

**Book Review:**  
**What's Wrong With the American Imagination?**  
By Mark T. Harris

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The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think for Themselves, by Curtis White (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003). 205 pages.

Curtis White is a troublemaker masquerading as an English professor. In a provocative new book, *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think for Themselves* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), White delivers a critique as brilliant as it is blistering of the current state of critical imagination in popular American culture.

*The Middle Mind* will no doubt prove to be one of the more controversial commentaries in recent memory on the level of blandness and conformity in the media, politics, and entertainment. White scours everything from Steven Spielberg films to the sea-to-shining-sea monotony of Clear Channel radio, the techno-visions of Internet guru Bob Davis, and even Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* with the harsh bleach of his critical social perspective. Not to forget the small matter of the Bush administration's "war on terror" and other political delusions. We're being sold a mediocre, false and self-limiting culture, says White, and we've gotten too damned used to it.

White's book is actually an extended polemic based on the author's earlier essay on this theme in *Harpers* magazine (March 2002). That essay caused something of a firestorm with White criticizing NPR's *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross as an example of the kind of hackneyed, middle-mind thinking that passes for sophisticated critical commentary on art and culture. White accused Gross of obliterating any real criteria for distinguishing artistic achievement, "flattening" everything into a kind of assembly line *Fresh Air* product. The most gifted of artists, the latest hit TV sitcom writer, or Barry Manilow, all breeze merrily past the line inspectors, White charged, subject only to Gross's invariably trivial inquiry.

On the surface, White's critique may appear to be a kind of highbrow protest, the tenured literary scholar schooled in the classics and wanting everyone to turn off *Everybody Loves Raymond* for a warm evening before the fire and *The Brothers Karazamov* (or, at least, old reruns of *Masterpiece Theater*). In the case of *Fresh Air*, his rebuke did initially appear perhaps overly subjective, sparked by some personal distaste for the host's personality or interview style. But even if Gross happens to rub White the wrong way, it would be a mistake to dismiss his larger argument on such grounds.

Actually, *Fresh Air* is symptomatic for White of a

larger cultural framework at work, one implicitly demanding only that an artist or work pleases us, or at least has earned enough marketing buzz to justify appearances on shows like *Fresh Air* (or *Charlie Rose* or *Oprah* or...). And by virtue of latter said achievements, thus becoming—ta dah!—culturally significant.

White's enemy is the dull blade of complacency, as evident in so much of today's mass entertainment, politics, and intellectual life. It's a complacency he views as profoundly inadequate for our times. In spite of 9/11, an unprovoked war on Iraq, major corporate bankruptcies and a volatile, depressed economy and stock market, it's nonetheless mostly just "business as usual" for the social imagination. American mass culture is largely just cruises along on automatic, unused to genuine, unfettered creativity or envisioning social change that goes beyond predictable banalities, this or that tweaking of the status quo. The problems of our lives and our world should ask more of us, says White. Our human potential should ask more of us.

**When the Future Felt Wide Open**

I heard White at a recent book signing in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, where he directs the Dalkey Press at Illinois State University, remind his audience of the cultural ferment that had once gripped the youth generation of the late 1960s. Those were days when young people by the millions questioned the status quo, challenging authority and a war that many had come to believe was criminal. They were days when young women rebelled against the traditional thinking that required their deference to male authority, refusing to be tethered to cultural notions of biology as (second-class) destiny. They were days when music and art flowered in new directions and the future felt wide open. They were days when, you might say, many questions were raised.

White himself is a product of those days. Listening to his own story, I couldn't help but think that only someone who went off to college in 1969, attending the University of San Francisco in the heyday of the Bay Area counterculture scene, and who ends up 30 years later in the solidly Midwestern, mostly conservative enclave of Bloomington-Normal, home to State Farm Insurance, could end up writing such a compelling, wildly incendiary book like *The Middle Mind*.

Indeed, White's writing is edgy and often mocking, tinged with a polemical enmity that appears almost gleefully provocative. He accuses self-help writer Julia Cameron, for example, of selling individual solutions to blocked creativity like modern-day "snake oil," profiting from the deadening effects of alienated workplaces, TV, money, and other toxic distractions without ever suggesting what we really need is an alternative culture. He similarly takes issue with the "blandly informative" Ken Burns' PBS

documentaries, transforming as they routinely do the seismic, often violent sweep of historical events and epochs into comforting Hallmark Card pathos. Nor is the Middle Mind historian aware that “history is mostly just the version told by the victors.”

As for Spielberg’s Saving Private Ryan, White eviscerates it as an ideological disaster of unstated “crypto-fascist” meaning, a movie whose shockingly effective battle scenes only lull viewers into what White considers a deeper, far more insidious message of the rationality of old-fashioned (murderous) patriotism. Or what historian Howard Zinn, author of *A People’s History of the United States*, more politely describes as the “War is hell, but what are you going to do?” mentality.

White is equally unimpressed with the “high-tech vision” of Lycos CEO Bob Davis’ *Speed is Life* (Doubleday, 2001). Davis led one of the first web portals to multi-billion dollar success in just six years. But you might as well be dozing through some Rotary Club luncheon on career options in insurance for all the breadth of vision his book reveals. Instead, the Lycos entrepreneur comes across as a kind of “Bizarro-Buddha,” tossing out such Koan-like gems as “to act fast is to live fully.” Or, “If you let up, you lose.” In the end, revealing not much than the startling insight that the Internet is “a great place to advertise.”

#### **Hark the ‘Necessary Angels’**

In a sense, White wants to raise a ruckus about everything that keeps the rest of us from raising a ruckus. “Thought ought to be the liveliest thing we do,” he says, “because it is necessarily about the possibility of change. The presence of real thought in the culture (in place of what we have, a show-biz confidence game overseen by media moguls) would keep us constantly on the edge of our collective seats with common interest and anticipation.”

How far we are from that lively reality! Who says now the cultural narratives we were raised on, the stories we learned about religion or politics, work or love or what makes a novel great, were necessarily right? Who says “free-market” American capitalism is the best we can do? Or that artistry belongs only to the genius few, those at least with the savvy publicists and right corporate endorsements? Who says we have to put up with endless Hollywood mediocrity, television executives who see dollar signs in “hot babes in halter tops eating insects?”

Who says we just have to get used to the threat of nuclear destruction?

Certainly not Curtis White. *The Middle Mind* encourages us to ask such questions. To question everything, especially authority. It’s a book that stings, an indecorous rejection of orthodoxy and cultural mediocrity in all its mind-numbing tedium. But as

biting a writer as White is, his message is also a hopeful one. He wants all of us to believe in the wild, unfettered power of human imagination, trust in it. Let the poets speak to the philosophers, the philosophers to the politicians. Let revolt happen against all those who would administer culture “for our own good,” or their own profit.

This is a writer who wants us to discover what the poet Wallace Stevens called the “necessary angels” of our imagination. And to let those angels fly now and burn away in their light the collective fears that keep us humans so divided and in conflict, mired in the perpetual muck of our current disorders.

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