

SCARLET WOMEN AND BLUE-EYED BOYS

One reason I wouldn't want to live at 20,000 feet above or below sea level, beside the limited supply of available oxygen, is the absence of color. Like sunlight and rain, color is a free lunch spread by Mother Nature every time her "lemon-yellow" sun rises despite Crayola's retirement of this color in 1990. I have much to be thankful for, and not being color blind, as seven percent of all men are, is one of them. Women are rarely afflicted with such shortsightedness.

I think I was about ten when I realized how sensitive to color I'd become. I was snooping among some folders in my parents' file cabinet while my mother was shopping when I found a copy of my birth certificate. Imagine my surprise when I read under "Complexion" that my skin color was listed as "olive." Now you need to understand that up to that time I'd never eaten or seen anything but ripe black olives, so "olive" to me meant "purplish-black." I wasn't terribly fond of ripe olives especially the ones with the seeds still inside; they were just all that I knew. Mother never bought the unripe variety because (she told me later) they were too salty, and we all hated pimentos, which was the only way they came. Perhaps my consternation had something to do with my father being transferred every couple of years by the Army, twice in war zones, a fact of life that made me a less-than-secure pre-adolescent. So "olive" led me to the conclusion that I'd been adopted: the real Skip Eisinger had died, and I was called up from the "minors" to fill out the lineup. When Mother returned, I listened to her assurances that she'd never given birth to a child darker than myself and that, indeed, I was the one with an olive complexion. "Olive," she assured me, meant "yellowish-brown" when the word referred to skin tone. In a certain slant of light, I could see that shade on my forearms, but the next time I used my crayons, I noted that the Crayola labeled "olive" was not the shade of my arm; rather it was a stomach-churning green. (But then the crayon labeled "flesh" was far peachier than my arm as well.) Consequently, I was well into adolescence before I was confident I never had an alien sibling.

I grew up with a box of forty-eight Crayola crayons, which I carried about in an old coffee can when the cardboard wore out. After my parents had convinced me that I should not eat them, I used these delicious wax sticks to animate Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, Champion, and a host of other western heroes in my coloring books. A best-left-nameless art teacher in the third grade introduced me to Roy G. Biv. Roy was no match for Hopalong, but he did help me nail down the color spectrum, the primaries, and secondaries. In addition to teaching the fundamentals of color, our teacher introduced the class to art criticism. To this end, she wore a cardboard octagon around her neck, one side red, the other green. When any of her students "drove recklessly," she'd flash them the red of her "traffic" sign; if the class "drove" in an orderly fashion, her "light" flashed green. But she also used the sign in place of any thoughtful commentary: if she liked your fingerpainting, meaning you didn't have it on your clothes, you got the green. If she disapproved of your smear or the place you'd smeared it, you received the red card like a soccer player banished from the field. In this class, "cautionary yellow" wasn't even in the critical lexicon. Art was either "red" or "green." Most of mine was "red" as was that of my two classmates who got into a paint-throwing contest and "failed with flying colors." Even then, I sensed that the teacher's red octagon, which she was waving frantically, was insufficient to describe the misdemeanors of my classmates or the nuances of art.

I was in high school when I read in the *Washington Post* one morning that Crayola was changing “Prussian blue” to “midnight blue.” After delivering about seventy-five papers, I often sat outside our garage reading the sports section and the comics before school. The journalist who’d written the piece said that the failure of most students in the 1950s to know either who the Prussians were or that they wore dark-blue uniforms were the reasons for the name change. My father, who worked in the Pentagon at the time, was of another opinion: “Prussian” sounds too much like “Russian,” he said, and at the height of the Cold War, no one risked looking like a “Commie-lover” or a “Red.” However, when the Russians placed their Sputnik in orbit in 1957, I remember a lot fewer “Reds” and a lot more “Russians” in Dad’s remarks as he scanned his morning *Post*. Silently, I wondered whether the Russians referred to us as the “red, white, and blues.”

About the time of the Russians’ space coup, we purchased our first television set—a black-and-white Dumont in the same dark-brown Bakelite as the kitchen radio. The appliance was the only thing in Mother’s kitchen that wasn’t white trimmed in chrome; in fact, it may have been the only appliance in any 50s-era American kitchen that wasn’t white. I guess that is the period many today think of as “the good old days,” but to me achromatic kitchens seemed dull places. Now chocolate brown is not one of my favorite colors, but it was the only color available in the size television we wanted, and it did match the walnut paneling in the den where it took up residence in front of Dad’s red-leather easy chair.

Sitting there one afternoon watching *Howdy Doody* with my sisters and some friends, Carly Hall said that his family now owned a color TV. I’d read of this development in *Popular Science*, but I had no idea these futuristic sets were already available. A few days later, I begged Carly to let me see his “color” set. It must have been a Sunday morning because when he turned the set on, choirs and preachers commanded each of our three channels. The trouble was, each sacred venue was blue on top, red in the middle, and green on the bottom. Carly said the set worked better when an episode of *Daniel Boone* was being broadcast especially when there were some “redskins” in the middleground walking across a green meadow under an azure sky. During the *Camel News Caravan*, which is all his divorced, working mother ever watched, Carly’s sheet of plastic came off. His mother was still upset with him for sending \$3 to “some damn-fool outfit” for his “color TV.”

My mother’s love of white kitchens and Carly’s mother’s distaste for “color television” was my introduction to gender color differences. I became more attuned to the disparity in personal taste a few years later when I told Brenda O’Baugh, my first serious girl friend, what I saw studying her face. A writer in one of my father’s *Playboys* had advised, “Don’t neglect to compliment a woman’s eyes,” so I told Brenda that her blue eyes reminded me of my grandmother’s Plymouth. As she frowned, I said, “Actually, they are more like Dodger blue.” When the furrows deepened, I said recalling her love of nature that her eyes were “the same shade as the blue-bottle fly.” I quickly learned that not all “blues” are created equal. I don’t suppose that I’d been in the Army more than a couple of months when Brenda wrote me a Dear John; she’d apparently found someone who had the right simile to unlock her heart.

By the time I became a teacher, I was married and a strong advocate of women’s rights. Far be it for me to obstruct any woman who wanted to burn her bra regardless of its color. One day I asked a class of freshmen if there was a difference in the way men and women organize their lives, and one young lady volunteered that she had a “rainbow closet,” meaning that all her clothes were hung in harmony with the natural order of the

spectrum. Not a male in the class including me had ever heard of a “rainbow closet”; most men, it appears, organize their clothes by garment type, not color. To many of us a “rainbow closet” implies a homosexual with a lot of pastel sweaters from Barney’s of New York. Indeed a few years ago, I met an obviously gay male at a party sporting a lapel pin with a rainbow arcing from an open door over which were the embossed words, “I’m out!”

Incidentally, this young man is the only person I’ve ever heard use the word “Isabeline.” The word means “brownish-yellow,” the color of soiled underpants, and unless you wash a lot of diapers, there aren’t many places you can use the word. It’s interesting that the word may derive from the Spanish Princess Isabel who publicly vowed not to change her underwear until King Philip’s siege of Ostend was successful. How she thought her sacrifice would aid the siege, is not recorded. Since that military endeavor took three years to accomplish, my guess is that the ladies of Isabel’s court coined the dainty word, no doubt snickering behind her back when using it. The males of the court, I suspect, probably coined something more vulgar, but it has not survived. In my experience, no straight male has ever used the word: you may recall that when I was discussing “olive” earlier I did not mention it. I’m not surprised that either gender is reluctant to employ it because it would require an explanation that no one would be comfortable with.

The whole sordid affair is reminiscent of “street colors” that several cosmetics manufacturers introduced in the 1990s. “Toxin,” “Gangrene,” “Urban Decay,” “Bruise,” “Frost-Bite,” and “Roach,” among others quickly became popular to almost universal surprise among young white women with a taste for “gangsta rap.” The usual explanation for the success of these colors was that the women who chose them were rebelling against the “preppy colors” that had reigned as long as rich whites had oppressed minorities. But this choice was more a class preference than a gender difference and so falls outside my purview. The Sex Pistols may have dabbed a bit of “Bruise” lipstick across their cheeks prior to a performance, but I’ll bet it came off before they met their fathers after the show.

Speaking of family, I don’t recall my paternal grandmother being especially color sensitive, and Heaven knows she never wore any street colors. She usually dressed in grays, off-whites, and browns. I would not be surprised to learn that she was a stockholder in the Taupé Dye Company. But when I inherited her small journal-notebook a few years after her death, I realized just how attuned to color she was. The very first page of the book that she kept records in for over twenty years was reserved to record the family’s automobile purchases. Here’s that page in its entirety: “We got our first Auto. April 26, 1924, black. 2nd, Dec. 6, 1928, green. 3rd, Aug 20, 1930, navy blue. 4th, July 27, 1934, maroon. 5th, Feb. 26, 1937, gunmetal. Car stolen Feb. 17, 1938 in front of Barnes Hospital, East St. Louis [Furthermore, it was uninsured, but there was no mention of that!]. 6th, March 8, 1938 gunmetal. 7th, Chevrolet, May 2, 1940.” If she kept a diary any later than February 1941, I have not seen it. Of course, what caught my masculine eye as I read this diary page was the fact that she didn’t take written notice of any car’s make until their seventh purchase! Yet she carefully recorded every car’s color except the last. I asked myself if someone inquired about my first car, how would I describe it? I’d say, “1930 Model A convertible with red spoked wheels.” The car’s blackness would be understood if the inquisitor were male and had a few years on him. If not, I might toss in the fact that it was black, but I would never say, “My first car? It was black.” Yet my own flesh and blood, provider of one quarter of my genetic bankroll, described her first car as “black,” nothing else. And this

was at a time when 95% of all cars were black because it absorbed light faster than other colors, as Henry Ford discovered, and, therefore, dried more quickly. It was purely an economic choice like painting all nineteenth-century barns and schoolhouses red because that was the cheapest color available.

I e-mailed my sister and a distant female cousin with a copy of the list above asking them if they would ever describe a car the way Grandmother Eisiminger had, and their response was an overwhelming “Yes!” My sister said that an old boy friend once had asked her what her fantasy car was, and she began with the car’s color. “It drove him batty!” she added, as did her habit of answering questions about the car she drove by saying, “I don’t know, but it’s orange.” Insensitive to her color tunnel-vision, he dumped her shortly afterwards. My cousin’s response illustrated the same gender difference. She said that when her husband describes a car he begins with the make and model. However, if he asks her, “What kind of car did Joe have?” her answer would be something like, “White.” And in this naked monosyllable, she would be confident she had pinned down the vehicle’s identity among the millions of white cars on the road as surely as if she’d provided a teaspoon of the car’s DNA and a full set of fingerprints.

Of course, one e-mail deserves another, and so I wrote, “OK, I’ve given this some thought. Here’s my theory of gender and color—color is a female thing. Males of the species (being naturally better endowed with color than females, especially those of us with feathers or hair) are not so concerned with it. The female must be concerned with color lest she acquire or produce a bad egg, if you catch my drift. Furthermore while the Paleolithic male was out hunting woolly mammoths, all the same dull brown, the female was foraging for berries and mushrooms whose color might have meant the difference between living and dying. Consequently, natural selection favored the female with the keenest eye for color. I haven’t done a count, but I’ll bet the female eye has more of those rods and cones that quiver when red and blue (the color of most ripe berries) are near. All of which leads one to ask why human females generally use more color than the men they are stalking. ‘Color-blind’ men grade first on the curve, second on the hue!”

Only my cousin rose to the bait. She responded, “Beside being very scientific and no doubt true [had she counted the rods and cones?], this gave me my best laugh of the day, especially the ‘grade-on-the-curve’ part. Perhaps I should write an exposé for my sisters telling them to give up colors altogether especially in regard to wardrobe and eye-shadow...though I suppose lipstick must stay as there is a biological reason for that altogether, which we shouldn’t go into. It’s funny that human males are relatively colorless and that nowadays females are attracted more by the color of a man’s car than his hair. . . .”

Having some second thoughts about the biological basis of my theory, I replied, “Now I’m not so sure. It may all be cultural rather than genetic as I first so confidently stated. Men, I have learned, are twenty-four times more likely to be color blind than women. This may account for the fact that if I have twenty blue dress-shirts and each is a different shade of blue, every one is ‘blue’ to me but not my wife. Too, I now realize that women are forced to make decisions between ‘wheat’ and ‘oatmeal,’ for example, every day, when any straight male will tell you that they are the same color despite what Calvin Klein might tell you! Calling off-white ‘wheat,’ is just another way to add 20% to the price of a blouse.

“When we repainted our living room a few years back, Ingrid [my wife] brought home a chart with thirty samples of off-white. Guess who made the final selection? You

should know that my choice was made within minutes while Ingrid agonized for days with several of her 'color-gifted' friends. Isn't it interesting that in New York, the fashion capital of this country and perhaps the world, most women prefer black, which technically isn't a color? (Don't they realize that nature prefers white, red, and blue flowers in that order and has never produced a black bloom?) Tease and tint your hair, don a red blouse, paint your nails scarlet, and you are immediately 'from Jersey,' a fashion fate worse than wearing white after Labor Day. In fact, I've heard New Yorkers say that 'the redder the nails, the more bridges she crossed to reach Manhattan.' Unfazed Jersey-ites respond, "The bigger the hair, the closer to God."

To test some of my color ideas, I decided that I would poll my students (average age 20) and a few friends (average age 60). My grandmother inspired the first of eight questions: "Describe in a few words any one of your grandparents' automobiles." Typical of the men were the following: "old brown Cadillac," "black Olds," "Ford with a funny odor," but there were quite a few males who omitted the make such as these: "black and rusted," "ugly and expensive," and, "large, slow, and boring." Women, on the other hand, hardly ever mentioned the make if they'd ever known it. These are typical: "dusty blue 'boat,'" "big, old, and money-green," "little red truck," "grannymobile," and "hoopty."

Second, inspired by my sister's boy friend, I asked respondents to describe in a few words their fantasy car. Many males were quite specific: "Porsche 911," "1955 Mercedes-Benz Gull-Wing," and, "red Plymouth Prowler" are typical. More men than I expected, however, generalized: "anything with a new-car smell," "a sleek, silver SUV," "a pollution-free 8,000,000 mile per gallon candy dispenser," and, "anything sleek and sexy." Women occasionally were very concrete: "black and gold Jeep," "little red Corvette," and, "silver Audi," but of those who mentioned the make, most specified the color as well. More women described their dream car in general terms: "racy red," "big, green, and fast," "sleek and luxurious," "suburban pimp-ride," "red sport-convertible," and, "safe, comfortable car with a 200,000 mile warranty."

Third, I asked for their top three colors. Both men and women liked blue best followed by red. (One male listed his favorite as "red, redder, and reddest.") In third place for men was black. For women, purple and pink tied for third with black and green close behind. And one woman qualified her preference for yellow, "Only if I'm tan."

Fourth, I asked for any colors my respondents detested. Men ranked pink first, purple and yellow tied for second, and brown came in third. Women placed "puke green" first, mustard second, and orange, pink, and brown tied for third. Frankly, I've long been suspicious of color preferences, more so since conducting this poll. "Detroit Announces That Blue Is Number One This Year," is the sort of headline one sees every year or so, but which blue do Americans really prefer? Personally I love a "navy blue," but I loathe "baby blue" especially on the exterior of an automobile. Can you imagine a powder-blue Ferrari? (Yes, but only one driven by a Hollywood ingenue with more money than the GNP of some Central American countries.)

Fifth, I asked, "If you're buying a shirt (male) or blouse (female), do you prefer chromatic hues (red, green, blue, e.g.) or achromatic ones (white, black, gray)?" In general, women preferred chromatics more than men who have a higher tolerance for the achromatics. I was somewhat surprised by this, but then how many men wear a red suit even to a party? Nancy Reagan might, but Ronnie, never.

The sixth question asked for a one- or two-word definition of each of the following: “taupe, cerulean, russet, ocher, and verdant.” If I use the questionnaire again, I’ll change “russet” because I realize women are more likely to have heard of russet potatoes. Still women didn’t do that much better on this item scoring only 52% to the men’s dismal 34%. Many knew none of these, and not one knew all five among the sixty-four people who answered the questionnaire. Still the conclusion I draw here is that women have a slightly more sophisticated color vocabulary than their masculine counterparts. Both men and women, scientists say, can distinguish some six million colors; women just have more names for theirs.

Question seven asked respondents to rank “soft colors or pastels” on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the best). Women gave pastels a 6.2; men gave them a 4.9. Using the same scale, they were then asked to rank bright colors (this was question eight). Consistent with the results of question five, women ranked bright colors at 7.3 while men gave them a 6.1. I think then it is safe to say that women like a wider range of colors, both bright and pastel.

Briefly to summarize the results: just like my grandmother, women are much more likely to describe a relative’s car or their fantasy car solely by color. Men and women prefer blue and red, but after that there is a wide divergence. Surprisingly, there is far less agreement in the colors that the sexes dislike. As a rule women like brighter colors than men do; by a small margin men prefer the achromatics. And finally, women have a broader color vocabulary. As my cousin suggested, American women probably could do with less color because males aren’t especially sensitive to it. I doubt that any man has ever gone to bed with a woman because he liked the shade of her lipstick or the color of her dress. In societies where color is less prominent like Saudi Arabia, women appear to have no trouble getting a man’s eye even under a heavy black robe and veil. You can bet the mortgage that if the woman is available, she will have used some eye shadow and eyeliner.

The origins of this discussion of gender color differences are rooted in prehistory when European mothers are thought to have first chosen blue for their sons’ receiving blanket and pink to swaddle their daughters in. Desmond Morris speculates that the origins are a reflection of the ancient sexist hierarchy that prized boys over girls. Blue was picked because the gods themselves surely protect boys who were dressed in the same color as the sky. And girls wrapped in pink, the natural color of their flesh, tells any spirit intent on doing harm that these undisguised and thus unprotected females are not all that special, or the parents would have done more to guard them. It’s a little like giving a child an unflattering name: any child named Oedipus (“swollen foot”) Cruikshank (“crippled leg”) can’t have much going for it, or at least that is what literate demons should conclude. Not much has changed since Oedipus’ day: you still won’t find blue stockings on a scarlet woman, nor will a blue-eyed boy dress in a pink suit unless his name is Gatsby, but then he’s already doomed.