



Kids Today

Funny thing is, most of them are over 35.

You can tell a lot about any society from its deceptions. A century ago, the female author of *The Mill on the Floss* felt obliged to invent a male identity for herself, "George Eliot." These days, the last thing any aspiring novelist would do would be to try and pass herself off as a man—especially a white one. Indeed, in Australia there's been a stampede in the opposite direction: So many fashionably primitive aboriginal female artists have been belatedly unmasked as canny Caucasian male opportunists that Parliament has now made it illegal to falsely claim to be a native person. Here in America, even Oprah Winfrey was taken in by *The Education of Little Tree*, the bestselling reminiscences of a Cherokee boy who, unfortunately, turned out to be not a Cherokee but a Klansman, Forrest Carter, the fellow who wrote George Wallace's "segregation forever" speech. Alas, neither Oprah nor Jake Eberts, the *Chariots of Fire* producer who outbid her for the film rights, could see the Forrest for the *Little Tree*.

But it's surely as telling that Forrest pretended to be not just a Cherokee but a *young* Cherokee. In our culture we venerate not the mighty oaks and ancient maples but the little trees: If you're a sapling, we'll gladly be the saps. So it was with hot TV writer/actress Riley Weston, who, according to her agent, her studio, and the colleagues on her hit TV show who threw her an on-set birthday party a couple of months back, is 19 years old.

But, as with so much else nowadays, it

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depends on what the meaning of the word "is" is. Miss Weston certainly *was* 19 once, back in 1985, when she was going under the name Kimberlee Kramer or Kimberlee Seaman or one of the other passing monikers of her varied life. But, tired of nowhere jobs, the 32-year-old actress



decided to re-invent herself as "Riley Weston," the voice of youth, spokesperson of a generation. Kimberlee—or Riley—is 4'11", weighs 93 lbs., and is blessedly unwrinkled. She wears baggy jeans and sneakers; she has a *Titanic* poster on her office wall; she claims to have a crush on the teenager who plays Tim Allen's son on "Home Improvement"; she says "like" and "duh" a lot. If that's not a 19-year-old, what is? Disney execs took one look at her and offered a \$300,000 contract.

What a great country. Maybe it's not true that anyone can grow up to be president, but it seems anyone can grow up to be a presidential-class liar—as long as you don't grow up, that is. When the yellowing parchment of Miss Weston's birth certificate turned up and it emerged that Disney had signed the world's oldest child prodigy, the hoodwinked honchos were furious. In this business, if you're old, you're dead—unless you're shrewd enough to hire some fresh-faced kid in

tune with the zeitgeist of the hour. But, if the fresh-faced kid turns out to be some middle-aged divorcee only a couple of years away from the Angela Lansbury roles, what does that say about you? What sort of schmuck claims to be in tune with America's youth and then signs some dame almost as old as his first wife? So

now Miss Weston's fate hangs in the balance. Aside from having shaved 13 years off her age, the wunderkind-turned-wundermatron claims not to have done anything wrong. "The

person they knew *is* me," she told *Entertainment Weekly*. "I talk like this, wear these clothes."

Big deal. Who doesn't? Walk down any American Main Street. Half a century ago, it would have been full of solid citizens in three-piece suits, homburgs, pocket watches, the works. Now 50-year-old guys lumber around in oversize T-shirts with silly slogans, shapeless diaper-like pants, huge bouncy sneakers; they slurp from plastic soda containers with strange nipple caps, just like baby bottles. I don't usually pay much attention to the grumbles of Europeans but, when both a Frenchman and a German complained to me recently that they found it almost physically nauseating to walk around an American shopping mall because everyone looks so...infantile, I thought they had a point. In recent months, there've been endless pieces comparing Rockefeller's and Bill Gates's wealth, but the most telling comparison is the accompanying photographs: Gates is the richest

man in the world, locked in combat with the government of the last superpower on the face of the earth, and he's dressed like the junior clerk at the video store. We don't need Dress-Down Friday, we need Dress-Up Monday To Thursday.

I blame Steven Spielberg, whose own variable birth date has been the subject of two lawsuits. Despite being a 50-year-old executive with a billion dollars in the bank, he's so determinedly boyish he insists on the same uniform of sneakers, jeans, sweatshirt, and baseball cap he's always worn. Now all his fellow Hollywood "suits" wear it, too: Soon there'll be no "suits" left for these relentlessly casual types to look down on. Spielberg's Hollywood is like *The Rewrite of Dorian Gray*: The younger these fellows dress, the more stuntedly immature the product gets.

In our youth-crazed culture, Miss Weston is not, of course, the only one trying to pass as an eager teen, and in fairness she's doing a better job of it than many others desperate to make it in Hollywood. Take Al Gore: Like Riley Weston, he's uncannily in tune with the concerns of today's youth—global warming, gay rights, you name it. But once in a while the effort of keeping up the act begins to show. At a party in Hollywood recently, he happened to find himself next to Courtney Love, widow of grunge rocker Kurt Cobain and now lead singer with the popular beat combo Hole. "I'm a really big fan," gushed the Vice-Panderer. To her credit, showing a disdain for establishment approval rare among today's aristorockracy, Miss Love declined to be impressed. As she subsequently told *Spin*, "I was like, 'Yeah, right. Name a song, Al.'" The panicked veep floundered helplessly until his minders eventually moved in to put him out of his misery. It's a poignant vignette, with an eerie echo of a British Labour Party veteran's advice to politicians in trouble. According to Denis Healey, the First Rule of Holes is: "When you're in one, stop digging." In this case, when you're with one, stop pretending to dig her.

If he's still interested, Hole's new album is called *Celebrity Skin* and Al might find its title song useful for a Gore 2000 campaign theme: "No second billing 'cause you're a star now...." The question is: Is

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he? Can Al Gore rise to the top of the bill? In a sane world, the vice president's ignorance of the *Love oeuvre* would be cause for celebration: It would have been far more shocking if he'd glibly reeled off his three favorite Hole tracks. But Al Gore hopes to succeed Bill Clinton and, if there's one thing Bill Clinton has his fingers on the pulse of, it's the youth of America. I hasten to add that he doesn't literally have his fingers on the youth of America: As his grandjury testimony made clear, he favors a scrupulously hands-off approach. But turn to footnote 707 of the Starr Report, a letter from Monica to Bill: "When I was hiding out in your office, I noticed you had the new Sarah McLachlan CD. I have it, too, and it's wonderful. Whenever I listen to song #5 I think of you."

Sarah McLachlan! In the Oval Office! When I first read it, Monica's note brought me up short and I gave an involuntary shudder. Like most guys with an eye for pliant young flesh (again, Bill "Look, No Hands" Clinton insists he wasn't actually plying Monica's flesh, but let that pass), I recognized the moment: The meaningless sex is great, the girlish giggle is charming (in small doses), but damn it, now she wants to know what kind of music you like. I can't be the only busy executive who's found himself buzzing through to the outer office: "Miss Jones, I'm scheduled for oral sex with my intern this afternoon. Find out what ghostly caterwauling the young people are into these days and order up ten CDs in assorted colors. I think my Robert Goulet eight-tracks are beginning to throw her off. And for God's sake don't get that second Hootie and the Blowfish album again: Mindy in Accounts still won't speak to me."

But then it occurred to me: Maybe the

new Sarah McLachlan CD is on the Oval Office desk because the president actually *likes* it. In 1993, in the week Bill Clinton took his oath of office, I happened to be on a radio show with the editor of *Vanity Fair*, Graydon Carter, who'd just returned from the "MTV Inaugural Ball." Isn't it a bit pathetic, I suggested, that the inauguration of "the most powerful man in the world" should be officially marked with a formal ball thrown by the rock video channel? Oh, lighten up, he said: "It's no different from Reagan having Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadians at his inaugural." Just for the record, Guy Lombardo didn't play at President Reagan's inaugural, if only because he'd been dead for four years. But, even if he had, I can't imagine Ronald Reagan having a Guy Lombardo LP—or 78, or whatever they had back in the eighties—on the Oval Office desk.

"Do What You Have To Do," sings Sarah McLachlan on Bill and Monica's "song #5." But what is it that Bill Clinton *has* to do? He tells his fellow citizens repeatedly that he needs to "get back to work for the American people." But he has time to listen to the new Sarah McLachlan; time to have 90-minute phone sex with Monica; time to lead her gently into the outer office, after informing her that regrettably they'll have to cut out the oral sex, and join her in a duet of "Try a Little Tenderness."

Most of us assume that, if like Monica we ever got to rummage around the president's desk for half an hour, we'd at least stumble across some IMF Russian bailout proposals or a NATO plan to bomb Serbia. We would, frankly, be disappointed to press the nuclear strike button and find it just cranked up the new Natalie Merchant CD. But the Cold War is over and in the Cool War the president can hold his own, with a song for every occasion. One of the many fun games to play with the Starr Report is to pull quotes at random and guess whether it's Bill or Monica talking: "If I had known what kind of person you really were, I wouldn't have got involved with you." The airhead Valley Girl? No, the father of our country. Like, *duh*.

An executive for "Felicity," Riley Weston's show on the WB network, said: "We thought we had found a staffer who spoke the language." So did America: All that stuff about the bridge to the twenty-first

century, so noble, so presidential. But it seems that, just like Riley, Bill's been lying about his age — trying to pass himself off as a mature, sober statesman when he's actually just a ditzzy adolescent. But what was he to do? Like Riley he knew that if he told the truth about his age, he'd never get the gig. After all, the Constitution says you can't be president unless you're over 35 — which must surely be a typing error by the Founders: Face it, every other job in America worth having you can't get unless you're *under* 35.

So maybe the simplest solution for our two most famous liars' predicaments would be to swap jobs. It turns out Riley's so old she's almost old enough to be president, while Bill's so immature he's certainly young enough to work on "Felicity," a show about an 18-year-old college freshman. Meanwhile, if Al Gore isn't entirely comfortable with a presidency that's now the triumphant apotheosis of the American urge to defer adulthood, he might look for a pop star who's easier on the ear than Miss Love. My suggestion

would be Gene Autry, who died a few months ago. Being a nonagenarian, Autry's passing didn't generate the buzz Riley Weston did. But in these troubled times the sagebrush troubadour's Cowboy Code seems more timely than ever, especially Rules Number Three ("The Cowboy must always tell the truth"), Number Eight ("He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action and personal habits"), and Number Nine ("He must respect women, parents and his nation's laws"). ❁



PRESS WATCH

by John Corry

Murder in Wyoming

Did the usual suspects kill Matthew Shepard?

Matthew Shepard, beaten, burned, and near death, was found lashed to a wooden fence near Laramie, Wyoming, on a Wednesday night. By Saturday the big news organizations were all on the story, and a consensus began to form. On Sunday Bill Clinton called for a federal hate-crimes law. On Monday Katie Couric wondered on NBC's "Today" whether "conservative Christian political organizations" were contributing to an "anti-homosexual atmosphere," and on ABC's woefully misnamed "Politically Incorrect," Bill Maher likened the Republican Party to the Afghan Taliban. "It's no wonder," he said, "that things like this happen." Two days later the *New York Times* said in an editorial that even though Wyoming was the first state to allow women

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to vote, Laramie was still "a small town in a masculine culture...not big enough to have its own gay bar." The *Times* also wanted a federal hate-crimes law.

But a federal law would not have prevented the gruesome murder of young Shepard. Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, his killers (the journalistic convention is to identify them only as suspects, but let us dispense with that) could have been the stock characters of off-Broadway plays—rootless, amoral, and not very bright predators on a barren landscape. It was the guileless Shepard's terrible misfortune to turn up in the Fireside Lounge the same night they did; his sexual orientation was really irrelevant. The Laramie police say a plan to rob him went wrong. They also say that after tying Shepard to the fence McKinney and Henderson returned to Laramie and picked a fight with two other young men. There is no reason to think the young

men were gay, but McKinney apparently hit one of them with the same pistol he had used to bludgeon Shepard, and opened a wound on his scalp that later required twenty-two staples to close. He might have gone on and beaten him as savagely as he had beaten Matthew Shepard except that the other young man then hit McKinney with a stick and gave him a hair-line skull fracture.

Meanwhile, recall now that Truman Capote once explored the minds of two young men who butchered a family in Kansas. His *In Cold Blood*, while sympathetic, said their psyches were twisted. Capote, however, was writing in the 1960's, and fashionable thinking since then has changed. The Clutter family of Kansas might have lost their lives to random violence, but Matthew Shepard died because hate had trickled down from high places. The Republicans were to blame. As columnist Jonathan Alter wrote somberly in *Newsweek*, it might seem "unfair to link the anti-gay remarks of political leaders to a heinous crime they don't condone," but the reality had to be