

A DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF ALL THE THINGS I LIKE (AND SOME I HATE): SELECTIONS
FROM A NONFICTION COLLECTION

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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ABSTRACT

A Definitive History of All the Things I Like (And Some I Hate)

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This creative thesis is a nonfiction collection, where each essay is about various things that have had a severe impact on my life, or at least the things I've been obsessed with over the years. I am interested in exploring obsession and pop culture and the relationship I have with it. I've always been really interested in pop culture and the history of that pop culture that I'm interested in, like boy bands or the Muppets. These essays will be personal, though I will be including some information as I go into the history of each pop culture obsession. However, I'm not only interested in exploring my relationship with pop culture but the relationship that the masses have with it. Pop culture and obsession is something that is treated negatively or engages in lots of negative stereotypes that I seek to change. I want to not only celebrate nostalgia, but also create positive associations with pop culture and fandom. Throughout this collection I will be discussing the "history" of various obsessions of mine—books, movies, tv shows, music, and general Stuff—along with my positive association with it. Along the way, I will also be exploring the negativity that comes with being interested in pop groups or having a lot of nostalgic toys, along with more personal, harder to talk about moments surrounding these obsessions in my life.

I'm drawing inspiration from works that I feel not only represent a love of pop culture, but also writing about your love of something or your hate of something. Ross Gay's *Book of Delights*

features small essays in which Ross Gay features one thing that he enjoyed about the particular day that he writes the essay on, whether that was a conversation he had with his wife or a moment he shared with a city bus driver. Sei Shonagon's "Hateful Things" is purely about things that the author dislikes, and often the emotional impact it has on her. Elena Passerello's "Space Oddity" discusses how humanity's love and faith in popular singing is so intense and uplifting that they were willing to send Johnny B. Goode on a record into space. Each of these pieces explores personal moments and personal relationships to these moments, and that is what I hope to achieve with this nonfiction collection.

“A (ALMOST NEARLY) DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF BOY BANDS”

It all starts in 1989—

No, wait.

It all starts in 1964—

No, not that either.

Believe it or not, the earliest fangirls were not part of Beatlemania, nor were they in the never-ending war between *NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys. One of the earliest manias was in fact Lisztomania or Liszt fever, in which women went completely rabid for Franz Liszt, a 19th century Hungarian composer. Apparently, these women went loco for Liszt, traveling far and wide to see him perform and having fainting spells at his performances. It got to the point where people would wear brooches with his face on it, try to steal locks of his hair, and one woman even took a cigar butt that he had flicked away and kept it in a diamond encrusted locket. Not only was Franz Liszt the first to receive this kind of attention, once the term was coined in 1844, it was treated as a legitimate medical condition.

However, it is most often the Beatles that are credited with the insanity that is a bunch of teenagers finding common ground lusting over a group of men with swoopy hair and dimples who could carry a tune. At the very least, The Beatles are what started the boy band revolution. *Beatlemania*. And when I say lusting, I do mean *lusting*. Young women would practically scream their lungs out at the prospect of even getting near one of the four British pop stars.

Every girl had her favorite boy, arguing over who was better looking and who would make the better husband¹ and every boy had their own unique personality—and haircut.

Of course, with every new craze comes about a million copycats. The first of the Beatles' copycats were The Monkees,² a fictional foursome who paired their music with sitcom television high jinks.³ After the Monkees, at least in the United States, Motown took over the mantle, producing groups such as the Jackson 5, the Four Tops, and the Temptations. However, groups like Bay City Rollers and Menudo carved out a spot for boy bands all over the world.

I was five when I saw *NSYNC in concert. It was my first concert, and my first foray into Grown Up Music. Music that wasn't songs from *Blue's Clues* or *Barney* or the dozens of Disney sing-a-long VHS tapes I had. It was music that I could hear on the radio and know every word to when my parents wouldn't play CDs in the car. I could watch television with my mom and see them there. It was my first true step away from toddlerhood and into early adolescence. On Memorial Day weekend in the year 2001, my family and I took the journey from Queens, New York, to Hershey Pennsylvania for the show. It was only their second show on the tour. I still have small, fleeting glimpses of standing in a crowd full of people, craning my little neck up towards the screens to see a glimpse of my favorite musicians in the world, since the security officers at the show wouldn't let my dad put me on his shoulders.

Before that, my dad took never-ending trips to the bathroom since I was only five and had a little bladder.

¹ Or something a little less PG, even for the 1960s.

² My family once saw two members of the Monkees while at a family reunion. Apparently, the restaurant attached to the hotel was known for its impressive pies, and the Monkees were stopping there on their way to a concert.

³ Even this has been replicated with Big Time Rush in the 2010s.

Before *that*, we lost our concert tickets in the parking lot of the arena.

I'm still not totally sure how it happened. ⁴I asked my mom what she remembers, and this is what she told me: It had already been a rough day. We spent the day at Hershey Park, and one of the last rides we went on was a river raft ride. Think Kali River Rapids at Animal Kingdom or the Popeye ride at Universal. Rides in which you sit in a large, round river raft and get thrown around by rapids and dumped on by waterfalls. Long story short, we got absolutely *soaked*, and my older sister and I waddled around in our wet clothes, crying and complaining until my parents finally agreed to take us back to the car to get clothes to change into. My mom had the tickets in her hand, or her fanny pack⁵ and somehow, they fell out. My mom and dad checked under cars, retraced our steps dozens of times, tore apart our car. The beloved concert tickets that my godfather had given my sister as a communion present were gone from my life just as quickly as they had entered them. I hadn't even gotten to see my future husband, Justin Timberlake yet.

Until two girls, probably still much younger than I am now, in matching "Team *NSYNC" shirts came up to my mom.

"Hey, did you guys lose concert tickets? Cause we found some in the parking lot." My mom, ever the pragmatic one, was able to list off the seat numbers, section number, even the serial number that was on the tickets. There was just one problem.

The girls only found two.

⁴ Hello, I was only five?

⁵ It was 2001 after all.

So now came the problem of figuring out which parent would take which child. But there wasn't a solution that anyone would be happy with. Either my dream of seeing *NSYNC would be ruined, or my sister wouldn't get to use her Communion present.

After that, my mom's memory gets fuzzy, but somehow two other tickets were scrounged up. She thinks that the girls had two extra tickets that they were attempting to sell, and there was merely an exchange made: their seats for ours. My mom thinks that that's why our view was significantly shitty.

*NSYNC didn't come onto the United States boy band scene until 1997, officially, two years after the Backstreet Boys. After New Edition and New Kids on the Block both faded out of existence, the Backstreet Boys made their US debut in 1995, though they had put the group together and began working in 1993, when Nick Carter was only 14 years old. The man in charge of both bands was Lou Pearlman, a doughy looking man with questionable feelings about the minors he looked after,⁶ who died while in prison for tax fraud in 2013. After seeing the massive success of Backstreet in the US, Lou decided to jump ahead of the competitors who would no doubt try to copy his beloved boy band idea that he copied. He did so by creating his own competition. Thus, *NSYNC was born.

Like Backstreet, *NSYNC started in the European market. It helped that their early music had the same beats as a lot of Europop club music that was popular in the 90s. However, unlike Backstreet, *NSYNC did not have an audition process. Chris Kirkpatrick—countertenor and

⁶ There's a great documentary on Youtube called *The Boy Band Con*, about Lou and his history with these groups and just how unsettling some of his behavior was towards the young men that he employed. I highly recommend it. It's a great nostalgia trip.

former Chip Skylark⁷—approached Lou with the idea of creating another group after he missed the cut for the Backstreet Boys. Lou agreed and said that he would finance it provided Chris could find all the members himself. Chris first reached out to Mickey Mouse Club alum Justin Timberlake. The two knew each other from previous auditions for various projects. It was Justin who recommended fellow MMC cast member J.C. Chasez, as the two had just finished spending time in Nashville together recording demos. Next came Joey Fatone, who knew of Chris from their shared gig at Universal Studios Orlando. Of course, they still needed a bass singer, and thus Chris reached out to...Jason Galasso.

Yeah, *NSYNC did not have Lance Bass at first.

After Galasso quit right before rehearsals started,⁸ they needed another bass vocalist. Justin reached out to his vocal coach, who recommended Lance provided they could convince his mother. Lou helped the group convince Lance's mom to let him join, officially forming the *NSYNC we know today. *NSYNC were surprisingly successful in places like Europe, the United Kingdom, and even Korea, but were failing to hit the same stride that Backstreet was hitting in the United States, just barely managing to hit music charts in the states. So how did they become one of the biggest boy bands of the late 90s, and one of the biggest rivals to the Backstreet Boys, prompting many a teenage fan war?

Well, the Backstreet Boys helped with that. Even though they didn't realize it at first.

⁷ A recurring pop star character in Nickelodeon's *Fairly Odd Parents* that was friends with Timmy. Though initially frustrated by the character's popularity, especially when most kids only knew him for Chip, Chris has since embraced it.

⁸ Allegedly, he had reservations about being a teen star, which I don't fault him for. Now, he's a Mortgage loan officer and was on an episode of *To Tell the Truth*.

When I was in college, The Backstreet Boys gave me another excuse to needle my friend Jake. We had the sort of back-and-forth friendship that could be considered toxic if we ever took anything the other said seriously. Whenever we would bicker, our friends would whine “mom and dad are fighting again!” and joke about whose side they would take in our inevitable imaginary divorce. It was during one of the calmer points of our friendship that I learned about one of Jake’s deepest secrets: he was secretly a Backstreet Boys fan. Or rather, his sister was, and through musical osmosis he managed to pick up on a few songs. One of which was the Ultimate BSB Song: *I Want it That Way*. The story goes that he got pulled over by a cop while under the influence and *definitely* underage. He got out of it by singing the entirety of the lyrics to *I Want it That Way* to the cop, who somehow believed he was not under the influence and let him leave with nothing more than a warning.

Of course, I used this to tease him. Obviously. Whenever we would hang out with our other friends, driving to malls and lookout points and tunnels to nowhere, we would take turns picking songs to make the journey go by faster. My friends would pick songs from modern artists, groups like Little Mix and One Direction, or whatever song from the 80s they had stuck in their head that day. I would use my song choices to tease my friend even further, and between early 2000s pop rock and the occasional modern pop song, I would manage to sneak in the Backstreet Boys. *I Want it That Way*, *Larger than Life*, and the ever classic *Everybody (Backstreet’s Back)*.⁹

Those songs became a staple in our friendship. He always refused to admit that he ever knew the songs in the first place, but I brought them out at every opportunity I could get so that I

⁹ Which, oddly enough, was on their “official” first album. Their real first album was released exclusively in Germany and didn’t really do that well. So, they were “back” but not really.

could tease him about it. In a way, it felt good, having a secret bond with friend I had only made a few months prior. I had never been that great at making friends, and even worse at keeping them, so having someone that I was close with that was willing to share these secrets with me felt like nothing I had ever felt in my life. Of course, he caused a fuss every time I made fun of him for it, but at the very least I never explicitly told them why he knew the songs. I would just rag on him until he did it himself.

In 1998, *NSYNC got their big break in the US, the kind of break that shot them to superstardom practically overnight. In the late 90s and early 2000s, Disney Channel would promote both popular and up-and-coming artists by hosting a concert for them, in a program known as *Disney Channel in Concert*. Performers like Britney Spears, Aaron Carter, and LeAnn Rimes all graced a stage in front of the Chinese Theatre at Disney's MGM studios to perform for adorning fans. The spot originally belonged to the Backstreet Boys, who pulled out after lead singer Brian Littrell had to be hospitalized for heart surgery due to an ongoing cardiovascular issue that has affected him for most of his life. Johnny Wright, the manager to both groups, offered to have *NSYNC—stylized as 'N Sync at the time—fill the spot.

This would not have been a problem, had the Backstreet Boys been aware of *NSYNC at all. The entire time that both groups were spending long days singing and dancing for hours on end, *NSYNC were kept a secret. Lance Bass said they felt like the red-headed stepchild. They signed in to TransCon Records—their label at the time—under a fake group name. While the Backstreet Boys were super popular in the United States, *NSYNC worked their asses off for two years in Europe to make sure that they were just as big if not bigger. For the Backstreet

Boys, it felt a little bit like family betrayal. Here Lou Pearlman was ~~being all gross~~¹⁰ being their friend and confidant and he was also aiding the competition simultaneously.

This would explode the boy band scene, both in the press and the homes of teenage girls. Lou was very aware of the growing battle between *NSYNC and Backstreet Boys fans, and he would start internal wars within the two groups. He would go to one group and say “you’ll never believe what the other band said about you guys,” or go to another group and say “you guys work so hard, the others are just lazy,” These rivalries would be hot button articles for teen magazines. For the teen girls at home consuming magazines and engaging with content, it was a way for them to let out their hormones. Boy bands and the members of those boy bands are stealthy sexual beings. Safe and approachable when the music was off. But as soon as you looked at a video or listened to a song, the sexuality would crank to a hundred. A thrust to the camera and a song about cybersex¹¹ sends a wave of hormones towards a group of tweens. Boy bands offer a unique opportunity for people—especially young women—to gather in a unified love for a singular something. So, when the battle became *NSYNC versus BSB on which was the better boy band, girls went all out. High school hallway fights, crowding the streets of New York City whenever their favorite group was on TRL just to show who the superior group was. Despite being divided, all these girls were still united in their love of 90s pop music, which is why it was completely devastating when that craze started to slide downward.

¹⁰ In 2009, Rich Chronin, former LFO member, told Howard Stern in an interview that Lou Pearlman attempted to take advantage of him, saying that they had a “make or break” meeting with a German record producer, and that to seal the deal he would have to let the producer touch him inappropriately, and that Lou would help Chronin himself to get him used to it.

¹¹ Listen to “Digital Get Down” from *NSYNC, and then watch their live Madison Square Garden performance to fully understand what I mean. It’s one of those “my friend told me it’s really about x” type of songs, and I was only five when I first listened to it and knew every single word to it. It took me 13 years to really get it.

I found out that *NSYNC broke up from a girl at school I knew named Patricia. Patricia was the only friend I had that liked the band just as much as I did. It was during arts and crafts time in the second grade when she broke the news, and of course I refused to believe her. At seven years old, the concept of a music group breaking up was new to me. *NSYNC existed in the earliest formation of my consciousness, so the idea that they suddenly no longer existed? Blasphemy. Though, I will admit that at this point, I was turning my nose up at them. I had their most recent CD, *Celebrity*, but it didn't sound anything like *No Strings Attached*, which is what I was most familiar with. I liked *Bye Bye Bye* and *This I Promise You*, I didn't want it if it wasn't exactly the same as it was before.

There were others after them, though none of them had the same grip on me that *NSYNC did. One Direction¹² came close, but it took me a long time to accept the fact that I liked them in the first place. I did like them when they were first getting big. But I had a friend who saw that I was listening to them on my iPod and made fun of me for it. So, I buried it, because I was a sad, socially anxious gremlin who desperately wanted to make friends and she was one of the few people that was genuinely nice to me. Looking back on it now, though, I think that I could have very easily continued listening to them. It's what made me happy. Boy bands made me happy. Boy bands and liking boy bands, I think, give young people a sense of self. It gives them the ability to discover themselves as they are going through tumultuous and rapid physical and mental changes.

¹² One Direction started out a little more wholesome, but were no less covert in their sexual anthems, especially in their middle albums. It still makes me laugh when people think that "Rock Me" is too sexual and no one should be singing along to it. Because, honestly, that's the point.

Teenage girls need something to scream their puberty out to, and for many boy bands are just that. They are part of sexual discovery; they are part of a young person figuring out who or what they might like or identify as. Their catchy songs do more for a teenager's development than providing a nostalgic memory ten years down the line. And it goes beyond the music. Girls¹³ go on the internet in droves to draw fan art or write fanfiction.

God, the *fanfiction*.

Page after page of “imagines”—imagine you and Harry Styles are going out on a date, imagine you and Connor from The Vamps make up after a big fight. “One shots” dedicated to NSFW interactions that allow girls to explore their sexual fantasies with boy band members. Multiple fanfictions where One Direction adopts you and simultaneously fight over which one loves you more. Sheer madness.

Boy bands didn't even start out that way. In fact, a lot of boy bands—like New Kids on the Block—for example, were created purely to compete with other groups, or to cater to different demographics. It was only once the media realized that specifically girls and young women were tuning in on the daily did this change. Boy bands like *NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys were chemistry tested among themselves. Lou made sure that these guys would be good together before they could be good for an audience. But eventually, groups became curated, molded specifically so girls could each have their favorite, whether they got along or not. Groups like O-Town and Big Time Rush and even One Direction were manufactured. Each member was hand-picked based on their style, personality, or how they could potentially appeal to girls and

¹³ And gay men, but most boy bands aren't curated to cater to them. We still have a ways to go on that front.

make the record companies a lot of money.¹⁴ It no longer became for enjoyment, but for profit. They took advantage of the fact that girls were going to spend their parents' hard-earned money on music and merchandise because they were in love with—and often sexually attracted to—these boy bands. They took advantage of women's sexuality for profit. There were so many One Direction copycats out there, so many groups reviving the revival of *NSYNC and other boy bands. As an adult, I was having trouble looking for a group that felt organic that still gave me the same feeling that *NSYNC did all those years ago.

And it was one group that really rocketed me back into my true love for groups of dudes who sang in harmonies.

5 Seconds of Summer.

I hesitate to call them a boy band. Because by all technical definitions they *are* a boy band. They're a group of guys who started releasing music at a young age who all had their own distinct personality traits and haircuts.¹⁵ They are boys who are in a band. However, they're a *band* band. Like the Beatles, they all play their own instruments. Though, they probably would prefer it if I likened their earlier days to the likes of Green Day and All Time Low, since that's who they emulated in their first two albums. They weren't the kind of group who had personality types like "the shy one" or "the bad boy," and they certainly didn't dance. However, they were pushed into the mainstream with the help of a critical shout out from One Direction member Louis Tomlinson. I, like many, just assumed they were an edgy One Direction built by the very

¹⁴ I fully blame most record companies for this, including Lou Pearlman, since he created the show that put O-Town together. They tried to go all in on boy band copycats because they knew it would make them money, not because they wanted to help guys achieve their dreams or make music that they genuinely liked.

¹⁵ The Jonas Brothers and Hanson also fall into this tricky technicality, especially since they were largely marketed towards young women. And yet all three groups have had great pop-rock careers without having to dance in sync (heh).

people that built One Direction.¹⁶ I had listened to a few songs, but it took a while to really get into them. And once I was in, I was *in*.

The first time I saw 5 Seconds of Summer in concert was July 18th, 2016. This was after two years of going full force into my obsession. Their most recent album was less than a year old, and their tour, *Sounds Live Feels Live*, was said to be one of their best shows yet. A few months prior, some of my college friends and I tried to look at cheap, general admission tickets, but even \$65 a piece was a bit too steep for three college freshmen. I begged my parents for weeks to even *think* about giving me the money to go. It was half an hour away from where we were, it was after my dad got out of work, and two weeks out from the show lawn seating was around \$30. It was a perfect plan.

Only they didn't fall for it.

This was already their second tour that they had embarked on since I became a fan. If I had to go another round without seeing them? Life would simply be over.

Then, out of the darkness of tragic fandom mourning, came 96.1. A local radio station who was holding a contest for a pair of tickets. All we had to do is tweet them with the hashtag #SendMeTo5SOS961 and they would pick a handful of people to give a pair of tickets to. I tweeted them every single damn day. Asking them how their day was, sending them pictures of my pets. I'm pretty sure they knew me by name by the end of it. I even tweeted them "If I don't get picked, it was a pleasure speaking with you guys. #SendMeTo5SOS961" Truly unhinged. And kinda guilt trippy.

¹⁶ They were friends before they were ever a platinum selling band. Just friends who wanted to play instruments and play music that they enjoyed. They were not manufactured whatsoever.

Congrats! You've won a pair of tickets to see 5SOS on Monday from the #SendMeto5SOS961 contest! You have until 5 p.m. today (Friday) or 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Monday to pick up your tickets from our station located at 801 Wood Ridge Center Dr, Charlotte NC 28217. If you're under 18, a parent must come with you to sign for the tickets. Please confirm you received this message by sending us your full name, date of birth and phone number. THANKS!

I only remember screaming, calling my mom at work, and sobbing.

She was not pleased.¹⁷

The hardest part was waiting. My dad works in data cabling, so often he would have to go out of the area to work on jobs, often overnight. He was expected to go away the Monday of my concert, so the likelihood of me even getting the tickets I won, let alone use them, was slim. I paced the length of the bottom floor of our town home, my fingers flying impossibly fast over my keyboard as I told my friends—internet and real life—about the win. They all wanted me to get the tickets, they all wanted me to go. Most of the people who knew me from college didn't know me without my attachment to the band. They knew how important it was to me.

When my mom walked in the door after work, she was on the phone with my dad.

So, you're not going to have to go away? I hear. I immediately jumped off the couch, where I have been sitting for the past twenty minutes, trying to calm my frazzled nerves.

As it turned out, my dad wasn't the only one capable of doing the away job. They could get someone else to do it if my dad turned it down. And he did. He turned down the job and was able to make it home in time to drive all the way to Charlotte for me to claim my tickets. I ended up going with a friend from school, who lived in the area. It was easier than having to go with my mom and feel like I had to hold myself back. Because as I've already discussed, these groups

¹⁷ Who knew calling your mom crying when it wasn't a dire emergency would be cause for anger?

tend to bring out the most intense emotions in girls. Being surrounded by others just like you with the same emotions as you explodes that to an insane degree.

Even though most of the videos I took were lost to time and defunct cell phones with poor reception, that concert remains one of the top memories I have in my life. And while I will argue with you until I'm blue in the face about 5SOS not being a boy band but rather a regular band, I get the same feelings at a 5SOS concert that I imagine I would get at a One Direction concert, or even a Backstreet Boys or *NSYNC concert, had I been old enough to appreciate it. Boy bands are about more than just the music, or who has the best hair, or scrutinizing photo after photo trying to determine if they're in a relationship. Boy bands are unifying, like any fandom. Music brings people together, and boy bands bring a specific group of people together.

Four years ago, *NSYNC got a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, over a decade after they formally ended the group. The Backstreet Boys just celebrated their 26th anniversary. In 2024, New Kids on the Block will be celebrating 40 years of having "The Right Stuff."¹⁸ Despite how often people trash their sound or their similar haircuts or call them names like "N-stink," boy bands are never going to go away. There is always going to be something for teenagers to scream their lungs out to, for them to sexually fantasize about. There are always going to be walls of posters, fanfictions, arguments over if you're a Nick, Joe, or Kevin girl. Boy bands have the kind of unique staying power that most solo artists can only dream of having. They are always going to be around.

¹⁸ Cheesy? Maybe? But totally necessary.

“JIM AND BING CROSBY: BFFS?”

When I was seventeen, my parents and I moved from Florida to North Carolina. Aside from a handful of online friends—the kind that you told everything to but never saw their face—I didn’t have much going for me. I was fresh out of high school when we moved, though I didn’t start college or build a substantial social life until two years later, so my first two years of living in North Carolina was spent doing a lot of nothing. Since I wasn’t in school, I would simply wake up, walk my dog in the morning, sit in front of the television with my laptop and scroll endlessly until my parents came home from work. Sometimes I would play video games, and sometimes I would watch television.

I got very into Food Network.

Fortunately, this essay isn’t going to be about my very intense opinions about Ree Drummond or Guy Fieri, or whether or not the judges on *Beat Bobby Flay* recognize his food so much that it helps him win every time.¹

It starts with watching Sunday football with my dad.

Like me, my dad didn’t have much going for him when we moved to North Carolina. He had a job, and a good one at that, but his co-workers weren’t the people he would spend time with outside of work. They wouldn’t call each other up and invite each other over for drinks or dinner, or plan to meet up somewhere for a meaningless bonding activity like axe throwing or beer tasting or whatever it is social people of that age get up to. So often, my dad would spend his weekends off sitting and watching sports by himself. He wasn’t speaking to his extended

¹ They definitely do.

family at the time, and I didn't have anyone that I was really speaking to at the time.² I felt bad, really. My mom worked part-time at Target, which meant her schedule was fluid, which meant that often, my dad and I would spend Sundays on our own. A lot of my afternoons were spent in my room, playing *Kingdom Hearts II* on my second hand Playstation 2 on a small television with colored lines scattered along the left side of the screen—both gifts from my dad's boss when we moved into the little town home we lived in at the time. Sometimes, though, I would wander downstairs, hovering between the bottom two steps, my eyes glued to the screen.

Let the record show that at the time, I knew nothing about football.

...

Okay, I still don't know anything about football, but I'm getting better.

The point is that I would look at the screen, watching men in uniforms chase down a small object that half the time wasn't even on the screen, before smothering each other to get possession of said object all to move forward a few feet towards the goal. Sometimes it would be just enough to put them back at the beginning of the "down" cycle, and other times it would be one or two feet.

Sorry. *Yards.*

I would ask questions. Like, why do they stop when they're run off the edge of the field? Does an incomplete pass mean they start that round over or do they move to the next round?

² Back in 2013, I was chronically online, as they say. I wasn't talking to almost anyone I knew in real life, and most of my friends were behind a screen.

How do people earn two points, when a touchdown is worth six and a field goal is worth one?
Why don't we like Tom Brady?³

It became a Sunday tradition. I would wake up in the morning and sit and watch Animal Planet⁴ while my dad dropped my mom off at work. When he came back, we would watch tv until around noon, when he would switch over the channel to the NFL Network, since we splashed out to get the extra sports package from our cable service. I would sit on one couch while my dad would stretch out on the other, facing the television. When the Jets were playing, he would switch back and forth between the NFL Network and the NFL Redzone, which played live moments from every team playing that day,⁵ switching between games every five or ten minutes.⁶

I at least would *try* to pay attention. Sure, I spent most of the time sitting on my laptop while he would watch, and I would occasionally look up, but I think it mattered more to my dad that I was sitting there with him instead of leaving him to enjoy something by himself. My mom would be at work all day, and as I said, he was not really talking to any of his family. I was all he had, and truthfully, I felt bad for him. I didn't want him to be by himself, because being by himself was often dangerous. At least I thought so. When my dad had time to properly sit by himself, he would drink and get all in his feelings, which often lead to arguments—no, full on *screaming matches*—that would leave my mother crying and falling asleep on the couch. I've always tried to look out for him, to avoid those moments. I would sit up with him after these

³ The answer? Because we're Jets fans.

⁴ There's a show where a guy builds luxury treehouses and it is *incredible*. I have never loved anything more.

⁵ For the nonsports fans asking, "why couldn't he just watch it on regular tv?" only the team for that immediate area gets local playtime, unless it airs during primetime. We're out of range of the Jets, so we can't get them on local television.

⁶ Or when a team was close to scoring.

weekend beer binges, when he didn't know right from left and let his intrusive thoughts get the better at him. It's not like I liked listening to him, especially when he started talking about our money troubles, but he was just drunk enough to keep me there, guiltting me into staying awake until well past my self-appointed bedtime. I would do it to keep an eye on him, waiting until he decided he wanted to go to bed. I would go upstairs, listening as he trundled up the stairs and forgot to turn off half the downstairs lights before I could hear him snoring loudly.

I've always made an effort to keep an eye on my dad, even when I was in high school. Back then, his alcohol intake was even worse, and his intrusive thoughts were borderline suicidal. Despite my own mental health struggles, I would still worry about it. I would still wait until he went to bed or sit out on the patio with him, gently attempting to persuade him to step a little bit farther away from the patio railing as he would dump loads of anger and depression onto me. When that didn't work, I would walk with him to the Taco Bell across the street while he got a drunk snack, making sure to obey the traffic lights and keep him walking on the crosswalk.

The self-destructive, manic-depressive, alcoholic stupors have faded now, thankfully. Nothing is perfect, but we are capital-b-Better.

Thankfully, we've replaced the father daughter therapy sessions with Christmas media. Every father/daughter relationship has its own thing, right? Some have country music, some have superheroes. My dad and I truly bond on any media that surrounds the holidays, but mostly movies. When my father was a child, his father would watch the 1938 version of *A Christmas Carol*⁷ starring Reginald Owen every year. He always timed it so that as the clock struck

⁷ On my first day of my Dickens literature class in graduate school, my professor introduced the class to a phenomenon known as "Dickenspotting," in which you find some reference to Charles Dickens and his works in real life and popular culture. As it has followed me and my fellow students for the rest of our lives, it will now follow you.

midnight on December 24th, ushering in Christmas day, Scrooge realizes the error of his ways, and a random passerby walks through the streets yelling “Merry Christmas!” This is a tradition that my father has continued. We have the movie on DVD, and after everyone has gone to bed, my dad turns the movie on in black and white (never color, despite the DVD having both versions), timing it just right just as his father had. I’ve never really seen the appeal of a black and white movies. I like *A Christmas Carol*—The Muppets’ version is the best and no I will not be taking any criticism for that opinion—but when I was younger, I wasn’t really into any version of the tale that I wasn’t already familiar with: The Muppets, Mr. Magoo, Mickey Mouse. He would try to get me to watch it with him, but I always turned it down, saying that I needed to go to bed before Santa got there.

After we moved to North Carolina, both my father and I were determined to revive his love for Christmas, which had shrunk over the years. In his mind, he had spent too many years feeling sorry over what we didn’t have: we hardly ever had enough money to scrape by, one year we spent Christmas living in a hotel, plus there were a few run ins with thieves and Kmart lay-away.⁸ North Carolina was a fresh start for everyone and everything. We could completely redo our lives over.

And we did. Both my parents had well-paying jobs; bills were being paid on time. Often, my father liked to equate his personal happiness with the money that we had and the stuff that he bought with it. If we didn’t have enough money for a good Christmas, it wasn’t a Christmas

⁸ RIP Beatles Rockband.

worth celebrating. Christmas of 2014, the first in our new home,⁹ seemed like the right time for my dad to finally get into the Christmas spirit.

Let the record show that I absolutely *love* Christmas. I feel like I have to, with my birthday being two weeks beforehand. Since most people tend to miss my birthday or give me a “combined” present, I go all in on Christmas. Just to feel an ounce of joy during my birthday month. All I wanted was for my dad to have *any* spirit whatsoever. I wanted him to get past his Grinchy ways and realize that Christmas doesn’t necessarily come from a store, but the way that you spend time with the people that you care about. To him, that meant diving into the Christmas movies of his youth, starting with *A Christmas Carol*. And who doesn’t love a good Christmas movie? So, on that first Christmas in our new home, I finally sat and watched the Reginald Owen version of *A Christmas Carol*. It wasn’t too bad. Black and white sure, but not too bad.

Christmas of 2014 was also the first year I truly sat down and watched *White Christmas*, which is our favorite to watch together. See, something even better than Christmas movies is Christmas movie *musicals*.¹⁰ Of course, if no Christmas movie musicals are available, regular store-bought movie musicals will work just fine.¹¹ If you’re not familiar with *White Christmas* as both a movie and a song, allow me a few moments to rhapsodize about Irving Berlin.

Irving Berlin was born on May 11th, 1888, in what was then known as the Russian Empire. When he was five, his mother and father took Berlin and his eight siblings and uprooted them, moving to New York City. Berlin and his family were part of the thousands of Jewish

⁹ We temporarily stayed with my mom’s cousin when we first moved to North Carolina. Christmas of 2013 was spent with her family.

¹⁰ Even better if it’s a musical version of *A Christmas Carol*. See *Muppets Christmas Carol*, *Mr. Magoo’s Christmas Carol*, and *Scrooge*, a 1970 musical adaptation starring Albert Finney.

¹¹ This is a very specific and niche joke, and I really hope that whoever got it is both delighted and irritated by it as much as I was when I wrote it.

families that left the Russian empire to move to America at the time, escaping poverty and desolate conditions.¹² At the age of fourteen, Berlin left home to start hanging around the city with other young immigrants in the city. The grimy lodging house that they and other homeless boys lived in was considered almost Dickensian¹³ in how filthy it was, and how rude and awful the people that looked after the boys were.

Though Berlin started gaining traction with his music in the early 1910s, people more than likely know him for the songs he started writing later in his career. Follies hits like “Blue Skies,” “Puttin’ on the Ritz,” and “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm” are some of his earlier hits. A year after his first Christmas hit, Berlin released one of the most patriotic songs known to man and the seventh inning stretch: “God Bless America,” written for the 20th anniversary of Armistice Day. He even wrote several musicals, including *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Irving Berlin’s music gained a new life in the movies, starting with “Blue Skies” in *The Jazz Singer*, the first talking picture.¹⁴ “Easter Parade” was used as the titular song for the Judy Garland and Fred Astaire holiday movie of the same name.¹⁵ Finally, in 1942, one of the most recorded songs in history, the most classic Christmas song written by Irving Berlin *ever*, premiered...

In *Holiday Inn*.

Starring Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire, *Holiday Inn* stars Crosby and Astaire as two pieces of a performing trio, alongside Crosby’s fiancée. Crosby’s character, Jim Hardy, plans to

¹² Other such Hollywood escapees included George Gershwin, Al Jolson, and the Warner Brothers. The more you know.

¹³ See? Dickens Spotting.

¹⁴ A very important plot point in *Singing in the Rain*.

¹⁵ There’s a brief cameo by Liza Minnelli, Judy’s daughter, towards the end of the movie.

leave showbusiness and live with his fiancée on a farm in Connecticut. However, tragedy strikes when Hardy learns that his fiancée, Lila, and their other dancing partner, Ted Hanover, have fallen in love. They wish to take their dancing act on the road without Jim, leaving him to try to run the farm alone. When that doesn't pan out, he winds up back in New York the following year with the plan to hire performers for his new venture: A Holiday Inn. A hotel that's only open on and exclusively celebrates the various holidays throughout the year. "White Christmas" comes into play specifically when Jim is trying to write a song for the Christmas show that will coincide with the hotel's grand opening,¹⁶ and becomes the central song that pulls the two romantic leads together. *Holiday Inn* is full of previously mentioned Berlin hits, including "Easter Parade."

It wasn't until 1954, a full twelve years after *Holiday Inn*, that *White Christmas* the movie was finally put to screen. A masterful work of song, dance, and Christmas magic, *White Christmas* is a movie that combines Christmas magic and Hollywood movie musical realness. When Two World War II soldiers, played by Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye, become performing and producing partners, they happen across a sister duo act that they instantly fall for. Because that's how movie musicals work, obviously. Hoping to play matchmaker and get his partner to actually take a break from work, Phil Davis, played by Kaye, helps the two women escape a false charge against them and convinces Bob Wallace, played by Crosby, to go to Vermont instead of New York city for the holidays, where the sisters are performing at an Inn.¹⁷ While there, they

¹⁶ It is worth noting that while *Holiday Inn* is a holiday classic, the original film is a product of a different time, one that Berlin himself was a part of and participated in. For example, while trying to protect his new love interest from Ted after he falls in love with her, Jim covers his paramour Linda in blackface, to help celebrate Presidents' Day and the birth of Abraham Lincoln. For a more pleasurable viewing experience sans casual racism, I recommend the pro shot of *Irving Berlin's Holiday Inn* on BroadwayHD, starring Bryce Pinkham and Corbin Bleu, he of the *High School Musical* trilogy.

¹⁷ Both the inn in *White Christmas* and Holiday inn in *Holiday Inn* use the same set: a rustic looking bed and breakfast type deal on some studio stage to look like Vermont. Or Connecticut, depending on which movie you watch.

realize that the Inn is not only in financial strain, but it is owned by General Waverly, their former commander. Together, Wallace and Davis help put on a show that celebrates their former General, gathering their old platoon back together for the holiday.

If the scene where General Waverly sees his surprise doesn't make you sob like a baby, I do not trust you as a person.

My dad considers Bing Crosby one of his favorite actors/musical artists of all time. He was raised by older parents, and therefore grew up with a lot of older media. He watches *The Bishop's Wife*, another Christmas classic, every year because it was my grandmother's favorite movie. So, it's really no surprise that he has instilled these passions and these traditions on to his children. I'm not as big of a fan of Frank Sinatra music as he is, but I will sit and watch *Guys and Dolls* with him. I haven't heard anything of Bing Crosby's besides his Christmas albums, but I will put on *White Christmas* in the middle of July if we're feeling inspired to watch it. Recently, I watched a video online about a 70th anniversary remastered edition of *Singing in the Rain*. I looked up the Amazon listing and texted a screenshot of it to my father without any caption. He already knows that this is a purchase worth considering. We both love the movie, so it's a no brainer. Above that text is a video I texted him of Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra singing a Christmas song, from a special they did in the late 50s. Neither my dad nor I knew of its existence, so I suggested that we track it down for the next holiday season.

I think that Christmas movies specifically help my dad and I bond because Christmas is all about togetherness. It's about family, it's about spending time with people that you care about. And sure, part of that is Christmas magic. I'm always down for a little Christmas magic. Beyond that, though, I think we both understand what it's like to hate being lonely.

Not alone, lonely.

When I was younger, I always thought I was introverted. I preferred staying at home when I wasn't in school, I never made any plans to see the few friends that I did have. Being alone and doing my own thing was more comforting than having to go out and about and feel like everyone was judging me every step I made or feeling ashamed when I didn't want to do something that everyone else did. However, I've come to realize that while I am probably just as introverted as I was back then, I now consider myself an "introverted extrovert." As much as I like being on my own and having time to myself where I am free of any responsibilities, I like being with people. I like doing things. I go stir crazy if I am in my house for more than five days in a row without going outside to do anything meaningful or fun. When I am stuck inside, I suffer from serious cases of FOMO. Not because I want to do what everyone else is doing, but because I just want to be with the people I care about, even if we're just sitting around and doing nothing.

My dad, on the other hand, has been isolated from most of his family since we moved away from Florida in 2013. Three of his five siblings have passed away. We get a visit from one of my cousins once or twice every few years,¹⁸ but it's not enough to satiate him. He's big on family; he thrives off getting together with a lot of people in one big space, whether that's just family or friends or a mix of both. He just wants to be around people all the time, and he constantly talks about how much he misses everyone. He wants to talk to everyone and keep in touch with everyone. He wants to be able to remember and honor his parents the same way that anyone would.

¹⁸ None of my stubborn northern relatives really want to make the trip to North Carolina. I wonder why?

My dad and I spend every Christmas watching as many Christmas movies as we can. We spend every Christmas season hunting for a new version of *A Christmas Carol* that we haven't watched yet. It gives me something to do, and it gives him a chance to spend time with family. Which is why every time I see something that I know he'd enjoy, I send it to him, and vice versa. We both go through moments of utter despair and loneliness, when we feel as though the people that we care about are out of reach, when no one wants anything to do with us, when they have their own lives and jobs and families and don't have time to worry about the feelings of a singular person. But those moments of loneliness tend to fade away when we watch any Christmas movie, but especially when we put on *White Christmas*. Since it's our favorite, it's the one we watch the most. It's one of those movies that my dad and I will throw on during the holiday season when it's just the two of us. After my mom has gone to bed for the night, but it's still too early for us to follow suit. When we fire it up on Netflix, and Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye appear on screen, I can see that far-away look in his eyes. He'll say the same things every single time, like most dads do:

“Bing Crosby was an amazing singer, but he used to beat his kids.”

“Rosemary Clooney was beautiful, it's such a shame that she wasn't given the recognition she deserved.”

“You know Vera-Ellen's voice was dubbed over? She was a dancer, not a singer.”

He also sings along to the song “White Christmas” in a pretty decent imitation of Bing Crosby's voice.

I don't ever tell him that he says the same things to me every single time. I don't want to spoil the nostalgia for him. I don't want to spoil the warmth in his voice as he talks about his

mother and father, my grandparents, and how they were the ones that introduced him to this movie. In our hectic adult lives, it's nice to have something to bond over with my dad. My dad isn't perfect, and is by no means anywhere near so, but I don't hold that over him. When he reaches out his hand, I take it, and hope that he knows that I still think he's been the best dad he could possibly be. I hope that he thinks that I'm the best daughter he could possibly have. He looks to me as the one who is going to continue to watch these movies and share them with my future family long after he's gone. And as he sings along to *White Christmas* with Bing, I like to picture a future where I do just that. Where I sit with my kids and watch *White Christmas* and tell them all the same facts and figures that my father would tell me.

“A DCOM LOVE AFFAIR”

Picture this: You’re ten years old. You just got home from a day of fifth grade. It’s a Friday. You don’t have to worry about homework until tomorrow, maybe Sunday if you’re really lazy. You drop your stuff off by the front door, run to your room, and turn on the television, flipping to channel 51: Disney Channel. A tv commercial plays on the screen: A new movie is airing this Saturday. Two teens in completely different worlds (science and basketball) come together with their unique love of singing without telling anyone about it. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Grease*-style chaos ensues. The commercial ends, and a rerun of *Lizzie McGuire* comes back on. Life is good.

Any self-respecting millennial/zillennial that wants to keep their nostalgia card knows exactly what I’m talking about. *High School Musical*. A Disney Channel Original Movie. The DCOM, if you will. The pinnacle of “made for tv movies” for children. DCOMS are a staple of both nostalgia and entertainment, when our childhoods were simple, and we could ignore our life’s problems by watching a bunch of young actors solve problems just like ours, sometimes in very precarious situations. Before I get into my passionate love affair for DCOMs and rhapsodize about why Kenny Ortega¹ is a damn *genius*, let’s go back for a second, to the very first Disney Channel Original Movie.

No, not *Under Wraps*.

Just trust me, okay? I know what I’m talking about when I say that *Under Wraps* was not the first original Disney Channel made for tv movie.

¹ Kenny is an award-winning director, choreographer, and all-around Disney icon. We’ll get to him a bit later.

In the spring of 1983, a brand-new premium cable channel, known as The Disney Channel, was launched. Cable television was on the rise, and like with many entertainment trends, Disney sought to make it their own. A premium cable network was the perfect opportunity for the Walt Disney company to usher in family friendly programming on television in a way that they had never done before. From 7am to 11pm every day, Disney introduced kids and families to programming such as *Welcome to Pooh Corner*, *Dumbo's Circus*, *Adventures in Wonderland*, and *Mousercise* alongside many other family-friendly, kid centered programming that entertained just as much as it educated.²

Much like Nickelodeon's Nick at Nite, The Disney Channel also had a nighttime, grown-ups only programming block, known simply as "Disney Nighttime." Disney Nighttime would air older movies, both Disney and the kind you would see on Turner Classic Movies, as well as concert specials by artists like Rick Springfield and Elton John and the occasional documentary. This programming block was primarily for adults to enjoy after the kids had gone to bed and their programming was all done for the day. Though, it remained largely family friendly. In October of 1983, six months after the launch of The Disney Channel, *Tiger Town*, a film about the Detroit Tigers and its devout fans premiered on Disney Night Time as Disney's first made-for-tv movie. This is what I consider to be the very first Disney Channel Original Movie. It's original, it was made for the Disney Channel. You get the idea.

Tiger Town won a CableACE award for Best Dramatic Film in 1984, though it has since faded into obscurity. Despite this, though, it does have the honor of being the first movie made

² I truly wish I had time to go into detail on the delightful insanity and nightmare fuel that was this programming. I highly recommend you check out the Defunctland Youtube channel, as he does a great job of covering all this content and more. Go watch those videos, and then come back and finish this essay.

by Disney strictly television. Though I'm not sure of any other movies made for The Disney Channel, the concept of the made-for-tv Disney movie would go on to develop into original movies on ABC's *Wonderful World of Disney*, like *Geppetto* and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* featuring Brandy and eventually made-for-tv movies for children.

The Disney Channel remained premium until 1997, when it switched over to basic cable, removing the "The" and just labelling it as Disney Channel. Alongside the launch of Disney Channel came different kinds of programming. Playhouse Disney, for example, was an early morning programming block meant for preschoolers and early learners, introducing programs such as *Bear in the Big Blue House*, *PB&J Otter*, *Out of the Box*, and many others that I'm sure just scratched the nostalgia itch in your brain. Since Disney Channel was now part of basic cable rather than premium cable, its content set up was changed as well. Disney wanted to hop on the success of Nickelodeon's "by kids for kids" programming. Things were still family friendly, but for the first time, kids were seeing Disney programming designed specifically for them, not just for families. *Disney Channel in Concert*, which we've already spoken about in an earlier essay, played concerts of some of the newest artists live from Walt Disney World. There was original programming like *Teen Angel*—a show about a kid whose recently deceased best friend returns to Earth as his guardian angel—alongside reruns of Disney Afternoon cartoons like *Ducktales* and *The Gummi Bears*.

It was on the basic cable version of the Disney Channel where the modern concept of the DCOM was introduced. On October 25th, 1997, the film *Under Wraps* premiered. The very first official DCOM.³ To summarize it briefly, *Under Wraps* is about a group of friends, Marshall,

³ I briefly also want to mention the movie *Northern Lights* starring Dianne Keaton. *Northern Lights* was the first made-for-tv movie that aired on Disney Channel, technically making it the first modern DCOM. Disney, however,

Amy, and Gilbert, who accidentally revive a mummy back from the dead after finding him in the home of a dead man. Marshall and his friends seek to protect their mummy, who they name Harold, from the so-called dead man—a businessman who faked his death to avoid paying taxes. The businessman has a bunch of Egyptian artifacts hidden his basement, most of which were stolen. The three friends are able to help Harold pass to the other side and reunite him with his one true love.

A very riveting story, to say the least.

But it sparked a love affair of these made for tv movies in the hearts of kids everywhere. Including yours truly. Nothing was better than getting to sit with my older sister while we watched the newest movie about a young girl who liked to figure skate *and* play hockey, or a young boy who entered a cooking competition.⁴ The commercials played constantly, the promos were frequent, and every kid had their favorite.

At first, I wasn't terribly interested in DCOMS. I liked a few: *Zenon*, *Girl of the 21st Century*, *Halloweentown*, and *The Luck of the Irish* were some of the earlier DCOMS I remember that didn't scare the absolute crap out of me. I wasn't even terribly interested in late-afternoon Disney Channel programming. I still hung on to the Playhouse Disney block, or I would watch the cartoons in the early afternoon before switching over to Nickelodeon, whose live action programming I liked better. Then, in late 2005, just shy of my tenth birthday in December, they started advertising a new movie to air as the first DCOM of 2006.

has made it clear that it considers *Under Wraps* to be its first DCOM, as *Northern Lights* didn't appear in its special programming block to celebrate the 100th DCOM, *The Babysitter's Club*, in 2016. *Under Wraps* did.

⁴ *Go Figure* and *Eddie's Million Dollar Cook Off*, respectively.

High School Musical.

For whatever reason, the movie captivated me. I have a very clear memory of asking permission to eat dinner in my room so that I could watch it on the day it aired. With my grilled cheese and chocolate milk, I sat on the floor in my darkened bedroom on that fateful January evening, watching as Troy Bolton and Gabriella Montez sang about the start of something new at a new year's party that would change their lives. And mine.

The following Monday I went back to school, my mind buzzing with the scenes and songs that would soon become a core memory. They aired the movie all weekend, and I had already grown familiar with some of the songs that they clipped and showed during commercials. I sang "We're All in This Together" with my friend⁵ on the bus, who already had the CD imported onto her MP3 player. As I went to lunch that day, heading to my familiar lunch table with the same group of classmates I had been sitting with all year, I asked if anyone had seen the movie. My girlfriends immediately started gushing about it. We talked about it at length, saying how much we wished we were like Gabriella, how cute Troy was, what our favorite songs were. The two boys in our group just rolled their eyes and started talking about skateboards or *Jackass* or whatever ten-year-old boys talked about in 2005.

High School Musical had a grip on kids in a way that no DCOM ever had before. Sure, most were insanely popular. Both *Halloweentown* and *Zenon: Girl of the 21st Century* spawned multiple sequels. None of the previous DCOMS, though, blew up the way that HSM did. We're talking novelizations, dolls, clothes, accessories, board games, stationary, multiple sequels

⁵ This friend is very important. We'll get to her a little later.

including a theatrical release, and a concert tour. Just some of the ways that HSM had a vice grip on kids growing up in the mid-2000s.

But why did it have such a grip on me?

Well, there are several reasons. For one, it aired on Disney Channel practically every week in multiple forms—sing along versions, dance along versions, info pop ups akin to MTV videos. The cast was accessible via television and interviews in teen magazines, which included posters that readers could hang up on their walls. For another, it catapulted most of us past that line of young adolescence/tweenage hood that starts to blur around this time. We went from enjoying being a kid to looking forward to being a teenager and growing up.

See, before HSM dominated my every waking thought, my first love was *NSYNC. My childhood obsession. I know I had at least two posters of them hung up in my room, displayed alongside a *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* poster and my sister's life-sized poster of Michael Jordan in *Space Jam*. But even though I liked *High School Musical* and wanted to absorb as much of it as I could, posters like the ones featuring the *HSM* cast really were not something in my wheelhouse until I met Jennie.

Jennie was my age, but while most kids thought that being cool was having the most Webkinz or a Club Penguin membership, Jennie took being cool to a new level. While she had things like Webkinz, a Millsberry account, and Cabbage Patch kids that she regularly played with, she was one of the first friends I had that acted older than she was. At ten years old, she had teen magazines, she read books about teenagers with teenage problems like the *Clique* series. While I casually enjoyed tv shows like *That's So Raven* and *Kim Possible*, she loved them and watched them almost religiously. She was the only girl child, she had her own room with its own

couch, her mom would let us order pizza or have Burger King whenever I slept over. Jennie was Cool, and I wanted so badly to have a Cool friend. I wanted so badly to have Any friend, one that would come over to my house for sleepovers and live close to me.

I think Jennie being my first real Sleepover Friend was what made me so desperate for her to like me. I wanted us to have everything in common so that we could spend as much time together as possible, and since my interests seemed babyish by comparison, I wanted to pick up hers. So, I went all in on the Disney Channel train. I went all in on the teen magazines and the posters. I still say the poster⁶ I had of Jesse McCartney at the foot of my bed was part of my sexual awakening.⁷ I became obsessed with watching the channel every single day, not just when there was nothing on Nickelodeon that I wanted to watch. When *High School Musical* was premiering, Jennie was all over it, because she did local children's theatre and loved everything and anything about musicals and the arts.

It brought us together in a way that I had never experienced before, and I think that the same could be said for so many of these DCOMS. You could talk about it in school the next day, you could watch the DVDs at home with your friends and try to learn the dances or the lyrics to the songs. You could play pretend in the pool during the summer and decide which one of you would get to be Sharpay or Gabriella. It unified kids under a common umbrella, with something we could all enjoy and agree upon.

Childhood desperation aside, though, I fully believe that *High School Musical* worked purely because Disney struck gold when they hired director and choreographer Kenny Ortega.

⁶ One of many along an entire wall covered in Jesse McCartney posters. No space went un-Jessed.

⁷ *Gasps*, his boxers were exposed just slightly. Someone get me a fan and some smelling salts.

Kenny's first film credit is choreographer for 1980's *Xanadu*, starring Olivia Newton John.⁸ From there, he moved onto choreograph dance scenes in several "brat pack" movies, including *St. Elmo's fire* and *Pretty in Pink*. In 1988, he choreographed one of the most iconic dance movies of all time, *Dirty Dancing*. Kenny Ortega would then make his directorial debut in 1992, for the Disney cult classic *Newsies*, where he also served as choreographer. The following year, he would direct *Hocus Pocus*, a little-known Disney Halloween movie. Maybe you've heard of it. As both a director and choreographer, Kenny Ortega is brilliant. Little kids knew him as part of *High School Musical* just as much as they knew the cast. He was in commercials, he was in interviews, he was even in *Disney 365* behind the scenes shorts. Kenny was *High School Musical*; Kenny was *Cheetah Girls 2*. They wouldn't exist without his energy, without his sprinkle of extra something. He was celebrated and lorded over by a bunch of adolescents and pre-teens the same way Stanley Kubrick is lorded over by film bros.

This has not stopped. In fact, less than ten years after the last *High School Musical* movie was released, Kenny did it again going back to Disney Channel for a trilogy that would have a similar global, phenomenal affect.

Descendants.

This is what I think truly submits Kenny as a Disney Channel icon. *Disney Descendants* was released in July of 2015, and the story follows a group of kids of Disney villains (Maleficent, the Evil Queen, Jafar, and Cruella De Vil) as they leave the Island the "heroes" isolated their families to and begin a new life as "good people," going to school alongside the

⁸ I won't get into it here, because it's truly an insane movie, but just know that she plays a roller-skating version of Terpsichore one of the nine muses from Greek Mythology, and it is also Gene Kelly's last film.

children of the princes, princesses, fairies, and various other good guys of classic Disney movies. The main love interest is the son of Belle and the Beast, while another love interest is the son of Dopey. From a personal standpoint, while these movies are not in my age demographic and certainly cheesy, they benefit from an enjoyable watching experience. The sets, the costumes, and music are perfect for Disney: just the right amount of color (perfect for toys), just the right amount of catchiness, and just the right amount of world building to make anyone hooked—including me.

I got into *Descendants* purely by accident. I knew it existed, and I wasn't interested in it because it seemed overly cheesy, more than the previous year's DCOM *Teen Beach Movie*.⁹ I would see commercials as I flipped through channels and rolled my eyes. Kristen Chenoweth as Maleficent? Seems fun, but no thanks. I caught a few minutes one day, and I thought while cute, it was a bit cringe, and not something worth my time.

Oh, how wrong I was.

I was on break from school when I decided to sit down and watch it. Or rather when there was nothing else on and I decided it was better than nothing. I caught the last 45 minutes or so, right when the villain teens were questioning if being evil was really what they wanted to do, because they had grown so much as individuals and finding things that they liked to do without being underneath the thumb of their evil parents. DCOMs do a great job of making children's content universally relatable. No matter how old you are watching these movies, be that 9 or 19, it makes sense. And in some way, I found *Descendants* to be relatable. I'd never been away from

⁹ I have seen *Teen Beach Movie* recently, in an effort to catch up on things that people my age watched that I didn't think were "cool." It is cheesy, but I still enjoyed it.

home for this long, and I'd never been able to do things independently of my parents. I finally started to figure out who I was as a person, much like these kids did.

Well, you can imagine how little time it took for me to become obsessed.

I watched the movie, I read the books that existed to fill in the gaps between movies, I got my friends to watch it. If one of us was having a bad day when we got out of class, we would crowd in my room on my bed, with my laptop hooked up to my tv via HDMI so we could watch the movie online. There was a week where we watched the movie every day, just because we could.

Another great thing about Kenny Ortega DCOMS is how true to life they are. In *Descendants 3*, Mal, daughter of Maleficent, lies to her friends about closing the magical barrier that separates the villains island from the hero island. Her friends want to let more kids come over for a new life, just like they did. However, after a dangerous encounter with Hades, crown princess Mal decides that it's best for everyone to close the barrier for good, despite the dream her boyfriend—the king—has of letting all the kids from the villain island live on the hero island.¹⁰ She lies to her friends about this decision, though eventually they find out. And much like Mal nearly betrays her friends, Sleepover Friend Jennie also betrayed me.

Though I don't think she realizes it.¹¹

¹⁰ Also, King Ben is 18 years old in this third movie, and it's two years after he becomes king. He becomes king while still in high school. Which like, why did the former king and queen of the hero island step down and allow their sixteen-year-old son to rule their land in the first place? Why are they allowing a random little girl to make decisions on behalf of the entire kingdom only two years after knowing her?

¹¹ Maybe she will if she ever reads this. Though I don't hold anything against her for it now.

See, while the first two HSM movies were DCOMS, the third one, *High School Musical 3*, was considered big enough to warrant a theatrical release. Jennie and I wanted nothing more than to go see it, and we agreed we would see it together. It would be the first time I would go to the movies to see something with a friend, without parents, without even my older sister.¹² A true milestone for any adolescent. I waited for weeks for her to decide when she wanted to go. Every time the commercial would come on television I would change the channel, whenever someone would talk about it in school, I would cover my ears. I didn't want my parents to take me to see it, I was supposed to go with Jennie.

A month after its release, I was starting to get worried. Movies didn't stay in theatres for very long, and I wanted to go see that movie *in* theatres with my one friend that I knew still enjoyed the DCOM. I finally went to her and asked her when she wanted to go see it, and she hit me with seven words that haunted me for the next 12 years.

Oh, I saw it with my boyfriend.

To this day, I don't know if she forgot accidentally or on purpose, to cut me out. I came to realize a few years into our friendship that I was the "replacement friend." A friend that she hung out with when there was no one else around that she wanted to hang out with. The same year as the HSM incident, at my birthday party, she complained to her mom that she would rather be at her best friend's house than my party. At that point, I decided to stop emotionally attaching myself to her. She was one of my best friends, but I don't even think I qualified on her best friends list. I had to pick myself up and find out who I was with the friends that did like me,

¹² My first movie without my parents/any adult figure was *Sky High*, which my sister and I went to with her friend and younger sibling.

though there weren't that many. Moving to a new school the following year helped, but not by much. I don't think I realized it at the time, but I realize now that I wanted to watch the movie and be the poster girl because it felt like that's what I was supposed to do, as someone who wanted to be friends with Jennie, as someone who wanted to be cool and mature. She did all those things, and so to feel like I had to fit in with the elite Mature Crowd of ten-year-olds that she knew, I had to be there too. Now, though, I realize how silly that was. I realize how ridiculous a 12-year grudge, and a refusal to see a movie I wanted to see just because she didn't watch it with me, was. I finally watched HSM 3 for the first time just last year, reclaiming the part of my teenage self that genuinely loved the movie franchise and Kenny Ortega, and I join the ranks of millennials/gen z who have seen and loved all three movies.

My generation of young millennials/elder gen z still looks back fondly on these movies, the same way that our parents look back fondly at things like *Footloose*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Dirty Dancing*, and even the early slasher horror movies of the 70s and 80s.¹³ The teen stars were all over the place, in all the content that we consumed. They were guest stars in our favorite shows, featured artists on other DCOM soundtracks. You couldn't walk into a store without seeing some sort of memorabilia related to the *High School Musical* trilogy.¹⁴ Even now, those movies still hold a grip on modern media. Zac Efron is one of the biggest stars in the world and has been for the past decade and a half. He's in movies, television shows, he's won an Emmy award for his adventuring program on Netflix. And you can't find an awards show season red carpet that Vanessa Hudgens isn't on, giving an interview or *being* the interviewer herself.

¹³ *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, etc.

¹⁴ Come to think of it, you *still can't*. Though, the stores they're in now are antique malls and second-hand stores, rather than the big box stores.

Hollywood recognized the impact these actors had on young people like me and elevated them to fit into our modern adult media consumption.

I think one of the biggest takeaways from the *High School Musical* franchise, and even from the concept of DCOMs is just how important DCOMs are to the generation that they served. It was very rare to find a wholesome, fun movie for kids to enjoy that didn't have some type of violence or adult themes in them in theatres.¹⁵ The only *pure* children's movies were Disney animated movies. Kids didn't see themselves and their problems reflected on screen. DCOMs changed that. They started off a little before me, but the current style of DCOMs seen today are truly because of the way that my generation obsessed over them for a good decade. From the *HSM* franchise to the *Camp Rock* franchise to *Teen Beach Movie* to *Descendants*, Disney found a way for kids and young adults to explore their emotions and still enjoy being a kid for just a little while longer before the worries of adulthood take over.

¹⁵ Yes, I know movies like *The Goonies* and *E.T.* existed and were primarily enjoyed by children, but they were still PG-13 movies, and movies like them for kids certainly didn't air on television.

“FANDOM: AN INTERLUDE”

I like a lot of things. I like a lot of books, movies, tv shows, music, general Objects.¹ I dip my toes one at a time into various obsessions, stretching them for all their worth into little puddles of nerd. But when that little puddle spreads too far and I get too lost in the fandom, it's hard to be critical of the things that I love, and try to figure out just what, if anything, is wrong with them. Which, quite frankly, I hate to talk about. I can talk all day about how the things I love positively affected me, but in my everyday life I predominantly ignore a lot of the negativity or at least distance myself from it, and I tend to skirt around that negativity when it comes to talking about my favorite media, never directly addressing it. I know that there are so many people out there who can just drop something or someone as soon as something negative is revealed about them, either in their personal lives or in the media that they enjoy. If a movie no longer reflects current feelings about a particular subject, that movie gets treated as if it never happened. If an actor has behaved in a way that is unquestionably bad, that actor gets blacklisted. They are bad products of a bad time, or people who do bad things. I'm sure there are several that you're already thinking of, and I can assure you I am also thinking of those same movies and actors.

It's easy for people who aren't as deeply entrenched in a piece of media to be critical about it. But for those who dedicate their lives and emotions to it, it's a lot harder. We acknowledge those negative things, and we adjust our behavior and perception of the media we

¹ By objects I mean collectibles. Lots and lots of collectibles. I have a pretty decent sized collection of Funko Pops, a very large collection of over 300 pairs of socks, special edition Harry Potter illustrated editions, Harry Potter Lego sets, two wands, *Blue's Clues* mini surprise toys, mini-Disney surprise figures, Disney pins, Loungefly bags, as well as CDs, vinyls, and collectibles from my childhood like *NSYNC marionette dolls and TY beanie kids.

love, but we can't bring ourselves to fully remove ourselves from it. I remember back in 2016, right off the success of 5 Seconds of Summer's most recent album, they were profiled for *Rolling Stone*. Now, I know that *Rolling Stone* has a habit of glorifying the lives of rockstars, and that habit was out in full force during their profile, starting with the cover. They were completely nude (thankfully covering their privates) with their own lyrics painted all over them in red and black paint. True Edgy Emos. And the edginess doesn't stop there. The band went from wholesome teens to party boy rockstars, bragging about groupies and sex toys. The most damning thing featured in that profile, however, was Luke Hemmings' girlfriend, who bragged about not needing to have a job because she had a trust fund and could easily follow her boyfriend on tour.

The fandom went ballistic, and for good reason. The band had always projected themselves as kids from the Australian suburbs who didn't have the best home lives and just wanted to get out there and play music. But now they were gross? And sleeping with girls? The horror. A lot of people dropped them as soon as that interview came out, saying that they just couldn't believe that this band wasn't the bunch of wholesome teenage boys they expected them to be.² However, while I was a little stung and couldn't look at photos of them for a while, I stayed. I stayed because despite these (very normal) issues, I still loved them. I could ignore everything that was unsavory about them because I could never truly drop them. Just like I could never truly drop anything that I'm currently a fan of that has its fair share of issues. And I'm sure you already have an argument cooking up in your head, dear reader. *Samantha*, I hear you cry,

² Which like...duh.

how could you celebrate movie xyz when it was so racist? How could you talk about book abc when the author is a terrible person? Why do you even like those things?

Before I sat down to write this essay, I mentioned to some writer friends the nature of being labelled as a weird fandom girl when I was in secondary school. In one school, I was the “Weird Disney girl”; in another, I was “the weird Harry Potter girl” I asked them that if I were to write an essay about this what would be the correlation? One of my friends mentioned that it could be a great “duality of self” type of essay, which I agreed with. Who am I if not my obsession with these things? They’ve become ingrained into my personality. Another of my friends, who I bounce a lot of my ideas off, said this: “the correlation is kind of just a difference of opinion. We’re all obsessed with SOMETHING or another.”

He’s right, of course.³

While it is true that I was definitely “the weird __ girl” the peers who labeled me as such were just like me. They were obsessed with something too. Even if they didn’t realize it. The word “fandom,” I think, has such a negative connotation. Mass media looks at fandoms as something intensely negative, the people within them weird, and the general idea of being obsessed with something generally annoying. What’s the fun in dressing up like a Powerpuff Girl or Harley Quinn if it’s not Halloween? Why would you do that, you sicko freak?

I’ve met a lot of my friends via the internet, and because of that it’s hard to be on the same page when it comes to our consumption of media. We’re all from different places and grew up watching different things, and we all have different interests. Despite this, I always try to go out of my way to introduce my friends to the content I like, to explain the history of that aspect

³ And if he somehow gets a hold of this essay in the future, I’m sure he’s very pleased with himself about it.

of popular culture and discuss the positive impact it has on me, because I genuinely love it and am a devoted member of the fandom. I want them to enjoy the pop culture and content that I absorb, so that we can talk about it and find common ground in something when we're hundreds of not thousands of miles away from one another. And I would argue that anyone who genuinely loves something is part of its fandom. For example, say Johnny Stevens—your imaginary neighbor who lives down the street—likes Post Malone. He listens to Post Malone daily, has been to see him in concert multiple times, has opinions on his music, probably owns a tour t-shirt or two. Johnny also engages in conversations about Post Malone online. He will write comments under his music videos on Youtube or his photos on Instagram or replies to a comment where someone asks what everyone's favorite Post Malone song is. With this engagement, Johnny is part of the Post Malone fandom. On the other hand, Johnny also saw your "my other vehicle is a TARDIS" sticker on the back of your car a few weeks ago and said how he doesn't understand "all that fandom crap" because it's just for a bunch of virgin nerds who live in their mom and dad's basements, and you seem kinda cool.

I think the problem with public perception of fandom is that while yes, the public thinks fandoms are negative, it's because they only *see* the negative. They only see the wave of racists online who chased a *Star Wars* actress off social media because she was a woman of color in the series. They only see the animation studio who went bankrupt and had to close its doors forever because a bunch of video game nerds didn't like the fact that Sonic the Hedgehog had human teeth.

I mean, I didn't either, but you don't see me harassing hard working animators on the internet over it.

Yes, the internet! I hear you declare, slamming your hand down hard on the page. *It's the internet's fault! The internet has ruined fandom! Social media is the devil!*

Yes, and no.

Though fandoms and fan clubs existed before the internet, I like to think that the internet truly let people be themselves when it comes to the content they love, and how they interact with people who also love that content. A globalization of fandom, with instant access to people just like you like never before. Before modern social media allowed you access to anyone's opinions at any time, it was just you and a handful of strangers on forums that could barely read HTML. You would sit at your computer and click on page after page of opinions on a television show, movie, or book series, and you would get responses from all over the world. The best part was how many of them there were. Forums on anything from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to Stephen King novels to a forum specifically for players of Build a Bear Workshop's online MMORPG⁴ that they had in the late 2000s and early 2010s.⁵ The only way you could communicate with these people outside of these platforms were email, or direct messages on the forum.⁶

I'm not exactly sure when the internet soured, at least publicly. I know that the even the wholesome world of forums has a sour taste to it. For every agreement over an opinion on a ship,⁷ there are ten people who disagree. For every piece of fan art about Sonic the Hedgehog on a heroic adventure, there's a piece of not-so-savory fan art of Sonic on a different kind of adventure. For every nice anonymous message someone receives on Tumblr about a piece of

⁴ MMORPG, for the uninitiated, stands for massive multiplayer online role-playing game.

⁵ Guilty.

⁶ Of course, you could always stretch the friendship past the internet and into real life, but there are some real weirdos out there. I know this because I have become very good friends with multiple people in this way.

⁷ Meaning a relationship between two characters on a tv show, if you weren't someone who is in the know about that kind of vocabulary.

artwork, there's another one demanding the artist commit suicide over such terrible work, because *Hermione isn't black*, or whatever nonsense people seem to come up with these days. It's disgusting and outrageous, yes. And it is that outrage that becomes the public platform for the mass media and other "normal" people to look down on those who are just looking for a little escapism.

Now, at this point I could talk about the very many reasons why people are cruel to fandoms and people in them, or people who participate in the thing that the fandom is centered around. Racism, gender issues, homophobia etc. However, that would require a lot heavy conceptual, think tank type writing, and that's not what we're all here for.⁸ We're here for some goofs and to learn a thing or two along the way. So, instead, I'm gonna talk about a rarely thought of side of fandoms. Something so mind blowing and so unheard of you won't even see it coming.

Kids.

When we're little, we are completely overstimulated on our quest to grow up into walking, talking, functioning human beings. We are thrown into situations like school, activities like theatre and sports, all while trying to learn cognitive skills meant to carry us into the rest of our lives. But we're not just sitting around drooling and then magically one day speaking in full sentences. We learn things about ourselves. We learn what we like and dislike in terms of food, colors, lights, sounds, and yes, even pop culture. Let's take, for example, young Samantha. You know, me. I know from my mom that the only way little Samantha could check out for half an hour while she took a shower was by watching *The Price is Right*. I liked the bright lights and

⁸ And quite frankly, I don't have the brain power for all that.

flashing colors and fun sounds that the show would make, and that was apparently enough to keep me occupied for the 30 precious minutes of the day she got to herself.

While I did love *The Price is Right* and relied on it to keep me occupied, it wasn't really something that had a "fandom," and not one built for a toddler. There was no such thing as a *Price is Right* lunchbox or a Bob Barker⁹ action figure. However, *Blue's Clues* was for toddlers, and there was a such thing as a *Blue's Clues* lunchbox, and I owned one of those. I got to eat lunch out of every day when I went home after preschool. I would sit in my playroom surrounded by all my *Blue's Clues* toys and watch my *Blue's Clues* VHS tapes that were on repeat as often as I was able. I dressed as Magenta, the pink dog from the show, for Halloween one year. To this day, as a fully grown adult with grown adult friends, I *still* brag about being one of the only people I know that knew Blue was a girl from the very beginning.¹⁰

Obviously, *The Price is Right* is not for kids. Most kids don't care about the price of a box of Original Ben's Ready Rice.¹¹ *Blue's Clues*, however, is for kids. Even today, with *Blue's Clues'* current reboot, *Blue's Clues and You!*. Kids still care about Blue and her adventures with her friends. They find it fun and exciting to be able to guess alongside Steve what Blue is trying to do with her day while learning new things. They get excited when they open a *Blue's Clues* themed toy for their birthday or Christmas. Maybe they bought one with allowance they had been saving up. They have discussions on which character is their favorite, potentially getting

⁹ I googled him while writing this to see if he was dead or not, because honestly you never know. Not only is he *not* dead, but he is also 98 years old. Good on you, Bob Barker.

¹⁰ "Which way did Blue go? Oh, *she* went that way? Thanks!"

¹¹ Truthfully, I didn't care much about the price of a box of Original Ben's Ready Rice either (back in 1999 it would have been between \$0.85 and \$1.99), but I was utterly fascinated by Plinko.

into heated playground arguments because obviously Orange Kitten is the best secondary character of the group of colorful animals besides Blue. Purple Kangaroo fans are wrong.

Does this sound familiar?

The same way that kids look at their favorite pop culture media is the same way that we look at our favorite pop culture media. We get into discussions, we get excited as we travel alongside the characters on their journeys towards character development or plot stuff. It's all the same.

Well...mostly. Marvel doesn't have a song about the planets of the solar system like *Blue's Clues*, but that's not their fault.

While thinking about kids and fandoms, we can also think about things that are geared towards children, that adults commandeer for themselves. Sometimes to the point of entire fandoms being built specifically for the adults who like that piece of media or memorabilia. Things like Squishmallows, those mini brand surprise toys that you can buy for eight dollars at Target, and especially *My Little Pony*.¹² All stuff geared towards children that adults have taken for themselves and exploded the market for it. Squishmallows are collector's items now, similar to the Beanie Baby craze of the 90s. Most of the people I know who are super into them are adults. Most stores won't let you buy more than two at a time, and there are people who will go to ten stores in one day just to buy them.¹³

¹² I'm not brave enough to talk about Bronies. I would suggest an internet search, but I'm not sure if you're ready for that. Go ask your best friend or older brother.

¹³ I follow way too many creators on TikTok who have made decent livings on making videos where they spend every day going to Walmart, Kroger, Five Below, or other stores where they sell these stuffed animals. They'll make Instagram posts, they'll get sponsorships. They will even specifically buy duplicates just to sell them online for profit.

You know what else is for kids? *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* is a perfect example of what happens when adults look at something geared towards children and take it for themselves. Ewan McGregor and Mark Hamill have both said that the *Star Wars* movies have always been for kids. But for every new generation of *Star Wars* kids, there's the older generation that speaks louder than them. It took Hayden Christensen 20 years to get back into the good graces of the *Star Wars* fandom, and that has everything to do with the kids who fell in love with the prequels growing up and giving him the credit that he rightfully deserved. Giving the prequel series the credit that it rightfully deserved.¹⁴ Those *Star Wars* kids who genuinely got excited over something cool and new finally have a way to voice that excitement through social media. And that excitement over something does not suddenly switch off when a kid outgrows a show or gives their toys to their younger sibling because they get too old for them. It merely gets deposited elsewhere.

So then why do adults in fandoms get criticized and ostracized? There's no switch to turn off the part of our brain that loved those fandoms. No one goes from a kid who loved playing mermaids in the pool to an adult who works a 9-5 and completely forgets everything about their childhood. And, to pair one existential question with another, why do adults even feel the need to seek out the comfort of fandoms in the first place? What's so great about them?

It's simple, really: we're all just really sad.

The wave of public fandoms happened with the wave of the advancement of the internet, but it also happened in response to the tragedies we face in everyday life. In the past twenty years, humanity has faced endless tragedy, both on a personal and global scale. Life as we know

¹⁴ This is the part where I'm sure most of you have turned up your nose at this essay and called me stupid for liking the prequels in the first place. Stop trying to hate things just because it's cool to hate them or they're not to your standard. They're medieval knights in space with laser swords. It's not that deep.

it is constantly and rapidly changing and evolving, and sometimes that can be overwhelming. We adults often get scared or feel lost trying to figure out what comes next. So, we turn to comfort. For a lot of people, that comfort lies in childhood media and the way that media made us feel. We didn't have any thoughts in our head except where Blue was going to Skiddoo next, or what the number of the day would be in *Sesame Street*, and if we could see Elmo's World or not that day. We engross ourselves in those worlds to escape the state of ours, even if that world is a bit intense or supernatural or high fantasy, because its familiar to us. It triggers that comforting nostalgia and excitement that we felt as kids, when we would sit and eat food that was bad for us and watch tv shows that we liked because we had nothing else to worry about but those two things. Adult me can't face threats head on like a superhero, but I can feel comforted by the Powerpuff Girls, who did. Grown up Samantha can wear a t-shirt with Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup on it just like five-year-old Samantha did.

As a kid, the things that we're fans of help prepare us for the outside world. We learn educational and interpersonal concepts about life and friendship, vocabulary, and even space. As an adult, we use that prep in our everyday lives, and return to it when we're struggling to find the answers to questions that we face in adulthood. How do I deal with these bullies? What happens when I lose someone? What about the planet Pluto? We seek others who look for answers to the same questions and find comfort in one another. We foster communities. We build fandoms.

“MEDIA REBOOTS: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE FULLER HOUSE”

There’s a great image that exists on the internet, of a story about a lonely orphan who was friends with two social outcasts. The trio lived happily until something evil tried to take over everything that they hold dear. Thankfully, though, the hero defeats the villain with their special object that they keep close to them, and everyone lived happily ever after. I’m sure as you read that, a movie that you really like ran through your head. *Yeah, that’s totally Star Wars, you said. Or Harry Potter is definitely friends with two outcasts! Ron and Hermione are losers!*¹ However, if you look up that image, it not only has *both* of those franchises, but also *Batman, Cinderella, The Lion King, Lord of the Rings*, and even *The Jungle Book*. They are all driven by the same narrative structure.

What this tells us is that even if the things we love feel unique to us, there are about a thousand pieces of media just like it. The people who make those things can make them and remake them as many times as they want because they own the property. So, it should come as no surprise that in the wake of social media and the wave of nostalgia that has taken over the internet in the last ten years, many companies are doing just that.

I’m talking about reboots.

See, as the world implodes around us, many humans are nostalgic for simpler times. When we didn’t have to pay attention to the world burning, and instead could focus on watching mindless Saturday morning cartoons. Or mindless middle-of-the-week cartoons. Or mindless sitcoms that aired after 8pm on children’s television networks. Anything that we could shut our

¹ Note: I do not think of Ron and Hermione as losers.

brains off to. But of course, like all good things, those shows end. And when the world is imploding, we long for the simplicity of those shows to bury ourselves in. We take to the internet to make posts about those shows. We draw fanart of the characters ten years later or write fanfictions that fill in the gaps in the middle of seasons or for relationships that we wanted but never happened. Only we can't watch those shows anymore. Sure, most of them are available for streaming at any time, but they're not new content. They don't evoke the same excitement. *I miss the good old days, we cry, with my favorite television shows. And what are they even showing on those kids networks these days? I miss the good shows, with actors I recognize. Why can't we just get those shows back?*

I have good news!

Remember that television show that was really popular, the one back from the late 90s/early 2000s? Well, the company still has the rights to that property, and can bring it back whenever they want! Sure, it might look different and sound different and be altogether different, but it's back!

That's what we all wanted, right?

*But that's not my *insert piece of media here*! Mine was way different! Someone must be changing it!*

Yes, but also no.

Any company that owns a singular product can do whatever they want with it. Let's look at Strawberry Shortcake, for example.² Strawberry Shortcake was created in 1973 by Barbi Sargent, a contracted freelance artist for the American Greeting Cards company. Initially, Barbi's design was just a small girl holding a flower. However, four years later, she was asked to create four new character cards to test the popularity of new designs for the company. The character took off, and by the late 70s toys were being made. By the early 80s, the character had been copywritten by American Greeting Cards, and alongside toys, several television specials, sticker books, and even a video game was made. However, by the mid-1980s, the character had faded out of popularity. A brief attempt to revive the character with a line of dolls happened in 1991, but the big revival—and the one a lot of people know the most—came in 2003. Following that came the 2007 reboot, then the 2009 reboot, then the 2018 reboot.³

I picked Strawberry Shortcake specifically because it is one of the only franchises I know to go through multiple reboots. Why? Because the company that owns Strawberry Shortcake and its franchising can do whatever it wants. Especially after American Greeting Cards signed their rights over to Wildbrain and Iconix Brand Group in 2017. Though, the character still went through several reboots before that acquisition. Strawberry Shortcake is copyrighted material, and in her case, she is considered privately owned until 70 years after the death of the original creator or copyright holder. Then she goes public domain. Until then, though, your precious, childhood memories are in the hands of greedy corporations.

² Who, by the way, I absolutely loved. I had a ton of Strawberry Shortcake dolls, and I played the online games all the time. Her sister Apple Dumpling was my favorite, purely because of the fact that she smelled like her fruit counterpart.

³ Much to the detriment of the loyal 2003 followers. Have you seen what she looks like now? Like a weird cross between a Trolls creature and a little girl.

Super depressing, isn't it?

But this is exactly what I think about when people start complaining about reboots. The very people that complain are part of the demographic of consumers. Of *course*, these companies are going to reboot toys, or movies, or television shows. They know that the property is still popular, and they can easily make money off it. And of *course*, they're going to make it modern. They have to bring in a new audience. Let's say a popular animated show from the 90s gets ten viewers, and those ten viewers make the company that produces the show a million dollars each, equating to ten million dollars. Now, let's say they're bringing back the beloved 90s show, however it's going to cost them ten million dollars to make. They could easily rely on the ten million dollars they already have but getting those same ten viewers back only means they break even on the property; they don't earn any money. So, they need to find a way to bring in ten new viewers in addition to the original ten viewers they already have. That means finding a way to make that original show more exciting and appealing to ten new people. They have to not only still appeal to the audience demographic that they started with, but to the original audience that made the show popular in the first place. This means bringing back old characters, but it also means new characters, new settings, and yes, new modern terms and technology.

I have very divisive⁴ opinions on what makes a successful reboot. I don't hate the idea of reboots; I think they're a good way of bringing renewed interest in a beloved property, especially one that people haven't given good thought to in a long time. I also think that it gives these properties a chance to address and correct some mistakes made back then, such as *iCarly's* weird obsession with feet and young girls getting sprayed with various liquids while wearing bathing

⁴ And correct.

suits.⁵ I do, however, think that a good reboot has to meet several criteria in order to be considered good. These are as follows:

- As previously mentioned, they have to bring something new to the table. It can't be the same show twice. If it's a reboot, it's something new.
- They can't be *too* heavy handed on modern references. They date the reboot very quickly. But they can't be stuck in the past either. Addressing Instagram is okay but using lingo like *yeet* and *on fleek* every other line is very cringe worthy.
- They can't be too heavy handed on *any* references that exist outside of the scope that the original universe created. Again, it dates the original material.
- They still have to maintain the spirit⁶ of the original. I want to be warmed by seeing old characters and find new favorites.
- It cannot be an exact "next generation" copy/paste reboot. It will just make me miss the old show.

Ultimately, a good reboot should be new content in a familiar shape. Kind of like with Uno cards, when you switch colors by putting a card down with the same number as the previous card, but with just a different color. It feels the same on the inside and has the heart of the show, but the outside is updated and original. There are a handful of shows that I think do this really well, but I also think that there are some shows that are not quite there yet, or not there at all. However, I want to talk about remakes for a second. I'm not going to use this essay to discuss any show that's a remake of an older show because I think they fall into a different category of

⁵ Yes, this is unfortunately very real. We blame Dan Schneider and the Hollywood system for failing these teenagers.

⁶ Mostly, what made the show good. The characters, the plots, the lessons we learned along the way.

old/new material. I think that reboots are a show or movie that exists in the same universe as the original one, but with a slightly different or updated premise. It follows the same characters when they're older, or it's the next generation of kids in that same universe. Remakes, however, are a new take on the same material that existed before it. A show like Netflix's *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* isn't necessarily a reboot of the 90s/2000s ABC sitcom. It's a new imagining of the material from Archie comics. Or when CBS decided to bring back shows from the 80s like *Magnum PI* and *MacGyver*. They don't exist in the same universe. It's not the same *Magnum* from the 80s. It's a remake, not a reboot. Remakes don't invoke the same sense of nostalgia that reboots do,⁷ so we're not going to be discussing them.

Great reboots

Blue's Clues and You!

This should come as literally no surprise to anyone that knows me. I absolutely love *Blue's Clues* and everything about it, so when they announced that they were rebooting the series in 2016, the year of its 20th anniversary, I was ecstatic. I was so happy that another generation of kids would get the chance to grow up with Blue and her human friend as they solved clues. *Blue's Clues* means a lot to me. When the series first aired in September of 1996, I was just barely 9 months old.⁸ I came into human consciousness already liking the show, so clearly my mom had to have been showing it to me since the very beginning. Or rather, sitting me in front of the television and buying me all sorts of toddler toys and clothes based on the property.

Whatever works.

⁷ Most of them, including the CBS ones, just make a lot of boomers angry.

⁸ When I tell people "Blue's Clues is my whole life" I mean it.

As they began the search for the new human companion to the animated dog, uncertainties started piling up. How could you replace Steve? Or Joe? Which characters are coming back? Why is Blue CGI?

Eventually, though, what really got people angry wasn't the fact that Blue looked more computer-animated than traditionally animated. It wasn't the fact that Steve wasn't gonna be the main guy anymore. It wasn't the fact that the new guy, Josh, was a man of color. Everyone could look past those things. But what really took them by surprise, what made them descend on the internet with utter vitriol, was the fact that—*gasp*—the new human companion had a *cell phone*. It's too much technology! What about the handy dandy notebook! This isn't *my* ideal version of the kids show I haven't thought about in 15 years.

The cool thing about the new show, retitled as *Blue's Clues and You!*, is that not only does the series continue to feature characters like Steve⁹ and Joe, but the entire first season is just a reimagining of some of their classic episodes. Blue's birthday, her playdate with Magenta, and her big news were all storylines featured in the original series, but they were updated and revived in a way that's fitting for modern audiences. For example, in Blue's original birthday episode, everything from her birthday cupcakes to her party decorations to the stuffed dog given to her as a present¹⁰ were blue and spotted. Now, these are all rainbow tinted. The song they sing to Blue is also different. However, what hasn't changed is what Blue gets for her birthday: a little turtle

⁹ Also, Steve is very present in the production of the show. He not only had the final say in who the new human companion would be, but he also helps write the songs. Did you know Steve Burns straight up has a music career that's pretty well received? He also has several successful children's albums and has toured with They Might Be Giants. Oh, also, he wrote and performed the theme song for *Young Sheldon*. That *Big Bang Theory* spin off your mom watches? He sings the theme song!

¹⁰ Maybe like when people receive dolls?

named Turquoise.¹¹ Blue's big secret is still that Mr. Salt and Mrs. Pepper had a baby, but with Paprika and her younger brother Cinnamon already in the series, it means two new babies.

But, what about the notebook?

Well, since these are old episodes redone, and the smart phone did not exist in the 90s and early 2000s, Josh uses the notebook! And people would know that if they watched two seconds of the show to actually see it! Josh still draws the clues, but he uses the phone side to receive emails instead of the tradition letter,¹² take selfies and facetime with his cousins Steve and Joe.¹³

So, we have no heavy reliance on technology, no super modern terms. The material echoes the original but still brings something new to the table. Not to mention the new stuff it does bring is beyond what they could have done in the 90s. *Blue's Clues and You!* had an entire pride parade sing along video with popular drag queen Nina West serving as the animated grand marshal of the parade. The focus was placed entirely on different animal families and their different family dynamics: two mommies, two daddies, etc, families with trans family members, chosen family, etc. *Blue's Clues and You!* can now represent the families and kids that watch the show in a way that they couldn't before. While groundbreaking to see in modern children's television, the show has never shied away from things like different family dynamics and gender construct. Blue is a girl puppy, but blue is a traditionally male color. Orange Kitten is a girly girl who likes to play with dolls, while Green Puppy is rowdy and likes to knock over blocks. In a

¹¹ Another significant change is the present store, where Steve and Josh both went to get said turtle. The present store is no longer run by a living cash register, but instead Joe. With the help of the personified cash register.

¹² Because this is the 2020s and no kid is going know what a letter is.

¹³ They're related on Steve and Joe's father's side, I think? Josh's mom is Filipino, which plays a big part in the series, which I think is lovely.

holiday episode, Purple Kangaroo is gifted a denim pocket to keep his things in, since male kangaroos don't have pockets.

Basically, *Blue's Clues and You!* is great. Let's move on, shall we? Before this becomes a *Blue's Clues* essay.

iCarly

Ooh, I can hear the young Millennials and elder Gen-Z's all yelling at me right now.¹⁴ *iCarly* is the most recent reboot of the bunch, having just restarted in 2020. The new series continues ten years where the original series left off, but with new dynamics. For those not in the know, the series ended with Carly moving to Italy to be with her dad, thus ending the *iCarly* web series that the sitcom had been centered around for the entirety of its run. When we meet back up with Carly in the year 2020, she's a 20-something former internet star who decides to bring back her web show after her internet clout chasing boyfriend breaks up with her to date someone else who will have way more subscribers than her.¹⁵ She does it with the help of her brother, famous artist Spencer, and her loyal producer Freddie. However, she is without the help of her best friend Sam, who in world is off with a gang of bikers.¹⁶ We have new characters, such as Carly's roommate Harper,¹⁷ and Freddie's adopted daughter Millicent, who is from his second failed marriage.¹⁸

¹⁴ Your anger fuels my soul, thank you.

¹⁵ I know I said a good reboot is one without too many modern references, but for a show that is centered around the internet, I'm not surprised by all the internet lingo.

¹⁶ Jeanette McCurdy, who played Sam, has left the world of acting, after years of emotional abuse, manipulation, and embarrassment. I won't get into it, but she has a book coming out soon. So you should go read that.

¹⁷ Harper is also queer, by the way. Another way that television can represent the people that watch the show

¹⁸ Yeah, I don't know why they made Freddie a Ross type character. Freddie deserves better, in my opinion. Freddie deserves better, maybe?

Occasionally, characters from the original will make its way into guest spots, such as Carly and Spencer's grandfather, their old doorman Lewbert, and their friend Gibby's¹⁹ younger brother Guppy, who in the beginning didn't say much but 'happy birthday'. I have less to say about this one, probably because there's enough *iCarly* think pieces to fill about five and a half hours-worth of video essays, but I do enjoy it. I like the way that these characters have grown up and face adult problems but aren't any different than who they were as teenagers. The character dynamics are still the same, but *sometimes they swear and drink alcohol*. You know, like real grown-ups. There's still a genuine connection between Carly and Freddie, which I was always a big fan of.²⁰ I like that the show still looks at the rise and fall of internet trends and how web content has changed since 2007, when the show started. I know that people are annoyed that some of the main cast, like Sam and Gibby, didn't return, but the show barely misses them. The new characters they added are reminiscent of the original ones while still being individual. Maybe Millicent has bitey comebacks like Sam, but she's young and funny in her own way. It can get a little heavy-handed at times, and I don't always enjoy Carly's manic personality, but for a 2020 modern reboot of a beloved show, it's one of my favorites.

Just okay

These reboots are ones that I either don't necessarily hate, or don't really pay attention to. I think that what they do is great for the platform that they have, or perhaps the story that they're creating. I think that these kinds of reboots are good for the newer side of the audience, not for the older side, though there are some moments. I say *reboots*, really there's only one.

¹⁹ Gibby is also noticeably absent from the main cast. Gibby was constantly taking his shirt off as a shtick, and Noah Munck probably didn't wanna do any of that anymore, because it's demeaning. Good on him, and Jeanette McCurdy for that matter, for sticking to personal comfort over audience needs.

²⁰ Go away, Seddie shippers, this one's not for you.

Raven's Home

In the early 2000s, *That's So Raven* was the peak of Disney live action sitcoms for children. It followed a teenager, Raven Baxter, as she navigated high school, friends, family problems, and having psychic powers. The show tackled some topical issues that weren't always common in tweenage sitcoms like it: racism, body shaming. It was by all means a very forward-thinking show. So obviously they had to try to replicate that. Because money.

Raven's Home follows Raven as an adult, living out her dream as a fashion designer in the city of Chicago. She is a divorced mother of two,²¹ living with her two kids, her best friend Chelsea, and her son. Not only does Raven still have her psychic powers, but the pilot episode reveals that her son has now developed psychic powers of his own. While the first two seasons do follow Raven's son Booker in the same way that the original series followed Raven, Raven herself is still very much a main character, and the plots of the show go back and forth between the two of them. Another element back from the original is the way that Raven would often dress up in disguises or get herself into trouble to prevent a lot of her psychic visions from happening. The show does *try* to push the social, topical boundaries it did, but for me it often fails to live up to the way that the original show handled these topical boundaries, and how the characters dealt with them. This Disney Channel era is far from the Disney Channel that sought to present issues that real kids go through.²² It's getting *better*, but in my opinion, it suffers too much from trying to copy off the success of other shows within its network. Every one of their shows has a

²¹ Because that's really something that teenagers like watching.

²² I saw a great video recently about how most Disney Channel shows/Disney Channel reboots suffer because they use the writing to talk down to kids instead of to them, to shame them into making the right choices before they even have to face them at all. That makes the most sense to me here, and with other Disney Channel reboots like it.

fun/nerdy/joker character, a sassy/mean/bullying character, a character that fits into stereotype, a character that doesn't fit into stereotype and a diversity character.²³ There's no originality. *That's So Raven* was original and interesting, and I don't feel like they did a good job of bringing it into the 2020s.

The show did realize that what it needed to do was appeal to those first ten viewers, and it did so. Kind of. Raven moved back to San Francisco to live in her original house with her father. She still works at a fashion designer, and her son goes to her former high school, where her former adversary/mean girl is the principal. However, she only takes the psychic kid with her. Once *Raven's Home* had the soft reboot, it lost most of its recurring cast members: Chelsea, her son Levi, Raven's *whole other child*. I think that moving it back to San Francisco was a smart move for the fans of the original show, but I think that its already too late. Those people looked at the first season, saw what wasn't there, and moved on. Which is the problem for many reboots. People only want to see what they loved about the original show, and nothing new or different about it. It's not overtly modern, but it feels robbed of the joy that the original one had.

Just bad

This might hurt a lot of people's feelings.

Let me just start by saying I have nothing against the people involved in these shows, of which there are two. I just don't think they make for a great reboot. They fall under what I previously mentioned as the "copy/paste" types of reboots. They just make the same shows over again, only with less success and again, more conservative plots and storylines. I know I said for *Raven's Home* that the show should have started relying on its predecessor right away, and

²³ Looking at you, *Liv and Maddie*.

despite sometimes being *too* out there it was starting to go back to its roots. The same cannot be said for these shows. They bounce back and forth between completely different and the exact same; there's no balance. And when they fall back into the exact same, all I want to do is go back and watch those shows. Because at least those characters had substance and weren't just flat recreations of old characters and stereotypical new ones.

Girl Meets World

Consider me terrified for having even considered this one.

Look, I'm on the internet, I know how insane people went over this show. I know that I can already feel the hate mail. I'm sure that people like it, and I know it was very successful in its run.

But it's not a good reboot.

Girl Meets World, if you haven't figured it out, is a reboot of *Boy Meets World*, a pinnacle of 90s TGIF television. Similar to *That's So Raven*, *Boy Meets World* tackled a lot of personal and social issues, albeit in an after school special kind of way.²⁴ It introduced the world to one of the best 90s couples *ever*, Cory and Topanga.²⁵ *Boy Meets World* was a show that could appeal to families, as it provided interesting plot lines that weren't too hyper-focused on teenage problems. They provided good lessons while still being able to be funny and interesting.

The same cannot be said, however, for *Girl Meets World*.

²⁴ I think there was once a cult? But also, lots of underage drinking and male/female power dynamics in the form of an uncomfortable teacher/student relationship.

²⁵ Like I said: divisive and correct opinions.

I get that it's hard to bring a show from the 90s into the 21st century. I do. The world changed rapidly in the decades between *Boy Meets World* and *Girl Meets World*. Technology has changed, the way that humans view each other has changed. Kids on Disney Channel (where the show airs compared to BMW airing on ABC) care more about identity crises²⁶ than about underage drinking. *Girl Meets World* brings back every beloved character from the original series: Cory, Topanga, Shawn, Eric, both Morgans,²⁷ the parents, the accidental baby the parents had at the end of the original series that came back as a new college student. *Mr. Feeney*. These characters had the same emotional, life-lesson type moments that genuinely got me emotional at times.²⁸

Notice how I said *these* characters, referring to the original characters of BMW. GMW, however, is an entirely different story.

It's not that they're bad characters, but it just...recycles. Riley, Cory and Topanga's daughter, is just as optimistic and ditzzy as her father. Maya, her best friend, is as edgy as Shawn and comes from a broken family just like he did.²⁹ They even have a Minkus.³⁰ Cory is a teacher, just like Feeney, and he uses his classroom to teach valuable life lessons. They even recycle episode storylines. In one episode of *Girl Meets World*, an English teacher is nearly fired by the

²⁶ This is the other reboot that I mentioned in a previous footnote, one that talks down to kids instead of to them. That's the biggest problem I have with current Disney content. Creators are afraid to show kids the realities that face them and try to shield them from it by steering them away to other things.

²⁷ Cory and Eric's younger sister, Morgan, was played by two different actresses on *Boy Meets World*. The original actress went upstairs after being punished, disappeared for a season, and came back downstairs a completely different actress. It was the longest punishment ever.

²⁸ *Boy Meets World* fanatics will remember when Eric almost adopted a kid named Tommy, and the emotional gut-wrenching heartbreak when he couldn't go through with it. The same actor who played that kid came back to play the same character in an episode of *Girl Meets World*, and I still cry every time I see the clip online.

²⁹ Though Shawn's is only ever half-solved by going to college. Maya gets her happily ever after, because that kind of intense storyline is too much for Disney Channel.

³⁰ Minkus was an early series adversary of Cory and Shawn, whose son, Farkle, is friends with Riley and Maya.

school principal because she's teaching a violent Batman comic instead of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In *Boy Meets World*, Mr. Turner the English teacher butts heads with the principal because he teaches the X-Men. The plot to fire Riley and Maya's English teacher is only foiled by the Superintendent of schools.

Guess who that is!³¹

Everyone who was part of the original series that made a comeback did a great job of triggering the intense nostalgia that comes with watching those characters interact. But every time I watched these characters interact or watched as the Next Generation of kids play out a similar storyline to the original show, all I wanted to do is watch that original show. Often, the main tween characters would become secondary characters in the scenes where the original characters were featured. The show reminds people far too often of the original show. There's nothing new about the show, aside from the next generation of characters and the usual Disney Channel love triangle shtick that does not play out in a satisfying way whatsoever.³² It has a specific audience—families with young kids where the parents grew up watching the original series. The parents can enjoy the cameos from the original characters, while the kids can enjoy the tween plots. Ultimately, though, it fails to live up to the expectations of the childless millennial, a group that most reboots cater to. It's a good show, it's just a bad reboot.

³¹ It's Mr. Turner. Mr. Turner is the superintendent of schools. Riley calls him Uncle John.

³² Or rather, the focus is more about "our friendship is more important than dating and what everyone thinks of us." Maya at least moves on to Riley's uncle Josh, who's only a few years older than them and says that she'll play the long game with him. Which raises all kinds of questions, but you know, Disney will Disney. Riley and Lucas, the other points of the triangle, just kind of fizzle out.

Fuller House

And now we reach the final reboot. I'm not as scared to talk about this one, because I feel like my criticisms are the same as they are about *Girl Meets World*. *Fuller House* is the next generation of *Full House*, another quintessential 80s/90s TGIF television show. *Full House* followed Danny Tanner, a recent widow who enlists the help of his best friend and his brother-in-law to take care of his three young children, including an infant. *Fuller House* follows DJ Tanner, Danny's eldest child, as she moves into her childhood home after her husband passes away. She enlists the help of her best friend and her sister to take care of her three young children, including an infant. Only this time, they're all boy children instead of all girl children. It's *totally different*.

Except it's not. Every detail is practically mirrored: the two older brothers have to room together; the basement is redone so that someone can have a bedroom down there. The family member is involved in music, while the goofy best friend has a weird career. Some elements are different: there's more of an emphasis on 80s pop culture to appeal to the elder millennials that were DJ's age during the original show.³³ While the show does try to bring in new characters to the mix—DJ's co-worker turned boyfriend Matt, Kimmy's ex-husband Fernando, and Kimmy's brother Jimmy—and the storylines themselves aren't copied from the original, the show doesn't really have the heart of the original.³⁴ It doesn't have the wholesomeness and the genuine emotion. Even DJ eventually getting back together with her high school sweetheart, Steve,

³³ And when I say an emphasis, I mean multiple members of New Kids on the Block make an appearance, and they reference the group several times, despite no reference to them being made in the original series.

³⁴ Another show that talks down to its younger audiences rather than to them. The original *Full House* did a great job of making the kids' problems seem just as important as the adults' problems.

doesn't have the same emotional appeal as it did when they were teenagers.³⁵ It all feels just a little too cheesy, a little too wink wink, nudge nudge for me. Especially when it came to how they handled the absence of Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, who shared the role of Michelle when they were younger. They even go so far as to mention the fashion designers by name, and in the first season the cast looked directly in the camera to address Michelle, asking the twins to join them on the show. It doesn't seem like it was done in a mean-spirited way, but it just felt too obviously referential for me. And, when Aunt Becky's actor Lori Loughlin left the show for participating in the USC college scandal, they made a joke about her absence.

That's the problem I have with this show. When they feel like they're forced to address a character's absence, they just make a joke out of it. It just feels like every time they have to portray something serious, they try to ruin it with a joke. Which, yes, sitcoms are *meant* to have jokes, and break the tension of serious scenes. But when *Full House* DJ was mistakenly caught for drinking, it was a very serious, very after-school-special type scene. No kid in *Fuller House* would be caught *dead* in one of those scenes. Teens are so much more wholesome now than they were in the late 80s and early 90s! Nothing ever happens to them!

Ultimately, it just feels too silly to me. I can't connect to the characters because they're just intense stereotypes, there's very little if anything of their original characterization remaining. They're all flanderized³⁶ versions of their former selves.

³⁵ Though to be honest, I am a BIG Steve fan. *Full House* Steve was very important to teenage me.

³⁶ Flanderization is a popular tv trope, named after Ned Flanders from *The Simpsons*. Essentially, it takes one personality trait of a character and makes it their entire personality as the show goes on. For example, Joey from *Friends* becoming progressively dumber, Monica getting progressively more OCD and competitive. In *Boy Meets World*, Eric starts off as mostly cool and charming, but kind of air headed. By the end of the series, he is all stupid.

These are only some of the reboots out there. And truthfully, I think that there are going to be more reboots and remakes of old properties as time goes on. Every month, there is news about a new reboot about some show or another from the 90s/early 2000s. *Powerpuff Girls*, *Rugrats*, *Fairly Odd Parents*, all those Disney live action reboots. As technology and the media creates new ways to make television, and opens new doors for storytelling, those companies are going to try to bring back their familiar property to breathe new life to it. Keeping this in mind, I think that reboots are inevitable. I think it's best for people to understand that going forward before they start yelling about how nothing is original nowadays. But I don't think that's true. There is plenty of great, original programming that deserves attention and often does get that attention, but it's the reboots that the current generation of young adults pay attention to. It's the nostalgia that they look for in a world where they just feel lost. They don't want to watch an episode of *Black Mirror* or *Law and Order: SVU* about a recent tragedy that hits too close to reality, because it makes them think about reality when they don't want to.

I think there is a lot to be said about my generation's mentality around reboots. To us, our childhood tv and movie favorites represent the kind of innocence we lost when we became adults. It is pure and it is joyous. But when adults our age (aka production companies), try to touch it, we get defensive. We don't want that content; we don't want our innocence tainted and stained. We want to absorb it in the way that we choose to absorb it, in its wholesomeness. People complain about another string of *Star Wars* sequels, or the fact that Sam isn't in the new *iCarly*, but they'll go back and watch the original shows and movies any day of the week. We look back fondly on how much we loved shows like *Rocko's Modern Life* as we spend who knows how much money on memorabilia with his face on it: t-shirts, socks, purses. Because its safe consumption. If this generation does consume reboots, they only consume those that are as

close to the original as possible. *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* is a great example of that. It follows the same format, just with new characters that fit in well enough. No one's complaining that they didn't bring back Sticky when the new characters fill his void.

I've spent a lot of time in this essay critiquing a lot of media and thinking about why people hate that media so much, both from a surface level and a personal level. But as I wrote this essay, I kept asking myself why? Why do I care so much? I think that like so many of my generation, I consume a lot of media that is representative of the innocence of my childhood. I want to feel safe when I watch television, because I use it as an escape from the horrors of modern times. I can shut off the anxious part of my brain for a few hours and watch an old episode of *Blue's Clues* and (almost) completely forget that I have adult problems to face. But the little girl that watched *Blue's Clues* and *That's So Raven*, even the teenager that watched *iCarly*, is gone now. She's a different person. She has new thoughts and feelings, and questions and problems that she wants to see answered. What do I do as a 20something when I feel like my life didn't work out the way I want it to? When I start a new path in life, will my familiar friends, family, and settings be there to catch me? Will I ever get used to starting completely over? For all their faults, these reboots answer those questions for me. Above everything else, I find comfort in that.

“HOW CHILDREN’S TELEVISION TURNED ME INTO A HOARDER”

In every house my family and I moved to in New York, there were always three bedrooms: one for my parents, one for my older sister and I to share, and one for all the toys my sister and I had acquired in our short lives. These playrooms stored what you would expect two girls raised in the early 2000s to hold: bicycles that were hardly touched once I was too afraid to ride my talking *Barney* bike without training wheels. Closets stuffed full of board games that I never won unless I cheated, like I did with the *NSYNC board game¹ where the prize was a fake VIP pass that five-year-old me *needed* to have my name on despite knowing virtually nothing about the much older boy band other than I liked their music and wanted to marry Justin Timberlake. A matching Little Tykes kiddie table and toybox/bookshelf combo that I remember being pink and white, and covered with crayon marks. These now run “RARE, GOOD CONDITION” on ebay for upwards of \$150, and I can’t help but scrutinize it for any indication that it might have been mine once, even though the Ebay seller likely scrubbed it of whatever dirt and crayon marks that would have given any indication that it was my lost toybox.

What was in this toybox, you ask?

Well, beyond the usual childhood fodder of abandoned stuffed animals, one those push and pop lawn mowers, and quite frankly *haunting* looking early 2000s Powerpuff Girl dolls, there was one stuffed animal I do vividly remember.

A bear.

¹ I would ask to play later in the day, before going into the box and attempting to memorize the order and answer to as many questions as I could. It hardly worked.

Little Bear, to be exact².

It should be noted that while thinking about my stuffed bear and writing about it, I decided to look it up on the internet. My memory for my earliest childhood toys might not be great, but I remember how terrified I would be while trying to look for other toys in the toy box only to hear an echo of a giggle because something accidentally pressed against Little Bear's stomach or hear it if gravity decided to randomly let toys shift around in the pink and white hard plastic storage container. Now, I certainly don't remember how terrifying it looked, or that it seemed far cuddlier than mine ever was³. But I was surprised about the sudden loss I felt as the memory of this bear washed over me. The loss of the memories I didn't even realize I had until they had inserted themselves into my brain again, 23 years later.

I found two videos. One, a commercial for the bear from 1998, which still boasted a phone-to-order system, the comforting *Little Bear* theme song in the background. The other video had someone showcasing the handful of phrases and giggles that happened when you squeezed his hands or stomach. "Let's go play!" he'll say as you squeeze his hand. "You always make me happy," he'll continue, as I squeeze my eyes shut to block the unexpected tears from escaping.

Who knew a bear that once hit me in the face would make me sentimental?

I'm like that, I suppose. Especially with television from my childhood. I had a lot of VHS tapes as a kid, because didn't we all? It was the 90s and that was what was available. Some of

² Also, thinking about it: Little Bear totally would have eaten his friends, right? I mean, he was friends with a duck, a cat, a chicken, and owl, and a small little girl. In no normal situation would a carnivore be friends with all this prey (plus a weak little predator named Emily) and not eat them.

³ I smacked myself in the face with it once and it certainly didn't feel cuddly going to my mom and crying with a bump on my lip.

my favorites were the Time Life Magazine special collections of various episodes of *The Muppet Show*. Steve Martin, Liza Minelli, and John Denver were the earliest celebrities I even knew about. And Brian Henson, Jim Henson's son, who opened the beginning of every episode, sitting in a director's chair and sharing some behind the scenes facts about the show. Did you know that there is archival footage of Jim Henson's funeral? Did you know that you will *weep* like a *baby* at the sight of Carol Spinney walking down the center aisle in his Big Bird Suit wearing a green bow tie and singing *It's Not Easy Being Green*? Your heart just *breaks* as you hear the way that the original muppeteer thanks Kermit in his high, childish Big Bird voice, just barely hiding the cracks in his voice. It's heart wrenching.

It's only in my adulthood that these things make me cry. I cry when I see Big Bird talking to Kermit because I miss being able to go home and watch the VHS tapes of *The Muppet Show* that my godfather bought me when I was younger. I cry when I watch Steve and Blue give gifts to their friends and learn about different holidays because I remember owning that holiday special on home video. It makes me yearn for the things I had when I felt like I had the whole world in front of me. It's not like I was crying over Steve from *Blue's Clues* when I was six years old.

...Actually, I totally was.

I cried when my mom told me I couldn't stay home and watch his going away to college special...and when I couldn't stay home to watch the Backstreet Boys on *Arthur*. I guess I thought that I would be missing out on the greatest collaboration known to man if I didn't stay home and watch it, even though most kids my age just barely knew the words to *I Want It That Way* when it played on the radio. Now, when I squint at a grainy Youtube video of the five

members singing the theme song, I can just barely make out their features. I go off voice alone. Their rendition of the theme song is *okay*, I suppose, but it's not anything that was worth missing whatever my first-grade boyfriend Tommy ate for lunch that day⁴. We broke up, by the way, because our teacher separated us on the classroom rug during reading time because I had my head in his lap and pretended to sleep. A true romantic tragedy.

My mom did tape the Backstreet guest spot, but it's gone now. It's all gone. The Little Bear doll, the toybox. Lost to the gods of *Storage Wars* and thrift store resellers. Lost to an inability to pay for a dinky storage unit up the coast. The people who bought my childhood storage unit called my parents shortly after we moved to Florida and offered to give my parents the boxes of irreplaceable family photos and documents. For a price. They had to make their money back somehow.

So, what do we do when we lose our entire lives?

We start over.

We don't have playrooms, or toy boxes or bicycles. But we have closets. *So many closets*. We find new things to be interested in and collect. We find new television shows to love, even though we don't have our VHS of *Barney's Imagination Island* to find comfort in. We rely on the kindness of friends and family members to fuel our obsessions and inspire new ones.

When I was ten years old, for example, I was given a Cabbage Patch Kid for my birthday. It was only my second one—the first gifted to me by my grandparents when I turned five—but by the time I was thirteen I had nearly quadrupled my collection. After Ruth Tina came Melina,

⁴ Usually, chicken nuggets wrapped in tin foil, but there was always a chance for change.

Ruby, Abigail, and a whole slew of others in various sizes and with various gimmicks. Melina and Abigail, for example, were part of a big sister/baby sister two pack. They, along with the near dozen others, were designated to the end of my bed in their own little beds and nests made of doll blankets. During my *Warrior Cats* phase, those beds and nests were home to the dozens (yes, I had that many) of plush cats that I sorted into clans and families, sending them on hunting adventures and putting the ugliest ones into the antagonist clan, Shadowclan. Once the nests had lost their feathers, Build A Bears had replaced them. A dozen in just a few short years, helped by the glory that was *the ten-dollar bear*. A cheap bear, a cheap t-shirt, free ear ribbons, and I was good to go. When people bought them for me, things were different. The ten-dollar bears became the fancier bears, with different fur colors and patterns. Or, occasionally, they were the limited-edition bears. The *iCarly* bear and the autumn bear were staples of my collection, both fully dressed, and both purchased for me by other people who could afford those kinds of things.

But those, too, eventually lost their appeal. As I moved from adolescence into young adulthood, and struggled more and more with basic human functions, the idea of keeping fourteen Build a Bears all clothed and upright just felt like a chore. Some of the earliest signals of my depression, channeled through the lens of not being willing to dress up a stuffed animal that sat at the edge of my bed. A photo of my high school twin bed from the early days of Instagram only has one peeking out from the edge of the frame: a fleece, polka dotted, Halloween themed owl. The last glimpse of a dead collection.

When I go back and look at the photo, I know that there are only a few things that have survived from the bed. My pillows, for one. I never travel without them. A bear that was a gift from my now dead grandfather, purchased for me at my first baseball game. A *Harry Potter*

blanket, a handful of Disney plushies. All those things stayed. But everything else, well, the storage gods got them again. Another lifetime spent building memories. Another lifetime gone.

I have built new memories though. I have created an entire persona based on nostalgia. I have started rebuilding my Build a Bear collection. Not the same ones I used to have, but new ones. I think I have six, counting Isabelle from *Animal Crossing*. I've given them all different names and different clothes, some with multiple outfit changes depending on the season. I've spent countless mornings pulling up little bear-sized sweatpants, tying little bear-sized *Frozen* robes, and exchanging little bear-sized jeans and sneakers for onesie pajamas with baby Yoda on them⁵. I take time and effort to make sure that all their faces are showing when I rearrange the stuffed animals on my bed, to make sure that they can all see during the day. All, except for one gifted to me, purchased with my own money. All with different meanings behind them. All with new memories to create and cherish.

Now, when I look at a video of Steve Burns telling me that he's proud of me, I google. "*Blues Clues art kit 90s. Blues Clues pajama party toy 2000s. Foam thinking chair toy.*" I skulk through shopping results, peeling back layers of a broken child and looking for things to heal her. Things I remember owning but could never replace after I lost them. And while I would never really have a use for a 90s art kit and could never justify buying it just to keep it displayed, I channel my purchases into newer collectibles and items. Do I really need a Funko Pop of the little blue puppy that is just as captivating to me 25 years after I first saw her? No, but she looks nice on the stack of other Funkos that I have on my desk. Did I really need to spend way too much money on a 35th anniversary edition of Samantha Parkington the American Girl doll

⁵ I hear you, and I don't care. I know his name is Groggu, but he's baby Yoda to me.

because my first was a second-hand Ebay purchase that was poorly taken care of? No, but I know I cried when I opened her, calling her sweetheart and cuddling her close to me, refusing to let her leave my side the whole day. Did I need the *NSYNC marionettes that a five-year-old Samantha took with her when she saw them in concert, that the hotel housekeepers set up in different positions every time they came to clean the room?

Yes, actually, I did. I got them for a steal.

Purchases aside, I think it's important to recognize that my life now is largely amplified by what my life was like 20-plus years ago. The same *Arthur* TV show that I fell in love with as a little girl is now all wrapped up in a neat little bow, but I still get nostalgic over the character designs and how far the show has come in its 25-year run. As an adult, I mourn the loss of never getting to meet the charming and adorable and majorly talented JC Chasez as he was at my age. *Blue's Clues* still gives me warm fuzzies every time I look at Steve and hear how after all these years, he never forgot about me ever. And I definitely did not cry thinking about it now.

...Okay, so maybe that's a lie too.

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