

People watch with unshocked eyes...
But the old men know when an old
man dies.

(From *Selected Verse of Ogden Nash*,
1931, Random House, p. 114).

Poems by authors such as Hughes and Nash are easily read and can provoke thoughtful, adult conversation. An added benefit is that poems often come in short lengths—non-threatening and easily digested.

Before I began the poetry unit with my adult students, I asked that each bring in a favorite poem. Their selections ranged from nursery rhymes to Bible verses. Some Russian women provided Russian poetry, which was interesting because the language was beautiful and unquestionably poetic. We had a wonderful class discussion about words and the way they fit together in poetry.

Although the exercise of choosing a favorite poem was simple, it helped the class begin to consider poetry. We were talking and thinking about words. We were thinking about what we liked.

Another exercise was designed as a segue from reading to writing poetry. I asked students to brainstorm with me—verbs, then nouns and pronouns, then adjectives. I took these words, added some prefixes, suffixes, and articles, and transcribed them onto plain white paper, which I then photocopied and cut up into words. I gave each student a set of words, with a couple of blanks, and asked them to compose a poem from the words.

After a few balky minutes at the onset of the exercise, everyone produced a poem. There was no expectation of rhyme and no pressure to come up with extraordinary words. We were all transformed into poets. The discussion that followed was exhilarated and optimistic. We talked about the ways words can combine to produce a poem.

“A poem...begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness” (Robert Frost, *Letter to Louise Untermeyer*, 1916). Is there a person alive that cannot instantly recall “a lump in the throat” or “a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness”? Everyone has a voice, and everyone can be a poet. It’s important to engage our students in literacy. Frost also said that “Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat.” I think it’s also a way of taking literacy by the throat.

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Not “what little kids can be like”: Cultural appropriation and adults watching *South Park*

Gwynne Ellen Ash

I love *South Park*. I’m not afraid to say it. I’ve watched from the first episode in which Cartman was probed by aliens to a recent one in which Kyle, Moses, and the Jewbillees were saved by Kenny. As a 30-year-old American *South Park* fan, as well as a graduate student in reading education interested in young adolescents, I eagerly flipped to Helen Nixon’s Media & Pop Culture column, “Adults Watching Children Watch *South Park*” (*JAAL*, September 1999) while still standing at my mailbox. Having recently discussed *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* with several prominent researchers in adolescent literacy in the United States, I thought, “All right! Someone has taken *South*

Park and is going to examine it from a literacy perspective.”

When I read the title, I enthusiastically expected a piece that perhaps would suggest issues of critical media literacy as related to *South Park*, for both the sanctioned (adult) and unsanctioned (child and adolescent) audiences. Instead, Nixon explained both what *South Park* is and why children enjoy watching it. Unfortunately, I found that the voice attributed to children was her own, not that of children, and that her descriptions of the pleasures that children derived from watching *South Park* were also her own perceptions. Indeed, although Nixon suggested that she had the secret as to why children watch and enjoy *South Park*, we were given no hint as to her own viewing habits and pleasures related to the show, her own reasons for watching *South Park*, and why she enjoys it (if indeed she does).

In her suggestion that children like *South Park* because it presents spectacle, is not easily translated into socially acceptable text, and has a transgressive edge that signals membership, Nixon argues that “the broader audience” (i.e., viewers other than young people) like *South Park* because, as noted by an Australian SBS spokesman, “they know that this is what little kids can be like.” Unfortunately this oversimplified—and in my own view patently inaccurate—description of adult viewing purposes and pleasures fails to recognize adults’ meaning making with the show, just as it imposes an adult’s perspective on children’s meaning making and pleasures. Nixon appropriates children’s choices and pleasures as her own, rather than exploring her own choices and pleasures in watching *South Park*.

In my reading of the *South Park* series text, and especially in the text of the movie *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*, *South Park* is not about children; it is about

media—media uses and media abuses—and *adults*, not children's, lack of understanding of the way media function in their lives. *South Park* might be used to address issues of critical literacy with those who watch it, but to suggest that adults have a better understanding of the show, and therefore know why children watch it and what their pleasures are in watching it, begs the question: Are adults really critically making meaning for themselves while watching *South Park*? While watching Kenny's ubiquitous death, do they think about, as suggested by Nixon, the myth of the eternal return (Eliade, 1985)? Do they reflect on the possible satire of the constant violence in U.S. television, willingly accepted by viewers as inevitable and unaffecting, and, therefore, its possible attack on the apathy and lack of critical meaning making of TV viewers? Or are they, like the "clueless" *South Park* adults, really missing the subtext that might make the show meaningful and pleasurable to them?

I resonate with the so-called transgressive edge of the show because, as an appreciator of *South Park*, I see myself as both critic of and pleasure seeker in the larger U.S. culture in which it exists and in which it is funny. In my opinion, *South Park* is not "intensely realistic," but it is a deconstruction of the reality of American constructions of media, fame, and all aspects of pop culture. Because I view *South Park* in this way, my lens shapes the humor and my own interpretations of the humor. I might not have found *South Park* so funny had I not reflected on Mr. Garrison's attempted assassination of Kathie Lee Gifford as a possible attack on those who attempt to create one ethical media image and live another unethical one. I might not have found Mrs. Broslowsky's attack on Terrance and Phillip so chuckle-worthy if in my master's program I had not led a

townwide protest of a local cable company's attempt to drop MTV (Music Television) from the channel line-up in response to limited disapproval expressed by fundamentalist religious leaders in one of their areas of service. I might not laugh every time Stan or Kyle end an episode with "You guys, I've learned something today" if I didn't see it as a blatant slap in the face of the empty, candy-coated, easy-solution offerings of most "family"-oriented sitcoms on U.S. television. And I might not question some part of *South Park* almost every week and remind myself that, like all other forms of media, it is not above critical readings.

I suggest that possibly many more adolescents understand that *South Park* is about adults and the adult world of media than adults do. Those outside of the intended audience sometimes see satire more clearly than those being satirized. Just as my sixth graders didn't understand why I thought *Beavis and Butthead* was funny, Nixon's (1999) article suggests to me that some adults watching *South Park* do not realize that they themselves might be the butt of the joke, especially if they truly view Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman as representing, in a literal sense, children and portraying children's worlds.

If the only reason adults are watching *South Park* is to judge how they can make meaning of the show for children, they are ignoring both how the text of the show positions them and how they are positioning the text, essential elements of critical literacy. In equating children's own meaning making and pleasures with their own, adults hoping to make meaning for the children they think are watching *South Park*—without *really* watching it themselves—raise questions about their own critical media literacy, not that of children, particularly when discussing a television show and movie written and targeted for adults.

Nixon's (1999) claims in echoing *Time* magazine that *South Park* "is devoid of subtext" do not ring true to me. I would argue that all of *South Park* is subtext, even at times subverting itself. *South Park* can be viewed as a cultural representation of the U.S. at the end of the 20th century, and it certainly can be interpreted as much more than "crude, shocking, and humorously offensive satire," although it is that as well. It is quite possibly the postmodern satirical depiction of the cannibalization of all culture inherent in current American pop media culture. And as such, it is, in my opinion, inarguably funny and thought provoking.

Instead of watching *South Park* as a child and thinking that it is about children, I watch it as an adult and view it through the constructs of my adult world. As an adult watching *South Park*, that's why I watch, how I watch, and the pleasures I derive from watching. To find out what children think, ask them.

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A response to Gwynne Ash

Helen Nixon

I thank the editors of *JAAL* for the opportunity to write a rejoinder to the response by Gwynne Ash to my column on *South Park*. In the space I have available I hope to