

Rebecca Solnit: The Myth of “Real” America Just Won’t Go Away

WHO'S REALLY LIVING IN A BUBBLE IN AMERICA?

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Watching the film *Phantom Thread*, I kept wondering why I was supposed to be interested in a control freak who is consistently unpleasant to all the people around him. I kept looking at the other characters—his sister who manages his couture business, his seamstresses, eventually the furniture (as a child, I read a very nice story about the romance between two chairs)—wondering why we couldn’t have a story about one of them instead.

Who gets to be the subject of the story is an immensely political question, and feminism has given us a host of books that shift the focus from the original protagonist—from Jane Eyre to Mr. Rochester’s Caribbean first wife, from Dorothy to the Wicked Witch, and so forth. But in the news and political life, we’re still struggling over whose story it is, who matters, and who our compassion and interest should be directed at.

The common denominator of so many of the strange and troubling cultural narratives coming our way is a set of assumptions about who matters, whose story it is, who deserves the pity and the treats and the presumptions of innocence, the kid gloves and the red carpet, and ultimately the kingdom, the power, and the glory. You already know

who. It's white people in general and white men in particular, and especially white Protestant men, some of whom are apparently dismayed to find out that there is going to be, as your mom might have put it, sharing. The history of this country has been written as their story, and the news sometimes still tells it this way—one of the battles of our time is about who the story is about, who matters and who decides.

It is this population we are constantly asked to pay more attention to and forgive even when they hate us or seek to harm us. It is toward them we are all supposed to direct our empathy. The exhortations are everywhere. *PBS News Hour* featured a quiz by Charles Murray in March that asked “Do You Live in a Bubble?” The questions assumed that if you didn't know people who drank cheap beer and drove pick-up trucks and worked in factories you lived in an elitist bubble. Among the questions: “Have you ever lived for at least a year in an American community with a population under 50,000 that is not part of a metropolitan area and is not where you went to college? Have you ever walked on a factory floor? Have you ever had a close friend who was an evangelical Christian?”

The quiz is essentially about whether you are in touch with working-class small-town white Christian America, as though everyone who's not Joe the Plumber is Maurice the Elitist. We should know them, the logic goes; they do not need to know us. Less than 20 percent of Americans are white evangelicals, only slightly more than are Latino. Most Americans are urban. The quiz delivers, yet again, the message that the 80 percent of us who live in urban areas are not America, treats non-Protestant (including the quarter of this country that is Catholic) and non-white people as not America, treats many kinds of underpaid working people (salespeople, service workers, farmworkers) who are not male industrial workers as not America. More Americans work in museums than work in coal, but coalminers are treated as sacred beings owed huge subsidies and the sacrifice of the climate, and museum

workers—well, no one is talking about their jobs as a totem of our national identity.

PBS added a little note at the end of the bubble quiz, “The introduction has been edited to clarify Charles Murray’s expertise, which focuses on white American culture.” They don’t mention that he’s the author of the notorious *Bell Curve* or explain why someone widely considered racist was welcomed onto a publicly funded program. Perhaps the actual problem is that white Christian suburban, small-town, and rural America includes too many people who want to live in a bubble and think they’re entitled to, and that all of us who are not like them are menaces and intrusions who needs to be cleared out of the way.

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After all, there was a march in Charlottesville, Virginia, last year full of white men with tiki torches chanting “You will not replace us.” Which translates as get the fuck out of my bubble, a bubble that is a state of mind and a sentimental attachment to a largely fictional former America. It’s not everyone in this America; for example, Syed Ahmed Jamal’s neighbors in Lawrence, Kansas, rallied to defend him when ICE arrested and tried to deport the chemistry teacher and father who had lived in the area for 30 years. It’s not all white men; perpetration of the narrative centered on them is something too many women buy into and some admirable men are trying to break out of.

And the meanest voices aren’t necessarily those of the actual rural and small-town. In a story about a Pennsylvania coal town named Hazelton, Fox’s Tucker Carlson recently declared that immigration brings “more change than human beings are designed to digest,” the human beings in this scenario being the white Hazeltonians who are not immigrants,

with perhaps an intimation that immigrants are not human beings, let alone human beings who have already had to digest a lot of change. Once again a small-town white American narrative is being treated as though it's about all of us or all of us who count, as though the gentrification of immigrant neighborhoods is not also a story that matters, as though Los Angeles and New York City, both of which have larger populations than many American states, are not America. In New York City, the immigrant population alone exceeds the total population of Kansas (or Nebraska or Idaho or West Virginia, where all those coal miners are).

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, we were told that we needed to be nicer to the white working class, which reaffirmed the message that whiteness and the working class were the same thing and made the vast non-white working class invisible or inconsequential. We were told that Trump voters were the salt of the earth and the authentic sufferers, even though poorer people tended to vote for the other candidate. We were told that we had to be understanding of their choice to vote for a man who threatened to harm almost everyone who was not a white Christian man, because their feelings preempt everyone else's survival. "Some people think that the people who voted for Trump are racists and sexists and homophobes and deplorable folks," Bernie Sanders reprimanded us, though studies showed that many were indeed often racists, sexists, and homophobes.

Part of how we know whose party it is was demonstrated by who gets excused for hatred and attacks, literal or verbal. A couple of weeks ago, the *Atlantic* tried out hiring a writer, Kevin Williamson, who said women who have abortions should be hanged, and then un-hired him under public pressure from people who don't like the idea that a quarter of American women should be executed. The *New York Times* has hired a few conservatives akin to Williamson, including climate waffler Bret Stephens. Stephens devoted a column to sympathy on Williams's behalf and indignation that anyone might oppose him. Sympathy in

pro-bubble America often goes reflexively to the white man in the story. The assumption is that the story is about him; he's the protagonist, the person who matters, and when you, say, read Stephens defending Woody Allen and attacking Dylan Farrow for saying Allen molested her, you see how much work he's done imagining being Woody Allen, how little being Dylan Farrow or anyone like her. It reminds me of how young women pressing rape charges are often told they're harming the bright future of the rapist in question, rather than that maybe he did it to himself, and that their bright future should matter too. *The Onion* nailed it years ago: "College Basketball Star Heroically Overcomes Tragic Rape He Committed."

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This misdistribution of sympathy is epidemic. *The New York Times* called the man with a domestic-violence history who in 2015 shot up the Colorado Springs Planned Parenthood, killing three parents of young children, “a gentle loner.” And then when the bomber who had been terrorizing Austin, TX, last month was finally caught, journalists at the newspaper interviewed his family and friends and let their positive descriptions stand as though they were more valid than the fact he was an extremist and a terrorist who set out to kill and terrorize black people in a particularly vicious and cowardly way. He was a “quiet, ‘nerdy’ young man who came from ‘a tight-knit, godly family,” the *Times* let us know in a tweet, while the *Washington Post*'s headline noted he was “frustrated with his life,” which is true of millions of young people around the world who don't get this pity party and also don't become terrorists. *The Daily Beast* got it right with a subhead about the latest right-wing terrorist, the one who blew himself up in his home full of bombmaking materials: “Friends and family say

Ben Morrow was a Bible-toting lab worker. Investigators say he was a bomb-building white supremacist.”

But this March, when a teenage boy took a gun to his high school in Maryland and used it to murder Jaelynn Willey, the newspapers labeled him lovesick, as though premeditated murder was just a natural reaction to being rejected by someone you dated. In a powerfully **eloquent editorial** in the *New York Times*, Marjory Stoneman Douglas student Isabelle Robinson writes about the “disturbing number of comments I’ve read that go something like this: Maybe if Mr. Cruz’s classmates and peers had been a little nicer to him, the shooting at Stoneman Douglas would never have occurred.” As she notes, this puts the burden—and then the blame—on peers to meet the needs of boys and men who may be hostile or homicidal.

This framework suggests we owe them something, which feeds a sense of entitlement, which sets up the logic of payback for not delivering what they think we owe them. Elliot Rodgers set out to massacre the members of a sorority at UC Santa Barbara in 2014 because he believed that sex with attractive women was a right of his that women were violating and that another right of his was to punish any or all of them unto death. He killed six people and injured fourteen. Nikolas Cruz said, “Elliot Rodgers will not be forgotten.”

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Women often internalize that sense of responsibility for men’s needs. Stormy Daniels felt so responsible for coming to a stranger’s hotel room in 2006 that she felt obliged to provide the sex he wanted and she didn’t. She told Anderson Cooper, “I had it coming for making a bad

decision for going to someone's room alone and I just heard the voice in my head, 'well, you put yourself in a bad situation and bad things happen, so you deserve this.'" (It's worth noting that she classified having sex with Donald Trump as "bad things happen" and the sense in that she deserved it was a punitive one.) His desires must be met. Hers didn't count.

Women are not supposed to want things for themselves, as the *New York Times* reminded us when they castigated Daniels with a headline noting her ambition, a quality that Hillary Clinton and various other high-profile women have also been called out for but that seems invisible when men have it, as men who act and direct movies and pursue political careers generally do. Daniels had, the *New York Times* told us in a profile of the successful entertainer, "an instinct for self-promotion" and "her competitive streak is not well concealed." She intended to "bend the business to her will." The general implication is that any woman who's not a doormat is a dominatrix.

Recently people have revisited a 2010 political-science study that tested the response to fictitious senatorial candidates, identical except for gender; "regardless of whether male politicians were generally preferred over female politicians, participant voters only reacted negatively to the perceived power aspirations of the female politician." They characterized that reaction as "moral outrage": how dare she seek power. How dare she want things for herself rather than others—even though seeking power may be a means to working on behalf of others. How dare she consider the story to be about her or want to be the one who determines what the story is.

And then there's the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. We've heard from hundreds, perhaps thousands, of women about assaults, threats, harassment, humiliation, coercion, of campaigns that ended careers, pushed them to the brink of suicide. Many men's response to this is sympathy for men. The elderly film director Terry Gilliam said in March, "I feel sorry for someone like Matt Damon who is a decent

human being. He came out and said all men are not rapists, and he got beaten to death. Come on, this is crazy!” Matt Damon has not actually been beaten to death. He is one of the most highly-paid actors on earth, which is a significantly different experience than being beaten to death. The actor Chris Evans did much better with this shift, saying recently, “The hardest thing to reconcile is that just because you have good intentions, doesn’t mean it’s your time to have a voice.”

But the follow-up story to the #MeToo upheaval has too often been: how do the consequences of men hideously mistreating women affect men’s comfort? Are men okay with what’s happening? There have been too many stories about men feeling less comfortable, too few about how women might be feeling more secure in offices where harassing coworkers may have been removed or are at least a bit less sure about their right to grope and harass. Men themselves insist on their comfort as a right; Dr. Larry Nassar, the gymnastics doctor who molested more than a hundred girls, objected to having to hear his victims describe what he did and how it impacted them on the grounds that it interfered with his comfort.

We are as a culture moving on to a future with more people and more voices and more possibilities. Some people are being left behind, not because the future is intolerant of them but because they are intolerant of this future. White men, Protestants from the dominant culture are welcome, but as Chris Evans noted, the story isn’t going to be about them all the time, and they won’t always be the ones telling it. It’s about all of us. White Protestants are already a minority and non-white people will become a voting majority in a few decades. This country has room for everybody who believes that there’s room for everybody. For those who don’t—well, that’s partly a battle about who controls the narrative and who it’s about.