

# What to do when our heroes fail us

By Sophie Caldwell

AP English teacher Clay Guinn has been teaching Junot Díaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" for the past three years as part of his AP curriculum. He initially selected the book because he liked its exploration of family, politics, history and "nerddom."

Next year, Guinn will not be teaching "Oscar Wao."

After allegations of sexual misconduct against Junot Díaz came to light, Guinn and many other fans and supporters have grappled with what to do when yet another hero is exposed as abusive.

I loved Junot Díaz, too. I adored Díaz's profane and penetrating prose and his unflinching treatment of difficult issues. Most of all, I loved his heartbreaking "New Yorker" article, in which he detailed his childhood sexual abuse in wrenching detail. He spoke clearly and poignantly on the effect this trauma had on his relationships, writing and lifestyle, and the toxic effects of an atmosphere that valued masculinity above all else.

Díaz portrayed himself as someone who was sympathetic and an outspoken defender of women. He portrayed himself as someone who understood. It was a painful shock when we found out that he absolutely, tragically did not.

In the same vein, Eric Schneiderman's alleged domestic abuse appalled his constituents and peers. As New York Attorney General, Schneiderman championed women's rights, speaking out against domestic violence and filing a civil rights lawsuit against accused serial predator Harvey Weinstein.

Schneiderman pushed legislation that made intentional strangulation a violent felony, a victory for domestic violence activists. As it turns out, he allegedly choked and slapped the women he dated.

It's a unique betrayal when people who are supposed to be on your side — people who are ostensibly fighting for your rights — are found to be so utterly duplicitous.

The MeToo movement has smashed idols, and for good reason. Men long revered for their talent or wit have been hiding dreadful secrets. Even worse, many of our most trusted allies have been exposed as predators themselves.

How could we not have known?

One of Schneiderman's former girlfriends said that when she told friends about the rampant abuse in her relation-

ship with Schneiderman, they told her that he was too important a politician for the Democrats to lose. For a time, Schneiderman's career trumped a woman's right to justice.

The common thread with these men — Schneiderman and Díaz, as well as Aziz Ansari, Louis C.K. and others — is that our rage at their actions goes beyond righteous indignation. It feels like a stab in the back. The harm these men have caused goes beyond hypocrisy: every damning story comes to light because a woman has been hurt or violated. These people convinced women that they were allies. They purposefully cultivated a façade of "wokeness," waving the banner of feminism while flagrantly betraying their ideals behind closed doors.

Many of us who revered these people and their work will blame ourselves for not noticing. For my part, after I read of Díaz's misconduct, I dug out my copy of his novel "This Is How You Lose Her," marveling at how often he mercilessly reduced women to caricatures and objects.

What do we do with these men and their works? Do we resume this exhausted discussion of separating the art from the artist, or the policies from the politician? Do we excise them from our cultural consciousness for good?

Ironically, we are in constant danger from heroes, the very ones we look to when everyone else fails us, the ones we point to as beacons of righteousness even when the rest succumb.

When these heroes fall, it seems like the whole world is falling with them. I think that's part of why so many people are dismayed at the number of men exposed by the MeToo movement.

A modest proposal: lift up only those who are worthy of your respect. For every catchy song or fantastic movie produced by an artist who degrades women, there are hundreds of equally fantastic works by women who haven't gotten the same cultural boost. Take one of Carmen Maria Machado's books for a spin — when Díaz allegedly tried to shout her down in a recent discussion of the misogyny in his books, she stood her ground and refused to be silenced.

Last month, Guinn and his family met Díaz at a local book signing for his new children's book "Islandborn." Guinn's wife, who like Díaz is from the Caribbean, had a lively discussion with Díaz about their heritage. His daughters loved seeing characters who looked like them. Guinn has a photograph of his family with Díaz, which has taken on a new dimension now.

Like so many who have been burned by those we once loved and respected, he is learning to live with the ambiguity.



CLAY GUINN

**Clay Guinn and his family met author Junot Díaz (redacted) at a book signing for his children's book. After allegations of sexual misconduct against Díaz, Guinn will no longer teach one of Díaz's novels.**

## STAFF EDITORIAL

# After the flood: redefining what 'normal' means

When Harvey hit three days after school began, it completely altered the course of our year.

The aftermath of the hurricane was devastating for families, many of whom are still repairing damaged homes. Houston, one of the most sprawling cities in the US, a city that usually seems disconnected, felt more united than ever before.

Because we lost over a week of school to Harvey, the school wisely decided to cancel midterms in order to make up for lost time and ease the burden on displaced students, giving them the chance to fully relish the holiday season without cramming for massive tests. Not having to worry about finals made December a bit more manageable.

And as if apocalyptic flooding wasn't enough, we even had a few "snow days" in 2018. While the damage from the freezing weather was limited to some plants dying and pipes bursting, after Harvey, you can understand why everyone was willing to err on the side of caution.

October brought the city an unexpected post-Harvey celebration as the Astros won their first championship. Though many students barely cared about baseball in the past, seeing the Astros win the World Series was moving. It was so moving that it moved more than a few of us to skip A Carrier to see the victory parade in person.

One facet of life that remained tragically normal was that mass shootings continued with alarming frequency. This time "thoughts and prayers" were not good enough. A movement took hold, and this time high school students were leading the charge. St. John's students joined in solidarity with Parkland students and other victims of gun violence by organizing our own walkout.

St. John's also took a progressive step by hiring Gene Batiste as Director of Community and Inclusion. With Batiste's help, participation in Unity Council and other affinity groups have surged. Unity Council meetings went from having 30 people attend last year to needing two classrooms to fit everyone in this year.

Our sports teams made history on many fronts. Boys' swimming won SPC for the first time ever while boys' track broke three relay records at SPC, securing the title. Girls' sports saw tennis win back-to-back SPC titles, golf break

the SPC record for the lowest score en route to their own repeat SPC championship, swimming and diving tie for the SPC championship, and soccer reach the SPC finals for the first time ever.

In the world of pop culture, superhero films are nothing new, but Marvel finally gave us the first mainstream black superhero, "Black Panther," while 20th Century Fox released the first LGBT teen studio film, "Love, Simon." Not only did "Black Panther" provide positive representation and start a valuable dialogue about race and global politics but it proved a box office smash. "Love, Simon" finally allowed queer teens to see themselves in a mainstream rom-com. These movies allowed us to celebrate diversity and put characters of marginalized identities center stage.

Wet weather in May and June has long been the norm, so this year organizers staged a music festival in March to avoid being flooded out. While the Free Press Summer Fest is no more, out of its soggy ashes arose the In Bloom Music festival, which allowed attendees to see their favorite acts without fear of being caught in a flash flood. Not having to pack a poncho really lightened the load.

Perhaps Harvey caused some sort of butterfly effect that ripped a hole through the matrix (which would explain



ISABEL BALLARD

**In January, snow capped the Great Lawn and surrounding buildings. The unexpected wintry weather gave everyone an extra day off from school.**

why lo-fi art-pop artist Grimes is dating Elon Musk). The more reasonable explanation is that things have been building up for years, whether it's developers continuing to rebuild houses in the floodplain, marginalized citizens joining progressive movements or athletes working hard to reach the pinnacle of their sport.

Harvey was the defining moment of the year, but it doesn't define us. Back in early September, when the floodwaters finally subsided and we returned to school, Head of Upper School Hollis Amley told us "this is not a normal year." And while this mantra perfectly encapsulates how much has transpired over the past nine months, what remains true is that our school continues to redefine what exactly "normal" really is.