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## It's better to know



### YOU CAN GET HEALTH CARE AND TREATMENT IF YOU TEST POSITIVE.

For information on HIV testing:

- call toll-free from in Vermont  
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- for hearing impaired TTY access  
**800-319-3141\***

▪ or visit us on-line at  
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\* The Vermont AIDS Hotline is open weekdays, 8:30-4:30.  
(For information 24/7, call the National AIDS Hotline  
**800-342-2437.**)

## Take the TEST. Take CONTROL.



# Culture Vulture: In Praise of Buffy and Anne Shirley

**W**hen we think of guilty pleasures, what comes to mind first? Eating Ben and Jerry's while sitting on the couch watching *The O.C.*? These pleasures make us guilty because we know we're doing something that, while it feels good, is probably not too good for us in the long run. In her book review "Super Women," (January, 2005) Elizabeth Allen seems to be arguing that "revisionist feminist fiction" is one of these guilty pleasures, chiding the reader not to look to fiction for role models, but to instead strive to be a superhero in her daily life.

Okay, fair enough. I don't think, however, that reading and being are mutually exclusive. Can't we watch or read about superheroes and simultaneously strive to be them? In the spirit of full disclosure, I have to admit that I've taken Allen's article a bit personally since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Anne of Green Gables* are two of my all-time-favorite pleasures, guilty or otherwise. In the sixth grade, I changed the spelling of my name from Ann to Anne, directly influenced by Anne Shirley's claim that Ann-without-an-e looked horribly plain and incomplete.

I know that Allen's claims of the "wonder bread" nature of Buffy are true in many ways, and I've written papers myself to that effect, making much the same point as the essay from *Girls Who Bite Back* she cites – that Buffy is consistently defined in opposition to women of color on the show, and that this doubling makes Buffy work as a feminist icon. The dangerous aspects of her character, like out-of-control sexuality without guilt are foisted onto these Other characters and Buffy is thus able to remain pure.

I don't believe, however, that the show's lack of consciousness around race robs it of value. For instance, the relationship between Tara and Willow is perhaps the first representation of the kind of lesbian couple who begin to look the same over time, instead of being clearly differentiated along gender lines. And the show's engagement of feminist issues doesn't stop with Tara and Willow, either—Buffy's development over the course of the show illuminates both the possibili-

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ty and the socially imposed problems of female power. Since the show addresses feminist issues so explicitly, its shortcomings in addressing issues of race become almost impossible not to notice. By using the show's lack of diversity as a reason to write it off altogether, Allen denies the possibility of reader resistance, and the ability of readers to take what they want from a text and leave the rest.

Her critique of *Anne of Green Gables* follows the same logic – because Anne settles with childhood crush Gilbert, all the power of the young Anne is just negated? Ultimately, Allen is making the same mistake in her critique that she's throwing at the people who find value in these shows – only looking at a piece of the picture, not the whole thing.

Even though Ally Sheedy's makeover at the end of *The Breakfast Club* is heartbreaking and awful, which version of her character sticks with you, as a viewer? The Talbots-looking girl from the end of the movie, flush with excitement over her new jock boyfriend, or the witchy-creepy-cool girl sitting in the back of detention eating a Cap'n Crunch sandwich and decorating her drawings with dandruff?

This shift in attention from the later, more heterosexually defined version of the character to the earlier one doesn't make her transformation less awful, but the staying power of that transformation is mediated by our choices as a viewer. The earlier version of the character is the one that carries cultural weight—early-90's riot grrls were copying the Ally Sheedy from the beginning of the movie, not the end.

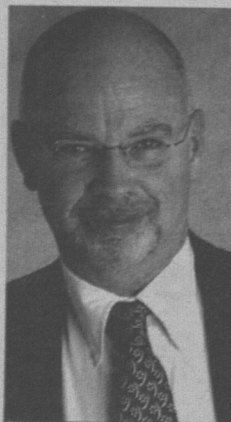
At the end of the day, if

we throw out all the texts that we find problematic, there won't be any texts left. And maybe this is Allen's point – that we shouldn't be looking to texts for heroes, but instead should work on becoming those heroes ourselves. But don't these fictional heroes help us to become real ones?

Reading *Anne of Green Gables* as a kid, I felt a kind of solidarity with Anne, the dreamy, bookish weirdo, and this feeling of identification helped me to believe there was a world beyond my middle school where I'd be rewarded for my own weird bookishness. And sure, her marriage to Gilbert is depressing, but I was always much more interested in her relationship with Diana Barry anyway. Part of what we do as readers is go through texts, mining them for the bits we find meaningful. In saying this, I by no means intend to imply that we should just ignore the racist or sexist or homophobic aspects of the texts that surround us, but that we can use these moments as jumping-off points for analysis and critique.

I'll admit, there are problems with even my favorite shows, but I don't think those problems make the shows themselves entirely worthless. Ideally, if a text is smart enough, it will spur conversation, about its failings. Besides which, I'm not interested in perfect heroes, even fictional ones. ▼

*Anne Moore lives in Winooski and tries to feel little guilt over pleasure.*



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