



Publications

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Richard Campbell with Caitlin Campbell Demons, Aliens, Teens and Television



(1) As a 51-year-old journalism professor and occasional TV critic, I get asked by friends and colleagues, what do I watch on television (when I'm not watching consummate network news professionals butcher presidential election predictions)? While they no longer raise an eyebrow about *The X-Files*, I get blank and sometimes open-mouthed stares when I announce – without embarrassment—“*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Roswell*, on the WB.”

(2) I have my 16-year-old daughter, Caitlin, to blame for this. An honor student, soccer player, and avid reader, she introduced me to *Buffy* and the WB a couple of years ago. At the time, I just thought I would do my fatherly/media critic duty: watch a few episodes and point out the error of her TV ways. But something else happened. I got hooked. I liked *Buffy*. The improbable story of a teenage vampire slayer, set against the backdrop of life at Sunnydale High School (*Buffy's* now moved onto college), kept my interest with its sly humor, action adventure, and wide-ranging portraits of teens and teachers. To me, this was not only a skillfully written show but dead-on in capturing the conversational rhythms of teenagers and exploring issues that permeated their lives – friendship, jealousy, self-esteem, responsibility, rules, sex, good and evil. Watching *Buffy*, I got insights about the occasional clumsy ways of adults in turning responsibility over to

teens so they can make decisions, learn the consequences, and grow up. Last season I also got hooked on *Angel*, a *Buffy* spin-off starring Buffy's former vampire-with-a-soul boyfriend, and *Roswell*, a series about three alien-human hybrid teens and their close encounters with corrupt g-men, bad aliens, and guidance counselors.

(3) Armed with new insights into teenage culture, I found myself getting more and more annoyed during the 2000 presidential election at the way that popular culture aimed primarily at teens (admittedly some if it too violent and exploitative) became a whipping boy for the demise of civilization. "The Media" and "Hollywood" – whatever these all-purpose clichés mean – became easy targets for politicians – a transparent attempt to distract citizens from the increasing limitations of a bloated two-party system run by insiders who have managed to alienate most young people from politics. With both mainstream presidential candidates pandering to "seniors" over the prescription drug issue, Hollywood and The Media became short-hand symbols for political attacks on screen violence or sexually explicit material aimed at "juniors." Older voters concerned about medical issues were likely to vote; teenagers ticked off by politicians who demonize them and their culture were not. Media fare became to the 2000 election what crack cocaine was to the 1988 campaign – something that all politicians could rally against, a shared adult Mission from God. (And we all know how the political focus on The Drug War and the 1980s' "Just Say No" campaign ended alcohol and drug addiction in our time.)

(4) Even the amazingly popular and seemingly benign *Harry Potter* books – by British author J. K. Rowling—got into the act in summer 2000 with the release of the fourth book in the series. Cultural conservatives like literary critic Harold Bloom weighed in to pronounce the books drivel and unfit for enshrinement into the Literary Canon. Religious fundamentalists also rose up in numerous towns to protest the series for classroom use because Rowling deals with magic and wizardry, apparently offering a competing point of view about the nature of spirituality that scares some school board bureaucrats or inflexible parents who think they have to abandon the First Amendment to protect children.

(5) Well, my daughter hooked me on *Potter* as well. I picked up the first one to see what the fuss was about and couldn't put them down. While probably not candidates for Great Books 101, the *Potter* series nevertheless tell wonderfully imaginative and compelling stories that have given many hard-working teachers new life in introducing new generations of children to reading. For me, the *Potter* books and my own addiction to the WB are all of a piece. *Harry Potter* and the WB shows tap into cultural interests in the mystical, in the supernatural, in things beyond the routines of "normal" life. My daughter says her attraction to the series is partly how the books take her out of her everyday world and transport to her to interesting, sometimes fantastic places. This works for me too. Living in a time where our spiritual lives are often undernourished or untended, it would seem that everyone from the cultural elitists to Christian fundamentalists would welcome these stories that take our children beyond the cynicism and coarseness that often so dominates our cultural landscape.

(6) The remainder of this essay offers a defense rather than a demonization of culture aimed at young readers and viewers – from the *Harry Potter* series to the WB series. I am partly trying to redress an imbalance here, given that far too much critical writing on teen culture focuses only on the most violent or exploitative kinds of popular music, video games, and horror films. While its important to address the negative impact of this kind of culture, there are other sides to the story. I have invited my daughter, who inspired this piece and with whom I enjoy these stories, to add her perspective to mine. In spite of our shared fascination with these series, we see them from points of view separated by the gender gap and 35 years.

Harry Potter

(7) Dad: The first four Potter books follow the British boy wizard, Harry Potter, from age 11 to 14 through his first four years at the Hogwarts School (it's a seven year program and series – tougher and longer than my Ph.D. adventures). Away from school in the off season, Harry has to do hard time with his intolerant uncle and aunt and gross cousin Dudley. These folks are Muggles – messed up, uptight middle class humans with no witch or wizard powers. In the first book, Harry—whose parents were killed when he was a baby by the evil Lord Voldemort – is an embarrassment to his aunt and uncle. To them, his special powers mark him as odd, weird, and different. And this is partly what I love about the books. They get at feelings that kids have about adults who misunderstand them, who underestimate them, or who can't fathom how they are different. Extraordinary fantasy and imaginative play make these books special, but they are more often about the ordinary problems of kids struggling to find their way in a world governed by adults – some wise and supportive, others mean, oblivious, and self-absorbed.

(8) Caitlin: What I love most about the Harry Potter books is their ability to suck anyone into their pages. When I opened up *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (the first book of the series), I was skeptical that a 16-year-old whose favorite book is *Jane Eyre* could swallow the mush I was about to read. I was happily mistaken. In about two days Harry joined Jane on my bookshelf. All four *Potter* books transport the reader into a world of potions, brooms, giants, eccentric wizards, spells, final exams, and never-ending possibilities. As I read, I related to every event as if it were happening to me: when Harry won the Quidditch (the soccer-like wizard sport played on broomsticks) final, it was me being hoisted onto the school's shoulders; when the

entire school hated Harry for losing Gryffindor 150 house points (each of the four school houses earns points throughout the year; the house with the most points wins the House Cup), it was me they detested. I was thrown into an amazingly magical world where school no longer included memorizing the periodic table elements or trigonometric identities but where young witches and wizards were taught to make a pineapple dance, mix a forgetfulness potion, ride a broomstick, and tend to a half-horse, half-bird called a hippogriff. Knowing that a junior in high school would love to live in this incredible world of magic, I can safely assume that the thousands of other children entangled in Harry's life would too.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

(9) Dad: Like the Potter books, *Buffy* mixes together supernatural themes with the ordinary world of kids – negotiating normal school experiences by day, slaying wicked vampires by night. Joss Whedon, creator and executive producer of *Buffy* (and also *Angel*), has said that he intended the show as “a horror story about high school, and that’s exactly what high school life is like ... both literally and metaphorically.” So the story is never totally fantastic, cut off from the reality kids know. In fact, it works because it stays grounded in everyday problems—identity issues, sexual tensions, popularity contests, and too much homework. Like the range of characters at Hogwarts, *Buffy* offers a smorgasbord of teen and teacher character types. Among my favorites are the spoiled and snobby Cordelia, who’s now moved on to serve as secretary to the soulful Angel; the smart and sweet Willow, who’s moved on from a doomed relationship with werewolf boyfriend Oz to a lesbian liaison with her fellow witch Tara; and the British and bookish Giles, who serves as Buffy’s mentor and “watcher.” Giles is particularly important to me. Unlike a number of teen oriented programs that portray adults as idiots, *Buffy* casts Giles as a complex teacher/parent, who recognizes his proteges’ need for independence but also serves as a knowing adult who watches – not over them but with them. But, for me, the smart mix of suspense and comedy remains the main attraction on *Buffy*. Take this exchange from an early episode during which a menacing but tiny “fear demon” appeared:

Giles (Buffy’s mentor): “Don’t taunt that fear demon.”

Xander (Buffy’s friend): “Why, can he hurt me?”

Giles: “No, it’s just tacky.”

In the end, Buffy steps on it like a bug.

(10) Caitlin: Dad’s right. I also appreciate *Buffy*’s comic side. But above that I value its creativity. My favorite episode pits the Buffster against fairy tale demons whose evil agenda is to steal the voices of all the occupants of Sunnydale (the fictional California town that serves as Buffy’s setting) and then collect their hearts. This episode is an example of the show’s uniqueness because it was done almost completely in silence. About 40 minutes of the show went by without one word or noise, yet the suspense and comedy that make *Buffy* so great were still there in full force.

(11) Ever since I started watching *Buffy* I have developed a secret desire to take kick-boxing lessons; and hey, maybe someday I’ll actually do it. I wonder if the Spice Girls watch *Buffy*, because she is the epitome of “Girl Power.” That’s what I love about the show. Buffy’s this totally kick !#@ babe who has the strength and skills to conquer any challenge that comes her way, but like every teenager, she still doubts herself. I’ve watched many episodes in which Buffy wonders if she’s smart enough for college, strong enough to beat up some baddie, and special enough for her friends’ attention. Every teen has awesome abilities and potential, and just like Buffy, can’t always see them. Buffy may have supernatural strength but she still has her weaknesses, making her the ultimate inspiration to kids.

Angel

(12) Dad: In 1999 Joss Whedon told a college audience, “*Buffy*’s about becoming and *Angel*’s about dealing with what you’ve become.” Set in Los Angeles, *Angel* is the improbable story of a 247-year-old vampire with quite a wicked past. His story is about redemption—about accepting the consequences for awful choices, taking responsibility for those choices, and trying to make amends. He now runs a detective-like agency to help the tormented. These are powerful lessons, often set in a violent urban world. While I acknowledge that this show is sometimes more violent than it needs to be, I still think TV violence has a place, particularly when viewers are provided with a context and see the consequences of the violence, which often happens on *Angel*. Clearly kids are vulnerable to media images if parental and peer networks break down. Still, I subscribe to Bruno Bettelheim’s notion in *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*: that young people already know that violence and depravity exist in the world but need help in seeing that they have the power and resources to make choices and oppose these forces. Storytelling, whether in fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel* or in TV tales like *Angel*, can show kids they are not powerless against the evil in the world.

(13) Caitlin: Like *Buffy*, *Angel* has a comic side attached to its primarily dark and suspenseful plots. My favorite silly addition to the show this season is having Angel sing karaoke (poorly, very poorly) to the tunes of Barry Manilow – and you have to watch the show to get all this—in order for a mind-reading demon to help him best serve the needs of a current distraught client.

(14) I also enjoy the chemistry between the show's three main characters: Angel, Cordelia, and Wesley. The once snobby and spoiled Cordelia became employed by Angel when her attempts at an acting career proved futile. As a result of all the suffering she has witnessed, this materialistic Valley Girl has gradually become more caring and compassionate. Like Angel and Cordelia, Wesley first appeared on *Buffy*, acting as the slayer's uptight and foppish replacement watcher. He came under Angel's employment when he arrived in L. A. as a "rogue demon hunter"—dressed in black leather and riding a Harley. Wesley, also as a result of aiding Angel, has become a stronger person. While Angel works to redeem himself, Cordelia struggles to grow up, and Wesley fights to be taken seriously.

Roswell

(15) **Dad:** Lots of the characters we are discussing here—particularly Harry Potter, *Buffy*, and the Roswell kids—wrestle with self-esteem issues as they make their way through their teen years. Even though many of these characters are very skilled, often in extraordinary and supernatural ways, they have self doubts and are often misunderstood by the authority figures around them. This is another powerful theme that resonates with young viewers. Match that theme with a compelling action adventure narrative—three alien-human teens searching for their destiny, keeping their secret, and dodging government agents and alien shape-shifters (who are not unlike cameleon-like political candidates who morph into also sorts of self-serving shapes in the course of an election). With *Roswell*, the WB has another fascinating, although often uneven, program. *Roswell* got off to a good start – smartly portraying the tales of the main characters against the backdrop of a Roswell café and a tourist-trap museum (which recounts the tale of the famous 1947 alien sighting). "Normal" and hybrid teens work at the café and the museum, where wacky tourist believers don't realize they are rubbing elbows with actual aliens.

(16) But this usually smart show relies too often on an overdose of teen sexual tension. It also could take a lesson from *X-Files* and intersperse its darker conspiracy plots with more playful tales – particularly of alien teens trying to make their way through high school. I also want to lodge a formal complaint against the pseudo-hip glamour, not only on *Roswell*, but on too many of these WB shows. It's as if the producers dress characters so they could glide right from the set to a photo shoot for *Teen* or *Tiger Beat* magazine. (As my 21-year old son said recently when I tried in vain to hook him into an episode of *Buffy*: "Aren't there any ordinary looking people on this show?") I found the 2000-01 second-season premier of *Roswell* particularly distracting because all the main characters looked like they'd spent the off-season shopping at Abercrombie & Fitch and getting their hair redesigned by a Rodeo Drive stylist. Trendy leather and strategically mussed hair seem out of place in unpretentious Roswell, New Mexico. Maybe it's just my age but I'm annoyed that the WB powers-that-be think viewers will only go for these characters if they present themselves as the new wave in fashion design and hair makeovers.

(17) **Caitlin:** All right, Dad, don't go dissing my show now. *Roswell* has not (as you so haughtily put it) become "often uneven." The show is focusing on a darker aspect of itself and cannot always intermingle its suspenseful plot with "playful tales." *Roswell* is a new show and (unlike *The X-Files*) hasn't had seven seasons to get into a groove; it's like a teenager who hasn't found her identity yet, so lighten up, Old Timer!

(18) Dad also neglected to mention the double meaning of the aliens on the show, which is more important than what the characters are wearing. Every teenager deals with feelings of "alienation" and *Roswell* handles the subject very well. The kids on the show, while fighting off enemy aliens and corrupt government conspirators, struggle to find their place in society.

(19) I concede my daughter's point that *Roswell* may need time to develop. Still, there's too much focus on youthful style, good looks, and gratuitous libido. Maybe the networks—new and old—are responding to the spring 2000 cancellation of NBC's acclaimed *Freaks and Geeks*, which along with *My So-Called Life* has been the finest program ever about adolescent and teenage life on network television. The program featured a strong cast of very "ordinary-looking" kids struggling with the everyday problems of adapting to high school bullies and negotiating their independence from bewildered parents and insensitive teachers. With good humor and almost no sentimentality, *Freaks and Geeks* may have fared better on the WB, UPN, Fox, or cable where it would have been given more time to build a loyal audience. The old clueless networks, however, panicked by their tumbling audience shares, keep lurching after another fad hit like *Millionaire* or *Survivor*. Today the old networks yank a weakly rated show from their schedules faster than an assistant principal pulls a tardy student into detention. When Judd Apatow, executive producer of *Freaks*, learned that the new time slot to "save" the show would pit it against ABC's *Millionaire*, he knew the show was dead: "When I heard that our big relaunch was facing Regis, I knew it was over. . . . The sad part is that a show like *Millionaire* makes every network think there is a quick, cheap fix to their schedules. . . . They become less interested in supporting harder-to-sell quality shows when they think there is a golden calf out there that can solve all their problems."

(20) The networks today prefer the lack of controversy around quiz shows, which was also true in the 1950s—until the scandals. Good teen television, on the other hand, usually embraces controversy. Remember that NBC and Fox both passed on *Buffy*. In spring 1999, the season finale of *Buffy* was postponed for several months because WB execs thought that a violent battle seen staged at the high school graduation was inappropriate in the wake of Columbine. We still live today in a time when the media images of Columbine

linger, still overdetermining how many adults see young people and sustaining the stereotypes that teenagers – if we don't watch them carefully and if we don't control their media fare – might just go berserk. The smart ironic twist in shows like *Buffy* and *Angel* is the way they go right after the news media and adult stereotypes of demon teenagers. In *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Roswell* teens ARE often demons and aliens, and the high school experience, as Joss Whedon notes, is a "horror story" that is often about alienation. Kids get the joke.

(21) In the end, I would encourage parents to watch these shows with their kids. And, I strongly encourage taking the television sets out of kids' bedrooms and putting them in common areas. The bedroom is the place to read *Harry Potter* while television often does its best work as a communal activity. (This season we have added NBC's *Ed* and Fox's *Boston Public* to our shared TV interests.) Many of the TV programs Caitlin and I have discussed here are among the best written on television. Although they are flawed in the way that many programs suffer under pressure of weekly deadlines, at their best they help teens wrestle with problems of popularity or self-esteem, and what to do about some of the bad stuff that happens in the world – that even the most conscientious parents can't protect their children from. Kids are resilient. They are media savvy and generally smart about good and bad TV. (In their decision not to vote in the 2000 election, many young citizens certainly sent a message to major parties about the phoniness, artifice, and "shape-shifting" of over-managed presidential TV campaigns concerned primarily with image.) Adults should trust teens to be responsible for their media choices and listen to them about why the stories they like are important, instead of fixating on their choices only as an opportunity to lecture on "having better things to do" and "all the crap that's on television." One of the best things I've learned from watching TV with Caitlin is seeing the world more from her perspective and taking her seriously. And I think she would agree that my take on some of our favorite shows has revealed insights about her father – and about the strangeness of parents in general. Let's use teen television as an opportunity for some shared conversation about how hard it can be growing up in world where adults get to make most of the big decisions – and as the network news grown-ups demonstrated in November 2000 – sometimes get them wrong.

