

MIKE PEMBERTON: VOICES

'The Biggest Loser': Exploitation or enlightenment?



If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then maybe feelings of guilt are as well. One person's enjoyment viewed with disdain by another. I imagine it harkens back to our earliest communities, a cave-

man sketching on rock walls being chastised by contemporaries who felt he should be hunting and gathering, laying a guilt trip on him for drawing stick figures when there was work to be done. Similar to how some today might view musicians or, dare I say, writers, who wile away their time "expressing" themselves for no apparent reason other than self-gratification, practicing their craft in the wee hours of the morning while spending the rest of the day toiling at socially acceptable jobs. Perhaps that ostracized caveman artist was the first individual to engage in what we now call a "guilty pleasure."

Of course, "guilt" is in the eye of the beholder as much as beauty. Sexual mores, for example, have evolved to where we openly discuss activities on afternoon TV that would make our grandmothers blush (OK, maybe great-grandmothers). As for beauty, what we now term "plus-sized" women were the epitome of desire for centuries. Even today, in certain

cultures, what Americans consider overweight is viewed in a positive manner, a fat man or woman a symbol of sexual maturity, wealth, strength and wisdom.

In American culture, however, not many positive attributes are associated with heavy people. There are exceptions. Some entertainers, like Queen Latifah, celebrate their size and encourage others to come to terms with their body type. More advertisers are using "plus-sized" models. But, for the most part, the definition of beauty in America is tied to being thin. You have far more celebrities, like Marie Osmond, Jennifer Hudson, Jason Alexander and Dan Marino, touting weight-loss programs as opposed to body image acceptance.

The irony of our quest to be thin is that we have never been fatter. For Americans over the age of 20, 30 percent are deemed overweight and another 30-plus obese. Overweight is defined as one to 20 percent above medical guidelines; obese, 20 percent or greater. In America today, then, over 60 percent of us 20 or older are carrying too many pounds.

It is the nexus of these societal constructs, the notion of guilt and our standards regarding weight and beauty that make possible reality TV shows like "The Biggest Loser." For some, reality TV, regardless of the subject matter, is considered

About Voices

Voices columns are personal essays on life. To submit a column for consideration for Voices, please send the column by email to letters@news-gazette.com with Voices in the subject line, or by mail to Voices, The News-Gazette, 15 Main Street, Champaign, IL 61824-0677. If possible, include a jpeg head shot as an attachment with email, or a head shot with mailed columns. Columns should be a maximum of 750 words.

voyeurism and/or an exercise in schadenfreude, the taking of pleasure in the troubles of others, the "maybe my bad habits/lifestyle/personal choices aren't so bad compared to this schmuck" rationale. Fearful of being accused a voyeur or a practitioner of schadenfreude, most people are reluctant to own up to watching reality TV. Yet the shows garner high ratings and generate millions in profits. The public/private divide between professed viewers of reality TV and the programs ratings are similar to the "I usually break even in Vegas" line. Yeah, right. That is why the drinks are free, the buffets overflowing and Steve Wynn and Donald Trump are worth more than some countries.

I am not a regular gambler or overweight. Those times I have been to Vegas, I have lost money while imbibing the "free" drinks. I used to carry some extra pounds courtesy of my love for such beverages, but I cut back on the booze, started running, and have maintained a healthy weight since. My wife, Yolanda, and I now split restaurant meals in a concession to slowing metabolisms.

That said, with a new season upon us, I must admit to watching "The Biggest Loser." Not because I delight in observing overweight people sweat, but because I admire what they are doing, fighting to reclaim their health and redefine their self-image. While I understand that we all come in different shapes and sizes and some are genetically disposed to be heavier, the preponderance of evidence shows that most of us are overweight because we eat too much and exercise too little.

If you tune into "The Biggest Loser" you realize that being overweight is not a conscious choice or a genetic fate for most people. Some have always fought the battle of the bulge, encouraged by well-meaning parents to "clean their plates." Others, only as they aged, the weight rising each year. But a lot say they use food as a substitute for things they feel they lack like love, friendship, understanding or acceptance. Many have dia-

betes, high blood pressure and joint pain. Thus, their desire to lose weight is not solely about looking better. It is about regaining control of their emotions, health and life.

Yes, there is a \$250,000 prize, although I have not heard an eliminated contestant moan about not winning. Rather, they appear grateful to have made a significant lifestyle change. Even though there are times when I think the camera is intrusive and the trainers are practicing psychology without a license, there are many uplifting moments in "The Biggest Loser" that engender empathy, understanding and respect for the participants' struggles.

One may argue that there remains a voyeuristic exploitation designed to attract viewers. There is truth to that. Yet, from my perspective, in a society that increasingly rewards image over substance, that often applauds the superficial and vain, witnessing people improve their health, and inspiring others to do the same, is no "guilty pleasure." For me, it is a beautiful thing.

Mike Pemberton's short stories have appeared in such literary journals as *Aethlon*, *Touchstone* and *Euphemism*. His first novel, "Transcendental Basketball Blues," was published in 2011. He lives in Hoopeston and can be contacted at www.mikepembertonbooks.com.