiders and outsiders heroes. Venus Williams, for example, is a hero to a great many people. Yet because she is African-American and has, as some critics claim, “masculinized” tennis, she is also an outsider to some people. Osama bin Laden is an outsider to many people, yet many others claim him as a hero. Madonna is a hero to many, but she is also an antihero, rebelling against and challenging traditional gender stereotypes. In examining these apparent contradictions, we come to a more complex understanding of our culture and, as a result, of ourselves.

Our heroes, our role models, are who we strive to be. Outsiders are who we distance ourselves from—they embody our fears. In analyzing popular-culture heroes and outsiders, we come to understand the cultural norms that we are being prodded to conform to—how we are supposed to *be* and, perhaps more important, how we are *not* supposed



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

men, and 3 in 1 million U.S.-born Latinos become professional athletes, and only one athlete in every generation becomes a Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods, we may develop more realistic expectations for our futures—and for our athletic performance. Or once we understand the ways in which “outsiders” are created and understood in our culture, we may open ourselves to learning to know people who are different from us.

In looking at outsiders, and the idea of the outsider, we learn a great deal about alienation and may begin to understand some of our own feelings of alienation—in our families, our peer groups, our schools or jobs. We also see that just as the concept of *hero* shifts and changes over time so does the concept of *outsider*. We see how what was alien and dangerous in one generation becomes assimilated into the popular culture of the next generation. In the early 1990s, for example, adults worried that “grunge” music would corrupt and alienate young people, would have a negative effect on culture. Now many young people don’t even know what grunge refers to, even though many of the conventions of grunge are part of the music they listen to.

The readings in this chapter raise a number of questions about heroes and outsiders in our society—why we need them, how we define them, and how their definitions have changed over time:

- Where do we find our heroes?
- Why does the idea of the outsider appear so frequently in our entertainment? Does it somehow reflect our distrust of the heroic stereotype?
- Is our fear of the outsider also fear of the unknown, both within and beyond ourselves?
- Is our fear of the outsider an attempt to protect and preserve what is and to guard against change?
- Can heroes be outsiders? Can they be anything but?
- Can outsiders be heroes?

Who are your heroes? The response clearly varies from generation to generation. People who came of age during World War II might instantly think of Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Eleanor Roosevelt, John Wayne, Ingrid Bergman, or Jackie Robinson.

to be. In the process, as we come to see the constraints and improbabilities in our concepts of heroes and outsiders, we may liberate ourselves from impossibly high standards and expand the boundaries of our world. Once we realize, for example, that without plastic surgery only about 3 in every 300,000 women can look like a supermodel, we may learn to accept our bodies and move on to other concerns. Or once we realize that only 4 in 100,000 White men, 2 in 100,000 Black

Baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, might answer President John F. Kennedy, Elvis Presley, Gloria Steinem, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or Grace Kelly. The 1980s and 90s generation might point to President Ronald Reagan, Princess Di, Mother Teresa, Gen. Colin Powell, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, or Michael Jordan.

What is a hero? Surely a hero is someone we respect, someone we hold up as a model, someone we'd like to be. In the classic Western, such as *Gunsmoke*, the hero was typically the sheriff who wore a white hat; was handsome and mannerly, respectful toward women, and kind to his horse; did his job effectively without calling attention to himself; and, by fighting fairly, defeated those who would bring disorder



Madonna

and ruin to the town. When we move to Captains Kirk or Picard in *Star Trek*, we recognize the same kind of nobility. The horse has become a spaceship and the costume has changed, but the basic outline is the same. The hero maintains order, supporting the group or community he leads, and offers a model for positive behavior and ethics. In family TV shows of the 1950s and 60s, the hero was the father—Ward Cleaver in *Leave It to Beaver*, Jim Anderson in *Father Knows Best*. He behaved in much the same way as the sheriff or captain, always solving his children's crises and wisely caring for his family. Clearly, a hero is someone who communicates and preserves a certain set of values, often putting him- or herself in danger to do so.

The basic plot formula of Western myths evolving from the Greeks and Romans—Theseus and Aeneas—to those of modern times—Superman and Batman—depicts a male hero risking his life through a series of spectacular adventures to save a beautiful woman in distress or his country or both. We also see the formula in the tales of King Arthur written during medieval times, and we see it in more contemporary stories such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, James Bond films, and Westerns.

And our heroes are almost always White, male, heterosexual—and, until September 11, 2001, of a higher social class than the people around them. Consider the heroes of September 11, people of color and women lost their lives trying to save others,



Brandi Chastain

attention have resulted from Bingham's being gay? Does our culture permit us to have gay heroes? or women heroes? or Black or Asian or Hispanic heroes?

yet where are they in the many media representations of the heroes of 9/11? In the story of the passengers who fought the hijackers on United Airlines Flight 93 and brought it down before it could hit its target, for example, we all know and heard a great deal about Todd Beamer, who talked to his wife before the attack on the hijackers. But we heard almost nothing about Mark Bingham, the 6'5" former rugby player who sat next to Beamer and, according to everyone who knew him, would have certainly been one of the leaders in the attack. Might this lack of

ANTIHEROES AND COMIC HEROES

Although the traditional hero still exists, the antihero, a social outcast who actively opposes accepted values, now seems more prominent. Examples dot novels, films, and various kinds of entertainment from the 1950s on. Consider James Dean, Marlon Brando, Dennis Rodman, Sean Penn, John McEnroe, and Madonna. More often than not, in the view of mainstream culture, these antiheroic heroes are outsiders because they seem so alienated by and from the mainstream. They are rebels. Rather than saving someone else or their society, they're more apt to take care of themselves.

What accounts for this shift to the antihero? After Vietnam and Watergate, the O. J. Simpson murder case, the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, and the controversy surrounding the 2000 presidential election, and now the Enron scandal, we seem more skeptical of those who might have passed for heroes in an earlier time. Because our demand for increased information has heightened media scrutiny, the flaws of people in the spotlight have become magnified and the sheen of carefully polished images tarnished. Presidents Thomas Jefferson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Bill Clinton all had extramarital affairs—some single, long-term affairs and some numerous affairs. But only one of these leaders was singled out for censure. Why?

What compels us to turn heroes into pariahs or fools? Our entertainment now includes more satire than ever before. We have complicated the mythic formula of the hero and opened it to reversal and jokes. Consider the success of Monty Python; Leslie Nielson films—*Airplane*, *Naked Gun*; TV shows such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*; and other representations that depict those in command of government,

military, or corporations as bumbling or sinister—the *X-Files*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Insider*, *Spin City*, *24*, and *Alias*. With the boundaries between good and evil smudged, heroism becomes a more complex term, and its function in contemporary culture may seem problematic. If our heroes fail us and heroism itself appears dubious and vague, where might we look for salvation or for behavior worth emulating? Might we look to those whom we define as outsiders for our heroes?

OUTSIDER HEROES

We admire the ironic outlaw, the smug outsider—the gruff and grim Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry, Sigourney Weaver as Ripley, Sylvester Stallone as Rambo, or Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Terminator. If society has been corrupted, only the intruder from the outside can restore it—and so the outsider becomes the hero. Why else do politicians run campaigns where they position themselves as anti-Washington? If a fresh perspective is necessary, sometimes only the antiestablishment figure, the outsider, can provide it. Also, the outsider as hero appeals to the rebel in many of us. We like to challenge authority, particularly if we feel that authority limits our freedom or compromises our identity.

The increased attention in popular culture to the ultimate outsiders, aliens—Elvis sightings, the *X-files*, the *Terminator* films, *Men in Black*, *ET*, the numerous aliens in video games—offers another place to look for heroes. When things on earth seem less than satisfactory, humans consistently have turned their hopes skyward. Our longing for an intervention from above or from outside may take the form of everything from an increased interest in angels to UFO fantasies to science fiction. *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, for example, illustrate otherworldly wisdom that might save us from ourselves or at least provide a better model to aspire to. During the past several years, a fascination with angels has pervaded popular films such as *Ghost* and TV shows such as *Touched by an Angel*. With traditional heroes less identifiable in contemporary life, might we be transferring our yearning for them onto less human but still humanoid forms—aliens from outer space or from heaven?

OUTSIDER VILLAINS

But not all aliens are heroes. We ascribe the term *alien* to another type of outsider—the person outside our community who attempts to join it. When immigrants come to the United States, we sometimes anticipate disruptive consequences because they seem different from us. We may consider differences in language, customs, and skin color threats to our social well-being. Many people think, for example, that the growing number of disaster films featuring devastating comets or malevolent outerspace creatures reflects our economic fears that an influx of immigrants in a time of shrinking resources will destroy our culture. In response to the real attacks on September 11, 2001, that attempted to destroy much of our culture, the government formed an Office of Homeland Security to help us keep out these threats from

outsiders. So much in life is unknown or unseen, and we often fear what we don't understand. Stories about hostile outsiders, real or imagined, offer us ways to vent these fears as much as stories about benevolent outsiders help us find solace and hope.

WHICH IS WHICH?

The overwhelming success of the Harry Potter books and films among both children and adults is a vivid example not only of our search for heroes to give us hope when we feel powerless but also of the difficulty of finding the line between hero and outsider. Even as people buy the books faster than they can be printed and flock to the films, many other people denounce the books and films as the work of the devil, the ultimate antihero and outsider. Harry himself is an outsider in the Muggles world. And although he is a hero among wizards, he is in many ways an outsider.

Trying to understand this blurring of the boundaries between hero and outsider is instructive for sorting through some of the complications of our culture and of how culture influences our identities. We see how our ways of coming to know ourselves and our world have changed, what still works for us, and what doesn't work any longer. And we also get to ask why. Why have we turned from the Lone Ranger to Jerry Springer? Why are we fascinated with *Stars Wars* and *ET*? We often mark cultural change in challenges to what has become standard. The pairing of heroes and outsiders presents a point of entry for exploring both cultural standards and challenges to them. This chapter looks at where heroes and outsiders separate, where they converge, and the ways we see ourselves in them.

THE TEXTS

The texts of "Heroes and Outsiders" examine the fine distinctions among characteristics of the hero and the outsider—particularly between individuality and alienation and among the connections between gender and heroism. "The American Dream: Alienation, Individuality, or Heroism?" begins with Gene Autry's Cowboy Code and Willie Nelson's classic song to set up some of the mythology associated with the American hero and to raise questions about our notions of alienation and individuality. Tom Junod's essay looks at a contemporary hero, TV's Mr. Rogers. Joshua B. Freeman discusses other contemporary heroes—the working-class heroes of September 11. Buzbee's poem portraying Tarzan taking a break from the call of the wild shows us an alienated hero. In "Alienating Language," Jack Thomas explores some of the implications of referring to immigrants as aliens.

"Heroes and Sheroes: How Does Gender Affect Heroism?" begins with an article on the feminist implications of the Disney character Mulan. "Women in Action" considers the Ripley, Xena, Buffy, and Wing Chun action heroines who have infused pop culture with an alternative depiction of women. Michael Messner looks at the effect that our participation in athletics and our worship of athletic heroes have on our personalities and relationships. The interview with Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, presents a different view of a hero.

❖ The American Dream: Alienation, Individuality, or Heroism?

GENE AUTRY

Cowboy Code (© 1994 Autry Qualified Interest Trust)

Gene Autry was America's favorite singing cowboy during an entertainment career that spanned 60 years. Autry was involved not only in music but also in radio, motion pictures, rodeo, and television. Some of his films are based on his hit songs, including South of the Border (1939), Mexicali Rose (1939), Back in the Saddle (1941), The Last Round-Up (1947), and Strawberry Roan (1948). Autry is the only entertainer to have five stars on Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame. In 1988 the Autry Museum of Western Heritage opened in Los Angeles, California, and it remains a tribute to the American West. Autry passed away on October 2, 1998, at his home in Studio City, California.

1. The Cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage.
2. He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him.
3. He must always tell the truth.
4. He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals.
5. He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas.
6. He must help people in distress.
7. He must be a good worker.
8. He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits.
9. He must respect women, parents, and his nation's laws.
10. The Cowboy is a patriot.

WILLIE NELSON

My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys

Writing and performing music for more than 40 years, Willie Nelson is one of the icons of modern music. Although he was first identified as a country-music singer, his music, a mix of gospel, big band sounds, and country, has crossed over into the mainstream. He

has also recorded songs with a wide variety of singers—from Dolly Parton to Frank Sinatra. In February 2000 he was awarded a Grammy Lifetime Achievement award. Some of his most famous songs are “You Were Always On My Mind,” “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain,” and “To All the Girls I’ve Loved Before.” Nelson is also a social activist. Since 1985 he has sponsored and performed in Farm Aid, a concert series to raise money for an emergency fund for small farmers. Unlike Gene Autry, Nelson has cultivated an “outsider” image—for example, promoting the legalization of marijuana.

I grew up dreaming of being a cowboy.
Cowboys are special with their own brand of misery
And loving the cowboy ways
From being alone too long.
5 Pursuing the life of my high riding heroes
You could die from the cold in the arms of a nightmare.
I burned up my childhood days.
Knowing well that your best days are gone
I learned all the rules of modern-day drifter
10 Picking up hookers instead of my pen.
Don’t you hold on to nothing too long.
I let the words of my youth fade away.
Just take what you need from the ladies and leave them
Old worn-out saddles and old worn-out memories.
15 With the words of a sad country song.
With no one and no place to stay.
Chorus: My heroes have always been cowboys
And they still are it seems
Sadly in search of and one step in back of
20 Themselves and their slow-moving dreams.

FREEWITING ASSIGNMENT

Spend five minutes freewriting about your response to the Cowboy Code and the lyrics from Nelson’s song. Which depiction seems closer to your image of “the cowboy”—the hero or the outsider? Could you follow Autry’s code in your daily life? Would you want to? Do you?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the Cowboy Code reiterate other American codes—those of Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the medical professional, military personnel? What do these codes tell us about how we define ourselves? How does Nelson’s song rebut the codes? What does it tell us about how we define ourselves?

2. How does the Cowboy Code reiterate or revise the chivalrous codes of English knights? What do the similarities and differences tell us about how we define ourselves?
3. Is there any room for women or minorities in the Cowboy Code—or in the song? What does your answer tell us about cultural stereotypes of heroism?
4. How has the feminist movement contributed to a revision of heroic codes? Consider the “damsel in distress” and the emergence of female heroes.
5. Has there been an antifeminist backlash in the production of heroes, in heroic ideals? Consider the attitudes of modern-day heroes toward women and the ways in which female heroes are depicted. Offer some specific examples around which to organize your argument.
6. In small groups, write ten commandments for contemporary heroes, based on the behavior and attributes of heroes depicted in popular culture—in films, television, comic strips, wrestling, and contemporary literature.
7. In small groups, write a “song” that illustrates the reality of the hero you depict in number 6 above.
8. How does “machismo” in contemporary culture extend or alter the Cowboy Code? Is “machismo” reiterated in “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys”?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Find some magazine advertisements or film stills that reinforce the Cowboy Code and create a collage demonstrating that the code of the Old West is alive and well in the twenty-first century.
2. View some World War II era, cold war era, and Vietnam era Westerns and summarize the changes in the heroic code depicted. Prepare a poster presentation showing the changes and attempting to account for them.
3. How have Western films changed over time? View films such as *Stagecoach*, *Shane*, and *High Noon* and measure them against a Western by Clint Eastwood or a film such as *The Wild Bunch*. Create an illustrated timeline showing how the Cowboy Code has been reinvented and how the times in which these films were produced might have contributed to this reinvention.
4. Another popular film genre has been the detective film. With a group of your classmates, view some detective films such as *The Big Sleep*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Create an image text demonstrating that the code of the detective is an outgrowth of the code of the West. Do Black and other men of color fit in?
5. Research the history of the conditions and lives of real cowboys. How much is Autry’s code a Hollywood invention? How close to real cowboys is Nelson’s depiction? Prepare a PowerPoint presentation showing the

connections between your research findings and Autry's and Nelson's portrayals.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write your own hero code—listing the qualities you think make you an ideal woman or man. Then, write an essay attempting to determine how you developed your ideas—from your parents, your schooling, your peers.
2. Choose one of the ten commandments for contemporary heroes from the group work assigned above, and create a video that supports the commandment, using specific examples from popular culture to reinforce your ideas.
3. Write an essay or create an image text or hypertext that argues for the impossibility of Autry's code in contemporary society, and assert whether you consider this impossibility positive or negative. Support your claims.
4. Write an essay in which you argue that the long-term popularity of country western music reflects a cultural desire for the preservation of the Cowboy Code.

TOM JUNOD

Can You Say . . . “Hero”?

For over 30 years Mister Rogers has been one of the most popular day-time children's shows on TV. Fred Rogers dons his comfortable sweater, invites his viewers to become part of his neighborhood, and teaches them how to like themselves and each other. Tom Junod's interviews with Rogers reveal his missionary zeal, his unrelenting dedication to righting the wrongs of contemporary culture through its most effective medium, television. Through meeting Mister Rogers, Junod undergoes a personal revelation and in this essay paints him as a hero. Junod's essay offers us additional ways to consider the heroic concept. Describing himself as a “writer at large,” Junod has published controversial and award-winning articles on abortion, Kevin Spacey, and other subjects.

Once upon a time, a little boy loved a stuffed animal whose name was Old Rabbit. It was so old, in fact, that it was really an unstuffed animal; so old that even back then, with the little boy's brain still nice and fresh, he had no memory of it as “Young Rabbit,” or even “Rabbit”: so old that Old Rabbit was barely a rabbit at all but rather a greasy hunk of skin without eyes and ears, with a single red stitch where its tongue used to be. The little boy didn't

know why he loved Old Rabbit he just did, and the night he threw it out the car window was the night he learned how to pray. He would grow up to become a great prayer, this little boy, but only intermittently, only fitfully, praying only when fear and desperation drove him to it, and the night he threw Old Rabbit into the darkness was the night that set the pattern, the night that taught him how. He prayed for Old Rabbit’s safe return, and when, hours later, his mother and father came home with the filthy, precious strip of rabbit road-kill, he learned not only that prayers are sometimes answered but also the kind of severe effort they entail, the kind of endless frantic summoning. And so when he threw Old Rabbit out the car window the next time, it was gone for good.

* * *

You were a child once, too. That’s what Mister Rogers said, that’s what he wrote down, once upon a time, for the doctors. The doctors were ophthalmologists. An ophthalmologist is a doctor who takes care of the eyes. Sometimes, ophthalmologists have to take care of the eyes of children, and some children get very scared, because children know that their world disappears when their eyes close, and they can be afraid that the ophthalmologists will make their eyes close forever. The ophthalmologists did not want to scare children, so they asked Mister Rogers for help, and Mister Rogers agreed to write a chapter for a book the ophthalmologists were putting together—a chapter about what other ophthalmologists could do to calm the children who came to their offices. Because Mister Rogers is such a busy man, however, he could not write the chapter himself, and he asked a woman who worked for him to write it instead. She worked very hard at writing the chapter, until one day she showed what she had written to Mister Rogers, who read it and crossed it all out and wrote a sentence addressed directly to the doctors who would be reading it: “You were a child once, too.”

And that’s how the chapter began.

* * *

The old navy-blue sport jacket comes off first, then the dress shoes, except that now there is not the famous sweater or the famous sneakers to replace them, and so after the shoes he’s on to the dark socks, peeling them off and showing the blanched skin of his narrow feet. The tie is next, the scanty black batwing of a bow tie hand-tied at his slender throat, and then the shirt, always white or light blue, whisked from his body button by button. He wears an undershirt, of course, but no matter—soon that’s gone, too, as is the belt, as are the beige trousers, until his undershorts stand as the last impediment to his nakedness. They are boxers, egg-colored, and to rid himself of them he bends at the waist, and stands on one leg, and hops, and lifts one knee toward his chest and then the other and then . . . Mister Rogers has no clothes on.

5 Nearly every morning of his life, Mister Rogers has gone swimming, and now, here he is, standing in a locker room, seventy years old and as white as the Easter Bunny, rimed with frost wherever he has hair, gnawed pink in the spots where his dry skin has gone to flaking, slightly wattled at the neck, slight lily stooped at the shoulder, slightly sunken in the chest, slightly curvy at the hips, slightly pigeoned at the toes, slightly aswing at the fine bobbing nest of himself . . . and yet when he speaks, it is in that voice, his voice, the famous one, the unmistakable one, the televised one, the voice dressed in sweater and sneakers, the soft

one, the reassuring one, the curious and expository one, the sly voice that sounds adult to the ears of children and childish to the ears of adults, and what he says, in the midst of all his bobbing-nudity, is as understated as it is obvious: "Well, Tom, I guess you've already gotten a deeper glimpse into my daily routine than most people have."

* * *

Once upon a time, a long time ago, a man took off his jacket and put on a sweater. Then he took off his shoes and put on a pair of sneakers. His name was Fred Rogers. He was starting a television program, aimed at children, called *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. He had been on television before, but only as the voices and movements of puppets, on a program called *The Children's Corner*. Now he was stepping in front of the camera as Mister Rogers, and he wanted to do things right, and whatever he did right, he wanted to repeat. And so, once upon a time, Fred Rogers took off his jacket and put on a sweater his mother had made him, a cardigan with a zipper. Then he took off his shoes and put on a pair of navy-blue canvas boating sneakers. He did the same thing the next day, and then the next . . . until he had done the same things, those things, 865 times, at the beginning of 865 television programs, over a span of thirty-one years. The first time I met Mister Rogers, he told me a story of how deeply his simple gestures had been felt, and received. He had just come back from visiting Koko, the gorilla who has learned—or who has been taught—American Sign Language. Koko watches television. Koko watches *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and when Mister Rogers, in his sweater and sneakers, entered the place where she lives, Koko immediately folded him in her long, black arms, as though he were a child, and then . . . "She took my shoes off, Tom," Mister Rogers said.

Koko was much bigger than Mister Rogers. She weighed 280 pounds, and Mister Rogers weighed 143. Koko weighed 280 pounds because she is a gorilla, and Mister Rogers weighed 143 pounds because he has weighed 143 pounds as long as he has been Mister Rogers, because once upon a time, around thirty-one years ago, Mister Rogers stepped on a scale, and the scale told him that Mister Rogers weighs 143 pounds. No, not that he weighed 143 pounds, but that he weighs 143 pounds. . . . And so, every day, Mister Rogers refuses to do anything that would make his weight change—he neither drinks, nor smokes, nor eats flesh of any kind, nor goes to bed late at night, nor sleeps late in the morning, nor even watches television—and every morning, when he swims, he steps on a scale in his bathing suit and his bathing cap and his goggles, and the scale tells him he weighs 143 pounds. This has happened so many times that Mister Rogers has come to see that number as a gift, as a destiny fulfilled, because, as he says, "the number 143 means 'I love you.' It takes one letter to say 'I' and four letters to say 'love' and three letters to say 'you.' One hundred and forty-three. 'I love you.' Isn't that wonderful?"

* * *

The first time I called Mister Rogers on the telephone, I woke him up from his nap. He takes a nap every day in the late afternoon—just as he wakes up every morning at five-thirty to read and study and write and pray for the legions who have requested his prayers; just as he goes to bed at nine-thirty at night and sleeps eight hours without interruption. On this afternoon, the end of a hot, yellow day in New York City, he was very tired, and when I asked if I could go to his apartment and see him, he paused for a moment and said shyly, "Well, Tom, I'm in my bathrobe, if you don't mind." I told him I didn't mind, and when,

five minutes later, I took the elevator to his floor, well, sure enough, there was Mister Rogers, silver-haired, standing in the golden door at the end of the hallway and wearing eyeglasses and suede moccasins with rawhide laces and a flimsy old blue-and-yellow bathrobe that revealed whatever part of his skinny white calves his dark-blue dress socks didn't hide. "Welcome, Tom," he said with a slight bow, and bade me follow him inside, where he lay down—no, stretched out, as though he had known me all his life—on a couch upholstered with gold velveteen; He rested his head on a small pillow and kept his eyes closed while he explained that he had bought the apartment thirty years before for \$11,000 and kept it for whenever he came to New York on business for the Neighborhood. I sat in an old armchair and looked around. The place was drab and dim, with the smell of stalled air and a stain of daguerreotype sunlight on its closed, slatted blinds, and Mister Rogers looked so at home in its gloomy familiarity that I thought he was going to fall back asleep when suddenly the phone rang, startling him. "Oh, hello, my dear," he said when he picked it up, and then he said that he had a visitor, someone who wanted to learn more about the Neighborhood. "Would you like to speak to him?" he asked, and then handed me the phone; "It's Joanne," he said. I took the phone and spoke to a woman—his wife, the mother of his two sons—whose voice was hearty and almost whooping in its forthrightness and who spoke to me as though she had known me for a long time and was making the effort to keep up the acquaintance. When I handed him back the phone, he said, "Bye, my dear," and hung up and curled on the couch like a cat, with his bare calves swirled underneath him and one of his hands gripping his ankle, so that he looked as languorous as an odalisque. There was an energy to him, however, a fearlessness, an unashamed insistence on intimacy, and though I tried to ask him questions about himself, he always turned the questions back on me, and when I finally got him to talk about the puppets that were the comfort of his lonely boyhood, he looked at me, his gray-blue eyes at once mild and steady; and asked, "What about you, Tom? Did you have any special friends growing up?"

"Special friends?"

- 10 "Yes," he said. "Maybe a puppet, or a special toy, or maybe just a stuffed animal you loved very much. Did you have a special friend like that, Tom?"

"Yes, Mister Rogers."

"Did your special friend have a name, Tom?"

"Yes, Mister Rogers. His name was Old Rabbit."

"Old Rabbit. Oh, and I'll bet the two of you were together since he was a very young rabbit. Would you like to tell me about Old Rabbit, Tom?"

- 15 And it was just about then, when I was spilling the beans about my special friend, that Mister Rogers rose from his corner of the couch and stood suddenly in front of me with a small black camera in hand. "Can I take your picture, Tom?" he asked. "I'd like to take your picture. I like to take pictures of all my new friends, so that I can show them to Joanne. . . ." And then, in the dark room, there was a wallop of white light, and Mister Rogers disappeared behind it.



Once upon a time, there was a boy who didn't like himself very much. It was not his fault. He was born with cerebral palsy. Cerebral palsy is something that happens to the brain. It means that you can think but sometimes can't walk, or even talk. This boy had a

very bad case of cerebral palsy, and when he was still a little boy; some of the people entrusted to take care of him took advantage of him instead and did things to him that made him think that he was a very bad little boy, because only a bad little boy would have to live with the things he had to live with. In fact, when the little boy grew up to be a teenager, he would get so mad at himself that he would hit himself, hard, with his own fists and tell his mother, on the computer he used for a mouth, that he didn't want to live anymore, for he was sure that God didn't like what was inside him any more than he did. He had always loved Mister Rogers, though, and now, even when he was fourteen years old, he watched the Neighborhood whenever it was on, and the boy's mother sometimes thought that Mister Rogers was keeping her son alive. She and the boy lived together in a city in California, and although she wanted very much for her son to meet Mister Rogers, she knew that he was far too disabled to travel all the way to Pittsburgh, so she figured he would never meet his hero, until one day she learned through a special foundation designed to help children like her son that Mister Rogers was coming to California and that after he visited the gorilla named Koko, he was coming to meet her son.

At first, the boy was made very nervous by the thought that Mister Rogers was visiting him. He was so nervous, in fact, that when Mister Rogers did visit, he got mad at himself and began hating himself and hitting himself, and his mother had to take him to another room and talk to him. Mister Rogers didn't leave, though. He wanted something from the boy, and Mister Rogers never leaves when he wants something from somebody. He just waited patiently; and when the boy came back, Mister Rogers talked to him, and then he made his request. He said, "I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?" On his computer, the boy answered yes, of course, he would do anything for Mister Rogers, so then Mister Rogers said, "I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?" And now the boy didn't know how to respond. He was thunderstruck. Thunderstruck means that you can't talk, because something has happened that's as sudden and as miraculous and maybe as scary as a bolt of lightning, and all you can do is listen to the rumble. The boy was thunderstruck because nobody had ever asked him for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed for. The boy had always been the object of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mister Rogers, and although at first he didn't know if he could do it, he said he would, he said he'd try, and ever since then he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn't talk about wanting to die anymore, because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, that must mean God likes him, too.

As for Mister Rogers himself . . . well, he doesn't look at the story in the same way that the boy did or that I did. In fact, when Mister Rogers first told me the story, I complimented him on being so smart—for knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself—and Mister Rogers responded by looking at me at first with puzzlement and then with surprise. "Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn't ask him for his prayers for him; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his intercession."



On December 1, 1997—oh, heck, once upon a time—a boy, no longer little, told his friends to watch out, that he was going to do something "really big" the next day at school,

and the next day at school he took his gun and his ammo and his earplugs and shot eight classmates who had clustered for a prayer meeting. Three died, and they were still children, almost. The shootings took place in West Paducah, Kentucky, and when Mister Rogers heard about them, he said, "Oh, wouldn't the world be a different place if he had said, 'I'm going to do something really little tomorrow,'" and he decided to dedicate a week of the Neighborhood to the theme "Little and Big." He wanted to tell children that what starts out little can sometimes become big, and so they could devote themselves to little dreams without feeling bad about them. But how could Mister Rogers show little becoming big, and vice versa? That was a challenge. He couldn't just say it, the way he could always just say to the children who watch his program that they are special to him, or even sing it, the way he could always just sing "It's You I Like" and "Everybody's Fancy" and "It's Such a Good Feeling" and "Many Ways to Say I Love You" and "Sometimes People Are Good." No, he had to show it, he had to demonstrate it, and that's how Mister Rogers and the people who work for him eventually got the idea of coming to New York City to visit a woman named Maya Lin.

20 Maya Lin is a famous architect. Architects are people who create big things from the little designs they draw on pieces of paper. Most famous architects are famous for creating big famous buildings, but Maya Lin is more famous for creating big fancy things for people to look at, and in fact, when Mister Rogers had gone to her studio the day before, he looked at the pictures she had drawn of the clock that is now on the ceiling of a place in New York called Penn Station. A clock is a machine that tells people what time it is, but as Mister Rogers sat in the backseat of an old station wagon hired to take him from his apartment to Penn Station, he worried that Maya Lin's clock might be too fancy and that the children who watch the Neighborhood might not understand it. Mister Rogers always worries about things like that, because he always worries about children, and when his station wagon stopped in traffic next to a bus stop, he read aloud the advertisement of an airline trying to push its international service. "Hmmm," Mister Rogers said, "that's a strange ad. 'Most people think of us as a great domestic airline. We hate that.' Hmmm. Hate is such a strong word to use so lightly. If they can hate something like that, you wonder how easy it would be for them to hate something more important." He was with his producer, Margy Whitmer. He had makeup on his face and a dollop of black dye combed into his silver hair. He was wearing beige pants, a blue dress shirt, a tie, dark socks, a pair of dark-blue boating sneakers, and a purple, zippered cardigan. He looked very little in the backseat of the car. Then the car stopped on Thirty-fourth Street, in front of the escalators leading down to the station, and when the doors opened—

"Holy shit! It's Mister Fucking Rogers!"

—he turned into Mister Fucking Rogers. This was not a bad thing, however, because he was in New York, and in New York it's not an insult to be called Mister Fucking Anything. In fact, it's an honorific. An honorific is what people call you when they respect you, and the moment Mister Rogers got out of the car, people wouldn't stay the fuck away from him, they respected him so much. Oh, Margy Whitmer tried to keep people away from him, tried to tell people that if they gave her their names and addresses, Mister Rogers would send them an autographed picture, but every time she turned around, there was Mister Rogers putting his arms around someone, or wiping the tears off someone's cheek, or passing around the picture of someone's child, or getting on his knees to talk to a child. Margy

couldn't stop them, and she couldn't stop him. "Oh, Mister Rogers, thank you for my childhood," "Oh, Mister Rogers, you're the father I never had." "Oh, Mister Rogers, would you please just hug me?" After a while, Margy just rolled her eyes and gave up, because it's always like this with Mister Rogers, because the thing that people don't understand about him is that he's greedy for this—greedy for the grace that people offer him. What is grace? He doesn't even know. He can't define it. This is a man who loves the simplifying force of definitions, and yet all he knows of grace is how he gets it; all he knows is that he gets it from God, through man. And so in Penn Station, where he was surrounded by men and women and children, he had this power, like a comic-book superhero who absorbs the energy of others until he bursts out of his shirt.

"If Mister Fucking Rogers can tell me how to read that fucking clock, I'll watch his show every day for a fucking year—" that's what someone in the crowd said while watching Mister Rogers and Maya Lin crane their necks at Maya Lin's big fancy clock, but it didn't even matter whether Mister Rogers could read the clock or not, because every time he looked at it, with the television cameras on him, he leaned back from his waist and opened his mouth wide with astonishment, like someone trying to catch a peanut he had tossed into the air, until it became clear that Mister Rogers could show that he was astonished all day if he had to, or even forever, because Mister Rogers lives in a state of astonishment, and the astonishment he showed when he looked at the clock was the same astonishment he showed when people—absolute strangers—walked up to him and fed his hungry ear with their whispers, and he turned to me, with an open, abashed mouth, and said, "Oh, Tom, if you could only hear the stories I hear!"



Once upon a time, Mister Rogers went to New York City and got caught in the rain. He didn't have an umbrella, and he couldn't find a taxi, either, so he ducked with a friend into the subway and got on one of the trains. It was late in the day, and the train was crowded with children who were going home from school. Though of all races, the schoolchildren were mostly black and Latino, and they didn't even approach Mister Rogers and ask him for his autograph. They just sang. They sang, all at once, all together, the song he sings at the start of his program, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" and turned the clattering train into a single soft, runaway choir.



25 He finds me, of course, at Penn Station. He finds me, because that's what Mister Rogers does—he looks, and then he finds. I'm standing against a wall, listening to a bunch of mooks from Long Island discuss the strange word— . . . he has written down on each of the autographs he gave them. First mook: "He says it's the Greek word for grace." Second mook: "Huh. That's cool. I'm glad I know that. Now, what the fuck is grace?" First mook: "Looks like you're gonna have to break down and buy a dictionary." Second mook: "Fuck that. What I'm buying is a ticket to the fucking Lotto. I just met Mister Rogers—this is definitely my lucky day." I'm listening to these guys when, from thirty feet away, I notice Mister Rogers looking around for someone and know, immediately, that he is looking for me. He is on one knee in front of a little girl who is hoarding, in her arms, a small stuffed animal, sky-blue, a bunny.

“Remind you of anyone, Tom?” he says when I approach the two of them. He is not speaking of the little girl.

“Yes, Mister Rogers.”

“Looks a little bit like . . . Old Rabbit, doesn’t it, Tom?”

“Yes, Mister Rogers.”

30 “I thought so.” Then he turns back to the little girl. “This man’s name is Tom. When he was your age, he had a rabbit, too, and he loved it very much. Its name was Old Rabbit. What is yours named?”

The little girl eyes me suspiciously, and then Mister Rogers. She goes a little knock-kneed, directs a thumb toward her mouth. “Bunny Wunny,” she says.

“Oh, that’s a nice name,” Mister Rogers says, and then goes to the Thirty-fourth Street escalator to climb it one last time for the cameras. When he reaches the street, he looks right at the lens, as he always does, and says, speaking of the Neighborhood, “Let’s go back to my place,” and then makes a right turn toward Seventh Avenue, except that this time he just keeps going, and suddenly Margy Whitmer is saying, “Where is Fred? Where is Fred?” and Fred, he’s a hundred yards away: in his sneakers and his purple sweater, and the only thing anyone sees of him is his gray head bobbing up and down amid all the other heads, the hundreds of them, the thousands, the millions, disappearing into the city and its swelter.



Once upon a time, a little boy with a big sword went into battle against Mister Rogers. Or maybe, if the truth be told, Mister Rogers went into battle against a little boy with a big sword, for Mister Rogers didn’t like the big sword. It was one of those swords that really isn’t a sword at all; it was a big plastic contraption with lights and sound effects, and it was the kind of sword used in defense of the universe by the heroes of the television shows that the little boy liked to watch. The little boy with the big sword did not watch Mister Rogers. In fact, the little boy with the big sword didn’t know who Mister Rogers was, and so when Mister Rogers knelt down in front of him, the little boy with the big sword looked past him and through him, and when Mister Rogers said, “Oh, my; that’s a big sword you have,” the boy didn’t answer, and finally his mother got embarrassed and said, “Oh, honey, c’mon, that’s Mister Rogers,” and felt his head for fever. Of course, she knew who Mister Rogers was, because she had grown up with him, and she knew that he was good for her son, and so now, with her little boy zombie-eyed under his blond bangs, she apologized, saying to Mister Rogers that she knew he was in a rush and that she knew he was here in Penn Station taping his program and that her son usually wasn’t like this, he was probably just tired. . . . Except that Mister Rogers wasn’t going anywhere. Yes, sure, he was taping, and right there, in Penn Station in New York City, were [throng]s of other children wiggling in wait for him, but right now his patient gray eyes were fixed on the little boy with the big sword, and so he stayed there, on one knee, until the little boy’s eyes finally focused on Mister Rogers, and he said, “It’s not a sword; it’s a death ray.” A death ray! Oh, honey, Mommy knew you could do it. . . . And so now, encouraged, Mommy said, “Do you want to give Mister Rogers a hug, honey?” But the boy was shaking his head no, and Mister Rogers was sneaking his face past the big sword and the armor of the little boy’s eyes and whispering something in his ear—something that, while not changing his mind about the hug, made

the little boy look at Mister Rogers in a new way, with the eyes of a child at last, and nod his head yes.

We were heading back to his apartment in a taxi when I asked him what he had said.

35 "Oh, I just know that whenever you see a little boy carrying something like that, it means that he wants to show people that he's strong on the outside.

"I just wanted to let him know that he was strong on the inside, too.

"And so that's what I told him.

"I said, 'Do you know that you're strong on the inside, too?'

"Maybe it was something he needed to hear."

40 He was barely more than a boy himself when he learned what he would be fighting for, and fighting against, for the rest of his life. He was in college. He was a music major at a small school in Florida and planning to go to seminary upon graduation. His name was Fred Rogers. He came home to Latrobe, Pennsylvania, once upon a time, and his parents, because they were wealthy, had bought something new for the corner room of their big redbrick house. It was a television. Fred turned it on, and, as he says now, with plaintive distaste, "there were people throwing pies at one another." He was the soft son of overprotective parents, but he believed, right then, that he was strong enough to enter into battle with that—that machine, that medium—and to wrestle with it until it yielded to him, until the ground touched by its blue shadow became hallowed and this thing called television came to be used "for the broadcasting of grace through the land." It would not be easy, no—for in order to win such a battle, he would have to forbid himself the privilege of stopping, and whatever he did right he would have to repeat, as though he were already living in eternity. And so it was that the puppets he employed on *The Children's Corner* would be the puppets he employed forty-four years later, and so it was that once he took off his jacket and his shoes . . . well, he was Mister Rogers for good. And even now, when he is producing only three weeks' worth of new programs a year, he still winds up agonizing—agonizing—about whether to announce his theme as "Little and Big" or "Big and Little" and still makes only two edits per televised minute, because he doesn't want his message to be determined by the cuts and splices in a piece of tape—to become, despite all his fierce coherence, "a message of fragmentation."

He is losing, of course. The revolution he started—a half hour a day, five days a week—it wasn't enough, it didn't spread, and so, forced to fight his battles alone, Mister Rogers is losing, as we all are losing. He is losing to it, to our twenty-four-hour-a-day pie fight, to the dizzying cut and the disorienting edit, to the message of fragmentation, to the flicker and pulse and shudder and strobe, to the constant, hivey drone of the electroculture . . . and yet still he fights, deathly afraid that the medium he chose is consuming the very things he tried to protect: childhood and silence. Yes, at seventy years old and 143 pounds, Mister Rogers still fights, and indeed, early this year, when television handed him its highest honor, he responded by telling television—gently, of course—to just shut up for once, and television listened. He had already won his third Daytime Emmy, and now he went onstage to accept Emmy's Lifetime Achievement Award, and there, in front of all the soap-opera stars and talk-show sinceratrons, in front of all the jutting man-tanned jaws and jutting saltwater bosoms, he made his small bow and said into the microphone, "All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are. . . . Ten seconds of

silence.” And then he lifted his wrist, and looked at the audience, and looked at his watch, and said softly, “I’ll watch the time,” and there was, at first, a small whoop from the crowd, a giddy, strangled hiccup of laughter, as people realized that he wasn’t kidding, that Mister Rogers was not some convenient eunuch but rather a man, an authority figure who actually expected them to do what he asked . . . and so they did. One second, two seconds, three seconds . . . and now the jaws clenched, and the bosoms heaved, and the mascara ran, and the tears fell upon the beglittered gathering like rain leaking down a crystal chandelier, and Mister Rogers finally looked up from his watch and said, “May God be with you” to all his vanquished children.

* * *

Once upon a time, there was a little boy born blind, and so, defenseless in the world, he suffered the abuses of the defenseless, and when he grew up and became a man, he looked back and realized that he’d had no childhood at all, and that if he were ever to have a childhood, he would have to start having it now, in his forties. So the first thing he did was rechristen himself “Joybubbles”: the second thing he did was declare himself five years old forever, and the third thing he did was make a pilgrimage to Pittsburgh, where the University of Pittsburgh’s Information Sciences Library keeps a Mister Rogers archive. It has all 865 programs, in both color and black and white, and for two months this past spring, Joybubbles went to the library every day for ten hours and watched the Neighborhood’s every episode, plus specials—or, since he is blind, listened to every episode, imagined every episode. Until one night, Mister Rogers came to him, in what he calls a visitation—“I was dreaming, but I was awake”—and offered to teach him how to pray.

“But Mister Rogers, I can’t pray,” Joybubbles said, “because every time I try to pray, I forget the words.”

“I know that,” Mister Rogers said, “and that’s why the prayer I’m going to teach you has only three words.”

45 “What prayer is that, Mister Rogers? What kind of prayer has only three words?”

“Thank you, God,” Mister Rogers said.

* * *

The walls of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood are light blue and fleeced with clouds. They are tall—as tall as the cinder-block walls they are designed to hide—and they encompass the Neighborhood’s entire stage set, from the flimsy yellow house where Mister Rogers comes to visit, to the closet where he finds his sweaters, to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, where he goes to dream. The blue walls are the ends of the daylight universe he has made, and yet Mister Rogers can’t see them—or at least can’t know them—because he was born blind to color. He doesn’t know the color of his walls, and one day when I caught him looking toward his painted skies, I asked him to tell me what color they are, and he said, “I imagine they’re blue, Tom.” Then he looked at me and smiled. “I imagine they’re blue.”

He has spent thirty-one years imagining and reimagining those walls—the walls that have both penned him in and set him free. You would think it would be easy by now, being Mister Rogers; you would think that one morning he would wake up and think, Okay, all I have to do is be nice for my allotted half hour today, and then I’ll just take the rest of the day off. . . . But no, Mister Rogers is a stubborn man, and so on the day I ask about the color

of his sky, he has already gotten up at five-thirty, already prayed for those who have asked for his prayers, already read, already written, already swum, already weighed himself, already sent out cards for the birthdays he never forgets, already called any number of people who depend on him for comfort, already cried when he read the letter of a mother whose child was buried with a picture of Mister Rogers in his casket, already played for twenty minutes with an autistic boy who has come, with his father, all the way from Boise, Idaho, to meet him. The boy had never spoken, until one day he said, "X the Owl," which is the name of one of Mister Rogers's puppets, and he had never looked his father in the eye until one day his father had said, "Let's go to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe," and now the boy is speaking and reading, and the father has come to thank Mister Rogers for saving his son's life. . . . And by this time, well, it's nine-thirty in the morning, time for Mister Rogers to take off his jacket and his shoes and put on his sweater and his sneakers and start taping another visit to the Neighborhood. He writes all his own scripts, but on this day when he receives a visit from Mrs. McFeely and a springer spaniel, she says that she has to bring the dog "back to his owner," and Mister Rogers makes a face. The cameras stop, and he says, "I don't like the word owner there. It's not a good word. Let's change it to "bring the dog home." And so the change is made, and the taping resumes, and this is how it goes all day a life unfolding within a clasp of unfathomable governance, and once, when I lose sight of him, I ask Margy Whitmer where he is, and she says, "Right over your shoulder, where he always is," and when I turn around, Mister Rogers is facing me, child-stealthy with a small black camera in his hand, to take another picture for the album that he will give me when I take my leave of him.

Yes, it should be easy being Mister Rogers, but when four o'clock rolls around, well, Mister Rogers is tired, and so he sneaks over to the piano and starts playing, with dexterous, pale fingers, the music that used to end a 1940s newsreel and that has now become the music he plays to signal to the cast and crew that a day's taping has wrapped. On this day, however, he is premature by a considerable extent, and so Margy, who has been with Mister Rogers since 1983—because nobody who works for Mister Rogers ever leaves the Neighborhood—comes running over, papers in hand, and says, "Not so fast there, buster."

50 "Oh, please, sister," Mister Rogers says. "I'm done."

And now Margy comes up behind him and massages his shoulders, "No, you're not," she says. "Roy Rogers is done. Mister Rogers still has a ways to go."



He was a child once, too, and so one day I asked him if I could go with him back to Latrobe. He thought about it for a second, then said, by way of agreement, "Okay then—tomorrow, Tom, I'll show you childhood." Not his childhood, mind you, or even a childhood—no, just "childhood." And so the next morning, we swam together, and then he put back on his boxer shorts and the dark socks, and the T-shirt, and the gray trousers, and the belt, and then the white dress shirt and the black bow tie and the gray suit jacket, and about two hours later we were pulling up to the big brick house on Weldon Street in Latrobe, and Mister Rogers was thinking about going inside.

There was nobody home. The doors were open, unlocked, because the house was undergoing a renovation of some kind, but the owners were away, and Mister Rogers's boyhood home was empty of everyone but workmen. "Do you think we can go in?" he asked

Bill Isler, president of Family Communications, the company that produces Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Bill had driven us there, and now, sitting behind the wheel of his red Grand Cherokee, he was full of remonstrance. "No!" he said. "Fred, they're not home. If we wanted to go into the house, we should have called first. Fred . . ." But Mister Rogers was out of the car, with his camera in his hand and his legs moving so fast that the material of his gray suit pants furred and unfurled around both of his skinny legs, like flags exploding in a breeze. And here, as he made his way through thickets of bewildered workmen—this skinny old man dressed in a gray suit and a bow tie, with his hands on his hips and his arms akimbo, like a dance instructor—there was some kind of wiggly jazz in his legs, and he went flying all around the outside of the house, pointing at windows, saying there was the room where he learned to play the piano, and there was the room where he saw the pie fight on a primitive television, and there was the room where his beloved father died . . . until finally we reached the front door. He put his hand on the knob; he cracked it open, but then, with Bill Isler calling caution from the car, he said, "Maybe we shouldn't go in. And all the people who made this house special to me are not here, anyway. They're all in heaven."

And so we went to the graveyard. We were heading there all along, because Mister Rogers loves graveyards, and so as we took the long, straight road out of sad, fading Latrobe, you could still feel the speed in him, the hurry, as he mustered up a sad anticipation, and when we passed through the cemetery gates, he smiled as he said to Bill Isler, "The plot's at the end of the yellow-brick road." And so it was; the asphalt ended, and then we began bouncing over a road of old blond bricks, until even that road ended, and we were parked in front of the place where Mister Rogers is to be buried. He got out of the car, and, moving as quickly as he had moved to the door of his house, he stepped up a small hill to the door of a large gray mausoleum, a huge structure built for six, with a slightly peaked roof, and bronze doors, and angels living in the stained glass. He peaked in the window, and in the same voice he uses on television, that voice, at once so patient and so eager, he pointed out each crypt, saying, "There's my father, and there's my mother, and there, on the left, is my place, and right across will be Joanne. . . ." The window was of darkened glass, though, and so to see through it, we had to press our faces close against it, and where the glass had warped away from the frame of the door—where there was a finger-wide crack—Mister Roger's voice leaked into his grave, and came back to us as a soft, hollow echo.

55 And then he was on the move again, happily, quickly, for he would not leave until he showed me all the places of all those who'd loved him into being. His grandfather, his grandmother, his uncles, his aunts, his father-in-law and mother-in-law, even his family's servants—he went to each grave, and spoke their names, and told their stories, until finally I headed back down to the Jeep and turned back around to see Mister Rogers standing high on a green dell, smiling among the stones. "And now if you don't mind," he said without a hint of shame or embarrassment, "I have to go find a place to relieve myself," and then off he went, this ecstatic ascetic, to take a proud piss in his corner of heaven.



Once upon a time, a man named Fred Rogers decided that he wanted to live in heaven. Heaven is the place where good people go when they die, but this man, Fred Rogers, didn't want to go to heaven; he wanted to live in heaven, here, now, in this world, and so one day, when he was talking about all the people he had loved in this

life, he looked at me and said, “The connections we make in the course of a life—maybe that’s what heaven is, Tom. We make so many connections here on earth. Look at us—I’ve just met you, but I’m invested in who you are and who you will be, and I can’t help it.”

The next afternoon, I went to his office in Pittsburgh. He was sitting on a couch, under a framed rendering of the Greek word for grace and a biblical phrase written in Hebrew that means “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine.” A woman was with him, sitting in a big chair. Her name was Deb. She was very pretty. She had a long face and a dark blush to her skin. She had curls in her hair and stars at the centers of her eyes. She was a minister at Fred Rogers’s church. She spent much of her time tending to the sick and the dying. Fred Rogers loved her very much, and so, out of nowhere, he smiled and put his hand over hers. “Will you be with me when I die?” he asked her, and when she said yes, he said, “Oh, thank you, my dear.” Then, with his hand still over hers and his eyes looking straight into hers, he said, “Deb, do you know what a great prayer you are? Do you know that about yourself? Your prayers are just wonderful.” Then he looked at me. I was sitting in a small chair by the door, and he said, “Tom, would you close the door, please?” I closed the door and sat back down. “Thanks, my dear,” he said to me, then turned back to Deb. “Now, Deb, I’d like to ask you a favor,” he said. “Would you lead us? Would you lead us in prayer?”

Deb stiffened for a second, and she let out a breath, and her color got deeper. “Oh, I don’t know, Fred,” she said. “I don’t know if I want to put on a performance....”

Fred never stopped looking at her or let go of her hand. “It’s not a performance. It’s just a meeting of friends,” he said. He moved his hand from her wrist to her palm and extended his other hand to me. I took it, and then put my hand around her free hand. His hand was warm, hers was cool, and we bowed our heads, and closed our eyes, and I heard Deb’s voice calling out for the grace of God. What is grace? I’m not certain; all I know is that my heart felt like a spike, and then, in that room, it opened and felt like an umbrella. I had never prayed like that before, ever. I had always been a great prayer, a powerful one, but only fitfully, only out of guilt, only when fear and desperation drove me to it . . . and it hit me, right then, with my eyes closed, that this was the moment Fred Rogers—Mister Rogers—had been leading me to from the moment he answered the door of his apartment in his bathrobe and asked me about Old Rabbit. Once upon a time, you see, I lost something, and prayed to get it back, but when I lost it the second time, I didn’t, and now this was it, the missing word, the unuttered promise, the prayer I’d been waiting to say a very long time.

60 “Thank you, God,” Mister Rogers said.

FREEWITING ASSIGNMENT

Spend five minutes freewriting your response to this essay. Has your view of Mister Rogers been altered by this essay? reinforced?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Junod adopts the tone, style, and language of the TV show *Mister Rogers* to tell his very personal story about his encounters with Rogers. Does doing so make his essay more effective? Why or why not?

2. A religious theme runs through the essay. From the story of Old Rabbit to the concluding prayer, we learn that Rogers wants to live in heaven, “here, now, in this world.” What glimpses of heaven does the author achieve through his meetings with Mister Rogers?
3. How is the idea of grace demonstrated in the essay? What does grace have in common with heroic qualities?
4. What does Mister Rogers’s visit to New York tell us about his character? Why is the inclusion of this visit strategic to Junod’s thesis?
5. How would you formulate a definition of a hero based on Mister Rogers’s character? Does he appeal only to children?
6. Many people consider that Mister Rogers is so one-dimensionally sweet and caring as to be unrealistic. What do you think?
7. Can Mister Rogers be considered a talk show host? Why or why not?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Investigate some TV shows for children that have aired over the past few decades. How have they changed? How have they remained the same? Create an illustrated timeline showing the changes.
2. Focus on an important issue that concerns children—abuse, education, nutrition, divorce—and analyze how it is addressed in popular media designed for children. Create a collage to show your findings.
3. Watch some children’s TV shows. Do they express a heroic code that parallels Autry’s Cowboy Code? Do they have any heroes? If so, what are they like? Create an image text showing the various heroes of children’s TV.
4. With a group of your classmates, examine how cartoon shows for children have changed over the years. How has the education of children through this popular medium changed? Create an illustrated timeline showing the changes.
5. With a group of your classmates, investigate some psychological studies on the effects of video games and action heroes on children’s behavior. Prepare a debate arguing the pros and cons of video games and action heroes for children.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Comedian Eddie Murphy used to parody Mister Rogers on *Saturday Night Live* with a “Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood” skit set in a ghetto. Sketch a response to *Mister Rogers* using your family or a fictional family as your neighborhood.
2. Compare Mister Rogers’s model of heroism to another popular model.
3. Consider how *Mister Rogers* reinforces themes expressed in *Sesame Street* or some Disney films. Write an essay explaining the values communicated to children in these shows or films and discussing why they are important.
4. If you consider the themes expressed in 3 unrealistic or part of a cultural brainwashing, write an essay explaining your position.

JOSHUA B. FREEMAN

Working-Class Heroes

Joshua B. Freeman teaches history at Queen's College in New York City. He is the author of Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II and In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933–1966, and is also a frequent contributor to The Nation, where this article was first published.

The September 11 attack on the World Trade Center led journalists and image-makers to rediscover New York's working class. In an extraordinary essay in *Business Week* titled "Real Masters of the Universe," Bruce Nussbaum noted that during the rescue effort, "big, beefy working-class guys became heroes once again, replacing the telegenic financial analysts and techno-billionaires who once had held the nation in thrall." Nussbaum fulsomely praised "men and women making 40 grand a year . . . risking their own lives—to save investment bankers and traders making 10 times that amount." In *The New York Times Magazine*, Verlyn Klinkenborg, describing the construction workers who formed the second wave of rescuers, wrote, "A city of unsoiled and unroughened hands has learned to love a class of laborers it once tried hard not to notice."

Until September 11, working-class New Yorkers had disappeared from public portrayals and mental maps of Gotham. This contrasted sharply with the more distant past. When World War II ended, New York was palpably a working-class city. Within easy walking distance of what we now call ground zero were myriad sites of blue-collar labor, from a cigarette factory on Water Street to hundreds of small printing firms, to docks where longshoremen unloaded products from around the world, to commodity markets where the ownership of goods like coffee was not only exchanged, but the products themselves were stored and processed.

Much of what made post-World War II New York great came from the influence of its working class. Workers and their families helped pattern the fabric of the city with their culture, style and worldview. Through political and ethnic organizations, tenant and neighborhood associations and, above all, unions they helped create a social-democratic polity unique in the country in its ambition and achievements. New York City became a laboratory for a social urbanism committed to an expansive welfare state, racial equality and popular access to culture and education.

Over time, though, the influence and social presence of working-class New Yorkers faded, as manufacturing jobs disappeared, suburbanization dispersed city residents and anti-Communism made the language of class unacceptable. Then came the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, which saw a rapid shift of power to the corporate and banking elite. When the city recovered, with an economy and culture ever more skewed toward a narrow but enormously profitable financial sector, working-class New York seemed bleached out by the white light of new money.

5 The September 11 attack and the response to it have once again made working-class New Yorkers visible and appreciated. Not only were the rescuers working class, but so were

most of the victims. They were part of a working class that has changed since 1945, becoming more diverse in occupation, race and ethnicity. Killed that day, along with the fire, police and emergency medical workers, were accountants, clerks, secretaries, restaurant employees, janitors, security guards and electricians. Many financial firm victims, far from being mega-rich, were young traders and technicians, the grunts of the world capital markets.

The newfound appreciation of working-class New York creates an opening for insisting that decisions about rebuilding the city involve all social sectors. Whatever else it was, the World Trade Center was not a complex that grew out of a democratic city-planning process. We need to do better this time. Labor and community groups must be full partners in deciding what should be built and where, how precious public funds are allocated and what kinds of jobs—and job standards—are promoted. Some already have begun pushing for inclusion; others should begin doing so now.

In the coming weeks and months, we need to rethink the economic development strategies of the past half-century, which benefited many New Yorkers but did not serve others well. Might some of the recovery money be better spent on infrastructure support for local manufacturing, rather than on new office towers in lower Manhattan? And perhaps some should go to human capital investment, in schools, public health and much-needed housing, creating a work force and environment that would attract and sustain a variety of economic enterprises.

Winning even a modest voice for working-class New Yorkers in the reconstruction process won't be easy. Already, political and business leaders have called for appointing a rebuilding authority, empowered to circumvent zoning and environmental regulations and normal controls over public spending. The effect would be to deny ordinary citizens any role in shaping the city of the future. As the shameful airline bailout—which allocated no money to laid-off workers—so clearly demonstrated, inside operators with money and connections have the advantage in moments of confusion and urgency.

But altered perceptions of New York may change the usual calculus. On September 11, working-class New Yorkers were the heroes and the victims, giving them a strong moral claim on planning the future. Rightfully, they had that claim on September 10, too, even if few in power acknowledged it. It ought not require mass death to remind us who forms the majority of the city's population and who keeps it functioning, day after day after day.

FREEWRTING ASSIGNMENT

What do you associate with the working class? Do you normally associate heroism with working-class status? Why or why not?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is Freeman's intended audience for this piece? What expectations does he have about that audience's beliefs, politics, and knowledge of his subject matter?
2. What is Freeman's attitude toward the "rediscovery" of New York's working class? How do you know?

3. Freeman argues that “we need to rethink the economic development strategies of the past half-century, which benefited many New Yorkers but did not serve others well” and that “all social sectors” should be involved in “decisions about rebuilding the city.” Who does Freeman think has been left out of this process in the past? Why?
4. Who makes up the working class? Do you agree with Freeman that “on September 11, working-class New Yorkers were the heroes and the victims”? Would you group “accountants, clerks, secretaries, . . . young traders and technicians” along with “fire, police and emergency medical workers” in the working class, as Freeman does?
5. Freeman argues that “until September 11, working-class New Yorkers had disappeared from public portrayals and mental maps of Gotham.” Do you agree with this assessment? As a class, compile a list of the ways in which New York City has been portrayed in popular culture and consider whether those representations include or feature working-class people. If they do, is the working class represented as heroic?
6. If working-class New Yorkers are the heroes of Freeman’s essay, who are the villains or antiheroes? Why do you think Freeman fails to mention the terrorists who were responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?
7. What class are your heroes from? Is class status an important component of heroism? Does class figure in our cultural myths and stories about heroism? What are the class backgrounds of Batman, Spiderman, Superman, Luke Skywalker, Wonder Woman, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer? What about real-life heroes such as Mother Teresa, Colin Powell, and Tiger Woods?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. What is the “airline bailout” that Freeman refers to? Why were “laid-off workers” allocated no money? With a group of your classmates, research this issue and present your findings to the class. Be sure to investigate different positions on and interpretations of this event. Prepare a panel discussion to present your findings to the class.
2. Find and read one or both of the two essays Freeman cites and present a summary of their ideas to the class.
3. Based on your class discussions and further research, create a collage, hypertext, or video of working-class New Yorkers based on popular culture. Investigate how these representations have changed over time.
4. With a group of your classmates, investigate how the working class is represented and regarded in your community, city, or town. Visit the Chamber of Commerce and gather promotional and tourism materials, watch local commercials, read local magazines and newspapers, and research local unions. Try to identify working-class neighborhoods and hangouts. Interview people who identify themselves as working class and

some who do not about the role and status of the working class in your area. Create a Web site or video illustrating your findings.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Using Freeman's essay as a starting point, write an essay that investigates the role of class in some aspect of the heroic. For example, you might analyze the importance of class status among comic book heroes, folk heroes, or people recognized for heroism. You may want to narrow your focus by concentrating on a specific era, region, or type of heroic act.
2. Write a letter to the editor of *The Nation* responding to some aspect of Freeman's article, based on your responses to the Discussion Questions. Do you disagree with any of Freeman's assertions? Do you have something you wish to add to his observations about the working-class "heroes and victims" of September 11?
3. Based on your research on the working class in your area, write an essay or create a hypertext or image text that analyzes how your community regards, represents, and treats the working class and the reasons behind such treatment.

LEWIS BUZBEE

Sunday, Tarzan in His Hammock

Lewis Buzbee was born in San Jose, California, in 1957. He received an M.F.A. from Warren Wilson College and has worked as a bookseller, publisher, teacher, and caterer. He has published one novel, Fliegelman's Desire (1990), and the poem reprinted here, which was reprinted in Harper's Magazine and chosen for the anthology Best American Poetry 1995. He says that the poem is his "revenge against Tarzan and cheerful aerobics instructors everywhere." In it, the heroic figure, played for years on the screen by Olympic swimming champion Johnny Weismuller, may seem more a sullen laborer in the jungles of everyday life.

When the king of the jungle first wakes up, he thinks
it's going to be a great day, as laden with possibility
as the banana tree with banana hands, but by ten
he's still in the hammock, arms and legs dull as
termite mounds. He stares at the thatched roof and realizes

that his early good mood was a leftover from Saturday,
 when he got so much done: a great day, he saved
 the tiger cub trapped in the banyan, herded the hippos
 away from the tourists and their cameras and guns,
 10 restrung and greased the N-NW vines, and all by noon.
 All day he went about his duties, not so much kingly duties
 as custodial, and last night, he and Cheetah went for a walk
 under the ostrich-egg moon. This morning nothing stirs him.
 The world is a stagnant river, a scummy creek's dammed pool.
 15 Cheetah's gone chattering off, Jane is in town,
 and the rest of the animals are busy with one another—
 fighting, eating, mating. Tarzan can barely move,
 he does not want to move. Does the gazelle ever feel this
 lassitude, does it ever want to lie down and just stare,
 20 no longer caring for its own safety, tired of the vigilance?
 Does the lion, fat in the grass, ever think, fuck it,
 let the wounded springbok live, who cares?
 Tarzan thinks maybe he'll go to the bathing pools
 and watch the village girls bathe, splashing in the sun,
 25 their breasts and thighs perfect. He wishes someone
 would bring him a gourd of palm wine, a platter
 of imported fruits—kiwi, jack fruit, star fruit—
 or maybe a bowl of roasted yams slathered in goat butter.
 Maybe Jane will bring him a book.
 30 He hears far off in the dense canopy a zebra's cry for help,
 those damned jackals again, but, no, he will not move.
 Let the world take care of itself, let the world eat
 the world. He can live without the call of the wild.
 He thinks.

FREEWITING ASSIGNMENT

Record your impressions and ideas about the figure Tarzan. What do you know about him? What do you think of him? Where have these impressions come from—movies, comics, video games, television shows, books?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare your freewriting with a group of your classmates'. Consolidate everyone's impressions to arrive at a general description of Tarzan that all of you can agree on, that you feel accurately represents the "idea" of Tarzan in current popular culture. Present this description to the class, noting similarities and differences in the descriptions of other groups in the class. Finally, as a class, compare your descriptions to the figure of Tarzan in the poem. How does the poem's depiction of Tarzan compare to yours?

2. Is the author relying on the existence of a common cultural definition and knowledge of Tarzan on the part of his audience? What in the poem might indicate that Buzbee is or is not doing so? Does he explain who Tarzan is? Does he merely reproduce the popular image of Tarzan, or does he change it in some way? Are these changes humorous? Why or why not?
3. What is the significance of the day of the week in the title of the poem? Is it an allusion? Do you think Tarzan will get back to work on Monday? How is his observance of Sunday as a day of rest related to religious observance? Does Tarzan sound like a man raised in the jungle by apes or a man with a weekly 9-to-5 job?
4. What is Tarzan's role in the jungle? Who or what might play the same role in our society? How would our society be affected if that person or body abdicated responsibility in the manner that Tarzan does in the poem? Would the consequences be greater or less than those in the poem?
5. In the poem, what is the relationship between Tarzan and the animals? Does he appear to draw distinctions between himself and the animals he protects? Is this image in keeping with images of Tarzan in popular culture? How does the poet indicate Tarzan's relationship to the animals? What techniques does he use to suggest or describe the relationship? What is the relevance of the last two lines of the poem?
6. Is Tarzan a hero? What makes him heroic? Does Buzbee's poem present him in a heroic light? Why might Buzbee have painted Tarzan in this way?
7. What sort of oppositions are set up in this poem in addition to vigilance versus lassitude, with lassitude being privileged? Do these oppositions remain intact throughout the poem, or are they dismantled or reversed?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Interview someone from an earlier generation about his or her memories of Tarzan as a figure in popular culture. How do those memories compare to yours? What are the differences or similarities based on? Write a report of your findings.
2. Edgar Rice Burroughs created Tarzan in 1912 and wrote 25 books about the character. Take a look at some of these novels, or do some research on Burroughs's sources and the popularity of the books and the character. Present your findings to the class.
3. Search out popular culture depictions of Tarzan in popular movies, books, TV shows, comic strips, and advertisements. Create a collage, hypertext, or timeline that suggests the variety of these depictions. You may want to show how Tarzan has changed over the years, concentrate on parodies of Tarzan, or come up with an approach of your own.
4. Research the importance or significance of heroes and heroic figures by looking at some works that analyze or trace the figure of the hero in different societies, such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Consider how Tarzan fits into these theories about heroes.

What sort of hero is Tarzan? What need did he fulfill in early-twentieth-century American culture? How do contemporary parodies or satires of Tarzan such as Buzbee's poem and the film *George of the Jungle* reflect our current attitudes toward heroes and the heroic, toward Tarzan as a heroic figure? Create a Web site situating Tarzan among heroes from all cultures but also showing him as a distinctly American hero.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a poem from the point of view of Jane, Cheetah, or another of the animals in the poem about the same day and events that Buzbee depicts.
2. Write an essay that examines how the poem depends on the audience's familiarity with popular culture, specifically the figure of Tarzan as he is depicted in popular culture.
3. Write an essay that analyzes Tarzan's identification with the animals in the poem.
4. Write an essay or create a hypertext that examines Tarzan as a heroic figure or outsider or both, using Buzbee's poem and other representations of Tarzan as an illustration. Use the research from 3 above to support your analysis.

JACK THOMAS

Alienating Language

Jack Thomas, ombudsman for The Boston Globe, acts as an intermediary between the paper and its readers, investigating and answering readers' complaints. This article is from his weekly column in which he elaborates on a complaint. Thomas raises interesting questions about the power of language in our lives—and about how we define immigrants hoping to live and prosper in the United States.

From time to time, when the *Globe* mangles a name, publishes the wrong address, misspells a word, or commits a grammatical blunder, readers are baffled and want to know: "Does anybody read this stuff before it gets into the newspaper?"

Errors are an embarrassment to everybody here, but they are particularly galling to the many writers and editors who are obsessed with accuracy and who love the language enough to debate the nuance of a word or the felicity of a phrase.

In recent days, for example, some writers and editors have been engaged in word-to-word combat over the suitability of a seemingly innocuous word, "alien."

The dialogue began with publication of an editorial that called upon the government to exercise common sense toward immigrants here illegally. The editorial was no more offensive than a glass of water, but some people were unable to swallow the reference to immigrants as "aliens."

- 5 One audacious reporter, Tatiana With Ribadeneira, challenged the word: "Unless they have come from Pluto or elsewhere in the galaxy, they should not be called 'aliens.' The preferred form is 'undocumented immigrants.' I know that the government calls them 'aliens.' I myself had one of the infamous 'resident alien' green cards when I arrived here. But we should not perpetuate the government's xenophobia."

Her message landed on the desk of the editor who had approved the original copy, Robert Turner, who is known for his sensitivity and also for his love of words.

"Thank you for your thoughts," he replied. "Our dictionary defines 'alien' as: 'a foreigner; a foreign-born resident in a country who has not become a naturalized citizen.' This seems straightforward. There can be negative connotations, including references to space creatures," Turner conceded. "However, I would resist letting Hollywood sci-fi screenwriters so easily snatch a perfectly good word out of common usage. If there is a sense the word is now seen as pejorative, we should include a warning in our style book."

The exchange sparked a debate in the newsroom: Is Ribadeneira speaking responsibly for Hispanics and others who feel that the word has been debased so it now insults immigrants? Or is Turner justified in attempting to rescue a word whose viability is being kidnapped by Hollywood?

Some reporters, like Alex Pham, who emigrated from Vietnam in 1975, speak from personal experience. "It's a loaded word that for me carried a great stigma. Aliens are little green creatures from outer space with gaping jaws that kill you in horrendous ways. It lends an 'us' versus 'them' mind-set between people here and people arriving."

- 10 Evidence to support Ribadeneira: The dictionary's first definition refers to immigrants, but "alien" appeared in 110 stories in the *Globe* this year, and by a margin of two to one, it referred to creatures from outer space rather than immigrants.

Evidence to support Turner: Although Hispanic reporters have been aggressive in denouncing "aliens," among those who have used the word offensively in the *Globe* are Hispanic reporters themselves, including Tatiana's husband, Diego.

Nevertheless, she makes a strong argument. "Over the years, we have stopped using many words that groups considered offensive. 'Queer' and 'colored' are examples. At the time, they were probably defined in the dictionary as perfectly acceptable."

Turner knows that the battle may be over. "If a word takes on a coloring that is negative and it becomes widespread, then we have to be realistic and make an effort to avoid it as offensive. Maybe 'alien' falls into that category. Still, I don't think we should jump against a perfectly good word that sometimes may be used pejoratively."

Thomas F. Mulvoy Jr., managing editor for news operations, who is the editor of the stylebook, says that in the aftermath of the debate, he will recommend that the newspaper formally acknowledge the concerns raised about "alien."

- 15 "It's a legitimate word," said Mulvoy, "but it resonates the wrong way with too many people. We have asked writers and editors to use 'undocumented immigrants' or even

‘illegal immigrants’ and to use ‘alien’ only in quotations or when relating specific governmental action. The stylebook will suggest that otherwise we ought to avoid ‘alien’ and use the longer phrase rather than risk the pejorative.”

That, however, may not be the end of the debate. H. D. S. Greenway, editor of the editorial page, says: “I will resist robbing the English language of its richness.”

No one faults Turner, by the way. The language is well served by guardians who stand in favor of tradition. At the same time, trying to rescue a word that has slipped out of proper usage is like running across a field with a net in pursuit of a butterfly that is aloft, already out of reach and gone forever.

FREEWITING ASSIGNMENT

What is your attitude toward the power of language. Do you think language is as powerful as Thomas suggests?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of instances where words have justified or rationalized behavior or where they might be a cultural and political weapon? Have you ever been hurt by words? Have you ever used words to hurt someone else? Do you agree with the children’s rhyme “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”?
2. A common language is one delineation of a culture, determining who is in and who is out. How does slang function in this way? How do you feel when you hear outsiders, people outside your group, using your slang—for example, your parents? Why?
3. In George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, later transformed into *My Fair Lady*, Henry Higgins turns a poor flower girl into a “lady”—merely by changing her language and accent. Is language still a class marker? How might you assess two people who walk into your classroom, one dressed in the latest high fashion and the other in old and dirty clothes? Would your assessment change if the fashionable person spoke nonstandard English with a country accent and the unkempt person spoke standard English with an upper-class accent?
4. Thomas says that the “language is well served by guardians who stand in favor of tradition.” How is language well served by these guardians? Have you ever tried to read Beowulf in Old English, Chaucer in Middle English, Shakespeare in Elizabethan English? It’s all English—what happened? Can you think of some words whose meaning has changed just in the last five or ten years?
5. When you think of the word “immigrant,” what do you think of? When you think of the word “alien,” what do you think of? Are the concepts the same? Do you think of all immigrants in the same way—Haitians, British, Chinese, Mexicans, Koreans, Irish, Vietnamese, Russians? How does your view of them differ? What do you base your assessments on?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Interview two or three immigrants—preferably from different cultures and with different status (e.g., on a student visa, with a green card, naturalized citizen). Ask them about their experiences in coming to the United States, particularly with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Did they have difficulties making their way through the legal process? If so, what were they? What do these people's experiences suggest about our attitudes toward outsiders? Present your findings to the class.
2. The Statue of Liberty is a worldwide symbol of the United States. What does she symbolize? What does Emma Lazarus's poem engraved on the statue say about our attitude toward immigrants? Research current attitudes toward immigrants and the ways in which immigrant quotas have changed over the years. What does your research suggest about the current status of immigrants in the United States? Are all immigrants "created equal"? Is there a gap between the symbol and the reality? Construct a poster or hypertext that illustrates the current state of immigration in the United States and present it to the class.
3. Research current INS requirements for people who wish to come to the United States as visitors. Then research the visa requirements for people who wish to visit three or four Western European countries. What differences do you find in these requirements? Create a video illustrating your findings.
4. In groups of four or five, find the ways in which various immigrant groups are stereotyped in our culture—in films, magazines, advertisements, newspapers and on TV. Construct a collage or hypertext for each group and present it to the class.
5. Research the ways in which slang has changed over the years and how it varies from one region of the United States to another—and how it varies between the United States and the United Kingdom. Create a timeline and map to illustrate your findings.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an op-ed column in which you call for abolishing a word or phrase that particularly offends you. Or write one in which you defend a word or phrase that is currently under attack.
2. Using your research from 4 above, construct an on-line slang dictionary—noting regional variations and changes over time.
3. Write an essay calling for the removal of Emma Lazarus's poem on the Statue of Liberty. Or write one that defends the Statue of Liberty as a legitimate symbol of the United States.
4. Listen to songs from different eras—the 1890s, 1920s, 40s, 60s, 90s—and construct a sound clip, with an accompanying hypertext, that illustrates and comments on the ways in which the language of popular songs has changed.

❖ Heroes and Sheroes: How Does Gender Affect Heroism?

MIMI NGUYEN

Pop Culture Saved My Life

*Mimi Nguyen, a doctoral student in comparative ethnic studies at the University of California–Berkeley, was born in Saigon, Vietnam, and immigrated to America on a gutted U.S. cargo plane. She grew up in Minnesota. She has been writing fanzines since she was fifteen and currently writes a zine called slander, which is available for purchase at <http://panderzinedistro.com>. She is a columnist for Punk Planet and the founder of “exoticize this!” (<http://members.aol.com/critchicks>), a virtual Asian-American feminist community. As she says, “cultural critique is a part of my every day.” The following article was published in the Perspectives section of the San Jose Mercury News on July 5, 1998, and is available at <http://www.worsethanqueer.com>, Nguyen’s Web site. Nguyen describes the following article on the Disney film *Mulan* as “my take on how to do feminist cultural studies in 1500 words or less.”*

As a refugee-tomboy slogging through the swampy environs of a Midwestern small town, I produced hundreds of bizarre fictions starring me, pilfering from comic books and TV shows for fantastic plots and daring personalities I’d suture into the fabric of my otherwise less-than-panoramic existence.

Comparing childhoods with a Latina girlfriend, the both of us migrants from wars of all kinds, we lined up our icons side by side, secret identities we appropriated to survive being alien in similarly hostile situations. Bionic Woman, Wonder Woman, Laura Ingalls, Pippi Longstocking—together we’re an encyclopedic recounting of all possible pop-culture heroines.

And barring the rare Storm or Karma from the mutant X-Men universe, all of our early models were white as snow. I’m still obsessed with pop culture, and I admit I was helpless in the thrall of “*Mulan*,” this year’s animated feature film by Disney about a young cross-dressing Chinese woman who runs away to take her father’s place in the Emperor’s army and eventually saves China. Loosely based on a historical myth, it appealed to me on exactly that note: an Asian tomboy defies convention, hoodwinks patriarchal authority and goes on to save the masses—the dominant narrative of my fantasy youth, thank you very much.

I paid my eight bucks. And I loved it.

5 So is “*Mulan*”—channeled through the coffers of a multimedia conglomerate—an overdue exhortation of girl power for Asian America?

Well, not quite. But as Disney fictional heroines go, the proto-feminist *Mulan* outranks Pocahontas, Belle, and the pathetic Ariel. And she’s light-years ahead of Cinderella or *Sleeping Beauty*, spunkless specimens of yesterday’s Cold War gender roles.

Too butch for the bride gig, Mulan is impulsive, disobedient and resolutely vocal in her defiance of the “seen not heard” school of social conventions. She’s a skilled martial artist and an intuitive strategist, a girl of action and intelligence who does the feet-sweeping, butt-kicking and outwitting. *All at once.*

GENDER SUBVERSION

Light on the Confucian strictures, the film pokes fun at the ultimately repressive gender roles that seek to make Mulan a domesticated creature. In some great boot-camp scenes, it satirizes male homosocial behavior—patting butts, punching arms, trading insults.

What’s amazing is the sly acknowledgement that gender norms are socially constructed—both masculinity and femininity are exposed as elaborate performances—while concurring that these same gender norms prove to be the source of much injustice. Never mind feudal China, it’s a critique that resonates in contemporary U.S. society. So throw in lots of drag and transvestitism, “Mulan” becomes a veritable boiling pot of gender trouble.

10 Okay, so Mulan doesn’t take the cabinet position the Emperor offers her after she saves China—who wants to be a bureaucrat, anyway? And there are the requisite cheap shots: The character who most obviously signals “gay”—the effeminate, sniveling consul—happens to be the most resolutely misogynist. And the pompous matchmaker finds herself the victim of the ever-popular “fat lady on fire” gag.

But there’s something awesome about an epic, animated or not, starring a strong-willed heroine—and an Asian woman, no less. So call me a sucker. I’m easily susceptible to Mulan’s struggle and the revenge of the tomboy. If I were 10, I’d probably change my name. I loved “Mulan” as long as I remained selectively amnesiac. Disney, who?

DISNEY CASHES IN

But “Mulan”—the movie as opposed to the celluloid heroine—is, of course, strategic. Swift on the heels of Xena, the WNBA, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Olympic women’s hockey team, the Mouse-Eared One rides the wave of female athleticism with its own Nike-esque “Just Do It” directive. Tie that to a current U.S. fascination with Hong Kong directors, feng shui and Tibetan Buddhism—all things Asian are all the rage—and Disney cashes in. Action maven Michelle Yeoh’s burgeoning popularity is the apex of all these trends, and Mulan is her animated counterpart.

But Disney doesn’t really want to inspire a generation of swashbuckling tomboys, let alone foment any preteen gender-bending on the grade-school playground. This becomes glaringly obvious in the toy store aisles.

There you can purchase Mulan in a variety of strictly feminine guises, play at having tea and dumplings with the Palace Playset or become a suburban “China Blossom” with the Matchmaker Deluxe Dress-Up Set, complete with coquettish fan, mandarin-collared top and a mirrored compact.

15 Mysteriously—or not—all the packaging features a chubby-cheeked blonde be-decked in hackneyed orientalia. A McDonald’s commercial dishes up another of these

white clones mouthing some irritating “honorable father” gibberish—serving Happy Meals to the men in her family, no less—while the Mac himself pulls some ill-executed moves, Karate-Kid style and Rambo-red headband intact.

The conspicuous lack of props for the Mulan-inspired tomboy is not a surprise. Imagine if hoards of little Asian girls paraded the public streets with their own swords and utilitarian soldiering togs, making proto-feminist declarations of both independence and solidarity à la Mulan. That’s my Fantasia, not Disney’s.

So we can hardly ignore the instrumental reason for Disney’s cultural production: profit. Take teenage sweatshop labor in Haiti and scattered overseas Free Trade Zones, place it next to the “girl power” message of “Mulan” and we have something of a gaping inequality.

Obviously, uprisings are for some and not for others, and in any case must be tempered by the immediate purchase of a Simply Charming Jewelry Necklace Set.

Even so, I’m hardly innocent. For my 24th birthday, I paid the eighteen bucks for the Secret Hero Mulan—the only model of four with jointed limbs, shorn hair, a sword and comfy shirt and trousers—with a clear sense of my own ironic distance from any critique of directed consumerism.

20 Aside from girl power, “Mulan” is also being lauded as a breakthrough for Asian American representation on the big-screen. It’s hailed as a signpost: we’ve made it. Tinseltown (i.e., mainstream America) wants us.

Call me a selective cynic, but I don’t buy it. To read “Mulan” as a rubber stamp—Asian America, as validated by Disney—means that in the desire to see our reflection splashed across the blank white walls, we end up scrambling for crumbs and pretending it’s a whole meal. Are we only “real” if we’re imprinted on Hollywood celluloid? Should we be grateful? Are Asian-Americans finally vindicated, and of what? Why should we be so desperate for mainstream recognition in 35 mm—to be mirrored in the box office figures and merchandise sales?

Besides, I never had a Mulan—and I still managed to find inspiration enough for long summer afternoons spent swinging through trees and staging elaborate fight scenes on monkey bars. I borrowed liberally from Star Wars, X-Men, Wonder Woman and even James Bond flicks to fashion my own fictional interventions and alternate personas, and I later realized my nascent feminist impulses in the punk-fostered riot grrrl movement. Throughout my plundering and partial identifications with space pirates, mutants and punks, I remained a resolute Vietnamese refugee-tomboy.

That is, we validate *ourselves*, when we have to.

On the other hand, the sweeping denunciation—that “Mulan” is just another cheap vehicle for the Disneyfication of culture—is similarly too, too literal. *Of course* there is no mass culture that isn’t shaped by mega-corporate management and marketing trends. And we’ve all memorized the usual arguments decrying how Hollywood simplifies, plagiarizes and Westernizes.

25 But outright dismissal suggests that those of us who derive pleasure, however contradictory, from “Mulan” are dupes—as if our reception of pop culture is not a process of negotiation: of picking, choosing and reimagining.

So let’s get over the obvious, the bad dog/good dog scenario. We give too little credit to the power of the imagination if we believe either that until “Mulan,” little Asian-American girls floundered without inspiration or, on the other hand, that with “Mulan,” little Asian-American girls are ripe for conglomerate-sponsored consumer conformity.

Between the opposing camps—one suggesting that “we” finally are represented and acknowledged, the other arguing that identification with the Mouse’s *Mulan* is naive or otherwise participates in a nefarious plot to assert mass mind-control—there is a third space where, I think, we can juggle our critiques and our pleasures with the complexity of analysis they deserve.

Still, I would’ve killed for a *Mulan* when I was 10.

FREEWITING ASSIGNMENT

Spend five minutes freewriting about your initial response to this piece. If you have seen the film *Mulan*, do you agree with Nguyen’s summary and analysis?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is Nguyen’s thesis? Why does she delay revealing this thesis? What is her purpose?
2. What kind of article is this? What sort of language is used? What might the use of both slang and academic jargon indicate about the intended audience? about the author? about the subject matter?
3. What is Nguyen’s ideology, as expressed in this article? What is her view of gender? of sexuality? of race? What shapes these views?
4. Does Nguyen have one commentary to make on the whole *Mulan* phenomenon? Why does she distinguish between the film and the marketing campaign? What is the paradox Nguyen points out in her analysis of the film’s message about gender roles and the message conveyed by the associated toys and their packaging? What point does she make about the audience for both?
5. Nguyen is able to enjoy the movie as long as she remains “selectively amnesiac,” as long as she doesn’t consider the film’s economic, social, cultural, and political contexts and *why* the movie was made. Why was the movie made? What are the contexts that cause her to question her enjoyment of the film? Why does she react to these contexts as she does?
6. Nguyen says that her pop-culture heroines were usually “white as snow” when she was growing up. Are pop-culture heroines today more diverse? Discuss your answers as a class.
7. In groups of two, make a list of all the Asian-American or Asian characters or celebrities in popular culture that you can think of—including actors and actresses, and characters in movies, comics, TV programs, and video games. Subdivide this list into males and females and write a description of the ways in which Asian-American or Asian women and men are portrayed in popular culture. As a class, discuss this activity and the differences in the representations between the sexes, and between Asian Americans and other races.

8. Nguyen describes herself as a “refugee-tomboy” and says she and a Latina girlfriend are “migrants from wars of all kinds” who had to “survive being alien in similarly hostile situations.” What wars is Nguyen a migrant from? How are she and her friend alien? What hostile situations might they have had to survive?
9. Why does Nguyen comment that the *San Jose Mercury News* gave her article a “horrible title”? What kind of title do you think she might have preferred?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. As a class, watch and discuss the film *Mulan*. Consider why Nguyen’s article does not address the ending of the film. Does the end of the film, like the toys, undermine the feminist message of the film?
2. In her memoir *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts*, Maxine Hong Kingston relates the story of Fa Mu Lan (the historical myth the film *Mulan* is loosely based on), which her parents told her when she was a child, and describes how this story affected her. Read *Woman Warrior*, or the section concerning Fa Mu Lan, “White Tigers.” Do some further research on the Chinese legend and compare it to Hong Kingston’s version of the story as well as to the film’s. Research the reaction to the film in China, where it was banned. Present your findings to the class.
3. For one week keep a log of the depictions of Asian Americans you encounter in your daily life. Consider the differences between the depictions of men and women as well as how these depictions construct or represent Asian-American identity. Present your findings to the class.
4. To increase your understanding of Nguyen’s experiences as an immigrant, research Vietnamese history, particularly the war between the United States and Vietnam in the 1960s, and Vietnamese-American culture. Create a collage to illustrate your findings.
5. Visit Nguyen’s Web site and virtual Asian-American community at <http://www.worsethanqueer.com>. Present your review to the class.
6. Visit <http://www.theory.org.uk> and read about Judith Butler and her book *Gender Trouble*, which Nguyen alludes to in her article. Give a presentation to the class on Butler’s theory of gender as performance.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an essay comparing the film *Mulan* to the Chinese legend recounted by Hong Kingston in *Woman Warrior*. Incorporate references to Nguyen’s article into your essay.
2. Write a personal essay, modeled on Nguyen’s. Either discuss your reaction to a film that in some way caused you to think about your identity or discuss the pop-culture heroes and/or heroines of your childhood and their effect on your sense of boundaries or potential. Did you, like Nguyen, have to “fashion . . . alternate personas” from the available models of heroism?

3. Write a letter to the editor of the *San Jose Mercury Times* that responds to some aspect of Nguyen's commentary on the film *Mulan*—for example, her descriptions of the heroines of Disney animated films.
4. Using the next article, "Women in Action," as a model, write an essay or create a hypertext or image text that analyzes *Mulan* as an action hero—as represented in either the film or the original legend. Nguyen says *Mulan* is "the animated counterpart" of Michelle Yeoh, one of the "action figures" discussed in "Women in Action." Use this comparison as a starting point for your analysis.

ANAMIKA SAMANTA AND ERIN FRANZMAN

Women in Action

Anamika Samanta and Erin Franzman are regular contributors to HUES (Hear Us Emerging Sisters), a New York City-based quarterly publication from New Moon Publishing. (More information about this magazine is available at www.hues.net.) Here they consider the emergence of the female action hero in contemporary film and TV, and her transformation to a "postfeminist icon," a combination of sexiness and independence.

Move over, Rambo. Bruce, we have no use for you. No longer damsels in distress, women are kicking ass and saving the world from doom—in Hollywood technicolor. But is happiness really a warm gun? HUES explores how our action packing sisters present powerful new images of women—or not.

Traditionally, women's roles in action movies are no more than glorified plot devices. They exist only to be kidnapped; to trip while running from danger; to innocently step in the path of myriad evildoers and be captured, or used as leverage to exact revenge from the brave, strong, manly hero. But at long last, we've gathered a small but significant collection of action sheroes to call our own. Women are finally infiltrating action films and TV shows, a media frontier once clearly marked "no estrogen allowed."

Blazing the trail, Sigourney Weaver still fills the screen with her fist in the *Alien* movies. Michelle Yeoh follows close behind as the kick-ass kung fu crossover queen. On the small screen, viewers can relax while *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* save the world on a weekly basis.

Is this a sign? Are we on our way to mass physical empowerment? Or are we just headed for a whole new pack of stereotypes to live down?

- 5 In 1979, Sigourney Weaver was one of the first to challenge the novelty of a female action hero with her portrayal of Ellen Ripley in *Alien*. It was the first time a major action film

dared to rely on a female protagonist. In the *Alien* series, she proved that women could not only carry an action film, but could kick a whole bunch of alien ass in the process.

Softening the blow was the fact that the part of Ripley, although played by a woman, was a notably un-feminine character—implying that a woman can carry an action film only if she “acts like a man.” No one would believe Rambo as a woman, because accepting female strength and aggression unravels the fabric of society. That’s why Ripley must be so masculine, and that’s also why she and so many action heroines who have followed her occupy the realm of science fiction or fantasy. Only in other worlds can we comfortably accept chicks who kick ass.

While Ripley does have sex, as well as maternal inclinations, the *Alien* series always stops short of allowing her to be emotionally vulnerable and forces her to pull out the big guns. Instead of trying to present a woman who can both save the world and not be embarrassed to shed a few tears, writers created a classic male action hero but changed the pronouns.

Ripley did blaze a fine trail for women in action films, and others have gone on to reap the benefits. Besides the wildly popular *Thelma and Louise*, movies like *Set It Off*, *Jackie Brown* and even *Terminator* have featured more realistic female action characters. But like Ripley, these women still use guns to make their point.

Michelle Yeoh brings new hope to the female action hero by using her fists and her voice. At only five-foot-four-inches and 100 pounds, Kung Fu master Yeoh left James Bond shaken and badly stirred in the recent *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Yeoh’s characters, while initially emotionally remote, eventually reveal a warm side that most women can relate to while still enjoying the action.

10 Yeoh refuses to play the typical vixen subdued by 007. Not only does she routinely outkick and outsmart him, but she saves him with her fighting skills unlike any previous Bond girl. Then again, Yeoh has never been mistaken for Pussy Galore. Unlike American Bond girl Teri Hatcher, whose character used her seductive powers rather than her fighting skills, Yeoh gets what she wants without taking off a stitch. While Hatcher slips off her slinky evening gown because she can’t resist Bond, Yeoh jumps from rooftops in sneakers and slacks. As the only woman to always take the punches, Yeoh has said that it took a long time for men to take her seriously enough to hit her with accuracy and force—she began by hitting twice as hard until they really started hitting back.

One of Yeoh’s better known Hong Kong movies, *Wing Chun*, is the kind of action film that puts Hollywood to shame. Yeoh is the heroine of this funny, sexy, action-packed flick, where the conflict is between masculine and feminine roles, Kung Fu fighting and marriage. In the end, Yeoh is able to have both.

As *Wing Chun*, Yeoh presents a very real female sexuality. She wants a man who accepts her for who she is, and is hilariously unsure about sex. Even though *Wing Chun* is sought after, she is clearly at odds with her unusual role in her Chinese village. She doesn’t want to give up being a fighter, but she still wants to fall in love.

This dilemma is hammered in when her childhood love mistakes her for a man. Even though her lover eventually realizes his mistake and still wants *Wing Chun*, she refuses his affections until she resolves her own issues. *Wing Chun* also saves her lover repeatedly. In one battle, she asks him to wait outside so that he won’t get hurt. Her lover reluctantly agrees to stay behind but adds, “Go kick ass, *Wing Chun*!”

In the end, Wing Chun takes the lead and proposes to her man. And although she is a powerful fighter, she is still afraid of rejection. In the one wacky sex scene, her husband-to-be tickles her out of her shyness and inexperience, in the face of her halfhearted warrior threats.

15 The Hollywood machine will surely try to trade on Yeoh's good looks. Already, she's been fetishized in *Tomorrow Never Dies*, having a one-woman wet T-shirt contest with everyone's favorite womanizer. Hopefully, though, as she gains clout at the box office, she'll be able to bring her Hong Kong recipe for success to the United States.

Until then, at least we have Buffy.

What can be said about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that hasn't already been said by *YM*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *Rolling Stone*?

Despite the deluge of media attention dropped on Barbie doll–doppelganger Sarah Michelle Gellar, who plays Buffy, people have so far failed to detect Buffy's potential as a post-feminist icon. Perhaps they can't see over her eye-popping cleavage, which is heavily showcased in each episode. It's a shame, because the show isn't nearly as insipid as it ought to be. The television Buffy, a far cry from the campy bimbo of the movie, is a smart, together, strong teenage girl. When was the last time you saw one of those on TV?

Buffy spends most of her time on the show kicking vampire ass. Yet the writer/producer, Joss Whedon, has also managed to convincingly write her as a likable teenage girl who is understandably conflicted about her responsibilities as the Vampire Slayer. The premise is that for each generation, there is a Chosen One, the Slayer, who is imbued with a sixth sense which helps her fight all kinds of undead monsters. One of the best running subplots touches on Buffy's reluctance to fully accept her Slayer status, trying instead to fit in and live a "normal" teenage life. It's surprisingly compelling to watch her realize and embrace the scope of her power, as the Slayer and as a woman. The show's message is actually mature, and Buffy's ability to take care of herself, save the world from the undead and still maintain her impeccable lipgloss makes her a decidedly Gen X heroine.

20 Not coincidentally, Whedon was also the writer of *Alien Resurrection*, for which he created two strong, complicated female leads for Sigourney Weaver and Winona Ryder. Effective or not, this guy is obviously trying to even the score, which is more than one can say for most of Hollywood.

Still, the show makes one serious concession: Buffy is dressed in plunging necklines and the shortest miniskirts. It's as if, fully clothed, a pretty teenage girl who can physically defend herself is too much of a threat to the established order of society. So they literally strip away her armor, leaving her scantily clad, more exposed, more vulnerable. All of this begs the eternal question: how do you kill vampires in platform heels?

There's nothing wrong with using a pretty actress, and Gellar is great as Buffy. It's even fair to say that kickboxing in platform heels is pretty fierce, especially considering that Gellar does it herself, instead of using a stunt double. But the show takes one step forward and one step back by objectifying its star in this manner. No one notices that Buffy is the smartest, strongest (literally and figuratively) teen role model television has seen in ages. Instead, the show gets attention for its Lolita-esque star's abundant cleavage.

If more cleavage means more advertising dollars (which in turn means the show stays on the air), then hopefully more young women and girls will be able to see the show and appreciate the finer points of Buffy, such as they are. You have to take what you can get these days.

And these days it just doesn't get any bigger than *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Xena is fast becoming a pop culture icon and setting a higher standard for television action heroines. Every week millions of viewers tune in to watch her leap through the air, jump off horses and defeat Greek gods. Xena's mix of the tough warrior and pinup girl, mixed with a good deal of camp, has won the admiration of everyone from *Ms.* magazine to *Playboy*. Inspired by Hong Kong action films, Xena begins life as a warrior princess when she realizes that in the process of becoming the ultimate warrior, she's lost her humanity. Determined to make a change for the better, the reformed Xena meets her chatty sidekick Gabrielle while defending a small peasant village. Together, they embark on a new adventure each week, battling the forces of evil as well as Xena's personal demons.

25 Instead of deriving her power from her sexuality, Xena commands the screen with her swordsmanship and strong personality. Whether using her chakram or the improbable "Xena touch," a two-handed pinch on the neck which forces the enemy to tell the truth, Xena uses her wits and courage to save the world peacefully. But if forced, she lashes out at her enemies without mercy.

However, Xena's physical prowess doesn't detract from her sexiness. While each episode is filled with sexy Xena shots, the campy humor saves the show from dissolving into gratuitous T-and-A. Between battles, she manages to seduce the likes of Caesar and Ares. Xena directly plays with her sexiness in an episode where she enters a beauty contest in order to chase an enemy. Donning a blonde wig and a gold-lamé outfit, Xena flaunts her "assets" while ridiculing the very concept of a beauty contest.

Xena adds another twist to her sexuality with her intentionally ambiguous relationship with Gabrielle. The infamous episode "A Day in the Life" features Xena and Gabrielle playing "catch the soap" in the hot tub. Catch the soap? The lesbian sexual innuendoes have resulted in loyal queer following. Not surprisingly, straight men find Xena and Gabrielle's relationship intriguing as well. Well, what else would you expect from a fantasy show?

The jury is still out on whether these characters are making the world of action a friendlier place for women. Sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same. It's not always enough to have women represented in a male-dominated field. Action heroines are revealing to us as a society all our silly little neuroses about power and gender. And that's part of the point: sex and violence commingle in disturbing ways when women become action heroes.

In the everyday world, today's kick-ass women are still stuck in fantasies and fairy tales. Who really battles monsters? Where's the action heroine who takes on fascist dictators or at least slaps around sexist bosses? It seems that female aggression is only acceptable in the realm of extreme fiction—as if movies and television are not far enough removed from reality.

30 We should be moving in the direction of every woman being able to physically defend herself. True, characters like Buffy, Ripley, Wing Chun and Xena have taken strides toward that example. We should take the lead from our silver screen and TV sisters, and learn to physically defend ourselves, to become women of action rather than passive victims.

In the meanwhile, let's hope that more of these feisty and fearless females head for the hills—the Hollywood Hills, that is—and continue to roundhouse, iron-fist and sword-slash their way into broader, more complex starring roles.

FREEWITING ASSIGNMENT

Spend five minutes writing about other shows, comics, movies, Web sites, and cartoons in which females are the primary protagonists. How are they portrayed? How do you react to them?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare your freewriting from above with that of your classmates. Discuss your conclusions and questions about the representation of women in popular culture with the class.
2. The authors describe Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy the Vampire Slayer as not only a potential postfeminist icon but also a “decidedly Gen X heroine.” What specifically is a postfeminist icon? a Gen X heroine? What seem to be the differences the authors draw between the two types of heroes here? Why do you think that Buffy is able to encompass both?
3. Women action heroes are becoming more prevalent in Hollywood, but will they ever gain the footing of male heroes, or will they always be “fetishized” and marginalized? Can a female be a hero without exhibiting “classic male hero” traits as Ripley does in *Alien* or without showing “abundant cleavage” as Buffy does? Can you think of any examples?
4. What is the industry the authors call the Hollywood Machine that capitalizes on women’s looks over their abilities? What role do you think Hollywood plays in promoting or stifling the emergence of true female action heroes? Is it true that a female who can “physically defend herself” while “fully clothed” is too much of a threat to the “established order of society”? What do you base your answer on?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Rent several James Bond movies that span a number of years. Aside from Yeoh’s character, have any other Bond females been true action heroes? Has there been an evolution in the portrayal of women in Bond films? Create an illustrated timeline showing the changes.
2. With a group of your classmates, watch some of the other movies mentioned in the article: *Thelma & Louise*, *Set It Off*, *Jackie Brown*, and *Terminator*. Make an inventory of each hero’s qualities and then prepare a panel presentation comparing and contrasting these heroines, with your ultimate goal being to decide which one is closest to being a true action hero.
3. *HUES* magazine is subtitled “A Woman’s Guide to Power and Attitude.” At your local bookstore or on the Internet, find other women’s magazines that are untraditional or revolutionary as well as some that are long-standing fashion magazines. How are the women in the different magazines presented? Look at the ads, articles, and models, and then construct a collage for each type of magazine and write a brief analysis of your findings. Present both to the class.

4. The authors claim that when Sigourney Weaver first starred as Ripley in *Alien*, the idea of a female action hero was an alien concept itself. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explore and research the history of the female protagonist in film history. Who were Ripley's predecessors? How did they pave the way for the creation of Ripley and others? Create an image text to illustrate your findings.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. At the end of the article, the authors call for women to move into "broader, more complex starring roles." Noting the shortcomings that the authors attribute to the existing characters, create your own action hero, complete with costume and a signature superhero catchphrase. Compare your character with that of a classmate.
2. Do you agree or disagree with the authors' opinions that we still have a long way to go in creating the perfect female action hero? Write an essay defending your point of view.
3. Write an essay arguing why or why not you believe women heroes will eventually be as mainstream as male heroes.
4. Create a comic strip, graphic novel, or hypertext narrative based on the action hero you created in 1.
5. Choose a female action hero from a contemporary movie, TV show, comic book, or video game, and analyze the character as the authors have done in this article.
6. With several other classmates, design and write your own femme magazine, having each member of your "staff" work on a different aspect of it. Make sure that each part contributes to a collective vision, one that actively presents a certain view of women. You might decide to create a zine such as *HUES* or even to parody an existing fashion magazine. Once your group has completed its tasks, present your magazine to the class, explaining its main purpose and how you as a staff of writers and editors see it accomplishing that purpose.

MICHAEL MESSNER

"The Meaning of Success," from Power at Play

Michael Messner teaches sociology at the University of Southern California. The son of a high-school basketball coach, Messner spent much of his childhood in the locker room, on the bus, at games: "I observed and scrutinized my idols (and my father) carefully, and I attempted to mimic more than just their bounce passes and jump shots. . . ." As he grew

older, he and his friends "dreamed . . . dreamed of becoming professional athletes with the San Francisco Giants, Warriors, or Forty-Niners." But he got only as far as the bench on his community college team. In graduate school he began asking the questions about men and athletics that led to the book that this reading is from: "Why was it that I, and so many thousands of other boys and young men, became so intensely committed to athletic careers? How and why did our developing identities become so closely intertwined with our successes—or failures—as athletes? How had our athletic careers shaped, expanded, or constrained our relationships with other boys and men, and with girls and women? What effect had our athletic careers had on our personalities, our health (both emotional and physical), and on the ways that we relate to others as competitors in public life, as friends, as lovers, as family?"

SCHOOLS, PEERS, AND CLASS DIFFERENCES

[E]ven in childhood, middle-class boys were aware of an expanding range of life options, while lower-class boys had fewer choices. This made it more likely that boys from lower-class backgrounds would see athletics as *the* career option rather than *a* career option. The stories of these men suggest that relationships with teachers, coaches, and peers in junior high school, high school, and college more often than not reinforced these class differences.

"Respect" for Lower-Class Men

For the lower-class young men in this study, success in sport wasn't an added proof of masculinity; it was often their only socially legitimate means of achieving public masculine status. Larry W. and Calvin H., two black men from lower-class backgrounds, were able to utilize athletics as a vehicle to get college educations and become, respectively, a high school teacher and a college professor. As Calvin H. said, "The opportunities that were presented to me to develop came from athletics. I took that, and I've since been able to generalize and expand upon it."

More common, though, were the words of Ray J., who, in describing the options available to him, concludes that his youthful focus on sport stardom and his concomitant lack of effort in academics made sense:

You can go anywhere with athletics—you don't have to have brains. I mean, I didn't feel like I was gonna go out there and be a computer expert, or something that was gonna make a lot of money. The only thing I could do to live comfortably would be to play sports—just to get a contract—doesn't matter if you play second or third team in the pros, you're gonna make big bucks. That's all I wanted, a confirmed livelihood at the end of my ventures, and the only way I could do it would be through sports. So I tried. It failed, but that's what I tried.

- 5 Why would a young male restrict himself so completely to sport? The answer lies in how the social structure of opportunity for young lower-class males interacts with the perceptions that a given individual has of his opportunities (which are affected by role models, familial values, peer group relations, schools, teachers, and coaches). For young men

from lower-class backgrounds—especially blacks—the road to upward mobility through education is a psychological, cultural, and structural minefield.

Schools and teachers in poor black communities tend to be of lower quality. If an athlete from a poor background manages to get a college scholarship, he is often at an academic disadvantage to his peers. This was documented by a 1984 sociological study of 10,000 U.S. athletes that revealed that athletes in general are less well prepared for college than are nonathletes; this is especially true of scholarship holders, black athletes, and participants in football and basketball. Lower-class athletes' poor academic preparation is often grounded in the tendency of teachers, coaches, and counselors to stereotype young black males, from a very early age, as "dumb jocks" and to channel them into easy (not college prep) classes to keep them eligible for athletic participation. The gifted young athlete receives a dual message: First he learns that if he simply continues to work hard in practice and star in athletic competitions, he will be taken care of in school. As Willy S. said of his high school years, "I'd hardly ever go to classes and they'd give me C's. My coaches taught some of the classes. And I felt, 'So what? They owe me that! I'm an athlete!' I thought that was what I was born to do—to play sports—and everybody understood that."

This sort of treatment is experienced by the young male as privilege: "They owe me that!" But second, he is also receiving—and too often internalizing—the message that others believe he is incapable of intellectual growth and achievement. Ricardo R., from a poor Mexican immigrant family, said of his high school years:

I wasn't a student, and never professed to be one. If I went through my [high school] grades now, I'd probably crack up! I had a bad attitude, you know? And [the coaches and teachers] knew I didn't really give an effort other than in athletics—so they treated me that way too. My whole junior year was a farce, because I really didn't try and I got C's all the way through . . . the coaches were finding ways to keep me eligible all the time, and I just laughed at it, you know, just went along with it [*laughs*].

We can see from Ricardo's statement how others' definition of one's lack of intellectual ability can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, resulting in a low self-image: even in his mid-thirties, he still concludes that he "had a bad attitude." Similarly, Thomas M. says that in high school, "I was the good dumb athlete . . . I just got by." But, as sociologist Harry Edwards has argued, "The 'dumb jock' is not born; he is systematically being created." In addition to lowering the athlete's self-image, this social context further reinforces his perception that sport is his only chance to excel. As Ricardo R. said,

10 In high school, that was my self-identity, being a good ballplayer. At that time, I was realizing that whatever you excel in, you put out in front of you. In other words, it's almost like a product—if you're a good baseball player, bring it out. Show it. *Be the jock*. If you're a good athlete, or student, or something like that, stick out like a sore thumb. And that's what I did. That was my protection. That was my saying, "Hey, I'm better than you." It was rotten in high school, really. Sports got to be a product at that time—before, it was just fun, and having acceptance, you know. Yet I had to work for my acceptance in high school that way, just by being a jock. So it wasn't fun anymore. Not that much. I put a lot of pressure on myself, and I tried really hard to work myself into the ground just

to show that I excelled in something. Athletics was the one thing that I excelled in, and that was the one thing I had to use. That was my tools. That was my attention-getter.

Once a person is committed to a sport career, it takes a huge amount of time, energy, and concentration to succeed. At each level, the competition becomes more fierce for fewer positions. The "raised stakes" at these higher levels call for more commitment and directed focus on athletic accomplishment. By the time one gets into college athletics, according to Calvin H., "It becomes a full-time job." According to Harry Edwards, the modern university scholarship athlete is required to carry a full load of classes while putting between forty-five and sixty hours a week into practice, preparation, and travel for athletic contests. If he is poorly prepared to start with, the scholarship athlete has little chance to take advantage of the opportunity to become college-educated. Indeed, in their study, Patricia and Peter Adler observed that freshmen athletes began with high expectations of playing ball and getting a college degree. But over the next four years, the amount of time that their athletic roles demanded, the amount of reinforcement they received from peers, fans, and the media for their athletic accomplishments and their relative isolation from academic life undermined their commitment to academic goals. Gradually, the Adlers observed, these college athletes became "pragmatically detached" from academic life.

Peer group values interact with this limited structure of opportunity to shape further the goals and perceptions of these young males. The interviews suggest that these lower-class boys and young men were not simply duped or "channeled" into putting all their eggs into one basket by an all-powerful system. The development of masculine status within male peer groups played a key role in their active participation in making themselves into "athletes." By the high school years, class and ethnic inequalities had become glaringly obvious, especially for those who attended school with students from wealthier backgrounds. Cars, nice clothes, and other signs of status were often unavailable to these young men, and this contributed to a situation in which sport took on an expanded importance for them. Ricardo R. describes what it was like to be "one of the very few Mexicans" in his high school:

Off the field, I was low-key. I always kind of put myself down because I didn't have a black sweater or a school ring—I didn't have any of those things. A lot of times, I would even walk [several miles] home—I'd even jog all the way home, just because I was too embarrassed to be asking for rides, you know? I was really never accepted by the students—to them I was just some dumb jock who was supposed to be a terror on the football field. The only time I got any attention was when I was out on the field playing.

David P., who grew up in a poor white, single-parent family, was also acutely aware of his lower-class status in his high school:

- 15 I had one pair of jeans, and I wore them every day. I was always afraid of what people thought of me—that this guy doesn't have anything, that he's wearing the same Levis all the time, he's having to work in the cafeteria for his lunch. What's going on? I think that's what made me so shy. . . . But boy, when I got into sports, I let it all hang out [*laughs*]*—*and maybe that's why I became so good, because I was frustrated, and when I got into that element, they gave

me my uniform in football, basketball, and baseball, and I didn't have to worry about how I looked, because then it was *me* who was coming out, and not my clothes or whatever. And I think that was the drive.

Similarly, Thomas M. described his insecurities as one of the few poor blacks in a mostly white, middle-class school and his belief that sport was the one arena in which he could be judged solely on his merit:

I came from a very poor family, and I was very sensitive about that in those days. When people would say things like "Look at him—he has dirty pants on," I'd think about it for a week. [But] I'd put my pants on and I'd go out on the football field with the intention that I'm gonna do a job. And if that calls on me to hurt you, I'm gonna do it. It's as simple as that. I demand respect just like everybody else.

"Respect" was what I heard over and over when talking with the men from lower-class backgrounds, especially black men. I interpret this type of "respect" as a crystallization of the masculine quest for recognition through public achievement, unfolding within a system of structured class and race inequities and constraints. The institutional context of education (sometimes with the collusion of teachers and coaches) and the limited economic opportunities made the pursuit of athletic careers appear to be the most rational means of achieving respect. As Gene H. put it, "I like people to respect me more than anything. If that respect has to be with football, well, I'll accept that. Athletics has been my attention-getter throughout my life."

The same is rarely true of young lower-status women. Writer Margaret Dunkle points out that from junior high school through adulthood, young black men are far more likely to place high value on sport than are young black women, who are more likely to value academic achievement. Sociologist Clyde Franklin has argued that many of the normative values of young lower-class black males (little respect for nonaggressive solutions to disputes, contempt for nonmaterial culture) contribute to the constriction of their views of desirable social positions, especially of education. Calvin H., who did succeed in beating the odds by using his athletic scholarship to get a college degree and eventually become a successful professional, says that his boyhood peer group rejected the "feminized" world of books, teachers and schools in favor of physical expressions of status: "By junior high, you either got identified as an athlete, a thug, or a bookworm. It's very important to be seen as somebody who's capable in some area. And you *don't* want to be identified as a bookworm. I was very good with books, but I was kind of covert about it. I was a closet bookworm. But with sports, I was *somebody*, so I worked very hard at it."

20 For most young men from lower-class backgrounds, the poor quality of their schools, the attitudes of teachers and coaches, as well as the anti-education environment within their own peer groups, made it extremely unlikely that they would be able to succeed as students. Sport therefore became the arena in which they attempted to "show their stuff." For these lower-class men, as sociologists Maxine Baca Zinn and Richard Majors argued in studies of chicano and black men, when institutional resources that signify masculine status and control are absent, physical presence, personal style, and expressiveness take on increased importance. What Majors calls "cool pose" is black men's expressive, often verbally and physically aggressive, assertion of masculinity. This self-assertion often takes

place within a social context in which the young man is quite aware of inequities. As Ray J. said of his high school years:

See, the rich people use their money to do what they want to do. I use my ability. If you wanted to be around me, if you wanted to learn something about sports, I'd teach you. But you're gonna take me to lunch. You're gonna let me use your car. See what I'm saying? In high school I'd go where I wanted to go. I didn't have to be educated. I was well respected. I'd go somewhere, and they'd say, "Hey, that's Ray J., yeah, that's a bad son of a bitch!"

Majors argues that although "cool pose" represents a creative survival technique within an environment that is hostile to black males, in the long term, this masculine posturing is likely to result only in educational and occupational dead ends. Lower-class men's responses to a constricted structure of opportunity—responses rooted, in part, in the developmental insecurities and ambivalences of masculinity—serve to lock many of them into limiting activities, such as sport careers.

"Small Potatoes" for Middle Class Men

Sport was very important to the boys from middle-class backgrounds as well. But in contrast to lower-class male peer groups, athletic accomplishment, though highly respected, was not as singularly valued in the middle-class male peer group. Larry W., now a junior-high school coach, described differences in the ways that lower-class boys from "the flatlands" and middle-class boys from "the hills" relate to sport and intermale competition:

For kids in the flatlands, the poorer kids, [sports] is their major measuring-stick. You'll hear a verbal callout or putdown, like, "Hey, man, I took you to the *hoop!* In your face!" It's an extremely verbal putdown. They constantly remind each other what they can't do in the sports arena. It's definitely peer-acceptable if they are very good at sports—although they maybe can't read, you know—if they're good at sports, they're one of the boys. Now I know the middle- and upper-class boys, they do sports and they do their books . . . and the rich kids, I'll see them doing a different kind of argument, on vocabulary and stuff. They never call each other out—sports callouts, that is—they might on *records* or something, like "who hit the most home runs in 1912?" or something—historian-type of stuff. Knowledge, not performance. They get away from performance, because quite a few of them are very weak in athletic performance. But as a whole, the kid from the hill, he's putting less effort into it—he reads more, you know, and he emphasizes different things. As you slide down the hill, the kids become better in sports.

- 25 There are similar, yet class-specific, forms of masculinity being expressed here. In each case, boys are using sport to compete for status and recognition within the male peer group. But in the case of the boys from "the flatlands," the competition is physical; for the boys from "the hill," the competition is intellectual. As we shall see, this differential appropriation of sport as a "measuring stick" eventually contributes to the reconstruction of class differences among men.

What was the process through which these differences emerged? Boys from middle-class backgrounds developed their identities within a context that afforded them a wide range of options, and their family, educational, and peer-group experiences tended to expand their awareness of these options. Clarence T. describes a relationship to school and to teachers that stands in stark contrast to those of most lower-class men: "There was a whole lot of pressure from my father and mother to succeed and accomplish stuff. The game was to get into the most prestigious college possible. I studied a lot. I was home every night studying. I was a model student if there ever was one. Teachers loved me."

Sport was an important part of his life, but education was at least as highly valued within his family and schools. Jon P., born into a white, middle-class family, loved sport, and hoped that being an athlete would give him the sort of camaraderie and respect from peers that he did not feel he received from getting straight A's or from working on the school yearbook. Being on the basketball team was important to him, but not the "most" important thing:

It was one of the really important things. . . . I was really shy, I had terrible acne that really stifled my being confident. I was the premier student at that school. There was nobody else at that school that even compared in terms of what I was getting with grades and testing and all that. But I didn't think anybody in the world gave a damn about that, and probably nobody did—and I wanted so badly for that to mean something. So basketball, somehow I wanted that to be it—it was a conscious thing on my part.

Here we can see that for Jon, sport played a similar role in constructing a public image as it did for lower-class men like Ricardo R. Yet for Jon, sport was used to bolster his public image, not as the basis of identity. It is very significant that he already had other options in life—high grades, a nice car, knowledge that he was college-bound—even though they may not have seemed to deliver what he wanted and needed most at the time. On some level, he knew even then that his future was not dependent on his being good in sport, and this was probably reinforced by the fact that he was a second-string player. As he said, "Most of the time, I just enjoyed being on the team. I loved practice and I worked my butt off in practice, somehow thinking it would get me a chance to play [in games]. [Laughs]—it never really did."

30 Many other middle-class men I interviewed had dreams of becoming professional stars—but most of them say (at least in retrospect) that these were more pipe dreams than realistic hopes. As a boy, Clarence T. says he idolized Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris, wore their jersey numbers, and fantasized of one day playing for the Yankees: "I'd have to say it was more of a fantasy. I don't think I ever grew up thinking I was going to be a professional player. No, I never really had that dream. Yet I still love to fantasize about it—it's great fun." By junior high school, some of these boys consciously began to shift their attentions away from sport and directed energies elsewhere. Brent F. suggests that as early as junior high school, he was becoming aware that the world of sport was a "structure of failure": "By junior high, I started to realize that I was a good player—maybe even one of the best in my community—but I realized that there were all these people all over the country and how few would get to play sports. By high school, I still dreamed of being a pro—I was a serious athlete, I played hard—but I knew I wasn't heading anywhere. I wasn't going to play pro ball."

These kinds of realizations are, of course, most common among athletes of marginal talent. But one of the striking findings of my research is that lower-class males rarely came to this conclusion early on, while several middle-class males, even some who were excellent athletes, did. For instance, Steve L. had been a successful college baseball player. Despite considerable attention from professional scouts, he decided to forego a shot at a baseball career and entered graduate school to pursue a teaching degree. He explained this decision: “At the time I think I saw baseball as pissing in the wind, really. I was married, I was twenty-two years old with a kid. I didn’t want to spend four or five years in the minors with a family. And I could see that I wasn’t a superstar, so it wasn’t really worth it. So I went to grad school. I thought that would be better for me.” Perhaps most striking is the story of Jim P.—high school student body president, top-notch student, and “Mr. Everything” in sport. This young white man from a middle-class family received attention from the press and praise from his community and peers for his athletic accomplishments, as well as considerable interest from college athletic departments, and even some professional baseball scouts. But by the time he completed high school, he had already decided to quit playing organized sport. As he said, “I think in my own mind I kind of downgraded the stardom thing. I thought that was small potatoes. And sure, that’s nice in high school and all that, but on a broad scale, I didn’t think it amounted to all that much. So I decided that my goal is to be a dentist, as soon as I can.”

How and why do many—even highly successful—male athletes from middle-class backgrounds come to view a sport career as “small potatoes,” as “pissing in the wind”? How and why do they make an early assessment to shift away from sport and toward educational and professional goals? The white middle-class context, with its emphasis on education and income, makes it clear to them that choices exist and that the pursuit of an athletic career is not a particularly good choice to make. Where the middle-class boy once found sport to be a convenient institution in which to construct masculine identity and status, the young adult simply transfers these same strivings to other institutional contexts: education and careers. As a result, as we examine the higher levels of the sport career hierarchy, we find that an increasingly disproportionate number of the athletes come from lower-class and minority families.

FREEWRTING ASSIGNMENT

Spend about five minutes responding to Messner’s observations about the different place of athletics in the lives of young men of different social classes. Do they correspond with your own observations and experiences?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Take a few minutes and jot down how important athletics is to you. Compare your answers with those of your classmates. Do your answers correspond to Messner’s analysis?
2. Do you think that the class distinctions Messner describes—that success in sports plays a more central role in the lives of poor and working-class young people—apply to girls and young women in sports? What are you basing your opinions on—specifically?

3. Think about messages from popular culture—what do they tell us about women and sports? Do young girls have athletes as heroes? Can girls be jocks and still be “feminine”?
4. Could we argue that beauty queens such as Miss America play the same part in the lives of young girls that athletes play in the lives of young men? That the “developing identities” of young girls are closely intertwined with [their] successes—or failures—as “beauty queens”?
5. Messner calls careers in sports “limiting.” In what ways are they limiting? If these careers are so limiting, why are star athletes paid so much money to endorse products?
6. Where do you think the term “dumb jock” comes from? How has the dumb jock become a stereotype in our culture? Is it possible to be White and wealthy and a dumb jock? White and poor and a dumb jock?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. For the last ten years, find the number of varsity athletes at your school who have received offers from professional teams. Compare this number with the total number of varsity athletes in those years. Do your findings support Messner’s contention that most young men do not become professional athletes? Present your findings to the class.
2. Examine the ads in two or three magazines that you read regularly to determine how many of them are endorsements by professional athletes. How are the athletes portrayed in the ads? What is the proportion of male to female athletes? Are male and female athletes portrayed differently? Create a collage that exemplifies your findings and present it to the class.
3. Research child beauty pageants. Are there pageants for both girls and boys? At what ages do the children compete? What are the expectations for the children who compete? What “categories” do they compete in? Using your findings, with two or three of your classmates, outline the requirements and competitive categories of a pageant for male athletes, for female athletes.
4. Interview athletes on your campus. What are their days like? Are their experiences similar to those of the young men Messner interviews? How? How do they differ? Prepare a poster presentation to illustrate your findings.
5. Read one or two biographies of famous athletes (e.g., Tiger Woods or Lance Armstrong). What do you learn about the differences between the lives of “real athletes” and the depictions of athletes in popular culture? Do they support the theory that superathletes train so hard that they lose their childhood and consequently never lead a “normal” life? Present your findings to the class.
6. Watch *A League of Their Own* and *Hoop Dreams*. Create a visual presentation that shows the difference between the reality depicted in these films and the images of superathletes that are so prevalent in popular culture.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Interview an athlete at your school who is successful—someone who starts, has a sports scholarship—and write an essay that examines the relevance of Messner’s theories about young men and sports to this athlete’s life and career.
2. Based on your research for 3 above, write a feature article for the local paper in which you argue that child beauty pageants are, in fact, pornography.
3. Based on the information you received in interviews with athletes on campus, write an op-ed article for your school newspaper in which you argue that athletes on scholarship should be paid for the work they do.
4. Write an essay in which you argue for or against women playing on your school’s football team. For example, should a woman be allowed to be a kicker in football? a linebacker? a tackle?

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Children and Poverty

Marian Wright Edelman is founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF). After graduating from Spellman College, where she joined civil rights protests, Edelman went on to Yale Law School and became the first black woman ever admitted to the Mississippi bar. In the late 1960s Edelman founded the CDF, whose mission is “to leave no child behind, and to ensure every child a healthy start, a head start, a fair start, a safe start, and moral start in life.” CDF provides an effective voice for poor, minority children and those with disabilities. It researches and disseminates information on legislation affecting the lives of children, and provides support and technical assistance to a network of state and local child advocates. Edelman’s capacity to transform rage into courage and action has made her over the last four decades a central figure in the quest for justice for the dispossessed in America. Although the interview excerpted below was to have been about her own heroic work, Edelman turns her attention to others, discussing not only children and poverty but also the extraordinary courage of ordinary people.

It must be hard to be a poor child in America, hard, when so many have so much, to have little and to know it. When I was growing up in the South, without television, we didn’t have the sense that one had to have all these things that our consumer and excessively materialistic society tells us we need. People didn’t see poverty as something that set them apart. To be poor today, to be unable to get the basic necessities of life, and then to have the judgment about who you are as a person be based on material wealth, is much more difficult. Most of our measures of success have become external....

Here we are on the cusp of a new millennium. God has blessed us with more riches than we know what to do with, yet we let millions of our children go hungry, without shelter, and without other basic necessities of life. Here we are blessed with the best health technology, yet we have places where children's immunization rates fall behind those of some developing nations, and eleven million children are without health coverage. . . . As a nation, we've got the means to prevent child gun deaths and to end child poverty and preventable diseases, but we haven't got the will. Here we have poverty killing children, more slowly, but just as surely as guns, in a nation that has been blessed with a nine-trillion-dollar economy. . . . We addict our children to consumption and tell them you have to have the latest material things in order to be viewed as somebody, yet we don't provide the education and training for them to get the jobs to get those things legally. We've also told rich kids that they need all those things, and they're finding that their appetites aren't really satisfied. So we have a spiritual poverty problem that is going to have to be confronted in a culture that treats children as consumers rather than as developing human beings in need of protection. . . .

We lose a classroom full of children every two days. A quiet Littleton almost every day, in which nearly twelve children are killed by gunfire. But you know, it's dispersed and many of them aren't white so nobody pays attention. . . . To be talking about the President's proposal for a \$1.5 trillion increase in this post-Cold War era to protect children against outside enemies [the defense budget], when they are being killed like fleas here at home, while they struggle to read and get ready for school, is obscene. . . . One of the messages that we have to set forth is that most poor people today are working. Seventy percent of poor children live in a working family. . . . So if we really don't believe in welfare, why don't we make sure there is health care and child care and transportation available for working families. . . . [T]he racial issue, and the fact that most poor people are white and work, is a hard one in the media and every place else. We have made a conscious effort over the last twenty-five years to try to redefine the face of the poor and hurting child. Black and brown children have a disproportionate chance of being poor and being at risk of all the worst things. Still, in numbers, there are more poor whites. We [CDF] constantly try to say that the majority of children who are affected are white, and we always try to get white welfare recipients to testify so that the congresspeople realize this can happen to somebody they identify with. But there is such a long history of stereotyping that is constantly reinforced by the media, it is very difficult not to have people constantly put a black face on poverty. . . .

I was blessed to have been challenged to do something that's worth living and dying for, and to have a life that's never lacked purpose. And I have been blessed with extraordinary role models throughout, starting with my parents. . . . I was a lawyer by the time I went back to Mississippi. One case I worked on involved an immensely courageous black woman, Mrs. Mae Bertha Carter, the first school desegregation plaintiff in Sunflower County. She wanted her eight younger children not to have to go into the cotton fields like her older kids. She described what it felt like the first day the white school bus came and she saw those kids go off to the formerly white school and how every afternoon she'd wait and count them all as they came in. . . . I never feel I am half as good as those incredible, ordinary people who, day in and day out, withstood beatings, assaults, and torments without bitterness and with a transcendent faith. I don't think I got a child out of jail who hadn't been beaten or worse. . . .

5 I am also clear that if we do not save our children, we are not going to be able to save ourselves. I cannot believe that God gave us all of these riches, and we would fail to take care of the most vulnerable among us. Taylor Branch said that never before in history have school children been the decisive factor in the transformation of a nation. We often forget that it was children who had to go through the mobs and weather the violence in Birmingham and Selma; children who were herded into the cattle cars and jails in Jackson. Their parents were terrified, but their children were the frontline soldiers. . . . Commitment is both a gift of God and the luck of circumstance. I grew up in a family that really did believe in the graciousness of God. Mrs. Mae Bertha Carter said it very eloquently when she said, "God has a good purpose for all of us. And so God builds in those strengths to do what you have to do." And I think she was echoing Kierkegaard who said that everybody needs to open up the envelope of their soul and get their orders from inside of you. And nobody ever said that it was going to be easy. But you have to try.

Courage is just hanging in there when you get scared to death. One of the things that I remember about Dr. King is how as a young person he could always look scared to death. Look at his face in many of his pictures, he is depressed. He often did not know what he was going to do next. I remember him saying how terrified he was of the police dogs in the back of the car when he was being taken out to rural Georgia after being arrested. And in my little college diary, the first time I met him, I must have written down half of the speech he gave, about how you don't have to see the whole stairway to take the first step. You can be scared but you shouldn't let it paralyze you. And he used to say over and over again, "If you can't run, walk; if you can't walk, crawl; if you can't crawl, just keep moving." That reflects courage. There comes a point in life when you look around and decide that this is not what life's about. It is not what God meant for you. And you have to change things. And if that means dying, that's fine. But it is not living. Otis Moss used an analogy recently that the worst thing to happen to a bird is not to kill it, it's to clip its wings, to clip its tongue. Many people were terrified in the civil rights days but terror is a part of living in an unjust system. I felt that when I went to Crossroads, the Cape Town camp out in South Africa. When I saw those young people, I saw myself thirty years earlier, and I knew they would just not stop. That's courage—acting despite it all.

FREEWRTING ASSIGNMENT

Respond to Edelman's interview. Is she a hero? How does her definition of *courage* correspond to yours?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with Edelman that "most of our measures of success have become external"? What does this say about our culture? How might we measure success through internal means?
2. Can you give examples of "spiritual poverty" other than those Edelman describes? Is it only a product of a culture based on consumption? What other factors might contribute to it? How might we engage in the kind of social action described by Edelman to combat these factors?

3. Were you shocked to discover Edelman's message that "most poor people today are working" and that "most poor people are white"? How does this information impact your stereotypes about poverty? What have those stereotypes been based on? What measures might we take to resist them?
4. Throughout her comments, Edelman connects personal life with public life. Consider the ways in which a candidate's personal life is often packaged for public consumption in a political campaign. What is different about Edelman's personal and public message?
5. How do you respond to Edelman's belief that we must open up our souls and be receptive to messages from inside of ourselves? How would you go about opening your soul? to what end?

FURTHER RESEARCH

1. On the Web, research the CDF. Where is the nearest office to you? What CDF projects, if any, are in progress in your community? How can you become active in the work of this organization? Prepare a handout explaining its work.
2. Who are Taylor Branch, Otis Moss, and Kierkegaard? Research their contributions to society. Present your findings to the class.
3. Edelman describes visiting Crossroads in South Africa. Investigate the historical situation to which she refers and create a collage to illustrate your findings.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Edelman discusses courage in terms of terror. Write about a situation where courage has been expressed in the face of terror.
2. She also discusses terror as part of injustice. Write an essay in which you use a specific situation to describe terror in the face of injustice.
3. Describe a specific example of spiritual poverty in your immediate household, residence hall, or community and the steps that might be taken to combat it.
4. Write a poem or song lyrics about spiritual poverty.

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Discussion Questions

Heroes, Outsiders, and Gender

1. How is heroism gendered? How are outsiders and alienation gendered? How do cultural images and representations of heroes and outsiders reinforce or refute this gendering? Do we consider aliens to be sexed and gendered in the same ways as humans?
2. What qualities do extraterrestrials, aliens, share with illegal aliens? Why do they share the same name? Are they gendered in the same ways? What is a legal alien?
3. Are women who resist gender stereotypes or criticize gender roles outsiders? Does this resistance involve heroism?
4. Are male superheroes objectified in the same ways as female superheroes?
5. Are heroes' sexuality and appearance important components of their identity as a hero? Are sexuality and appearance important components of one's identity as an outsider?

The Search for Salvation

1. When we look to the sky are we hoping that Superman or Wonder Woman will rescue us, fearing an alien invasion, hoping for an alien encounter, or praying for salvation?
2. How is spirituality connected to our cultural construction of outsiders and heroes?
3. Do we need to feel threatened in order to reassure ourselves that we are safe? Do we need an enemy, an outsider, in order to feel that we are redeemed?
4. Do we create heroes to make our aspirations real? Do we create them to free ourselves of personal responsibility?
5. Do the decline and parody of the heroic figure in our society represent a loss of faith? Was Christ a hero? Was he an outsider?

Heroes as Outsiders/Outsiders as Heroes

1. How is being an outsider heroic? How is it antiheroic?
2. How does heroism emerge from alienation or in resistance to alienation?
3. Would you want to live with a hero? with an outsider? Would a hero want to live with an outsider or an outsider with a hero? Why?
4. Who are your heroes? Who or what do you view as outsiders?
5. Are you a hero? to whom? Are you an outsider? to whom?

Writing Projects

1. Many of the selections in this chapter investigate how heroism is gendered. Write an essay or construct a hypertext in which you consider how the notion of outsider also is gendered.

2. Construct a contemporary mythology for your residence hall, for your home, for your class. What are the similarities and differences? How does your mythology emerge from traditional mythologies? How does it depart from them? Present your mythology in the form of a collage or hypertext.
3. Compare the selections in this chapter with those in Chapter 9: “Fashion and Spirituality.” Write an essay that considers how hero or outsider status becomes a fashion statement. Consider how either relates to spiritual concerns.
4. Investigate ways in which popular culture has accommodated the notion of the outsider and made it part of the average domestic environment. Think about TV sitcoms and comedies that do this. Write an essay that explores the cultural implications of this development.
5. Construct a collage, zine, or hypertext that demonstrates the blurring of the traditional roles of hero and outsider.