
Introduction

culture: education, enrichment, erudition, learning, wisdom, breeding, gentility, civilization, colony, community, crowd, folks, group, settlement, society, staff, tribe, background, development, environment, experience, past, schooling, training, upbringing, customs, habits, mores, traditions.

Culture is ordinary; that is where we must start.

—Raymond Williams

The British cultural historian Raymond Williams has written that culture “is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” This is so, Williams explains, because the term *culture* has acquired new meanings over time without losing the older meanings along the way. Therefore, writers sometimes use the term *culture* in quite different and incompatible ways. Even a simple list of synonyms, such as the one that opens this chapter, can illustrate the truth of Williams’s observation.

For some, culture refers to great art in the European tradition—Beethoven’s symphonies, Shakespeare’s plays, Picasso’s paintings, or Jane Austen’s novels. *Culture* in that tradition refers to something that you read; something that you see in a museum, art gallery, or theater; or something that you hear in a concert hall. It is often called “high culture” and is closely linked to the idea of *becoming* cultured—of cultivating good taste and discriminating judgment. A cultured person, according to this sense of the term, is someone who has achieved a certain level of refinement and class.

Those who equate culture with high art would most likely think, for example, that musicians like Jimi Hendrix, Nirvana, and TV on the Radio or pop icons like Marilyn Monroe or Lady Gaga do not belong in the domain of culture. They would not include popular entertainment like *The Daily Show*, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, *Portal 2*, or NASCAR stock car racing in that category either. In making a distinction between high and low art, this view of culture is largely interested in the classics and in holding what might be considered “serious” art separate from popular culture.

Others, however, take an alternative approach to the study of culture. Instead of separating high from low art, they think of culture in more inclusive terms. For them, culture refers not only to the literary and artistic works that critics have called masterpieces but also to the way of life that characterizes a particular group of people at a particular time. Developed since the turn of the twentieth century by anthropologists, though it has now spread into common use, this approach to culture offers a way to think about how individuals and groups organize and make sense of their social experiences—at home, in school, at work, and at play.

Culture in this broader view includes all the social institutions, patterns of behavior, systems of belief, and kinds of popular entertainment that create the social world we live in. Taken this way, *culture* means not simply masterpieces of art, music, and literature, but lived experience—what goes on in the everyday lives of individuals and groups.

Reading Culture explores the interpretation of contemporary culture and how cultural ideas and ideals are communicated. When we use the term *culture* in this book, we are using a definition that is much closer to the second definition than to the first. The distinction between high and low art is indeed an important one but not because high art is necessarily better or more “cultured” than popular entertainment. What interests us, instead, is how the two terms are used in an ongoing debate about the meaning of contemporary culture in the United States—about, say, what languages should be taught in the schools, about the way media interpret daily events, or about the quality of popular tastes. We will ask you to explore these issues in the following chapters to see how arguments over media or schooling or national identity tell stories of contemporary U.S. culture.

In short, the purpose of this book is not to bring you culture or to make you cultured but to invite you to become more aware of the culture you are already living. According to the way we will be using the term, culture is not something you can go out and get. Rather, culture means all the familiar pursuits and pleasures that shape people’s identities and that enable and constrain what they do and what they might become. Our idea is to treat contemporary American culture as a research project—to understand its ways of life from the inside as we live and observe them.

The following chapters offer opportunities to read, research, and write about contemporary culture. The reading selections feature writers who have explored central facets of culture and who offer information and ideas for you to draw on as you do your own work of reading and writing about culture. Each chapter raises a series of questions about how culture organizes social experience and how individuals understand the meaning and purpose of their daily lives.

In these chapters, we will be asking you to think about how the writers find patterns in culture and how they position themselves in relation to contemporary cultural realities. We will be asking you to read not only to understand what the writers are saying but also to identify what assumptions they are making about cultural issues such as schooling, the media, or national identity. We also will be asking you to do another kind of reading, where the text is not the printed word but the experience of everyday life. We will be asking you to read culture—to read the social world around you, at home and in classrooms, at work and at play, in visual images and public places.

Reading a culture means finding patterns in the familiar. In many respects, of course, you are already a skilled reader of culture. Think of all the reading that you do in the course of a day. You read not only the textbooks assigned in your courses, but also the books and magazines you turn to for pleasure. You probably read a variety of other “texts” without thinking about what you are actually reading. You read the logos on clothes people wear, the cars they drive, and the houses they live in. As you read these cultural signs and artifacts, you might make guesses about people’s social status or about how you will relate to them. You read the way social experience is organized on your campus to determine who your friends will be, who the jocks are, where the geeks hang out.

You read all sorts of visuals in the media, not only for the products advertised or the entertainment offered, but for the lifestyles that are proposed as attractive and desirable. Most of your reading takes place as you move through the day, and it

Getting

EXPLORATO

often takes place below the threshold of consciousness. Often, people just take this kind of reading for granted.

To read culture means *not* taking that reading for granted. Reading culture means bringing forward for analysis and reflection those commonplace aspects of everyday life that people normally think of as simply being there, a part of the natural order of things. Most likely you do some of that kind of reading when you stop to think through an ad or a history lesson or anything that makes you connect what you are seeing or reading with other ideas coming your way every day. Very likely, you do not accept without question all that you see and read. You probably turn a skeptical eye to much of it. Still, to read culture you will have to be more consistent as you learn to bring the familiar back into view so that you can begin to understand how people organize and make sense of their lives. To read the world in this way is to see that culture is not simply passed down from generation to generation in a fixed form, but rather it is a way of life through which individuals and groups are constantly making their own meanings in the contemporary world.

We are all influenced by what cultural critics call mainstream culture, whether we feel part of it or not. Everyone in the United States, to one extent or another (and whether they embrace or reject America's tenets), is shaped by what is sometimes called the "American way of life" and the value that it claims to place on hard work, fair play, individual success, romantic love, family ties, and patriotism. This is, undoubtedly, the most mass-mediated culture in human history, and it is virtually impossible to avoid the dominant images of America past and present—whether of the Pilgrims gathered at that mythic scene of the first Thanksgiving or of retired pro football players in a Miller Lite commercial.

Yet for all the power of the "American way of life" as it is presented by schools, the mass media, and the culture industry, U.S. culture is hardly monolithic or homogeneous. The culture in which Americans live is a diverse one, divided along the lines of race, class, gender, language, ethnicity, age, occupation, region, politics, economics, religion, and more. Ours is a multicultural society, and in part because of that diversity, contemporary culture is constantly changing, constantly in flux. To read culture, therefore, is to see not only how its dominant cultural expressions shape people but also how individuals and groups shape culture—how their responses to and interpretations of contemporary life rewrite its meanings according to their own purposes, interests, and aspirations.

Getting Started

We have gathered a number of what might be considered key statements about and definitions of culture. As you can see from these brief selections, the concept of culture is a contested one.

EXPLORATORY WRITING

Begin your investigations of culture by reading through the passages reprinted here. When you have finished reading, write for 10 minutes about what, according to these writers, the term *culture* means. Use the following questions to help direct this initial exploratory writing:

- What does each individual statement claim about culture?
- How do they differ?

- What do they have in common?
- Which of these statements or definitions comes closest to your own understanding of culture? Why?

MATTHEW ARNOLD, FROM *CULTURE AND ANARCHY* (1869)

But there is of culture another view, in which not solely the scientific passion, the sheer desire to see things as they are, natural and proper in an intelligent being, appears as the ground of it. There is a view in which all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it,—motives eminently such as are called social,—come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture

is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good. As, in the first view of it, we took for its worthy motto Montesquieu's words: "To render an intelligent being yet more intelligent!" so, in the second view of it, there is no better motto which it can have than these words of Bishop Wilson: "To make reason and the will of God prevail!"

MATTHEW ARNOLD, FROM THE PREFACE TO *LITERATURE AND DOGMA* (1873)

Culture is to know the best that has been said and thought in the world.

RAYMOND WILLIAMS, FROM "CULTURE IS ORDINARY" (1958)

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. . . . A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered

and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. . . . Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.

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AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, MARTINIQUE WRITER SPEAKING TO THE WORLD CONGRESS OF BLACK WRITERS AND ARTISTS IN PARIS (1959)

Culture is everything. Culture is the way we dress, the way we carry our heads, the way we

walk, the way we tie our ties—it is not only the fact of writing books or building houses.

CLIFFORD GEERTZ, FROM *INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE* (1973)

The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to

be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.

E. D. HIRSCH, FROM *THE DICTIONARY OF CULTURAL LITERACY* (2002)

[C]ultural literacy is not knowledge of current events, although it can help us understand those events as they occur. To become part of cultural literacy, an item must have lasting significance. . . . This rule of lasting significance tended to eliminate

certain fields altogether, or nearly so. For example, our collective memory of most of the people and events in the fields of sports and entertainment is too ephemeral to take a permanent place in our cultural heritage.

ANDREI CODRESCU, FROM “WHAT IS CULTURE?” (BESTOFNEWORLEANS.COM, APRIL 3, 2007)

The purpose of the word “culture” these days is to express something large and unwieldy that nonetheless has some common features. It’s shorthand for atmosphere, only instead of vapor and clouds, it’s made of thoughts, ideas, people and operating procedures. . . .

The word “culture” has either a positive or negative sense depending on what you already think about the thing it qualifies. The “culture of New Orleans” generally means good things: music, food, easy-going people, street festivals. It is invoked to bring business and tourists to

the city. There is, no doubt, a real culture at the origin of this bloated gumbo, but that culture is not so easily described. For one thing, culture is poverty: the expression of people who can’t afford the ready-made. Most Americans appreciate such a thing only if it comes packaged as a ready-made. Live culture, in New Orleans or anywhere else, is difficult to package because it is an evolving artistic activity whose purpose is to undo such generalities as the “culture of . . .” In other words, most of what marketers, journalists and academics call “culture” is not.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Work together with a group of classmates. Share the exploratory writing you each did in response to these passages about culture. As a group, discuss how these statements differ, what they have in common, and what each adds to the others.

When you have completed your discussion, write your own statement on what culture is and what it means to be “cultured” today. In your statement, draw on any or all of the statements reprinted here to identify which statements come closest to your own understanding and which you and your group members would take issue with.

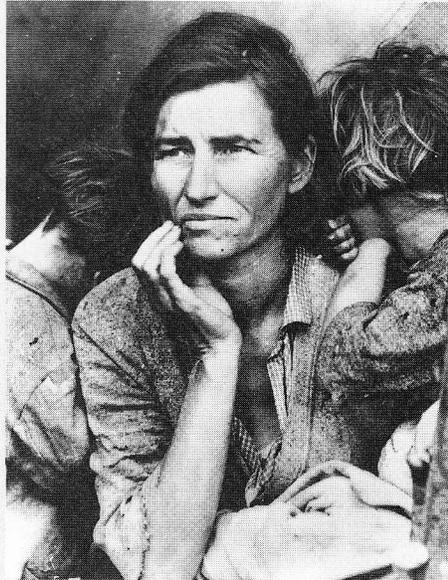
A Guide to Visual Analysis

Throughout *Reading Culture*, you will be asked to analyze visual texts of all sorts. The following brief guide is designed to introduce some of the questions you can begin with. It will also help you locate various tools of visual analysis that appear in *Reading Culture*.

Reading Images

Most of the images you will be asked to examine are still images—photographs, advertisements, logos, graphic novels, comics, and so on. As with the 1936 Dorothea Lange documentary photograph of Florence Thompson (often called *Migrant Madonna*) reprinted here, the way you analyze a still image depends very much on the questions you ask.

- What do you see in the photo?
What details do you notice first?
Who are these people?
- What does the photograph seem to be about?
- How do you respond to the image?
Does it remind you of anything you have seen before?
- What is the medium (photography, digital image, painting, drawing, etc.)?
- What kind (*genre*) of image is it (documentary photo, publicity photo, family snapshot, news photo, etc.)?
- Who took the photo and for what purpose? Where can you find out about the photographer and her career?
- When was it made? What do you know about the historical background?
- Who is the intended audience for the image?
- How are the figures (people) in the image arranged and what relationships are indicated by the arrangement?
- What is the relationship between the figures in the photograph and the viewer?
How would that relationship change if the woman were looking at the camera instead of away from it?
- How would the meaning change if you saw the photograph in the following settings:
 - A family album?
 - A history book?



Dorothea Lange, "Florence Thompson, 1936"

- A poster about hunger in America?
- A news story?
- An advertisement for antidepressants?

Critical Writing

One way to begin your own work reading images is to examine various approaches to the investigation and analysis of visual culture—to listen to the conversation and explore the ways various writers raise questions and frame issues.

- “Literacy in the New Media Age,” Gunther Kress, p. 12
- “I Tweet, Therefore I Am,” Andrew Lam, p. 24
- “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” N. Katherine Hayles, p. 27
- “Always On,” Sherry Turkle, p. 35
- “Diagnosing the Digital Revolution: Why It’s So Hard to Tell Whether It’s Really Changing Us,” Alison Gopnik, p. 40
- “In the Shadow of the Image,” Stewart and Elizabeth Ewen, p. 178
- “Ways of Seeing,” John Berger, p. 193
- “The Female Nude: Surfaces of Desire,” Richard Leppert, p. 202
- “Style in Revolt: Revolting Style,” Dick Hebdige, p. 229
- “Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance,” John Fiske, p. 282
- “Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals,” Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez, p. 303
- “Necessary Fictions: Warren Neidich’s Early American Cover-Ups,” Christopher Phillips, p. 453
- “Reading American Photographs,” Alan Trachtenberg, p. 489

Some Useful Terms for Reading the Visual

Composition Visual composition usually refers to how elements of an image are arranged within the space or frame and how that visual design conveys meaning and sets up a relationship with the viewer or reader.

- **Page design and layout**—arrangement of elements on the page. This includes attention to the text-to-graphics ratio, use of color and choice of font size and style. See the Visual Essay “Word, Image, and the Design of the Page,” p. 14, and “Designing a Photo Essay or Digital Video Essay on *Life* Magazine,” p. 110.
- **Conceptual and narrative representations**—conceptual representations depict situations, scenes, and states of being, while narrative representations show actions. See the Visual Essay “American Photographs,” p. 490.
- **Distance**—how near or far the camera is from the subject. Distance controls how intimately or impersonally viewers encounter what’s represented in a photo. See the Visual Essay “American Photographs,” p. 490.
- **Perspective**—the angle of vision. Perspective is a technique for representing three-dimensional objects and depth relationships in a two-dimensional space

to give the appearance of depth and establish a point of view. See the Visual Essay “American Photographs,” p. 490.

- **The gaze**—the direction in which a subject looks at or away from the viewer. The gaze creates either an offer (offering the subject to the viewer to be looked at) or a demand (engaging the viewer in a direct way); common term in visual analysis of gender. See the Visual Essay “Reading the Gaze: Gender Roles in Advertising,” p. 206.

Genre Analysis Genres are familiar acts of communication that take place across a broad range of media. Genre analysis examines a visual in terms of how it conforms to or breaks with various genres of visual representation. Documentary photography, news photos, and landscape paintings, for example, are different visual types or genres that carry with them the expectations and forms of their type. Genres featured in *Reading Culture* for visual analysis include:

- **Documentary photography**—see “Reading American Photographs,” Alan Trachtenberg, p. 489, and the Visual Essay “American Photographs,” p. 490
- **News photography**—see Student Activism in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s, p. 173, and the Visual Essay “American Photographs,” p. 490
- **Landscape photography**—see “Cancer Alley: The Poisoning of the American South,” Jason Berry and Richard Misrach, p. 313
- **Glamour photography/publicity shots**—see the Visual Essay “Hollywood Icons—Brando, Monroe, and Dean,” p. 87
- **Print advertising**—see Suggestions for Reading Advertising, p. 191
- **Publicity campaign posters**—see “Public Health Messages,” p. 219
- **Graphic narrative/comics**—see “A.D. New Orleans After the Deluge,” Josh Neufeld, p. 20, and “The Veil,” Marjane Satrapi, p. 361
- **Performance art**—see “Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West,” Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, p. 540
- **Page design**—see the Visual Essay “Word, Image, and the Design of the Page,” p. 14, and “Designing a Print Photo Essay or Digital Video Essay on *Life* Magazine,” p. 110
- **College viewbooks**—see the Visual Essay “Analyzing College Viewbooks,” p. 144
- **Logos and packaging**—see the Visual Essay “M.I.A.’s Graphic Style, p. 512, the Visual Essay “Reading Labels, Selling Water,” p. 248, and Race and Branding, p. 269
- **Murals**—see “Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals,” Eva Sperling Cockroft and Holly Barnet-Sanchez, p. 303, and “The History of Labor in the State of Maine,” Judy Taylor, p. 435
- **Street art**—see the Visual Essay “Banksy: ‘The Most Honest Artform Available,’” p. 310
- **Timeline**—see “Timeline on Fitness: Jack LaLanne to Michelle Obama,” p. 258

Analyzing Visual Representations In visual theory, representation is a term that refers to how cultural ideas, ideals, and attitudes are popularized and presented visually.

- **Images of gender**—an examination of how women and men are treated visually. See “When You Meet Estella Smart, You Been Met!” Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, p. 184, the Visual Essay “Reading the Gaze: Gender Roles in Advertising,” p. 206, Advertising Through the Ages, p. 225, and “The Veil,” Marjane Satrapi, p. 361.
- **Images of difference**—an examination of how racial, ethnic, economic, and other differences are treated visually; sometimes called the process of “othering.” See Race and Branding, p. 269, the Visual Essay “Contra Curtis: Early American Cover-Ups,” Warren Neidich, p. 456, the Visual Essay “Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West,” Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, p. 540, “Le chef qui a vendu l’Afrique aux colons,” Samuel Fosso, p. 542, “Requesting Buddha Series, No. 1,” Wang Qingsong, p. 542.

Historical Analysis

Although historical analysis can refer to the history of the image itself or to the history of the technology that is used to create an image (glass plate, film, and digital technology are all a part of the history of photography), in *Reading Culture* historical analysis refers to an examination of the relation of an image to historical events (what the image can tell viewers about those events as well as the role it might have played in events) and to public memory of the past (how images are selected to represent the past and what this selection can tell us about the present).

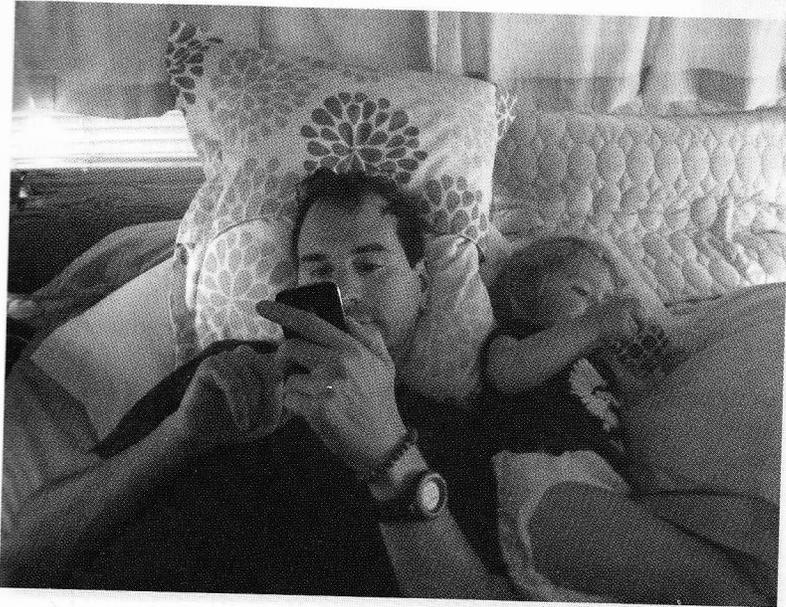
- See “Advertising Through the Ages,” p. 225.
- See the Visual Essay “Contra Curtis: Early American Cover-Ups,” Warren Neidich, p. 456.
- See the Visual Essay “American Photographs,” p. 490.

Visual Parody/Satire

Visual parody and satire overturn or overwrite the original image as a commentary on the original message or the politics of the image. Parody begins with analysis to understand what the original is saying and how it conveys that message in order to rewrite or satirize the original message.

- See the Visual Essay “Rewriting the Image,” p. 214.
- See the Visual Essay “Contra Curtis: Early American Cover-Ups,” Warren Neidich, p. 456.
- See the Visual Essay “Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West,” Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, p. 540, “Le chef qui a vendu l’Afrique aux colons,” Samuel Fosso, p. 542, “Requesting Buddha Series, No. 1,” Wang Qingsong, p. 542.

Generations



Children are always episodes in someone else's narratives.

—Carolyn Steedman

Musicians write the songs of their generation. Commentators worry over the values, intelligence, and taste of younger generations. Historians trace the roots of generations that came before them. Sociologists create labels to describe them. In naming generations, we link groups of individuals born in the same time period to historical events, fashion trends, cultural attitudes, music, technologies, and more. We even use those generational tags to suggest what is good or bad in a society as a whole. The generation sociologists call the “greatest,” born before 1928, is credited with saving the world during the second World War. The generation born after 1980 is being called “Millennials” by some because they came of age at the turn of this century. Others, however, have called them the “Look at Me Generation” because of a rise in social network use and an increase in self-made and self-promoting online videos. Still others have damned the same group as the “Dumbest Generation” or “Google That,” arguing that digital technology has left this newest generation with too much information and too little knowledge.

Generations are identified by place and circumstance, as well as by current events. The United States, for example, is a nation of immigrants, and it is common to distinguish between first and second generations—between those who first came to the United States (voluntarily and involuntarily, from Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America) and their children who were born here. The two generations are biologically related to each other as well as to older generations as far back as people can trace their ancestry. Yet first-generation and second-generation Americans often differ in the way they live their lives, in the hopes they have for themselves and their children, and in the ties they feel to the traditions and customs of their places of ancestry. To be a member of a generation in cultural terms, then, is to belong both to a family you are related to biologically and to a group of people you are related to historically.

Each generation seems to have its own characteristic mood or identity that the media tries to capture in a label: the “lost” generation of the Jazz Age in the 1920s, the “silent” generation of the Eisenhower years in the 1950s (traditionalists), the “baby boomers” of the 1960s, the “yuppies” of the 1980s, the Generation X “slackers” of the 1990s, and the “Millennials” (or “Nexters”) of the 2000s. When people use these labels, they are not only referring to particular groups of people but are also calling up a set of values, styles, and images—a collective feeling in the air. When thinking about your generation, look at how the media has represented it and how these media representations have entered into your generation’s conception of itself.

Each generation produces its own way of speaking and its own forms of cultural expression. Cultural historian Raymond Williams says that “no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessor.” Young people, for example, use their own slang to recognize friends, to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, and to position themselves in relation to the older generation. Whether you write letters, regularly post your status on Facebook, or Tweet your way through large lecture classes; the kind of music you listen to; the way you dance; your style of dress; where you go to hang out—all of these reveal something about you and your relation to the constantly changing styles of youth culture in the contemporary United States.

How a generation looks at itself is inevitably entangled in the decisive historical events, geopolitical changes, and popular entertainment of its day. Events such as the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, the Reagan years, the dot.com boom and bust of the 1990s, the attacks on 9/11, and the invasion and occupation of Iraq have influenced different generations profoundly. To understand what it means to belong to your generation, then, you will need to locate your experience growing up as a member of your generation in its historical times—to see how your generation has made sense of its place in American history and its relation to past generations. In this chapter, you will be asked to read, think, and write about what it means to be a member of and a participant in your historical and cultural generation.

Of course no generation is monolithic—not all thirty-somethings, for example, think alike or value the same things. Every generation is divided along the same lines of race, class, gender, and ethnicity that divide the wider society. But a generation is not simply a composite of individuals either. To think about the mood of your generation—the sensibility that suffuses its lived experience—you will need to consider how the character of your generation distinguishes it from generations of the past, even if that character is contradictory or inconsistent.

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the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the dramatic economic recession that followed, and the election of the first black U.S. president.

With a group of your classmates, consider how or if these more recent events might define the generation coming of age after 2001 in the way that the Great Depression, World War II, and Vietnam defined the generations coming of age in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1960s. This article was published in 2000. If Hochschild were writing the article today, how would she have to revise her description of a generation informed by events since then?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Neither Hochschild nor any of the people she interviews offer a term to “fill in the blank” and characterize the current generation of young people. In a 3 to 5 page essay, write about what it means to describe an entire generation using a label. Consider, for example, the terms used to characterize earlier generations: The Greatest Generation of World War II, the Beat generation, baby boomers, the Me generation, Generation X, slackers, and so on. What do such terms say about the generations they are meant to define? What do they leave out? In your essay, suggest the qualities of your own generation you would like to see in any term that might be used to define it.
2. Consider Hochschild’s claim that the “market dominates not just economic life . . . but our cultural life as well.” Write a 3 to 5 page essay that applies that claim to your generation. You’ll want to take into account, of course, how individual identities are shaped by what people buy and consume—whether that is styles of clothing or music or digital technologies, for example. But consider also how the market permeates people’s thinking, their relationships with others, and their capacity to experience the world.
3. Assume that Hochschild has hired you to help her update her article. Write a memo to her that first explains to what extent her findings remain valid and why. Then provide an explanation of what she would need to add or revise in order to update the article.

MILLENNIALS: CONFIDENT. CONNECTED. OPEN TO CHANGE.

The Pew Research Center Project on Social and Demographic Trends

On its website pewresearch.org, The Pew Research Center describes itself as “a nonpartisan ‘fact tank’ that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It does not take positions on policy issues.” The following selection from the 2009–2010 report on the Millennial Generation (the generation coming of age at the turn of this century) was published as a part of Pew’s ongoing Project on Social and Demographic Trends. You can read the entire report online or download it as a pdf file by visiting the Pew Research Center site at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1437/millennials-profile>.

SUGGESTION FOR READING Before you begin reading, take the Pew Research Center’s Millennial quiz, “How Millennial Are You?” We have reproduced the quiz and survey results after this reading, but you can also locate it by visiting the Pew site www.pewsocialtrends.org and clicking on the

or that they will eventually meet their long-term financial goals. But at the moment, fully 37% of 18- to 29-year-olds are unemployed or out of the workforce, the highest share among this age group in more than three decades. Research shows that young people who graduate from college in a bad economy typically suffer long-term consequences—with effects on their careers and earnings that linger as long as 15 years.¹

Whether as a by-product of protective parents, the age of terrorism or a media culture that focuses on dangers, they cast a wary eye on human nature. Two-thirds say “you can’t be too careful” when dealing with people. Yet they are less skeptical than their elders of government. More so than other generations, they believe government should do more to solve problems.

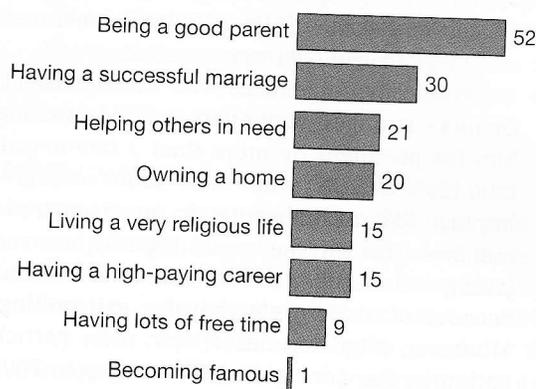
They are the least overtly religious American generation in modern times. One-in-four are unaffiliated with any religion, far more than the share of older adults when they were ages 18 to 29. Yet not belonging does not necessarily mean not believing. Millennials pray about as often as their elders did in their own youth.

Only about six-in-ten were raised by both parents—a smaller share than was the case with older generations. In weighing their own life priorities, Millennials (like older adults) place parenthood and marriage far above career and financial success. But they aren’t rushing to the altar. Just one-in-five Millennials (21%) are married now, half the share of their parents’ generation at the same stage of life. About a third (34%) are parents, according to the Pew Research survey. We estimate that, in 2006, more than a third of 18 to 29 year old women who gave birth were unmarried. This is a far higher share than was the case in earlier generations.²

¹⁰ Millennials are on course to become the most educated generation in American history, a trend driven largely by the demands of a modern knowledge-based economy, but most likely accelerated in recent years by the millions of 20-somethings enrolling in graduate schools,

Millennials’ Priorities

% saying . . . is one of the most important things in the lives



Note: Based on adults ages 18–29.

colleges or community colleges in part because they can’t find a job. Among 18 to 24 year olds a record share—39.6%—was enrolled in college as of 2008, according to census data.

They get along well with their parents. Looking back at their teenage years, Millennials report having had fewer spats with mom or dad than older adults say they had with their own parents when they were growing up. And now, hard times have kept a significant share of adult Millennials and their parents under the same roof. About one-in-eight older Millennials (ages 22 and older) say they’ve “boomeranged” back to a parent’s home because of the recession.

They respect their elders. A majority say that the older generation is superior to the younger generation when it comes to moral values and work ethic. Also, more than six-in-ten say that families have a responsibility to have an elderly parent come live with them if that parent wants to. By contrast, fewer than four-in-ten adults ages 60 and older agree that this is a family responsibility.

Despite coming of age at a time when the United States has been waging two wars, relatively few Millennials—just 2% of males—are military veterans. At a comparable stage of their life cycle, 6% of Gen Xer men, 13% of Baby Boomer men and 24% of Silent men were veterans.

Politically, Millennials were among Barack Obama's strongest supporters in 2008, backing him for president by more than a two-to-one ratio (66% to 32%) while older adults were giving just 50% of their votes to the Democratic nominee. This was the largest disparity between younger and older voters recorded in four decades of modern election day exit polling. Moreover, after decades of low voter participation by the young, the turnout gap in 2008 between voters under and over the age of 30 was the smallest it had been since 18- to 20-year-olds were given the right to vote in 1972.

15 But the political enthusiasms of Millennials have since cooled—for Obama and his mes-

sage of change, for the Democratic Party and, quite possibly, for politics itself. About half of Millennials say the president has failed to change the way Washington works, which had been the central promise of his candidacy. Of those who say this, three-in-ten blame Obama himself, while more than half blame his political opponents and special interests.

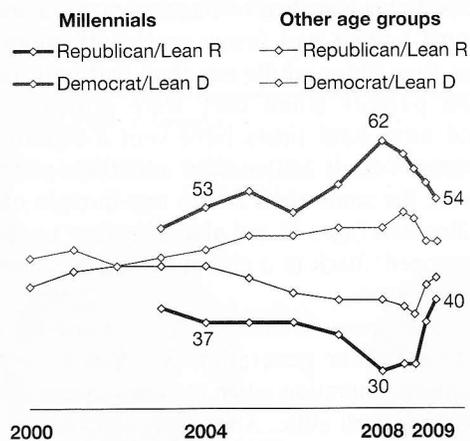
To be sure, Millennials remain the most likely of any generation to self-identify as liberals; they are less supportive than their elders of an assertive national security policy and more supportive of a progressive domestic social agenda. They are still more likely than any other age group to identify as Democrats. Yet by early 2010, their support for Obama and the Democrats had receded, as evidenced both by survey data and by their low level of participation in recent off-year and special elections.

OUR RESEARCH METHODS

This Pew Research Center report profiles the roughly 50 million Millennials who currently span the ages of 18 to 29. It's likely that when future analysts are in a position to take a fuller measure of this new generation, they will conclude that millions of additional younger teens (and perhaps even pre-teens) should be grouped together with their older brothers and sisters. But for the purposes of this report, unless we indicate otherwise, we focus on Millennials who are at least 18 years old.

We examine their demographics; their political and social values; their lifestyles and life priorities; their digital technology and social media habits; and their economic and educational aspirations. We also compare and contrast Millennials with the nation's three other living generations—Gen Xers (ages 30 to 45), Baby Boomers (ages 46 to 64) and Silents (ages 65 and older). Whenever the trend data permit, we compare the four generations as they all are now—and also as older generations were at the ages that adult Millennials are now.³

Democratic Advantage Narrows Among Millennial Voters (%)



Note: Based on registered voters. Figures show net leaned party identification as yearly totals from 2000 through 2008 and quarterly for 2009.

Source: Pew Research Center surveys.

What's in a Name?

Generational names are a part of our culture. Some are derived from others from rapid social change, others from a big turn of events.

The Millennial generation is a new category. The label was first used for the first generation to be born in the millennium.

Generation X covers the generation born through 1980. The first name affixed to the generation. Xers are often depicted as loners.

The Baby Boomer generation is the result of a spike in fertility that began at the end of World War II and ended abruptly in 1964, a time when the pill went on the market. The generation is demography-driven.

The Silent generation (born 1928 through 1945) is the generation that grew up during the Depression and World War II. The generation refers to their conformity and the generation makes for a nice contrast to the anti-establishment generation.

The Greatest Generation (born 1928) "saved the world" during the war. The generation is the memorable phrase for the generation that fought in World War II.

Generational names are a part of our zeitgeist changes, and the generation spot-on fall out of fashion. The Millennial tag will change that comes with the years seems like a

Most of the generation on a new survey of 2,020 adults (Millennials), co-

What's in a Name?

Generational names are the handiwork of popular culture. Some are drawn from a historic event; others from rapid social or demographic change; others from a big turn in the calendar.

The Millennial generation falls into the third category. The label refers those born after 1980—the first generation to come of age in the new millennium.

Generation X covers people born from 1965 through 1980. The label long ago overtook the first name affixed to this generation: the Baby Bust. Xers are often depicted as savvy, entrepreneurial loners.

The Baby Boomer label is drawn from the great spike in fertility that began in 1946, right after the end of World War II, and ended almost as abruptly in 1964, around the time the birth control pill went on the market. It's a classic example of a demography-driven name.

The Silent generation describes adults born from 1928 through 1945. Children of the Great Depression and World War II, their "Silent" label refers to their conformist and civic instincts. It also makes for a nice contrast with the noisy ways of the anti-establishment Boomers.

The Greatest Generation (those born before 1928) "saved the world" when it was young, in the memorable phrase of Ronald Reagan. It's the generation that fought and won World War II.

Generational names are works in progress. The zeitgeist changes, and labels that once seemed spot-on fall out of fashion. It's not clear if the Millennial tag will endure, although a calendar change that comes along only once in a thousand years seems like a pretty secure anchor.

lar telephone from Jan. 14 to 27, 2010; this survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.0 percentage points for the full sample and larger percentages for various subgroups. The report also draws on more than two decades of Pew Research Center surveys, supplemented by our analysis of Census Bureau data and other relevant studies.

SOME CAVEATS

²⁰ A few notes of caution are in order. Generational analysis has a long and distinguished place in social science, and we cast our lot with those scholars who believe it is not only possible, but often highly illuminating, to search for the unique and distinctive characteristics of any given age group of Americans. But we also know this is not an exact science.

We acknowledge, for example, that there is an element of false precision in setting hard chronological boundaries between the generations. Can we say with certainty that a typical 30-year-old adult is a Gen Xer while a typical 29-year-old adult is a Millennial? Of course not. Nevertheless, we must draw lines in order to carry out the statistical analyses that form the core of our research methodology. And our boundaries—while admittedly too crisp—are not arbitrary. They are based on our own research findings and those of other scholars.

We are mindful that there are as many differences in attitudes, values, behaviors and lifestyles within a generation as there are between generations. But we believe this reality does not diminish the value of generational analysis; it merely adds to its richness and complexity. Throughout this report, we will not only explore how Millennials differ from other generations, we will also look at how they differ among themselves.

THE MILLENNIAL IDENTITY

Most Millennials (61%) in our January, 2010 survey say their generation has a unique and distinctive identity. That doesn't make them

Most of the findings in this report are based on a new survey of a national cross-section of 2,020 adults (including an oversample of Millennials), conducted by landline and cellu-

unusual, however. Roughly two-thirds of Silents, nearly six-in-ten Boomers and about half of Xers feel the same way about their generation.

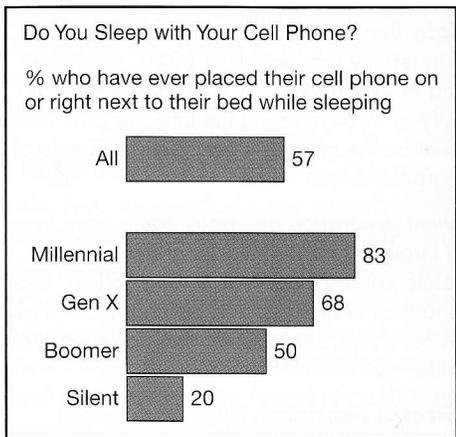
But Millennials have a distinctive reason for feeling distinctive. In response to an open-ended follow-up question, 24% say it's because of their use of technology. Gen Xers also cite technology as their generation's biggest source of distinctiveness, but far fewer—just 12%—say this. Boomers' feelings of distinctiveness coalesce mainly around work ethic, which 17% cite as their most prominent identity badge. For Silents, it's the shared experience of the Depression and World War II, which 14% cite as the biggest reason their generation stands apart.

25 Millennials' technological exceptionalism is chronicled throughout the survey. It's not just their gadgets—it's the way they've fused their social lives into them. For example, three-quarters of Millennials have created a profile on a social networking site, compared with half of Xers, 30% of Boomers and 6% of Silents. There are big generation gaps, as well, in using wireless technology, playing video games and posting self-created videos online. Millennials are also more likely than older adults to say technology makes life easier and brings family and friends closer together (though the generation gaps on these questions are relatively narrow).

WORK ETHIC, MORAL VALUES, RACE RELATIONS

Of the four generations, Millennials are the only one that doesn't cite "work ethic" as one of their principal claims to distinctiveness. A nationwide Pew Research Center survey taken in 2009 may help explain why. This one focused on differences between young and old rather than between specific age groups. Nonetheless, its findings are instructive.

Nearly six-in-ten respondents cited work ethic as one of the big sources of differences between young and old. Asked who has the better work ethic, about three-fourths of respon-



What Makes Your Generation Unique?

Millennial	Gen X	Boomer	Silent
1. Technology use (24%)	Technology use (12%)	Work ethic (17%)	WW II, Depression (14%)
2. Music/Pop culture (11%)	Work ethic (11%)	Respectful (14%)	Smarter (13%)
3. Liberal/tolerant (7%)	Conservative/Trad'l (7%)	Values/Morals (8%)	Honest (12%)
4. Smarter (6%)	Smarter (6%)	"Baby Boomers" (6%)	Work ethic (10%)
5. Clothes (5%)	Respectful (5%)	Smarter (5%)	Values/Morals (10%)

Note: Based on respondents who said their generation was unique/distinct. Items represent individual, open-ended responses. Top five responses are shown for each age group. Sample sizes for sub-groups are as follows: Millennials, n = 527; Gen X, n = 173; Boomers, n = 283; Silent, n = 205.

dents said that margins, survey adults have the moral values an

It might be as a typical today." But wh traits—work et others—young have the better be a self-confid little appetite fo

That 2009 s lic—young and generation is m elders. More tha surveys confirm about interracial are the most op followed closely Silents.

30 Likewise, M immigrants than ten (58%) say in try, according to just 43% of adul

The same p tudes about non from mothers of side the home, out being marrie

Weighing Trends in

- More single women
- More gay couples re
- More mothers of you
- More people living t
- More people of differ

Note: "Good thing," "D

dents said that older people do. By similar margins, survey respondents also found older adults have the upper hand when it comes to moral values and their respect for others.

It might be tempting to dismiss these findings as a typical older adult gripe about “kids today.” But when it comes to each of these traits—work ethic, moral values, respect for others—young adults *agree* that older adults have the better of it. In short, Millennials may be a self-confident generation, but they display little appetite for claims of moral superiority.

That 2009 survey also found that the public—young and old alike—thinks the younger generation is more racially tolerant than their elders. More than two decades of Pew Research surveys confirm that assessment. In their views about interracial dating, for example, Millennials are the most open to change of any generation, followed closely by Gen Xers, then Boomers, then Silents.

30 Likewise, Millennials are more receptive to immigrants than are their elders. Nearly six-in-ten (58%) say immigrants strengthen the country, according to a 2009 Pew Research survey; just 43% of adults ages 30 and older agree.

The same pattern holds on a range of attitudes about nontraditional family arrangements, from mothers of young children working outside the home, to adults living together without being married, to more people of different

races marrying each other. Millennials are more accepting than older generations of these more modern family arrangements, followed closely by Gen Xers. To be sure, acceptance does not in all cases translate into outright approval. But it does mean Millennials disapprove less.

A GENTLER GENERATION GAP

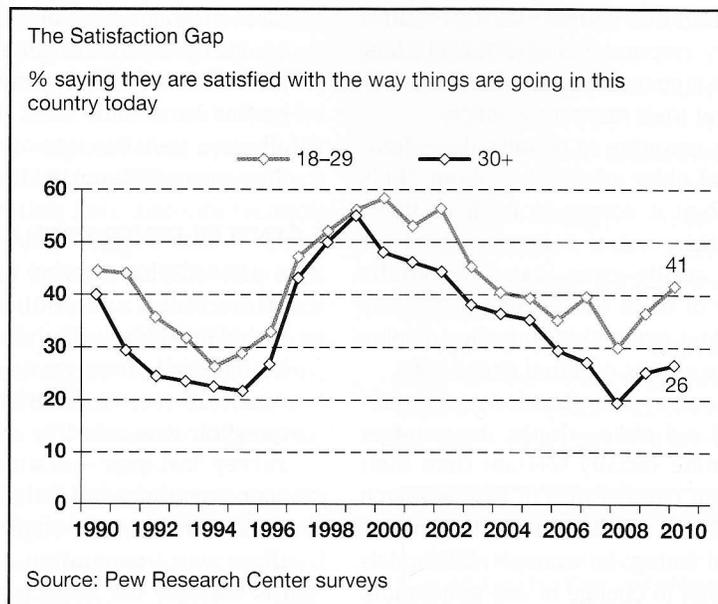
A 1969 Gallup survey, taken near the height of the social and political upheavals of that turbulent decade, found that 74% of the public believed there was a “generation gap” in American society. Surprisingly, when that same question was asked in a Pew Research Center survey last year—in an era marked by hard economic times but little if any overt age-based social tension—the share of the public saying there was a generation gap had risen slightly to 79%.

But as the 2009 results also make clear, this modern generation gap is a much more benign affair than the one that cast a shadow over the 1960s. The public says this one is mostly about the different ways that old and young use technology—and relatively few people see that gap as a source of conflict. Indeed, only about a quarter of the respondents in the 2009 survey said they see big conflicts between young and old in America. Many more see conflicts between immigrants and the native born, between rich and poor, and between black and whites.

Weighing Trends in Marriage and Parenthood, by Generation % saying this is a bad thing for society

	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer	Silent
More single women deciding to have children	59	54	65	72
More gay couples raising children	32	36	48	55
More mothers of young children working outside the home	23	29	39	38
More people living together w/o getting married	22	31	44	58
More people of different races marrying each other	5	10	14	26

Note: “Good thing,” “Doesn’t make much difference,” and “Don’t know” responses not shown.



There is one generation gap that *has* widened notably in recent years. It has to do with satisfaction over the state of the nation. In recent decades the young have always tended to be a bit more upbeat than their elders on this key measure, but the gap is wider now than it has been in at least twenty years. Some 41% of Millennials say they are satisfied with the way things are going in the country, compared with just 26% of those ages 30 and older. Whatever toll a recession, a housing crisis, a financial meltdown and a pair of wars may have taken on the national psyche in the past few years, it appears to have hit the old harder than the young.

35 But this speaks to a difference in outlook and attitude; it's not a source of conflict or tension. As they make their way into adulthood, Millennials have already distinguished themselves as a generation that gets along well with others, especially their elders. For a nation whose population is rapidly going gray, that could prove to be a most welcome character trait.

NOTES

1. Lisa B. Kahn. "The Long-Term Labor Market Consequences of Graduating from College in a Bad Economy," Yale School of Management, Aug. 13, 2009 (forthcoming in *Labour Economics*).
2. This Pew Research estimate is drawn from our analysis of government data for women ages 18 to 29 who gave birth in 2006, the most recent year for which such data is available. Martin, Joyce A., Brady E. Hamilton, Paul D. Sutton, Stephanie J. Ventura, Fay Menacker, Sharon Kirmeyer, and TJ Mathews. Births: Final Data for 2006. National Vital Statistics Reports; vol 57 no 7. Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics. 2009.
3. We do not have enough respondents ages 83 and older in our 2010 survey to permit an analysis of the Greatest Generation, which is usually defined as encompassing adults born before 1928. Throughout much of this report, we have grouped these older respondents in with the Silent generation. However, Chapter 8 on politics and Chapter 9 on religion each draw on long-term trend data from other sources, permitting us in some instances in those chapters to present findings about the Greatest Generation.

HOW MILLI

1. In the past
 Yes
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2. In the past
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EXPLORATORY WRITING

This Pew profile calls Millennials “confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change.” In an exploratory piece of writing, use those terms as reference points for your own description of Millennials (the generation born after 1980). To what extent is this an accurate description of Millennials you know? Are there other, more accurate terms you would use to describe this generation?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

If you did not take the Pew quiz “How Millennial Are You?” before you began reading, take it now. (It is reprinted here.) Compare your responses with those of your classmates. How do you account for your own score? How well would you say the quiz describes your generation? What questions would you add to the quiz? How might those questions change the way a study like this one describes this generation?

HOW MILLENNIAL ARE YOU? A PEW RESEARCH QUIZ

1. In the past 24 hours, did you watch more than an hour of television programming, or not?
 Yes
 No
2. In the past 24 hours, did you read a daily newspaper, or not?
 Yes
 No
3. In the past 24 hours, did you play video games, or not?
 Yes
 No
4. Thinking about your telephone use, do you have . . .
 Only a landline phone in your home
 Only a cell phone
 Both a landline and cell phone
5. In the past 24 hours, about how many text messages, if any, did you send or receive on your cell phone?
 No text messages on your cell phone in the past 24 hours
 1 to 9 text messages
 10 to 49 text messages
 50 or more text messages
6. How important is being successful in a high-paying career or profession to you personally?
 One of the most important things
 Very important but not the most
 Somewhat important

7. Do you think more people of different races marrying each other is a . . .
- Good thing for society
 - Bad thing for society
 - Doesn't make much difference for society
8. In the past 12 months, have you contacted a government official, or not? This contact could have been in person, by phone, by letter, by sending an email, or posting a message on their website or social networking page.
- Yes, contacted a government official in past 12 months
 - No, did not contact a government official in past 12 months
9. Have you ever created your own profile on any social networking site such as MySpace, Facebook or LinkedIn, or haven't you done this?
- Yes, have created profile
 - No, have not created profile
10. How important is living a very religious life to you personally?
- One of the most important things
 - Very important but not the most
 - Somewhat important
 - Not important
11. Were your parents married during most of the time you were growing up, or not?
- Married
 - Not married (includes divorced, separated, widowed or never married)
12. Do you have a tattoo, or not?
- Yes
 - No
13. Do you have a piercing in a place other than your earlobe, or not?
- Yes
 - No
14. In general, would you describe your political views as . . .
- Conservative
 - Moderate
 - Liberal

Finally, please tell us your age so that we can see how people in different age groups score on the quiz (we don't use your age in computing your score).

- Under 18
- 18-29
- 30-45
- 46-64
- 65+

Survey Results

Here's how the survey

In the past 24 hours
hour of television

Yes

No

In the past 24 hours
newspaper, or no

Yes

No

In the past 24 hours
games, or not?

Yes

No

Thinking about you

Only a landline phone

Only a cell phone

Landline and cell

In the past 24 hours
messages, if any,
cell phone?

No text messages

1 to 9 text messages

10 to 49 text messages

50 or more text messages

How important is
career or profession?

One of the most important

Very important but not

Somewhat important

Not important

Do you think more people
marrying each other

Good thing for society

Survey Results from "How Millennial are You?"

Here's how the survey's respondents from each generation answered the questions, along with the total for the whole sample.

	Total %	Millennial 1981+ %	Gen X 1965-80 %	Boomers 1946-64 %	Silent 1928-45 %
In the past 24 hours, did you watch more than an hour of television programming, or not?					
Yes	71	57	67	78	82
No	29	43	33	22	18
In the past 24 hours, did you read a daily newspaper, or not?					
Yes	55	43	50	58	73
No	45	57	50	41	26
In the past 24 hours, did you play video games, or not?					
Yes	16	28	14	15	6
No	84	72	86	85	93
Thinking about your telephone use, do you have . . .					
Only a landline phone in your home	11	4	8	6	35
Only a cell phone	21	41	24	13	5
Landline and cell phone	68	53	68	81	60
In the past 24 hours, about how many text messages, if any, did you send and receive on your cell phone?					
No text messages	53	20	37	65	96
1 to 9 text messages	20	21	25	23	3
10 to 49 text messages	16	27	25	10	1
50 or more text messages	11	31	13	2	0
How important is being successful in a high-paying career or profession to you personally?					
One of the most important	9	15	10	4	5
Very important but not the most	36	47	40	28	28
Somewhat important	34	27	33	41	32
Not important	21	10	17	25	32
Do you think more people of different races marrying each other is a . . .					
Good thing for society	24	34	27	18	15

(continued)

	Total %	Millennial 1981+ %	Gen X 1965-80 %	Boomers 1946-64 %	Silent 1928-45 %
Bad thing for society	13	5	10	14	26
Doesn't make much difference	61	60	62	65	52
In the past 12 months, have you contacted a government official, or not?					
Yes	33	26	34	41	27
No	67	74	66	59	73
Have you ever created your own profile on any social networking site such as MySpace, Facebook or LinkedIn, or haven't you done this?					
Yes	41	75	50	30	6
No/Not an internet user	58	26	50	70	94
How important is living a very religious life to your personally?					
One of the most important	20	15	19	21	24
Very important but not the most	35	28	34	38	44
Somewhat important	25	30	26	23	19
Not important	19	26	20	17	10
Were your parents married during most of the time you were growing up, or not?					
Married	76	62	71	85	87
Not married (includes divorced, separated, widowed or never married)	22	37	28	14	11
Do you have a tattoo, or not?					
Yes	23	38	32	15	6
No	77	62	68	85	94
Do you have a piercing in a place other than your ear lobe, or not?					
Yes	8	23	9	1	—
No	92	77	91	99	100
In general, would you describe your political views as . . .					
Conservative	40	29	38	44	50
Moderate	32	32	33	33	29
Liberal	21	29	25	17	12

*Note: Don't know responses not shown. Based on data from the 2010 Millennials Survey.

Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim (2004), and *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary* (2010). In 2001 he was awarded the Thurber Prize for American Humor for the collection *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000) from which the following was taken.

SUGGESTION FOR READING Much of David Sedaris's work is written to be read aloud, and so his recordings of this and other essays and stories are widely available online and in bookstores. If possible, listen to Sedaris reading from his work, so that when you read the essay reprinted here you have the tone and cadence of that voice and delivery in mind.

1 My father loves jazz and has an extensive collection of records and reel-to-reel tapes he used to enjoy after returning home from work. He might have entered the house in a foul mood, but once he had his Dexter Gordon and a vodka martini, the stress melted away and everything was "beautiful, baby, just beautiful." The instant the needle hit that record, he'd loosen his tie and become something other than the conservative engineer with a pocketful of IBM pencils embossed with the command THINK.

"Man, oh man, will you get a load of the chops on this guy? I saw him once at the Blue Note, and I mean to tell you that he blew me right out of my chair! A talent like that comes around only once in a lifetime. The guy was an absolute comet, and there I was in the front row. Can you imagine that?"

"Gee," I'd say, "I bet that was really something."

Empathy was the wrong tack, as it only seemed to irritate him.

5 "You don't know the half of it," he'd say. "Really something, my butt. You haven't got a clue. You could have taken a hatchet and cut the man's lips right off his face, chopped them off at the quick, and he still would have played better than anyone else out there. That's how good he was."

I'd nod my head, envisioning a pair of glistening lips lying forsaken on the floor of some nightclub dressing room. The trick was to back slowly toward the hallway, escaping into the kitchen before my father could yell, "Oh no you don't. Get back in here. I want you to sit down for a minute and listen. I mean *really* listen, to this next number."

Because it was the music we'd grown up with, I liked to think that my sisters and I had a genuine appreciation of jazz. We preferred it over the music our friends were listening to, yet nothing we did or said could convince my father of our devotion. Aside from replaying the tune on your own instrument, how could you prove you were really listening? It was as if he expected us to change color at the end of each selection.

Due to his ear and his almost maniacal sense of discipline, I always thought my father would have made an excellent musician. He might have studied the saxophone had he not been born to immigrant parents who considered even pot holders an extravagance. They themselves listened only to Greek music, an oxymoron as far as the rest of the world is concerned. Slam its tail in the door of the milk truck, and a stray cat could easily yowl out a single certain to top the charts back in Sparta or Thessaloniki. Jazz was my father's only form of rebellion. It was forbidden in his home, and he appreciated it as though it were his own private discovery. As a young man he hid his 78s under the sofa bed and regularly snuck off to New York City, where he'd haunt the clubs and consort with Negroes. It was a good life while it lasted. He was in his early forties when the company transferred our family to North Carolina.

"You expect me to live *where*?" he'd asked.

10 The Raleigh winters agreed with him, but he would have gladly traded the temperate climate for a decent radio station. Since he was limited to his record and tape collection, it became his dream that his family might fill the musical void by someday forming a jazz combo.

His plan took s
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His plan took shape the evening he escorted my sisters Lisa and Gretchen and me to the local state university to see Dave Brubeck, who was then touring with his sons. The audience roared when the quartet took the stage, and I leaned back and shut my eyes, pretending the applause was for me. In order to get that kind of attention, you needed a routine that would knock people's socks off. I'd been working on something in private and now began to imagine bringing it to a live audience. The act consisted of me, dressed in a nice shirt and tie and singing a medley of commercial jingles in the voice of Billie Holiday, who was one of my father's favorite singers. For my Raleigh concert I'd probably open with the number used to promote the town's oldest shopping center. A quick nod to my accompanist, and I'd launch into "The Excitement of Cameron Village Will Carry You Away." The beauty of my rendition was that it captured both the joy and the sorrow of a visit to Ellisburg's or J. C. Penney. This would be followed by such crowd pleasers as "Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should" and the catchy new Coke commercial, "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing."

I was lost in my fantasy, ignoring Dave Brubeck and coming up for air only when my father elbowed my ribs to ask, "Are you *listening* to this? These cats are burning the paint right off the walls!" The other audience members sat calmly, as if in church, while my father snapped his fingers and bobbed his head low against his chest. People pointed, and when we begged him to sit up and act normal, he cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted out a request for "'Blue Rondo à la Turk!'"

Driving home from the concert that night, he drummed his palms against the steering wheel, saying, "Did you *hear* that? The guy just gets better every day! He's up there onstage with his kids by his side, the whole lot of them jamming up a storm. Christ almighty, what I wouldn't give for a family like that. You guys should think of putting an act together."

My sister Lisa coughed up a mouthful of grapefruit soda.

15 "No, I mean it," my father said. "All you need are some lessons and instruments, and I swear to God, you'd go right through the roof." We hoped this was just another of his five-minute ideas, but by the time we reached the house, his eyes were still glowing. "That's exactly what you need to do," he said. "I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner."

The following afternoon he bought a baby grand piano. It was a used model that managed to look imposing even when positioned on a linoleum-tiled floor. We took turns stabbing at the keys, but as soon as the novelty wore off, we bolstered it with sofa cushions and turned it into a fort. The piano sat neglected in the traditional sense until my father signed Gretchen up for a series of lessons. She'd never expressed any great interest in the thing but was chosen because, at the age of ten, she possessed what our dad decided were the most artistic fingers. Lisa was assigned the flute, and I returned home from a Scout meeting one evening to find my instrument leaning against the aquarium in my bedroom.

"Hold on to your hat," my father said, "because here's that guitar you've always wanted."

Surely he had me confused with someone else. Although I had regularly petitioned for a brand-name vacuum cleaner, I'd never said anything about wanting a guitar. Nothing about it appealed to me, not even on an aesthetic level. I had my room arranged just so, and the instrument did not fit in with my nautical theme. An anchor, yes. A guitar, no. He wanted me to jam, so I jammed it into my closet, where it remained until he signed me up for some private lessons offered at a music shop located on the ground floor of the recently opened North Hills Mall. I fought it as best I could and feigned illness even as he dropped me off for my first appointment.

"But I'm sick!" I yelled, watching him pull out of the parking lot. "I have a virus, and

besides that, I don't want to play a musical instrument. Don't you know *anything*?"

20 When it finally sank in that he wasn't coming back, I lugged my guitar into the music store, where the manager led me to my teacher, a perfectly formed midget named Mister Mancini. I was twelve years old at the time, small for my age, and it was startling to find myself locked in a windowless room with a man who barely reached my chest. It seemed wrong that I would be taller than my teacher, but I kept this to myself, saying only, "My father told me to come here. It was all his idea."

A fastidious dresser stuck in a small, unfashionable town, Mister Mancini wore clothing I recognized from the Young Squires department of Hudson Belk. Some nights he favored button-down shirts with clip-on ties, while other evenings I arrived to find him dressed in flared slacks and snug turtleneck sweaters, a swag of love beads hanging from his neck. His arms were manly and covered in coarse dark hair, but his voice was high and strange, as if it had been recorded and was now being played back at a faster speed.

Not a dwarf, but an honest-to-God midget. My fascination was both evident and unwelcome, and was nothing he hadn't been subjected to a million times before. He didn't shake my hand, just lit a cigarette and reached for the conch shell he used as an ashtray. Like my father, Mister Mancini assumed that anyone could learn to play the guitar. He had picked it up during a single summer spent in what he called "Hotlanta G.A." This, I knew, was the racy name given to Atlanta, Georgia. "Now *that*," he said, "is one classy place if you know where to go." He grabbed my guitar and began tuning it, holding his head close to the strings. "Yes, siree, kid, the girls down on Peachtree are running wild twenty-four hours a day."

He mentioned a woman named Beth, saying, "They threw away the mold and shut down the factory after making that one, you know what I mean?"

I nodded my head, having no idea what he was talking about.

25 "She wasn't much of a cook, but hey, I guess that's why God invented TV dinners." He laughed at his little joke and repeated the line about the frozen dinners, as if he would use it later in a comedy routine. "God made TV dinners, yeah, that's good." He told me he'd named his guitar after Beth. "Now I can't keep my hands off of her!" he said. "Seriously, though, it helps if you give your instrument a name. What do you think you'll call yours?"

"Maybe I'll call it Oliver," I said. That was the name of my hamster, and I was used to saying it.

Then again, maybe not.

"Oliver?" Mister Mancini set my guitar on the floor. "*Oliver*? What the hell kind of name is that? If you're going to devote yourself to the guitar, you need to name it after a girl, not a guy."

"Oh, right," I said. "Joan. I'll call it . . . Joan."

30 "So tell me about this Joan," he said. "Is she something pretty special?"

Joan was the name of one of my cousins, but it seemed unwise to share this information. "Oh yeah," I said, "Joan's really . . . great. She's tall and . . ." I felt self-conscious using the word *tall* and struggled to take it back. "She's small and has brown hair and everything."

"Is she stacked?"

I'd never noticed my cousin's breasts and had lately realized that I'd never noticed anyone's breasts, not unless, like our housekeeper's, they were large enough to appear freakish. "Stacked? Well, sure," I said. "She's pretty stacked." I was afraid he'd ask me for a more detailed description and was relieved when he crossed the room and removed Beth from her case. He told me that a guitar student needed plenty of discipline. Talent was great, but time had taught him that talent was also extremely rare. "I've got it," he said. "But then again, I was born with it. It's a gift from God, and those of us who have it are very special people."

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He seemed to know that I was nothing special, just a type, yet another boy whose father had his head in the clouds.

“Do you have a *feel* for the guitar? Do you have any idea what this little baby is capable of?” Without waiting for an answer, he climbed up into his chair and began playing “Light My Fire,” adding, “This one is for Joan.

“You know that I would be untrue,” he sang. “You know that I would be a liar.” The current hit version of the song was performed by José Feliciano, a blind man whose plaintive voice served the lyrics much better than did Jim Morrison, who sang it in what I considered a bossy and conceited tone of voice. There was José Feliciano, there was Jim Morrison, and then there was Mister Mancini, who played beautifully but sang “Light My Fire” as if he were a Webelo Scout demanding a match. He finished his opening number, nodded his head in acknowledgment of my applause, and moved on, offering up his own unique and unsettling versions of “The Girl from Ipanema” and “Little Green Apples” while I sat trapped in my seat, my false smile stretched so tight that I lost all feeling in the lower half of my face.

My fingernails had grown a good three inches by the time he struck his final note and called me close to point out a few simple chords. Before I left, he handed me half a dozen purple mimeographed handouts, which we both knew were useless.

Back at the house my mother had my dinner warming in the oven. From the living room came the aimless whisper of Lisa’s flute. It sounded not unlike the wind whipping through an empty Pepsi can. Down in the basement either Gretchen was practicing her piano or the cat was chasing a moth across the keys. My mother responded by turning up the volume on the kitchen TV while my father pushed back my plate, set Joan in my lap, and instructed me to play.

“Listen to this,” he crowed. “A house full of music! Man, this is beautiful.”

40 You certainly couldn’t accuse him of being unsupportive. His enthusiasm bordered on mania, yet still it failed to inspire us. During practice sessions my sisters and I would eat potato chips, scowling at our hated instruments and speculating on the lives of our music teachers. They were all peculiar in one way or another, but with a midget, I’d definitely won the my-teacher-is-stranger-than-yours competition. I wondered where Mister Mancini lived and who he might call in case of an emergency. Did he stand on a chair in order to shave, or was his home customized to meet his needs? I’d look at the laundry hamper or beer cooler, thinking that if it came down to it, Mister Mancini could hide just about anywhere.

Though I thought of him constantly, I grabbed any excuse to avoid my guitar.

“I’ve been doing just what you told me to do,” I’d say at the beginning of each lesson, “but I just can’t get the hang of it. Maybe my fingers are too shor— . . . I mean litt— . . . I mean, maybe I’m just not coordinated enough.” He’d arrange Joan in my lap, pick up Beth, and tell me to follow along. “You need to believe you’re playing an actual woman,” he’d say. “Just grab her by the neck and make her holler.”

Mr. Mancini had a singular talent for making me uncomfortable. He forced me to consider things I’d rather not think about—the sex of my guitar, for instance. If I honestly wanted to put my hands on a woman, would that automatically mean I could play? Gretchen’s teacher never told her to think of her piano as a boy. Neither did Lisa’s flute teacher, though in that case the analogy was fairly obvious. On the off chance that sexual desire was all it took, I steered clear of Lisa’s instrument, fearing I might be labeled a prodigy. The best solution was to become a singer and leave the instruments to other people. A song stylist—that was what I wanted to be.

I was at the mall with my mother one afternoon when I spotted Mister Mancini ordering

a hamburger at Scotty's Chuck Wagon, a fast-food restaurant located a few doors down from the music shop. He sometimes mentioned having lunch with a salesgirl from Jolly's Jewelers, "a real looker," but on this day he was alone. Mister Mancini had to stand on his tiptoes to ask for his hamburger, and even then his head failed to reach the counter. The passing adults politely looked away, but their children were decidedly more vocal. A toddler ambled up on his chubby bowed legs, attempting to embrace my teacher with ketchup-smearred fingers, while a party of elementary-school students openly stared in wonder. Even worse was the group of adolescents, boys my own age, who sat gathered around a large table. "Go back to Oz, munchkin," one of them said, and his friends shook with laughter. Tray in hand, Mister Mancini took a seat and pretended not to notice. The boys weren't yelling, but anyone could tell that they were making fun of him. "Honestly, Mother," I said, "do they have to be such monsters?" Beneath my moral outrage was a strong sense of possessiveness, a fury that other people were sinking their hooks into my own personal midget. What did they know about this man? I was the one who lit his cigarettes and listened as he denounced the careers of so-called pretty boys such as Glen Campbell and Bobby Goldsboro. It was I who had suffered through six weeks' worth of lessons and was still struggling to master "Yellow Bird." If anyone was going to give him a hard time, I figured that I should be first in line.

45 I'd always thought of Mister Mancini as a blowhard, a pocket playboy, but watching him dip his hamburger into a sad puddle of mayonnaise, I broadened my view and came to see him as a wee outsider, a misfit whose take-it-or-leave-it attitude had left him all alone. This was a persona I'd been tinkering with myself: the outcast, the rebel. It occurred to me that, with the exception of the guitar, he and I actu-

ally had quite a bit in common. We were each a man trapped inside a boy's body. Each of us was talented in his own way, and we both hated twelve-year-old males, a demographic group second to none in terms of cruelty. All things considered, there was no reason I shouldn't address him not as a teacher but as an artistic brother. Maybe then we could drop the pretense of Joan and get down to work. If things worked out the way I hoped, I'd someday mention in interviews that my accompanist was both my best friend *and* a midget.

I wore a tie to my next lesson and this time when asked if I'd practiced, I told the truth, saying in a matter-of-fact tone of voice that no, I hadn't laid a finger on my guitar since our last get-together. I told him that Joan was my cousin's name and that I had no idea how stacked she was.

"That's okay," Mister Mancini said. "You can call your guitar whatever you want, just as long as you practice."

My voice shaking, I told him that I had absolutely no interest in mastering the guitar. What I really wanted was to sing in the voice of Billie Holiday. "Mainly commercials, but not for any banks or car dealerships, because those are usually choral arrangements."

The color ebbed from my teacher's face.

50 I told him I'd been working up an act and could use a little accompaniment. Did he know the jingle for the new Sara Lee campaign?

"You want me to do what?" He wasn't angry, just confused.

I felt certain he was lying when he denied knowing the tune. Doublemint gum, Ritz crackers, the theme songs for Alka-Seltzer and Kenmore appliances: he claimed ignorance on all counts. I knew that it was queer to sing in front of someone, but greater than my discomfort was the hope that he might recognize what I thought of as my great talent, the one musical trick I was able to pull off. I started in on an a cappella version of the latest Oscar Mayer commercial, hoping he might join in once the spirit moved him.

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It looked bad, I knew, but in order to sustain the proper mood, I needed to disregard his company and sing the way I did at home alone in my bedroom, my eyes shut tight and my hands dangling like pointless, empty gloves.

I sang that my bologna had a first name.

I added that my bologna had a second name.

55 And concluded: *Oh, I love to eat it every day
And if you ask me why, I'll say*

*Thaaaat Os-carr May-errr has a way, with
B-Oooo-L-Oooo-G-N-A*

I reached the end of my tune thinking he might take this as an opportunity to applaud or maybe even apologize for underestimating me. Mild amusement would have been an acceptable response. But instead, he held up his hands, as if to stop an advancing car. "Hey, guy," he said. "You can hold it right there. I'm not into that scene."

A scene? What scene? I thought I was being original.

60 "There were plenty of screwballs like you back in Atlanta, but me, I don't swing that way—you got it? This might be your 'thing' or whatever, but you can definitely count me out." He reached for his conch shell and stubbed out his cigarette. "I mean, come on now. For God's sake, kid, pull yourself together."

I knew then why I'd never before sung in front of anyone, and why I shouldn't have done it in front of Mister Mancini. He'd used the word *screwball*, but I knew what he really meant. He meant I should have named my guitar Doug or Brian, or better yet, taken up the flute. He meant that if we're defined by our desires, I was in for a lifetime of trouble.

The remainder of the hour was spent awkwardly watching the clock as we silently pretended to tune our guitars.

My father was disappointed when I told him I wouldn't be returning for any more lessons. "He told me not to come back," I said. "He told me I have the wrong kind of fingers."

Seeing that it had worked for me, my sisters invented similar stories, and together we

announced that the Sedaris Trio had officially disbanded. Our father offered to find us better teachers, adding that if we were unhappy with our instruments, we could trade them in for something more suitable. "The trumpet or the saxophone, or hey, how about the vibes?" He reached for a Lionel Hampton album, saying, "I want you to sit down and give this a good listen. Just get a load of this cat and tell me he's not an inspiration."

65 There was a time when I could listen to such a record and imagine myself as the headline act at some magnificent New York nightclub, but that's what fantasies are for: they allow you to skip the degradation and head straight to the top. I'd done my solo and would now move on to pursue other equally unsuccessful ways of getting attention. I'd try every art form there was, and with each disappointment I'd picture Mister Mancini holding his conch shell and saying, "For God's sake, kid, pull yourself together."

We told our father, no, don't bother playing us any more of your records, but still he persisted. "I'm telling you that this album is going to change your lives, and if it doesn't, I'll give each one of you a five-dollar bill. What do you think of that?"

It was a tough call—five dollars for listening to a Lionel Hampton record. The offer was tempting, but even on the off chance he'd actually come through with the money, there would certainly be strings attached. We looked at one another, my sisters and I, and then we left the room, ignoring his cry of "Hey, where do you think you're going? Get back in here and listen."

We joined our mother at the TV and never looked back. A life in music was his great passion, not ours, and our lessons had taught us that without the passion, the best one could hope for was an occasional engagement at some hippie wedding where, if we were lucky, the guests would be too stoned to realize just how bad we really were. That night, as was his habit, our father fell asleep in front of the stereo, the record making its pointless, silent rounds as he lay back against the sofa cushions, dreaming.

EXPLORATORY WRITING

This essay actually has at least three storylines: (1) the story of the father who wants his children to love what he loves, to be moved by the same music, to become more like him; (2) the story of the boy who is fascinated by strangeness and difference—sometimes repelled by it, other times identifying with it, and always finding the humor and absurdity in his situation; (3) the story of Sedaris realizing that his tastes, interests, and manners identify him (at least to his music teacher) as gay.

Write an exploratory essay in which you trace those storylines, note where they emerge, and examine how the three lines finally come together. In what way is this a story about generational differences?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We opened this chapter with the Carolyn Steedman comment that “Children are always chapters in someone else’s narrative.” In many ways, the story David Sedaris tells is precisely that—an episode in his father’s narrative of trying to introduce his children to the things he loves, trying somehow to get his children to hear and experience what he hears and experiences when he listens to jazz. With a group of your classmates, discuss how this story would change if it were written from the father’s point of view.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Early in this story, Sedaris admits that he and his sisters did prefer jazz (his father’s music) over any of the music their friends listened to. Write an essay in which you explain why, then, he and his sisters rejected their father’s attempts to get them to appreciate jazz in the way he does. What is it that Sedaris’s father really wants from his children? In your essay, consider to what extent this is a story about parents and children—different generations trying to connect, without much success.
2. This story opens and closes with Sedaris’s father settling in to listen to jazz LPs—something that takes him back to memories of great jazz artists he has seen and to moments he treasures. The story really doesn’t remain there, however. Instead, Sedaris allows that memory and the chain of events that follows it to move him into other memories, thoughts, observations, and moments that remain important. For this assignment, write a brief reflection (3–4 pages) in which you begin with a specific piece of music or music technology—an instrument, a car stereo, a jukebox, an album—that was important to you, but that also allows you to use the memory to go beyond music. In what ways might the memory be typical of growing up in your generation?

Personal reflection is tricky to write because it begins with a personal memory or observation, but if others are going to read it the reflection has to go beyond the self. Your rhetorical challenge, then, is to make your reflection relevant to readers who might not know you well or at all.

3. Although he opens and closes with scenes of his father at the stereo, Sedaris puts his encounter with Mr. Mancini at the center. Like Sedaris’s father, Mr. Mancini is from a decidedly different generation. He strikes Sedaris as weird and somehow worldly. As the story evolves, however, it is clear that Sedaris seems just as strange to Mr. Mancini. If you completed the exploratory writing, go back to that piece and develop a more formal and complete examination of this as a story about difference that goes beyond generational differences (3 to 5 pages). Make sure you select specific passages from the story as you develop your analysis.

PISSING IN

— Nick Hornby

SUGGESTION FOR READING

1. Patti Smith’s *Just Kids* (New York: Knopf, 2010) is a memoir about her time in New York City’s East Village, just down the street from Islington, just down the street from where she came at the end of the 1960s. It’s a little island of Bohemianism in the middle of a gritty city. It’s about enjoying my work, about being a good friend, about producing something, about having a bad stomach habit, about being as sunny as a summer day.

And Patti Smith’s *Just Kids* is a memoir that expected much of the same. It’s a memoir about a draiser for the city, about poetry and an interest in a whole set of things, about attempting to find a way to live, about autographed drawings, about the best, there’d be no other way, we’d be given a chance, once upon a time, seeing a riveting performance, Patti’s best day.

One of the things about Smith’s *Just Kids* is about Bohemianism, about something connecting, about In this one ev