

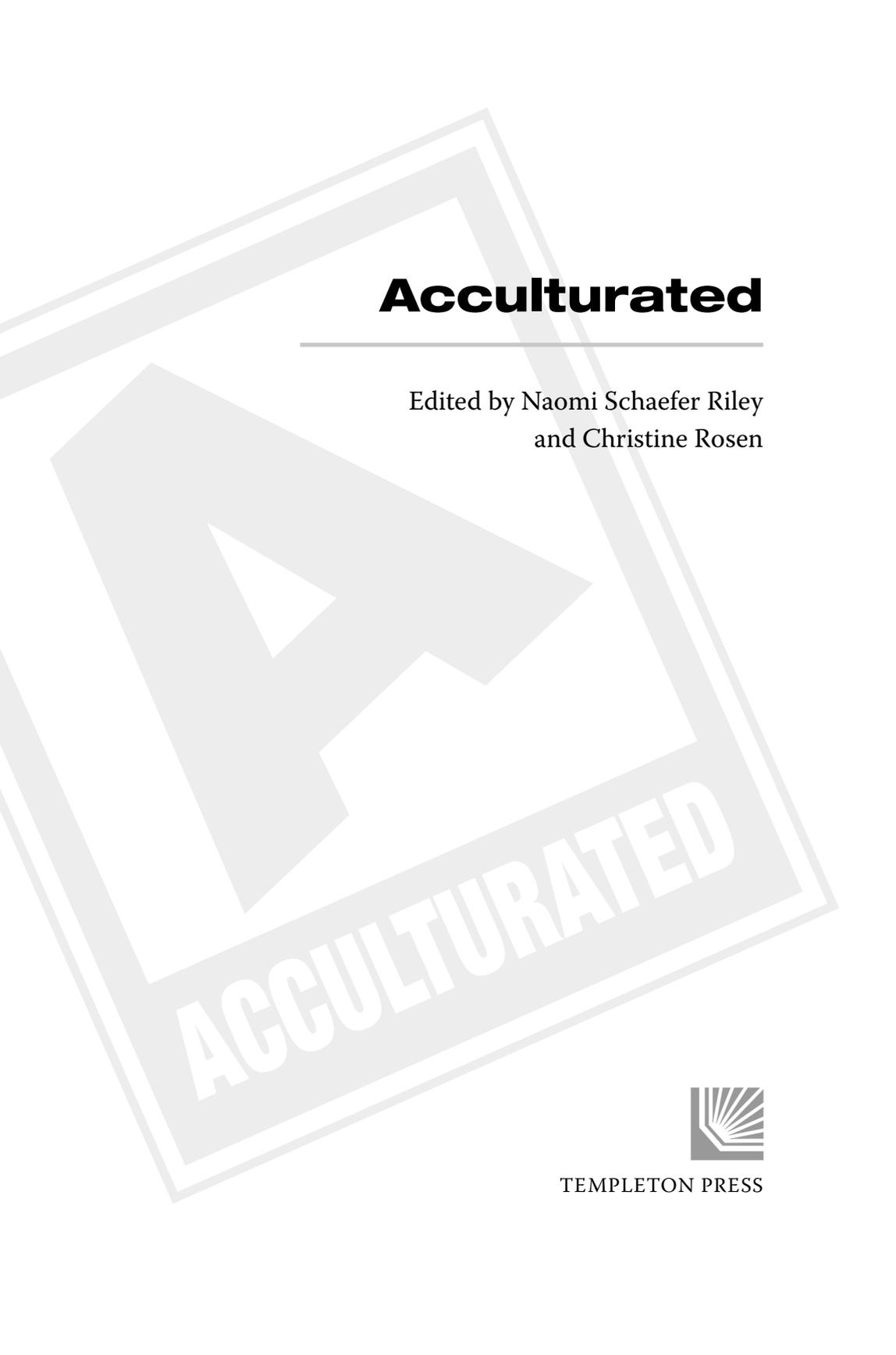
ACCULTURATED



# Acculturated

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Edited by Naomi Schaefer Riley  
and Christine Rosen



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# Introduction

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**Naomi Schaefer Riley and Christine Rosen**

**M**YTHS. LEGENDS. Bible stories. Fairy tales. Fables. Every culture in every era finds a way to express our human need to tell stories about ourselves. We rely on these stories to teach us why we do the things we do, to test the limits of our experience, and to reaffirm deeply felt truths about human nature. They are the explicit and implicit vehicles for teaching younger generations about vice and virtue, honor and shame, and a great deal more.

The contemporary crop of reality television shows, with their bevy of “real housewives,” super-size families, and toddler beauty-pageant candidates, seems an unlikely place to find truths about human nature or examples of virtue. And yet on these shows, and in much else of what passes for popular culture these days, a surprising theme emerges: move beyond the visual excess and hyperbole and you will find the makings of classic morality tales. Bad characters come to disastrous ends; people struggle with unexpected hardship and either triumph or fail, depending on their strength of character. For some, hard work pays off. For others, failure is swift and cruel. All of these dramas play to a large and eager audience of viewers.

Americans increasingly understand their own reality through the prism of these television shows and the celebrity-industrial complex they support. Indeed, for many Americans, and particularly for younger Americans, popular culture *is* culture, for it is the only kind of cultural experience they seek and the currency

in which they trade. Whether through television, movies, tabloid magazine or websites, blogs, social-networking sites, and video-sharing sites such as YouTube, the public now has unparalleled opportunities to observe, comment on, and create popular culture. Our new technologies give us a steady diet of images and information, right down to the eating, dressing, and mating habits of every would-be celebrity in the world.

Liberal-minded observers tend to praise the smashing of taboos and anything-goes extremism of pop culture. Conservatives tend to tut-tut about declining standards and moral relativism. What is missing from the landscape of cultural criticism is a sustained and thoughtful discussion about what popular culture has to teach us about ourselves—our values, our interests, and our hopes for the future—and the ways in which we might reclaim some space in popular culture for a discussion of things such as virtue and character. Popular culture tackles the full spectrum of human experience: birth, death, love, marriage, hatred, failure, and redemption. Although commentary on popular culture often focuses on the multitude of settings where virtue and character are absent, might it also be possible to create cultural settings that could encourage things such as thrift, compassion, and self-reliance?

These are some of the questions we tackle in this book. The title *Acculturated* is a play on words: although the essays in this volume are steeped in the culture and aware of the current trends in a variety of media, the book is also “A Culture Rated”—that is, our contributors have taken a step or two back from the unceasing din of popular culture so that they might better judge its values and help readers think more deeply about what the barrage of narratives around them really mean.

The book is organized thematically into four sections: The first section explores relationships and the myriad and often contradictory ways popular culture teaches us how to behave, how to treat each other, and, for better and for worse, how well we are learning these lessons. The second section of the book explores

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the world of children and teen culture. Kids are perhaps the most avid consumers of and market for pop culture. What does our current culture reflect about their experiences, from Facebook friendship to Lady Gaga metamorphoses to the often-chilling yet wildly popular narratives of teenage fiction? The third section of the book examines some of the surprising and counterintuitive ways pop culture has changed the way we spend our leisure time, whether watching professional sports or playing video games. The last section tackles that most American of pursuits: self-improvement. Whether we are learning how to cook, going back to school, or just trying to lose a few pounds, pop culture has a reality television show or blog chronicling others' experiences. What does our avid vicarious consumption of others' struggles tell us about ourselves?

Perhaps no other forum in popular culture today offers us greater access to others' lives than reality television. When did reality television start? Some observers trace it to a documentary called *An American Family*, the story of a nuclear family going through a divorce, which aired on PBS in the 1970s. Others point to *The Real World*, MTV's portrayal of a new group of young people thrown together in a group house in a different city every year, which has been on the air for nearly two decades. But there is a good argument for placing *The Dating Game* at the start of the reality TV trend. With both "real people" and occasional appearances by singers and actors, *The Dating Game* reflected much about the state of romantic relationships and the relationship of ordinary people to celebrities in the late twentieth century.

In a 1972 episode now archived on YouTube, a young Michael Jackson—he had just turned fourteen—was the show's bachelor, interviewing three obviously happy, but nonetheless composed and polite adolescent girls. The three adorably dressed fans—one had never missed a day of school, another starred in her school play, and the final contestant liked both tap and modern dance—kept

their answers short. No one spoke out of turn. The meanest thing in the episode was one girl's admission that she thought another contestant resembled Mickey Mouse. When Jackson asked one of the young women to describe what she thought it would be like to share a kiss with him, she smiles sweetly and says, "Lovely."

At the time the episode aired, Michael Jackson had the number one selling album in the country. It's a little hard to imagine this scene repeated today with Usher, the Jonas Brothers, or Justin Bieber. The reason is not simply that there are no sweet, innocent thirteen-year-old girls left. It's because our relationships—particularly ones with the opposite sex—are now filtered through the prism of popular culture. The girls who were being courted by Michael Jackson were behaving the way they were taught to in ordinary life. One doesn't imagine their answers would be much different if a young suitor was sitting with them at a dinner table and their extended families were all present.

Today, the girls would likely adopt a television persona to better suit our more revealing and consciously therapeutic times. One-word answers would be replaced by long sentences of self-conscious observations about how excited they are to be there and how worried they are about their appearance or their answers. If one of them still seemed nice at the end of the episode, that person would be "the nice one." More likely they would all be shrieking or offering up risqué responses to titillate the audience.

It is not just television; the Internet has also had this effect on our relationships. We think about ourselves differently and we present ourselves to others differently, too. As Megan Basham writes in her essay regarding online dating: "The idea that what people write on their Facebook profiles or answer in personality questionnaires is a perfect reflection of who they actually are is demonstrably naive. It can just as easily reflect who they want to be or whom they want others to think they are more than it does the true person. That goes doubly for the young." Basham even acknowledges: "If I'd had a Facebook page in my late teens and

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early twenties, I probably would have posted pictures and links that made me look flirtatious, impulsive, and carefree because at the time it's who I aspired to be."

And yet, popular culture doesn't always urge us to perform our worst versions of ourselves. In fact, it often reminds us of the boundaries we must not cross in our real-life relationships. As Kay Hymowitz notes in her essay on adultery, we may think we live in an anything-goes world, but the taboo against adultery remains as strong as ever. And the prohibition is beaten into us at every opportunity in what Hymowitz terms a National Adultery Ritual: "A politician or role model is discovered to have betrayed his wife with another woman, or as it frequently happens, women. The press circles and the shame fest begins. The sinner is subjected to a veritable waterboarding of late-night TV jokes, derisive cartoons, tabloid headlines, embarrassing interviews with the mistress and other former girlfriends, analyses by psychologists on the inner demons that drove the man to such behavior, rampant speculation on the future of the bleeding marriage . . . a sane person might prefer a scarlet letter."

Beyond serving as morality tales, what do celebrity relationships and our relationships with celebrities do to us? We gawk, we imitate, we cringe. But we also wonder how our own lives would look on TV, on the Internet, and in the movies. What would the viewers say about us right now, for instance?

Before reality television and social-networking sites, the public could easily distinguish between real people and glamorous actors. No one's marriage really looked like Donna Reed's or Dick Van Dyke's or Bill Cosby's sitcom marriage. But now, we're not so sure. We can all be actors. We can all be celebrities. Maybe that couple on the screen really does have amazing sex every night. Maybe they really do know how to balance work and family and throw great dinner parties and raise wonderful children too. And before you know it, we're looking at our spouse and wondering, "Why can't we be like that, honey?"

Pop culture is capable of criticizing that urge as easily as it celebrates it. The recent film *The Joneses*, starring Demi Moore and David Duchovny, follows the diabolically clever careers of four people who work for a stealth marketing company. Posing as the perfect family, they infiltrate upper-class neighborhoods and impress their peers with their remarkable lifestyle—all with the intent of selling people things they don't need and can't afford. The fake family's denouement is a far more compelling critique of American materialism (and argument for thrift) than any earnest documentary about overspending could be.

As well, we tend to forget how much television, e-mail, blogs, Twitter, and social-networking sites have influenced our perceptions of time. We are quick to admit that we have more difficulty focusing for long periods of time and can't get through a long book any more. But what about the instant gratification of getting a note back from someone, of being able to tell everyone what you're doing all the time, of watching whatever show you want to whenever you want? These can help relationships thrive just as easily as they can harm them.

Where pop culture often falls short is in relaying the message that there are certain habits that can only be mastered through repetition and extensive practice; there are qualities—virtues even—that cannot be developed in the time it takes to blog about them. Children don't have a good grasp on time, and popular culture does them a disservice when it suggests that everything can happen overnight. The unpopular can become popular. The ugly can become beautiful. The single become attached. Even a show like *Made* on MTV, which helps teens “achieve their dreams” of becoming homecoming queen, losing weight, earning a spot in the school play—all projects that take months—can be viewed in an afternoon. The transformation can seem instantaneous, at least to the viewer.

And teens, more than ever, are surrounded by “nowness.” With their own smartphones and laptops and televisions, their worlds

are whittled down to their immediate concerns. As Mark Bauerlein writes, teen culture “raises ordinary fears and ambitions of the teen ego—Do I look okay? Do they like me? Am I invited? Can I get a car?—to dramatic, decisive standing. The very presence of youth on twelve different channels for hours every day and night grants a lasting validity and consequence to youth aims and anxieties even when the outcomes of the plots display their shortsightedness.” To the extent that adults are present in this teen world, they are observers, sometimes even puppeteers, trying to manipulate the children. As Caitlin Flanagan describes in her essay on the young-adult book series, *The Hunger Games*, teens in fiction are often pitted against one another in a struggle to survive. But it is all done for the entertainment of the adults.

Adults spend a large percentage of their leisure time consuming pop culture as well. For many of them, the immediacy and impermanence of pop culture is also part of its allure. Shows that fail to garner an audience quickly disappear. And pop culture’s insatiable appetite for the newest thing allows for endless reinvention: yesterday’s sitcom has-been is today’s *Dancing with the Stars* contestant, and today’s reality television show contestant is tomorrow’s cohost of *The View*.

But impatience also exacts a price: it erodes our ability to appreciate things that take time, whether that is developing a friendship or mastering a hobby. As Megan McArdle details in her essay on cooking culture, time is the enemy of most modern cooks, and so, inspired by cooking shows and celebrity chefs, they spend their money creating perfect kitchens and turning out showy meals but not their time making everyday food for their loved ones. “For all the tongue-clucking about obesity that you often hear from upper middle-class foodies,” McArdle notes, “I wonder if we middle-class aspirational chefs aren’t the worst gluttons of all. When we are alone, we eat almost furtively . . . and when we are with others, we cannot simply delight in feeding our friends.

We must overwhelm them with our food—no, not with our food, but with our marvelous, marvelous selves.”

Then again, contemporary pop culture also offers new, positive opportunities for socializing, as Jonathan Last describes in his essay on social video games such as Wii bowling. He finds it encouraging that “after years of tearing at the social fabric, the video game has once again become part of the tapestry of American sociability, another thread that helps bind us together.” Similarly, Wilfred McClay mines the great American songbook of the twentieth century and finds inspiration for twenty-first-century popular music. “As the form flourished,” McClay writes, about songs such as those by Cole Porter and the Gershwins, “it gave expression to an ethos, one to which I think we can profitably return—not to wallow in it nostalgically, or readopt it anachronistically, but to learn something from it about the art of living.”

It is the art of living, and, broadly speaking, the American art of self-improvement that provide the theme of the essays in the final section of the book. Patrick Allitt describes Americans’ enthusiasm for lifelong learning through the lens of businesses like the Teaching Company, which sells lectures on a wide array of subjects to an eager audience of American self-improvers. Judy Bachrach offers suggestions for how pop culture, particularly television and film, might better portray the realities of death and dying since today, as she observes, “The death you see on the screen will not be the death you have.” Chuck Colson tackles the subject of forgiveness by asking what contemporary culture deems sinful. “A society that doesn’t take sin seriously has difficulty taking forgiveness seriously,” Colson argues. “After all, if nobody does anything wrong, there’s nothing to forgive.”

Contemporary popular culture, from books to film to television to music, has provoked a great deal of criticism, some of it well deserved. But for better or worse, popular culture *is* culture and it serves an increasingly important function in Americans’ everyday lives. It is not just an escape from everyday life; it is a

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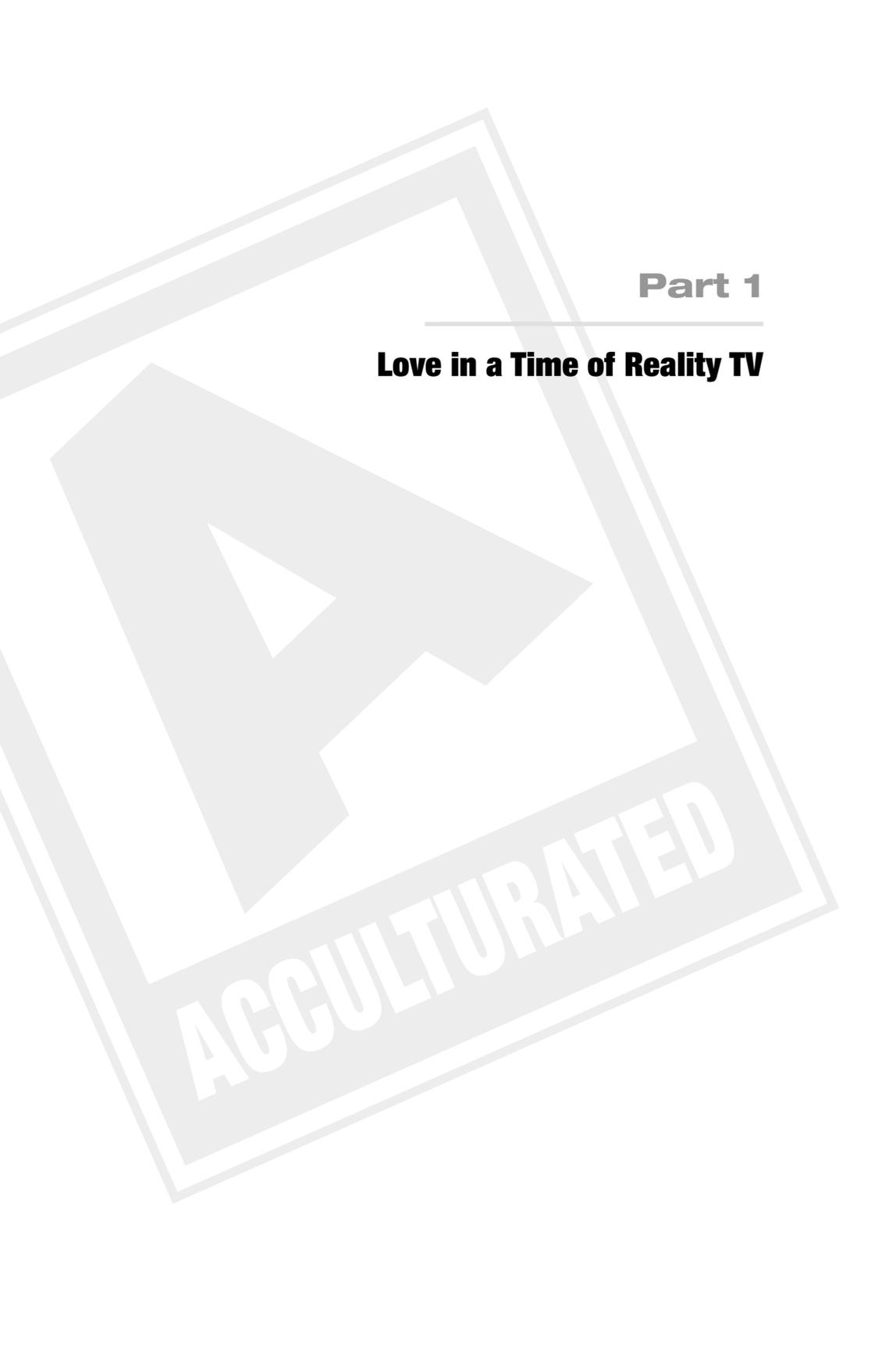
commentary on it as well. It is a tool that we use to create better lives for ourselves and our children, whether our aspirations are as mundane as losing a little weight or as ambitious as forgiving our mortal enemies. Much like a mirror, popular culture reflects what our society looks like: brash, ambitious, at times vulgar, but also capable of generosity, self-improvement, and honesty. If we don't like what we see in the mirror of pop culture, we do have the power to change it. This book is a modest attempt to do just that. By bringing together an eclectic range of contributors who raise provocative questions about pop culture, we hope to encourage a debate about its meaning in contemporary life and offer some suggestions for the way forward.



**Part 1**

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**Love in a Time of Reality TV**



**ACCULTURATED**



# 1: Sex, Lies, and YouTube

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**Kay S. Hymowitz**

**I**F THE HEADLINES seem to tell us one thing about our culture, it is that we are living in the Age of Adultery. A steady line of prominent men have taken the walk of shame across our television screens and through our magazine and newspaper pages over the past decade or so; Bill Clinton (he says it wasn't sex, but would even he deny it was adultery?), Newt Gingrich, Rudy Giuliani, the three Johns (Edwards, Ensign, and Gosselin), Jim McGreevy, Mark Sanford, Eliot Spitzer, and Tiger Woods. These are just the thirty-minutes-of-fame-ers. There are plenty of other minor-league cads who got their more commonly apportioned fifteen minutes—San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom, CNN legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin (said to have fathered the child of Casey Greenfield, daughter of pundit eminence Jeff Greenfield), eight-term Indiana congressman Mark Souder; no doubt by the time these words reach print, there will be others. Add them all together, and culture and politics seem like they're all adultery, all the time.

To many observers, the problem is not so much the lapses of the men in question as the public obsession with them. Why, they ask, are the media and its consumers so preoccupied with these matters when we have so many important things to be pondering? Why are we chattering about sex tapes and cigars when there are loose nukes and economic mayhem out there? These objections frequently come with accusations against a corporate media