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# A Senior's Anthology

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**A Senior's Anthology**

**An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of Journalism,  
University at Albany, State University Of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Journalism  
and  
graduation from The Honors College.**

**Jason Robert Seligson  
Research Advisor: Professor Thomas Bass**

**May, 2013**

## Abstract

The first piece in my portfolio is a narrative article about the growing phenomenon of Quidditch. I did a lot of preliminary research about the evolution of the game—including how it was adapted from the pages of *Harry Potter* to an actual college sport. The Quidditch World Cup is an annual event in New York City and has received coverage from mainstream media outlets over the past few years. I have a close friend who plays the sport at Tufts University, which was what first drew me to the topic. I attended a tournament at Hofstra University and interviewed a number of students from various schools about how they first got involved, and why they love playing such a unique kind of game. It was a fascinating experience and one of the most rewarding investigative stories I've worked on.

The next piece is a memoir assignment that details my life as a thirteen-year old becoming a Bar Mitzvah. I chose to focus on the actual singing the haftorah portion in front of my friends and family—something that I was initially quite nervous about doing. The assignment was initially difficult because I had to ease back into the emotional state of a 13 year old. However, I quickly found that there were plenty of interesting smaller stories to explore; including how our Rabbi at the time managed to offend a number of our friends and family. I find that the piece is about the weight of becoming a man and how even adults are fallible—which was a really important lesson for me to learn.

The third piece is a response paper to the non-fiction report *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, by Ariel Levy. I wanted to incorporate Levy's ideas about gender roles into an analytical discussion of my thoughts on the current state of television. I talk about the numerous intelligent, nuanced roles women have on television today, and how far we've come over the years (particularly even in the last decade with shows that now appear far less progressive than they did at first). Furthermore, the piece also delves into my personal feelings on how men have become stereotyped in pop culture as well, and what this means for modern masculinity.

The fourth piece is a personal essay titled, "Weird! Boy." I drew from personal experience; toward the end of my senior year in high school, I had discovered that a friend of mine had kept an online blog in which she wrote about me. It was important to me approach writing about this experience in a lighthearted fashion; though the subject matter was personal, I crafted the piece to be more comedic than some of the other pieces.

The fifth piece in my portfolio was an entertainment news feature. I had long been interested in how movie trailers have become so different over the past 20 years or so. When *E.T.* was released, trailers evoked genuine suspense and intrigue from moviegoers; now, we roll our eyes and complain that we know how an entire movie will play out after seeing a three minute trailer. I interviewed a number of people asking if they were excited for the film, or if the lack of knowledge alienated them.

Overall, I hope that the eclectic mix of works presented here reflect a wide range of writing ability, and the hard work and dedication it took in completing this project.

## Acknowledgments

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Thank you to all of my friends. You have been an incredible support system over the past four years. Together we've gone from Melville to Empire and everywhere in between. What an amazing journey these last four years have been.

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### **“Brooms Up: The College Quidditch Phenomenon”**

It's the first gorgeous day on Long Island in recent memory and Hofstra University's campus has never looked so alive. Dozens of families are walking to the nearby spring festival in the town of Hempstead.

But unbeknownst to many passersby, nearly 200 people from fourteen different schools have come out this Sunday morning for one reason—to participate in the Northeast Regional Quidditch Tournament. With just one half hour before game time, Hofstra's team, the “Flying Dutchmen” begin to stretch. Before long, Steve DiCarlo, captain of the Dutchmen, calls a team huddle, and begins a crucial pre-game element of any sport—the pep talk. “It's a great day for Quidditch,” he says, unable to contain the excitement in his voice. “Let's go have some fun.”

Five years ago, the word “Quidditch” only had a spot in the lexicon of a select few individuals: i.e. rabid fans of the *Harry Potter* books and films created by J.K. Rowling. But leave it to one of the most accomplished writers of all time to inspire creativity in her fans—not just through words, but in the world she created. In 2004, it was Alexander Manshel, a Middlebury College student at the time, who had the initial idea of creating a “ground” version of Rowling's fantasy game—which up until that point had been synonymous with flying broomsticks and enchanted “snitches,” well out of the realm of our reality.

Today, college Quidditch—a kind of hybrid game of Ultimate Frisbee and Dodgeball meets Capture the Flag with a geeky twist—continues to rise from cult favorite status to receiving recognition as a legitimate college sport. With over 400 colleges and 300 high schools with active (and internationally recognized) teams, Quidditch has quickly become ubiquitous—

the new “cool” thing to start up on any campus. Teams compete with other schools and universities for a spot at the World Cup, held in New York City. This past year’s tournament saw over 20,000 people in attendance, and with even more teams on next year’s roster, that number is projected to increase.

Naysayers may turn their heads to the silly premise of the game, but to the people playing, Quidditch is as real a sport as it gets.

Kirsten Black, 19, of Maine, says she first heard about Quidditch during last year’s World Cup season (around October), and didn’t hesitate to join up when the Hofstra team was formed this past semester. “There was no question about it. If my school is going to do something this cool, I’m there. People ask me all the time—‘you play Quidditch, that’s like some kind of joke, right?’ What they don’t understand is that it’s an actual sport, and a pretty physical one at that.”

Black’s teammate, Sarah Barber, 20, of Poughkeepsie, actually knew about the growing popularity of Quidditch for some time before it reached her university. “I have a lot of friends from home that play and all they say is that it’s just this amazing game to play with a bunch of great people, and so I knew that it was something I wanted to be a part of.” Barber had been studying abroad this past semester (when the team was formed), but was able to join once she returned.

In the *Harry Potter* series, Quidditch is a fully realized game. It’s an intricate sport that has a multitude of rules, positions, and equipment involved. To Quidditch neophytes everywhere, the game consists of seven players on each team: three chasers (who score points by taking the

“Quaffle” ball and throwing it into the opposing team’s goalposts), two beaters (who must throw “Bludgers” or dodge balls in the real world version at opposing players in order to temporarily knock them out of play), one keeper (who defends their team’s goal post), and one seeker (who has to catch the opposing team’s “snitch,” thus ending the game). The ground version stays true to the core elements of the fictional sport, but distinguishes itself in a few key ways. First and foremost, the golden “Snitch”—the highly coveted prize of any Quidditch match (usually a tiny golden ball) is in fact a person wearing a gold jersey, who has to wear a pouch with a yellow tennis ball around their waist, and avoid the Seekers, who are out to swipe the tennis ball and win the game.

At 11:30 a.m., the Hofstra Flying Dutchmen rush to the nearby parking lot to assist Alex Benepe, commissioner of the International Quidditch Association (IQA), unpack his car. A former Middlebury College student and one of the original founders of “ground” Quidditch (along with Manshel), Benepe walks with a swagger that says he knows he’s a big deal. While overseeing most regional tournaments, he takes his role as commissioner seriously. Dressed in a black suit with dark pants, sporting a tie and a top hat, Benepe looks more like “Mr. Monopoly” than an officiator—a strange ensemble even for an unconventional sport. The real kicker to Benepe’s outfit is the eye patch strapped across his left eye, branded with the logo for the IQA and the sizeable cane he carries (all for show) with a golden snitch wrapped around the top. One thing is clear—this guy means business. And his arrival means something else—it’s time to play some Quidditch.

Just before the 2011 Northeast Regional Quidditch Tournament commences, all fourteen teams (Hofstra, NYU, Stonybrook University, University of Maryland and UMass among them)



gather together in a giant circle. Benepe takes the microphone, and addresses all players at once. “I just want to thank everyone for coming out this weekend. I know that everyone’s semesters are coming to an end, but let me just say this: Quidditch is more important than exams,” he cracks, followed by laughs from the crowd. “Fifteen years from now, you won’t remember what you were studying for, but you *will* remember this day!” Benepe’s energy is infectious and he sets a perfect tone for the afternoon’s festivities.

At just about 11:40, the first two matches begin, pitting NYU vs. UMass, and Pittsburg against BU. The fields are oval-shaped, and are 48 yards in length, 33 yards wide, according to the IQA official rulebook. Four balls are placed on the mid-line of both fields at the start of a match. Both team’s snitches (again the two people wearing gold jerseys) are then “let lose” and gain a head start to run away from the field before the whistle blows. Benepe’s voice booms from the microphone, saying: “Starters ready...and...brooms up!” And with that, the five front-line players—holding their brooms in between their legs with one hand—charge to the dividing line, and scatter to various positions on the field.

After a swift victory, the NYU “Hipster Horcruxes” (a title that references both Harry Potter and the stereotypical “hipster” nature of NYU students) hug each other, cheering and jabbing their broomsticks in the air. “NYU all the way, baby! We didn’t come all the way out here for nothing,” one male player said confidently.

Sara Landis, 20, of New Jersey, first attempted to create an NYU Quidditch team in her freshman year, but didn’t have enough interest. Ultimately, she got her wish in her sophomore year. “Once I created a facebook group and saw some real interest in it, things really got rolling. We have about 30 people who regularly show up,” she says. “They’re dedicated and I love it.”

But what Landis loves most about her team—and this is true for Hofstra as well—is that people genuinely enjoy the *sport* of Quidditch. “Some of the people on the team haven’t even finished reading the Harry Potter series or even seen all the movies. Quidditch has really become something else entirely.”

Ironically, the team formed most recently was also the host of Sunday’s tournament. The Hofstra Flying Dutchmen have come a long way since their humble beginnings just a few months ago. “We won our first two or three games in February and we held our first tournament in March,” says Barber, who alternates as a team chaser and beater. “Now we’re hosting the Northeast Regional’s. It’s a lot for our new team.”

But not too much for captain DiCarlo, who singlehandedly saved the Northeast Regional tournament after BU canceled a few weeks ago.

DiCarlo, 22, of Saratoga, became enamored with the sport of Quidditch last year after he went to the World Cup in New York City. After seeing the 50 plus teams come out, he was determined to start up a team at Hofstra. “I absolutely love the physicality of it. I played soccer and football in high school, and I feel like I’m using similar skills, but this is more fun,” he says. Like most college sports, the average Quidditch team consists of people of varying athletic abilities; ones that are peripherally interested, alongside the more hardcore players. Former experience helps for sure, but it isn’t a requirement.

DiCarlo will be graduating from Hofstra in just a few weeks, but is glad to have organized this massive event—to have fourteen teams come out to his school and play the game he loves before he leaves. “Next year, even though I’ll have left, I’ll be going to the World Cup

with the Flying Dutchmen as a coach. This team—more than anything else I’ve done here—really is my legacy,” he says with a smile.

The Northeast tournament is proof that Quidditch has far exceeded the reach of Middlebury College, and has acquired a following that original creators Manshel and Benepe never could have imagined. Take David Meyers, an average college sophomore—he’s majoring in International Relations at Tufts University and stressing about summer internships and study abroad programs—but perhaps his biggest concern is finding the precise moment to dash across the field and steal his opponent’s “snitch.” Meyers is the Tufts Quidditch team’s Seeker.

A job best suited for agile runners, the Seeker’s job is to chase the opposing team’s snitch runner (who can be elusive, as they move on and off the field) and retrieve the tennis ball for their own team. Just as in the Harry Potter novels, one maxim rings true in the real world adaptation: the game only ends once the Snitch has been caught—making the Seeker arguably the most important position in the game. It’s a job that Meyers takes seriously, but he loves every minute of it.

Much like DiCarlo and the Flying Dutchmen, Meyers emphasizes that the Tufts players try not to take themselves too seriously. “We try to have a really upbeat, lively feel at practices. We absolutely become serious when a tournament comes up; leading up to the World Cup, we have four mandatory practices per week, but we like to have a good time about it,” he insists. “We’re running around with brooms, after all. As ridiculous as it sounds, we’re just there to have fun.”

Tufts Quidditch players also have a strong sense of camaraderie. Quidditch blood runs thick, much like fraternity brothers. Meyers says that generally speaking, the team has been well-

received on campus. “I think people kind of relish the fact that Tufts is a quirky college. “We get more fans than regular varsity sporting events, which is saying a lot,” he remarks. “Sure, there are people that mock you, but usually those are people who haven’t watched a game. Once you go to a game and see the intensity of it, it usually changes people’s minds.”

Perhaps for some students, Quidditch is too strange an activity to be associated with their school. A “comment war” was created on the web site for Tufts’ school newspaper earlier this year. A heated debate ensued over whether or not students should be proud or ashamed of being associated with the sport. Seeing as how Tufts has previously received negative attention for its annual “Naked Run,” an event where students celebrate the end of the semester by running nude across the quad, Quidditch doesn’t seem quite so abnormal by comparison. There’s nothing wrong with showing a little school spirit. Meyers thinks Tufts alums should take pride in their ranking of number two in the United States—even if it’s not a mainstream sport.

The phenomenon of Quidditch is one where people play a competitive sport, albeit an unconventional one—and still have fun while doing it. At the end of the day, Meyers, like DiCarlo, sees Quidditch as an opportunity to be part of a team again. “You get the feeling of working towards a goal, of testing yourself,” he says. “It’s a very well-thought out game. It truly transcends Harry Potter.”

### **“Becoming a Man”**

I stood out on the bema, staring at my friends and family. In a veritable sea of people, I was able to glimpse loved ones and friends; distant relatives I hadn't officially met yet, and acquaintances that had never sat in a synagogue before. All eyes in the room were on me. I never much cared for being the center of attention—at thirteen, I was more self-conscious than ever. But then again, this wasn't some school concert or production.

Today was a defining moment—a milestone in my young life: one that required me to step out on my own, prove my worth, and in the eyes of the Jewish faith, become a man. Rabbi Gorman stood by my side at the podium, gave me a warm smile, and using his pointer, tapped the scroll, landing on the exact line at which my portion started. In spite of my nerves, I kept telling myself, today was a happy occasion; today *meant* something. Today—I become a bar mitzvah. I glanced at the congregation one last time, took a deep breath, and began to chant.

“You're going to make us all so proud,” my mother said as she drove me home from my last session with the Cantor. *Make us all proud.* Her words coursed through me. She knew that even though I tried not to show it, inside I was a bundle of nerves waiting to burst. When I got quiet and pensive, both she and my father always tried to assuage my fears, to give me that extra ounce of encouragement. But even with their unwavering faith in me, I was terrified. “Just remember,” she said. “Don't rush your singing—you only get to do this once.”

It's not that I wasn't confident—I had my haftarah portion down to a science. I was excited about the party—usually the highlight for most kids that age. It was a much larger question that kept digging at the back of my brain. *Tomorrow, you become a man. Ok, I thought. Then what happens?* Will there be some culminating moment, one where I feel more connected with g-d? Most of all, I thought, how on *earth* am I going to be an adult?

It was the day before the big event. Everything was planned; my sister and I were putting the finishing touches on the poems for the candle lighting ceremony at the party (after I had accidentally erased the original files on our computer the night before). No one could write these poems better than my sister. To draw on all of someone's life experiences, their various relationships with friends and family, carefully balancing both a humorous and heartfelt tone, is truly a rare talent. After printing them out, neatly stapling the pages together, I decided to practice my haphtarah portion one final time. After a while, I started thinking about the party that would follow tomorrow's service. Filled with excitement, I finally fell asleep.

Standing up singing in front of everyone I knew was one of the most nerve-wracking experiences in my life. Still, by all accounts, my part of the service was a success. I couldn't help but feel an immense sense of accomplishment at what I was doing. Here, in this synagogue, in this moment, was the culmination of six years of Hebrew School; the apex of my Jewish life. More than halfway done with my haftarah, a rare sense of confidence rose up inside me. When I finished, I was flooded with relief; I had done it, and though I was sure I appeared awkward, and my voice was far too high-pitched, none of it mattered—because I had *done it*.

Rabbi Gorman resumed control of the service, and after a chorus of "Simitov and Mazeltov," everyone grew silent, and it was time for the Rabbi's speech about the bar mitzvah boy. Rabbi Gorman spoke of my academic achievements, praising me for being valedictorian of my Hebrew School class. "What stuck out most to me is that when Jason told me what his hobbies are...he didn't say, as many kids his age have, 'sports'. Instead, he said his passion is in writing. We wish Jason a hearty Mazeltov and a fortuitous future in his writing, and all of his life's endeavors." Rabbi Gorman extended his hand—which I then shook, thanking him for everything—accepting the books and warm remarks with gratitude. It was as though my life was

playing out as a movie, and I had just won best actor in a lead role. And then—the service took an unexpected turn.

I sat back down. I was now clutching the Torah tightly to my chest, with my *tallis* draped over my shoulders. The Torah was rather large; even angled diagonally across my body, it obscured my view of the room, preventing me from smiling at some family members who were sending winks and gesturing “thumbs up” in my direction. I found myself wondering when the service would break for the reception, when my ears perked up at what the Rabbi had just said in his sermon.

Rabbi Gorman is relatively young man—only in his late 30s when he stood up on the bema and gave the sermon that would effectively end his career at our temple, the Bellmore Jewish Center. He was always smiling; he had a vibrant personality that many people found infectious. The kids in Hebrew school certainly respected him, as did many of the parents. But respect is a hard thing to regain once it has been lost.

On my bar mitzvah day—my “coming of age”—I sat there, listening in awe as Rabbi Gorman spouted messages of “the importance of marrying Jews (“keeping the faith”), raising Jewish children, and thus not adopting; emphasizing the importance of having Jewish friends, and attending Jewish schools. I froze. I could only imagine my parent’s faces: more than half our guests—both friends and family alike—weren’t Jewish.

My eyes darted to my aunts and uncles in the front seats, who looked shocked. Naturally, they were stunned by what the Rabbi was saying, particularly the part about not adopting; as I would later find out, my cousin Richard (two years my senior) was adopted, which wasn’t something my aunt and uncle liked to talk about. My Aunt Sharon was just as dumbfounded. “What about Richard?” She muttered under her breath, to which my sister responded “What

*about* Richard?” I dared to take a quick glance at my mother. She looked mortified. This was something that she wouldn’t soon forget.

In retrospect, it’s not as though Rabbi Gorman was trying to be malicious; but his comments were insensitive. And though his message of spreading Jewish faith wasn’t inherently bad, it was inappropriate for a bar mitzvah service, where people of different faiths and upbringings gathered in support of my family. It’s a time of unity and love, not one of exclusion—unfortunately, the Rabbi’s comments were isolating to so many people I cared about. In the months following my bar mitzvah, with increasing complaints from other temple members, Rabbi Gorman left Bellmore Jewish Center.

At thirteen, I understood what reciting my haftorah portion meant, knew that it was a rite of passage. But I hadn’t fully processed it yet. And even though I had technically become an adult by all standards in Judaism, it was still just a title. There’s no one age where you become an adult, just like there’s no one shining moment where you feel religious. It’s all about growth.

And yes, as wonderful as my bar mitzvah turned out, it was a revelatory moment for me. I came to terms with the fact that adults are fallible too: religious figures, parents, everyone. It was on my bar mitzvah day—the day where I had the immense weight of being in some regard, an adult thrust upon me—where I realized the imperfections we all had. And in this, I found comfort.



### “A Few Good Men (and Women) Left on TV”

The past decade has had a number of strong female presences grace the small screen; some have certainly placed more of an emphasis on sex appeal than others; for every *Buffy*, there's any number of female leads that aren't written to do much else other than look pretty. But in recent years, television has seen a significant growth in the number of multifaceted female leads—from Tina Fey's Liz Lemon (*30 Rock*) to Jennifer Carpenter's Deborah Morgan (*Dexter*). Still, there are plenty of examples where TV and film are just getting it wrong. Along with this shift in intelligent, multi-dimensional women, it should also become important to pay attention to how the portrayal of men has (or hasn't for that matter) changed in our media as well.

In her nonfiction report, *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (the chapter titled “Shopping for Sex”), feminist author Ariel Levy puts shows like HBO's massively popular *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) under the microscope, and critiques how much empowerment these characters that embody “raunch” culture really have. The perceived success of the show that women were finally being elevated to the level of men; that girls could be just as perverse, and as sexually promiscuous as any man could. But does this actually make women feel as though they've “won” in any sense in the fight for equality?

I think it's ironic that a show like *Sex and the City* became synonymous with female empowerment—this seems like a contradiction. In reality, while culturally, *Sex and the City* made its female viewers feel more powerful, isn't there a problem when the ultimate goal is to act more like men? In *Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy also talks about the difference between women gaining what they want, and simply gaining a better understanding of what men want from them. That's not true power, but something else altogether. Ariel Levy argues, “If you start to think

about women as if we're all Carrie on *Sex and the City*, well, the problem is: you're not going to elect Carrie to the Senate or to run your company...let's see women in decision-making positions—*that's* power." She goes on to say that true sexual freedom shouldn't be "a smokescreen for how far we haven't come" (Levy, pg. 195). With a show like *Sex and the City*, (from an entertainment perspective), it's only a matter of time before writers realize that they're trapped at a narrative dead end. Sex may sell, but it doesn't sustain itself—shows that depend solely on raunch are a ticking time bomb that while flashy and attractive at first, will surely lose their luster after a certain period of time.

I question whether or not the kind of female empowerment going on in shows like *Sex and the City* is actually benefitting women just as much as I cringe at the onslaught of unfunny sexual puns and misogynistic on *Two and a Half Men* (which, by the way, I don't think is doing wonders for men, either). Not to suggest that promiscuity is wholly encouraged by either sex, but I don't think anyone would deny that there's still a double standard when it comes to women. The entertainment industry is a perfect microcosm of this very issue: if a female celebrity were acting loose in her dating life, the public is most likely going to see her in a negative light, so why do should the situation be any different if the person is George Clooney?

I think in regards to television and film, men also need to be held to a higher standard. I'm not making the lofty claim that men are underrepresented or marginalized to the extent that women are; all I'm saying is that men have become stereotypes too, and I think it's time we try and correct that. Yes, some men are womanizers, who have loose morals. Sure, men are guilty of consuming raunch culture and keeping the perpetual machine moving. But it's beyond cliché at this point; it's just a tired trope. Even shows like *How I Met Your Mother*, which pride

themselves on ultimately telling a sweet love story (see the show title), have their protagonist make some extremely morally questionable romantic decisions. In so many instances in film and television, male characters have become caricatures of themselves—and if *Sex and the City* captures the feelings of so many modern women—what does this say about men today?

I think it's interesting that you rarely hear people criticize the superficiality of male characters. Maybe the reason there are fewer fully fleshed out male characters on television is because society thinks they have less to prove. There have been a crop of shows in recent years such as *Spartacus*, *Hung*, and even *Game of Thrones* that all center to some degree on the objectification of both female and male bodies. To some extent, men have to constantly live up to that hulking, over-sexualized image—a pattern that doesn't seem to be going anywhere in the near future.

In the end, I don't think Ariel Levy would agree that men need more power, and she's probably right. But I do feel—and this could be due to the time of the book's publication—that Levy misses the mark on some of the truly memorable and versatile female characters television has given us. Furthermore, though she says that *Sex and the City* was a fairly accurate representation of some New York women, it seems that the show wasn't quite as progressive as it may have wanted to be. Finally, we can't forget the role men play when discussing what's wrong with television today. I would hope that the future will see a kind of reversal with the rigid gender roles that have plagued our TV screens for so long.

**“Weird!boy”**

“Going outside is highly overrated.”

-Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*.

Let me start by saying that I hate “Live Journal.” I guess I’ve always been a bit skeptical about the idea of sharing that much personal information with strangers; pouring the intimate details of one’s life (stories that should probably be best kept in an actual diary) onto a computer screen. But if someone finds the site to be a creative outlet to express themselves, then who was I to argue? Naturally, I found it slightly harder to remain objective about the whole thing the moment I found out a girl I was going to high school with had been keeping an ongoing blog about me.

Rebecca and I had been friends for about three years—we’d gone to elementary and middle school together, but didn’t really start talking to each other until midway through high school. We quickly bonded over classes and extracurricular activities, both writing for our school paper, and magazine (the club that we would eventually both become co-editors of). I had considered her a good friend, but knew that she was had tendencies toward being jealous, and at times, even a little manipulative. Thus, it was unfortunate, but no surprise that our friendship slowly began to disintegrate over the course of our senior year. “Oh, you’re going to the movies with them again? She would say with disdain. No, that’s fine...I don’t want you to feel guilty for not telling me or anything.”

Having classes and clubs with her had quickly become a nightmare. She needed to be in control, and to always be one step ahead of me. As co-editors for our magazine, she would speak for the entire time during our meetings and wouldn’t let me get a word in, then would have

freshman club members handle work that was supposed to be my job. It was beyond frustrating, and I knew that something would need to be said. She had even gone on her off periods to tell school teachers about growing feud. I thought she had gone too far then, but little did I know I was about to stumble upon.

After school one day, I had gone with a friend to speak with my A.P. English teacher about an essay we had been assigned. My teacher, Mrs. Atkins, caught the end of our conversation, and much to my chagrin, her ears perked up. “Are you talking about Rebecca? I’m sorry to butt in, but she was venting to me this afternoon,” she said.

“Everything’s fine,” I told her. I’m just finding it really difficult to get anything done with the Magazine while she’s there...I’m supposed to be a co-editor, but she leaves no work to be done.” Mrs. Atkins’ response wasn’t what I had expected. “I know I shouldn’t say this, but honestly, I can’t stand that girl. We’re supposed to like all our students equally, but she is just *not* a nice person,” she finished. My friend and I were stunned, but couldn’t help but smile.

Rebecca was always a bit introverted. She considered me one of her closest friends. She always talked about people she knew from online forums and fan groups (of television shows and books she read). In fact, she met her very best friend on a group discussion board for the medical drama “Grey’s Anatomy.” Ironically, this same friend, Meg, had a falling out with Rebecca around the same time I did, and one day, out of the blue, I was contacted by her. She had gotten my number from Rebecca. “There’s something I think you need to see,” she said. Meg had the password for Rebecca’s “Live Journal” account, and it was through her that I was finally able to see what she had been writing about me all this time.

Online, Rebecca didn't refer to me by my real name, but instead used a rather bizarre alias: "Weird!boy." Rebecca had been turned her personal blog into an outlet to bash me; there were a few harmless entries talking about how I—a "weird" boy who she just couldn't understand, bothered her sometimes; how we butted heads in the clubs we had together, and how I seemed to be both flirty, and oblivious all at the same time. But then things just got vicious, and well, weird. "Weird!boy is an asshole," one enraged friend from Milwaukee posted underneath the entry "People who No Longer Exist to Me." A user by the name of RocketGirl113 said "Nobody has the right to hurt you, Rebecca, especially not this jerk." There were a dozen other like these, but I still think no one on the Internet had a lesser opinion of me than Hiddenwave, who said "Give me his address, and I'll drive to New York and kick his ass. Or you could just give me his number and I'll mess him up for you. You don't deserve this; you're too good for him."

Scrolling through the entries, I found one dated in December, right around the time of my birthday. "Interesting," I thought to myself. I now had the strange opportunity to see what she was really feeling even when we were still on decent terms. "Weird!boy and I didn't talk today," she wrote. "It's going to make buying a birthday gift for him real fun." Desperate to appease her, the hoard of bloggers posted their sympathies. One anonymous user wrote: "Why do you have to buy him anything! It's not like he's ever done anything for you! You know what you should buy him? A book on personality disorder." I'd have to agree; what a very astute observation, faceless name.

The problem is that Rebecca never had anyone in her life telling her that what she was doing was wrong; instead, she would simply "get through" her daily school life, and run home to

chat with her “real” friends in Ohio, Pennsylvania, etc. She chose to make a substitution: the friends she had face-to-face interactions with the ones she could only see a username and avatar—and who, most importantly, gave her constant gratification and support. These people didn’t know the real her, but rather had an image of what she wanted them to know. They liked some of her poetry, sure. But they didn’t know the half of her life, and yet, here these people were, threatening to come “kick my ass”—or Weird!boy’s ass I should say. I might have been scared if the person she was writing about actually existed.

I never confronted Rebecca about the blog. Our friendship had already collapsed, and we were graduating, so I was focused on moving forward and leaving our relationship behind. Over the next two years, Meg (the other friend she lost) and I became friendly through Facebook, sending each other the occasional message or wall post. At this point, I’d gone nearly two years without hearing from Rebecca, when Meg told me she’d received a threatening message on Facebook. “Stay away from him if you know what’s good for you.” “Unbelievable,” I thought to myself. After all this time, she was still finding a way to create stress in my life.

Ignorance may be bliss, and while reading those entries and comments about me was hard, I’m glad I found out the truth. All of these social networking sites are great if they can foster *actual* relationships, but this whole ordeal taught me to never forget what’s real and what’s artificial. Rebecca to my knowledge still has yet to learn the difference.

### “Super 8: Making an Old-School Movie in the Age of the Internet”

In the digital age, nothing remains secret for long. With the advent of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media, people are inundated with more information faster than ever before: people read friends’ status updates within seconds, receive coverage on natural disasters minutes after they strike, even hear about celebrity deaths (some who aren’t even dead) at an alarmingly rapid pace. The barrier between private and public knowledge is thinner than ever—sure to be a good thing for government conspiracies—but for workers in the entertainment industry, it’s become increasingly difficult to guard their projects without something getting leaked.

This lack of secrecy in feature films and television is something J.J. Abrams intends to change for his upcoming summer film, Super 8 (a title that comes from the Eastman Kodak film format used by amateur filmmakers in the 60s). A critically acclaimed television producer (*Alias*, *Lost*, *Fringe*) and feature film writer/director (*Star Trek*, *Cloverfield*), Abrams has a history in the entertainment industry for making mind-bending, high concept ideas that require the viewers engage with what they’re watching: intricate stories that are best told to an audience that hasn’t been spoiled. Super 8 is trying to accomplish the same feat—to revive a movie-going experience where people are (as much as possible) genuinely ignorant before going to see something.

In an effort to keep details about the film hidden, it’s no surprise that the marketing campaign for the film been cryptic. It wasn’t until the 2011 Super Bowl that the first trailer for was released—only 30 seconds with a few words of dialogue (“Do not speak of this. If you do...they will find you). Abrams tends to gravitate toward the unconventional way of doing things; he tries to puts himself in the shoes of his fans by making the promotional material a part of the film itself, as another way for the audience to interact with the story. To promote Super 8,



he released boxes of old Kodak Super 8 brand film containing reels of select frames of movie footage—which revealed few plot details, but seems to be an intricate and tantalizing marketing tactic nonetheless.

For all of Super 8's ambiguity and Abrams' careful planning, one wonders: do people care about the element of surprise in movies and television anymore? Judging from his past projects, fans of Abrams' works tend to agree that the mystique and ambiguity of watching his stories unfold is half the fun of watching them; if given a choice, they would prefer not being spoiled beforehand.

Evan Holt, 23, of Oceanside, Long Island, says he always tries to know as little as possible before seeing a movie or television show. Though he hasn't outright searched for spoilers, Holt has had the endings of multiple shows and films spoiled for him via "Twitter" and various online media outlets in the past. "Having participated in the *Lost* phenomenon, I can really appreciate the art of secrecy; I really think there's something to be appreciated to not know everything you're coming into. He [Abrams] has a good grip on the art of suspense—and I suppose the internet and its openness with social networking really cuts down on that element."

Melanie Graber, 24, of Bellmore, Long Island, agrees with Holt's sentiment. "There are shows and movies where I don't care if I know what's going to happen beforehand," she says. But there are other shows—*Lost* is a prime example—that are so complex that I never wanted to know what was coming before I saw it for myself." With these other shows and especially with J.J. Abrams' material which is very community-oriented, getting to experience all the shock and emotion with your friends is half the fun. If I had known it beforehand, I would be missing out."

But since online promotion has become a staple for advertising, the question still remains: will a film like Super 8 be nearly as successful without oversaturated promotion? Or will the light campaign be just enough to get people talking and be all the more intrigued to go see it?

Megan West, 20, of Philadelphia, says “the film definitely has the potential to do well, but people who are not as invested in his [Abrams’] work will likely be turned off by how cryptic he’s being. I think the film will do better if he is a little less secretive.”

“For me, it’s better to make the promotion underwhelming,” Graber adds. It generates discussion among people, which makes me personally want to see it even more. Back when *E.T.* came out, the trailer didn’t tell you the end of the movie. Nowadays, when you see the trailer, you can already predict what’s going to happen.”

All television and filmmakers are faced with the dilemma of how much to reveal (in trailers and through other promotional material) leading up to a release—the precise amount of information that will cause enough hype without ruining the entire product in the process. For Abrams and Super 8, a relatively unknown film with no A-list stars, the choice is between concealing the more telling plot details of the film from the public, while at the same time not being so reserved that the film receives barely any promotion at all.

Although Abrams and Spielberg together have a tremendous cult following, some critics—even Abrams himself—worry whether the lack of a strong promotional online campaign will impact the film’s success. After all, the nature of the story itself, in addition to how details of the movie have been heavily guarded, all lean towards the film being overlooked by the masses come summer 2011. Abrams believes that the film can and does speak for itself, but

acknowledges that they would be wise to pull back the curtain a bit more than they have.

“To me, all people need to know is that it’s an adventure about a small town, and it’s funny, it’s sweet, it’s scary, and there’s a mystery,” he says in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*. “But I know that’s not enough. Look, I feel we need a *little* bit of a coming-out party because we are up against massive franchises and brands and most people don’t know what ‘Super 8’ means. We’re a complete anomaly in a summer of huge films...and we don’t want to be so silent or coy that people don’t care or don’t hear about us.”

With joint producer Steven Spielberg and several comparisons already being made to *E.T.* (along with the film’s story set in the 60s with young children using old 8 mm film to capture a possible extraterrestrial threat), it’s no surprise that Super 8 seems a little out of its time. *Los Angeles Times* writer Geoff Boucher writes, “Abrams, a man with a tape cassette in his car is releasing a movie called ‘Super 8’ in the age of iPhones.” Essentially, Abrams is trying to reclaim some of the cinematic magic that may be lost on the next generation. He’s trying to keep his movie a mystery, but whether or not people will embrace him or pass on the film remains to be seen.

“I don’t think the film will be overlooked,” Holt says. But without having this hype from the Internet, it will lack that extra momentum,” Holt says. “I don’t think people will necessarily be turned off—perhaps you’ll have more of a mass flock of people who are just generally interested to see it just for the hell of it; because even though the Internet has a lot of promotional value, there’s something nice about being kept in the dark.”

“We have such a challenge on this movie,” Abrams says. “Yes, we’ve got Steven’s name on it and my name on it—for what it’s worth—but we’ve got no famous super-hero, we’ve got

no pre-existing franchise or sequel, it's not starring anyone you've heard of before. There's no book, there's no toy, there's no comic book. There's nothing. I don't have anything; I don't even have a board game, that's how bad it is. *But* I think we have a very good movie.”

Super 8 will have a fair amount of summer movie competition when the film is finally released and subsequently demystified on June 10<sup>th</sup>. But time will tell if Abrams and Spielberg's decision to stay tight-lipped about the movie was in fact the right move.

### **Honors Thesis Scholarly Portion**

This section of my honors thesis includes a scholarly analysis of the types of journalism explored in my portfolio. It is intended to dissect the various writing forms and link them to the pieces produced in the Honors Seminar. Encompassing my four-year tenure as a journalism student at the University at Albany, the writings discussed here include: narrative, memoir, op-ed, and feature styles.

“Brooms Up: The College Quidditch Phenomenon” is a narrative piece written about the intercollegiate sport Quidditch and its growing popularity. The seven-page story contains many of the cornerstone elements of a narrative feature. For instance, the opening paragraph, or “lead” should paint a scene for the reader. Narrative writing is about drawing one’s audience in; in addition to relaying factual story information, the lead should also have a certain hook to it, and a vivid description of what the subject matter is.

The first few lines in “Brooms Up” lay the foundation for the rest of the story. “It’s the first gorgeous day on Long Island in recent memory and Hofstra University’s campus has never looked so alive. Dozens of families are walking to the nearby spring festival in the town of Hempstead. But unbeknownst to many passersby, nearly 200 people from fourteen different schools have come out this Sunday morning for one reason—to participate in the Northeast Regional Quidditch Tournament.” In the lead, the fundamental questions of “where” and “what” are answered early on, but the “why” is something that will become apparent later on (the intention is to pique the reader’s interest). The scene is an idyllic spring morning at a local university, but the event is the hook; it’s something unexpected and will hopefully draw the reader in to continue reading further.

When writing narrative pieces, reporters are often required to act as “flies on the wall.” The objective is to tell a story—and to give a voice to something or someone previously unheard. Though the term “Quidditch” originated in the *Harry Potter* series written by J.K. Rowling, the general public remained unaware that the fictional sport had been adapted as an actual college sport. “Brooms Up” attempts to give a voice to this niche game, and perhaps make people more aware of its growing popularity.

Some narrative work entails “immersion journalism”—a style of reporting in which the reporter is personally involved in the story; they make up the research and thus, have a unique and more personal perspective when they get to the writing stage. For instance, Barbara Ehrenreich employed this technique when writing *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*. While our narrative pieces didn’t require the same level of immersion (we didn’t insert ourselves into our stories), we were responsible for completing a significant amount of research and interviews on our chosen topics for the duration of a semester.

One way to capture the voice of an offbeat story is through quotes. Narrative pieces would be dry without “characters”—the people in the story—to help guide the reader; quotes are truly the lifeblood of any story and are what distinguish bad writing from good writing. Reporters must think about whom the most interesting voices of a story are before they set out to write; oftentimes writers are struck with ideas of who the most compelling characters are before they even sit down to write. The overriding purpose of narrative journalism is to captivate one’s audience and the best way to do this is through vivid scenes, details, and dialogue.

“Becoming a Man” is a memoir piece about an important milestone in any young Jewish man’s life: his bar mitzvah day. The piece attempts to inform readers of certain Jewish customs,

as well as depict the emotional frame of mind of a young teen. Memoir is derived from the French word, “*mémoire*,” meaning memory. Memoirs are autobiographical in nature; they are told from a first-person perspective (naturally from the writer’s own memory) and tend to focus on significant or formative experiences in that person’s life.

Memoirs require a significant amount of exposition in order to allow the audience to fully connect with the writer; to visualize what a particular chapter in someone else’s life was. In “*Becoming a Man*,” the lead paragraph sets up all of the crucial faces in the writer’s life: his parents and close family, friends, the Cantor, and the Rabbi. “I stood out on the bema, staring at my friends and family. In a virtual sea of people, I was able to glimpse loved ones and friends; distant relatives I hadn’t officially met yet, and acquaintances that had never sat in a synagogue before. All eyes in the room were on me.” These opening few lines should act as the gateway for the reader—my internal thoughts, insecurities and anxieties, the general frame of mind of a thirteen-year old boy—it’s all there to serve a storytelling purpose.

Memoir pieces should also have some kind of culminating thematic idea; some takeaway in the form of a moral lesson or self-realization. Every story has a reason to be told, and memoirs being some of the most personal writings out there, tend to arise out of profound or life-affirming events in people’s lives. We like stories to have resolution, and to see some form of growth in a person’s life. Understandably, with age comes wisdom; writers are sure to come to different moments of self-recognition depending on the period of writing versus the period that the story takes place. In “*Becoming a Man*,” there is a reflective realization that manhood is a subjective idea; that being told something at one age and actually feeling it aren’t necessarily the same thing.

Memoirs are similar to narrative or hard news stories in that the goal is to craft scenes, details, and dialogue, but the difference lies in the perspective of the piece. Narrative—like most journalism—maintains the objectivity of the writer, while memoir strips away that barrier, leaving the writer to be entirely subjective about an experience. There is an inherent bias in memoir writing because the story is always skewed toward the person who is telling it (toward how they remember something).

This problem frequently occurs with writers who tackle early childhood—precise details and dialogue can get murky. Jeannette Walls exemplifies this in her memoir, *The Glass Castle*. While the essence of her childhood is depicted honestly, some of the minor details are likely embellished. Ultimately, it's the moral responsibility of the writer to ensure the essence of an event is presented truthfully. Of course, not all memoirs accurately reflect the life of the writer behind them: In 2006, James Frey appeared on CNN's *Larry King Live* after his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* had received widespread media criticism for being fabricated. Frey claimed he had only embellished a few of the details, but came under even heavier scrutiny from the public and on a subsequent appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in the coming months. Readers must therefore exercise caution—to accept or dismiss what is plausible on their own.

“Weird! Boy” is the second memoir piece or personal essay in this portfolio. The piece recounts a tumultuous friendship and the privacy (or lack thereof) of the social media outlet, “Live Journal.” “Weird! Boy” opens with an epigraph—a quotation preceding a literary work—from Ernest Cline, author of *Ready Player One*. The quote is intended to express the tone of the piece as satirical. While some moments are more serious than others given the subject, the story is generally told as a humorous anecdote; brief moments of levity scattered throughout the piece



try to accomplish this as well. Just like in “Becoming a Man,” the piece relays background information, but doesn’t run the risk of being overly-expository; this is important in nearly every form of writing, as readers can quickly lose interest if a piece has extraneous details.

One of the golden rules of journalism is objectivity—even if complete unbiased reporting is a myth. But when writing an op-ed piece (named after its position opposite the editorial page in a newspaper) it’s perfectly acceptable to insert your own personal bias into a story. “A Few Good Men (And Women) Left on TV” is an opinion-based article that critiques the presentation of both men and women on television. The article lauds the growth of multifaceted characters on shows in recent years, while expressing distaste for some of the more stereotypical portrayals.

The article also employs *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, a nonfiction report by Ariel Levy, to strengthen its argument. Levy, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* magazine claims that *Sex and the City* may have been an accurate representation of women living in New York City, but that doesn’t mean that the show gave women any kind of empowerment. By the same token, men have been made into caricatures. The article challenges a recurring issue with the way certain characters are seen, and expresses the desire for this problem in the television landscape to change in the near future.

“Super 8: Making an Old-School Movie in the Age of the Internet” is an entertainment news feature. Feature stories are either human interest pieces or stories that bear no relation to a current event; in other words, it’s not “breaking news,” though this doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be timely or relevant to the cultural conversation. It doesn’t matter if the subject is hard news or strictly entertainment—strong feature writers should do their research the same way any journalist would.

Features also need a compelling lead. This piece is speculative; it poses a question to the audience: will this film succeed under-the-radar or will it be a flop? The addition of voices aside from the writer helps shape the piece; the different perspectives hone in on the demographic that this story would likely appeal to. Once again, the importance of quotes in the journalism field cannot be overstated—feature writing is no exception.

This scholarly portion is intended to provide an analytic look at the various kinds of writing studied in the Journalism major; to deconstruct each style and allow the unformed reader to gain insight into the world of journalism. Summarily, the four types focused in my portfolio: narrative, memoir, op-ed, and features all tell stories, but do so in different ways. To recap, narrative uses scenes, details, and dialogue; memoirs depict a subjective story in an author's life; op-ed is opinion-oriented; and lastly, features inform readers of what are often-times “soft” news stories. Along with this analysis, I experienced firsthand each of these journalistic styles while assembling my diverse portfolio.

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