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## BoJack Horseman and a Language of Male Privilege

*BoJack Horseman* is about failing upward. If you haven't seen the Netflix animated series, it's main character is literally a horse man, [an anthropomorphized animal in a world where humanoid animals live alongside actual humans in a cartoon universe of ultra-integration](#). BoJack, voiced by Will Arnette, lives in an architecturally soulless mansion impossibly perched on a steep Hollywood hills incline. Star of the 90s hit sitcom “Horsin' Around” about a single horse who adopts three human orphans, he begins the series we're watching trapped in that 90s-era vision of himself and the world which formed him. As such, he's the epitome of late-twentieth century straight, white, cis-male movie star who remains tone-deaf to the cultural changes and critiques of the very industry and culture which made him rich and famous.

Thus, six seasons of wacky adventures wherein BoJack continuously makes a belligerent ass of himself in front of friends, colleagues and the world. He tries to or manages to sleep with friends' love interests, spectacularly bails on high-profile jobs on which his friends or business partners rely upon, causes the death of a younger costar, strings his agent along both romantically and financially, and, well the list goes on and on.

When the show had come out I had been through a divorce and was looking for answers. I knew the marriage had ended because of my selfish and myopic choices, but where had that come from? Because I hadn't started out that way, had I? Surely all of my

models of masculinity were evolved and in no way like those of my parents. [Things always get better.](#)

The latter half of the 2000s first decade gave us a nuanced critique of the era which birthed the character BoJack. “Dexter,” “House,” “Breaking Bad” and several others blurred the lines between heroes and villains. Many of us, however, didn't manage to parse the lessons of these narratives beyond the intellectual level. They all went a little too far, I told myself and others, but they were right and their causes ultimately just.

Plus, those guys are [super cool](#), right?

Until they're not. The cool factor carries these good/bad guys through to the various endings of their respective series. The fallout for their misdeeds always lands squarely on those around them. Lovers, children, wives, family, colleagues all suffer from the entitled shenanigans. And don't forget cool. Seriously, don't, because the cool factor drove these shows through some pretty nasty shit. Dexter's sister, Deb, kills her boss to save his murderous secret then spirals out of control to her ultimate death. House, a renegade doctor, routinely puts patients' and staff's lives at risk while under the influence of a Vicodin addiction. Walter White responds to his cancer diagnosis by making and selling meth, ultimately becoming a drug kingpin. As protagonists, though, it's hard not to root for their successes. The cool factor becomes dangerous when I, just for example, stand face-to-face with my own selfish behavior and refuse to accept that my marriage not only was ending, but should end.

After some kicking and screaming I figured that out. You see, I'd been had, lied to this whole time. I wasn't exceptional, just privileged, and if you make everything about you everything stops being about anyone else. It's like breathing all the oxygen in a room and leaving everyone else blue and gasping.

The privilege they're peddling kept us watching, identifying with their coolness, their exceptionalism that was always their get-out-of-jail-free-card. We're meant to paste our faces and our journeys onto these characters and maybe vice-versa and to keep watching because that's us up there on the teevee, making a difference because we're so goddamned special.

And sooner or later we who have been duped figure this out. It takes a few face plants, emasculating rejections and generally facing the music. Frankly, it's helpful to see that in exaggerated form of a horse man who sabotages his houseguest Tod's potentially successful rock opera to keep him from moving out and leaving him all alone. BoJack's selfishness, though extreme, demonstrates the toxic exceptionalism that seeped into our bones throughout our lives.

For those who haven't seen the show, [Hollywoo isn't a typo](#). BoJack steals the D from the Hollywood sign to impress Diane, the ghost writer for his memoir. Rather than replacing it or holding him responsible, the industry and the world just adapt to the loss of the letter. He commits a host of other insensitive, selfish acts throughout the show's run, from sleeping with his aimless, couch-surfing friend Tod's potential love interest to bailing on a high-budget, high-profile acting role only to insert himself into the very normal life of

an old friend. In that case he asks her to leave her husband, takes her daughter to a school dance, and has to turn down the daughter's request to be her first sexual experience. Except when she goes to his room and climbs into his bed there's no time to know if he would or wouldn't have slept with her before her mom walks in on them.

Jaded and shaken, he leaves the traumatized friend and her teen daughter behind to return to his mansion. Later, the story leaks when he's trying to reinvent himself as an acting teacher at a prestigious university. As friends peel away from him to live their own lives, he's left standing, still getting jobs. Similarly, Todd, a well-meaning slacker stoner who generally serves as a comic relief falls backward over and over into jobs, relationships, even a windfall for selling an accidentally successful (and sexist) company. BoJack's friend Mr. Peanutbutter, a yellow lab (clearly coded as white) who had a knockoff clone of \*Horsin' Around\* called \*Mr. Peanutbutter's House\*, similarly buoys from success to success solely on his ebullient, disarming personality.

This male exceptionalism isn't the fuzzy, confusing version of masculinity we experienced in his predecessors. For this to work, we have to know he's not the hero, but rather a man like us who's struggling to figure out exactly why he's such an asshole. We see some small bit of that struggle up from the same influences but we surely do not want to wear his face (such as it is).

The two main female characters don't have it so easy, always suffering for the antics of their male counterparts. They pick up the pieces and generally tolerate the status quo,

often even forgiving the imbalance and even the sheer capability of the men to burn the world down around themselves and somehow remain unscathed.

When I said it's a show about failing upward, I really mean it's a show about MEN failing upward.

And yet BoJack hates himself. Openly and loudly. His fame and notoriety--with the help of drugs and alcohol--manage to soothe his self-loathing temporarily. He craves and even feels empty because everything and everyone convinced him by virtue of his talent, gender, and luck of the draw that he was exceptional. Supported, burgeoned, even coddled, it wasn't enough for him to rise above everyone else despite his selfishness and laziness, he had to be adored as well.

Figuring out I needed to change out of that model was a hard journey and for a time I felt that same hatred. But that, in itself, is a kind of privilege. If BoJack seems sometimes incapable of understanding how he affected others through his selfishness and belligerent entitlement, he as often struggles with his self-loathing because, as the center of the universe, he's convinced he is the only reason for others' suffering. He is either the savior or the devil. In many ways, it's precisely [this failure](#) to understand himself that keeps us watching.

There's no great mission for BoJack. He is privileged, but aimless. He never has the ethical illusion of a Dexter, Greg House, or Walter White. His raw arrogance is pink and naked and right in front of us the whole of the series. By the show's end he's aware of this imbalance. He's aware that he survived by no means other than the good luck to be a

straight, white-coded, cis-male celebrity and the work everyone else has done to keep him alive, upright and comfortable. And, while BoJack will go on struggling and trying to figure out why he's made all of those mistakes, perhaps his direct and unvarnished failures have given men (and anyone else who sees themselves in his antics) a [language](#) to talk about our own failures.