

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."