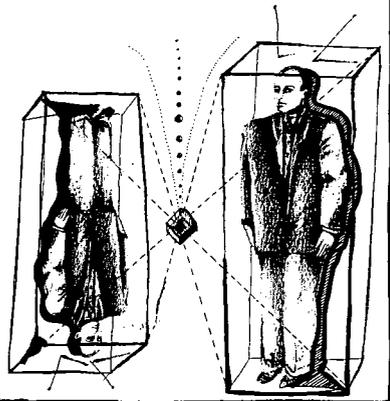


MEDIA



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

The Way It Was?

by Lorrin Anderson

The Ethics of Docudrama

“The nation must be grateful that millions of Americans . . . are being taught night after night lessons that may help them live more amicably with their fellow citizens.”

That’s Walter Goodman, writing in the *New York Times*. “Goaded by minority groups,” he says, “commercial television has become a leader in the movement to get Americans to accept other Americans . . . the biggest successes in the continuing push-and-shove have been won by minority groups bent on converting negative images into positive images.”

Walter Goodman, as it happens, is a perceptive and generally fair-minded TV critic, and he’s not the kind of guy to delude himself, or us: “The point, pardon the word, is propaganda—mild, benign, not force-fed by the state, but propaganda all the same.” But he’s not complaining either: “That is as it must be.”

Must it?

How grateful should we be that we are being force-fed by an entertainment establishment that keeps shoveling out the agitprop? That the aim is ostensibly benign—tolerance, brotherhood—doesn’t put the question to rest.

The Goodman quotes are actually from a piece he wrote a couple of years ago. But they apply *a fortiori* today,

when every other sitcom and fictional drama carries a social message, usually stacking the deck in favor of the latest elitist fashions in right thinking.

Where race is involved, nobody in his right mind can object to attempts to put positive images of blacks on television. Even casting gambits that defy current social probabilities—like making most street criminals white and most (non-corrupt) judges black or female or both—are perhaps more or less harmless. But intellectual dishonesty is dangerous at best, and it gets to be a particularly sticky business when the vehicle is that unholy amalgam of purported journalism and sensationalized entertainment, the docudrama.

When a movie purports to be essentially factual, and superimposes a crawl at the end telling us what ultimately happened to the principals in real life—well, given a skillfully doctored script and the powerful, visual impact of television, millions of people probably think that’s the way it was, the way it really happened. And when that *wasn’t* the way it was, in centrally important ways—when we’re getting a distorted picture of American history or social reality, or both—the result is likely to be not benign but pernicious; the well-meaning attempt to promote racial harmony may well end up exacerbating animosities, fueling white resentment, and feeding black paranoia.

Attacks on the docudrama—from both left and right—are hardly new. But it just keeps rolling along. Case in point: a made-for-TV movie that appeared earlier this year, on NBC: *If Looks Could Kill: The Marla Hanson Story*.

The crime the movie is based on was a shocker even for New York: MODEL SLASHED! The razor-wielding thugs who cut Marla Hanson up in the summer of 1986 weren’t trying to kill her. They just wanted to destroy her face. They didn’t quite succeed; the long red gashes they left were not, thanks to extensive plastic surgery, ultimately disfiguring. But the scars will always be there, and the attack ended a promising career before the cameras.

Cut to February 1991: Marla Hanson, the Movie. A story with the customary departures from reality—dramatic license—and with an increasingly familiar bonus, a sort of

cultural affirmative action that holds up a distorting mirror to the racial complexities of American society.

Marla was—is—a Missouri girl who had come to the Big Apple to carve out a career, and she was starting to get some breaks. The crime was instigated by a white man named Steve Roth, who had sublet an apartment to Marla and two other young women and who, in a twisted way, wanted to be more than a landlord—Marla’s lover, in fact; that’s the way the movie portrayed it, anyway. (It didn’t mention that Roth had a homosexual relationship with at least one of the two black friends he hired to carry out the razor attack.) The ostensible reason for the assault was money: Marla, fed up with Roth, wanted to move out, and she wanted her security deposit back. Roth reluctantly agreed, but instead of giving her the money he set her up for the slashing. (Roth and his two friends were all convicted and went to jail, though they’ll soon be eligible for parole.)

The most striking thing about the case, aside from the bizarre nature of the crime, was the way Marla Hanson was twice victimized, first by Roth and the slashers and then by the lawyer for the two black defendants. And the man who mounted the second assault—an unbelievably brutal courtroom attack on Marla as witness—was Alton Maddox, the bitterly antiwhite agent provocateur who has since been barred from practicing law because of his role in the Tawana Brawley hoax. Under the tolerant eye of Judge Jeffrey Atlas (you have to be careful about reining in militant black lawyers if you don’t want to be called a racist), Maddox announced that it was his circus now, that he was the ringmaster who was going to “get that lyin’ bitch.” He went on to administer a verbal battering, painting Marla as a slut and trying unsuccessfully to get her to say the word “c---” on the stand (to describe herself). It is difficult to believe that a white lawyer, especially in these days of feminist concern, could have gotten away with anything like it.

While the crime involved an attack on a white woman by two blacks, nobody, including the press and Marla herself, assigned any particular significance, at first, to the racial element. (Imagine, if you can, the racial uproar

if two white thugs had slashed the face of a black model.) The question of race, however, was brought to the fore by Maddox himself: he constructed a preposterous scenario involving a supposed conspiracy between Marla and the police, and portrayed the victim as a racist who had fingered his two clients only because they were black.

So what do we see in the movie? Well, the courtroom assault on Marla is there, in a watered-down version—the sarcastic hectoring, the blunt suggestion of sluttishness. In the interest of verisimilitude, apparently, the lawyer who batters Marla on the stand even wears the kind of glasses favored by Alton Maddox. *But he's a white man.* The lawyer character's persona is repulsive, and his behavior is just about (though not fully) as disgusting as Maddox's was at the real trial. *But he has been magically transformed.* And there's not so much as a mention of the racial red herring Maddox dragged into the trial.

The affirmative action doesn't stop there. Two cops, at first unaware of the crime, happened to catch the assailants because they were behaving suspiciously—running from the scene with razors in their hands and blood on their clothes. The cops were in reality white; in the movie, one of them, the good guy who is cast as the interrogator of the suspects, has become black. And the tough but sympathetic prosecutor who shepherds Marla through her ordeal is now a black woman; in real life she was a light-skinned Hispanic (who, reportedly, was privately upset that Hispanics hadn't gotten *their* due in the movie). But those adjustments are minor compared to the transmogrification of Alton Maddox.

Coincidentally, NBC's local anchorman in New York, Chuck Scarborough, had been involved personally, as a reporter, in covering the Marla Hanson case, and after the movie aired on February 4 we were treated to an unusual spectacle on the 11 o'clock news: instead of the usual practice, in which the news shows shamelessly plug movies and series broadcast on their own networks, we got a news spot, by Scarborough, which in a low-key but devastating way compared the facts of the case with the contorted movie version, noting particularly the conversion of Alton Maddox from nas-

ty black bully to nasty white bully. A salutary coda, though hardly an antidote to the preceding two hours.

That same distorting mirror, in an equally mendacious variation, was deployed a year earlier in a TV movie about another notorious New York crime, the fatal black-white incident in Howard Beach, Queens. (This movie was also aired on NBC, but that's probably a coincidence—NBC is no more prone to this sort of thing than the other networks.)

The facts of the Howard Beach case, in capsule summary, are these: after a couple of confrontations between white teenagers and three blacks from outside the neighborhood, the whites, several dozen of them having gathered by now, ended up chasing the blacks, catching and beating one of them while another, high on cocaine, ran into traffic on a busy highway, where he was struck and killed by a speeding car. The movie was called *Making the Case for Murder* and that's technically accurate, since it reverently chronicles the efforts of special prosecutor Joe Hynes to get murder convictions. But even the title is inflammatory and misleading: it is highly unlikely that the young whites intended to chase the black victim onto the highway, or to kill him in any other way, or that all of the defendants even knew until later that he had run to his death. In any case, the most serious crime anybody was convicted of was second-degree manslaughter.

While race was unavoidably one aspect of Howard Beach, contemporary society being what it is, the black-white confrontation arguably had more to do with turf than with race—the kind of episode that would have gotten little public attention if the people involved had been either all white or all black. The press and television, however, have persisted in calling the incident both “racial” and a “murder”; Joseph Fried of the *Times* used the phrase as recently as May of this year, and Fried in particular ought to know better—at least that no one was convicted of murder—since he covered the trial. Or maybe it was an overzealous copy editor who put in the “racial murder,” lest we forget.

How do you lie in a docudrama? Besides the obvious techniques available to print as well—ranging from

selective use of information to manipulation of tone—the visual dramatic medium, especially when it combines fact, fiction, and conjecture, offers a cornucopia of inviting possibilities. Casting and direction and the shading of performance alone create an impact that can easily overwhelm even an honest script. You can lie pictorially, without using any words at all. And if you're doing a docudrama you can pick and choose your facts and emphasis—and stir in your own fictions—to drive home just about any point of view you want to peddle. This philosophy, which, of course, applies to non-TV movies as well, was neatly summed up recently by Irwin Winkler, who directed *Guilty by Suspicion*, this year's misleading treatment of the blacklisting of the 1950's: his film is fiction, Winkler told reviewer Ronald Radosh, but fiction that he hopes “blends a certain amount of reality to make the fiction more truthful to the audience.” (Radosh's dissection of *Guilty by Suspicion* was written for the *New York Times* but published in the *American Spectator* after the *Times* decided instead to run a piece by Victor Navasky, editor of the *Nation*.)

In the Howard Beach movie, which presents itself as fact, not fiction, the lies started with the casting: the three blacks, who were all, in reality, physically imposing men, turned up on the screen as somewhat smaller, and as very appealing guys, despite some hostility that was implicitly and explicitly explained away in the usual terms of poverty, racism, etc. The movie generally fudged their unsavory past histories (all three had criminal records), and their own not-so-innocent role in triggering the ultimate violence. (Who started the exchange of racial epithets that took place, for instance, has never really been established.)

The white teenagers, on the other hand, were portrayed as sneering, smirking little bigots (that indispensable pejorative), and the movie made no reference at all to the fact that the most prominent defendant, seventeen-year-old Jon Lester, actually had a number of black friends (including a former girlfriend) who think, and have no hesitation in saying, that he was railroaded for essentially political reasons in a poisonous public atmosphere inflamed by sensational, and often inac-

curate, press coverage. Lester is serving a prison term of ten to thirty years.

Alton Maddox also figured in the Howard Beach case, as a lawyer for the black man who was beaten, Cedric Sandiford, and Maddox's refusal to cooperate with prosecutors greatly complicated efforts to get at the truth and resolve some still nagging questions about what really happened. In the movie, Maddox and an equally implacable colleague, C. Vernon Mason, are merged into a composite called Clayton Barry, whose hostility and obstructionism are made to seem both understandable and entirely justified, given the way blacks are victimized by the criminal justice system. There is no mention at all of their friend Al Sharpton, whose numerous provocative marches into Howard Beach had a lot to do with stirring up racial hostilities.

The movie got generally respectful press reviews. Wendy Lin, who covered the story for *Newsday*, found it "basically faithful" but "surprisingly dispassionate," and actually faulted it for "taking pains not to inflame." A somewhat puzzling complaint, in view of the way the movie portrayed the white defendants as junior Klansmen who deserved murder convictions whether the racially mixed jury felt that way or not.

If the movie desensationalized anything, it was the provocative and sometimes violent behavior of black militants and their white radical allies as they staged demonstrations both against the white defendants and against "racism" in general. White supporters of the defendants were sometimes openly hostile, and some Howard Beach residents rose to the bait as Al Sharpton and his troops marched through the streets, but the "balance" displayed in the movie was essentially false. One scene shows a white shoving a black outside the courthouse; that probably never happened. We don't see something that really did happen—the arrest of a black man for punching a white witness.

And if anybody had any doubts that the moviemakers' hearts were in the right place, there is the sequence involving a black man named Charlie Brasher, most sympathetically played by Gregory Alan-Williams, who has

been wrongly convicted of rape. Idealistic prosecutor Joe Hynes, heroically portrayed by Daniel J. Travanti, had been Brasher's unsuccessful defense lawyer, and his guilty feelings about losing that case have undermined his confidence to the point that he's scared to take on the Howard Beach job. So Charlie, in a moving jailhouse scene, has to talk him into it. A nice dramatic touch, with the added message (it doesn't have to be stated) that blacks accused of a crime don't get a fair shake. In reality, the defendant in the sex-crime case on which the sequence is remotely based was white, an accused child-molester who was eventually cleared and who had nothing at all to do with inspiring Hynes to meet the Howard Beach challenge.

The American dilemma has proved to be far more complicated and intractable than most people dreamed in the heyday of the civil rights movement. At the same time, we've come a long way in the past thirty years, if not in rescuing a large residual underclass, then at least in reforming prevailing popular attitudes about tolerance, justice, and equality before the law. The exaggerated focus on putative white hate, in short, traduces an America that is trying like hell—albeit counterproductively, often enough—to live up to its ideals. And in a way these overheated sermons are too pessimistic—turning Jon Lester, for instance, into a mean little hater, when by almost all accounts he was a nice kid with black friends who paid an inordinate price for his role in the affair. By painting a complicated tragedy like Howard Beach as a latter-day lynching, which it emphatically was not—despite incendiary comments at the time by politicians, including Mayor Ed Koch—the movie seriously distorts not only the case itself but present social reality. That doesn't make reasoned dialogue any easier.

And who can recall a television drama that even touched on black racism—not hostility, which can be a different thing, but racism? How patronizing to blacks it is, really, to trot out the old double standard every time there's a choice to be made.

Whatever his psychological problems, however understandably they may be rooted in America's historical guilt, Alton Maddox is a destructive

person. He's not a very good lawyer, but he has a real talent for his specialty: throwing racial monkey wrenches into an already beleaguered criminal justice system. He is a man, in short, who has carved out a career whose "most consistent themes have been hidden agendas, self-promotion, and hatred of all law enforcement."

That appraisal is from Jack Newfield, writing in the *Village Voice* in January 1987, a couple of weeks after the Howard Beach "racial murder." Newfield goes on to quote Murray Kempton, another columnist not known to tolerate white racist rhetoric, as suggesting that "Maddox's hidden agenda here [in the Howard Beach case] may not be public justice at all, but deeper racial bitterness among blacks, and a negligence suit against the city that might produce money for all concerned." Jack Newfield was the "creative consultant" for the Howard Beach movie, though not, apparently, creative enough to persuade the producers to put in an accurate portrait of Maddox or anything else.

As for the Marla Hanson movie, if the people behind that endeavor had taken on Maddox's disturbing role in the case, honestly and straightforwardly—well, that would have taken *real* courage. And it would not only have been better journalism but better art, if it's not too outlandish to use either of those honorable words in connection with such a debased genre.

Or how about a TV movie based on Tawana Brawley's lurid, lying tale of rape and degradation at the hands of white brutes, and the way Maddox, Mason, and Sharpton stirred the racial pot in that sleazy affair? (In the Brawley case, Sharpton outdid himself by comparing New York Attorney General Robert Abrams to Hitler and accusing Abrams of masturbating over a photo of Tawana; others said Tawana's purported ordeal was the kind of thing that typically happens to black women in present-day America, so it didn't matter if she was lying or not.)

The Tales of Tawana—a hell of a story. What we get instead—and of course it's not only on television—are movies like *Mississippi Burning*.

English director Alan Parker begins that story with the 1964 murder of the civil rights workers Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney (who are not specifi-

cally identified). But the plot revolves around a highly fictionalized attempt by two FBI men, winningly played by Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe, to find the bodies and bring the killers to justice. There's a disclaimer at the tail end of the closing credits: "This film was inspired by actual events which took place in the South during the 1960's. The characters, however, are fictitious and do not depict real people, either living or dead." Which not only reduces the possibility of lawsuits but allows Parker to serve up a heady mixture of fact, gripping violence, and imaginary episodes, like a made-up threatened castration, in the service not only of Mammon but morality. Only the most conscientious moviegoer is likely to have stayed in his seat long enough to see the disclaimer, and the film itself has already ended with a documentary-style montage of names, convictions, and sentences; since a lot of people don't read reviews, one might presume that many of those who saw it thought it was a faithful recreation of the case, and a genuine slice of Mississippi life.

In tune with received opinion as it was, *Mississippi Burning* nevertheless generated considerable controversy when it was released late in 1988. But the main criticism came from people who thought Parker and his writer, Chris Gerolmo, hadn't been politically correct *enough*—that while they were self-consciously on the side of the angels as far as racial justice was concerned, they shamelessly glorified the FBI and didn't pay enough attention to the black heroes, sung and unsung, of the 1960's civil rights battles in the South.

That may in fact be true. But the blacks in *Mississippi Burning*—and there are numerous black characters—are depicted with great sympathy, as courageous people with a quiet dignity that is emphatically denied to white Mississippians, almost all of whom, in 1964, seem to have been either homicidal Ku Klux Klansmen or their acquiescent fellow travelers.

There are two sympathetic Southern white characters: the Mississippi-bred but reconstructed redneck played by Hackman—the FBI agent Anderson—and an equally fictitious Mrs. Pell, the troubled wife of one of the guilty Klansmen. Anderson eventually

sweet-talks Mrs. Pell into spilling the beans about the bodies (the actual informant is believed to have been a Klansman bribed by the FBI), and Mrs. Pell pays dearly: her husband beats her mercilessly as his friends in the Klan goad him on. But later, on the mend, she gets to give a speech to Anderson about what it's like to grow up in Mississippi. Mrs. Pell also says that she's staying in town because "there's enough good people around here know what I did was right." That takes about four seconds of a two-hour film in which we haven't seen any of those good people, only maniacal Klansmen of unsurpassed villainy, corrupt local lawmen and politicians, and dumb stereotypical yahoos spouting white supremacist dogma.

Oddly enough, one of the complaints about the movie, from a black former civil rights worker named James McPherson, suggests that some ordinary humanity might have existed even in the heart of darkness. There's a sequence in the movie where Klansmen attack a black church; a young boy drops to his knees in fearful prayer, and one of the Klansmen comes up, gives him a savage kick in the head, curses him, kicks him again, in the stomach, and leaves him prostrate and writhing. In fact, according to McPherson, the character of the boy is based on a woman named Beatrice Cole, who, about to be beaten by the Klan, asked if she could kneel and pray. "The Lord was there," he quotes Mrs. Cole as saying later, "because then the man said 'Let her alone' and he looked kind of sick about it." McPherson concludes that "this Klansman, behind his mask, apparently had a slight moral sense."

McPherson was not, of course, doing p.r. for the Klan; his essay, on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, was making a different point—that by focusing on the violence of "the relatively few poor Anglo-Saxons in the Klan," the movie camouflaged the depths of (continuing) racism among whites in general. That's a hard thesis to defend, given the way *Mississippi Burning* trashed (Southern) whites in general. But whether or not McPherson has a point, his account of the Klansman and the praying black woman does suggest a rule of thumb for this kind of moviemaking: that is, take all

the barbarity you can find in the record, and if it's not barbarous enough to drive home your point—well, doctor it up until it is.

It's interesting to compare a feverish broadside like *Mississippi Burning* with an earlier work that doesn't pretend to be factual: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (the book and also the movie, which was a generally faithful adaptation). Harper Lee's 1960 novel, also set in Mississippi, but in the 1930's, was another passionate indictment of racial injustice: a decent black man—admirable in fact—falsely accused of rape by a young white woman, convicted by an all-white jury that has to know he's innocent but doesn't have the courage or moral fiber to go against the code. And the episode ends with the desperate black man shot to death while trying to escape. Not a story to let anybody off the hook, and the specific racial issues it addressed were still very much to the point when it appeared in 1960. But in its clear-eyed humanism—with many decent white as well as black characters—this work of honest fiction presents a far more convincing version of the segregated South than the "based-on-fact" movie does, a portrait of a tragically flawed but by no means monstrous society coming face to face with the moral imperative for change.

How far the arts have come since then. Honesty on matters of race—an approach that actually explored today's complexities and ambiguities—would of course mean giving the Zeitgeist a sharp kick in the shins. Far easier—and far safer—to give us tracts like *Mississippi Burning*, to go on dredging up bitter, violent memories of a bygone America, obsessively and tendentially picking away at yesterday's scabs, making sure that old, half-healed wounds are kept open and bleeding.

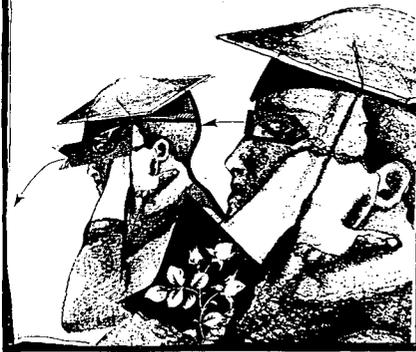
Art and journalism both go whoring off in dubious directions all the time, and always have, but they both still manage, occasionally, to fall back on their birthright: to speak the truth. Too bad that the pious pretenders of popular entertainment think they have a franchise to barter that birthright away for a pot of message.

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EDUCATION



Anna Mycek-Wodecki



The Weight of Bricks

by Janet Scott Barlow

Are we all going crazy? A few months ago, I read a newspaper column containing information so shocking yet unsurprising, so awful yet predictable, that I was overcome by emotional vertigo. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, I thought of John and Lawrence, two children I knew long ago, and disorientation was replaced by generalized depression. The lesson of John and Lawrence is that the past indeed is prologue.

From 1965 through 1969, in the years between getting married and becoming a mother, I worked as a teacher's assistant in the preschool/daycare center of a private, well-funded family services agency, one that employed an array of highly credentialed teachers, social workers, and psychologists. The agency was in an integrated urban neighborhood, next to a large university, and on the edge of a ghetto, which meant that the school drew children of all races and nearly every ethnic and socioeconomic background. There were children of university professors, of firemen, of welfare mothers. There were children of full-time college students who were also part-time hippies. There were Arab and Israeli children who got into fistfights during the Six-Day War. There were Haitian and Greek children who started school knowing not a word of English (and learned the language with breathtaking

speed).

For me, a young woman with an affinity for children but no experience with them, no systematic knowledge of them, and no preconceptions about them, the four years I spent in that preschool would be a disorganized crash course in the ways of kids, a time when I learned many things rapidly, through a reverse version of cause and effect. That is, my learning was inefficient but indelible. It was as if I had been ushered into a laboratory filled with bricks and invited to explore the law of gravity. Inevitably, I wound up dropping bricks on my foot. The trouble with experiential knowledge is that, for a while anyway, you learn more about the weight of bricks than about the principles of gravity. Of course, the beauty of experiential knowledge is that when some physicist comes at you all theoretical and technical, you can say, "Hey, have you ever dropped a brick on your foot?" As a form of insight, the lowly object lesson has an inescapable purity.

I also discovered a few things about adults in that environment, but in that instance, sequential knowledge was not a factor. My most important discovery — it was news to me at the time — was that adults as a group have an infinite capacity for rationalizing and justifying, in the name of children's welfare, all kinds of self-serving adult behavior that is contrary to children's welfare. And that's where John comes in.

The late 60's were the period of the black power movement, and there was much talk among the agency staff about how to "deal with" the issue of black power with the children, how to "communicate" the concept and "support" it. It is a strange experience to be, as I was then, 21 years old and professionally inexperienced, and to encounter experts in the field of child development whose thinking takes the form of urgent debates about how best to teach street politics to a group of preschoolers, some having serious emotional problems completely unrelated to race, class, or ethnicity. It is so strange an experience, in fact, that it can color for life one's feelings about experts.

The black power discussions, like everything else during those years, went on and on, month after month. And one day in the midst of all that, John, a child whose charm was the product of perfectly combined intelligence and in-

nocence, showed me a picture he had drawn. The picture was a collection of random shapes, all of them colored black, that were arranged on the page to look like they'd been shot from a cannon. When I asked him about the drawing, John, who was black, said, "It's a picture of black power." As I was studying the picture, John lifted his hand from behind his back and covered the first drawing with a second, this one of exploding orange-colored shapes. "That's orange power," he said. Another drawing, "Here's green power." Another. "Blue power."

When I related that episode at the next staff meeting, several teachers responded that John's drawing had exemplified his "confusion." And to minimize his "confusion," John was to be aided in being less "literal." It was almost funny: *Hey, isn't that a brick on your foot?* The plain fact was that John, four years old and by nature delightful, needed politicizing about as much as a day in springtime needs politicizing, and I had made another discovery about adults: they will fail at the business of helping children if they are unwilling to be made fools of by children.

Literalness, I would find, was to be encouraged or discouraged in children depending on what they were being literal about. Even more memorable than John is Lawrence, another "literal" child. But the difference between them was that John's literalness was organic to his age while Lawrence's was not.

After more than twenty years, I still remember every detail about Lawrence, including the color of his sneakers, the shape of his hairline, and the belt he cinched so tightly through the loops of his jeans that I wondered how he breathed. Lawrence was a child without resistance to physical impulses. When in doubt, which was always, Lawrence sought motion. He was fruitlessly confrontational, very intelligent, and extremely unhappy.

Among Lawrence's many burdens in life was the issue of religion. His parents, both college professors (that's no dig at college professors, but it seems somehow relevant), had told him from the time he could talk that there was no God and that religion was a "lie," an idea dreamed up by people unwilling to accept the finality of

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