

*Mayhem*, by Sissela Bok

reviewed by [Martha Ellen Stortz](#) in the [October 14, 1998](#) issue

By Sissela Bok, *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*. (Addison Wesley Longman, 194 pp.)

Sissela Bok poses two important questions: Does life, at least as reported in the news media, imitate art? and, What is the root of our insatiable taste for violence? She proposes "a discussion of violence in society and its links with cultural life, including all forms of entertainment." She compares U.S. society and culture with other cultures around the world and across the centuries. The production of films like *Natural Born Killers* suggests that our sensibility may be similar to that of ancient Rome, with its love of gore, spectacle and gladiatorial combat. Similarly, 18th-century debates on the theater eerily echo contemporary arguments about the role of media entertainment in forming--or deforming--character. Countries like Canada, Norway and Malaysia have squarely confronted questions of censorship, free speech and civic responsibility. Could their struggles inform ours?

Bok brings a philosopher's precision to the dilemmas of everyday life. As in her previous works, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (1978) and *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (1983), she enters her topic from the underside, understanding all too well that evil is more fascinating than good. As always, she illumines the moral gray areas.

Bok refuses to be governed by sound-bite dichotomies that pit supporters of censorship against supporters of artistic expression and free speech. Presenting fairly the arguments of each side, she proposes a middle way for media control: voluntary regulation by both producers and consumers, fueled by free associations and consumer choice. Similarly, Bok calls off the nasty duel over who best protects the interests of children. She holds state and parents jointly responsible.

Unfortunately, neither Bok's book title nor table of contents discloses her deep concern for the moral formation of children. As a philosopher she distinguishes between physical and other forms of violence; between actual and threatened violence; between direct and indirect violence; between violence as information and

as entertainment. But with a parent's passion, she reminds the reader that these distinctions are lost on children, who cannot tell what is real from what is not.

Drawing on the work of media analysts, Bok argues that excessive exposure to violence enhances fear, desensitizes people to and creates an appetite for more violence, and even cultivates aggression as an appropriate response to threat or frustration. These traits erode other characteristics essential to civil society. Fear wears away our capacities for resilience and self-reliance; desensitization destroys empathy; an appetite for violence cripples self-control; finally, aggression corrodes respect for self and others. Adults may be more consciously aware of and on guard against the deleterious effects of media violence, but children have fewer defenses. A steady dose "stabs the soul" rather than enlarging it.

Bok offers concrete strategies for counteracting media violence. The on-off button is the most direct, and the increasing availability of V-chips, browsers and filters increases consumer choice. Heightening awareness enhances viewer discrimination. Producers can be encouraged to rank their programming themselves. Bok both edifies and empowers, and the reader returns to the fray armed with ideas and concrete strategies.

Recently writers of theology and spirituality have been attending to "practices," those routine habits of mind and body that make up a way of life: meditation, keeping Sabbath, hospitality, table fellowship, prayer. Bok tackles the secular "practices" that compose our contemporary way of life: practices of truth-telling, disclosure, professional conduct, and image-making in the media. Through these practices, she asks, what kind of life are we creating for ourselves--and for our children?