

dumb & GETTING dumber

SIDEWAYS, SPONGEBOB, AND THE NEW MASCULINITY

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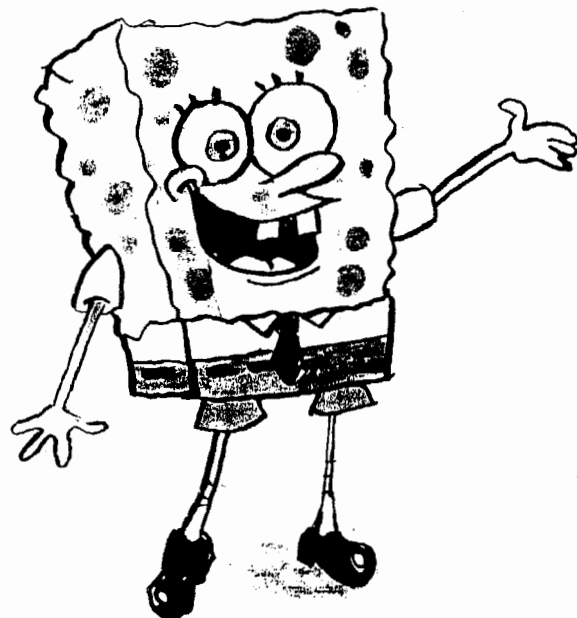
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In 2004, every corner of popular culture was populated by men in crisis, and I don't just mean George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney. We had men in trouble, men in triumph, men in uniform, men on the cross, men in square-pants; men being men with other men, talking about masculinity—what it is, how to have it, keep it, get it, make it last. We might even call it the Year of the Man, but the response to such a title could reasonably be, So what's new? Isn't every year the year of the man?

Yes, it is. And every year is the year that masculinity is declared to be in crisis, requiring lots of help from the

church, the government, the media, and Dr. Phil. And yet 2004 in particular—an annus horribilis for politics, world peace, and atheism—was notable for the way questions about masculinity dominated the media. Whether it was Bush and Kerry squaring off in the presidential debates over questions about who was more capable of killing Iraqis; or photographic reports of military prison guards in Iraq forcing prisoners into blatantly sodomitical postures; or images of a bleeding, suffering, masochistic Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*; or Paul Giamatti

and Thomas Haden Church in *Sideways* competing for the Most Unworthy Male to Find a Totally Hot Chick to Love Him Award, we had no choice but to sit up and notice new dimensions of male domination. These new dimensions include the incorporation of massive amounts of homoerotic imagery, explicit depictions of male-on-male violence (a defense against the homoeroticism), and, oddly, the performance of male stupidity. It's been



a creeping trend, this exaltation of humbling men on the big screen (Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber*, Adam Sandler in just about any Adam Sandler movie), the small screen (the hapless husbands of *According to Jim*, *King of the Hill*, and of course *The Simpsons*), and—most disturbingly—in real life.

Since the start of George W.'s first term as president, Americans seem to be increasingly enamored of the heroic couplet of men and stupidity. As the most recent election proved, playing dumb means playing to "the people"—who, apparently, now find intellectual acumen to be a sign of overeducation, elitism, and Washington-insider status. As many critics have pointed out, no one is more of a Washington insider than Bush, a former governor, the son of a former president, and the brother of the governor of Florida. Even so, W. has made his populist version of stupidity a trademark. The man who can't pronounce "nuclear" has sold himself to the public as a down-home guy, a fun guy pal, a student privileged enough to go to Yale but "real" enough to get only C's—in other words, a genial buffoon who's a safe bet for the White House because he doesn't try to befuddle the populace with facts, figures, or, god forbid, ideas. His latest opponent, Kerry, was fluent in French, well educated,

well spoken, and therefore highly suspicious on all counts. It's telling that one of the questions asked of the voting public by pollsters wasn't about the candidates' integrity or knowledge, but about which one voters would most like to share a beer with. As a culture, we no longer want a president who's smarter or more visionary than we are; instead, we want a frat brother.

Stupidity in women, as we know, has often been expected and acceptable in this culture, and some women cultivate it because they see it rewarded in popular icons like Jessica Simpson. Female stupidity can make men feel bigger, better, smarter; and it, in turn, can make many women themselves feel desirable. But what is the appeal of the stupid man, and why does the representation of male stupidity not lead to the same kind of disenfranchisement many women experience? Stupidity in men has historically been represented in the media as charming (Jerry Lewis), naively disarming, and comforting (George W.).

Male stupidity is, in fact, a new form of machismo, and it comes—perhaps not surprisingly—at a time

when alternative masculinities have achieved some small measure of currency. Feminists, transgender and butch activists, and drag kings have all demanded more from masculinity in recent years, and have lovingly and creatively re-envisioned it without past levels of misogyny and sexism. So just when some of us in queer culture presumed that it was finally safe to divorce masculinity from men, male masculinity has risen up again, like the seed of Chucky (or not, since apparently Chuck's seed in the new movie is quite queer!). Yesteryear's swaggering macho is this year's stumbling, bumbling male; omniscience is replaced by idiocy, irony is replaced by literality. As is often the case, we've seen the shift illustrated most boldly in the celebrated films of the past few years.

In 2003, for example, one film laid out with great precision the new role for women in a new world of male dominance. And what should have signified as an ironic trope all too quickly became a literal manifestation of gender roles: In Pedro Almodovar's critically acclaimed masterpiece of misogyny, *Talk to Her*, two talented women lie in comas and then become wallpaper while the unappealing and unremarkable male leads flirt and coo across their mute and prone bodies. While the male leads are exposed as flawed, deceptive, conniving, even criminal, the film still focuses on their complexity and leaves the women inert, simple, silent. Stupidity, in other words, passes as complexity and male complexity requires, again, female simplicity.

In 2004, most of the new masculinities on display in film intensified the link between aesthetics and misogyny, combining homoeroticism, male bonding, and masculine pathos in a potent stew designed to tug at the heartstrings of the women who love too much and slay the crit-

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ics in the process. A primo example is Alexander Payne's universally acclaimed Oscar hopeful *Sideways*, which pairs up nebbishy, intellectual loser Miles (Paul Giamatti) and preening, faded actor Jack (Thomas Haden Church) and turns their stag-week odyssey into an exploration of wine, women, and wisdom—with the women providing access to first the wine and then the wisdom. On the surface, the movie seems to be exposing male vulnerability, making a spectacle of male stupidity, and anatomizing male arrogance, but in the end it's no different from any other buddy movie; the movie's smart ugly guy-dumb cute guy pairing recalls male couples from George and

Lenny to Cassidy and Sundance.

The bare-bones plot of *Sideways* claims to be telling a different, more "human" story about men and masculinity than your average buddy-bonding narrative. On a weeklong wine tour to celebrate Jack's impending wedding, the men use Miles's oenophilia as an excuse to drink endlessly. Miles wants to drown his depression over a failed writing career; Jack wants to get laid before he has to sign away his sexuality to marriage. Miles is depressed, physically repulsive, and clearly an alcoholic, while Jack is past his prime, dumb, and blatantly on the make. None of this impedes their chances of getting lucky, though, and the two gorgeous, interesting women they meet up with are drawn to them for no obvious reason.

Just 10 minutes into *Sideways* we know we are in the presence of a really likable guy when Miles casually steals hundreds of dollars from his aged mother. In a film about working-class men, or men of color, such a scene would indicate the fundamental criminality of the character. In this film, though, the scene is just fine shading in what critics embraced as a heartwarming and complex portrait of two men stumbling together through their midlife crises. In his *Chicago Sun-Times* column, Roger Ebert suggests that this "human comedy" succeeds because it shows "us" that "women can love us for ourselves, bless their hearts, even when we can't love ourselves." Other critics swooned over the movie's ability to show men in a warts-and-all light. But while it's true that Miles and Jack are utterly flawed characters, and while director Payne frequently hits the mark with his close-up focus on the loneliness and humanity of all the film's characters,

Sideways is so enamored of its heroes' flaws that it elevates those flaws into a form of appeal. Personality defects that would mark other kinds of characters (a woman, a gay man, a lesbian, a person of color) as dangerous function to make these men more interesting and more real. In fact, the message of this alleged masterpiece is that men, like wine, get better with age and have to mature to just the right moment before they are opened up and enjoyed. And the message to women: those creatures who stand outside Ebert's "human comedy," is basically this: If you stand by your young man through his alcoholism, philandering, sexual-confidence crises, and general anxiety, he will suddenly blossom into...a drunken, philandering, impotent, anxious older man. Jackpot!

I suppose the reason otherwise intelligent critics love this film is because it seems to portray men and mas-

Below: Men behaving badly in *Sideways*.

Night: Sea creatures behaving queerly in *Spongebob Squarepants*.



culinity differently than the top-gun blockbusters do. In the *New York Times*, Manohla Dargis argues that Miles's appeal lies in his flaws and his obvious struggle to achieve acceptable modes of masculinity, writing that "without struggle and pain, Miles wouldn't be half the good and decent man he is, though he certainly might complain a little less, venture a little more." Other critics, like J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice*, speak admiringly of Miles's "humanity" and Payne's comic genius. But few recognize that the so-called humanity of a Miles or a Jack almost always comes at the expense of a woman. Miles's whole trip is unknowingly sponsored by his mother, from whom he steals the money; and Jack's lesson in maturity comes at the expense of Stephanie, the vineyard worker who falls in love with and believes Jack when he says he's ready to move to the wine country for her, as well as at the expense of his fiancée, who has no idea what his stag week involves. And Maya, the compelling object of Miles's desire, is having a midlife crisis of her own—she's just been through a divorce and is looking for new purpose in her life—but her role is only to prop up Miles's fragile ego, tell him she likes his rejected 750-page manuscript, and comfort him as he hurtles through his weeklong bender.

The men of *Sideways* are really just older, more critically lauded versions of the hapless losers who have always populated teen comedies—the geeky strivers of *Sixteen Candles*, the libido-crazed pals of the *American Pie* franchise, or the blindly hedonistic Jesse and Chester of *Dude, Where's My Car?* (Perhaps the film should have been called *Dude, Where's My Pinot Noir?*) And like the dudes, the

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brothers, the Jim Carreys and Adam Sandler and George W. Bushes, the stupider and more pathetic the male heroes become, the more they are loved by exceptional women.

One film of 2004, and one film only, had the courage to reveal the new, flawed-and-vulnerable masculinity for what it is: a version of the old, invincible John Wayne masculinity. *Spongebob Squarepants: The Movie* tells a gripping tale of an old kung who loses his crown (I smell an allegory here), an old crab who loses his business to a bottom-feeder, and a brave young sponge who, with the help of a pink starfish named Patrick and a princess mermaid, sets the world of Bikini Bottom straight.

Or is that gay? With the *Wall Street Journal* and other serious media abuzz with the news that the beloved Spongebob, a mainstay of children's tv, has found a following in gay communities, the film's creators have recently had to tackle the question of whether the cartoon is gay. Let's review the evidence: Spongebob and Patrick are inseparable; Patrick appears toward the end of the movie in fishnets and stilettos; on their journey to find the king's crown (and become "real men"), Spongebob and Patrick find themselves in a leather bar but disappear to the men's room together; they are chased by a big leather daddy on a motorbike and secretly want to be caught by him; they show much more interest in each other than in the pretty mermaid; and, last but not least, their final ride back to Bikini Bottom comes courtesy of David Hasselhoff's ass. As Hasselhoff speeds across the ocean with the little fellows, he looks (Continued on page 92)

on tv

(Continued from page 22) Spike seems to hold its viewers (and, by extension, men in general) in such low esteem. Although its shows are full of entertainment, fantasy, and predictable dramas, Spike avoids presenting viewers with much to encourage them to expand as individuals or challenge their minds. It's unfortunate that



Spike condescends to men with programming that suggests that complex issues, nonephemeral information, and an absence of car crashes won't appeal to them.

At the end of my immersion, with hours of Spike programming still rattling in my head, I noticed that I had arrived at a peculiar feeling of calm, the sort I imagined must permeate the brains of many regular Spike viewers. I found it increasingly easy to embrace the simplified world Spike presented, and my own life seemed clearer and less clogged with gray-area solutions to life's many problems. Why had I never seen the world this way before? Was it possible that—in the knee-jerk way that reading a fashion magazine makes me decide I should be thinner—after taking in enough Spike, my thinking

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(Continued from page 39) back at them fighting over his ass and says, "Hey guys, go easy on me back there!"

But more important than Spongebob's sexual proclivities is the film's explicit discussions of the difference between boys and men, which take on a very different tone than the angsty dialogue of *Sideways*. Spongebob and Patrick understand that their quest to recapture the king's crown will supposedly transform them from boys to men. But the film hilariously pokes fun at the archetypal rendering of this rite of passage, and actually makes boyhood look more complicated, more empathetic, more flexible than the forms of manhood modeled by adults in the story. *Spongebob* ultimately tells boys that it's okay to be a boy rather than a man, that manhood is exploitative and competitive, and that business and pleasure, in the end, depend upon figuring out new ways to access the responsibilities of male adulthood without the violence and injustice that so often accompany it. Spongebob and Patrick know that manhood is just a bad combination of confidence, bullshit, humiliation, and Viagra; rather than acquiesce, the two friends set out to make fun of it while representing boyhood as a kind of in-between space free of the performance anxiety and anger that orbit the adult male and fuel his fear of failure. Enlivened by a critique of fast food, capitalism, the monarchy, and nepotism,

was becoming man-ified? Even worse—had I left my toilet seat up?

But then I heard that on January 31, Spike president Albie Hecht abruptly resigned. His bosses seemed to think that more scripted shows were the key to Spike's future; after all, it was Hecht's acquisition of *CSI* reruns that gave the network its biggest ratings

boost—albeit at the embarrassing cost of dramatically increasing the female viewership. Hecht's replacement, Doug Herzog, who also heads Comedy Central, commented, "I am looking forward to finding out what men really want, and figuring out how to put some legal version of that on television." It remains to be seen if Herzog can discern what his predecessor couldn't, although one would've thought being men would have given both a head start. The unanswered question about Spike's future is whether the concept of "Television for Men" is one worth preserving at all. ☪

Erin Amar is a writer and entertainment journalist in Boston. Her work has appeared in the *Boston Phoenix*, the *Weekly Dig*, MTV.com, and in a score of well-intentioned but now defunct websites and magazines.

Spongebob Squarepants: The Movie makes a daring pitch for a softer, more absorbent masculinity.

Savvy viewers know that *Spongebob's* sexuality is crucial to his character. When asked about the character's queeny tendencies, creator Stephen Hillenburg told *E!* *Online News* that he thinks of his depictions as asexual, rather than gay, but he admits that they—*Spongebob* in particular—are "special...weird" and kind of "oddball." Some call it oddball, but some might say *Spongebob's* "softness" connotes a very particular genre of "odd." But in a year when even action-hero cartoons like *The Incredibles* pivoted on male midlife crisis, when the governor of California called his legislative opponents "girlie men," when the white male vote put Bush back in office after a disastrous first term—in such a year, any male icon, gay or straight, who's not trying to bolster his masculinity is worth a second look. In this new year, let's hope we can find and insist upon some compelling alternative masculinities—and that a few straight women can find it in their hetero hearts to insist on more from the straight or sideways men they love. ☪

Judith Halberstam teaches at USC and is writing a book on intellectual life in the U.S. titled *Dude, Where's My Theory?* She is the author of *Female Masculinity*, *The Drag King Book*, and, most recently, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*.

Jamison green/michelle tea

(Continued from page 41) partner. That's another serious thing we need, as a society, to look at: Why do we raise men to be lonely? Why do we raise men not to experience their feelings, let alone express them?

I was reflecting on that as I read your book, especially the chapter where you talk about the men's group you were in. It was really great to read about that, because I was always like, Oh, Robert Bly, what a jerk. But your group sounded like such an interesting, cool environment.

It was great. These guys were very real and very sincere about why they were there. They wanted to make a difference in their lives, in their relationships, and in their world about the fact that men cannot communicate with each other. It was scary at first. It was like, Oh, are they really going to see me, or are they going to suss me out and judge me? And I was blown away that that stuff didn't happen.

I've always liked hanging out with guys. All my life I've had guy friends. I was the captain of the neighborhood baseball and football teams, and I would say that I was the leader of the neighborhood gang but it wasn't like gangs today. I also taught all the girls in the neighborhood how to climb trees. I didn't have to give tree-climbing lessons to the boys, but I gave them to the girls for a nickel a shot

Did you figure out what the essence of masculinity is [at the men's group]? Deep masculinity—that's the Robert Bly phrase. I think. It is the sense of wholeness in your masculinity—not being a victim of some power hierarchy, not being an oppressor of women or being oppressed by women, but being completely centered in yourself and acknowledging that you are a man and taking responsibility for that. I think in a way I actually found [that essence]. It's not something that will shake loose from me. It's not something that can be removed if someone says, "You know you're really a woman." My masculinity is not threatenable. I think it's that place of peace where we have a sense of who we are and where we can be in the world. That's what men were looking for in those kinds of groups; they looked for it in a lot of ways that were funny, that were ludicrous, that were laughable in some groups. The particular group I was in was unique and one of the real leaders of the men's movement. I was very fortunate to be in that group, but I didn't learn that deep masculinity there. I was awakened there, but you find it in yourself. ☪

Find out about Jamison Green's public appearances and latest goings-on at www.jamisongreen.com. Michelle Tea's recent books include the illustrated novel *Rent Girl*, the poetry collection *America the Beautiful*, and the anthology *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class*.

Jim mckay/amy richards

(Continued from page 43) into full human beings.

I am constantly trying to check myself. A Barbie found its way into my daughter's hands, [and] it tripped me out for a couple of days. She was obsessing, "Daddy, look at her hair." I made snide remarks and told her that I didn't want to play Barbie, I wanted to play something else. After about four days, I delved into a very adult discussion about how Barbie is not like a real person. Then I realized that my daughter doesn't need this, and she certainly doesn't want it. It is horrifying what is out there that's defining the culture. [But] that's the world, and I have to trust that my kids will learn how to think.

I spend a lot of time on college campuses, and I'm shocked by how often students just want to know what "the" answer is. They ask me: "Is this a sexist ad?" Or, "What's feminist about *Mean Girls*?" They've forgotten how to analyze the world for themselves; they expect the answer to be obvious. Media and critical thinking are the most important classes. If you take today at face value, without interpretation, what are you getting? ☪

Jim McKay's new movie *Angel* will premiere in the U.S. in late 2005. Amy Richards's latest book, *Grassroots*, is out now.

