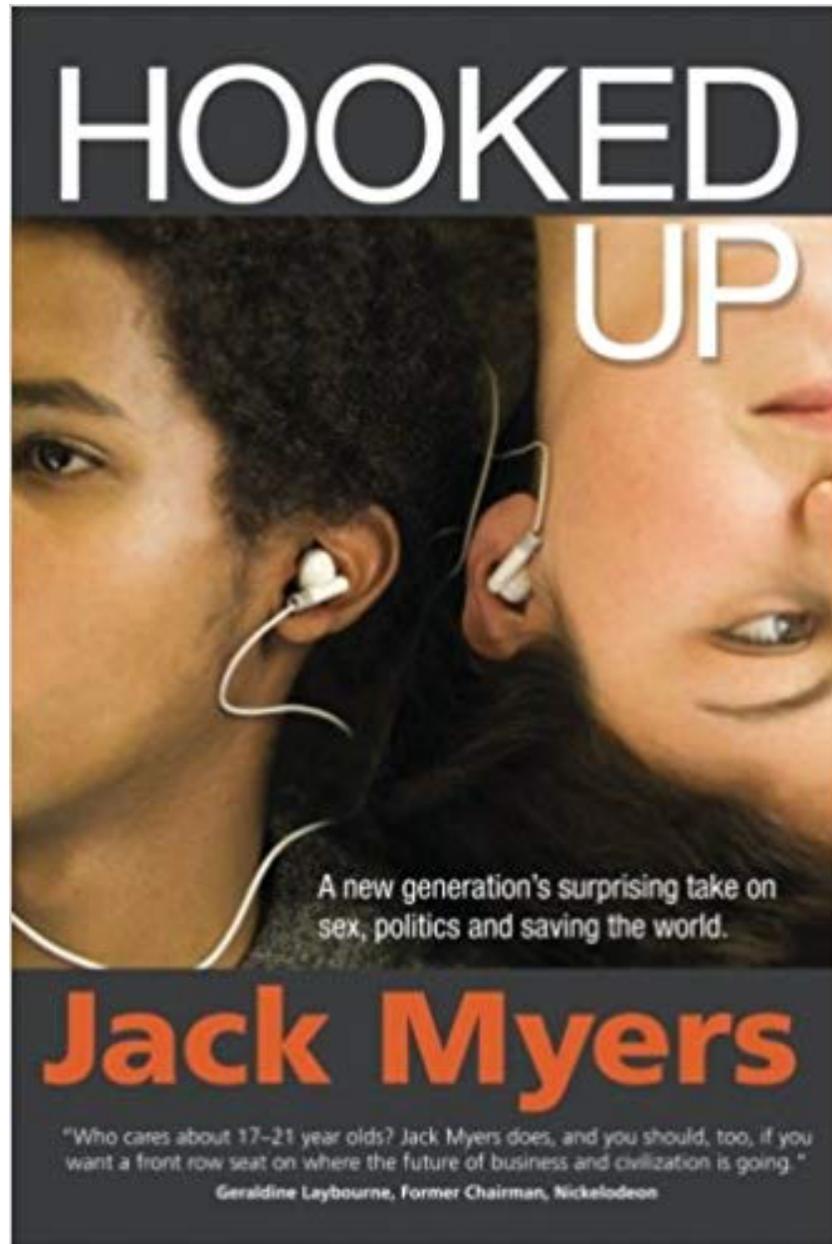


GREGORY PETERSON WRITING SAMPLE

Ghostwriting and Research for
Jack Myers' Award-Winning Book:



IN COMEDY AND CULTURE, THE LASTING LEGACY OF



In the wake of two initial seasons, Seth MacFarlane's fledgling *Family Guy* cartoon show had won the hearts and minds of a dedicated following. Dedicated, but too small for the Fox Network programming executives—who were unimpressed by the slow growth in viewers. “The show didn't perform,” said Fox entertainment chief Gail Berman, who proceeded to pull the plug.

The show's fan base, however, simply refused to let it go—and Fox soon faced a perfect storm of market forces: *Family Guy* DVD sales far exceeded expectations; the show's reruns drew audiences rivaling *The Tonight Show's*; and a fan-initiated petition steadily gained thousands of signatures. Clearly, MacFarlane's program resonated with a market segment that was actively engaged with the content. **In renewing the *Family Guy* contract, Fox Network didn't give this show a second chance; the market demanded it.**

After its brush with an early demise, *Family Guy* went on to become an iconic favorite with the Digital Natives who were growing up with it. The show earned an Emmy nomination in 2009, spawned spin-off cartoon shows *American Dad* and *The Cleveland Show*, and developed a cult-like following that endures today.

The show's continuing success begs a few questions, among them: **“Why is *Family Guy* so resonant with the Digital Natives demographic?”** And—after more than a decade of exposure to the program's edgy, cynical content—**“What impact has the program had on a generation's philosophy, politics and psychology?”**

Attempts to neatly describe this program's content are destined to fail. Like *The Seinfeld Show* (a popular sitcom that ran on a parallel—albeit more mainstream—track) *Family Guy* is a comedy “about nothing.” The plots present a threadbare canvas for a steady stream of bizarre characters, sight gags and wisecracks that invariably skirt (or exceed) the boundaries of good taste and decorum. Writing in *The New York Times*, Dave Itzkoff described the show this way: “*Family Guy*, the Fox animated comedy series, is either irreverent or crass, depending on your tolerance

for unmannerly humor. Viewers come for its pop-cultural free associations and flatulence gags, not necessarily to debate pressing issues of the day."

"*Family Guy* is anything but a family show. Its humor is about as politically incorrect as television gets," said NPR's TV Critic Andrew Wallenstein. "But what I find most interesting is it doesn't matter what the story in any given episode is about. In fact, there rarely ever is a story. The plot is really just a construct to cram as many one-liners in as possible, one more outrageous than the next. And that's just what MacFarlane (the show's creator) intended."

***Family Guy* as Post-Modern Manifesto**

To the extent that *Family Guy* espouses a consistent "philosophy" it would be in its cynical attitude about human affairs, and portrayals of lives led without meaning. In "Family Guy and Philosophy" (a 2007 book published by Wiley-Blackmun) Editor Jeremy Wisniewski wrote an essay about the show's postmodern outlook. Wisniewski's assessment? "It systematically calls into question our most serious ideas: truth, progress, freedom, rationality, and the individual."

Speaking of "serious ideas," one also must add religion to the list. *Family Guy* shines a searing spotlight on any-and-all practices it sees as non-rational and superstitious. Producer Seth Macfarlane is an outspoken atheist—so it should come as no surprise that organized religions of all kinds have been parodied time and time again on *Family Guy*. ("I think of myself as an equal-opportunity offender," MacFarlane said.)

***Family Guy* Casts a Cynical Eye On Politics and Government**

Given the FOX Network's conservative politics, one might expect that a liberal-leaning show would find itself on a tight leash with the expression of political content. Not so, MacFarlane says: "FOX is a company that is schizophrenic in a lot of ways. The news division is very conservative and the entertainment division is very progressive. They really keep their hands out of our business...within reason."

Truth be told, no political viewpoint is off-limits to the show's writers. *Family Guy* exposes and satirizes the political establishment—regardless of which party or politician happens to be in power. Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama all have felt the sting of the show's satirical treatments. And the Kennedy Clan—America's liberal "Royal Family," got the same gloves-off treatment. (MacFarlane admits that his writing team "may have gone too far" with its idea of a PEZ candy dispenser bearing JFK's likeness...and issuing its candy pellets through a gaping hole in the president's head!)

In his 1984 book, "Amusing Ourselves To Death," communications theorist Neal Postman expressed concern about the emergence of a "politically ignorant" society, arguing that democracy is undermined by citizens' exposure to media content that

was entertaining but not informative. "Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least-informed people in the Western world," Postman said.

Family Guy is hardly a primer in citizenship—but it certainly does communicate a point-of-view about government and politics. The show's consistently cynical portrayal of a local government official—the fictional Mayor of Quahog, Rhode Island—provides the best longitudinal indicator of its prevailing attitude about the "merits" of elected officials. Mayor Adam West (voiced by Adam West of the *Batman* television show) is utterly incompetent and truly bizarre—yet none of his constituents seems to notice or care. The lesson? Citizens get the government they demand and hold accountable.

In one episode, a candidate is elected largely because she "wraps herself in the flag"—gratuitously mentioning 9-11 again and again (candidate Rudy Giuliani comes to mind) in her campaign speech. So viewers gain a heightened awareness of the political pandering that drives so many political campaigns. (One could argue that these cartoon lessons in political literacy are worthwhile content for viewers who are—or soon will be—eligible to vote.)

Entertainment for a Disillusioned Citizenry

Despite the show's not-infrequent forays into politics, MacFarlane makes it clear that his priority is producing content that entertains. "People watch the show for laughs....They don't want to hear my personal views on politics" MacFarlane said.

In a case of "real life" intermingling with popular culture, conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh accepted MacFarlane's invitation last year to participate in an episode featuring the radio personality in its story plot. Although many conservatives viewed this as a "suicide mission," the resulting show displayed Limbaugh more favorably than many mainstream media have. In a followup editorial for *the Washington Times*, Michael Taube (former speechwriter for Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper) wrote:

"But here's the inescapable fact - Rush comes off looking like an intelligent, reasonable and likable conservative. He was portrayed as having strong beliefs and values, a love for his country and a genuine respect for intellectual discourse. Sounds rather tolerant, if you ask me...They treated him fairly...They made him look like an American hero for some people, warts and all-and will let their fans be the final judge and jury of this portrayal."

A Lasting Impact On a Generation's Psyche?

Not everyone sees *Family Guy's* content as balanced and benign. From the very start, critics have been actively opposed—including public denouncements, letter-writing

campaigns to FOX, and petitions to the Federal Communications Commission. In 2009 the Parents Television Council (a conservative watchdog group) successfully lobbied for Microsoft to pull its sponsorship of certain *Family Guy* programs. In a speech to Microsoft's board of directors, the PTC's grassroots director (Gavin McKiernan) condemned the show, saying that it had "...consistently presented excessively violent, graphically sexual and profane material." (Given the program's propensity for pushing the envelope of social norms, critics find ample opportunities to cry "foul!"—evidence, they believe, that justifies the censorship they seek.)

In "Understanding Digital Kids," author Ian Jukes wrote: "Increasingly, today's children's values are not—and will not be—inculcated by the family, the church or other institutions... They are, and will continue to be, developed by the electronic and visual media that they are exposed to. This is where they will learn many of their social skills as they've become increasingly immersed in the new digital landscape."

These concerns about a systemic erosion of values are fueled by media effects research such as "Cultivation Theory"—a framework first developed in 1978 by professors George Gerbner and Larry Gross at the University of Pennsylvania. Writing in *The Journal Of Communications* in 1980, Gerbner and colleagues stated: "Just as an average temperature shift of a few degrees can lead to an ice age or the outcomes of elections can be determined by slight margins, so too can a relatively smaller pervasive influence make a crucial difference. The size of an effect is far less critical than the direction of its steady contribution."

In terms of this "direction," there can be no question that television standards for propriety have changed substantially over the past twenty years—leading critics to label this genre as "subversive" comedy shows. First, *The Simpsons* (which debuted in 1989) broke new ground in exploring controversial subjects. Then came *Beavis and Butt-Head* in 1993; and *Daria*, *King of the Hill* and *South Park* in 1997—with each show providing more than a little cynical momentum before *Family Guy* finally made its debut after the 1999 Super Bowl.

For every adherent to Cultivation Theory (or its many variations), there is a critic challenging the validity of its methods and findings. (Many of the alternative theories focus on the widely differing contexts in which various teenagers watch television. Others stress the predisposition that certain viewers have towards violence or other anti-social behaviors.) Consequently, assessing the lasting influence of this (or any program) rarely yields a consensus view. We simply don't have a petrie dish of teenage test subjects who were sequestered away for ten years as a control group isolated from other cultural influences.

Looking back on America's political and economic declines during the past decade and the new transparency ushered in by social media, the increased public

expressions of discontent and cynicism are not surprising; neither are they limited to a few snarky television cartoons. Let's be honest: One needn't have been a *Family Guy* viewer to have grown concerned about the state of America's politics, economics, and social structures. Consequently, there are few clear-cut conclusions about any lasting attitudinal or sociological effects of long-term exposure to *Family Guy* programming.

To be sure, there are *anecdotal* accounts—from parents, therapists, clergy and social service providers. (Some of this evidence speaks to children's vulnerability, other material attests to their resilience; much of it echoes the age-old generational theme: "What's the matter with kids today?") But as policymakers, academics and psychologists study polls and surveys about this generation's attitudes, political participation habits, and psychological well being, their findings remain highly subject to interpretation.

Perhaps the most telling evidence will come as the Digital Natives themselves become "family guys and gals." As parents facing decisions about the media that will shape *their* kids, what legacy will the *Family Guy* generation leave behind?

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