

scores not also improved, Olson points out, the black-white achievement gap that existed in 1992 would have shrunk by 80 percent.

Eighth graders made less dramatic but still significant gains in math, increasing their NAEP scores by 11 points nationally.

The record was less encouraging in reading. The national average score inched up just two points in both grades four and eight. Even so, the reading scores for black and Hispanic fourth graders, and for all low-income kids at that grade level, increased an amount nearly triple the national average. That is about two-thirds of a grade level.

Did the states' embrace of standards-based education help boost the NAEP scores? Such assessments are tricky, but the research arm of the nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education, which is the publisher of *Education Week*, concludes that it did.

However, Diane Ravitch, a research professor of education at New York University, is critical of the fact that there are no *national* standards: "The idea that mastery of eighth-grade mathematics means one thing in Arizona and something different in Maine is absurd on its face." The states use their own standards, not NAEP scores, in assessing achievement, and most claimed that large majorities of their fourth and eighth graders were "proficient" in math and reading in 2005. Scores on the NAEP told a different story.

Ronald A. Wolk, chairman of the board of Editorial Projects in Education and an early supporter of the standards movement, now believes that the movement is "more part of the problem than the solution." It reinforces "the least desirable features

of the traditional school," including "obsession with testing and test prep, [and] overemphasis on coverage in curriculum and memorization."

Wolk sees more promise in replacing inadequately performing schools with more innovative institutions, such as charter schools. More than a decade of standards-based reform, he concludes, "has raised some test scores that were abysmally low to start with, but produced little else. Not a promising return for an all-or-nothing bet."

SOCIETY

Toy Stories

THE SOURCE: "Selling Compromise: Toys, Motherhood, and the Cultural Deal" by Allison J. Pugh, in *Gender & Society*, Dec. 2005.

IF YOU'RE A WORKING MOTHER grappling with the high-anxiety conflict between the demands of home and work, everybody from Oprah to your mother-in-law is lined up to give you advice. Then there's the potent stuff that comes in subliminal form, through



A classic childhood scene, driven by the toy industry: A young child dresses her doll up, learning how to be a parent with no parent in sight.

media such as films and advertisements. The multibillion-dollar toy industry, for example, sends a very clear message, writes Allison J. Pugh, a fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. Toy ads uphold "the contemporary received wisdom of children as needing nurture or an emotional connection but with one important compromise: The child does not need people, specifically a mother, actually to provide it."

In 11 mail-order toy catalogs ranging from FAO Schwartz's to the more offbeat Natural Baby Company's, Pugh sees the promotion of an idealized concept of mother-driven parenting. The advertising copy feeds mothers' anxieties by declaring what skills children should develop, then offers the soothing solution of educational toys. If working mothers worry that they neglect a child's reading skills because they can't find time to read aloud, they can just buy a Winnie-the-Pooh bear programmed to "read" books to children instead.

In the world of toy catalogs, childhood is a solitary and learning-driven time, with toys serving as proxies for

parents or even other children. Thus mothers are enticed to buy Rocket the robotic dog, an electronic aquarium that lulls babies to sleep, and the talking Pooh bear. The vast majority of catalog images in Pugh's survey depicted a child playing alone. The catalogs "are not selling toys as the means for deepening the bonds between other

caregivers and children or as a way for groups of kids to establish friendships and community," she asserts. "Rather, in these catalogs the child has no other human option for attachment or love but the mother; without her, the child can turn only to toys."

Fathers remain on the outskirts of the idealized play world. When they appear in the ads, it is either as a role model or playmate who doesn't supplant the mother's position as the dominant caregiver. An ad for a tree fort sold by Magic Cabin Dolls promises that it will "captivate children three years and older (especially men—they love this)." And for men who are too busy providing for the family to go camping or fishing, another company offers a miniature camping set complete with father and son dolls that provides "great fun even if it's only pretend!"

SOCIETY

The Invisible Class

THE SOURCE: "The Dispossessed" by William Deresiewicz, in *The American Scholar*, Winter 2006.

A VAST GROUP HAS GONE INCONSPICUOUSLY missing from American culture: the working class. The population to whom the rusting phrase "blue collar" applies has become invisible largely because class itself isn't part of a national conversation anymore, con-

EXCERPT

Becoming Modesty

In my experience, any man who says he's humble is not. True modesty is when a person who might have a right to boast does not do so. It's when people return praise rather than soak it up. It's not feeling entitled. It is what Judge Learned Hand once called the spirit of liberty, the spirit that is not too sure that it is right. It is the idea that we seek to understand by listening, by weighing other interests rather than merely our own, by walking around in someone else's shoes.

—RICHARD STENGEL, author of *You're Too Kind: A Brief History of Flattery* (2000), in *In Character* (Winter 2006)

tends William Deresiewicz, an English professor at Yale.

It's been a long time since TV shows such as *The Honeymooners* and *All in the Family* focused on people who earn an hourly wage and look like they live on it. Working-class characters are all over the place, but they're usually there to do a job (cop, nurse), not to serve as the focal point. The omissions aren't confined to the small screen. Mainstream movies are far more likely to depict trailer-trash stereotypes (see *Million Dollar Baby*) than the nuanced portraits of working-class characters in exceptions such as *Mystic River* and *Good Will Hunting*. And whither have gone American literature's Steinbecks and Dos Passoses?

The reasons the working class is missing in action are no mystery, says Deresiewicz. The creators of main-

stream American culture—"journalists, editors, writers, producers"—are children of the middle class themselves, and suffer from the usual myopias. Furthermore, it's "kind of a bummer" to watch the struggles of real working-class life; the movies and shows that do so, such as Roseanne Barr's *Roseanne*, are so rare they're called "edgy."

In a land where we're all supposed to belong to one great middle class, sexuality, gender, and, above all, race are the dominant identifiers. That being black is a stand-in for being working class is evident everywhere. When

the nation was shown images of Hurricane Katrina's victims, it saw that they were black, not that they were laborers, waitresses, and bus drivers.

Class hasn't entirely vanished from the national discourse. John Kerry's loss to George W. Bush in the last presidential election has been painted as a drubbing of "blue state" elites by "red state" rednecks, otherwise referred to euphemistically as "ordinary Americans."

But country music and NASCAR don't sum up the working-class life, which "breeds its own virtues: loyalty, community, stoicism, humility, and even tolerance." The middle class talks a lot about the latter, but "working-class people, because they can't simply insulate themselves from those they don't like with wads of money, are much more likely, in practice, to live and let live."