

No more villains

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue



TOO MENACING? The villainous Purple Pie Man has been phased out.

My school-aged self was intrigued by the Purple Pie Man. He was the villain of the 1980s Strawberry Shortcake franchise. Tall, sporting a purple hat and a thin mustache, the Pie Man was a constant if vague menace to Strawberry and her various sweetly named friends.

In the years since I thrilled to the Pie Man's threat, television has spun off in two opposite directions: increasingly violent images for boys and threatless universes for girls.

Even as we rightly worry about the violent media images that bombard children, villains like the Purple Pie Man have been stripped from girls' programming. Even Dora the Explorer, heroine of the quintessential program for preschoolers, has greater threats to face than does the updated version of Strawberry Shortcake. The message seems to be: even toddlers can stand up to evil better than elementary school-aged girls.

Purple Pie Man is a casualty of an era in which television is produced in perfect sync with consumer culture and its moneyed plans for girls. The children's programs of my generation were linked to lines of toys, and this was a lucrative enterprise. But the newer versions of Strawberry Shortcake and My Little Pony have taken things several steps further. The characters no longer look like pudgy-cheeked dolls. They

have been smoothed over and glossed up. Their hair is sleek. Pudgy cheeks have been replaced by tiny bodies and exaggerated eyes. The ragdoll apron is gone, traded in for always changing trendy outfits. In other words, these animated dolls have become idealized images of the girls themselves.

I suspect that the wiping away of Strawberry's freckles and baby fat is of a piece with the disappearance of the Pie Man. When I was in first grade, the franchise wanted to sell me a doll. Now it offers my first-grader endless lip gloss and nail polish while it preps her to be a future consumer of designer clothes and weight-loss drugs. Her only enemy is herself.

In his book *Lost Icons*, Rowan Williams mourns the loss of the kind of childhood in which children had the space to inhabit stories that included real threats, real danger, real evil. Williams believes that this imaginary space was made possible by the real safe space adults provided.

Williams thinks we need to make room for villains: "The freedom to try out roles and images and words that are not 'nice' is a rather significant part of learning speech." We may need evil in our stories, if we are to begin to imagine what it is to "turn away from evil and do good," what it means to "seek peace and pursue it" (1 Pet. 3:11).

I am not simply being nostalgic for the TV shows of my childhood. The 1980s shows were artless and commercialized precursors of today's artless and commercialized offerings. I am longing, though, for stories that make room for the capacious imaginations of both boys and girls, a world in which girls have something to fight for—and against.