

SPECIAL FIVE-GIRL PET OF THE YEAR PLAY-OFF PENTHOUSE

02242

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR MEN

JUNE 1991

DEADLY GREED:

BOSTON'S
NOTORIOUS RACE-
MURDER HOAX

NOT SO GOODFELLAS:

KAREN HILL'S
LIFE MARRIED TO
THE MOB

T.V.'S WEIRDEST CENSORS:

LOOKING FOR
SATAN IN KIDS'
CARTOONS

AFTER APARTHEID:

SOUTH AFRICA'S
ZULU CHIEF PLEADS
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SUMMER FASHION
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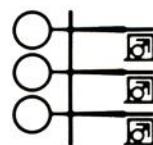
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EDITOR IN CHIEF & PUBLISHER: BOB GUCCIONE

VICE-CHAIRMAN: KATHY KEETON
EDITOR: PETER BLOCH
GRAPHICS DIRECTOR: FRANK DEVINO
MANAGING EDITOR: ROBERT SABAT
ART DIRECTOR, INT'L: JOE BROOKS
ART DIRECTOR: RICHARD BLEIWEISS



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Our cover features Pet of the Month Julie Strain, who was photographed by Suze Randall. Her pictorial begins on page 71.

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“A small group of individuals with their own personal agendas control what ideas you and your children should be exposed to. More often than not, their pronouncements go unchallenged.”

ADVISE & DISSENT

OPINION

BY J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI

The author, a Writers Guild Award nominee, has written extensively for film and television, including such series as “Nightmare Classics,” “Jake and the Fatman,” and the new “Twilight Zone.” His books include *Otherside*, *Demon Night*, and the anthology *Tales From the New Twilight Zone*.

CENSORING CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

They go by many names. Educational consultants. Entertainment psychologists. Broadcast Standards and Practices. Advisers. Censors. In the realm of network television, they are the “Watchmen,” and they are charged with the task of overseeing the psychological makeup of an entire generation.

The Watchmen operate out of a shadow realm populated by signs and portents that, they assure us, only *they* can read aright. Parents and viewers, who usually don't understand the methodology involved, are thus forced to trust that it is all being handled properly and by qualified people.

But is it?

For the record, as a television writer, I've penned about 110 produced episodes and story-edited 214. Although much of my work has been for grown-ups, I've also written for what is vaguely labeled “children's television.” The names alone of some of the shows on which I've worked are enough to elicit looks of horror from a variety of so-called “watch-dog” groups: “He-Man and the Masters of the Universe,” “She-Ra, Princess of Power,” “Jayce and the Wheeled Warriors,” “The Real Ghostbusters,” and “Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future.” (The last is a live-action series, not a cartoon—a description applied frequently and erroneously by some of the show's opponents, thus indicating that they've never even *seen* the thing!)

No writer enjoys having his words changed or his vision altered, but we all understand that television is a collaborative medium. You go *into* it with the sure and certain belief that you will get notes, suggestions, and criticisms from all sides. But television can become a veritable money machine for many of the highly paid advisers who charge enormous sums in exchange for their opinions. Are some of them raising concerns (which may or may not have any basis in reality) simply to ensure their being hired in order to set these concerns right? Because when the shouting starts, the networks often feel that their best defense is the assertion that the script was thoroughly reviewed by their educational consultants.

The process works something like this: Before a network purchases a series, the network or the studio hires a consultant, who reads the scripts, attends meetings, and supplies opinions about the show. In the past, the efforts of such consultants have been more in the area of keeping on-screen violence and unsafe activity to a minimum. But lately it is the *philosophy* of the show that has come under fire. The Watchmen have begun to exert control over the realm of ideas. And that is a very different, very dangerous area.

All too often, the result is the creation of a small group of individuals who, with their own personal agendas, control what ideas you and your children should be exposed to.

More often than not, their pronouncements go unchallenged by the networks and the news media.

For instance, one consultant I've met likes to mention that 12 out of 15 studies indicate that violence in TV shows results in higher aggression rates in children. But there have been far more than 15 studies published in this area, and many of them are contradictory. On what basis did she pick and choose only those 12? Who conducted them, what were the circumstances, and what specifically were the results? What was the definition of violence? How do they distinguish violence from action? Many fail to distinguish between seeing a televised punch in the mouth (violence) and the sight of a slammed door (action), arguing that both illustrate aggression equally.

These studies are often conducted by the very same groups making the accusations, making it all too easy to skew the data to fit their own point of view.

And what kind of recommendations do these rarely challenged "experts" actually make?

- On "The Real Ghostbusters," we were told that we must remove the glasses worn by one of the characters because they were angular . . . and children are frightened by sharp objects. When we countered by offering to make them round, this, too, was rejected on the grounds that "people who wear glasses are perceived as colder and less open than people who don't wear glasses." (The advisers shrugged off the counterargument that if we followed their advice and presented only non-bespectacled people as warm and likable, we would be perpetuating a stereotype.)

The *Watchmen* also decided that the main female character in the series, Janine—a brassy, strong-willed, funny, and self-assertive character who had become very popular with the female audience—was "too slutty" and suggested changes to make her a more "nurturing mother figure."

On the same series, the advisers felt that each member of the team must be given a clearly defined role. One would be the leader, another would be the thinker (coming up with incredible scientific solutions), and a third would be the builder (making the devices conceived by the preceding character). Each of these is a high-profile, admirable position. Then they said that the fourth team member—Winston—should be the one who drives and maintains the car. A low-profile, low-intelligence job.

Winston is black.

- On "She-Ra" we attempted to create a show that would present female characters who could be as strong, capable, and heroic as any male character on any other show. A consultant advised us that it would be "inappropriate" for the lead character—a woman—to be assertive or physically strong (stopping a tank, for instance). We were told that

having her jump around ballet-style *would* be acceptable. Similarly, she could not engage in banter during the action scenes because it was not sufficiently feminine. (The writers on the show, myself included, ignored this, despite continued opposition from the consultant.)

- "Captain Power" was a cautionary tale set in a devastated earth of the far future. The thrust of this live-action series was the need to stop war and thus prevent this fate from ever actually occurring. One leader of a pressure group that had made headlines in Los Angeles protesting violence in children's programming insisted that kids should not be allowed to see a show set against such a backdrop, maintaining that, regardless of context, a devastated earth is "an idea that kids should be protected from." Which raises an interesting question: How can viewers be taught that something is bad and should be avoided if they're not allowed to see it at all?

- A consulting group that deals with occult and satanic images in television recently came in to advise one of the networks. During the meeting, the group gave its pronouncement on the sure signs that proved a teenager is falling into the clutches of satanism. The first sign? "He's sometimes sad."

The second sign? "He's sometimes rebellious toward authority figures, his parents and teachers."

The third sign? "He listens to rock 'n' roll and heavy metal."

The fourth sign? "He tries to conform to his peer group."

The fifth sign? "He's curious."

The rest were all of the same order. If that list were, in fact, accurate, then just about every household in the nation would contain at least one satanist-in-training.

Bear in mind that these consultants are paid very highly—\$150 per hour and more—for their work. Once a *Watchmen* boards the network gravy train, life can become pretty easy. On one show we were being harassed by the leader of a pressure group against violence (call him Mr. X) and an educational psychologist (call her Ms. Y). Mr. X and Ms. Y were friends. Mr. X did everything possible to draw negative public attention to the show: protests, press conferences, publicity stunts, on and on. The sponsor of the show was getting nervous. I was in the room while both my producer and Mr. X were on the speakerphone, and my producer asked what we could do to ameliorate the problem.

The answer? "Hire Ms. Y."

She was hired. And, suddenly, her protests against the show evaporated.

One network retained a consulting firm to analyze series that were being developed by local animation studios in order to determine which shows to buy for the coming season. The *same* consulting firm was also hired by some of

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ADVISE & DISSENT

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the studios that were trying to sell shows to that same network.

Finally, while networks may or may not utilize the services of consultants, the network censors are always there. As occupants of the office of Broadcast Standards and Practices (B.S. & P.), they are charged with making sure that nothing objectionable, or even *potentially* objectionable, gets through.

In the past, comments from B.S. & P. have often been reasonably sane. "Put more minorities into the stories," "Please indicate that the characters should be wearing seat belts," et cetera. But as with the consultants, the tenor of the notes have changed over time, reflecting a fear of a very small handful of fundamentalists and other potential boycotters. As one censor told me, "We don't want to end up on any lists."

Notes from the censors range from the downright silly to the offensive and the dangerous. Two such examples, both drawn from episodes of "The Real Ghostbusters." In "Janine, You've Changed," Janine falls under the influence of a creature pretending to be her fairy godmother. B.S. & P.'s note: "Please do not have Janine's hands clasped in prayer as she summons the fairy godmother. This may be interpreted as demonic worship."


For "Live From Al Capone's Tomb!" we were told, "Please [refrain from using] the term 'netherworld' in order to avoid allusions to hell, Satan, et cetera. Suggest 'spiritworld' as a substitute."

That certainly clarifies things.

All this shouldn't be taken to mean that the censors are running rampant, their every whim acceded to. There are producers—such as those on "The Real Ghostbusters"—who have fought vigorously against them. And in my battles with B.S. & P., my most staunch allies have generally been the executives in programming at ABC. The unfortunate part is that there aren't nearly enough people like them who are willing to speak up. When push comes to shove, rather than risk antagonizing the network over a point of ethics or creativity or freedom, most producers cave in, often blaming the writer for being a troublemaker.

What I do hope is that parents and educators will realize that what their children are *not* seeing is sometimes as important as what they *are* seeing. Television is a mighty tool for socialization, the mightiest conceivable, and at this moment the soul of the beast is up for grabs. Fringe groups that are out to advance their own agendas succeed only when they are left to do so unchallenged. It is your right and your *obligation* to ask questions.

Who watches the Watchmen?

You do. Or no one does. 

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