

## Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

**H**AVING A BIT TOO MUCH TIME ON MY HANDS one afternoon, I began contemplating one of the great philosophical questions of our age. If I could invite any three guests to dinner, who would they be?

Historical figures immediately came to mind. Abraham, Moses, Mohammed, Gandhi. I like Gandhi, but his presence would severely limit the menu options, so I thought some more. Churchill and Castro would make an interesting pair, but I suspected that my non-smoking preference would pose a problem.

Realizing that I might not be the only one pondering this question, I decided to aim somewhat lower on the popularity scale. Jefferson and Lincoln, after all, could be in high demand. So I decided to approach the problem in a slightly different way. I would first decide on the topic I wanted to explore and then choose those "experts" who might contribute to a lively discussion.

Perhaps it was the warmth of the day or maybe the pleasing pinot noir that I was sipping, but as hard as I tried, I couldn't stay focused on any of those lofty questions about truth and beauty or the secrets of the stars. Instead, the question that kept forcing its way to the front of my mind was this: What is the meaning of reality TV?

Why, for instance, were 40 million people glued to their television sets for the last episode of *Joe Millionaire*? What compelled 52 million people to watch the finale of *Survivor*?

These shows dominate the airwaves.

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The website [realitytvlinks.com](http://realitytvlinks.com) lists nearly 150 separate entries in this genre—everything from *Are You Hot?* to *Celebrity Mole* to *Who Wants to Date a Hooters Girl?*—and I'm truly curious as to what this attraction says about life in the 21st century.



What reality, exactly, are we exploring as we watch survivors eat bugs on tropical islands and beautiful young women offer themselves up for rejection to an audience of strangers? Are we merely fulfilling voyeuristic fantasies or simply covering up for a lack of more engaging things to do?

In speaking about photography in an interview for the *Boston Globe*, Susan Sontag commented that "there is a difference between direct experience and represented experience, and more and more people are being told there isn't a difference." Does our infatuation with reality TV contribute to such confusion?

Writing in the *New York Times* about the war in Iraq, Michiko Kakutani observed that "the Pentagon and television news coverage are blurring the lines be-

tween movies and real life as never before, turning viewers into 24-hour couch potatoes." Can we readily switch from these different versions of reality or, as Sontag suggests, "[if] we are being told that nothing is real . . . that everything is representation . . . [does] this make us less and less able to understand anything?"

And as I was pondering all of these questions, my choice became clear. Who better to invite to dinner than two famous personalities from two different eras, who starred in two very different versions of reality programming?

Perhaps you've guessed by now?

My guest list would include none other than Jerry Mathers (better known as Beaver Cleaver), the centerpiece of that ideal, middle-class family of the late 1950s, and Ozzie Osbourne, the patriarch of America's favorite rock-and-roll family of today. I could hear the scintillating conversation already:

**Beaver:** Gee, Mr. Osbourne, you shouldn't use those bad words all the time.

**Ozzie:** If I can't bloody well use my %\*^&•ing vocabulary, what good is the \*^&★ing language anyway?

**Beaver:** Gosh, even Eddie Haskell doesn't use words like that.

I was convinced that by dessert all of the mysteries of reality TV would be revealed.

Oh, yes, and for my third guest, I'm going to invite my sister-in-law, Trish—partly to help me plan the menu but mostly because she's a licensed therapist. And after spending an evening with The Beaver and The Prince of Darkness, I'm likely to need some professional help to regain my own grip on reality.

Now if I can only decide on what wine to serve.