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Wait, Mr. Rogers Wasn't A Pedophile??

Joshua Matthews

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It's that time again in the semester for *True Grit*. I teach this novel to students in my literature class. We arrive at the scene where Rooster Cogburn, a man in his mid-40s, talks throughout the night with a 15-year-old girl, Mattie Ross. They are alone.

It's clear in the novel that Rooster, a friendless loner, prizes her companionship. With this fact in the foreground, I ask the students, "Can this relationship happen today? Can a man today be friends with a 15-year-old girl? Can a man be friends with any little girl?"

Each semester the students look at me in wonder and disgust. No, is the answer. No, no, and no. Am I not aware of the news? Have I never heard of cyberstalking? Sex trafficking? Sexual assaults? That there's a pedophile around every corner? Haven't I ever seen the TV show "To Catch a Predator," the one where old creeps on the Internet pretend to be young people, in order to lure in victims?

One student says that a man like Rooster Cogburn, all alone with a little girl, only wants one thing. So beware—and many of the students agree—beware of being alone with older men.

Recently, I was assigned to review the 2018 documentary "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" for inallthings.org, a movie that reminisces about the life and career of Fred Rogers.

You know Rogers from his children's show that lasted for over 30 years on PBS, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968-2001). If just the mention of the show's title prompts your brain to hum its indelible theme song, you're the primary audience for the documentary.

Critical reaction to it has been, in my judg-

ment, representative of the kind of groupthink that dominates movie criticism. At Rottentomatoes.com, film critics have given it a 99% "fresh" certification. Regular viewers also give it high praise. Reviewers on the Internet Movie Database have rated it an 8.6/10, and although it hasn't had enough reviewers to make its rating official, an 8.6 would put it on the site's list of top-25 list of all movies ever made.

I hadn't seen Roger's show in almost thirty years, and after viewing it again through the lens of the documentary, it's hard for me to see the show in any way other than this: *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* gives me the creeps.

Now, maybe I watch the documentary perversely. Maybe I'm the one perverting a great movie and a great man. Or maybe the film critics missed or ignored what was staring them in the face.

Or maybe viewers of this movie long for something that they can't have again: full trust in an older man.

Here's the way Rogers comes across in the movie.

He's a gangly older man, graying hair, no muscles, a button-down sweater over his shirt and tie. He likes to play with puppets and train sets. He's got the voice and mannerisms of the Pied Piper. He really, really loves children. He uses ten different voices with his puppets to calm and soothe children. He drones on and on about how special children are. He hangs around them all the time. He repeatedly says how much he wants to be the neighbor of my children.

In 2018, in the United States, I think that many of us would privately suspect this man of being a pedophile.

Now, I don't think that Fred was a pedophile, the documentary certainly doesn't hint at that, and just the association I now make is a near-libel of him.

But 2018 is not the 1970s. It's not even the

'80s or '90s, Fred's heyday. The Catholic Church's predatory priest scandal rages on, with no end or contrition in sight. A number of nice-seeming people have been accused or convicted of similar heinous acts as the priests. Even Fred's TV com-patriot, Bill Cosby, who played the nice dad-figure Cliff Huxtable on the most popular show of my youth, *The Cosby Show*, was just sent to jail for drugging young woman and assaulting them.

Remember Jared Fogle, for example, the nerdy-looking guy from the Subway commercials? He seemed like a guy you'd want as a high school math teacher, or as the guy who runs your city's chess tournament. He looked like many of my high school and college friends. But no, that perception was wrong: in 2015, he pled guilty to child pornography and traveling to pay for sex with a minor.

So an obvious question now is, and it's one that the Rogers documentary raises inadvertently: can a man teach young children now, without suspicion? Can a man even be around young children now?

I have four children of my own, which has made me a touch wary about the intentions of strangers, and this documentary's fresh look at Rogers' behaviors and preferences sets off my inner child-protection alert system. As well, perhaps, I have picked up the paranoia of the students in my literature classes.

My students have their reasons to be paranoid. In my small, remote American town, filled with churches and nice-seeming people, a local Christian-school teacher taped little boys in the school shower. He's gone to jail for this unthinkable act. He also, allegedly, committed other, even more disgusting acts with little boys.

Some of my college students, those paranoid readers of *True Grit*'s odd friendship between man and girl, went to that school years ago. A few of them had this pedophile as their fifth-grade teacher, who taught at the school for over a decade.

Now by all accounts, and as the documentary points out repeatedly, Fred Rogers was a kind man who had no devious intentions whatsoever. Most reviewers of the documentary likely want to think of him only in that way—as the nice, friendly-looking man who couldn't and wouldn't harm anything. Sort of like the persona of Jared Fogle in the Subway commercials.

I suspect that the high ratings for the docu-

mentary come solely from the documentary's strong preference for nostalgia, but it is hard for me to drum up any childhood feelings for a show that I thought—as a child who loved Transformers, DuckTales, and Star Wars—was unwatchable.

Depending on your view, Rogers was either a singular talent or an incredible bore. He created, produced, directed, wrote, and acted in this show. He was a true auteur. Yet his show, by today's standards, is unfathomable. As one interviewee in the movie says, it was the opposite of good TV. It was slower than oozing molasses, it had long stretches of silence in it, it had little action or slapstick, and the cheap puppets talked endlessly about their feelings.

For his entire career, Rogers plied the trade of children's feelings, articulating on the show and arguing in front of Congress that these feelings were special and meaningful and that adults have to talk about them with children. He repeatedly emphasized, seemingly in every episode, that each child is very special just as he or she is.

The documentary argues that Rogers consciously crafted and repeated this message because he despised other programming on TV, especially children's programs that he said malformed their audiences by rewarding selfishness and aggression.

The movie also argues that Rogers' show was an incredible, memorable success because of the humble, honorable character of Fred Rogers. He was an ordained Presbyterian minister and lifelong Republican voter, who believed that his calling was to, as he puts it in the movie's opening scene, "help children through the difficult modulations in life," through music, puppets, and general kindness.

Surprisingly, that meant he confronted hard issues directly on his show: he talked openly about what it feels like when a child gets lost, how to confront death, how to talk to disabled and sick people, what it felt like to hear about news from the Vietnam War.

The documentary's success is in its presentation of our nostalgia for the television of our youth. It loves Fred, and it will help some of you remember that you once loved Fred. It assumes that Fred Rogers the man was the same person as the persona of Mr. Rogers, which is an assumption I would like to have—and maybe that explains why viewers have loved this documentary. But as an adult now, in a world where media personas

are at best illusions and at worst totally fraudulent deceptions, I cannot make that assumption of any entertainer or public figure.

I couldn't help thinking about Mr. Rogers the character in today's terms. If he were on TV here in 2018, would he talk about today's hard issues on his show? What would Mr. Rogers say to his young viewers about predatory Catholic priests? Would he be so open as to talk about pedophilic school teachers on his show?

Let's soften the topics a bit. Would he talk about gay marriage? About what to do if you see a man dressed as a woman in a women's bathroom? About what it feels like to be called a girl but to feel like a boy?

The documentary doesn't address these questions. It remains a mere nostalgic glance back at a more innocent time, one that I think the viewers who have rated it so highly pine for. It offers hope only in a past that is not and may never again be, without the sufficient insight needed to confront the present spirits of our age.

Before I watched the documentary, I turned on *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* for my two older boys, ages 11 and 9. They watched it for five minutes, then left the room.

What did you think, I asked. The older one said, "On a scale of 1 to 10, it was a 1."

I think about what could have been, and why I might've felt creepy about Mr. Rogers. This boy, my son, was in fifth grade last year, at the time that the local Christian school teacher got caught. He wasn't, but he could've been, in the teacher's class. He wasn't, but he could've been, on that man's shower tape.

In seeing *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* for the first time, my son probably was just bored by the show. I doubt if he feels yet the strangeness that

I feel about Rogers. I pray that he doesn't. I pray that he doesn't ever have to experience the present age's paranoia about adult men.

He will one day be one of them, too.

It's that time of the semester. I'm teaching *True Grit* in my literature class.

I'm in my office. It's in a pod of offices, secluded in an upstairs corner of our building. Nobody else is around. I'm the only one.

Knock knock on my office door. I open it. It's an 18-year-old female student from the class. She wants to talk about the class, how she's doing, how she can improve. She enters my office. Making a move common to college students visiting their professors, she attempts to close my office door.

Out in the pod, and out in the hallway, no one else is around.

Oh Fred, what should I do?

I think I know what you would do. You would invite her in, you would fix her a cup of tea, you would tell her how glad you are to see her. You might show her your bookshelves, you might lend her a book, you would give life advice about how to deal with feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. You would calm her. You would seem caring and empathetic. You would be her friend.

Fred, I want to be a friend, too. But, as a middle-aged man alone with an 18-year-old girl, this scenario presents me with a bottomless chasm. If I am to be her neighbor, as you'd want me to be, I risk suspicions. I risk wrongful accusations. I risk my career, my family, and my life. You couldn't be a good neighbor today, Fred, and neither, it seems, can I.

But now, as a man in your sweater and shoes, I realize something, Fred. Should I ever be wrongly accused, I would feel in full what I have done to you.