

is insidious: now the moral measure of a war is how it makes us feel about ourselves.

"Try and put aside your own experiences in recovery and the way it makes you feel," I suggested to the audience on "Oprah." "Think about what the fascination with addiction means to us as a culture. Think about the political implications of advising people to surrender their will and submit to a higher power." People in the audience looked at me blankly. Later, in the limo, one of my copanelists (against codependency) shook his head at me and smiled and said, "That was a PBS comment."

Some two months later I showed my "Oprah" tape to a group of⁴³ college friends, over a bottle of wine. None of them is involved in the recovery movement or familiar with its programs or jargon. Listening to six panelists and a studio audience compete for air time, in eight-minute segments between commercials, none of them thought the "Oprah" show made any sense. Like the man in the audience who asked, "What are you all recovering from?" they didn't have a clue. "You have to think with your hearts and not your heads," a for-codependency expert exhorted us at the end of the show, as the credits rolled.

Responding to Reading

1. According to Kammer, what is the difference between "confessing" and "testifying"? What danger does she see in "blurring the distinction between confession and testimony" (5)?
2. In paragraph 11, Kammer says, "Never have so many known so much about people for whom they cared so little." Why do you suppose so many people are willing "to talk about themselves for nearly an hour in front of millions of strangers" (9)? Why do you think so many viewers of talk shows find them so compelling?
3. "The trouble with talk shows," Kammer says, "is that they claim to do so much more than entertain; they claim to inform and explain" (31). In paragraph 24 she concedes that talk shows can sometimes be "instructive"; for the most part, though, she is highly critical of these programs, saying, among other things, that they encourage viewers to "substitute sentimentality for thought" (25). Do you think Kammer is being too hard on talk shows? Do you think she is taking them too seriously? Explain.

FOCUS: DOES MEDIA VIOLENCE HURT?

UNNATURAL KILLERS

John Grisham

Best-selling novelist John Grisham (1955–) was born in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and graduated from Mississippi State University. After earning his law degree from the University of Mississippi in 1981, he worked as an attorney until 1990, also serving three terms in the Mississippi state legislature. Although his first novel (A Time to Kill)—written while he was still practicing law—was not an immediate success, with The Firm (1991) Grisham began a string of blockbusters that so far remains unbroken: The Pelican Brief (1992), The Client (1993), The Chamber (1994), The Rainmaker (1995), The Runaway Jury (1996), The Partner (1997), and The Street Lawyer (1998). While most of his books have also been turned into highly successful films, Grisham's relationship with Hollywood is not without strain. Following the senseless murder of a Mississippi friend by a teenage couple apparently influenced by the film Natural Born Killers, Grisham filed a highly publicized lawsuit against the director, Oliver Stone, and the studio that released the film, seeking damages for wrongful death. In the following essay written in 1996 for the Oxford American, Grisham describes the couple's killing spree and argues that lawsuits such as his are the only way to bring Hollywood violence under control.

The town of Hernando, Mississippi has five thousand people, more¹ or less, and is the seat of government for DeSoto County. It is peaceful and quiet, with an old courthouse in the center of the square. Memphis is only fifteen minutes away, to the north, straight up Interstate 55. To the west is Tunica County, now booming with casino fever and drawing thousands of tourists.

For ten years I was a lawyer in Southaven, a suburb to the north,² and the Hernando courthouse was my hangout. I tried many cases in the main courtroom. I drank coffee with the courthouse regulars, ate in the small cafes around the square, visited my clients in the nearby jail.

It was in the courthouse that I first met Mr. Bill Savage. I didn't³ know much about him back then, just that he was soft-spoken, exceedingly polite, always ready with a smile and a warm greeting. In 1983,

when I first announced my intentions to seek an office in the state legislature, Mr. Savage stopped me in the second-floor rotunda of the courthouse and offered me his encouragement and good wishes.

A few months later, on election night as the votes were tallied and the results announced to a rowdy throng camped on the courthouse lawn, it became apparent that I would win my race. Mr. Savage found me and expressed his congratulations. "The people have trusted you," he said. "Don't let them down."

He was active in local affairs, a devout Christian and solid citizen who believed in public service and was always ready to volunteer. For thirty years, he worked as the manager of a cotton gin two miles outside Hernando on a highway that is heavily used by gamblers anxious to get to the casinos in Tunica.

Around five p.m., on March 7, 1995, someone entered Bill Savage's office next to the gin, shot him twice in the head at point-blank range, and took his wallet, which contained a few credit cards and two hundred dollars.

There were no witnesses. No one heard gunshots. His body was discovered later by an insurance salesman making a routine call.

The crime scene yielded few clues. There were no signs of a struggle. Other than the bullets found in the body, there was little physical evidence. And since Bill Savage was not the kind of person to create ill will or maintain enemies, investigators had nowhere to start. They formed the opinion that he was murdered by outsiders who'd stopped by for a fast score, then hit the road again, probably toward the casinos.

It had to be a simple robbery. Why else would anybody want to murder Bill Savage?

The townspeople of Hernando were stunned. Life in the shadows of Memphis had numbed many of them to the idea of random violence, but here was one of their own, a man known to all, a man who, as he went about his daily affairs, minding his own business, was killed in his office just two miles from the courthouse.

The next day, in Ponchatoula, Louisiana, three hundred miles south, and again just off Interstate 55, Patsy Byers was working the late shift at a convenience store. She was thirty-five years old, a happily married mother of three, including an eighteen-year-old who was about to graduate from high school. Patsy had never worked outside the home, but had taken the job to earn a few extra dollars to help with the bills.

Around midnight, a young woman entered the convenience store and walked to a rack where she grabbed three chocolate bars. As she approached the checkout counter, Patsy Byers noticed the candy, but she didn't notice the .38. The young woman thrust it forward, pulled the trigger, and shot Patsy in the throat.

The bullet instantly severed Patsy's spinal cord, and she fell to the floor bleeding. The young woman screamed and fled the store, leaving Patsy paralyzed under the cash register.

The girl returned. She'd forgotten the part about the robbery. When she saw Patsy she said, "Oh, you're not dead yet." Patsy began to plead, "Don't kill me," she kept saying to the girl who stepped over her and tried in vain to open the cash register. She asked Patsy how to open it. Patsy explained it as best she could. The girl fled with \$105 in cash, leaving Patsy, once again, to die.

But Patsy did not die, though she will be a quadriplegic for the rest of her life.

The shooting and robbery was captured on the store's surveillance camera, and the video was soon broadcast on the local news. Several full facial shots of the girl were shown.

The girl, however, vanished. Weeks, and then months, passed without the slightest hint to her identity making itself known.

Authorities in Louisiana had no knowledge of the murder of Bill Savage, and authorities in Mississippi had no knowledge of the shooting of Patsy Byers, and neither state had reason to suspect the two shootings were committed by the same people.

The crimes, it was clear, were not committed by sophisticated criminals. Soon two youths began bragging about their exploits. And then an anonymous informant whispered to officials in Louisiana that a certain young woman in Oklahoma was involved in the shooting of Patsy Byers.

The young woman was Sarah Edmondson, age nineteen, the daughter of a state court judge in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Her uncle is the Attorney General of Oklahoma. Her grandfather once served as Congressman, and her great uncle was Governor and then later a U.S. Senator. Sarah Edmondson was arrested on June 2, 1995, at her parents' home, and suddenly the pieces fell into place.

Sarah and her boyfriend, Benjamin Darras, age eighteen, had drifted south in early March. The reason for the journey has not been made clear. One version has them headed for Florida so that Ben could finally see the ocean. Another has them aiming at New Orleans and Mardi Gras. And a third is that they wanted to see the Grateful Dead concert in Memphis, but, not surprisingly, got the dates mixed-up.

At any rate, they stumbled through Hernando on March 7, and stayed just long enough, Sarah says, to kill and rob Bill Savage. Then they raced deeper south until they ran out of money. They decided to pull another heist. This is when Patsy Byers met them.

Though Sarah and Ben have different socioeconomic backgrounds, they made a suitable match. Sarah, a member of one of Oklahoma's

most prominent political families, began using drugs and alcohol at the age of thirteen. At fourteen she was locked up for psychiatric treatment. She has admitted to a history of serious drug abuse. She managed to finish high school, with honors, but then dropped out of college.

Ben's family is far less prominent. His father was an alcoholic who divorced Ben's mother twice, then later committed suicide. Ben too has a history of drug abuse and psychiatric treatment. He dropped out of high school. Somewhere along the way he met Sarah, and for awhile they lived the great American romance—the young, troubled, mindless drifters surviving on love.

Once they were arrested, lawyers got involved, and the love affair came to a rapid end. Sarah blames Ben for the killing of Bill Savage. Ben blames Sarah for the shooting of Patsy Byers. Sarah has better lawyers, and it appears she will also attempt to blame Ben for somehow controlling her in such a manner that she had no choice but to rob the store and shoot Patsy Byers. Ben, evidently, will have none of this. It looks as if he will claim his beloved Sarah went into the store only to rob it; that he had no idea whatsoever that she planned to shoot anyone, that, as he waited outside in the getaway car, he was horrified when he heard a gunshot. And so on.

It should be noted here that neither Ben nor Sarah have yet been tried for any of these crimes. They have not been found guilty of anything, yet. But as the judicial wheels begin to turn, deals are being negotiated and cut. Pacts are being made.

Sarah's lawyers managed to reach an immunity agreement with the State of Mississippi in the Savage case. Evidently, she will testify against Ben, and in return will not be prosecuted. Her troubles will be confined to Louisiana, and if convicted for the attempted murder of Patsy Byers and the robbing of the store, Sarah could face life in prison. If Ben is found guilty of murdering and robbing Bill Savage, he will most likely face death by lethal injection at the state penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi. Juries in Hernando are notorious for quick death verdicts.

On January 24, 1996, during a preliminary hearing in Louisiana, Sarah testified, under oath, about the events leading up to both crimes. It is from this reported testimony that the public first heard the appalling details of both crimes.

According to Sarah, she and Ben decided to travel to Memphis to see the Grateful Dead. They packed canned food and blankets, and left the morning of March 6. Sarah also packed her father's .38, just in case Ben happened to attack her for some reason. Shortly before leaving Oklahoma, they watched the Oliver Stone movie *Natural Born Killers*.

For those fortunate enough to have missed *Natural Born Killers*, it is a repulsive story of two mindless young lovers, Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis), who blaze their way across the

Southwest, killing everything in their path while becoming famous. According to the script, they indiscriminately kill fifty-two people before they are caught. It seems like many more. Then they manage to kill at least fifty more as they escape from prison. They free themselves, have children, and are last seen happily rambling down the highway in a Winnebago.

Ben loved *Natural Born Killers*, and as they drove to Memphis he spoke openly of killing people, randomly, just like Mickey spoke to Mallory. He mentioned the idea of seizing upon a remote farmhouse, murdering all its occupants, then moving on to the next slaughter. Just like Mickey and Mallory.

We do not know, as of yet, what role Sarah played in these discussions. It is, of course, her testimony we're forced to rely upon, and she claims to have been opposed to Ben's hallucinations.

They left Memphis after learning the concert was still a few days away, and headed south. Between Memphis and Hernando, Ben again talked of finding an isolated farmhouse and killing a bunch of people. Sarah said it sounded like he was fantasizing from the movie. They left Interstate 55, drove through Hernando and onto the highway leading to the cotton gin where Bill Savage was working in his office.

Ben was quite anxious to kill someone, she says. He professed a sudden hatred for farmers. This was the place where they would kill, he said, and told Sarah to stop the car a short distance away so he could test-fire the gun. It worked. They then drove to the gin, parked next to Bill Savage's small office. Ben told her to act "angelic," and then they went inside.

Ben asked Bill Savage for directions to Interstate 55. Sarah says that Mr. Savage knew they were up to something. As he gave directions, he walked around the desk toward Ben, at which point Ben removed the .38 and shot Mr. Savage in the head. "He threw up his hands and made a horrible sound," she testified. There was a brief struggle between the two men, a struggle that ended when Ben shot Mr. Savage for the second time.

Sarah claims to have been so shocked by Ben's actions that she started to run outside, then, after a quick second thought, decided to stand by her man. Together they rummaged through Mr. Savage's pockets and took his wallet.

Back in the car, Ben removed the credit cards from the wallet, threw the driver's license out the window, and found two one-hundred-dollar bills. According to Sarah, "Ben mocked the noise the man made when Ben shot him. Ben was laughing about what happened and said the feeling of killing was powerful."

You see, the Mickey character in *Natural Born Killers* felt much the same way. He sneered and laughed a lot when he killed people, and then he sneered and laughed some more after he killed them. He felt

powerful. Murder for Mickey was the ultimate thrill. It was glorious. Murder was a mystical experience, nothing to be ashamed of and certainly nothing to be remorseful about. In fact, remorse was a sign of weakness. Mickey was, after all, a self-described "natural born killer." And Mickey encouraged Mallory to kill.

Ben encouraged Sarah.⁴¹
After the murder of Mr. Savage, he and Sarah drove to New Orleans, where they roamed the streets of the French Quarter. Ben repeatedly assured Sarah that he felt no aftershocks from committing the murder. He felt fine. Just like Mickey. He pressed her repeatedly to kill someone herself. "It's your turn," he kept saying. And, "We're partners."⁴²

Sarah, as might be expected, claims she was completely repulsed by Ben's demands that she slay the next person. She claims that she considered killing herself as an alternative to surrendering to Ben's demands that she shed blood.

But Sarah did not kill herself. Instead, she and Ben drove to Ponchatoula for their ill-fated meeting with Patsy Byers.⁴³

According to Sarah, she did not want to rob the store, and she certainly didn't wish to shoot anyone. But they were out of money, and, just like Mickey and Mallory, robbery was the most convenient way to survive. Ben selected the store, and, through some yet-to-be-determined variety of coercion, forced her out of the car and into the store, with the gun. It was, after all, her turn to kill.

In *Natural Born Killers*, we are expected to believe that Mickey and Mallory are tormented by demons, and that they are forced to commit many of their heinous murders, not because they are brainless young idiots, but because evil forces propel them. They both suffered through horrible, dysfunctional childhoods, their parents were abusive, etc. Demons have them in their clutches, and haunt them, and stalk them, and make them slaughter fifty-two people.

This demonic theme, so as not to be missed by even the simplest viewer, recurs, it seems, every five minutes in the movie.⁴⁴

Guess what Sarah Edmondson saw when she approached the checkout stand and looked at Patsy Byers? She didn't see a thirty-five-year-old woman next to the cash register. No.

She saw a "demon." And so she shot it.⁴⁵
Then she ran from the store. Ben, waiting in the car, asked where the money was. Sarah said she forgot to take the money. Ben insisted she return to the store and rob the cash register.

We can trust the judicial systems of both Mississippi and Louisiana to effectively deal with the aftermath of the Sarah and Ben romance. Absent a fluke, Sarah will spend the rest of her life behind bars in a miserable prison and Ben will be sent to death row at Parchman, where he'll

endure an indescribable hell before facing execution. Their families will never be the same. And their families deserve compassion.

The wife and children and countless friends of Bill Savage have already begun the healing process, though the loss is beyond measure.⁴⁶

Patsy Byers is a quadriplegic for life, confined to a wheelchair, faced with enormous medical bills, unable to hug her children or do any one of a million things she did before she met Sarah Edmondson. She's already filed a civil suit against the Edmondson family, but her prospects of a meaningful physical recovery are dim.

A question remains: Are there other players in this tragic episode? Can fault be shared?⁴⁷

I think so.⁴⁸

Troubled as they were, Ben and Sarah had no history of violence. Their crime spree was totally out of character. They were confused, disturbed, shiftless, mindless—the adjectives can be heaped on with shovels—but they had never hurt anyone before.

Before, that is, they saw a movie. A horrific movie that glamorized casual mayhem and bloodlust. A movie made with the intent of glorifying random murder.⁴⁹

Oliver Stone has said that *Natural Born Killers* was meant to be a satire on our culture's appetite for violence and the media's craving for it. But Oliver Stone always takes the high ground in defending his dreadful movies. A satire is supposed to make fun of whatever it is attacking. But there is no humor in *Natural Born Killers*. It is a relentlessly bloody story designed to shock us and to further numb us to the senselessness of reckless murder. The film wasn't made with the intent of stimulating, morally depraved young people to commit similar crimes, but such a result can hardly be a surprise.

Oliver Stone is saying that murder is cool and fun, murder is a high, a rush, murder is a drug to be used at will. The more you kill, the cooler you are. You can be famous and become a media darling with your face on magazine covers. You can get by with it. You will not be punished.⁵⁰

It is inconceivable to expect either Stone or the studio executives to take responsibility for the aftereffects of their movie. Hollywood has never done so; instead, it hides behind its standard pious First Amendment arguments, and it pontificates about the necessities of artistic freedom of expression. Its apologists can go on, ad nauseam, about how meaningful even the most pathetic film is to social reform.

It's no surprise that *Natural Born Killers* has inspired several young people to commit murder. Sadly, Ben and Sarah aren't the only kids now locked away and charged with murder in copycat crimes. Since the release of the movie, at least several cases have been reported in which random killings were executed by troubled young people who claim they were all under the influence, to some degree, of Mickey and Mallory.

Any word from Oliver Stone?

Of course not.

I'm sure he would disclaim all responsibility. And he'd preach a bit about how important the film is as a commentary on the media's insatiable appetite for violence. If pressed, he'd probably say that there are a lot of crazies out there, and he can't be held responsible for what they might do. He's an *artist* and he can't be bothered with the effects of what he produces.

I can think of only two ways to curb the excessive violence of a film like *Natural Born Killers*. Both involve large sums of money—the only medium understood by Hollywood.

The first way would be a general boycott of similar films. If people refused to purchase tickets to watch such an orgy of violence as *Natural Born Killers*, then similar movies wouldn't be made. Hollywood is pious, but only to a point. It will defend its crassest movies on the grounds that they are necessary for social introspection, or that they need to test the limits of artistic expression, or that they can ignore the bounds of decency as long as these movies label themselves as satire. This all works fine if the box office is busy. But let the red ink flow and Hollywood suddenly has a keen interest in rediscovering what's mainstream.

Unfortunately, boycotts don't seem to work. The viewing public is a large, eclectic body, and there are usually enough curious filmgoers to sustain a controversial work.

So, forget boycotts.

The second and last hope of imposing some sense of responsibility on Hollywood, will come through another great American tradition, the lawsuit. Think of a movie as a product, something created and brought to market, not too dissimilar from breast implants, Honda three-wheelers, and Ford Pintos. Though the law has yet to declare movies to be products, it is only one small step away. If something goes wrong with the product, whether by design or defect, and injury ensues, then its makers are held responsible.

A case can be made that there exists a direct causal link between the movie *Natural Born Killers* and the death of Bill Savage. Viewed another way, the question should be: Would Ben have shot innocent people *but for* the movie? Nothing in his troubled past indicates violent propensities. But once he saw the movie, he fantasized about killing, and his fantasies finally drove them to their crimes.

The notion of holding filmmakers and studios legally responsible for their products has always been met with guffaws from the industry.

But the laughing will soon stop. It will take only one large verdict against the likes of Oliver Stone, and his production company, and perhaps the screenwriter, and the studio itself, and then the party will be over. The verdict will come from the heartland, far away from Southern

California, in some small courtroom with no cameras. A jury will finally say enough is enough; that the demons placed in Sarah Edmondson's mind were not solely of her making.

Once a precedent is set, the litigation will become contagious, and the money will become enormous. Hollywood will suddenly discover a desire to rein itself in.

The landscape of American jurisprudence is littered with the remains of large, powerful corporations which once thought themselves bulletproof and immune from responsibility for their actions. Sadly, Hollywood will have to be forced to shed some of its own blood before it learns to police itself.

Even sadder, the families of Bill Savage and Patsy Byers can only mourn and try to pick up the pieces, and wonder why such a wretched film was allowed to be made.

Responding to Reading

1. Grisham opens his essay by providing background, including an explanation of his relationship to murder victim Bill Savage. Is this background information necessary? In what way does it help Grisham make his point? Is this essay an attack on one film, *Natural Born Killers*, and its director, Oliver Stone? A critique of Hollywood's values? A call to action designed to encourage readers to hold studios legally responsible for their films? What do you see as Grisham's primary purpose in writing this essay?
2. In paragraph 70, Grisham says, "A case can be made that there exists a direct causal link between the movie *Natural Born Killers* and the death of Bill Savage." Do you agree? Does Grisham make such a case? Explain your conclusions.

WHY BLAME TV?

John Leonard

John Leonard (1939–) was born in Washington, D.C., and attended Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley. A long-time staff writer for the New York Times and now a cultural critic for a number of different periodicals—as well as television critic for New York magazine—he has published a number of books, beginning with *The Naked Martini* in 1964. His most recent are *The Last Innocent White Man in America* (1993) and *Smoke and Mirrors: Violence, Television, and Other American Cultures* (1996). "Why Blame TV?" which originally appeared in 1993 in the liberal periodical *The Nation*, is Leonard's response to legislation proposed by Congress that year that would have severely limited the amount of violence broadcast by television networks, particularly during children's viewing hours. Leonard takes the position that television