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(White) Women We Love

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By Eugene Robinson
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Someday historians will look back at America in the decade bracketing the turn of the 21st century and identify the era's major themes: Religious fundamentalism. Terrorism. War in Iraq. Economic dislocation. Bioengineering. Information technology. Nuclear proliferation. Globalization. The rise of superpower China.

And, of course, Damsels in Distress.

Every few weeks, this stressed-out nation with more problems to worry about than hours in the day finds time to become obsessed with the saga -- it's always a "saga," never just a story -- of a damsel in distress. Natalee Holloway, the student who disappeared while on a class trip to the Caribbean island of Aruba, is the latest in what seems an endless series.

Holloway assumed the mantle from her predecessor, the Runaway Bride, who turned out not to have been in distress at all -- not physical distress, at least, though it's obvious that the prospect of her impending 600-guest wedding caused Jennifer Wilbanks an understandable measure of mental trauma.

Before the Runaway Bride, there were too many damsels to provide a full list, but surely you remember the damsel elite: Laci Peterson. Elizabeth Smart. Lori Hacking. Chandra Levy. JonBenet Ramsey. We even found, or created, a damsel amid the chaos of war in Iraq: Jessica Lynch.

The specifics of the story line vary from damsel to damsel. In some cases, the saga begins with the discovery of a corpse. In other cases, the damsel simply vanishes into thin air. Often, there is a suspect from the beginning -- an intruder, a husband, a father, a congressman, a stranger glimpsed lurking nearby.

Sometimes the tale ends well, or well enough, as in the cases of Smart and Lynch. Let's hope it ends well for Holloway. But more often, it ends badly. Once in a great while, a case like Runaway Bride comes along to provide comic relief.

But of course the damsels have much in common besides being female. You probably have some idea of where I'm headed here.

A damsel must be white. This requirement is nonnegotiable. It helps if her frame is of dimensions that breathless cable television reporters can credibly describe as "petite," and it also helps if she's the kind of woman who wouldn't really mind being called "petite," a woman with a good deal of princess in her personality. She must be attractive -- also nonnegotiable. Her economic status should be middle class or higher, but an exception can be made in the case of wartime (see: Lynch).

Put all this together, and you get 24-7 coverage. The disappearance of a man, or of a woman of color, can generate a brief flurry, but never the full damsel treatment. Since the Holloway story broke we've had more news reports from Aruba this past week, I'd wager, than in the preceding 10 years.

I have no idea whether the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida hung on every twist and turn of the

Chandra Levy case; somehow, I doubt he did. But I suspect the apostle of "deconstructionism" would have analyzed the damsel-in-distress phenomenon by explaining that our society is imposing its own subconsciously chosen narrative on all these cases.

It's the meta-narrative of something seen as precious and delicate being snatched away, defiled, destroyed by evil forces that lurk in the shadows, just outside the bedroom window. It's whiteness under siege. It's innocence and optimism crushed by cruel reality. It's a flower smashed by a rock.

Or maybe (since Derrida believed in multiple readings of a single text) the damsel thing is just a guaranteed cure for a slow news day. The cable news channels, after all, have lots of airtime to fill.

This is not to mock any one of these cases (except Runaway Bride) or to diminish the genuine tragedy experienced by family and friends. I can imagine the helplessness I'd feel if a child of mine disappeared from a remote beach in the Caribbean. But I can also be fairly confident that neither of my sons would provoke so many headlines.

Whatever our ultimate reason for singling out these few unfortunate victims, among the thousands of Americans who are murdered or who vanish each year, the pattern of choosing only young, white, middle-class women for the full damsel treatment says a lot about a nation that likes to believe it has consigned race and class to irrelevance.

What it says is that we haven't. What it says is that those stubborn issues are still very much alive and that they remain at the heart of the nation's deepest fears.

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