

Americans are a fanciful people, are we not? We love our romantic notions. Our fairytales. Our make-believe.



Even as I write this, I'm distracted by thoughts of 'Harry Potter & The Half-Blood Prince,' which opens tomorrow and will probably have set some outrageous box office record by the time you pick up this paper. Even as I labor over what I hope will be a "serious" essay, I'm plotting my movie-viewing strategy, calculating when best to go, and to which theatre, zipping back and forth to internet reviews (they're stellar!) and wishing I didn't have stupid ol' work to contend with. The wizarding world is calling to me, and everything else seems mundane...

But not every fantasy is of the supernatural variety. Yesterday, I got a phone call from my old friend and former employer Pat Conroy, who offered me first dibs on an interview about his long-awaited new novel. (Incidentally, the book-signing's August 29th at Bay Street Trading Co.) As pleased as I was for the professional opportunity, I was even more thrilled that it meant I'd be getting my hot little hands on a copy of 'South of Broad' a month early. My heart leapt at the prospect of sinking, once again, into the lush, lyrical realm of Conroy's Lowcountry – something like the Lowcountry I inhabit... but so much *more* so. I couldn't wait to enter that larger-than-life place, meet those larger-than-life characters, with their larger-than-life passion and humor and treachery. And all from the comfort of my sofa. I was almost faint with anticipation.

And it's not just me. The more I look around, the more it seems Fantasy has become our national pastime. (Sorry, Baseball, but I call 'em like I see 'em.) Movies like Harry Potter, Star Trek, Ice Age and Up (all fantasies of one type or another) dominate at the box office. On TV, series like Battlestar Galactica, Lost, and Fringe are the ones winning loyal fans and critical raves. Meanwhile, our children are glued to shows like Witches of Waverley Place and Hannah Montana, featuring "normal" kids who just happen to have supernatural powers and/or secret identities.

Not a problem, is it? A little whimsy never hurt anybody, and romance is good for the soul. Fantasy is a positive thing. Right?

Right. As long as we keep it in perspective. But too much fantasy can skew our sense of reality. When fantasy begins encroaching on real life – when those areas begin to blur and merge – well then, Houston, we have a problem.

We recently shared a National Day of Mourning for the self-proclaimed "King of Pop," indulging shamelessly in the sentimental fantasy that we actually knew him. Surely Michael would have approved, for he was a man for whom fantasy *was* reality, and vice versa. In his ever-morphing face, we saw *our*
twin fantasies – eternal youth and eternal beauty – made monstrously manifest. In our obsession with – and near deification of – this sad, deluded, albeit gifted man, we saw the full flowering of our collective investment in the myth of celebrity. One can only assume the pressure of maintaining that myth, that *fantasy*

, helped fuel the misery and desperation literally chiseled on Jackson's face in his final years. And his features were merely extreme versions of the arching brows, tight cheeks, and paralyzed foreheads we see, these days, on so many actors and actresses whose once beautiful, expressive faces now look more like sculpted marble masks.

Eternal youth. Eternal beauty. We expect our celebrities to uphold these fantasies for us,

even as we balk when the illusion's incomplete. ("Her hands don't match her face!" "Did you see that little scar?" "His mouth is too tight!") In 21st Century America, we want our celebrities to be 35 forever, and look "natural" while they're at it! Deep down, we know it's a fantasy. But, hey... if they can pull it off, maybe we can, too. And indeed, more of us are chasing that fantasy every day, lavishing ever-more energy on the upkeep of our bodies, while our creaky souls sag and groan, untended.

Also making the news, lately, are our all-American fantasies about marriage, which are couched in our abiding faith in the Storybook Romance. A series of high-profile bust-ups has people talking about marriage, which can only be a good thing. According to a recent cover story in *Time* magazine, we Americans still say we revere marriage, but we have such distorted expectations of it – and so little understanding of its true purpose and value – we're in danger of destroying the institution altogether, and, in turn, the very future of our society.

Time says: "What is significant about contemporary American families, compared with those of other nations, is their combination of frequent marriage, frequent divorce and the high number of short-term co-habiting relationships. Taken together, these forces create a great turbulence in American family life, a family flux, a coming and going of partners on a scale seen nowhere else. There are more partners in the personal lives of Americans than in the lives of people of any other Western country."

Wow. Why is that?

Next time you're in the grocery store, flip through one of those celebrity tabloids, and you'll find photo spreads from at least one or two "fabulous" weddings that have "Two years, max" written all over them. You'll also find copious articles about celebrity divorces, all of which follow the same storyline, surrounding an affair carried on by one (or both) of the celebrity spouses, usually with some other celebrity spouse. But don't despair. If you check back with the same tabloid a few months later, you'll find that all those divorcing celebrities have found love again, and are headed back down the aisle, lickety split.

"This time, I know she's The One," says Handsome Hunk, recently divorced from Sexy Starlet.

"I've finally found my Soul Mate," says Sexy Starlet, engaged to be married to Handsome Hunk II in a romantic sunset wedding on the beach. The bride will be wearing Vera Wang.

Glamour. Romance. Sex. It's all good fun. Why not make it last forever? And when it doesn't, no biggie. Just change partners.

That's the fantasy. And, again, we have our celebrities to help us buy into it.

But this fantasy doesn't match the reality of marriage (or divorce), and the consequences of that discrepancy aren't "fabulous" at all. According to *Time*, American marriage is "an increasingly fragile construct depending less and less on notions of sacrifice and obligation than on the ephemera of romance and happiness as defined by and for its adult principals... It is buffeted by affairs and ennui, subject to the eternal American hope for greater happiness, for changing the hand you dealt yourself. Getting married for life, having children and raising them with your partner — this is still the way most Americans are conducting adult life, but the numbers who are moving in a different direction continue to rise. Most notably... births to unmarried women have reached an astonishing 39.7%."

Does any of this matter? you ask. *Does marriage still matter?* Well, sociologists have been asking the same question for decades, many of them expecting – even hoping – the answer would be 'no.' But the statistics are in, and the answer is emphatically not 'no.' Unless, of course, we're willing to say our children don't matter.

From *Time*: “On every single significant outcome related to short-term well-being and long-term success, children from intact, two-parent families outperform those from single-parent households. Longevity, drug abuse, school performance and dropout rates, teen pregnancy, criminal behavior and incarceration — if you can measure it, a sociologist has; and in all cases, the kids living with both parents drastically outperform the others.”

That’s no fantasy. It’s fact. Maybe it’s time we starry-eyed romantics learned to distinguish between the two. And while we’re at it, maybe we should stop worrying so much about growing old, and focus, instead, on growing up.

Which in no way precludes seeing Harry Potter movies...