



kort's korner

First They Came for Bert and Ernie

AS THE YEARS GO BY, a growing number of cartoon characters have been forcibly “outed.” I am amazed that anyone would be concerned about the sexual and romantic orientation of any imaginary two-dimensional figure.

First it was poor Bert and Ernie of *Sesame Street*. These two beloved American figures were minding their own business, taking baths together, singing silly songs together (probably Broadway tunes), sleeping in the same twin beds—with a picture of them both together over the headboard. Best buds they were! Bachelors at best. And then in 1990, the Reverend Joseph Chambers, a Pentecostal minister from Charlotte, North Carolina, decided that they're a gay couple.

“They're two grown men sharing a house—and a bedroom!” bellows Chambers, whose radio ministry is broadcast in four Southern states. “They share clothes. They eat and cook together. They vacation together and have effeminate characteristics. In one show Bert teaches Ernie how to sew. In another, they tend plants together. If this isn't meant to represent a homosexual

union, I can't imagine what it's supposed to represent.”

The Children's Television Workshop and *Sesame Street* both issued a statement defending the characters saying that these two were, in fact, not a gay couple. Since then, nevertheless, Bert and Ernie have largely kept their distance from each other, onscreen. They are still friends, and my young nephews still say “Bert 'n' Ernie” in one breath. But the baths have stopped, and their pictures together are gone.

Then in 1999, Rev. Jerry Falwell outed a Teletubby who was minding his own business and having fun with the other three Teletubbies. But he was purple (lavender!), carried his magic bag (a purse!), spoke in a high voice (effeminate!) and wore a triangle (symbol of gay pride!) on his head. The Itsy Bitsy Entertainment Co. reassured everyone—including good old Jerry—

that the Tinky Winky—whom they license as dolls and in many other formats—is not gay.

I was so upset about all of this that in 2000, when my partner and I were married under Reform Judaism, we tied small figures of Bert, Ernie, and Tinky Winky together with a rainbow ribbon with a note that read, “A Perfect Family.” Since there was no bride at our wedding, so no bouquet or garter belt available, Mike and I threw big dolls of Bert and Ernie. My nephew, then aged three, thought that all weddings were like that—aimed at him and him alone!

Now James Dobson—founder of Focus on the Family, a right-wing Christian group—has singled out SpongeBob Square Pants, who has his own half-hour cable show on Nickelodeon. Dobson accused SpongeBob, or maybe his creators, with “promoting the gay agenda”—and has proudly continued claiming that on his web site. Also, SpongeBob's new video, “We Are Family” calls for tolerance of all people and is to be shown in schools. (That song is a gay anthem, and Diana Ross even appears in the video!—not that makes the video gay!)

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First They Came for Bert and Ernie continued

Actually, SpongeBob has been under suspicion for a while now and is a gay icon for some. But his creators deny that he is gay, and have also stated that those who think he is should “increase their medications.” Too funny—and how clever, to suddenly put the whole argument in an adult perspective!

But why are no female cartoon characters ever outed? Organizations for the Reparative Therapy of Homosexuality and religious organizations for the Ex-Gay movement, and NARTH—the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality—always target males.

Can we talk about Peppermint Patty from the Peanuts comic strip? She is clearly a lesbian, and it’s obvious that she is in romantic love with Lucy, always following her around. She even has a friend Marcie—clearly a lesbian—who calls her “Sir”! And what about Velma from “Scooby Doo”? Her hairstyle is very butch, and she always wears sensible clothes and shoes.

And what about the Power Puff Girls? Those three flying tomboys can throw punches and save the day, one half-hour at a time, better than any man in Townsville!

Why do those who oppose homosexuality make so little fuss about these lesbian cartoon characters, aside from a small uproar on the Internet? Because the vast major-

ity of homophobic and anti-gay attacks are made by sexist patriarchal men—and some women like Women of America (WOA)—who require rigid gender roles. These men will allow women to stray, as long as it is for their benefit and pleasure. Straight men buy and rent DVDs of lesbian sex for their erotic entertainment. But these same good ole boys get disciplined for not conforming to strict gender roles. Their punishment is to be outed as gay—as if that is the worst insult “a real man” can endure.

If Bert and Ernie, Tinky Winky, and SpongeBob are gay, then I’m glad to be alongside them as a real-life, openly gay man. I can’t wait until Buzz Lightyear, that Muscle Beach spaceman from Toy Story, comes out. Now, he is HOT!