

Looking Pretty, Waiting for the Prince

By Lila Johnson

[As a senior, Lila Johnson uncovered the "secret education" that cartoons, advertising, and the media slipped into her life. She wrote this article to educate others about the inaccurate visions Disney & Co. sell children.]

My two brothers and I lived for our daily cartoon fix. We hungered for the vibrant reds, blues, and yellows that raced around our screen for an insane hour or two. When we were away from the tube, we assumed the roles of our favorite characters: Bugs Bunny, that wisecracking, carrot-munching rabbit; Yosemite Sam, rough and tough shoot-'em-down cowboy; and Popeye, the all-American spinach-guzzling sailor. We took our adopted identities outside and to school where our neighbors and friends did the same.

Now, as a senior in high school, I see that cartoons are not just lighthearted, wacky fun. Animated material touches on such sensitive issues as roles of men and women in society, and people of color.

Cartoons are often the birthplace of the cultural stereotypes we learn and remember, as I do today: the idea that Indians are savages - tomahawks and moccasins, teepees and war paint - the bad guys who pursued my favorite cowboys, or the belief that Arabs have nothing better to do than to tear across deserts in robes while swinging fierce swords and yelping like alien creatures.

These notions didn't just occur to my brothers and me magically. We saw Indians in our afternoon cartoons and on some of our favorite Disney movies like Peter Pan. We witnessed villainous Arabs thieve their way through violent episodes of Popeye.

What is not seen in relation to people of different cultures can be as harmful as some of the things that are seen. People of color are rarely seen as the heroes of animated presentations. I can think of only one Disney classic where a person of color is the principal and heroic character - The Jungle Book. Not an impressive list.

Children search for personal identity. In first grade I adored Bonnie Bondell, a girl in my class. She wasn't a cartoon character, but she could have been. She had glossy blonde hair and blue eyes. She had a sparkly smile and a sweet voice. She could have been Cinderella's younger sister or Sleeping Beauty's long lost cousin. For those reasons, I longed to be just like her.

I look at old photos of myself now, and have decided that I was pretty cute. I wasn't a traditional cutie, and that's exactly what bothered me then. My father is African-American and my mother is German and Irish. Put the two together and I'm the result. Olive complexion, dark curly hair, brown and green eyes. All wrong. At least according to the "Fairy Tale Book of Standards."

The pride that I had in myself as a person with a colorful heritage did not blossom before it was crushed. The pride that I had in myself as a female was following the same path.

Women's roles in cartoons lack the cleverness and depth of their male counterparts. Instead, they are laced with helplessness and ignorance. The women are often in need of rescue - they seem incapable of defending or helping themselves. When they aren't busy being rescued, they spend their time looking pretty, waiting for a prince.

In first grade, these illustrations moved me to action. They influenced me to push aside my slacks and rustic bike and turn to dresses and dolls. I had to start practicing perfection if I was going to be happy. Weak, helpless, boring, I struggled to be all of those, then I could call myself a princess, an

awkward one, but a princess nonetheless.

At the same time, my brothers swung guns and swords like they were attached to their hands. They tossed aside their piles of books and tubs of clay - heroes didn't read or create - they fought! So they flexed their wiry muscles and wrestled invisible villains. They dressed, ate, talked, became miniature models of their violent heroes.

Sometimes it was fun, like a game, playing our parts. But we began to feel unhappy when we saw that some things weren't quite right. As I said - I wasn't Bonnie Bondell or Cinderella. My brothers, never destined to be hulks, went to great lengths to grow big, but gallons of milk and daily measurements didn't help. It wasn't a game anymore.

I have some fond memories of those afternoons with my brothers, yet I know that I will also remember them for the messages I swallowed as easily as gum drops. My newfound awareness has enabled me to better understand those messages I absorbed and the ones I observe daily, whether on billboards, in movies, or in magazines. I see them in a new light. A critical one. I don't have to be a princess to be happy or pretty. I don't need to rely on characters to learn about real people.

I proudly perceive myself as an exuberant, creative, responsible, open-minded individual who will never be reduced to a carbon copy of a fictional being.

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