
Speech, Humanitas Prize, Writer's Guild of America West

The day after I spoke with Bud Kieser about being on this program, we lost our gardener. He was a man of about 40, gentle and responsible. So when he didn't appear and didn't telephone on his usual day, we thought it rather odd and called his home. A little boy answered and said, "My father died yesterday." What we subsequently learned was that he'd parked his truck on a street where he was working, and came out to find some boys stealing his tools. When he tried to stop them, they attacked him with a shovel and fractured his skull. And he died that night.

I haven't been able to get it out of my mind. (Which is, I guess, why I'm talking about it here today.) I go to bed and close my eyes and I see him—a quiet man, defending his rakes and his pruning shears—or his dignity or manhood or whatever was the currency in which he measured his square of turf. And though I've never seen them, I can't stop thinking about the boys who killed him.

It's not that I don't know that kind of violence exists—we read it in the newspapers, we see it on the TV news every night, and on our entertainment programs, though how it qualifies as "entertainment" I've never quite understood. And for me to add my voice to all those demanding that we deal with the runaway "hype", the "amphetamine shot into the vein" that violence has become in all our media, is almost gratuitous. What seems to me to merit our concern is not so much what we take off the screen, as what we put on it.

What can we expect of a generation brought up on not seeing tenderness; on not seeing people touching each other without embarrassment, taking healthy pleasure in their bodies, loving each other joyfully—in bed and out; on not seeing a man who can cry, or a woman who can be strong; on not seeing honesty as admirable instead of foolish; and cheating and stealing as cowardly and reprehensible instead of exciting or funny or "a ball"; on not seeing people who might just value intelligence and excellence ahead of fame or money.

The writers who are being honored here today are very gallant fighters in the battle to save that generation—though they'd probably be embarrassed to think of themselves in that way. Amid the onslaught of assassinations and killings and hijackings and heists and holocausts that provide the "entertainment" on our screens, they tell deceptively quiet tales of everyday reality, ordinary people coping with the frustrations of their lives, reaching out to touch each other, to teach each other, to comfort each other—in extraordinary ways.

For all writers, I'd like to thank the Lilly Endowment and the Humanitas Prize for celebrating what the networks and the studios often characterize as the "soft" stories. In a world and an industry too easily taking for granted ugliness and hatred and horror and killing and alienation, we need all the encouragement we can get.