

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

MFA in Illustration & Visual Culture

All Graduate School of Art Theses

Spring 5-8-2024

Nostalgic Neighbors: Engaging the Single-Story of Wholesomeness

Jeffrey Johnson
j.jeffrey@wustl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/mfa_illustration



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Jeffrey, "Nostalgic Neighbors: Engaging the Single-Story of Wholesomeness" (2024). *MFA in Illustration & Visual Culture*. 28.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/mfa_illustration/28

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the All Graduate School of Art Theses at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in MFA in Illustration & Visual Culture by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.



**Nostalgic
Neighbors:
*Engaging the Single-Story
of Wholesomeness***

Jeffrey N. Johnson



Nostalgic Neighbors: *Engaging the Single-Story of Wholesomeness*

Jeffrey Johnson

Abstract:

In exploring our pasts, memories aren't made real until they're articulated out loud. This critical essay offers a meditation on meaning-finding activities of the twentieth century. I offer a definition of the word wholesome, as it exists as both an aesthetic, and as a way to find personal connection with others. As an Illustrator and Storyteller, I carry a responsibility for depicting a way that the world may be remembered. When our stories paint only a picture of a triumphant and moral people we do not only a disservice to the struggles of those same people, but also to the people we are, and hope to be. Nostalgia is looking back through a fog of variations on the same story told over and over again until we feel it instead of saying it. Unexamined nostalgia –unarticulated memories– leave us vulnerable to stories that we don't realize we're telling ourselves.

Christopher Moloney (@MOLOKNEE), The Wonder Years (1988), photograph, tumblr, April 25, 2013, <https://philmfotos.tumblr.com/post/49113434204/the-wonder-years-1988-image-356-posted-by>

A recent rewatch of the original Wonder Years pilot from 1988, starring Fred Savage as 12-year-old Kevin Arnold and soon-to-be Home Alone costar Daniel Stern as his grown-up voice, reveals a show positioned as a baby boomer's manifesto. Kevin is heading into middle school struggling to balance his geeky friends, overbearing siblings, a simmering crush on a neighbor and the occasional intrusion of bigger events, including — spoiler alert — the death of a neighborhood boy drafted to serve in the Vietnam War.

The wealth and wholesomeness of the 1950's made it possible for the children of the 1960's to live in comfort and safety, even though the world around them was very scary.

Cover Image saknakorn, Old Vintage Television or TV, photograph, Adobe Stock, <https://stock.adobe.com/images/old-vintage-television-or-tv/87889905>

We are taught young to enter a museum with the quiet reverence reserved for a church or a bank. The roped off austerity of a museum separates its artifacts from daily life. These objects are an ideal to be admired and aspired to, not used. They're treated as sacred and alien – holy. Their stories are written on plaques on the wall, not in the hands and hearts of the museum visitor. We all want our lives to have meaning. For many, that meaning can be found in the piles and stacks of everyday objects in a junk shop.

Among the sentimental middle class, the American junk shop –ahem, antique mall, thrift store, or flea market– holds special appeal. To twenty or thirty-somethings, young adults reaching for a connection to a feeling about their past, they're a tangible

remembrance. Sifting through remnants of estates and used but usable goods, feels like tracing a line back to their parents' parents. Purchasing something and using it in their home becomes a sort of performative reenactment of the *good old days* before they were born.

For their part, my parents – now well into their seventies – also spend a lot of time browsing the antique malls. They're also on the lookout here for connection to a past they remember remembering but may not have experienced firsthand. At the same time, they're re-seeing artifacts from their own lives, as they embark on their own quest to recover something valuable or meaningful to pass on and be remembered through.



I don't think we ever won a game, but we were known for knowing things.

In my mid-forties, there's a sense of melancholy in visiting these shops. I witness the replacement of games, home décor, and clothes that I remember wistfully from visits to my granny's house in West Virginia. I turn and see things from when I was growing up in my mom's house. For example, I haven't been in a thrift store in the last ten years without seeing an old, battered copy of Trivial Pursuit, Genus V. Immediately, my thoughts go back to my mom's dining room. For as long as I can remember, my parents, brothers and sister would pair up and play when everyone was in town visiting for the holidays. There'd be a brief discussion about whether my older brother and I could be a team, because we always win, and a groan as we chose the green token and placed it in the middle of the board.

Trivial pursuit is a game about knowing things – actually, it's a game about remembering things – that are mostly considered common knowledge. Some things that we know get *baked* into our knowledge of the world over time. For example, I couldn't have told you how I know what a rune is – until I noticed Bilbo Baggins asking an asinine question about them, and Gandalf the Gray patiently answering him – on a recent rewatch of *The Hobbit* (Rankin/Bass 1977). Trivia is not on the whole the kind of thing that one would find on the wall plaque of a museum exhibition. It's the kind of thing that might be found in between crumbling stacks of newspapers in a junk shop.



BuyfromGroovy, Trivial Pursuit: Genus V, board game, etsy, 2024, <https://www.etsy.com/listing/925517866/trivial-pursuit-genius-edition-board>

For example, did you know...

Mr. Rogers Neighborhood was the first children's television program featuring a black actor in a recurring role.

Officer Clemmons (played by Francois Scarborough Clemmons) made his debut in the neighborhood on one hot, summer afternoon in 1968. Mr. Rogers was soaking his feet in the cool water of a wading pool, and invited Clemmons to take his shoes off and join him. This was a boldly progressive move for a kid's show during the peak of the civil rights movement.

Francois Clemmons was gay.

While Rogers promoted a worldview of radical acceptance, famously encapsulated in the quote "I love you just the way you are," he had to temper that with the needs of his program and the audience it was created to serve. Rogers felt that if Clemmons were to come out publicly, it would alienate parents, and the larger message of love and acceptance would not be able to take root and lay groundwork for a world where people could live their most authentic lives.



John Beal, Courtesy of Focus Features, Fred Rogers and Officer Clemmons, photograph - Screen capture, Vanity Fair, June 27, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/06/mister-rogers-neighborhood-wont-you-be-my-neighbor-francois-clemmons-officer-clemmons-fred-rogers>.

Did you know that Clemmons continued to advocate for Rogers to allow him to come out in small ways over the course of his twenty-five years on the show?

Ultimately they agreed that the perceived wholesomeness of the show allowed other important issues to be addressed and taken seriously. In a 2018 interview with *Vanity Fair*, anticipating the release of the *Won't You Be My Neighbor* documentary, he had this to say, "Sacrifice was a part of my destiny. In other words, I did not want to be a shame to my race. I didn't want to be a scandal to the show. I didn't want to hurt the man who was giving me so much, and I also knew the value as a Black performer of having this show, this platform."

Are these things important to know, or is it just trivia? The short answer is, yes.

Wholesome: Adjective - conducive to or suggestive of good health and physical well-being.

The first video game system that my family owned was the Intellivision, distributed by Mattel Electronics. We had a handful of games for it, including the typical baseball and racing games. The ability to drive the on-screen narrative was exciting but was limited in sophistication by the amount of memory (4 kilobytes) and the analog chips used in the cartridges. At the same time that developers began to push the limitations of graphic representations from a single intrepid dot to simple animated sprites (fig 1), they also experimented with ways to use that circuitry to add sound effects and music to the games. Players were drawn into these more immersive experiences.

One of the games in our small library was *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, licensed from TSR and based loosely on the popular role-playing game. Players would traverse an overworld map and explore randomly generated caves in search of the broken halves of the “Crown of Kings.”¹

Oh yeah, and each half of the crown was guarded by a dragon.

The game regularly scared seven-year-old me, and sometimes made it hard to sleep. What made the game unsettling had nothing to do with the depiction of the dragons, or the other monsters the player would encounter. The violence of battle was about as provocative as a typing class. It was the *sound*. The layouts of the dungeons were randomly generated, and never the same twice. I never knew what to expect –or rather *when* to expect– the sudden appearance of the dragon, roaring its digital roar.

1 “Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Cloudy Mountain,” in *Wikipedia*, February 8, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Advanced_Dungeons_%26_Dragons:_Cloudy_Mountain&oldid=1205037842

Meanwhile...

In 1980, a sixteen-year-old student at Michigan State University made newspaper headlines when he took his own life. He was a gifted computer science major, and a devoted D&D player. Some people interviewed about the incident insisted that “the game warped his thinking and drove him to behave erratically.”²

2 Clyde Haberman, “When Dungeons & Dragons Set Off a ‘Moral Panic,’” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2016, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/18/us/when-dungeons-dragons-set-off-a-moral-panic.html>.

Michelle Remembers, the allegedly true account – written by a young girls hypnotherapist– of torture by a secret coven of Satanists in Victoria, BC was published. News outlets covered police accusations of satanic ritual molestation in daycare centers around the country. The creation of this “moral panic” caused parents to worry about a world where they were too busy to protect their children.³

3 Bromley, “Cults That Never Were: The Satanic Ritual Abuse Scare (SRAS),” accessed March 6, 2024, <https://www.people.vcu.edu/~dbromley/undergraduate/spiritualCommunity/SatanicCults.html>.



“4 out of 4. The graphics are terrific. The dragons look a lot like Godzilla.”
– *Electronic Fun With Computers & Games* 1983

fig 1
Mattel Electronics, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Cloudy Mountain, Intellivision video game screen capture, YouTube, July 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ML09L-D8jms>.

A *sprite* is a term commonly used in computer graphics and gaming to refer to a two-dimensional image or animation that is integrated into a larger scene or game environment. Sprites are often used to represent characters, objects, or special effects within a game.

When the dragon guarding the “Crown of Kings” roars, players have two choices. They can use their arrows and hope they defeat the monster, or they can run away. Research is the best defense against panic in the face of new ideas, but the very nature of panic makes it feel like there’s no time to decide whether the dragon’s roar is a greeting or a warning. I get it. My parents were trying to protect the hearts and minds of their kids and the news was full of awful stories about people who had gotten involved with this game. My brothers and I weren’t allowed to watch the *Dungeons & Dragons animated series* (1983) (figure 2) on Saturday mornings. Some of the other shows that we didn’t see included *Thundercats* (1985), *He-Man* (1983) and *The Smurfs* (1981) If we watched these shows, then we might be tempted to pick up the dice, so to speak.

If we watched these shows, then we might be tempted to pick up the dice, so to speak.

As a ninth-grader, I knew better than to hide things in my room. I’d seen my older brothers get in trouble for magazines hidden under mattresses or at the bottom of sock drawers. Unfortunately, I wasn’t as clever as I thought I was. Underneath a pile of comforters in the linen closet, pushed all the way into the back, behind fitted sheets that had been hastily wadded up and stuffed back there as a second cover for any contraband, a terrible trap had been set...the only reason I knew my mom found my D&D books was because they weren’t where I’d hidden them. Now I had to go and talk to her about playing a game that would open a door in my heart for the devil to walk through.

Man, I wished that I was one of those kids who just smoked weed.

Here’s the thing. At least if I were taking drugs, I’d know what the rules were supposed to be. My parents didn’t smoke. My parents didn’t drink. My mom was the kind of person who, if you were frustrated and said a cuss word, would say in a sing-song voice from another room, “You mean pooopy...” Like the Cleavers, or the Bradys, our family was the picture of wholesome.



Figure 2
BCI ECLIPSE, *Dungeons & Dragons: The Complete Animated Series*, illustrated DVD box art, IMDB, Dec 5, 2006, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085011/>.

Six kids enter the Dungeons & Dragons ride at a local amusement park and are transported into a world of swords and sorcery. They are met by a mysterious person named the Dungeon Master who seems to know much more about where they are, who they are, and why they’re there than he’s letting on. The Dungeon Master gives each kid a magic item that defines and enhances their natural abilities, and sets them on a journey to find their way home, before disappearing until they need him most.

Along the way, the kids have many adventures, make friends and allies, and begin to suspect that the mysterious Dungeon Master had motives other than getting them home safely. The fate of the world hangs in the balance and rests on the safety of a rambunctious baby unicorn they are traveling with.

Spoiler alert, like many shows of this type, the kids didn’t make it home before the series was cancelled.



the FLIGHT OF DRAGONS

30th ANNIVERSARY

Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment, The Flight of Dragons (1982), film still, TimeSpace Warps, Mar 2, 2020, <https://timespacewarps.wordpress.com/2020/03/02/1489-flight-of-dragons-1982/>.

A favorite on family movie night, The Flight of Dragons is based on a 1979 speculative evolution book, of the same name by Peter Dickinson. Its story centers around a young scientist and fantasy author (Peter Dickinson) who is drawn magically into a board game he'd created, and back in time. Sound familiar?

Magic is dying in the world, that Peter finds himself transported to—a world that bears a striking similarity to the game he'd created. The three good wizards who live there have decided to create a Magic dome around what remains to protect and preserve it. Meanwhile, the evil wizard is set on stopping them, blaming the coming age of reason for the decline. Peter has been called as the champion of good, and embarks on a quest to the dark lands, having adventures and making friends on his journey to save magic, as well as the world of science that he comes from.

Oh yeah, and he gets turned into a dragon while he's there.

My parents had a beat-up and dog-eared set of The Lord of the Rings, and I could sing all the songs from the Rankin/Bass animated version of The Hobbit (1977). My mom would read us Lloyd Alexander's The Chronicles of Prydain on long car rides. My dad's collection of militaria could rival a small museum, and we spent many weekends at gun shows, where we'd come home with patches, ninja stars, and one time, even a set of throwing knives. The house rule wasn't about magic, or monsters, or war, violence, dragons...or dungeons. The rule wasn't about a lack of wholesomeness. It was a reaction. Like a little boy getting startled by the sudden sound of static - pretending to be a dragon's roar - while playing an old video game.



Figure 4
Iris Honold/Shutterstock, DJ Jazzy Jeff with the Fresh Prince in 1995, photograph, *Esquire*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.esquire.com/style/mens-fashion/a32424082/dj-jazzy-jeff-block-party-fresh-prince-merch/>.

Will Smith once said in an interview that he never wanted to make something that his grandmother would be ashamed of.

I was writin' my stuff and I had all my little curse words in my rap book. And my grandmother found my rap book. She never said nothin', turned to the back page and she said, "Dear Willard, truly intelligent people do not have to use words like this to express themselves. Please show the world that you're as smart as we think you are. Love, GG."

If you project a wholesome image, other people see you as a decent, moral person, somebody who's trustworthy and not living a secret life of crime. This would suggest that people only appear to be good because they are atoning for something — like the urban legend that Fred Rogers was a decorated Marine sniper who covered sleeves of tattoos with his cardigan⁴ — or perhaps that they are censoring themselves in order to be more agreeable⁵. (fig 4) This complication is revealing. It illustrates a native distrust that we have of people.

Let's spool that thought out a little bit — Mr. Rogers practiced what he called radical acceptance. He was a man of conviction, who believed that everyone was able to express love and was worthy of being loved. As a pacifist, he believed that being generously curious about people's motivation for acting out physically was always the correct action. He was extremely particular about the way he used words to construct sentences and phrases, believing that children — lacking the experience to interpret subtlety — needed practical, literal communication. It might have been easy to write something that would be engaging and well received. To write something that would be engaging and well-received, in addition to thoughtful, and nourishing, takes practice and intention.

Michael Long⁶ notes that Rogers conceded that the meaning of his songs and stories might be challenging for children to understand fully. He viewed his program in part as the planting a seed. It was an act of faith that a song might one day grow into an understanding that pushing down and ignoring their feelings and anger would only have the effect of making them prisoners to it. (Long, 56) Fred Rogers attempted to subvert the violent slapstick of contemporary children's programming — an expression of angry feelings — by softening it

4 "Mr. Rogers a Navy SEAL? | Navy SEALs," accessed March 7, 2024, <https://navyseals.com/ns-overview/notable-seals/mr-rogers-navy-seal/>.

5 "Will Smith Explains How His Grandmother Influenced His Clean '90s Rap Lyrics," *Genius*, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://genius.com/a/will-smith-explains-how-his-grandmother-influenced-his-clean-90s-rap-lyrics>.

6 Michael G. Long, "It's Okay to Be Angry," in *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 56–57.



as an intentional statement in his *Neighborhood of Make Believe*. Still, he recognized the fundamentally human nature of anger, and so Lady Elaine Fairchild (fig.5) retained a measure of her forebear Mr. Punch, acting as an antagonistic foil to the obtuse declarations of King Friday XIII, and to her more peaceable neighbors.

It would be out of character for Mr. Rogers to embrace the idea of children pretending to explore a dungeon with swords and spells, raring for a devastating fight with the undead spirit of a wicked king. However, he believed in imaginative play; it was one a core element of his teaching and his program. Games like *Dungeons & Dragons* encourage communication. They encourage exploration of the musicality of language, through cooperative storytelling. Playing a game of *what if* allows participants to try out ways to express feelings and develop empathy by recognizing those feelings in others. Players don't learn how to use a sword, but they might learn some measure of what it's like to lose someone they love to one.

Figure 5
AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar, Fred Rogers works with Lady Elaine Fairchild 06/27/93, photograph, *The San Diego Union Tribune*, Nov 22, 2019, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/nation-world/story/2019-11-20/always-welcome-on-fred-rogers-neighborhood-set>

The term "pleased as Punch" is derived from Punch and Judy; specifically, Mr. Punch's characteristic sense of gleeful self-satisfaction. He is a variation on the same themes as the Lord of Misrule and the many Trickster figures found in mythologies across the world. Lady Elaine Fairchild is probably the puppet and character most directly influenced by Punch & Judy. She was the antagonist of the show. She wasn't necessarily a villain — she was not evil intentioned — but she did like to stir things up. She represented Roger's support of dissent.

To say that something is *wholesome* is to take a moral stance about that something. To say that something is wholesome is to say that it is good, healthy, and nourishing. While a statement like that is fraught with judgment, when something is wholesome, it expresses vulnerability without shame, degradation, or coercion. This dichotomy of striving to connect to our best selves while recognizing that it's okay to sometimes be much less than that is a more complete view of what the word can mean. It's this completeness that explains why Mister Roger's Neighborhood still resonates for me as an adult. Imagine a similar program that reminded adults that it is okay to be loving, or to look foolish, or to simply make a mistake.⁷

When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up. – C.S. Lewis

In the contemporary revival, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* (2012-) — an animated program set in Mr. Roger's fictional Neighborhood of Make Believe — wholesomeness is treated as an aesthetic instead of a position of conviction. The stories and songs do provide the requisite lessons in emotional regulation, and the characters are cleverly updated and modernized — while calling back to details of the classic neighborhood — as adults with children of their own (fig 6).⁸ The focus has shifted from one of generous curiosity and exploration of children's interior lives to the way they should look or act. There's a prescriptiveness that leaves less room to move laterally. Wholesomeness — the desire to be kind, the impulse to put something beautiful into the world — expressed as the wish for the kind of peace where we all just get along, and live quietly together on an endless summer day feels nice. But there's something hollow about it. Sentimental nostalgia, is like a warm, fluffy blanket that we pull over our heads to shut out our fears, and the troubles of the world.



Fig 6
The Fred Rogers Company, *A Trip to the Crayon Factory*, screen capture, fandom, Sept 12, 2012, https://danieltigerneighborhood.fandom.com/wiki/A_Trip_to_the_Crayon_Factory

In her examination of the newest iteration of Lady Elaine Fairchild, Betsy Bird implies that something essential is lost when we soften our stories, asking: "Am I the only one who finds the reinterpretation of Lady Elaine just a bit odd? She sort of lost her drive, since this show doesn't deal in plots long enough to include baddies."



Bill Watterson, Calvin and Hobbes, 1985-1995, In The Complete Calvin and Hobbes 23, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2012

Nostalgia: noun - Sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations.

My introduction to visual culture was on the television.

As parents, we are our children's first tastemakers. We make an effort to filter out the things that we'd rather not have in the world. We introduce them to all the things that we think are good, and hope they agree with us by the time we send them off to school. If all goes well — we think — they'll do the work of growing up better than we did, or at worst any problems that they encounter will be able to be wrapped up in thirty minutes, with time taken for commercial breaks.

I remember when my dad brought home our family's first VCR and a rented copy of *Empire Strikes Back* (1980). Before that, there was a very limited return on the amount of effort that went into watching TV. It was a big deal to be able to just insert a tape and press play. My dad used to bring home bargain bin VHS tapes with classic animated shorts like *Gulliver's Travels* (1938), Disney's *Silly Symphonies* (1934), and various collections of short featurettes. We watched those tapes, over and over again, adding movies over time — like *Tron* (1982), *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *The Last Starfighter* (1984), and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968)— that a family friend had recorded from cable.



Dave Fleischer - Max Fleischer Studios, *Gullivers Travels* (1939), film still, Simbasible, Sept 6, 2021, <https://www.simbasible.com/gullivers-travels-movie-review/>

We had a pretty eclectic collection of classic movies from the golden-age of animation. While my friends were busy watching what amounted to commercials for toys, I found myself being inspired by studios' commercials for themselves.

The form of those classic cartoons was often brazenly experimental as studios pushed the boundaries of what they knew they could do in favor of what they wanted to do. Often, those shorts films would be used as demonstration reels. Since they weren't experimentation for the sake of experimentation, the writing, music, and sound effects would always be the very best that a studio was able to produce.

—Cue “trippingly playful melody, carried by muted trumpets, pizzicato strings, chirping piccolos and a chuckling bassoon...”— James Isaacs



In his 1979 review of the *Leave it to Beaver* (1962), James Isaacs describes the introductory song as “respectfully cheery...”⁹ In this way the theme song, sets the tone of natural innocence embodied by actor Jerry Mathers as the title character Beaver Cleaver. “which is how the role-model children of my youth unfailingly behaved toward grownups.” Isaacs continues.(isaacs p8) The program celebrated an ideal of everydayness that may have been predictable, but that's also what made it feel safe. That safety was, and continues to be, *Leave it to Beaver's* appeal.

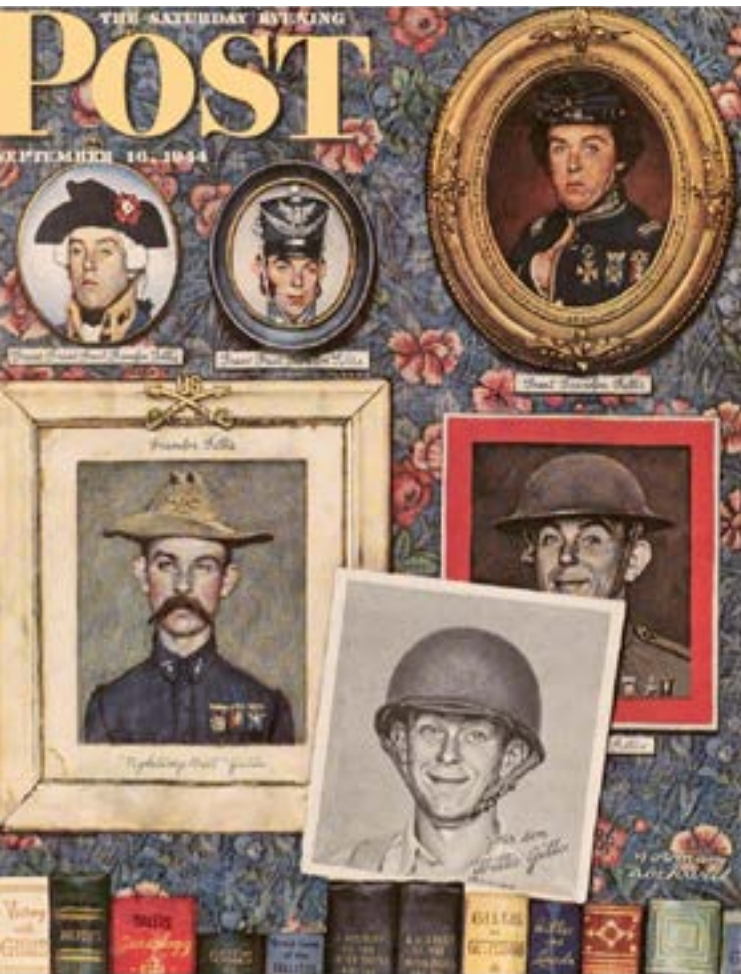
We — Americans living in the 21st century — cannot live with our real past. We not only prefer, but we need a substitute. So our stories about ourselves are built up around the character of the benevolent savior. We write a history of clear, moral good guys, and deny what Walter Benjamin called “revolutionary Nostalgia”. Meaning “an attempt to counter the present political order through an active summoning of the traditions of the oppressed in previous generations.” We wear the stylistic elements of an era like a cloak, without bearing any of its historical costs....¹⁰ we long for an existence that is no longer possible (the halcyon days of the 1950's for example) and that never in actuality existed in the first place.

ABC Photo Archives/Disney General Entertainment, *Leave It To Beaver* 1959, photograph, Forbes, Oct 4, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marcherman1/2023/10/04/tv-nostalgia-leave-it-to-beaver-debuted-on-this-day-in-1957/>.

“Theodore “Beaver” Cleaver (the sublimely natural Jerry Mathers), one of the most lovingly, faithfully drawn characters in all of television, was Everykid. Polite to his elders, well-liked by his schoolmates (except the girls, of course, though they actually found him less crude than his cronies), he was resolutely average. It was, in part, this very averageness, as well as his misadventures (never too far-fetched), that made *Leave It to Beaver* special.” (Isaacs, p8)

9 “Gone Are the Days,” *The Boston Phoenix*, May 29, 1979, Volume 8, Issue 22 edition, sec. Cellars By Starlight.

10 Tom Vanderbilt, “The Nostalgia Gap,” *The Baffler*, no. 31 (2016): 6–7.



Norman Rockwell, Willie Gillis Generations (The Fighting Gillis), Saturday Evening Post cover, Sep 16, 1944, Norman Rockwell Museum, 2024, <https://prints.nrm.org/detail/260956/rockwell-willie-gillis-generations-the-fighting-gilliss-1944>.

Norman Rockwell's tenth Willie Gillis cover for the Saturday Evening Post. Rockwell relied on his library of reference photos to create six generations of the Willie Gillis family.

Always appearing slightly bemused at his situation, the recurring character of Willie Gillis told an ongoing story of the American soldier. An everyman, the average—white, middle-class— young man could see himself in Gillis' resolve as he left home for his duty station. Family and friends could picture the—uncomfortable, sometimes amusing, always safe— adventures their boys were having overseas. Everyone could take a moment to feel proud that these brave young men were doing their duty for their country.

Later covers gently explored the melancholy relief of the hero returning home. They showed Gillis as a changed man, glad to put the war behind him, but also glad that the world was better for it. Taken as a whole, this collection of images underscores the rightness of the United States' global involvement. The United States looks at itself as a triumphant and— importantly— moral nation.

Marita Sturken writes, "The tension between memory and history is an active process that moves both ways: from memory to history as well as from history to memory." (Sturken, 2001, 35) The closest we will ever get to reexperiencing an event is through the remnants of it in our memory, but memory's very existence is...fluid and subject to rescripting and fantasy. In the 1980's, the Cleavers were the most famous example of 1950's sitcom families. *Leave it to Beaver* left an imprint on our collective memory of post-war United States. Now, it exists as an iconic story of who we would like to believe we were in the middle decade of the twentieth century. "Narrative film images reenact and subsume or cover-over documentary images, which in turn subsume personal memories and images. For example, for many WWII veterans, Hollywood WWII movies have become their memories, effectively changing their personal images into a general, near universal script." (Sturken, 2001, 35)

"The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable." (Sturken 35)¹¹

11 Marita Sturken, "Absent Images of Memory: Remembering and Reenacting the Japanese Internment," in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, ed. T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Duke University Press, 2001), 33–49.

Using the distance in time between the experience and the articulation of its memory through the public release of the documentary photographs of Japanese Internment as a sort of strategic forgetting, allowed the U.S. government to mute their cultural meaning to a large extent. It allowed the narrative in which the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was inevitable and appropriate at the time, to take iconic precedence. Tying the claim that the internment of Japanese Americans was a benevolent act to that narrative would force an examination of both statements if one of them were to be examined. And so, they remain fundamentally unexamined.

Much of our white, western world view is built upon the shaky foundation of the morality of success.

Nostalgia for post-war, suburban America has been coopted most recently by the campaign to Make America Great Again.¹² It encompasses the unreality of "the good old days", casting it in a golden glow of white, middle-class sentimentality. Instead of confronting a future where the outcome is uncertain, or dealing with a present that seems shaky at best, we look to our past. Journalist Tom Vanderbilt comments on this tendency saying, "... revivalists reincarnate the culture we once loved, then reacted against, then came to love again (but with a safe, added sense of camp). (Vanderbilt, p7) George Orwell, one of the few essayists in England studying popular art seriously, approached his critical essays with the assumption that in some sense the writer is a propagandist. Bernard Crick writes that "Orwell demonstrates that what appears to be the very lightest of entertainment has a definable world view, and even a conscious purpose behind it."¹³

In his critical essay about the work of Charles Dickens, George Orwell makes the assertion that Dickens was never writing about the poor, that in fact Dickens didn't have either experience of, or research about what it was like to be poor. Instead, Dickens was writing sentimental, middleclass nostalgia. It was not a revolutionary in the sense that he wanted to change the systems that created the worlds his characters live in.

12 The MIT Press Reader, "Podcast: How the FBI Destroyed the Careers of 41 Women in TV and Radio," *The MIT Press Reader* (blog), January 20, 2022, <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/how-the-fbi-destroyed-the-careers-of-progressive-women/>. Professor of women's studies at the University of Oregon, Carol Stabile writes, "In the 1960's, Ronald Reagan used the phrase 'family values' to attack groups that did not conform to anti-communists' preferred version of Americanism: Welfare moms, people of color, immigrants, students, and his progressive critics...his 1980 campaign 'Lets Make America Great Again', like Donald Trump's 2016 revival, drew on sexist, isolationist, and white supremacist visions of the past rooted in the television narratives anti-communists had created in the 1950's"

13 George Orwell, *Essays*, Introduction by Bernard Crick, Performed by Alex Hyde-White, (Blackstone Publishing, 2019), Audiobook, 12:56.

Dickens takes a moral position that if the people in charge were better men, the system would work well enough...¹⁴

For example, Ebenezer Scrooge has a change of heart, and the morality of the benevolent rich man makes the circumstances of those in his orbit better. Dickens wrote versions of this story over and over again, until we believe the truth of it even two-hundred years later.



Obi Wan and Luke on Dagobah, photograph - Screen capture, Reddit, 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/StarWarsCantina/comments/htnyc5/comment/fyi4yyz/>.

In *Return of the Jedi*, Obi-Wan Kenobi tells Luke Skywalker, "[...] what I told you was true, from a certain point of view. [...] [Y]ou're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view."

14 O. Dag, "George Orwell: Charles Dickens," accessed January 25, 2024, https://orwell.ru/library/reviews/dickens/english/e_chd.

Power, says Nigerian Author Chimanda Ngozi Adichie is “the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” - (Adichie 10:18)

My first year as a graduate student, I applied for a fellowship position, teaching art workshops in North Saint Louis. The fellowship project goals included revitalization of the community surrounding the school that we'd be working with and highlighting their historical and cultural significance. In my letter of application, I wrote that I'm excited about the opportunities for education and storytelling that the combination of illustration and authorship provides, and looking at the project mission specifically, I was eager to explore those opportunities as they apply to community activism and engagement.

Okay, now picture an earnest, forty-something, white, male, grad student who's worried that he's not diverse enough, but really feels like he has something to offer to this program.

“I'm excited by the ways in which this opportunity aligns with my values, experience and professional artistic goals.” That's me. I got an interview, and I didn't receive the fellowship position. What I did get was a question about myself, and one about stories.

The interview was at a long table in the middle of a workroom, with a panel of three of the project partners, who asked questions about my experience, teaching philosophy, and challenges that I anticipated. I wasn't worried about connecting with anyone. I said, “When I was volunteering to do demonstrations at the St. Louis Science Center, I really tried to make my projects as open ended as possible. I call this the Mr Myiagi method, because the goal is to teach how building skills is a matter of learning how to combine related processes. Anyway—at the Science center, we engage with a lot of families from all over the metro area, and what I've noticed is that the kids from the county take really naturally to the projects. I might have a bin of broken toys and pieces, and they saw right away that I was asking them to dream of a new way to make something with the materials that I had with me.”

“The city kids though...didn't seem to know how to dream. They just wanted all the parts to the original toy put back together and whole.”

“What do you mean by *city kids*?” the panel asked.

They looked at me. I looked at them. I didn't know what to say.

The panel let me off the hook, clarifying, “Do you mean under privileged?”

“Well. Yeah”

Poor is what I really meant.



Erika Doss/ABC, The Wonder Years (2021), photograph, NPR, Sept 24, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/24/1040388738/wonder-years-review-reboot-abc>

The Wonder Years revival, this time featuring a Black family in Montgomery Alabama again glosses over the reality of many families' lives in the late sixties, subsuming the memory of those lives with this one of comfort and upward mobility. Rather than giving new insight into a tumultuous time in our nation's history, it seems to be concealing the implicit message, that acknowledgment of that memory would mean rewriting the definition of what it means to be American.

Instead it asks, with a wink and a nod to white viewers, that minorities have faith that “Yes, even they could be comfortable and successful...

...if only we could make America great again.”

We're impressionable and vulnerable in the face of a story.¹⁵ I'd heard the single story of the dispossessed black population of North Saint Louis so many times that I couldn't see these children as anything other than people to be pitied, and that I could use my privilege as a white man to save them. It didn't make me a bad person, but it does make me a person who has some reflecting to do. Adichie wraps up her Ted Talk on single stories with a quote from Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti "If you want to dispossess a people, start the story, and begin with *secondly*. Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story."

In looking back at that interview and asking myself what story I started out with, I realize that I was telling myself the Dickensian narrative, casting myself as the hero. All I'd heard about these children was how poor they were. I hadn't given myself any room to see them as anything more than poor. The struggle of working hard and not getting anywhere without the help of a benevolent person of privilege was the single story I was telling myself.

If we only tell our own stories, we may never open our eyes to the stories of others. As an illustrator and storyteller, I have a responsibility in depicting a way we see the world we live in. This involves more than simply telling my own story, it involves telling many stories. In relating events and people out of my experience, I take the opportunity to see beyond my own single story. By being thoughtful and intentional about how I represent others, and being aware of how representation has been misused in the past, I can be a good steward of the stories of others.



Wholesomeness at it's best is the clarity and comfort that comes from feeling authentically represented. When we are nostalgic, we remember when we felt like we could trust the care of that representation. They may seem trivial, but the pursuit of these many individual stories builds a foundation that makes seeking out that trusting care easier and more fruitful.

PeiTalksAnime, When a Single Drawing Changed an Entire Film, screen capture - From Up on Poppy Hill (7:08), YouTube, November 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk4JN4CaA7Ko>.

Good draftsmanship goes beyond fidelity to reality. Celebrating the beauty of the everyday requires subtle exaggeration, in order to allow characters and stories to say what they're thinking, feeling...who they are without explicitly announcing those things out loud.

"Many of Miyazaki's films delve into the Fantastic with monsters and magic spirits that walk alongside humans. Within these fantastic stories Hayao Miyazaki often finds ways to talk about both the beautiful and overwhelming hardship of being a human, and the human experience. Miyazaki consistently does things that make us feel like what we're perceiving are actual human beings with their own experiences and emotions, not just characters in a movie. You can see in the way he makes his movies, he's a discovery writer that focuses a lot on how his characters would react to circumstances. While he has in mind an overarching theme, characters are never shoehorned into circumstance or moments purely to serve the plot because in Hayao's films the plot comes from the characters not vice versa That's a big part of what makes them so special."

Subtle exaggeration of small details that invite the viewer to pay attention to the way our protagonist expresses that she's more than a narrative element, rather, but she's an individual. The drawing is a wide shot of the main character walking across a bridge to class, leaning forward she walks with long strides demonstrating her determination. What this drawing showed Goro was how you breathe life into a character.

¹⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *The Danger of a Single Story* | TED, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lHs241zeg>.

Bibliography

Chris Azzopardi, "Mister Rogers's Gay, Black Friend François Clemmons Wears Tiaras Now," *Vanity Fair*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/06/mister-rogers-neighborhood-wont-you-be-my-neighbor-francois-clemmons-officer-clemmons-fred-rogers>.

"Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Cloudy Mountain," in Wikipedia, February 8, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Advanced_Dungeons_%26_Dragons:_Cloudy_Mountain&oldid=1205037842.

Clyde Haberman, "When Dungeons & Dragons Set Off a 'Moral Panic,'" *The New York Times*, April 17, 2016, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/18/us/when-dungeons-dragons-set-off-a-moral-panic.html>.

Bromley, "Cults That Never Were: The Satanic Ritual Abuse Scare (SRAS)," accessed March 6, 2024, <https://www.people.vcu.edu/~dbromley/undergraduate/spiritualCommunity/SatanicCults.html>. "Mr. Rogers a Navy SEAL? | Navy SEALs," accessed March 7, 2024, <https://navyseals.com/ns-overview/notable-seals/mr-rogers-navy-seal/>.

"Will Smith Explains How His Grandmother Influenced His Clean '90s Rap Lyrics," *Genius*, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://genius.com/a/will-smith-explains-how-his-grandmother-influenced-his-clean-90s-rap-lyrics>.

Michael G. Long, "It's Okay to Be Angry," in *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 56–57.

C. S. Lewis (2002). "On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature", p.56, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Betsy Bird 21 comments, "Deconstructing Daniel Tiger or Why Children's Programming Is Freaking Me Out, Man," *A Fuse #8 Production*, June 26, 2014, <https://afuse8production.sj.com/2014/06/26/deconstructing-daniel-tiger-or-why-childrens-programming-is-freaking-me-out-man/>.

"Gone Are the Days," *The Boston Phoenix*, May 29, 1979, Volume 8, Issue 22 edition, sec. Cellars By Starlight.

Tom Vanderbilt, "The Nostalgia Gap," *The Baffler*, no. 31 (2016): 6–7.

Marita Sturken, "Absent Images of Memory: Remembering and Reenacting the Japanese Internment," in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, ed. T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Duke University Press, 2001), 33–49.

The MIT Press Reader, "Podcast: How the FBI Destroyed the Careers of 41 Women in TV and Radio," *The MIT Press Reader* (blog), January 20, 2022, <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/how-the-fbi-destroyed-the-careers-of-progressive-women/>.

O. Dag, "George Orwell: Charles Dickens," accessed January 25, 2024, https://orwell.ru/library/reviews/dickens/english/e_chd.

George Orwell and Bernard Crick, "Introduction," in *Essays by George Orwell*, Audiobook, Blackstone Publishing, 2019. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *The Danger of a Single Story* | TED, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>.

PeiTalksAnime, "When a Single Drawing Changed an Entire Film - YouTube," accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkJN4CaA7Ko>.

This book was created at Washington University in St. Louis, in the MFA Illustration and Visual Culture program in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, in the spring of 2024.

The body text is set in Dolly Pro, designed by Underware. The title text is set in Maple Black, designed by Eric Olsen. The book was designed and typeset by Jeffrey Johnson based on a page design by Ben Kiel. Text editing by D.B. Dowd, John Hendrix, and Heidi Kolk. Production and binding was completed by the Done Department, St. Louis, Missouri. This book is printed on Cougar and 80lb text.



Mackenzie Crook, *The Detectorists*, photograph, *NYTimes*, April 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/arts/television/the-detectorists-are-back-with-their-existential-divining-rods.html>

*Mackenzie Crook's father was a businessman, and the family spent large portions of his Mackenzie's childhood in Africa. In an interview about his BBC program *The Detectorists*, Crook said that as a child, he spent a lot of time in solitary pursuits, outdoors in the African bush. When he was developing the script for the show, he'd begun by writing out bits of dialog between these two characters, Andy and Lance. On the surface, the show is about the unusual, solitary pass time of metal detecting in the English countryside. Underneath that is a show that is about men talking about the things that men talk about when they're alone. Crook taps into the wholesome vulnerability of deep relationships, and packages that in a grown-up, nostalgic wrapper of sunny afternoons with nothing to do.*



Jeffrey Johnson, Fred Rogers and the Citizens of the Neighborhood of Make Believe, 2021, photo by author, Fred Rogers Institute, Latrobe, PA