

**ncr 2001**

r e a l i t y



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# marge simpson is my mother

## the ultimate power of stories to shape our psyches

a creative work by #417-21-7717 ("matt supko")

The first time in my life that I was frightened for my own sanity was the time I mistook Marge Simpson for my mother. It was (admittedly) during my freshman year of college—but I was neither drunk nor "stoned" nor "tripping" at the time. I was perfectly sober, well-rested, and in good health when it happened—hell, I think it was even *day-time*. I was talking to my roommate and several friends when the conversation turned to parents trying to be "cool" in the eyes of their offspring. I began to relate the story of

to a fictional person—more specifically, it happened to Bart Simpson.

I was barely halfway through telling the anecdote when I stopped, slapped my forehead in true doofus fashion, and exclaimed, "wait—that wasn't my mom; that was

fictional character? I began to worry that television, in accordance with what everyone seemed to whisper about it in the same accusatory tones reserved for such evils as Saturated Fats<sup>1</sup>, Saccharine<sup>2</sup>, and Yellow #5<sup>3</sup>, really was rotting my brain. I feared that in another five years I would be entirely unable to distinguish reality from fiction.

What I lacked was a proper understanding of and respect for the power of stories. The story and character of Marge Simpson are parts of my memory just as my memories of my real mother are. Marge

Simpson is my mother—she defines and exemplifies what a mother is, and should be. The mind does not always draw a clear boundary between fictional and real experience—the two largely blur. Stories, whether real or fictional, form the basis of

Marge Simpson!" Everyone laughed at me, and I did what I could to laugh the incident off, but, on a deeper level, it troubled me. How could I confuse my own dear mother, who had sacrificed years of her life to raise and care for me, with a goofy pop culture



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1 makes you fat. also slow & stupid, by some accounts.

2 gives you cancer.

3 shrinks your penis.

human understanding of the world—they have a powerful reality that is entirely their own.

But I have been talking too much about myself. Perhaps this would be a good time to introduce John.

John is from Sacramento, California. He and his wife Stephanie have been married for 15 years. They have three children: Becky, Tim, and Josie<sup>4</sup> and a dog named Snuffles. John works for a local computer software company during the day, and on the weekends he likes to

one around him knows who John is. People define their lives in terms of stories—this is the way experience works. It doesn't get truly interesting, however, until fiction gets involved.

Susan dated Troy for about six months before the police dragged him away. She thought he was a wonderful and charming guy. She was shocked beyond belief when she found out that he was actually Michael Walker Humbert, 31, renowned car thief and escaped convict. He had told her all sorts of things

Here it is easy to see how "Troy," a documented pathological liar, has been able to influence Susan's perception of him so much that even after she learns he is lying, his story remains so strong she cannot perceive Troy as anything other than what he has told her he is—a terrific Cajun cook<sup>5</sup>. Whether stories are, in fact, real has no bearing on their persuasive power<sup>6</sup>. The notion of "truth" doesn't really apply to stories.

That being said, let us examine some instances in which fiction impacted decisions in people's lives.

how *dare* I confuse my *own dear mother*, who sacrificed *years of her life* to *raise* and *care* for me, with a *goofy pop fiction character!*

go hiking and take photographs. John and Stephanie met years ago at a photography seminar in college and they have been inseparable ever since.

I could go on and on about John, you know. My question is, is this anecdote fictional or is this real? Is this the truth about John? The truth is, it doesn't matter whether this is real or not—it's how John defines himself as well as how other people define John. John's identity, however repackaged for the listener, comprises a story. This is how John and every-

about himself—his long and comprehensive family history in New Orleans, old ethnic stories his grandfather had told him, how he used to be a four-star Cajun chef, until rent problems drove his business under. It wasn't until he was hauled off by Iowa state troopers that Susan found out he was born in Oregon to an Irish father and an African-American mother, and had lived in the Midwest for most of his smarmy life.

When asked what Troy was like, Susan invariably finds herself having to admit that his cooking was delicious.

Allison, 15, of Grovedale High School, has been trying to get Paul, 17, to notice her and ask her out—but as yet, she hasn't had much success. The other night, however, she saw an episode of a sitcom wherein a character dyed her hair red and, the next day, was fawned over by dozens of guys<sup>7</sup>. Newly inspired, Allison dyed her hair bright red, much to her parents' chagrin. Paul, however, did not respond as expected—nor (for that matter) did anyone else.

While only a very young student, James had

4 In order of descending age.

5 Curiously, other people who knew "Troy" during this time described his cooking as "edible, I guess."

6 Whether stories are realistic, however, is another matter entirely.

7 This was the comic premise of the episode, if you couldn't tell.



the Cleavers, the "model American family"—who actually knows a family like this? no one, right? yet people as real as you & me often look to the Cleavers as an ideal to be emulated.

about a friend whose family had landed in the hospital with food poisoning. Suddenly all beef products looked dangerous to her, and she forbade her children to eat beef.

Kathy is an accountant at Big John's Law Firm in Ashburn, North Carolina. She usually works late, and, when she finishes, she sometimes has to walk alone through a darkened parking garage to her car. She had done this for years without much thought and without serious incident. Recently, however, she watched a made-for-TV movie about a woman who is brutally raped and left for dead in a parking garage late at night. Since then she has been unable to walk in the parking garage during the daytime without looking constantly over her shoulder; to park there at night is unthinkable. Instead, she often takes a taxi home, abandoning her car to the dangers of the garage.

In each of these instances, a piece of fiction influenced a person's conscious thought processes—these individuals made real choices in the real world based upon experience gleaned from stories. But the influence of fiction upon people's lives can run much deeper than that. The next few anecdotes concern people who have constructed large parts of their own identity<sup>8</sup> based upon stories.

Dedalus is thrashed and teased by his classmates for the decision but sticks to his assertion and, from that day on, Tennyson's work has not held the same magic for James that it used to. He has, instead, begun reading Byron more seriously.

Anne cooked beef stroganoff for her family for years—in fact, she used to be pretty renowned for it. She stopped the practice, however, after her cousin told her

already begun to consider himself a great connoisseur of literature. He felt a particular fondness for Alfred, Lord Tennyson, a poet whom he considered to be a master at "proper" poetry. One day, however, he happened to be reading Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when he came across the scene where the young Stephen Dedalus accuses Tennyson of being "nothing but a rhymester," proclaiming instead the superiority of Byron.

8 (their own stories, to be accurate)

Marc Lenko, 37, describes his motives for joining the police force to an interviewer: "I had always loved those movies where cops went after criminals, and there were shootouts and car chases, and it just looked real exciting. And the cops always won. I guess I wanted to be one of the good guys."

Interviewer: "And is it actually like that?"

Marc [laughing]: "Not at all. Well, sometimes."

Interviewer: "Sometimes?"

Marc: "Sometimes I still feel like that. That excitement. Sometimes I'll have some guy up against the wall, and I'll be all like," [assumes dramatic voice] "you have the right to remain silent!

Anything you say can and will be used against you... and you know how that goes." [laughs].

Ariana never quite understood what was holding her down in her life until she happened to read *The Fountainhead*. She read the book merely by circumstance; she was encouraged by a high school English professor to enter an essay contest on *The Fountainhead*. Upon reading the book, she began to feel a powerful sense of admiration for the unbreakable Howard Roark and his unintimidated, uncorrupted world view. By the time she began writing the essay for the Rand Foundation, Ariana was well on her way to being

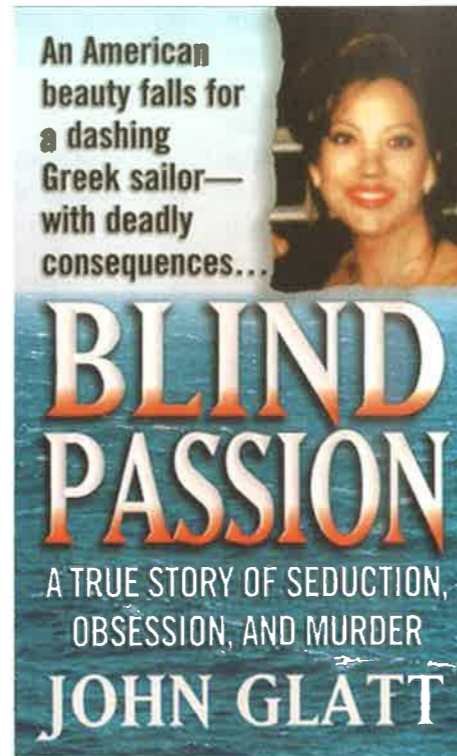
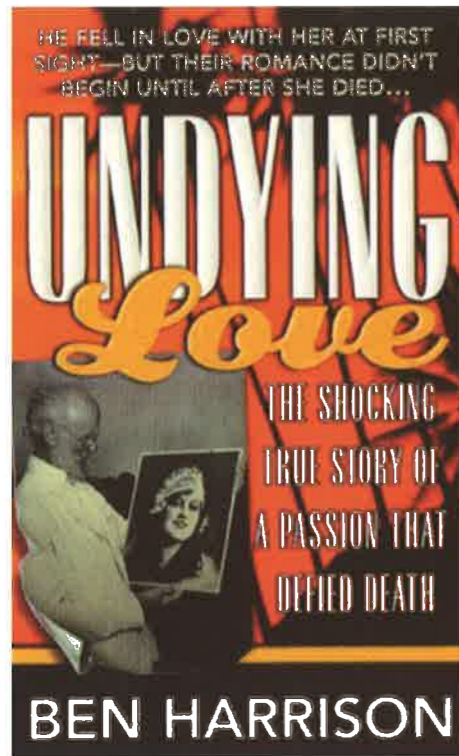
a good little Objectivist. She began acting cold and callous towards her friends<sup>9</sup>, occasionally (but only secretly) causing herself great emotional pain and destroying friendships she had had for years. Years later, she still describes herself as an "Objectivist"—but she also expresses a sense of regret on occasion for her behavior and tries not to hurt those around her.

In both these cases, a series of fictional images has become an inextricable part of a person's identity. For Marc, pulp cop movies have given him a concrete set of images describing what a policeman is, and so, as a policeman, he applies these images to him-

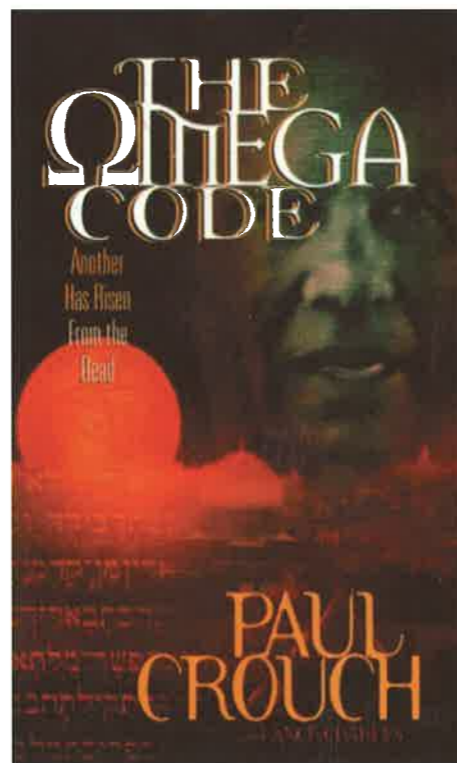
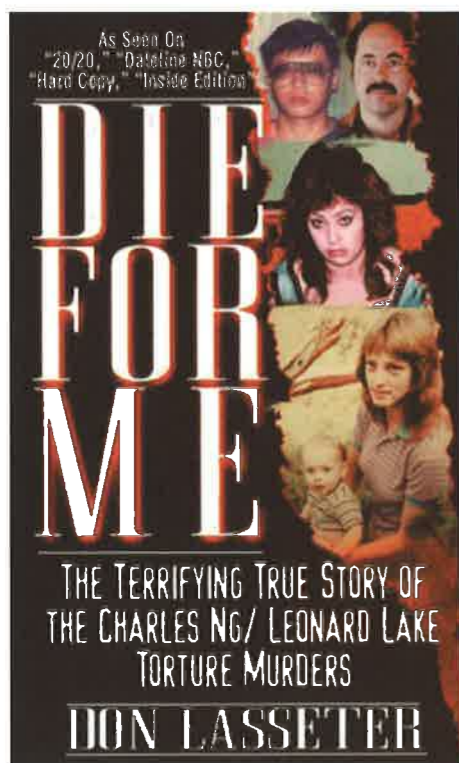
iconic American images like Barbie® have their own (often eerie) reality



9 other people don't matter, after all...



the notion of **“truth”** doesn't really apply to **stories**.



self. He perceives himself as a "good guy"—part of his moral code and ego are invested in this fiction-inspired notion. Ariana has bought into Rand's treatment of Roark as a heroic figure and emulates him. By acting like Roark, she believes she too can be heroic and morally superior.

Ayn Rand is actually a good example of something else, too. Many authors have caught on to this vast power of stories and write their fiction to influence the actions and ethical codes of others. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, while largely a work of fiction, created enough resentment against the meat packing industry that serious regulations were drafted and imposed within a few years of the novel's publication. The novelist George Orwell, fearful of global tyranny, wrote books like *Animal Farm* and *1984*, both of which were

intended<sup>10</sup> to make people increasingly leery of big government and politicians. Popular Christian fiction like *The Omega Code* has its own predictable agenda<sup>11</sup>.

These pieces of didactic fiction also show how fiction can influence the character and decisions of not just one person, but of entire societies. The powerful and ruthless influence of stories is evident at the deepest levels of history. How many people have been motivated to take part in crusades and jihads because of promises of eternal glory for those who perish<sup>12</sup>? How much were the Western world's perceptions of China shaped by Marco Polo's journals<sup>13</sup>? How much has conventional Western morality been shaped by the allegorical implications of stories in the Bible<sup>14</sup>?

So, how much have you bought into the anecdotes in this article? Are they even

true? Well, some are, and some aren't. It doesn't matter, though—they're all stories, and they all, as I have argued the entire time, have a reality of their own, independent of their basis in the "real world." They support my arguments. Perhaps they have even influenced your thinking. Am I manipulating the truth? To ask that is to miss the point.

#### BIOGRAPHY

#417-21-7717 is described as a caucasian male, approximately 5'9 when standing up straight, 5'7 when slouching, with black hair and brown eyes. Since birth, #417-21-7717 has demonstrated exceptional promise in the areas of writing, music, and graphic design. For this reason, we have assigned him career path #367-B ("English-Major").

10 and they were quite successful about it, too.

11 (Christian)

12 the nature & substance of this "eternal glory" being, of course, just part of another, more elaborate story called "religion."

13 the truth of which is, ironically, currently the subject of much speculation.

14 recent scientific estimates set this at "a lot."



In few id suspension  
photo by theresa rumore  
caption by mark cyst

# (un)reel history

what's missing in this picture?

by teresa brady

## A sense of elsewhere

Ideas seem to emerge from the silent scene on the other side of the glass: smokers gathered in front of a cafe, the flow of pavement under headlights, the woods outside the bedroom, a painting, a fish bowl – even a muted TV screen can evoke a realm which generates thought.

In the grand ballroom

popular detective novel. He rejected script after script by various studio writers until he ran out of time. Five days before shooting was scheduled to start, the director asked his secretary to “type up” the novel into screenplay format, which she did.

Panelists chuckled. The man at the podium explained that film-worthy

adapted for the screen by Leigh Brackett. Although it's true she wrote it in five days, she had never worked as a secretary. She wrote popular science fiction novels before she turned to writing for film. She was one of Howard Hawks' favorite writers and wrote five movies for him. Her screenwriting career spanned 35 years. The last movie she

It's **not** that most women *didn't do*; it's that *most* of what women did is **excluded** from the *textbooks*.

of a posh old hotel, I sat for most of a weekend with about 300 other writers on folding chairs at a screenwriters' conference. While film industry professionals shared their wisdom, my gaze drifted to a large dark painting on the wall.

On Sunday morning, a tall, gray-haired, Armani-clad man stood at the podium on the stage at the far end of the ballroom. His film credit was a script adaptation for a disaster movie, and he opened the panel discussion on literary adaptation to film with this story. A director was given a year to acquire a good screenplay adaptation of a

adaptations are notoriously difficult to write, and yet the director had been able to shoot the movie with nothing more than what the secretary had “typed up.” The man concluded his story by revealing that it was director Howard Hawks who had made *The Big Sleep* (1946), essentially, without a script. The film-literate audience applauded in recognition of that Hollywood legend's admirable adaptation of Raymond Chandler's novel.

I was expecting the story to be about a secretary who discovered she could write, until I heard the name of the movie. *The Big Sleep* was

wrote was *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). In telling his story, the man erased Leigh Brackett from film history.

Maybe he was confused. Maybe he was thinking of Alice Guy-Blache, who was working as a secretary in Paris when she made her first film in 1895. She taught herself to use the typewriter, an invention as new as the camera equipment produced by her employer, Leon Gaumont. After she saw the first moving picture ever projected onto a screen for an audience – a film showing workers leaving a factory – she had an idea to make movies that tell a story. Her employer believed that

In New York suspension  
photo by teresa brady  
caption by mark cyst



moving pictures were merely a fad, but he allowed her to experiment with a camera—as long as it didn't interfere with her secretarial duties. Within a few weeks she had written, directed, produced, acted in, and filmed a one minute movie—the first ever to have sets, costumes, actors, and a storyline. She learned by doing and in the process invented the art of film making. After two years, her feature films were so popular that she quit working as a secretary and made movies full time for Gaumont. She made over 100 movies with sound, and many in color, decades before such technology was used in Hollywood. She made the first film noir and was the first to use close-up shots for dramatic effect. She defined the role of the film director. She ran Gaumont's motion picture studio; trained hundreds of actors, camera operators and directors; and was known as a one woman film school. By 1906, she had made nearly 400 films in France. Her success continued with the films she made for her own film company in New York. Alice Guy-Blache is considered an architect of the movie industry. Maybe the man at the podium was simply ignorant.

#### The history of history

In fourth grade world history class I discovered the charm of the window. I was interested in the people of the past. I was curious about how they lived—their inventions,

arts, and sciences. I wanted to know how the past came to be the present, but history was only about kings and conquerors. Queen Elizabeth was a picture on a page, not a paragraph.

At Catholic school we studied the legends of the saints. We read them in religion class, leapfrogging over centuries, in the order of the feast days. Some of those stories sprang out of the



In the Middle Ages, control of wealth through land made women powerful.

myths of their time; some were grounded in fact. But it didn't matter. The saints were ordinary people who did extraordinary things. They were brave, bold, wise; they were heroes—and many of them were women. They showed me who I was and who I could be.

History failed to do that. As I progressed through school, it was presented with increasing sophistication, but its basic theme remained the same: History was only what men did. There were very few women in the past, and at

times there were no women at all.

For a long time, the ancient Greek mathematician Hypatia didn't exist. As a respected teacher of philosophy, Hypatia symbolized scientific learning, considered pagan by early Christians, and was slashed to death with oyster shells by a mob of fanatical monks. After her death, any reference to her was systematically removed from Alexandria's records. Historians have dug up and pieced together some of her life. Now, after centuries condemned to anonymity, Hypatia has her own Web site.

A few years ago, I was the only woman in a screenwriters' group. We met in the loft of a micro-brewery to read scripts, drink beer, and discuss movies. On slow nights with no scripts to critique, the group resorted to movie trivia contests. Some had an impressive command of movie trivia, but none could name more than three women directors. They claimed that the few women who have made films are not remembered because their films tend to be inferior. (This is also an argument for few memorable women in all of history. I don't believe it. By whose standards are the contributions of women inferior? Let me know who they are and what they've done and I'll be the judge.) I began to find books that named hundreds of women screenwriters and directors and their award-win-



ning films. Knowing what other women have done, knowing the ground they have broken for me, makes a big difference: I don't have to be the G. I. Jane test case for the movie business.

Soon after I started screenwriting, I had a project to work on—a historical screenplay about an American black woman. The woman's name was, of course, not included in any encyclopedia or reference book, and Internet searches on her produced nothing. She was never mentioned in books about her area of expertise nor in books about the America of her time. I located accounts of her exploits in old newspapers on microfilm. Finding her was a lot of work.

For two years, on each of many visits to the



Alice Guy-Blache directed her first movie in 1895.

library, I could separate the books I checked out into two stacks: black and white — those by and about blacks and those by and about whites. Black history books described significant contributions by blacks; American history books omitted contribu-

tions of blacks, yet some white men of little consequence were included, as if to fill space on the page. What I found at the library was Jim Crow history in the 90s—the 1990s—decades after the Civil Rights movement. America's recognition of significant blacks, women, and minority cultures has had little impact on what is included in American history books.

#### What the menfolk say

James Winders, a post-modern historian and university professor, has written critically about the presentation of controversial historical events as conclusive. He warns, "the textbook will present the ideas or works as neatly woven into the fabric of Western tradition, i.e., beyond question. This approach in particular puts the reader's

critical guard at rest." He has called attention to an invisible element which he refers to as a "masculinist" cultural bias. Critical guard is needed to detect the masculinist lens through which we view the past.

When a female student in a social science class complained about having to study white man's history, a male student explained that history is about significant contributions, and only men have made them; to include women, he said, would be revisionist. Another male student in the class spoke of the wars of early American history as the only events that mattered, and those wars, he said, didn't include women. History is about what it means to be a man; revising it to include women would change what history is about.

The coffeehouse rationale is more sympathetic: the number of men who made history is disproportionately larger than the number of women because most women's lives were taken up by childbirth. Then again, most men were husbands and fathers and too busy plowing fields to do much else. Parenthood is not a deterrent; of the men and women who did make history, most were parents. Another notion is that women's names don't grace history books because women have been oppressed and lacked opportunity to accomplish, but that logic compares kings to peasant girls rather than queens.

It's not that most women didn't do; it's that most of what women did is excluded from the textbooks. When so few of women's accomplishments are known, they appear as isolated events; when women's accomplishments throughout time are linked, women become a historical reality.

Not long ago I sat in a windowless auditorium listening to a film history lecture on early inventors and film makers, each singled out for what he had done first. The lecturer named a man whose film career was unsuccessful and short-lived as the first to make a film with a storyline, two years after Alice Guy-Blache first made hers. I looked around at the faces of the 100 or so other women in the class and wondered if they believed what was unspoken—that there were no significant women in early film history. The lecturer was a nice man—he meant no harm; he taught straight out of the film history textbook. I dropped the class. There was no window.



Hypatia was the most influential teacher of philosophy in Alexandria.

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#### BIOGRAPHY

*Teresa Brady is new to New College. She is either a writer who paints or a painter who writes and is fascinated by global distribution principles and flowering trees.*



Ann Bonny and Mary Read — women pirates

# detrimental reality

when reality hurts & the imaginary helps

by joshua ridenour

*There is something feeble and a little contemptible about a man who cannot face the perils of life without the help of comfortable myths.*

-Bertrand Russell

Reality is a concept that most people assume that they have a grasp on. Indeed, it would probably be tough for society to continue if its citizens were continually in doubt of the "realness" of the world around them. The economy would crash when people

decide its not worth going to a job that may or may not really exist. Crimes against persons would escalate with the assumption that "I" am the only real "reality," and therefore why should one treat another as they would like to be treated when there isn't really any "other?" These are of course extreme possibilities. What interests me, however, is the question of whether or not it would be permissible, or even beneficial, for people to throw out conventional thought and simply not believe in what is "real,"

or, at least, what is widely held to be "real."

Throughout the centuries, scientists, clergy, kings, and paupers have all responded square on the negative side to this question, putting their stock in what they call "real," and denouncing the "unreal," and then proceeding to kill each other over what exactly *is* the real reality. So, (just for argument's sake, mind you) I am going to say that there is indeed a tangible reality out there that each of us is capable of grasping and living in, but, there are

instances when not believing in this reality can be beneficial.

Bertrand Russell obviously believed that any divergence from belief in this "reality" seriously decreased one's standing as a reasonable human being. Most of us would agree that there is an intrinsic value in believing in the real world. There are numerous examples that one can point to, to show that bad things happen when an individual's belief in reality lapses.

I am reminded of the story of a lawyer in a Toronto skyscraper, who had the habit of demonstrating the strength of the windows to visiting law students by running and jumping up against them. On one (and non-coincidentally his final) occasion, he crashed through the pane and plunged 24 stories to his death. It turns out that jumping against windows is not a wise thing to do. In this case, I would argue that it would have been much more beneficial to him if he would have had a greater belief in the reality of window stress limits and probability, rather than the belief in the invincible window.

The religious faith of snake handling presents another interesting case in lapses of reality. This peculiar practice believes that if one has enough faith in God, than one may pick up a highly venomous snake and God will prevent it from biting. But, if one does not have enough faith in God, you are very like-

ly to get both fangs straight in the arm. Most people would call this behavior insane. Who in their right mind would pick up a very frightened and poisonous creature to prove something to a God that already knows everything? Would an all-loving and omnipotent God (who presumably has an infinite amount of faith tests floating around in that omniscient head) actually test people's faith in such a silly way or punish those who lack faith in

such a horrible way? Snake handlers would do much better to believe the reality that snakes do not like being handled, especially in a place where people are chanting and shouting at them, that they do like to bite, and that they tend to do that very well. It should be noted that this lapse in reality has been responsible for the death of approximately 78 people since its founding in the late 19th century .

Not all lapses in reality result in grisly deaths. My grandmother, swept up in the current of the Cold War, believed that Communists controlled all things, including the weather.



МОЮ ТЕПЬ НА САМОЛЕТЫ

a group of evil communists plotting to alter American weather

Any plane that she spotted over (of all places) northeastern rural Arkansas, was undoubtedly a Communist aircraft creating tomorrow's bad weather.

Her particular brand of "reality" was detrimental when one thinks about how much fear and suspicion her daily life must have included, believing the Communists were everywhere and that they were out to get her and her loved ones. This was needless and, above all else, not real. I imagine that her days would have been filled with much more joy and happiness if she had not lived under the constant threat of Communist takeover.

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several people with a slightly less-than-normal grasp on reality

If we believe in reality, braking at red lights, firing rockets to the moon, and sailing our ships to the New

of the writers, investigators, and researchers were hard-lined atheists who were attempting to arrest religion's

in an individual's best interest to believe in one. Maybe my response was initially a gut reaction to disagree with someone being dogmatic, but after a few seconds I began to think that I might actually have a point.

Voltaire said that, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary for us to invent Him." In the strictest atheistic sense, this is the only shot we get at life, so we had better make it count. Considering that people are different and handle the world in different ways, it seems reasonable that some might have a harder time dealing with the rough parts of life. If, say, a person's family dies, and they slip into a deep depression, should we fault them for believing that their family is floating on a cloud somewhere feeling fine? If that is the only way they will feel better about the situation and about going on living, then we have an obligation to let them, since their happiness in this, (their only) life depends on it.

Voltaire was right and Bertrand Russell was wrong. A person is not a fool if they believe in something that others consider myth, they are simply doing what is necessary to survive. The only amendment I would make to Voltaire's statement is that it would be necessary for some of us to invent God. There are other, non-religious,

instances where believing in the unreal can be of worth. In my childhood, I was told of the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and Santa Claus. These non-real beings not only brought much joy to my life, they were an important part of my socialization. Fantastic entities brought a sense of wonder to our childhoods, in addition to presents and money. The world is filled with much more color and happiness when we believe in more than what is right before our eyes. Thousands of years ago humans believed in a real "Mother Earth." Very few of us believe in this now. But these people were much closer to nature, more in tune with it. Native Americans believed that all animals were their spiritual kin. While the vast majority of us see this as superstition, I see this "unreal" belief as extremely beneficial to the world as a whole. It gives back to the world in spite of being superstition. After all, who in their right mind would bulldoze a forest or drop a nuclear bomb if they believed that all of the world was alive?

We shouldn't completely disassociate ourselves with hard science or even with

a materialistic worldview. However, it would do us a great deal of good to step back and give reality a break now and again. After all, what is hope but to feel that some-



PUT MY SNAKES DOWN BEFORE I TURN YOUR WATER SUPPLY INTO A PLAGUE OF MAGGOTS!

thing that is desired can happen, even if the world says it won't?

#### BIOGRAPHY

*Joshua Ridenour is a graduating senior in New College, focusing on Philosophy of Environmental Studies. He enjoys long romantic sunset walks on the beach, vegetarian food, shiny objects, and sarcasm. He plans to use his super powers for good, rather than evil.*

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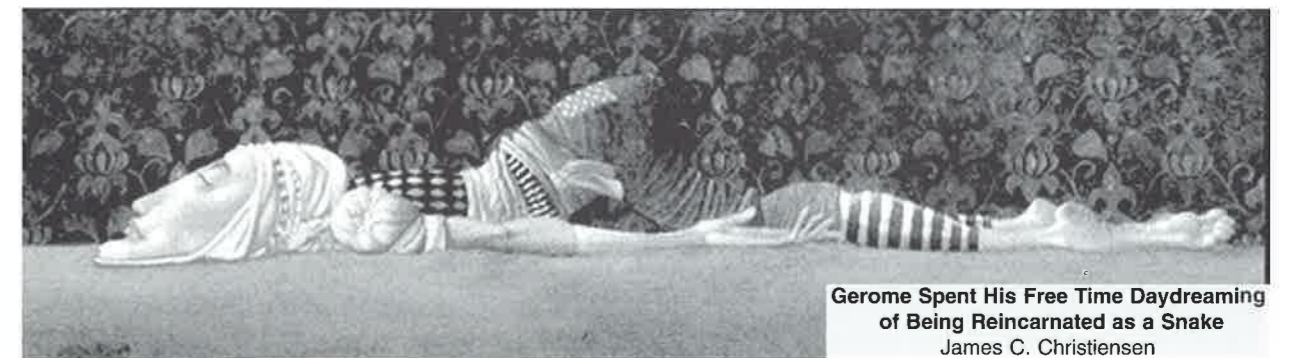


**snake handlers** would do much better to believe the *reality* that snakes **do not like** being **handled**.

World can pay off. But this isn't always true.

Recently, I interned at a magazine that examined global, human, and religious issues skeptically and critically. On occasion, the interns had lunch with the executive director, to argue philosophical issues. At one meeting, a staff writer's open theism was addressed. Here, where many

"strangle-hold" on our society, this man's belief was very puzzling. One of the more dogmatic interns began arguing vehemently about the "irrationality" and "silliness" of said writer's professed belief in God. Strangely enough, I found myself defending the writer, arguing that even if there is no God, there are occasions where it would be



Gerome Spent His Free Time Daydreaming of Being Reincarnated as a Snake  
James C. Christensen



**the handling of mainframes**  
photo by theresa rumore  
caption by mark cyst

# anatomy of a couch potato

a field guide to the fastest-growing race of humans

by heather kaye rainey

A new breed of humans was born in the latter twentieth century and placed at the glass teat of the television screen. Today, the television is used as babysitter, friend, lover, distraction. Following are some of the recently evolved specimens and how to identify them.

## Mr. Beanbag and the Real World

The door is open, exposing the guts of Mr. Beanbag's third floor apartment. The building is a sprawling, gray structure, a color easily painted over should its large student population get a little rowdy over the weekend. Our first specimen, Mr. Beanbag, sprawls on a red bean bag chair dangling a Bud Light from an apathetic hand. When a friend tries to convince him to go to a local bar for Songwriter's Night, Mr. Beanbag declines.

"Nah, I'm about to watch the Real World on MTV."

The first trademark of the Mr. Beanbag variety is that, when confronted with viewing life or living it, Mr. Beanbag will likely choose to play the voyeur.

Why does he behave this way? He thinks that real life is boring.

Those mundane things we do like brushing our teeth and driving to work are no cause for excitement. You don't see those acts on television very often, either. So maybe he has seen too much of this real life thing and finds a thrill in life on television that does not exist elsewhere.



Stories have aided the human race in fighting off boredom since the beginning of history. History is just stories, after all. You don't read of historic figures doing mundane things like eating dinner or looking in the bathroom mirror unless someone's wine has been poisoned or the mirror has revealed the villain about to strike. History books, like television, have the power to cut out what isn't exciting. In this way, watching television is exciting all the time, unlike real life. But this explanation

social norms. He can curse out loud, laugh, or cry without public scrutiny.

### Mr. Apathy and the Jealous Wife

He comes home from work every day, drapes his coat across the back of the chair, grabs a beer from the fridge and sprawls onto the couch, remote control in hand. Day after day, his wife complains to her friends:

"My husband is having an affair!" The women gasp.

will cook for dinner. But he doesn't know when he turns on the local news who has been killed or what the weather will be like tomorrow.

For Mr. Apathy, problems on the television aren't as complicated as his own. There is already a script planned, and more often than not, everything will turn out all right without his lifting a finger. The lovers will get together, the marriage will be saved, the kidnapped child rescued. By removing the actual power of the social situation, social

psychologists may argue, it is easier for Mr. Apathy to solve the problems on the television screen than it is to solve those of his own marriage. After all, Mr. Apathy doesn't have to wake up next to the woman on television to hear her complain about his failure to compliment her dinner. Of course, right across the street, his counterpart Mrs. Apathy stares at a television while her husband wonders why she never talks to him anymore.

### Ms. I'm Okay, You're Okay

Ms. I'm Okay, You're Okay is ill-equipped to handle the pressures of life away from the television. Aside from her difficult childhood, she has a failed marriage behind her,

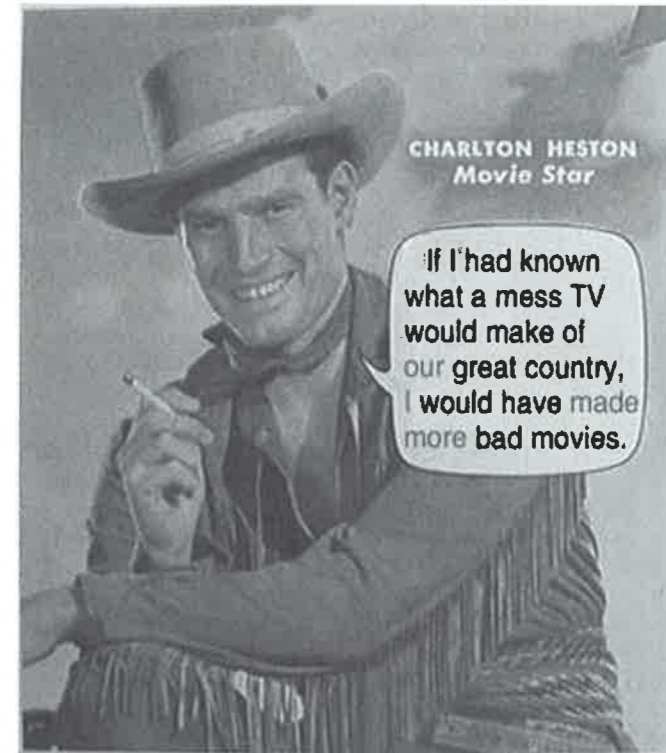
as her ex-husband suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder after Vietnam and spent several seasons in the hospital, before the marriage finally crumbled beyond reconstruction. She has a son who is physically and mentally ill. To top it all off, her doctor has informed her that she has multiple myeloma, a bone-marrow cancer nearly impossible to treat. Having given up on real life relationships (even to the point of trying to destroy any that threaten to exist) the television performs all the duties of an oxygen tank, therapist, friend, and comforter. She doesn't need to eat because of the exotic, yet tasteless, cuisine on the Food Network. She does all her shopping on QVC, buying pheromone perfumes and countless

soaps with her social security checks. She gets wedding after picture perfect wedding via Lifetime's *A Wedding Story*. She experiences the miracle of childbirth through *A Baby Story* and never has to wake up in the middle of the night to change a dirty diaper or feed a child who will one day become thankless.

Beneath the rattle and hum of the television, Ms. I'm Okay, You're Okay, like most of us, is afraid to die. She uses the television to avoid

thinking of death, which, as her doctor has admitted, looms ahead. It is unhealthy to avoid coming to terms with reality in this manner, or leaving the "house unclean" so to speak. But were it not for the television, there would be some other way to avoid the subject of death.

However, fear is still a



necessary element, even for specimens like Ms. I'm Okay, You're Okay. True fear teaches us when to move out of harm's way, when to be cautious, and not to take things that matter for granted. Also, fear can be fun. Roller coasters, horror movies, and television shows such as MTV's *Fear* exploit the human need for this emotion. However, there is a profound difference between the synthetic fear that television offers Ms. I'm Okay, You're Okay and the

fear of impending death she is avoiding. The ride ends, the credits roll, and the television show goes off.

### Mrs. General Anxiety

For Mrs. General Anxiety, the television is a source of information, which comes mostly from talk shows—Oprah, Maury, Montel, Geraldo, and Sally Jesse Raphael. Her constant calls to her out-of-town daughter usually initiate with a complaints like "I really wish you wouldn't go out so late at night. On Maury they had women who were raped right outside their houses!" or, "You be careful if your neighbor comes over and asks to borrow sugar. On Oprah, this woman was attacked right in her kitchen by a neighbor she had known for years!"

Let's face it, this world is a scary place. Especially for specimens of the anxious type. The television only serves to worsen this condition. Mrs. General Anxiety sees not only everything that has happened in her small town through the five o'clock news, but everything that has happened, or that possibly could happen, around the globe. She is afraid to venture out even in daylight. In the most extreme cases, she

Mr. Beanbag is watching *The Real World*, a show made to simulate real life. It's like hanging out with a bunch of real people doing mundane things, except less interactive.

excludes one small detail: Mr. Beanbag is watching *The Real World*, a show made to simulate real life. It's like hanging out with a bunch of real people doing mundane things, except less interactive.

Mr. Beanbag has friends in the television. After all, he has access to everyone's private actions. Through the eye of the camera, he can see just what girls talk about behind their bedroom doors. He can participate mentally in solving relationship problems presented by the program, and he gets to say out loud what he really thinks about each of the characters. He is not forced to hide his true feelings in order to avoid hurting someone's feelings or to obey

"I can't believe it!" says one.

"Are you sure?" says another. The wife nods her head sadly.

"Yes. He holds her hand on our couch. He stares into her eyes for hours and hours!"

"The nerve!" They chime in unison. "Who is she?"

"The television," Mr. Apathy's wife sighs.

This specimen and his wife have been married for 25 years or so. Mr. Apathy turns on the television to find out something he doesn't know already. He already knows what his wife will wear to bed, what she will say when she calls him at work, what she



In front of the television, families aren't urged to become *closer*, but to constantly **buy** more.

locks the car doors even while driving down the highway because she has seen so many tearful victims crying into the camera about family members lost to violent crimes.

"You better get the locks on your car doors fixed!" she complains. "Someone

could yank you right out of that car!"

"Mom, people don't try to open your car doors when you're going seventy-five down the interstate!"

"You shouldn't be speeding! There are cops that pull women out of their cars when they pull them over and

make them take all their clothes off. . ."

#### The Nuked Family

Families used to eat dinner around the table. In the most idealistic cases, there would be cheery banter, peace and love, and a sharing of the day's events. Every

sentence wasn't answered with "fine," and then left hanging like the corpse of an unfinished sentence. Family members talked to each other.

There is a new breed of family, these days.

The Nuked Family only knows what real families are supposed to be like because their evening meal is eaten crowded around a television that is playing back-to-back sitcoms. Television has been idealizing the nuclear family since the days of "Father Knows Best" and "The Donna Reed Show." The children of this Nuked Family learn to identify their families as "dysfunctional" when compared to the "functional" families on television. In the just-passed century, the television proved to millions of American households that even dysfunctional families could be functional in their own peculiar ways.

In front of the television, families aren't urged to become closer, but to constantly buy more. A parent's love for a child is measured by how much he or she spends on the child. Children often find the love and acceptance they need from parents on sitcoms while their own parents work overtime. The television succeeds in separating the

family because the various family members get the interaction they need from the fictional on-screen characters, rather than from each other.

It is not difficult to despise the television when so many of us smother our problems with the fantasy it offers. It seems that everyone is in therapy, that parents divorce each other and their children, that families struggle to make ends meet, but rarely does the cable bill go unpaid. Yet, the heart of the American obsession with the television is storytelling. Humans need stories like they need to breathe. Stories give us hope for the sometimes bleak future. They instruct us in love and relationships. They show us the follies of our past. The myriad ways television can waste or twist our lives, a few of which have already been discussed, show the power the television, and through the television storytelling itself, wield in our hearts and minds. Television's power often moves us in negative ways, but this particular form of storytelling is far from the only guilty party. Radio overflows with crude talk-radio "shock jocks" and endless top-forty repetition. Publishing abounds with Harlequin romances, pulp fantasies, sex

magazines, and endless spy novels and murder mysteries. Certainly, some are very good, and all have something worthwhile, but one must be careful which stories one reads or watches or listens to, if one wishes to grow from the experience, rather than rot from it. Television can transform and aid us in powerful ways, as the most versatile storytelling method ever invented. It can teach and comfort, and disperse information and wisdom with unimaginable speed. The only thing lacking is initiative on the part of the viewers to be selective and careful in what they allow to pour into their living rooms worldwide.

We must realize that television is just another book with a different cover. While often misused, perhaps it is valuable in this high-speed world as just another mode of doing what humans do best: creating stories that give our real world meaning.

#### BIOGRAPHY

*Heather Kaye Rainey, a recent New College graduate, now works somewhere in the subterranean banks of an out-of-state America Online tech-support center. We wish her luck.*

# the batcave has no bathrooms

one of the great appeals of fiction is freedom from mundanity  
by will hooper

Most people in the industrialized world recognize immediately the Millennium Falcon, the ship Han Solo pilots in the Star Wars series of films. Most people, in fact, have seen all three of the films in which the ship appears. How often, though, does anyone ask, "During all those hours and days they spend in outer space, where did they go to the bathroom?"

Where indeed. We will see pilot's chambers, beds, a

books that attempt to document everything that happens to a character usually get consigned to the "experimental" genre, and most people find them boring if not totally unreadable.

With a moment's thought, the most egregious of these omissions come to light, in that fictional characters do not seem to conform to any known human biology. Sherlock Holmes never violates his Victorian ethic by

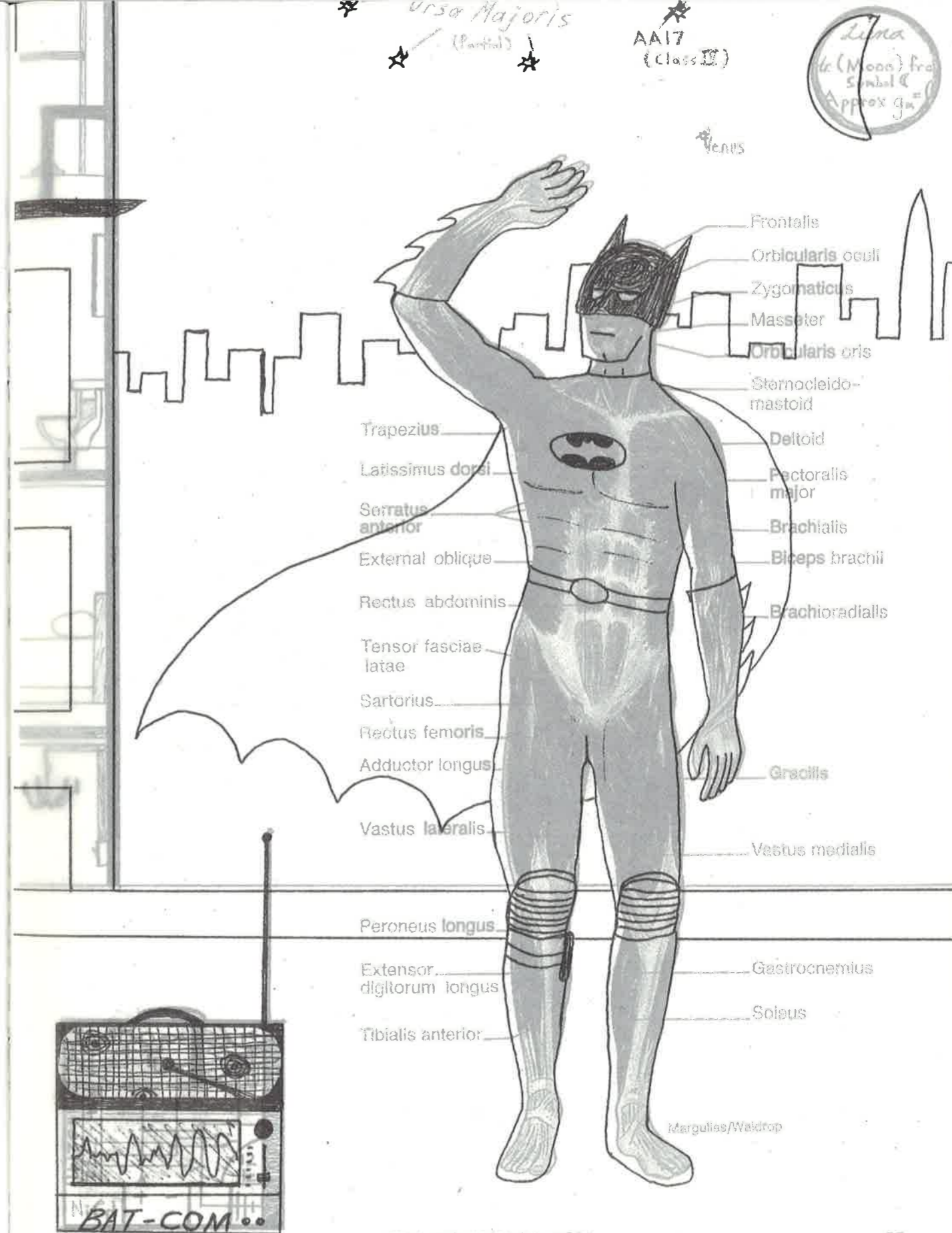
a multiple-hour process involving a great deal of pain and effort by the mother, followed by the ejection of not only a slimy, crying baby, but also a great deal of other fluids and solids of vague origin. All of this serves to greatly surprise, or render unconscious, anyone raised on the television myth of five minute, clean births in elevators, which end with a mom still in makeup and an infant, soft, dry, and quiet. At the other

this is the **essence** of what makes fiction enjoyable: it strips out all the **"boring"** parts of the human story.

holographic gaming table, smuggling cargo holds, hallways, a gun deck, even a bed - but no bathroom. Not even a hint of one. There doesn't appear to be any food storage, either, nor water receptacles, but no one ever questions these omissions. This captures the essence of what makes fiction enjoyable: it appeals because it strips out all the "boring" parts of the human story. Whether epic high fantasy or meticulously researched historical tales, fiction represents life on selective fast-forward and frees the partaker temporarily from the crushing weight of mundane minutiae. The few

lowering himself to something so crude as the use of water closet or chamber pot, yet modern experience and historical documents indicate the necessity of such items, even for a Victorian aristocrat. Eating often occurs in our fictional excursions, but mostly as a setting for dialogue and plot thickening rather than as a way to stop being hungry. Even then, the average character in any "make-believe" story would rapidly starve if they ate as infrequently in the "real" world as they do in their own. Being born and getting killed occur with much less mess in most worlds of fantasy. Humans begin life through

end of the mortal coil, a gunfight occurs, and Clint Eastwood (or John Wayne or James Bond) plugs the bad guy with a large-caliber handgun. A red hole appears in the bad person's forehead, and they fall face down. Death, sanitized for your protection. In reality, being shot at close range with a Colt Python .357 revolver creates not only a red entrance hole in the front of the head, but also a grapefruit sized exit hole at the back, from whence the bullet and most of the brain cavity's contents spray all over nearby structures. The victim, thrown backwards by the power of the shot, may well defecate,



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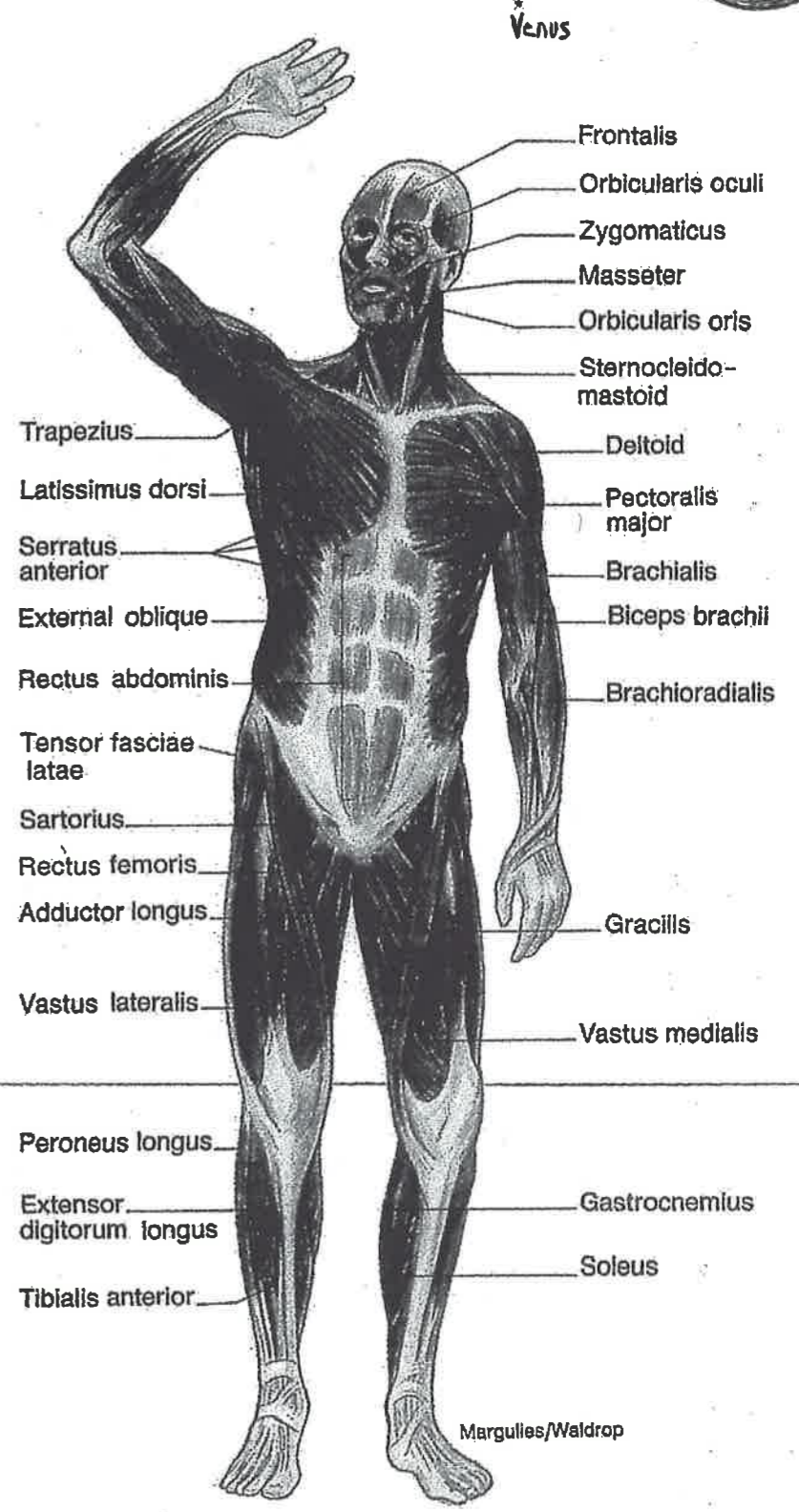
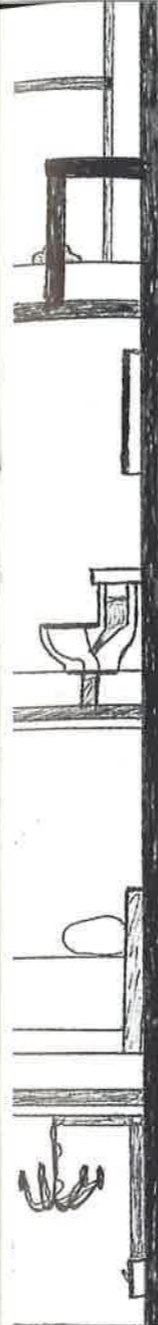
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urinate, or twitch noisily as his muscles try to deal with the sudden loss of central nervous system control. He lays sprawled in his own blood, for all intents and purposes a squishy, foul-smelling, slimy and bloody sack of cement. He is not a clean, cold corpse to be easily lifted into a wagon and placed in the morgue, despite what action movies depict. Unlike the heroic immortality present in fiction, a real-world knife wound, a bullet wound, a kick from a horse, a smash in the head with a tire iron, a strike in the torso with a tree, a fall down cement steps, a few minutes spent in nearly-ice water, or a savage beating by a group of flunkies can be, and often is, debilitating, if not fatal.



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A second, much more subtle example flies totally under the mental radar of most people, as they aren't even conscious that reality flew out the window. Observe: Even the most withdrawn, shy young girl in a Jane Austen novel talks with a skill and directness that would, in reality, put most orators to shame. She can have a discussion about some terribly painful,

much, much longer, in reality, I mean, to talk, you know? Public speaking class teaches one non-intuitive fact, such as multiple typewritten pages can be easily dispatched in a minute or two. Even professional speakers seem ridiculous if you look at an exact transcript of what leaves their mouths. Lenny Bruce discovered, decades ago, that just reading a politician's speech transcript out of context was enough to get the audience rolling with laughter. Your average fictional character might as well be speaking in mathematics, given how directly and precisely they state things, even when they are supposedly being vague or reticent or nervous.

Then there is the passage of time, which, in fic-

tion, gets stretched or compressed like some Einsteinian silly-putty to help make a piece readable, watchable, or listenable. Gandalf, Bilbo, and the Dwarves spent weeks traveling to Smaug's cave, yet in *The Hobbit* author J.R.R. Tolkien only describes a few isolated incidents during the journey, usually involving the threat of being eaten by larger, nastier creatures. Tolkien

embarrassing subject, and she may take three pages of talking to do it, but someone discussing the same subject in real life, if their words were transcribed, would take 30 pages. Why? Natural speech is padded with, um, like, lots of pauses, and mis-misspoken words and stuff, and a lot of it is body language and stuff like that, you know, and so...so it can sometimes take

**fiction, paradoxically, often represents a *search for reality*—people want stories that *seem true*, even if they involve *dragons and death stars*.**

Few people would be able to fight on, much less continue on for another half-hour (or ten chapters) of killing bad guys or solving mysteries or saving the planet when subjected to such treatments. However, Tarzan dying from yellow fever or a three-page description of what Sir Lancelot ate for lunch does not make for engaging entertainment.



J. Moriarti and S. Holmes, circa 1890

did not wish to bog down readers with the repetitive tedium of a long journey on horseback, recounting the wonders of making a fire, feeding the horses, finding fresh water, drying off after rainstorms, and so on. Instead, he focused on attacks by giant spiders, summoning lightning bolts against goblins, and riddles with cave-dwelling mutants.

Given that most people don't actually know much of anything about long journeys on horseback, why this omission? We don't know the feeling of riding a horse all day, making camp, and watching for trolls, and Tolkien briefly mentions the respective difficulties of each, but only in passing. The only reason an author would need to include them would be if they somehow advanced the plot. The Truman Show centered on a television series portraying every single instant of a man's

life, yet even then, when he ate breakfast, ads ran in the corners of the screen. Even when the mundanities are the entertainment, they only go so far.

Fiction, paradoxically, often represents a search for reality—people want stories that seem true, even if they involve dragons and Death Stars. Fictitious objects do follow rules: dragons breathe fire but not ice; the Death Star can destroy planets but it takes a few minutes to charge up the cannon. These underlying rules and logics, even if totally fantastic and without any "real world" explanation of why they should be so, provide a framework with which we can suspend disbelief and not have that disbelief cut down by a violation of whatever rules we're working under. The greatest suspension of reality, however, is the one we never consciously think about, the one of Batman shaving

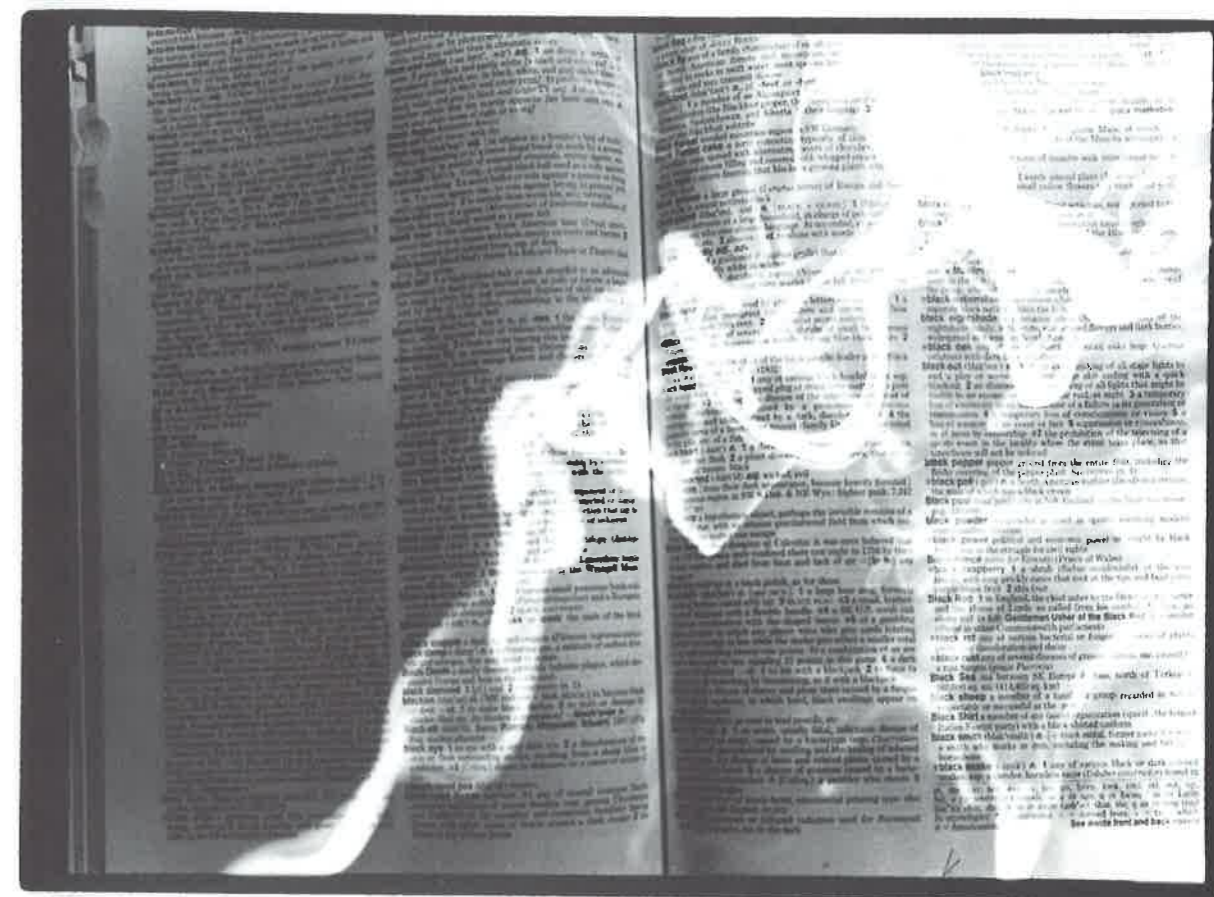
and Superman working at the newspaper and Sam Spade paying his bills. That is a reality we know, and cannot ever cease to be part of; we're there, we're doing that, and we certainly don't need anymore of it. We want the things we don't normally do, like following hot on the trail of the killer, living through a Civil War firefight, or piloting a starship. Sure, we need a reality, but one that fast-forwards to the good parts and allows us the luxury of leading a thousand different lives without ever leaving the house.

### BIOGRAPHY

*Will Hooper can often be found in the wood shop or in front of a computer terminal. If approached carefully—especially with vegetarian food—he can usually be calmed enough to communicate.*



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**colophon** helvetica was used throughout the magazine:  
article heads 36-24pt (sized to fit) \* subheads 24-18pt \*  
author info 18pt \* body text 11pt \* captions 8pt  
cover stock is 80# Mead cover \* paper stock is 80#  
Mead Text  
1000 copies printed by Lowry Printing of Birmingham, AL.

**new college**, college of arts & sciences, university of alabama  
107 carmichael hall, box 870229, tuscaloosa, al 35487-0029  
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the *new college review* (ISSN 1099-0429) is published annually by new college in the college of arts & sciences at the university of alabama, box 870229, tuscaloosa, al, 35487-0029, usa.

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