

## Help Me Syndrome

*By Hasina Deary*

It's a typical cartoon scene: Popeye off sailing or toting a sledge hammer doing whatever Popeye does to make a living, while Olive Oyl who does not have a job lounges around. Olive is skinny to the point of hospitalization. Popeye obviously does not share his spinach. Olive Oyl, in her frail condition has a tendency to be vulnerable to Bluto's frequent abductions. Bluto is the big, brawny bully who Popeye grapples with from cartoon to cartoon. Poor Olive is whisked away by the hair or thrown kicking and screaming over Bluto's shoulder. Her only salvation is knowing that Popeye will be coming to save her. "Help me, help me, Popeye!" Magically, he hears Olive's call for help. Popeye, her hero. He struggles with his can of spinach, but in the end the tattooed avenger saves Olive Oyl. It is so silly. Olive Oyl's only redeeming quality as a woman is the fact she is never stuck in the kitchen. Popeye, the strong and courageous, also prepares his own meals.

Why wasn't Olive ever smart enough to lock the doors so Bluto couldn't get in or clever enough to save herself? It is a disgusting example of the "Help Me Syndrome" so often portrayed in cartoons.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, the silly little princess pricked her finger, causing an entire kingdom to slumber. Peace was restored after the prince rode into town, fought with a witch in dragon's form, then kissed the *Sleeping Beauty*. All is well, another princess saved.

Why are women constantly in need of male rescue? Does the industry feed on some women's twisted fantasy to be saved by a make-believe Prince Charming? It might be said that these are old cartoons and women today have evolved. But Disney's three latest productions have at least one scene where the female character's life was in jeopardy, only to be spared by her male counterpart.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Eric steers a ship's mast through the evil Ursula's torso, freeing Ariel from the curse. After Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* tries to leave the castle she is attacked by slanty-eyed wolves. Lucky for her, the Beast came and fought off the angry hounds. A sigh of relief is breathed, another pretty face saved. Even in *Aladdin*, Disney's most progressive cartoon, Aladdin, the street-smart hero, first comes to Princess Jasmine's aid when she nearly has her hand cut off after being accused of thievery. In the end of the movie, we see Jasmine trapped in a huge hourglass. Her cries for help are drowned out by the sand that fills the glass. Finally, Aladdin breaks the glass to save Jasmine. Ahh.

While the women in Disney's three recent cartoons are a step up from the nonstop pathetic whining of Olive Oyl, they still lack independence and basic survival skills. They may be called a heroine, but by no means are they the woman hero. Indeed, they are merely girls in need of rescue. The misconception that females must be male-dependent is reiterated, even if they basically have things going for them. Belle wanted more than her "provincial life." So they want more, but never can they attain it by themselves.

Rarely do we see brave women saving others. Wonder Woman is the only woman cartoon character I know who has ever been the rescuer. She saves men, women, and children (but mostly women and children). Of course, she has to have Super Heroine powers to do it. She could not just be Mindy MacGyver, the normal girl, who uses her mind to solve problems. Instead cartoons are made about beautiful girls who sing and read, and bright-eyed, headstrong princesses who are all capable of thinking, but ultimately succeed because of the love of a man. I think it is time to change the outdated formulas of love and near-death rescue scenes. I challenge the cartoon makers to find a new happy ending.

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