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Cultural Commentary: The Danger of Danger

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The Presidential Fellowship has allowed me to make great progress in establishing the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) here at Bridgewater State College. It is designed to bring high-quality, low cost services to K-12 education in the area of understanding, coping with and preventing child-hood aggression, bullying and violence. In that effort, a multitude of services have been developed within MARC. The Center has already hosted six conferences here at BSC on a variety of topics about children and violence. There is a MARC Anti-Bullying Program for K-12 schools—our most popular program. It works intensively with children, teachers, administrators, and parents to begin to change school climates so bullying is no longer considered a high-status, desirable behavior. The program has age-appropriate curriculum, hands-on situation-centered faculty training and concrete suggestions for administrative and policy so they can cope effectively with aggressive behavior by chil-dren in their schools. MARC, a training Center, has a strong focus on training BSC students to work as facilitators so they can teach adolescent students how to begin to think about their school climate, and how to begin to plan to change it. A major goal of MARC is to teach children to be conscious of bullying behaviors, and to empower older children to begin to address this problem among themselves.

The Student Associates and Facilitators are a critical part of our collaborations with schools. For example, three undergraduate facilitators recently worked with a group of students in a Middle School in southeastern Massachusetts. The group learned to identify bullying and harassment behaviors which they felt were objectionable. They discussed how they should take responsi-bility for starting to change the climate in their school, and they began to plan student-led programs which might reduce the bullying they saw on a daily basis. One such program was a Lunchtime Program, where 8th-graders would be trained to visit several lunch tables during each lunchtime to help guide the conversa-tion to reduce bullying and abuse, and to help other students recognize the destructiveness of this behavior. This is a student-initiated, student-conceived, and stu-dent-led program, brought about through the facilita-tion and mentoring offered by the students’ older, collegiate peers.

Another example of how expertise from MARC has been employed during the initial year of its existence took place in an elementary school in Walpole. In that school it had long been the practice to require a child who was found to have been bullying a classmate, to write a letter of apology to his or her victim. Through

MARC training, we communicated to administration and faculty the drawbacks of involving victims in reme-dies for any bullying incident. In this case, having a bully write an apology letter to a victim can be counter-productive because such letters can readily be read by that victim as a further threat. In fact, the between-the-lines message sent by such a letter is often “I know that you told on me.” Disciplining a bully in isolation from the victim actually increases the reporting of bullying if victims and potential victims don’t have to be involved with their tormentor in any way.

Though MARC is only in its first year of operation, we can point at progress we have made toward fulfilling some of the important goals set out in the original pro-posa! for the Center. We have increased collaboration between Arts & Sciences and Education by drawing stu-dent facilitators from both departments in both areas. Students in MARC programs are involved in efficacy research measuring the effectiveness of MARC pro-grams. At the time this article is being written they are entering preliminary data and conducting simple data analysis. Several external grant proposals have already been sent out, and we anticipate using preliminary data in future grant proposals. MARC has become involved in regional and statewide planning, as a partner to the Massachusetts State Senate and the Attorney General, and is involved in the formulation of new state-wide law, policy and initiatives regarding school violence. Via MARC, partnerships have been formed with the Attorney General of Massachusetts and the District Attorney of Plymouth County. As the director of MARC, I am also working with several State Senators to help formulate effective legislation around school safety. Encouragingly, preliminary data indicates a posi-tive reaction to the pragmatic, hands-on approach the MARC training takes in preparing educators to deal with violence and bullying among children.

—Elizabeth Engleman, co-Professor of Psychology

**Cultural Commentary**

### The Danger of Danger

by William C. Levin

Judging by newspapers and television stories, it seems like we live in a pretty dangerous place these days. Just within the last day I counted more than fifty stories that reported mur-der and mayhem from every quarter. The Christa Worthington murder is in the news again with the arrest of a suspect after two years of investiga-tion. Worthington was the young woman writer who was found stabbed to death in her Truro home in January of 2002. Yesterday a mother of two was stabbed to death by her son in the dining room of their suburban home. There is serious possible danger to drivers posed by massive leaks (not just damp walls) in the new Big Dig tunnels. Crackles have appeared in the brakes of the high speed Acela trains that could result in disaster for riders. And today the Boston Herald headlined, in a screaming one inch type front page headline “Rape Fear Grips City.” Some local television news programs seem to have become so dominated by stories of threats to our lives, especially by murder (the more lurid and the more local the better), that they have no time left in the broadcast for information about anything else. Why is there such a focus on the dangers of the world, and what are the possible consequences of being exposed to so much horrible news?

It is easy to understand why newspapers and television stations produce these fear-inducing stories. They sell newspapers and build audience. But why do they? What happens when we watch a story about a murder in a town just like the one we live in, or read about a seemingly normal teenager who has been collecting guns for a planned attack on classmates? One explana-tion is that such information is useful to us. In the case of murder on the television news, we may watch because we need to keep track of how whacked the world is right now. It can be comforting to learn what the extreme of danger in everyday life have become. For example, we can use the information to plan to act so as to limit that danger myself and my family. Parents now typically drive their children to school rather than let them walk. And I think I’ll ask that psychotic board-man to move out of our guest room. Stories like these help us map the dangers of the real world so we can better navigate it.

Another common explanation for our fascination with news of the dangerous is a variant of the explanation for why so many people like getting “scared to death” because the experience reaffirms their sense of safety and security in real life. After all, if you can watch the awful stuff that Hollywood special effects departments can do to the characters on the screen, but still walk out afterwards to go for chocolate ice cream, how dangerous can the real world be? Every time you go to a film like this you psychically defy death. And it’s not just film that works this way. Great scary stories depicting human disaster have sold for as long as stories have been told. And video games like Mortal Kombat and Doom, which advertise themselves as “the scariest games ever made” have taken routine and extreme violence into the mainstream of play.

But what happens if we confuse the reporting of disas-ter in the news with the depiction of it in fiction? While mayhem may sell in both entertainment and in the news, this practice can lead to two kinds of prob-lems. One is that we may come to see real disaster as similar to entertainment disaster. Those generations of Americans who are raised in the film, television and computer game era may have lowered ability to make distinctions between the murder produced for enter-tainment value, and the murder that really happened. Think of the cases of children who imitate acts they have seen in film, but have no idea that they would have deadly consequence for their victims. If by blurring the line between news and entertainment we become less sensitive to the consequences of real suffering and dan-ger, we are less prepared to make good decisions about how to live in the real world. I can’t help think of the similarity in the depictions of massive floods and wholesale destruction of life and property in the 2004 film *The Day After Tomorrow,* and the television coverage of the South East Asian tsunami that killed more than 230,000 people in December of that same year I remem-
For example, the murder rate in the United States has been higher than others do, and rates change over time. According to data produced by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 2002 there were 15,500 murders in the United States. So how likely is it that you will be the victim of a murder? To figure it out you need to look at the number of murders and compare it to the number of people who are potential murder vic-
tims. In reporting these figures in the Statistical Abstract of the United States, the statisticians calculate a rate of murder for the United States per hundred thou-
sand population. Using a population figure of approxi-
ately 275,000,000 for the United States and a figure of 15,500 murders we find that in 2002 there were 5.6 mur-
ders for every hundred thousand Americans. Is that a high number? Let’s bring it down one person, like maybe you. In 2002 the odds of one person (in this case, you) being murdered completely at random was 1 in 560,000, or a tiny fraction of a 1 percent chance.

Of course, murder is not randomly distributed in any population. Some people run a far greater risk of being murdered than others do, and rates change over time. For example, the murder rate in the United States has changed in the last two decades. In fact, it has declined dramatically. Since 1980 the murder rate in America has dropped nearly in half from 10.2 per hundred thousand American residents, to 5.6 per hundred thousand in 2002. The really sharp drop in this rate began in the mid-1990’s. In 1994 the rate was still 9 murders per hundred thousand inhabitants.

This is data for the whole country. If you are thinking about your safety in Massachusetts, we’ll have to look for more information. As it happens, the data for 2001 reveals that compared with the national rate, the Massachusetts rate is quite low at 2 murders per hun-
dred thousand population. Only Maine, New Hampshire, North Dakota and Vermont had lower mur-
ders rates at 1 per hundred thousand residents. If you are thinking about your safety in the inner的城市, and violent crime in America. We most certainly should work hard to fight such crimes, especially in those areas and among those populations who are at greatest risk of being victims. We are, in fact, spending more than ever in this effort. Since 1980, federal expen-
ditures for items like agriculture, transportation and education have roughly tripled, depending on the administration of justice has increased nine-fold. Prisoners under jurisdiction of state and federal correc-
tions systems have quadrupled over the same time peri-
od, and the number of Americans who are in the criminal justice system, either because they are in jail, prison, on parole or on probation has gone from 1.8 mil-
lion in 1990 to more than 6.5 million in 2003. That is 3.1 percent of the entire American population. We sure are taking the problem of crime seriously. But we may also be overreacting. We seem to be feeding our citizens a large diet of “crime news.”

Philip Roth’s novel, which is set in 2002, is a rare attempt to do justice to the problems of race, favoritism and dependence. Ultimately, the result can be a demand for extreme reaction from our government, at all levels. In this distorted concept of reality the dan-
gers that exist in our lives are magnified beyond reason and may lead us to overreact to them. Perhaps such a view allows us to accept the rhetoric of legislation like the Patriot Act or some form of national identifica-
tion cards that the US Congress is currently consider-
ing. We should probably examine why violence sells, and talk seriously to the people who sell it.

The anti-Semitism intensifies. WalterWinchell, who had used his weekly radio broadcast to oppose Lindberg, decides to campaign for the presidency in September 1942. Intense anti-Semitism becomes virulent. Winchell is assassinated in Boston. The Justice Department starts rounding up and arresting prominent Jews. Hitler’s foreign minister von Ribbentrop travels to Washington, ostensibly to attend a state dinner but actually to pres-
sure Lindberg to formulate “more stringent anti-Jewish measures.” Lindberg, who once admired his mentor, now begins to worry about his role in Hitler’s political life and meetings, disappears. The facts, as they emerge, reveal that the Nazis have held Lindberg’s young son—supposedly kidnapped—in a German military school and kept Lindberg hostage to his Vice President Wheeler orders mass arrests of prominent figures which cause a backlash that ulti-
ately returns Lindberg to the White House. Lindberg’s
turn what might be termed alternative, anticipated, and actual history.

Roth employs his narrator Philip, presumably his young self, to recount the difficulties confronted by his family before and during the Lindberg presidency. His family members and relatives respond to the accelerating per-
cussion in typical ways: resistance, denial, collabora-
tion, even acceptance. Programs that at first seem harmless take on sinister overtones. Philip realizes that “turned wrong was the relentless un众所 was what we school children studied as ‘History,’ harm-
less history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic.” For the Jewish family and wider New Jersey community to which Philip belongs, the Lindberg presidency, made possible because of his epic flight across the Atlantic, is a disaster. He campaigns on a pledge to keep the U.S. disengaged from Eu-
rope—and shortly after his election signs an ‘under-
standing’ with Hitler and another shortly thereafter with the Japanese premier. Only the American Jewish community opposed the administration, in great mea-
sure because given its history, Jews could foresee all too clearly where such isolationist and nativist sentiments led. The administration creates a Just Folks program, “a volunteer worker program introducing city youth to the traditional ways of rural and heartland life,” which Philip’s broth-
er Sandy joins and eagerly embraces. Philip’s beautiful

Book Reviews

Philip Roth, The Plot Against America
(Houghton Mifflin, 2004)

Richard Clarke, “Ten Years Later,”
Atlantic Monthly (Jan./Feb., 2005)

(Random House Trade Paperback, 2004)

by Charles Angel

Some historical fiction likes to ask “what if?” Philip Roth’s The Plot Against America wonders what would have happened if Charles Lindberg, friendly to Hitler and a closet anti-

Semit, had been elected President of the U.S in 1940. Richard Clarke, author of last year’s Against All Enemies, looks ten years into the future and asks in a recent Atlantic Monthly article what would the U.S look like in 2011 if the country fails to develop adequate responses and policies toward militant terrorists and jihadists. Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran shows in detail what Iran looked like when the ayatollahs succeeded in imposing their fundamentalist ideology on every citizen and most particularly on women. The three readings offer in their turn what might be termed alternative, anticipated, and actual history.

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and ambitious Aunt Evelyn marries Rabbi Lionel Bengelidorf who heads the Lindberg administra-
tion’s Office of American Absorption and serves as the adminstration’s Jewish apologist.

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