

PAINTED IMPACT

In a recent letter (8/10), Wanda Ballentine rounded out a tribute to Charles Gray, my late husband, by describing one vivid tactic he used to give "a graphic picture of how lopsided and inhumane U.S. spending is." He did that many times in many ways but I believe the action Wanda tried to describe was even more savvy and effective than she'd heard.

Although Charles sometimes did use long paper tapes to dramatize, for example, the income gap between the world's poorest and its multibillionaires, back around 1970 he enlisted the help of a half dozen volunteers. Then with permission from the UO, they PAINTED a graph of the U.S. budget that ran all the way from Kincaid to University Street on 13th Avenue. It showed clearly the disparity between spending for "defense" and for human needs like education, health and housing. The campus officials had stipulated that they use water based paint. Nonetheless, the graph remained for months, and when parents visited, students pointed it out to them. What a teaching tool!

Yes, Wanda, it's high time another team of activists recreated it.

Sylvia Hart
Eugene



Charles Gray

PUBLIC LANDS NOT TOILETS

Thank you for your cover story on contaminants in local swimming holes (8/3). I feel compelled to comment on Brice Creek Canyon in particular, one of the most beautiful waterways in the county, a place that should be held sacred and protected at all cost. Until recently, I assumed it was pristine. Recent *Register-Guard* articles on area mining and my own discoveries indicate otherwise.

The Champion gold mine located in Bohemia Mountain routinely leaks acidic water and toxic metals into Champion Creek which empties into Brice Creek. There are plans to spend \$1.4 million in taxpayer money over the next three years to clean up the mess.

The DEQ person you quoted suggests that swimmers go farther up into the headwaters for higher water quality. Well, that's what I've been doing, but apparently so has everybody else. On a recent trip two friends and I drove as far into the Umpqua as we could while still hoping to find water that would not cause cardiac arrest. Surprise! Not only did we discover a smoking campfire someone had carelessly left behind, but in the middle of Brice Creek we found a half-full, open bottle of shampoo spilling itself over the rocks. Last year I witnessed a mother washing her



child's soiled diaper in the water above one popular campground.

Sometimes I think people are breathing too much benzene. Is it too much to respect

what little we have left of our natural world? The delicate creatures that live in and around clear mountain streams cannot absorb products like sunscreen and dishwashing soap.

monitoring THE media BY DEBRA MERSKIN

Pillage and Plunder

Pondering our passion for pirates

We pillage, we plunder, we rifle and loot.

Drink up me 'earties, yo ho!

We kidnap and ravage and don 't give a hoot.

Drink up me 'earties, yo ho!

Ho, yo ho! A pirate's life for me!



Three times a day at the Treasure Island casino in Las Vegas, pirates taunt and threaten tourists, forcing an unlucky few to "walk the plank." Three times a day since 1967, California's Disneyland Pirates of the Caribbean attraction invites youngsters to "sing along as you discover what it's like to become a Pirate of the Caribbean!" Every February since 1904 the 165-foot Jose Gasparilla, the "world's only fully rigged pirate ship," sails into the harbor of Tampa, Florida's Ybor City district. "Unruly plunderers," celebrants of Gasparilla throw caution to the wind, eat, drink and make very merry, with men occasionally throwing a woman (i.e., wench) over their shoulders in pretend games of rape and pillage as they celebrate the conquests of legendary pirate Jose Gaspar.

The pirate. Fodder of lore and legend. Long John Silver, Grace O'Malley, Captain Hook, Jacques Lafitte, Bluebeard, and Jack Sparrow ... all real or imagined pirates of the Caribbean. The subject of two, and soon to be three, films starring to Johnny Depp. Since the swashbuckling days of Douglas Fairbanks, pirates have been glorified, romanticized, and embellished in cinema and popular culture.

Instead of being portrayed as the merciless murderers they really were, pirates are emulated, imitated and adored. We encourage our children to dress like pirates, play with pretend swords and act like heroes. As adults, we emulate, imitate, and condone this brash and violent behavior. I've been thinking a lot about people's passion for all things pirate lately. The premiere of the latest Depp flick, associated merchandising, and unrelenting parade of National Geographic, Discovery and History channels' pirate programming, has American culture positively popping with piracy.

Piracy is part of the popular lexicon – stolen software, music, and radio programming is pirated. It's easy to see where the fantasy jolly rogue pirate comes from. We grow up reading about pirates in books such as J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, seeing them on stage in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*, and in films from Dennis Fairbanks Jr.'s swashbucklers to Johnny Depp's evil but gorgeous Jack Sparrow.

Fashion houses are celebrating a style known as "pirate chic" so fans can "look

good while walking the plank" when they carry out a "fashion mutiny" and "look without going overboard." In a high-end Eugene doggie boutique, I saw that our four-legged friends need not be left out of the frenzy – there was a sequined, studded skull T-shirt for Spot along with matching leash and other fashion accoutrements.

The truth is, we're celebrating deeds so deplorable and dastardly that if Hollywood were to tell the truth about pirates, it would be more than many of us could handle. Real-life pirates lived lives of fear, death, destruction, murder and revenge; they were a bloody, treacherous, hyperviolent lot. Pirates used swords to slice, stab, slash and decapitate their way through bodies to the booty. More often, the weapon of choice was a firearm, a flintlock. One model had the power of five single shot weapons at once and attacking pirates usually had two or three ready to fire pistols tied together. The rum was sometimes consumed in place of what was usually rancid drinking water or mixed with water, resulting in grog. Either way, a lot of alcohol was consumed and a lot of violence resulted.

So, why do we celebrate these killers? Why do we fail to see the realities of what and who pirates were? Moreover, I wonder, if enough time passes, do people become not who they were but who we want them to be? Does the passing of time make saints out of sinners? Is historical truth telling necessary if no one remembers the context within which the story was told?

What's the appeal of pirate fever today? The image of the pirate, that of a fearless, independent spirit, appeals to Americans. University of Pittsburgh professor Marcus Reidecker says, "Americans have a love for the rebel." Pirates "transgress for us. ... they live on the sea, traditionally a place of otherness ... and above all they are hedonistic to a greater extent than we are."

Movies, television programs, and popular culture paraphernalia reinforce the pirate romance. According to Beth Stanley, in *Bold in her Breeches*, "the pirate in 20th century western thinking stands for someone exciting who profitably and confidently operates outside society ... [who] pillages communities rather than contributes to them, disregarding laws and setting up his own. Anything is possible because nothing requires permission: No one controls the pirate's morality." Furthermore, "legendary ... piracy has a similar eroticized thrill about conquering as that of Westerns, but to find it exciting we have to make ourselves blind to the brutality and sexist and racist attitudes that accompanied it."

Our culture often becomes enamored with a romanticized version of the past that erases the truth of what happened to men, women and children at that time. What I am asking for is awareness of what we consume, not taking what appears to be so everyday, so normal and natural, as "truth." Unquestionably accepting information and images based on cultural longevity is, to me, unacceptable and potentially dangerous. I argue we should approach mass media content in the same way – know whereof they speak. Then decide. Pirates were very bad people who did terrible things. Is this something we should celebrate?

Debra Merskin is an associate professor in the UO School of Journalism and Communication. A longer version of this essay is online at www.eugeneweekly.com