

Competing masculinities in the dojo

As *Cobra Kai*'s final season is about to air, we are living in the aftermath of the political backlash to *The Karate Kid*'s softer kind of power.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [February 2025](#) issue

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Daniel (Ralph Macchio, left) and Johnny (William Zabka) in the Netflix series *Cobra Kai* (Courtesy of Netflix)

This first time we watched *The Karate Kid* (directed by John G. Avildsen in 1984) with our son, who was ten at the time, he thought it was a bit over the top. “It’s not like when you were kids,” he patiently explained. “There aren’t really bullies anymore.” On the face of things, this is a ridiculous idea; evil has not disappeared from the hearts of men thanks to the simple passage of a few decades. But I knew what he meant. My son grew up swaddled in adult supervision, where even ordinary

playground smack talk was likely nipped in the bud by hovering adults. The idea that a karate sensei would openly train his students to show “no mercy” both on the mat and in real life without raising a single adult eyebrow does seem far-fetched.

We’ve just spent weeks, however, processing the fact that a very aggressive form of bullying, intimidation, and promises of retaliatory violence helped win a presidential election. So we were primed to watch *Cobra Kai*, a spin-off Netflix series that reworks the *Karate Kid* story with exactly these questions in mind.

In the original movie, Daniel LaRusso (Ralph Macchio), a scrappy working-class Italian kid from New Jersey, moves to LA, where he quickly attracts the ire of the rich-kid bully Johnny Lawrence (William Zabka). Johnny is the prized student of the local karate sensei, John Kreese (Martin Kove), who teaches a strike-first, no-mercy style of fighting and approach to life. Daniel is taken under the wing of Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita), a Japanese karate master, who agrees to train him in a defense-only style of fighting and philosophy of life. The All-Valley Karate Championship tournament becomes the final battle scene—not just between Daniel and Johnny but between the styles of masculinity and violence represented by Mr. Miyagi and Sensei Kreese.

Cobra Kai (created by Josh Heald, Jon Hurwitz, and Hayden Schlossberg) assumes its viewers are invested in this mythology so that the show can turn it on its head. The story picks up 34 years after that fateful All-Valley tournament. At first glance, life seems to have unfolded according to a karmic law of punishment and reward: Johnny is an unemployed, hard-drinking loser estranged from his teenage son, while Daniel is happily married with two kids and owns a successful car dealership. But it doesn’t take long to realize that Daniel oozes the self-satisfaction of a middle-aged man who never stopped riding his high school successes. He is so confident in his inviolable sense of righteousness that he is blind to the way his own kids have become the rich bullies he used to despise. Johnny, we realize, has an entirely different set of memories of his high school rivalry with Daniel, where he was provoked as much as provoking; he has experienced his whole life as a downward spiral that began when he lost everything to Daniel. Before long, both men have become karate senseis themselves, rehashing their original rivalry through the proxies of a new generation.

As Mr. Miyagi used to say, “There are no bad students, only bad teachers,” and the rest of the series becomes a test of the kind of teacher Daniel and Johnny will

become. Daniel doubles down on Mr. Miyagi's teachings, creating a dojo devoted to the lessons of balance and inner peace. Johnny, on the other hand, knows he was traumatized by Kreese's brutal training. He doesn't want to enact that same trauma on his new students, but the kids who join his Cobra Kai dojo need something more than inner peace.

One of Johnny's first students is a kid named Hawk (Jacob Bertrand) who has been mercilessly mocked for a scar left from cleft palate surgery. In a flashback, we see him tearfully confessing his torment to his mom, who immediately hovers into action. She clearly feels the way my ten-year-old did when he watched the original *Karate Kid* movie: adults won't stand for this kind of bullying. She calls the school and demands action, and they promise to make an announcement to the whole school to put an end to bullying. We see Hawk's horrified face as he realizes how much worse she has made the situation.

Johnny offers Hawk a sense of self-worth and confidence, one that all the other adults in his life have denied him by attempting to keep him safe and fight his battles for him. The kids in Johnny's dojo are the kids he openly calls "losers"—the ones who have been mocked and teased all their lives for being fat, unattractive, or nerdy. Daniel's gentle lessons about defense first and finding balance feel like privileged extras for the rich, cool kids who don't have to worry as much about their self-esteem or bodily integrity.

The transformation of nerdy losers into badass karate champions was a lot more thrilling to my now-14-year-old than the cartoonish villainy of the original movie. Like most young men his age, he is caught in the crosshairs of our shifting ideas about violence and masculinity, and the show taps into this. In 1984, Sensei Kreese's version of hyper-masculine kill-or-be-killed bravado was quite familiar. Mr. Miyagi was the cultural radical, teaching Daniel a softer kind of masculine power. By 2018, when the first season of *Cobra Kai* aired, Trump had been elected president and there was widespread hand-wringing about the coddling of Gen Z and the softening of American masculinity. Now, in early 2025, as the final season is about to air, we are living in the aftermath of this backlash.

Against this backdrop, the show is asking one central question: Can you be a badass without being an asshole? The final seasons of the show have become trapped in a soap opera spiral, with implausible plot twists and more than a little melodrama. Still, we are going to finish the series, because this feels like an urgent question young men, my son included, are desperate to answer however they can.