

# The Homer in all of us

We can all be heroic when we need to be - meanwhile - 'Doh!'

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Judging by Orwell's own writings he probably would have strongly approved of the tubby, lazy, harebrained yellow figure of fun who this year became an American role model.

In his 1942 essay 'The Art of Donald McGill', Orwell touched on why characters like Homer Simpson have such enduring appeal. Defending the saucy seaside postcard, Orwell cited the duality of man, the divided self that is torn between heroism on the one side and self-preservation on the other. He labelled this dualism the Don Quixote/Sancho Panza division.

In one memorable passage Orwell reminds us of the Sancho Panza side of ourselves: 'If you look into your own mind, which are you - Don Quixote or Sancho Panza? Almost certainly you are both. There is one part of you that wishes to be a hero or a saint, but another part of you is a little fat man who sees very clearly the advantages of staying alive with a whole skin. He is your unofficial self, the voice of the belly protesting against the soul. His tastes lie towards safety, soft beds, no work, pots of beer and women with voluptuous figures.'

Those lines were written 59 years ago and yet there is hardly a better description around today that so perfectly sums up Homer Simpson. In a country where children have to salute the flag every morning and the currency states 'In God we trust', Homer represents, to borrow Orwell's phrase, 'the worm's eye view of life'. He is forever rebelling against virtue by sleeping on the job, stuffing his gut with doughnuts and chilli fries, escaping from Marge and the kids by guzzling down Duff beer at Moe's and fantasising in those ridiculously surreal daydreams. The villains in the programme are either too virtuous or over-enterprising. Ned Flanders is the irritating Holy Joe next door; Montgomery Burns, the owner of Springfield's nuclear power station, is the caricature of capitalist greed.

Two thousand and one was the year of heroes past and present: the New York fire fighters and police officers who died saving others from the infernos of the twin towers; the soldiers of Easy Company whose role in helping to liberate Europe in 1944 was immortalised on this year's most remarkable television series, Band of Brothers; the Irish peacekeepers who saved lives and preserved communities in South Lebanon and after 23 years bowed out with dignity.

Despite the celebration of courage on display in places such as Ground Zero, even the Americans did not forget about the Sancho Panza side of their nature. A magazine in the United States asked their male readers to nominate a famous celebrity as their role model in life. A large majority voted for Homer Simpson. Not long ago this would have been a cause for concern among politicians, moralists and policy makers.

George Bush senior once called on American families to be more like The Waltons than The Simpsons. In retaliation, The Simpsons put Bush on the same street in Springfield as Homer and his tribe and then hilariously sent up the ex-President.

Orwell was right when he wrote that heroic high sentiments would win out in the end. People will put up with sacrifices and deprivations in the cause of the common good. Even Homer would no doubt fight to the death to save the things he loves most - Marge, Bart, Lisa, Maggie and maybe even his country. But in the meantime he will still be found sitting on the couch glued to the television set while wolfing down doughnuts and swilling back cans of Duff.

Homer's elevation to national role model in America is a healthy development in a society that sometimes takes itself too seriously. It means that even in time of war people want to maintain the 'harmless Saturnalia' (Orwell's words again) of Homer's universe.

Last June we buried one of my own personal heroes - my aunt Margaret, a woman who brought up a family in

west Belfast through the darkest days of the Troubles. Like thousands of other women in that time she endured the violence, the poverty, the bad housing without complaint. After we paid our final tributes at her graveside in Belfast's City Cemetery I turned away and spotted another gravestone erected in memory of a young man. What marked the grave out was the plaque bolted onto black marble above his name. Instead of the Sacred Heart or Our Lady was the face of our fat, bald, hedonistic anti-hero. And beneath Homer's yellow visage and moronic grin was a simple message chiselled into the tombstone: 'Doh!'

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