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Mike Leigh, Randy Pausch, Reader's Digest and an End to Miserablism

By Margaret Heffernan, posted June 12, 2008

Lust, Caution. Michael Clayton. In the Valley of Elah. No Country for Old men. Control. There Will Be Blood. Before the Devil Knows You're Dead. All masterpieces in the new genre: the feel-bad movie. Enter feeling fine, exit in despair. Altruism's a

planet. And I'm increasingly outraged by so-called entertainment that reinforces my sense of meaninglessness. It all panders to a kind of adolescent sophistication that deems anything dark and tortured as smart, while anything funny

magazine is focused on."

Northrop isn't suggesting a magazine just full of good news; she's way too smart for that.

Northrop takes her inspiration in part from artists like Preston Sturges. Famous for screwball comedies, his films have a serious edge, daring to be sophisticated and raucous at the same time. His success came not from clinging to smug cynicism but from using a smart, critical mind to make people laugh.

"Films like *Sullivan's Travels* are goofy movies," says Northrop, "Sturges felt like he had to show what was happening in America—he could show criminal conspiracies and chain gangs—but he also understood that people need to laugh, they have a need to be happy. I think of this magazine that way. There is a need to think about solutions, about what works. And there is a need to be happy in order to be able to do that."

Consistent with that approach is the Digest's interview this month with Randy Pausch, whose last lecture at Carnegie-Mellon has already taken the web by storm. Here's a gifted, middle-aged man, who, even as he confronts his own early death, can talk about what makes life worth living.

What makes Americans happiest, says Northrop, are opportunities, freedom and work. What [Peggy Northrop] is talking about is the hunger for possibility instead of despair. Reader's Digest has the largest readership of any magazine in the world. If it is tuned into this new, positive zeitgeist, attention should be paid.

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fantasy. The world is doomed.

And yet into this morass of cynicism and gloom strides the zeitgeist master himself, Mike Leigh. The man who more or less invented miserablism as an art form (*Bleak Moments, Hard Labor, Secrets and Lies, Vera Drake*) has changed his tune. His new film, *Happy-Go-Lucky* is, as the title suggests, a cheerful film.

When Mike Leigh strikes out from the pack, pay attention. Here is an artist who, for decades, has charted the moods and preoccupations of ordinary people, with an insight and rawness few dare match. What's he doing making a happy film?

I think he's doing what we all need to do, and what more and more of us are doing: rejecting miserablism and all its works. I'm tired of seeing films that leave me feeling helpless. I'm sick of watching in utter passivity as men destroy the

and life-enhancing must be for idiotic airheads. I'm no Pollyana—I know we're in a desperate state—but increasingly I believe that pessimism is an indulgence and optimism a moral imperative.

And I'm in good company—starting, but not finishing with Mike Leigh. Have you seen *Reader's Digest* lately? The magazine is undergoing not so much a facelift as a life change, under the editorship of Peggy Northrop.

"We think our readers want to learn something," says Northrop. "They want to be inspired. We are hardwired to enjoy life and to overcome obstacles. We want a sense of community and a sense that we can all do something to contribute to it. More and more, what I'm hearing is that everyone knows that there are problems, but they want to hear solutions. And that is one of the things that no national