

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Scott Russell Sanders is a professor of English at the University of Indiana. The following passage is adapted from an essay in his prize-winning collection *The Paradise of Bombs* (1987).

"DEATH GAMES"

It's hard to escape the feeling, under the barrage of the day's news, that we've declared open season on our own kind. Coups and invasions, border wars and civil wars; execution gangs scouring the countryside, snipers crouched in tenements; explosives delivered by jet and car and parcel post; firing squads and electric chairs; plain old murder in our cities' mean streets: you know the sort of news I mean. Chewing on these reports of mayhem with our breakfast cereal, swallowing a bit of bitterness everyday, we gradually stop tasting it. Then a really sour slice of news lands on our plate -- depending on the year, the word might come from Auschwitz or Johannesburg, from My Lai or Beirut, from Moscow or New York -- and suddenly we gag. Not that, we say, stomachs turning. Lord, lord, not that. And for a spell we are baffled by the bloodthirstiness of our species. We are astonished and grieved.

When this aching amazement came over me recently, I couldn't help noticing that all the killers -- the heroes wrapped in flags, the goons wrapped in strait jackets -- are male, and I couldn't help seeing in their murderousness a grown-up version of the violent games we played back in boyhood.

Take my schoolyard, for instance. At every recess, dividing into tribes, we boys fought bitterly over that scuffed territory. Within each tribe there was a punching order, from the meanest big lugs down to the scrawniest wimps. The chief bully would bruise the runner-up, and the runner-up would shove the next in line, and so the punishment would cascade down. In nature films I have seen exactly the same thing happen among baboons: the alpha male starts a chain of growling and pushing that passes down through the ranks like a shock wave through a line of railroad cars. When it reaches the end, the puniest baboon -- with no other beast to belt -- gives a kick at the sand.

Unlike the female baboons, however, who take their lumps and give their lumps right along with the males, the girls rarely took part in our schoolyard bullying. Occasionally, a tough sweetie would wallop the daylights out of a pestering boy. "If you don't shut up," she'd cry, "I'll put out your lights! I'll chop you up for stew! I'll move that ugly nose to the back of your head!" And she would bloody the lout. But most of the time the girls stood aside from our battles, mocking us and murmuring mysteriously, or they rode the swings with bare legs thrust skyward. I always envied them for that aloofness. I still do. To my ignorant eyes they seemed more sensible than we boys: so contained, more confident of who they were and where they stood in the scale of things.

Nor did the girls play with guns. Now and again they would wear fringed skirts or cowboy hats, but they never strapped holsters to their hips, never carried plastic grenades in their lunch buckets, never hid wooden machine guns behind the coal chute for battlefield use during recess. We boys played with all those weapons and more: model tanks, bombers, howitzers, bazookas; rubber knives secreted in our hip pockets, pistols thrust under our belts. Our bedrooms were arsenals. The halls of our houses were awash with imaginary gore. The westerns and war movies that crammed the television after school showed us how it was done, this gleeful killing.

When I was in kindergarten, during the Korean War, you could buy plastic soldiers in the dime store, their bodies molded into fighting position, their chests crisscrossed with ammo belts, their waists bejeweled with grenades. Of course the girls would have nothing to do with them, those mysterious girls, but all the boys played war on the dusty floors of bedrooms and in the dirt of backyards for hours on end, slaughtering enemies. I don't think we imagined actual people dying in our assaults -- we were too young to know anything about death -- but we understood with utmost clarity that the world was divided, as in westerns and GI sagas, into good guys and bad guys. Our side deserved to live, and the other side to perish. The notion of the perfectly evil enemy hung in our minds like a blank target, waiting for a name to be written across it.

When our own son turned three and got the itch for guns, my wife and I said no. "Why not?" he wanted to know. "Because it isn't healthy," we'd say lamely; "it isn't good for you or the world." How could we recount for him what we had learned about real cowboys and Indians, about war, about genocide and assassination and the extinction of animals? How could we explain to a three-year-old Jesse the sense of betrayal we felt upon discovering that we were condemned to live our adult lives under the tyranny of the trigger?

Unconvinced, Jesse would halt in the aisles of department stores and gaze longingly at water pistols, like a starving bum in a bakery. In the library he would thumb his way through picture books, and when he found soldiers or spacemen he would show them to us triumphantly, as proof that every boy is entitled to bear arms. But we stood firm. No guns. Most of his friends' parents -- peacenik holdovers from the Vietnam era like ourselves -- also prohibited weapons. No cowboy shoot-em-ups on TV, we declared; no war movies, no cop shows. But here and there a grandparent delivered a six-shooter for Christmas, or an older schoolmate passed along a snapping rifle, or a magazine ad for the Army inspired a yearning for tanks, and suddenly the boys were blasting one another with every pointed object they could find, from rulers to fingers. One day at lunch, Jesse nibbled his peanut butter sandwich into the shape of a revolver and sprayed us all with bullets.

So where does this desire come from, this boy's compulsion to play at killing, this man's compulsion to kill for real? Pick your answer. Original sin, says a theologian. Too much testosterone, explains a biologist. Territorial imperative, insists an anthropologist. The will to power or the lust for death, say opposing psychologists. A historian assures us that it is all a legacy of life on the frontier. A feminist attributes it to male insecurity and the desire for sexual dominance. No, no, other pundits declare: it's television; it's food additives; it's the animal id.

"I just think playing with guns and soldiers is *fun*," says Jesse, and said the boy in me. Troubled about all this because I am troubled, he asks me, "What's so bad about playing war? It's all just pretend."

I think--but don't answer--that we veterans of childhood wars carry in our innermost ears the growl of machine guns, remember in our muscles the jab of a bayonet, preserve the starimage of bursting bombs. We know all about enemies. We understand how to divide the universe into the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Massacres wait in us. If we don't enact them ourselves, we feel little surprise when someone else does. Bang, bang you're dead, we sing inwardly. And somebody really dies.

ESSAY TOPIC: What relationship does Sanders see between boys "playing war" and the violence in the adult world? What do you think of his views? To make your essay convincing, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading -- including, of course, "Death Games" itself.