

# When Lorena Bobbitt Comes Bob-Bob-Bobbing Along

The Sorry State of Popular Culture

by George Garrett



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Dear Howard Stern,  
I don't care if your New Year's Eve program did set the all-time world record for a pay-for-view TV event. And I don't care, either, if your book is a best-seller and people are lining up around the block to get a signed copy of it. I just want to tell you, in all candor, that you are an ugly person. Ugly, Ugly, UGLY. You are as *ugly* as a raw turnip. Ugly as a day-old dog turd. Next to you that fat slob Rush Limbaugh looks like Clark Gable. You are ugly inside and outside both. Quit hiding behind ethnicity. That's no excuse. Your hippie hairdo doesn't do a thing for you, either. Why don't you get smart and go find a good place to hide instead of flaunting your ugliness in the florid face of the American public?

As a member in good standing of the South Carolina Ugly Patrol (an all-volunteer, nonprofit, statewide organization dedicated to the proposition that "Beauty is Truth") I am compelled in good conscience to write to you. . . .

Stop, please. Wait just a minute!

Please forgive me, dear reader. It was not I who wrote the above rude and counterproductive words addressed to one of America's cultural icons and leading celebrities. I, myself, would never do such a thing. True, I might conceivably *think*

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*George Garrett is Henry Hoyns Professor of English at the University of Virginia.*

something like that, but I would never allow myself to give voice and utterance to such negative thoughts. In my opinion it was Towne, John Towne, no more (and no less) than a common character in a novel I once wrote called *Poison Pen* (1986), a fictional figure, then, who has just lately reemerged, all bandaged and stinking, like Lazarus, from the quiet death of that novel to begin again his outrageous and unacceptable shenanigans, his half-assed japes and pasquils, his minstrel-show shucking and jiving, always and forever seeking to give offense not only to the vulnerable and prominent people he has elected to insult, but also, dear readers (if any), to you and to me and to every right-thinking human being from here to Sri Lanka. You may be thinking that I, as a bona fide author of sorts (though never either celebrity or best-seller), ought at the very least to be able to exercise some kind of control over a purely imaginary character whose sole existence (as far as I can tell) is in words on the printed page, whose environment is his text. Maybe so. It just hasn't worked out that way, that's all. He comes and he goes as he pleases. He pops up when least expected. Like some of my tacky, no-account kinfolk. Since he appears to have vanished (for the time being), let us now get down to serious business, to the topic of popular culture, while we can still safely do so.

What a time to be thinking about this subject; what a time to be trying to write about it. My imaginary readers will be reading this piece a couple or three months from now, on the

early teasing edges of springtime. But I am living here and now, composing this text in early January of 1994. It is a frozen, grungy day outside, gray on gray, with clumps of old snow in all directions, and if the weather report is to be believed, more snow on the way. Nothing much going on out there in the neighborhood. Not a dog barking, not a car growling up the hill outside. Not even the demented woodwind noise of the usual black caucus of crows anywhere nearby. Inside I have the newspapers with their annual lists of what's "In" and what's "Out." I gather from the *Washington Post's* half-serious consideration of the topic that Heidi Fleiss, Janet Malcolm, Donald and Marla, Robert Reich, and many more are in. Evidently, the out basket contains the likes of Joey and Amy, Richard Gere, Catharine MacKinnon, and, to be sure, Clarence Thomas. However, the big news is found a few pages later under the rubric of "Names & Faces." "Michael Does Vegas," says the headline. The brief story tells how Michael Jackson, identified as "beleaguered pop star," appeared in person to watch "a Las Vegas casino pirate show" in the company of the casino owner, somebody named Steve Wynn, together with (are you ready for this?) "junk bond king Michael Milken, along with a phalanx of security guards." "Phalanx," that's a nice touch. In the morning's mail came *Vanity Fair* with its lead article—"Heidi Does Hollywood." Which I don't have to read, anyway, because the Associated Press has a piece in the papers—"Vanity Fair names names in Fleiss story," where I can quickly learn that customer Charlie Sheen "liked to hire a blonde dressed up in a cheerleader outfit who would pretend she had a big game the next day, Fleiss said." My *New York Times* tells me all about a popular new video game, "Police Quest: Open Season," designed and created by Daryl Gates, late of the Los Angeles Police Department.

In short, friends, the world looks to be cuckoo. Bananas . . .

Interruptions flutter a few similar days (like those blowing calendar pages in old-timey movies), grungy, still gray on gray, and I can read in the *Washington Post*, in the front news section, mind you, how "ROCK MUSICIAN'S CONVICTION PROMPTS CANCELLATION OF AD ON CONDOM USE." This is a little glitch in the major radio and TV advertising campaign, sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, part of the Department of Health and Human Services, which, in its lofty wisdom "has ordered the immediate withdrawal of its AIDS-prevention public service announcement for radio featuring Red Hot Chili Peppers singer Anthony Kiedis." Seems that this fellow, this spokesperson for clean living and good behavior had earlier been convicted (in a real live courtroom—Fairfax County Circuit Court) of "sexual battery and indecent exposure." Since it is her bailiwick and the buck always stops somewhere, Donna Shalala had to come up with something: "We must not allow a single ad to overshadow the vital lifesaving message in the campaign."

Dear Miz Shalala,

When the poet Marianne Moore, in her poem "In Distrust of Merits," said "Beauty is everlasting and dust is for a time," she said a mouthful. . . .

—Go away, Towne! My readers don't want to listen to you any more. Be reasonable.

—Okay, boss. I was just leaving anyway. May I make one point, though, what I was fixing to say in my letter to Madame Secretary?

—Go ahead, but make it quick.

—Have you ever noticed that our American Presidents, at least the ones of our lifetime, like to surround themselves with people of certain definite types? Roosevelt liked smart-mouth intellectuals; Truman liked laughers and scratchers; Kennedy liked Harvard men and lace-curtain Irish; Johnson liked little bitty short guys like Jack Valenti and Moyers—it made him feel taller than ever; Carter liked undisguised crackers, etc., etc. What's the Clinton pattern?

—Beats me.

—Ugly. He has surrounded himself with some of the most singularly unattractive people ever collected. It makes him feel better about himself, don't you see? Bye-bye. . . .

Where were we? Oh yes, stories in the papers. Well, the big news today, prominently on page one as well as in the "Style" section of the *Washington Post*, is the Lorena Bobbitt trial, just getting underway at historic Manassas. (The San Antonio trial of some of the leftover Branch Davidians gets a lot less attention. No celebrities involved.) The Bobbitt event is described as big-time show business: "About 20 satellite trucks lined the roadway leading to the courthouse yesterday, and vendors turned the walkway into a carnival midway, hawking commemorative T-shirts, boxer shorts, knives, and penis-shaped chocolates."

"What does all this have to do with popular culture in the dear old U.S. of A.?" you ask.

Reader, *this is Popular Culture*. This is what it has come to. And if I get half a chance between interruptions, I am going to try to tell you how and why it has come to pass.

Dear Mrs. Bobbitt,

Looking at your picture in the paper today, my good friend Richard allowed: "Boy, that looks like a woman who would cut your d--- off." He's right, too, but please don't get us wrong. We have just founded a local chapter of the Lorena Bobbitt Marching Society and Fan Club. I thought you would like to know that there are guys who admire and respect you as well as the feminist gals. Today's *Washington Post*, in the "Style" section says (in a subheadline), "As Lorena's Trial Begins, Women Grab Onto a Powerful New Symbol." So? Guys, too. We are grabbing and holding onto our symbols for dear life. . . .

Something happened in the four generations of this century to change forever a popular culture that was essentially local, spontaneous, essentially amateur when compared and contrasted with the present, though modest amounts of money did indeed change hands from time to time. At the beginning of the century only opera singers and stage actors were "stars" in a contemporary sense. Both of those forms, opera and drama, were parts of the national and international popular culture of the time. Both are now merely shadows of themselves. Both are classified as "elitist" entertainment, together with symphony orchestras and art museums, subsidized and supported by taxes and philanthropy. Where in the late 19th century most forms of culture of any kind were local and regional, there was scarcely an American town that did not have at least a theater and an opera house. Now only the largest of cities, and only some of them, still try to continue to enjoy these once-popular arts.

What followed, at first gradually enough, was the development of technology (movies, radio, television, cable television, videos, computer networks), which, by linking us all to-

gether, like it or not, destroyed most of the earlier kinds of popular culture we had known, replacing these things with professionally controlled production and distribution of products that had only a shadowy relationship to original, authentic popular and folk culture. I can well remember the first time—it was 1947, and I was living in Greenwich Village—that I heard the word *authentic* used in a purely pejorative sense. Anything authentic could be copied and, at the same time, smoothed out and made slick. Things authentic were raw and rough-edged. The supermarket soon replaced the farmer's market and the family grocery store. Same thing in the culture business.

The second great force for change—more powerful in fact than technology; for the shopkeepers of culture; for these folks, then and now, have been only casually interested in research and development, letting others take the real risks of invention, just as, in the artistic sense, the custodians of culture are not interested in the real risks of creation; they hire and fire the creative types—was the discovery that, under controlled conditions, inordinate (not merely excessive, but simply incredible) profits could be made. Here the risks were and are high. It is a breathless gamble, a crapshoot; but enough huge fortunes are made to make the risks not wholly irrational. It really started with the movies and got well under way during the Depression. While the rest of the nation suffered, Hollywood made some money. Not a whole lot, because these first-generation aliens (who might as well have been aliens from outer space for all they knew or cared about things American, our cultural roots or traditions) were not secure enough to wish to call too much attention to themselves. That remained for the next generation. Meantime the Hollywood guys were on our side, more or less, during World War II. Partly because, with good reason, they didn't want the other side to win and partly because, win, lose, or draw, they didn't want to get drafted. They turned their business into a war industry and cranked out propaganda and entertainment, making some good money at the same time. It was here that the makers and purveyors of the new popular culture realized the power of propaganda, covert as well as explicit. And they have used their media for this purpose, with many a hidden agenda ever since.

They were beginning to earn a portion of the one reward they really could not generate or control on their own—respectability. For centuries, ever since the heyday of Rome, show-business people had mostly and often legally been classified as standing well outside the normal hierarchies and patterns of society. They were, as the Elizabethans used to say, “masterless men.”

One thing they had done that, slowly but surely, changed things in their favor was to create stars and the star system. The origin was merchandising, but the concept took hold and soon enough meant more than an aid to large-scale buying and selling. Very soon in the game, given the right context, it became possible to create stars possessed of very little, if any talent. Some had some talent, and some didn't. Talent became, finally, irrelevant to stardom. So, soon enough, did other factors like character and integrity. Soon enough the “true” character of a star was irrelevant. This aspect of the star system has proved beneficial to the movers and shakers of the business who have never been noted for sterling character or integrity. By now the second and third generations have been able to step forward and become public figures themselves without risk or shame. Similarly, the star system has spread first

to all other shapes and forms of show business and entertainment, but also into all other aspects of our lives, including politics and the professions, all the arts and crafts.

We of my generation (born 1929), and the next two after that, have witnessed these things happening in our time, energized by the demonic power of television, which was only very briefly a genuine competitor and soon developed as just another part of the total package—movies, radio, television, records, publishing, sports, fashion, the news, all of them now, thanks to the fun and games of arbitrage and the irresistible impulse toward mergers, joined together in an indissoluble multinational matrimony. What all this means (among other things) is that popular culture, in these last wild years of this bloody and terrible century, is whatever they say it is, whatever choices they choose to allow us to exercise. It means, too, that the human-scale and communal pleasures of popular culture—movies seen in a real picture palace, vaudeville shows, the music hall, burlesque—are gone for good. Rock concerts and the like, loosely based on the May Day or Nuremberg rallies, don't count, at least in the sense of offering the communal experience. If you want to see where we have come, what we are up to, just consider the last couple of presidential inaugurations.

What all this means is that it is no longer possible to avoid or escape the impact of the mass-produced popular culture. For a very few people in my generation it was, strictly speaking, possible to escape the experience. Not since then. There is no place on earth safely away from it. We cannot spare our children or grandchildren from its, at best, baleful influence.

Not long ago, critic Lee Lescase, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, took serious note of some of the attitudes that link show business (Hollywood) with the government of our nation, hunkered down inside the Beltway: “In other words the image is more important than the reality. In fact there doesn't have to be *any* reality. In a life revolving around prime time, events, even events involving thousands of people, can be arranged solely for the cameras.” Really? Take today's paper (*Washington Post*) for example. In the news section we have “As the World Watches on TV, Lorena Bobbitt's Trial Opens.” In the “Style” section we learn that not many people, on the scene at least, seem to be as interested as the reporters: “Because so few members of the actual public turned out at the courthouse, the hundreds of journalists were reduced to interviewing T-shirt hawkers (\$20 for a ‘Love Hurts’ shirt autographed by John Bobbitt, himself) . . .”

Years ago, in the 1950's, I worked for television as a writer for a show that died in labor. My first day on the job the producer told me the score: “If you think television has anything to do with art, you're crazy. If you think it's entertainment, you are naive and misinformed. Television is purely and simply an advertising medium [this long before the shopping network]. Your job is purely and simply to write stuff to fill in the time and space between the ads.” Years later I have to admit he spoke the truth. During the 1960's, and ever since, they took over the news and information services of television. Nothing has changed since then except that nobody even bothers to apologize anymore for the wealth of misinformation and disinformation and nonsense they solemnly and relentlessly produce and present to us. No wonder that nothing can equal or even approach the contempt that the masters of popular culture feel for the audience they routinely abuse.

Nevertheless, even though they are desperately few and far between, there are real people and moments in the history of our popular culture that are worthwhile and worthy of honor. Fellini and his works (treated elsewhere in this issue) are surely among these precious few. And you will have your own special favorites and examples, though I am willing to wager that in whatever field you choose to consider, from grand opera to Grand Ole Opry, the honorable few will be very few. And they will be creators and performers, not producers and dealers.

Dear George Garrett,

I was planning to write a letter to Christy Turlington, the supermodel (*it's all about models these days*), and tell her my thrilling life story and see if I can't, you know, like make friends. And I may even do that a little later. But right now I consider it my bounden duty to deal with you.

You certainly sound like a bitter and cynical little old man. Judging by this article of yours, which you in fact have not finished yet, there is no real popular culture in our country anymore (if there ever was any), just a whole lot of mass-produced and -packaged junk. Trash created by trash for trash on all sides and at all levels. Your not-so-subtle subtext seems to be that next to nothing is or can be immune from the AIDS-like viral infection of this *faux* pop culture foisted on us by degenerate and probably subhuman criminals and blatantly designed to appeal to our most bestial and atavistic promptings. Am I right or am I wrong? Let your readers (if any) decide for themselves.

But before we get that far, maybe I can talk you out of publishing this thing. Look, be sensible. You are no Saul Bellow or

Philip Roth. That's for sure. You are not even an Updike or a Richard Ford. In the pop culture game of the literary you are a definite benchwarmer. People will say, if they haven't already, that you are just sour and mean-spirited and even jealous of the others, writers like Jay McInerney and Norman Mailer who have earned their stars and wound stripes. They are legitimate public figures. You don't catch them saying bad things about the state of popular culture in America. They are very careful who they criticize. And so should you be.

But, for the sake of argument, let's say you really believe what you've been saying, which, basically, is that the world has gone crazy. So? You noticed that. It has happened in the last decade of every century we know anything about. Believe me, it won't last long. And on the other side of the great millennial divide there is plenty of profit for all, if we just wait patiently for our turn at the trough.

Meanwhile, watch your step. Control yourself. The great thing about popular culture as it's practiced nowadays is that it is altogether disposable and utterly forgettable. If you can't stand Eddie Murphy or Beavis and Butt-head it doesn't matter. Something else, better or worse, the same and different, will be along before you can say Rumpelstiltskin.

Now I better finish this off right away. I don't want to keep my supermodel waiting.

All the best,  
John Towne

P.S. You want a second opinion? You're ugly, too.

P.P.S. On second thought, I think I'll write Kate Moss. Her cockney accent is cute, and her belly button is wonderful. I think I may be in love again.

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## High Summer

by Tom Disch

When the bluebells have left off blooming  
And the woods are dusty and dry,  
It's time to go to the movies  
And switch from Low Cool to Hi.

When all the daffodils have withered  
And the scum is thick on the shore,  
Then go where the weather caresses  
In a large department store.

The season of blossoms is fleeting;  
Then comes the wearisome weeks  
When even the beaches are beastly  
And the rusty screen door squeaks,

And you sigh for those simpler summers  
When you stayed in the city and drank  
Perriers by a recycling fountain  
In the plaza of Chemical Bank.