

Realism's Gender Wars: Masculinity Effects in Late Realist Fiction and Contemporary Reality TV

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Three or four families in a country village. Seven or eight housemates in an urban loft. The first is Jane Austen's setup for a realist novel of ordinary lives.¹ The second is the basis for *The Real World* (1992–2017), MTV's groundbreaking reality television series. By taking a smallish number of characters, corralling them in a limited space, and observing their daily interactions, Austen and MTV evidently agree that such contrivances result in stories that feel "real." Novels and shows of this kind pursue reality in the spaces, routines, and mores that oversee our ties to other people. Attending to the rituals and intricate dynamics that arise from living side by side, they lean toward interior settings. Whether residents of Highbury or New York City, their characters move through middle-class worlds made real to us in part by the props of settled domestic life; beyond the basics of food, shelter, and clothing, there are books to read and sofas to lounge on. Featuring young adults, these realist forms favor narratives of development and courtship, individuals evolving in the context of family, friends, and lovers. Though feelings of anger or desire occasionally spill over, the general emotional tenor is low-key.² What's real lies in the undertones of conversations, in small acts of casual kindness or commonplace cruelty. Outright violence takes place elsewhere. Instead of desperate actions, we get meals, walks, and confidences. Instead of radical

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disruption, we get subtle shifts in perception—suspenseful plotting subordinated to psychological verisimilitude.

I begin with this unlikely comparison for several reasons. However historically and formally divergent, both of these texts may be taken to represent a realism of the mundane and nondire. Elaborated by novelists writing in Austen's wake—the likes of George Eliot and Anthony Trollope in England, William Dean Howells and Henry James in the US—this is the realist mode literary critics generally think of as classic. Given its traffic in social ties, houses, and dailiness, we might reasonably call it domestic realism. Along with concerns coded as feminine, its female characters are complex and frequently central. By the end of the nineteenth century, naturalists such as George Moore, Frank Norris, and Jack London would reject it on precisely these grounds. Deeming its realist perspective overly genteel and insufficiently virile, their repudiation was couched in unmistakably gendered terms.³ In what follows, I will focus on London in particular, taking two of his best known works as examples of a masculinized realism. Their hallmarks—sociality, wilderness settings, mortal danger—are the exact, purposeful inverse of those described above. I begin with London as prelude to considering a similar project in our own time. For if Austen's "feminine" realism is echoed today by docusoaps such as *The Real World*, so London's "masculine" realism has its own televisual correlate: the reality subgenre originating with *Survivorman* (2004–2016) about tough guys surviving in the wild.⁴

1. Whose Realism?

Contrasting Austen to London, comparing novels to television, I am interested in assessing various approaches to portraying the real, a category obviously much vexed by recent poststructuralist thinking. In literary and television studies alike, a wavering, socially constructed real has, in turn, meant trouble for the category of realism. No longer innocently mimetic, a realist work is now understood to evince and reinforce a particular, nonobjective notion of the real. This view applies to both nonfictional and fictional works, for while truth claims still matter (on which more eventually), we know that factual genres from memoir to sports programs are necessarily, to some degree, the products of artistic selection and shaping. My own placing of reality TV series alongside realist novels reflects an understanding of nonfictional and fictional forms as neighbors on a spectrum of realisms, not opposites. By opening with *The Real World*, anticipating my remarks on the compelling survival series *Alone* (2015–present), I would signal my intention to take reality

television seriously as a realist genre.⁵ Introducing contemporary TV shows by way of earlier literary works, I further suggest that discussions of realism can benefit from thinking across periods and media.

If even nonfictional forms are mediations rather than direct transpositions, then *fidelity* as a criterion of value loses much of its significance. Instead of asking whether a depiction is true to life, the critic explores its strategies for appearing to be so. What are the thematic and formal means by which it conjures a semblance of reality? Instead of assessing how real an image is, we are interested in how it contrives to produce what Roland Barthes calls a “reality effect.”⁶ The cognitive turn of recent years has seen literary critics approaching this question from a different angle—focusing not on the texts themselves but on the minds of readers as they make sense of fictions that “feel real.”⁷ Drawing on cognitive psychology, such an approach turns its back on strictly formalist readings along with those (like my own) that adjudicate the politics of one realist strategy as opposed to another. As a feminist theorist, asking how a text communicates “realness” requires a second question: *For whom* does it do so? If reality is a contested category, for what demographic does a given depiction ring true? Or perhaps, since we have all been schooled to take certain narratives as universal (others as merely partial), the question might be better phrased as: *Whose conceptions of reality* are validated by a particular realist paradigm? Who, in other words, gets The Real in realism, and what difference, in particular, does gender make?⁸

Scholars sharing my interest in ideology critique have tended to reflect on realism as a monolith and have often (in the last half century) deemed it reactionary by definition. Once approved for its democratizing attention to ordinary people, realism for many post-modern literary and TV critics is no more than an insidious ruse: pretending to be transparent and objective, disguising its actual ideological function, the realist text naturalizes the status quo. A modernist version of this logic remains available as well: here realism equals formal timidity and thus conventionality, while avant-garde forms are assumed to align with radical politics. Formally complacent, even misleading, realist works have been further associated with modes of address and thematic concerns promoting bourgeois identities and neoliberal values. US naturalism, in particular, has been deemed complicit with the very capitalist logic it often appears to oppose.⁹

These are some of the conservative possibilities and political risks of realist projects. Yet such projects are capable of hosting a diversity of political meanings.¹⁰ Instead of reviling realism per se, I mean to distinguish among differing vocabularies of the real. As

I've suggested, my specific interest is in how these vocabularies are divided by gender, with those coded as masculine presumed to be more efficacious, their version of reality more authentic and fundamental. I am not, of course, the first to scrutinize realism from a feminist point of view. Literary scholars have, for example, interrogated the US naturalist canon, extending or revisiting it to focus on female writers and characters.¹¹ My own major concern here is less with adding women than subtracting men—or, more accurately, with querying notions of true manhood as they animate a particular realist paradigm. By juxtaposing London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and "To Build a Fire" (1908) with contemporary survival shows, my readings critique two endeavors disparate in time but similarly anxious to put a masculine stamp on the real. Both would deliver a gut-punch to the domestic realism with which I began; both rather brutally invert its key terms and tenets. But as I hope to demonstrate, contrary to its premise and unlike others of its ilk, the History Channel's *Alone* has never succeeded, over the course of six seasons, in fully displacing a version of reality centered on home. For me, the significance and appeal of this show lies in its unevenly gendered realism.

2. The Realism of Club and Fang

London's Klondike writings (1900–1912) participate in what historians describe as a general shift in the US away from Victorian ideals of manly refinement and self-restraint. Countering what were seen as the feminizing effects of over-civilization, turn-of-the-century norms identified authentic virility with a reassertion of "primitive" passions. At a time of rapid change, with immigrants flooding in and women clamoring for the vote, the touting of natural male aggression arose in conjunction with a perceived threat to the authority of native-born white men.¹² The compensatory masculinism of works by London, Norris, and Stephen Crane is, indeed, more or less axiomatic. According to John Dudley in *A Man's Game: Masculinity and the Anti-Aesthetics of American Literary Naturalism* (2004), these writers felt driven to regender a literature they saw as feminized both by British aesthetes and by the predominance of women as writers of popular fiction (3–4).¹³ In addition to the boys' adventure stories popularized by Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling (12–13), they found inspiration in a burgeoning male culture of organized sports from boxing to football (19–54).

Two other discourses helped to shape London's hypermasculine realism and would, at the remove of more than a century, seep

into the gender unconscious of the reality survival show. The first is Westernism, or the romance of the frontier.¹⁴ Mary Lawlor, in *Recalling the Wild: Naturalism and the Closing of the American West* (2000), notes that naturalists like London set out to counter romantic notions of the West and its heroic Daniel Boones with a darker determinism. “But[,]” she continues, “their biographical as well as literary ambivalences about Western regional culture, which drew on such epic material for much of its identity and inspiration, dramatically compromise the critical gesture” (4). With the American West officially closed as of 1890, London’s nostalgia for frontier adventure is clear enough in stories set in the Canadian northwest, a mythic wilderness where white men could still test and prove their virility. True, some characters must eventually yield to outside forces. I agree with Lawlor that they do so within narratives still inspired by the romance of the journey, the courting of harsh conditions, and the primal struggle to survive.¹⁵ As this last suggests, the second discourse at work is a loosely Darwinian one: the view that all animals, including humans, are hard-wired for species survival. Herbert Spencer called this precept “survival of the fittest”; in *The Call of the Wild*, it would become “the law of club and fang” (107).¹⁶ Note that in London’s rendering, it is individual rather than group survival that is at issue. Upending the social premise of domestic realism, the project of this relentlessly brutal novel is to repudiate the group, slaughter the rival, and glorify the lone survivor (Figure 1).

Focalized through its canine protagonist, *The Call of the Wild* tells of the violence both suffered and dealt that transforms Buck from California house pet to “dominant primordial beast” (83) of the Yukon. Despite its genuine interest in animal behaviors, the book is transparently allegorical, an ode to atavistic aggression in men as well as dogs (almost all of whom are male). As Buck journeys back to his essential wolfness, we might expect to see him reclaim his place in the pack, the social formation synonymous with this species. London, however, has Buck establish his ferocity and primacy by hunting alone. After bringing down a “large black bear” followed by a couple of wolverines, the rewilded Buck is exalted as “a killer, a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and prowess, surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment where only the strong survived” (122). Though sometimes running at the head of the pack, Buck remains “unaided, alone,” set apart by his superior prowess. Of course Darwin’s law includes an imperative not only to dominate but also to reproduce. Finessing this point, the novel’s last page refers to sightings of dog-wolf hybrids but says nothing of a mate whose existence would compromise Buck’s absolute self-sufficiency.

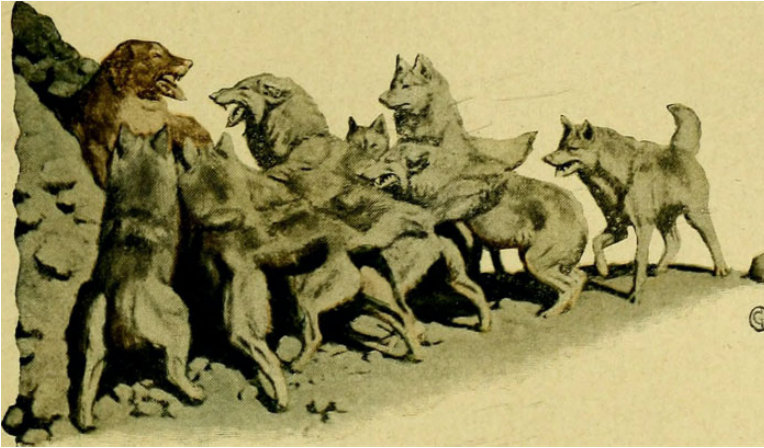


Fig. 1. Buck battles archrival Spitz and a pack of invading huskies. Illustration by Philip R. Goodwin, prefacing Chapter III, "The Dominant Primordial Beast," *The Call of the Wild* (Macmillan, 1903).

The 1908 version of "To Build a Fire" also equates masculine prowess with unyielding toughness and perfect autonomy, the resolve to go it alone no matter what.¹⁷ Here the unnamed male character dismisses an old man's warnings about solo travel across the snow-covered Yukon: "Those old-timers were rather womanish. . . . Any man who was a man could travel alone" (470). In this case, however, events quickly cast doubt on such a view. By the story's conclusion, our mannish protagonist has frozen to death, offering a rather strong rebuke to the ideal of lone-wolf individualism. Given the cautionary nature of this tale, London's take on manliness is arguably more complicated than *The Call of the Wild* suggests.¹⁸ I would note, however, that the narrative's unemotional detailing of external physical conditions remains largely identical with the male character's own perspective. Despite some critical distance imparted by the dispassionate gaze of his dog, we are with him every step of his doomed trek, share with him every flicker and dashing of hope. In the end, it is hard not to be impressed by as well as aghast at the man's stubborn independence and will to endure.

Survival shows, too, are less than fully consistent in their gender politics—all the more so given their many permutations. As we will see, *Alone* in particular is attractively at odds with its own gender messaging. Yet this modicum of instability occurs in the context of realisms overwhelmingly invested in proving the realness of male prowess—invested, too, in purveying a markedly virile reality over and against iterations judged to be feminine. The structure of feeling driving this contemporary project is our own, oft-mentioned crisis in white masculinity, following on the heels of the second-wave

women's movement and panoply of other bids for equality.¹⁹ As with the turn of the nineteenth century, so the turn of the twentieth saw, along with threats to male hegemony, the decline of traditional venues for the assertion of male physical prowess—shuttered factories recalling the closed frontier. Just as London and others would regender realism in novels, so do series like *Survivorman* endeavor to masculinize one of TV's most popular and profitable formats.²⁰ For despite precedents that include sports coverage and the crime show *Cops* (1989–2020), reality programming today is teeming with feminine subgenres—docusoaps along with shows devoted to make-overs, dating, cooking, and home decoration—suggesting the more significant influence of women-centered daytime television. The Discovery and History channels, in particular, have countered this trend with reality series set in male-dominated worlds, where gross motor adventures take the place of relational microdramas, and where the lingua franca (of affection as well as rivalry) is aggression.²¹

In our time as in London's, on the screen as on the page, challenges to male authority are met by redoubled assertions of mastery. As a first step, in hysterical flight from anything remotely “feminine,” real men (and male dogs) must leave behind the sissifying comforts of indoor living and destroy all traces of sentimental attachment. Due to its uncertain status, manliness must then be enacted, tested, and authenticated. Reality series about fisherman, loggers, or miners do so in the context of male homosociality. By contrast, Londonesque survival shows eschew collaboration for Darwinian competition. Survivormen outrun femininity and stave off death while demonstrating, whether directly or by implication, their ability to triumph over other men. As the trailer for *Alone* explains, “Last Man Standing Wins.”

3. Masculinity/Reality Effects

Survival narratives, I have posited, take hold in periods of panicked masculinity as attempts to both rebut feminist assertions and reclaim feminized genres. Of course my further interest in these narratives concerns their strategies for representing “real life.” I contend that in realist texts committed to verifying manliness, proof of manhood also operates as proof of realness. In these texts, readers and viewers are offered authenticated masculinity as an especially potent signifier of The Real. Its dual function is implicit in the expression “real man,” referring to a man who is *sufficiently virile* while also suggesting a man who *really exists*. Consequently, within this particular realist economy, masculinity effects and reality

effects are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Before we turn to the specific (and complicating) example of *Alone*, consider two overlapping tropes that London deploys and today's survival shows reiterate: the threat of Death and the presence of Nature. Together, these tropes work to authenticate manliness and, at the same time, to fortify claims that textual representations are true to life.²²

In survivalist country, there are many ways to die: lack of food or water, attack by predators, drowning, exhaustion, or hypothermia. The key, baked into the notion of survival, is that life hangs in the balance. London's protagonist is a man or male dog flayed by extreme conditions. He is well aware, and readers are continually reminded, that suffering is inevitable, injury likely, and death a looming possibility. In "To Build a Fire," the temperature is 75 below zero, the man's path along a frozen creek a minefield of treacherous pools hidden by snow. Anticipating the tragic ending, the watchword here is "danger," which London repeats five times in the course of three paragraphs (466). In *The Call of The Wild*, threats to Buck's life include starvation, overwork, falling through ice, and violence dealt by other animals (including human ones). Unlike the man in "To Build A Fire," Buck survives by becoming a veritable killing machine: "[H]e never forewent an advantage or drew back from a foe he had started on the way to Death. . . . Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law; and this mandate, down out of the depths of Time, he obeyed" (107).

To death as ultimate fate, London adds killing as primordial mandate. Yet characters teasing and tasting death do more for him than verify male supremacy; they also touch on and illuminate something essential, excavated from "the depths of Time." If Death in this dog story is frequently capitalized, it is because London appears to identify it with a higher order of reality, not some shadow on the wall of a cave. In Death, he finds a compelling figure for the irrefutable, unfalsifiable Real. Survival TV shows, too, double down on death as evidence of facticity by adducing it in multiple registers. Threats depicted within the diegesis along with B-roll clips of growling predators and dizzying drops are supplemented by references to real-world fatalities. It is common practice for these shows to boost their credibility by poaching higher-status realist discourses (journalism, anthropology, statistics, etc.). In the following examples, we see them ventriloquize these discourses to vouch for the realness of death within as well as beyond the televised world.

For the "Patagonia" episode of *Survivorman* (Season 7, Episode 7), the eponymous Les Stroud retraces the steps of an actual Argentine hiker who died (probably of hypothermia) in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park. Stroud begins by setting the scene in

the somber, objective tones of a crime reporter. “On December 21, 2013,” he intones, Laureano Santos set out from a hostel promising to retrieve a bag on his return. “*He never came back.*” In this episode, Stroud hunts down the real cause of this real death and does so, moreover, as the original, most genuine survival expert. According to Stroud, it is copycat shows purveying survival in unrealistic ways that encourage macho overreach and lead to unnecessary tragedy. Here I can’t help pausing to observe, since I’m already halfway down this trail, how much this episode seems to echo “To Build a Fire.” When the grizzled Stroud chides a younger man for exceeding his limits and hiking alone, he is essentially retelling London’s hypothermia tale—this time, from the old man’s point of view. Once again, however, the critique of go-it-alone masculinity is undercut, since *Survivorman*’s very premise is that Stroud and his camera are alone in the wild: “One man. Alone. 7 days. No food. No TV crew” (opening credits). As for my original point, by having Stroud follow in the footsteps of a real-world victim, the episode drives home the lurking nearness of death. By having him return safely, it proclaims Stroud rather than Santos or rival TV hosts the fittest man, while also certifying *Survivorman* as the most genuine show.

For another example of real events cited to mobilize Death as an authenticating trope, I turn to *Man vs. Wild* (2006–2011) starring Bear Grylls. With his chiseled looks, background in the British military, and high-adrenaline stunts, Grylls is the James Bond of survival TV. Here risk-taking machismo is fully embraced, and death (or so it appears) is never far away. Camera angles, diegetic commentary, voiceover, and pounding soundtrack all hype the hardships and dangers of Grylls’s exploits. Unlike Stroud, who searches diligently for food, water, and shelter, Grylls leaps from planes and proceeds to scale cliffs, plumb canyons, battle floodwaters, fight through sandstorms, endure extremes of heat and cold, while also proving himself the earth’s supreme predator. In keeping with Buck’s mantra of “kill or be killed, eat or be eaten” (107), Grylls kills and eats (often raw) adversaries from wild boar to poisonous snakes (Figure 2).

As viewers have not failed to notice, the very pile up of death-defying feats can actually backfire insofar as they stretch credulity.²³ Unlike Stroud, Grylls is being trailed by a TV crew, and the elaborateness of his stunts imply a degree of preparation and infrastructure. Perhaps as reassurance, the series sprinkles in some hard data quantifying the difficulty of Grylls’s challenges: 70-foot jump into a river, 2000-foot cliff climb, nine-foot boa constrictor, etc. All are bids for credibility, but what interests me most are statistical reckonings of the risk to life in various locations: the number of hikers *actually* stranded in the Alps, the number of US citizens *really* killed



Fig. 2. Bear Grylls takes down a wild boar. *Man vs. Wild*, Season 4, Episode 2, "Alabama." Copyright 2009, Discovery Channel.

by wild animals on the African Savannah. The blurb for Season 7, Episode 5 illustrates the unsubtle logic at work: "Over 100 people drown each year in New Zealand, and [Grylls] must cross a raging river on a tree trunk to head toward civilization." With his televised river crossing put up against the national drowning rate, Grylls's level of valor gains a kind of measurable concreteness. Given their highly efficient twinning of masculinity and reality effects, no wonder fatality factoids are a staple of the survival genre.

4. Nature vs. Artifice

The other trope similarly adept at credentialing men and male-centered realism is Nature. Overlapping with Death by contributing its share of hardship and disaster, Nature in survivalist texts has its own authenticating properties. As we know, in a modern Western context, ties to nature and the body have more often functioned to denigrate women, even as ties to culture and rationality have been construed as evidence of male superiority. But in works from *The Call of the Wild* to Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990) an inverted version of this binary has also been available, with particular appeal at moments of transitioning gender norms. In this version, men are reinvigorated by escaping into the wild, where they recover a primal form of manhood—an identity freed from the constraints of civilization, now shunned in feminizing terms as soft, artificial, and domesticating. As we have seen, *The Call of the Wild* celebrates untamed nature for its specific schooling in virility: aggression, toughness, a disregard for niceties. That these are *manly* qualities is made clear by the brief, negative appearance of a single

(noncanine) female character. Clearly out of place among the hardened Yukon miners and their overworked sled dogs, Mercedes is “pretty and soft” (99). Asked to abandon a tent, she throws up her hands “in dainty dismay” (93); asked to walk instead of ride, she “sits down like a spoiled child” (99). As the narrator explains, Mercedes regards helplessness as “her most essential sex prerogative” (99). Instead of toughening her, the wilderness brings out her inherent weakness and unfitness. Nature in London is thus empowered to reveal “essential” gender: true manhood and, in stark contrast, the true and inferior nature of womanhood.

In survival TV, too, immersion in nature serves (though usually less explicitly) to reaffirm male primacy. For these series, as for London, a favorite location for nature at its wildest is the Yukon and adjacent territories, including Alaska. But while London’s males have a fiercely adversarial relation to the wild—battling its conditions and dominating other animals—TV survivalists are actually divided between fighting against and affiliating with natural elements. Whereas Grylls exemplifies the former, Stroud is more apt to pick berries than to hunt, and his lessons in survival include care for the environment. Matthew Ferrari points to this split as the premise for *Dual Survival* (2016–2020), a Discovery show pairing the combative approach taken by army vet Dave with that of “bush hippie” Cody; Dave hunts, while his counterpart cites indigenous precedents and forages for plants. Like Stroud vis à vis Grylls, Cody occupies the less belligerent, “feminine” position in this binary. But I agree with Ferrari that Cody, too, serves alongside Dave to renew and redeem white male identity through recourse to the “masculine primitive” ideal (221). Though his mode is nonviolent, the bush hippie borrows from yet also effectively displaces both women and indigenous people, who remain invisible and extraneous to the survivalist’s version of the wild.

There is more to say about the function of indigeneity in the “man versus wild” genre. On the page and screen alike, indigenous people and practices are lumped together with nonhuman animals and rugged natural conditions, all part of the mythologized category of Nature. In *The Call of the Wild*, the “Yeehats” are seen as just one more natural element to be violently mastered. Having taken down the great bull moose, London’s canine hero turns to these fictional tribe members: “He sprang at the foremost man (it was the chief of the Yeehats), ripping the throat wide open” (128) and proceeds to slaughter others in similar fashion. Survivalist shows accomplish something similar by means of symbolic rather than physical violence. For one thing, despite occasional traces of human habitation, local residents past and present are conveniently disappeared from these televised versions of the wild. Tracts of land

previously, or even currently, belonging to indigenous peoples are taken to represent the pristine wilderness—unexplored and uninhabited until the white man slashes his way through and builds a rude shelter. At the same time, narrators as well as Cody-type protagonists are wont to interject that a certain technology originated in this or that indigenous context. Whether slaughtered, expunged, or appropriated as sources of “archaic” knowledge, indigenous people, like the wilderness in general, are bent to the purpose of certifying white masculinity.²⁴

As with male bodies at risk, male bodies in nature make assertions about white manhood that are also assertions about what’s real. In this respect, the reality effect of Nature is partly semantic. Like Death, Nature connotes something irreducible and incontestable. Ontologically, a chair is no less genuine than a tree, but whether in scientific or mystical terms, we tend to endow natural elements with a privileged relation to The Real. As the opposite of “culture,” Nature represents (wrongly, the new materialism insists) that which is intrinsic, preexistent, foundational, and thus immutable. As the opposite of “artifice,” naturalness equals authenticity, in contrast to entities contrived, disguised, or faked. Of course situating a man utterly alone in the wild is nothing if not contrived. In the survivalist imagination, however, isolation in nature has the power to strip him of all pretenses, return him to his original state, leaving him not only more manly but also more authentically himself. And if men in nature are assumed to be real, so nature itself is assumed to exceed our power to control and falsify it. We can, however, measure it. Unlike slippery social phenomena, the natural world can be rendered precisely in the “objective” language of hard science. In London’s stories and contemporary survival shows, these various assumptions about nature are wielded to uphold a more authoritative realism.

London’s Klondike stories drew on his actual experience in the subarctic wilderness, on other travel writers’ nonfictional accounts of this region, and on naturalist studies of canine behavior. The extended description of Buck’s patient, four-day take down of the old bull moose—cutting him out of the herd, denying him food, water, or rest until finally the great head droops—is a tour de force of verisimilitude (124–27). *The Call of the Wild* is notable, too, for its strings of knowing references to natural landmarks. A grueling sled run, for example, takes the dogs “up the Cañon, through Sheep Camp, past the Scales and the timber line, across glaciers and snow drifts hundreds of feet deep, and over the great Chilcoot Divide, which stands between the salt water and the fresh . . . down the chain of lakes which fills the craters of extinct volcanoes” (68–69).²⁵ An example from “To Build a Fire” illustrates a similar reliance on nature as a source of facts. Despite affirming the dog’s intuition of

danger over the man's calculation of temperature, the narrator proceeds to correct the latter—and to gauge “reality”—in the man's own scientific terms: “In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero. . . . It was seventy-five below zero. Since the freezing-point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained” (464). Men and male animals in nature, natural histories and topographies, the empirical language of the natural sciences—all of these imbue London's masculine tales with an aura of the real.

Similarly in survivalist shows, factoids gleaned from the natural sciences lend authority to truth claims. As with fatality statistics, Stroud and Grylls routinely drop in bits of scientific information about edible or poisonous plants, annual rainfall, locations favored by snakes, etc. To further appreciate the authenticating role of Nature in the context of television, I turn to reality TV scholars Misha Kavka and Annette Hill. Speaking of *Deadliest Catch* (2005–present), Kavka shares my sense that Nature serves to naturalize and verify virility: The fishermen “reveal the naturalness of their own masculinity by metonymic association” (66–67). Viewers are assured of the men's reality in part by the show's “documentary aesthetics.” Also at work is the belief that “Nature cannot be stage-managed; the reality of Nature in turn confirms the virility of men” (67). Stressing its masculinity effect, Kavka takes for granted the reality effect of an untamed natural setting. Despite our awareness that televisual images may be heavily manipulated, we tend to assume that scenes of thunderstorms and such are beyond the powers of editors and art departments. That TV audiences make this assumption is borne out by Hill's research on perceptions of various factual genres. Asked to judge these as more or less “true to life,” respondents ranked nature documentaries second in truthfulness, just below the news and well above documentaries on other topics (*Restyling* 120–121). As Hill's findings appear to confirm, in the minds of viewers, if Mother Nature can't be fooled, neither can she be fudged.

Hill's audience study revealed something else of interest. The same respondents who put nature documentaries at the top of the truthfulness scale, put “life experiment” and “reality game shows” at the bottom. Out of ten factual forms, these two were judged the least credible.²⁶ All the more reason, then, for survivalist shows invested in true grit to flee the interiority of *Real World*-type life experiments and shun the sociality of *The Bachelor*-type game shows. I have already observed that *Survivorman* and *Man vs. Wild* mobilize higher order discourses to verify the risk to life of Stroud's and Grylls's exploits. Referencing the aesthetic of the man in nature documentary similarly augments realness. Characteristics borrowed from this

aesthetic (as Kavka lists them vis à vis *Deadliest Catch*) include voiceover narration emphasizing hardship, to-camera interviews alternating with action shots, and long shots suggesting danger intercut with closeups of bodies under strain (67). Capturing male bodies in the throes of unmanageable nature, survivalist shows defy those centered on baking or “housewives” to match them as purveyors of the real.

Stroud provides an especially vivid example of mutually reinforcing masculinity and reality effects. The setup for this particular episode (launching Season 3) is that Stroud will deliberately lose himself in the Sierra Nevada mountains, challenging a search and rescue team to locate him. It’s a contrived exercise plausibly teetering, as Stroud strays deeper into the wild, on becoming “real.” At one point, the terrain is so steep and the brush so thick, Stroud is forced down onto his hands and knees. Breathing hard, he maneuvers with one hand and films with the other, camera flailing. Its chaotic movements, as much as the images it records, convey a man in extremis. An ominous, “primitive” soundtrack underlines his distance from civilization. Pausing to catch his labored breath, Stroud runs down multiple threats to his survival: snapped ankle (easy to do), attack by a mountain lion (one was recently reported), or even appendicitis—any of these, given the remote location, would spell “serious trouble.” Closeups show Stroud covered in sweat, unshaved face reddened with effort, dirty bandanna around his head, evidently a man unconcerned with appearances. Signifying at once his death-defying masculinity and the show’s unretouched reality, the figure we see in these shots is *literally* gritty. When such a man confesses to us, ruining the absence of a safety net, “It’s more than just a TV show at this moment,” who are we, watching from the safety of our homes, to disbelieve him?

5. Last Man Standing

True to its title, *Alone* drops each contestant in a location remote from “civilization” and from each other. The wilderness and, as in *Survivorman*, the absence of a camera crew guarantee isolation. Prefacing each episode of Season 1, block letters explain the setup: “10 men. Self-document their struggles. Against punishing wilderness. In complete isolation. No crew. Every man for himself. Last man standing wins.” When a contestant reaches his breaking point, he “taps out”; the final holdout walks away with half a million. *Alone*’s brilliance lies in tweaking the survivalist formula to include, and seemingly masculinize, elements of life-experiment documentary and game show competition. Unaware of how many others

remain, *Alone's* subjects are on their own both in the wild and in the game. Viewers, by contrast, enjoy an overview of how the competition is shaping up. Each episode zooms in on three or four contestants, keeping us abreast of each one's difficulties and successes. Suspense builds as days in the wilderness accumulate, hardship increases, and we bet on who will be the next to tap out.

As we have seen, masculine realism à la London features males beset by harsh environments who must also battle to be the fittest. Whereas Buck rips out his rivals' throats, Stroud's and Grylls's struggle to dominate is more muted; as survival gurus, celebrities with their own shows, their implicit superiority is never in doubt. *Alone*, by contrast, while avoiding direct confrontation, is structured as a Darwinian fight to the finish. With \$500,000 at stake, the drama of man vs. nature is artfully set within a frame of man vs. man. And though no one is literally "taken out," it's a given that nine will eventually be ousted both from the wild and from the world of the show. Further in keeping with precedent, *Alone's* certifying of dominant masculinity overlaps closely with its verifying of truth claims. Once again, fatality statistics come in handy (number of people killed by cougars; percentage of spider bites that prove deadly; percentage of body weight lost before organ failure) to gin up and authenticate our frontiersmen's risk to life. These sobering, educational notes appear as extradiegetic captions when, for example, someone has just been bitten by a spider. Other captions invoke the presumed facticity of biology to gloss various natural phenomena, often with the added effect of underlining difficulty (the Pacific banana slug is second largest of its kind; death may result after three days without water).

Calling on the tropes of Death and Nature to bolster manliness and realism alike, *Alone* echoes our other survivalist texts. Specific to *Alone*, however, is recourse to medical science. In addition to medical evacuations requested for reasons of sickness or injury, doctors forcibly evacuate contestants judged to be in physical danger. As we will see, such medical judgments (based on weight loss) play a decisive role in Season 3. The sporadic staging of medical checks, apparently part of a regular safety protocol, has powerful reality effects. Even as it mitigates isolation (help is never far away), it also dramatizes the actuality of risk (contestants really do put their bodies on the line). Before taking a closer look at the arc of particular seasons, I will offer a final generality. In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), David Shields describes today's burgeoning realisms as rooted in "'raw' material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional" (5). *Alone's* pastiche of edited, annotated narratives is clearly the product of highly professional "processing," yet two kinds of amateurism nevertheless enhance its veracity. First,

although some contestants actually teach bushcraft for a living, they function in this context (unlike Stroud or Grylls) as “everyman,” probationary survivalists. Second, despite being taught how to use their cameras, they are manifestly unprofessional in their role as self-documentary filmmakers.²⁷

6. Cryin’ Nights

All 10 of the contestants for *Alone*’s inaugural season, set in Northern Vancouver Island, were white men. Aged 22–46, all were avid outdoorsmen, many of them hunters. Their ranks included a cop, corrections officer, ex-helicopter crewman, self-described “prepper,” big-game meat processor, and yoga-practicing vegetarian. Most were married with kids, two even choosing to undertake this adventure while leaving behind pregnant wives. Things got off to a fast start when the cop tapped out on day one, tearfully citing “complete vulnerability” and being “scared shitless.” The prepper followed on day two, spooked by predators during what he called “truly the scariest night of my life.” By day eight, four more had folded, and block letters spelled out the math: “4 men remain. 3 will break. 1 will thrive.” The remaining four (including the vegetarian) settled in for more than a month; on day 56, the patient, dryly humorous corrections officer, 60 pounds lighter than when he began, took home the prize money.

Noting that “we’re social creatures,” the helicopter crewman had predicted from the outset, “There’s gonna be a lotta cryin’ nights.” Turns out he was right. Indeed, what first hooked me was the show’s parade of manly tears—a flow unprecedented in my experience (onscreen or off). As the weeks stretched out, men spoke often and openly about their longing for family and their own emotional distress: “I’d rather be home reading a book to my kids right now”; better than a shower or food, would be “just talking to my wife”; “I have a lot of anxiety not knowing how my [ailing] mother is”; “I’m not good in my head right now.” Framed as an ode to male endurance and self-sufficiency, what Season 1 revealed time and again was quite the opposite: male fear, fragility, and emotionality; the difficulty if not impossibility of either whupping Nature or persisting very long without other people. Certainly, there was evidence of toughness and competence, but *Alone* departs from our earlier masculine realisms in having to admit that men are needy social creatures after all (Figure 3).

Despite its Darwinian setup, I would point to three additional structural factors supporting this alternative view. For one thing, what we actually see over the course of 10 episodes isn’t one man



Fig. 3. Lucas in tears toward the end of Season 1. *Alone, Season 1, Episode 10*. Copyright 2015, History Channel.

standing but nine men crumpling. Even the ultimate winner suffers from loneliness and despair until the final moment, at which point the season ends. For another, while we see contestants engaged in such activities as fishing and foraging, the assignment to self-document combined with angsty boredom weights the footage (or at least the editing) in the direction of to-camera confessions. Instead of scaling mountains or crushing rivals, men hunker down under tarps and express themselves. Finally, notwithstanding the competition format, contestants tap out not when vanquished by others but when they themselves have faced their feelings, reckoned with precarity, pondered their priorities, and decided that being alone in the wild isn't where they want to be.

7. Callie's Chair

The survivalist formula, troubled by the emotive men of Season 1, was even more radically revised by the unannounced inclusion of female contestants beginning with Season 2. Suddenly, "10 people" (still all white) were vying to be "last one standing." Of these 10, three were women. Subsequent seasons (except Season 4, on which more shortly) would stick to this cautious gender ratio. Yet we need only recall London's pathetic, out-of-place "Mercedes" to appreciate how much the simple presence of women in the wild competing with men threatens the very hierarchy ("London" over "Austen") on which this realist mode is founded. At the same time, the show's refusal to include an equal number of women, giving them a numerically equal shot at winning, signaled fidelity to a

realism that needs to disqualify women in order to ratify men. My remaining pages will track *Alone*'s mixed gender messages across Seasons 2 through 6, before closing with some thoughts on the show's implications for a feminist realism.²⁸

There are several ways that *Alone*'s Season 2 drew the show still further from the survivalist template. By elaborating on family backstories, it prepared viewers for ever more fulsome odes to non-aloneness. Moreover, while two women tapped out early, the third woman, Nicole, made it to the final four. Outlasting Season 1's winner, Nicole did so as a harvester of medicinal plants and grateful fish whisperer—that is, as a peaceable survivalist in the “bush hippie” mode we've glimpsed before, but never in the person of a woman. Her success contradicted the logic of masculine realism in two important ways. First, it celebrated a collaborative “feminine” over combative “masculine” mode of interacting with nature. Second, it celebrated women's ability to match and perhaps outdo men in a grueling test of strength, endurance, and know-how. Casting doubt on masculine values and male superiority both, Season 2 put considerable pressure on the dramas of man versus nature and man versus man, exposing the genre's underlying drama of man asserting himself over woman.

The feminist challenge to this assertion came to a head the following season, set in Patagonia. Premiering in December 2016 as women were massing in Washington to protest president-elect Trump, Season 3 was lauded by viewers and was, indeed, the source of my own interest in the gender politics of survival shows. Stranded in the Andes this time, male contestants continued to stray from the normative script of self-sufficiency. As one contestant, Fowler, put it, his voice faltering with emotion, “You think about family and how much they mean to you. And the weight—gravity on your chest—is just *so strong*.” Here feelings are as irrefutable as the law of gravity. In contrast to the Law of Club and Fang, the principle illustrated is one of natural *connection*. Like many of the Patagonia contestants, Fowler also defined himself as a “maker”; to stay busy, he carved chopsticks and other utensils by the dozen, a rabbit for his daughter, and a record-keeping “wizard staff.” Season 3 was very much a showcase of artisanal creativity, much of it domestic. Participants outfitted their homes with amenities (fish-smoking rack, hangers for clothing), providing comfort and beauty far beyond basic survival needs. They made musical instruments and played them under the stars. The result was a collective revision of the game's very project, distanced from an adrenaline-fueled struggle to stay alive. Explicitly rejecting the credo of knife-edge survival, long-haul participants spoke of settling down, embracing the natural world, and simply “living.”



Fig. 4. Inside Callie's home: clothes on hangers, stone floor and hearth, bed with shelf. *Alone*, Season 3, Episode 5. Copyright 2017, History Channel.

Although more than one ascribed to this approach, Callie, herbalist and fan favorite, most fully expressed and embodied it. Her home, no mere temporary shelter, was anchored, emotionally as well as practically, by a laboriously constructed stone hearth (Figure 4).

For the sake of beauty, she added wind chimes and a paved walkway. Eventually this formidable “maker” laid a mossy path to a working sauna. Callie’s time in Patagonia was a love letter to the skill, labor, and art of homemaking—detached, however, from notions of normative family and literally pieced together from the ground up. As she declared early on, “A home is everything to me. I’m a total creature of comfort. I love making home.” We might have predicted as much from her very first day in the wild. While others were building fires and scouting for predators, Callie began with a swim: “It’s a way of deepening my connection to the earth,” she explained. Step two was to build a beautiful bamboo chair by the waterside; step three, to sit in it as the sky darkened over her new environs. Now taking in the stillness, she remarked that “even something as little as a chair can make all the difference.” Needless to add, Callie and her chair made all the difference, too, between a realism of the dire and a realism pivoting on the props of everyday life (Figure 5).

To an unprecedented degree, Season 3 of *Alone* betrayed its masculine provenance by veering ever more dangerously toward an ethos of connection and coziness, of dwelling rather than marauding. Equally threatening to the gender status quo (though coming at it from a different angle), all three female contestants kicked butt.²⁹ Carleigh, a carpenter living in Alaska, stated out loud her goal of



Fig. 5. Callie on Day 1, in her bamboo chair. *Alone*, Season 3, Episode 1. Copyright 2016, History Channel.

being the first woman to win *Alone*, adding, “I want to be a role model for young girls out there.” As we know, given the genre’s investment in shoring up manliness, such a win would cut against its very reason for being. Indeed, for a woman to beat seven guys in a contest definitional of manhood would not only upend the show’s worldview but also, more generally, intensify rather than calm the crisis in twenty-first-century masculinity. Measured by men’s own standards, clocked in numbers of days, it would do nothing less than prove women the equal (and possibly stronger) sex. All the more reason for my fervent rooting for Carleigh, Callie, and biologist Megan. And here is a context in which, as with the coverage of sporting or electoral outcomes, credible truth claims matter. However aware we are of manipulations by producers, writers, and editors, it makes a difference to us as viewers that these are not fictional characters but women who exist in the world, with lives before and after the show. Unlike a fictional triumph, a win by such a woman has evidential value in falsifying assertions of male superiority and female inferiority. As Carleigh observed, winning would make her a role model for aspiring survivor-girls—a reality effect extending beyond the screen.

Knowing the stakes, readers will excuse the scorekeeping bent of what follows. Consistent with the show’s overwhelming whiteness, all of the Patagonia final five were white. (Britt, only the second Black contestant to date, had long since tapped out.) Countering its emphatic maleness, three of the finalists were women; at 51 days, with five men gone, all three women were still in the game. At 73 days, it was down to the final three, and though Callie was out, women held onto their majority. At 78 days, Megan, fearing an

infected tooth, had had enough, leaving wizard staff Fowler and role model Carleigh as the last two standing. Fowler had by then lost a third of his original body weight, Carleigh nearly a third, and both were struggling. One man had already been pulled for blood pressure lowered by starvation. At this juncture—its suspense heightened by dueling weigh-ins, whispered conferrals, and delayed verdicts—apparently objective medical experts stepped in to play a decisive role. In the end, Carleigh's BMI of less than 17 determined her fate: she was, they declared, at risk of organ failure and needed to be medically evacuated. Fowler was named the winner.³⁰

7. Sons and Brothers

A decent and deserving competitor, Fowler graciously, and honestly, attributed his win to starting the game with a few extra pounds. He admitted, too, that his own BMI was never mentioned (over 17, by his account), thus creating an appearance of bias. In fact, with the criterion for elimination waffling among blood pressure, percentage of body weight, and BMI, it was hard to make direct comparisons—harder still quell the suspicion that Carleigh was pulled for the simple reason that she might have won. The male panic behind her elimination was made all too clear by subsequent seasons—a backlash beginning with Season 4's abrupt pivot from the original setup. This time, illogically enough, *Alone's* contestants would not actually be alone but instead compete in pairs: four of brothers, two of fathers and sons, and one of a husband and wife. Within this white male homosocial matrix, the sole female participant (of fourteen overall) was identified first and foremost as “wife.” In short, Season 4's casting as well as structure, based on male bonding, made it highly unlikely for a woman to win and impossible for her to win on her own.

Season 5, *Alone: Redemption*, brought back 10 losing contestants from earlier seasons, runner-up Carleigh among them. Determined to make the most of her second chance, she had put on extra weight and should have been a favorite. Instead, our aspiring role model was the very first to go—medically evacuated on day four after struggling for 20 hours with a fishhook stuck deep in her hand. The accident was heartbreaking enough; what made it worse was the show's milking of it for maximum humiliation. In a rare move, breaking with the natural chronology, the narrative leapt ahead to *open* with footage of Carleigh's agony, making her elimination a foregone conclusion. With this reordering, unexpected injury was framed as tragic certainty. More cruelly still, when the narrative rewound to Carleigh's early moments, full of hope and

determination, we watched her excitement at snagging multiple fish knowing what she herself did not—her optimism was mistaken, her confidence misplaced, her initial efforts and success for naught. With Carleigh’s definitive trouncing (and no women in the final five), what Season 5 ultimately “redeemed” was male prowess.³¹

Season 6, *Alone: The Arctic* was billed as the coldest, most dangerous yet. Underlining the nearness of death, the suspenseful opening montage concluded with a body carried out on a stretcher. Yet just as there was no suspense over Carleigh’s second loss, so was there little doubt about this season’s winner. Echoing *The Call of the Wild*, the show’s Arctic narrative turned on the drawn-out killing of a bull moose weighing close to 900 pounds. “Finally a big game kill in the series,” one viewer raved (Zaytoven). “Dude was just a beast. I knew he was going to win when this moment came,” said another (j2uazon83).³² The dude in question was contestant Jordan; dominant primordial beast, he proceeded to grapple with a wolverine and kill it with a hatchet. Along with a notable spike in carnage, the season still had its share of tearful men and tough women. Ray, the one Black contestant, was heartbroken after killing a friendly squirrel; Brady, a military survival instructor, went nuts after missing his daughter’s birthday. The runner-up was actually a strong, thoughtful woman in the bush-hippie mold; with less gore and more evident gratitude, she killed her own share of rabbits. All the same, once the great moose fell, Jordan’s win felt so overdetermined as to be anticlimactic. Certainly this man earned his prize money, but the show’s narrative capitalized on his success to effect a three-way win: for the contestant, for a particular version of reality, and for *Alone* as purveyor of that reality. Giving us Jordan as the realest man in a kill-or-be-killed world, *Alone* nailed the case for itself as the realest reality show.

8. Competing Realisms

I began by stressing that “realism” is neither stable nor monolithic. The category has, indeed, been continually contested both by those who oppose it and by those who would remake it.³³ My own discussion of debates internal to realism has identified them as crucially, often explicitly, informed by ideas and biases of gender. Across the range of realist forms, the predominance of settings, characters, and concerns coded as feminine is typically met by either dismissal or envy—the latter inspiring narratives that aim to reassert masculinity and masculinize realism. Illustrated by London’s Klondike stories as well as today’s survival shows, the compensatory alignment of realism with hypermasculinity was also evident in

Seasons 4 through 6 of *Alone*. At the same time, despite Jordan's win, there remained a number of other factors serving to keep divergent realisms in play: along with the evident lack of ideological clarity, I would point to the show's open-ended form; the complexity produced by its large cast of female and male contestants; the project of nesting in a fixed location; the psychological hardship and confessional mandate of its setup. If *Alone's* displays of real manliness coexisted with contestant behaviors at odds with gender norms, so did its moose-killing realism remain in tension with a realism of domestic labor and pride.

Readers may wonder, as I have, if the generic and historical distance traveled in this essay between Jane Austen and survivalist shows—between the realist novel and reality TV—is so great as to be unbridgeable, even when mediated by Jack London. As literary critic, how has my interest in gender and realism brought me to dwell at such length on six seasons of *Alone*? A preliminary answer lies in one of literary realism's foundational texts, which just happens to feature a man alone in the wild. As Ian Watt explained many years ago, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) deployed several formal strategies that laid the groundwork for subsequent realist novels by Samuel Richardson and Austen. These included Defoe's "total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir" (15) and the "economic individualism" (63) that his stranded protagonist exemplified. We may also cite *Crusoe's* dated journal entries, giving a blow-by-blow of daily struggles and supporting Watt's view that novels achieve a "closeness to the texture of daily experience" by employing a "minutely discriminated time-scale" (22).

Together, these formal elements chase the real by particularizing time, place, and personality. As evidence of resonances among realisms across disparate periods and genres, we see many of these elements operating to similar ends in *Alone*: self-documentation; isolated, economically motivated individuals; chronological subsections marked by time stamps; granular, personal accounts of physical and mental hardship. More telling for my purposes, what I also perceive in *Crusoe* are intimations of realism's gender wars, the skirmishes between and within works that this essay has endeavored to describe. As in *Alone*, Defoe's narrative of building up character and culture from scratch pulls in two directions: toward a realism of dominating others and a realism of making a home. Here too the isolated man provides lessons not only in autonomy but also in vulnerability and a yearning for sociality. Here too a story framed by male competition (slavery, mutiny, colonization, warring factions) has a "feminine" center celebrating the domestic arts. As I have argued elsewhere, one result of *Crusoe's* shipwrecked domesticity are

lengthy passages of “shelter writing”—a descriptive mode rendering household concerns with tender precision—arising from the need to piece it back together.³⁴ As an effect of precariousness, appreciation for homemaking skills and comforts is heightened, giving this pot-and-pan aspect of domestic realism an even stronger presence in Defoe than in Austen, where chairs and silverware are already accounted for.

Ultimately, the recurrent tension between realisms of dominating and dwelling refers to a much broader culture war, amplified at particular historical junctures, between those values elevated as “masculine” and those subordinated as “feminine.” An important but often overlooked feminist project in recent decades has been to recuperate the discredited feminine side of things—to claim for people of all genders such categories as domestic labor, emotional knowledge, and an ethics of care. My brief in this essay for the values and practices evinced by Callie’s chair and Fowler’s chopsticks is in keeping with that project. I recuperate them here not only as signs of feminine values (and the majority of female lives) but also, within a given narrative, as signs of the real. My reading of *Alone* asserts that a realism of the nondire is just as authentic—its sociable, homemaking women and men just as credible and worthy—as a realism of men in mortal danger.

“A realism of the nondire is just as authentic—its sociable, homemaking women and men just as credible and worthy—as a realism of men in mortal danger.”

In addition, my analysis of this show validates a figure omitted from both the realist paradigms described above: the *woman* in mortal danger. In this fight to survive, she is neither victimized by nor defending herself against men; instead, she is competing against them on their own brawny terms of physical strength, mental toughness, hands-on competence, fierce competitiveness, courage in the face of threats, and absolute self-sufficiency. Portraying such a woman plausibly triumphing over men speaks to a second feminist project: the demonstration of women’s equal abilities in traditionally masculine arenas.³⁵ It is one thing for female superheroes or feminist avengers to prevail in wishful genres defined by their distance from rather than “closeness to the texture of daily experience”; the inclusion of such characters usually suffices to emphasize that distance. It is quite another to see carpenter Carleigh from Alaska in a show based on truth claims defeat six men and lose to a seventh on a technicality (Figure 6).

Notwithstanding the qualified, managed realness of reality TV, the subsequent backlash is proof that Carleigh’s performance was *real enough* to threaten the gender status quo. Making her a model for girls, it also made *Alone*’s Season 3 the model for a new imagining of the real—one in which a female character might very well win at a man’s game.



Fig. 6. Carleigh on Day 36, stocking up on firewood. Alone, Season 3, Episode 5. Copyright 2017, History Channel.

Notes

1. From an oft-cited letter to Anna Austen, responding to that niece's efforts at novel writing: "You are now collecting your People delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life;—3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (Le Faye 287). Of course Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and other Victorian realists would build on Austen's formula, adding many more family circles (and hundreds of more pages). But their realist aesthetic would continue to prioritize domestic settings, routines, and relationships. As Eliot famously explained in *Adam Bede*, her aim was to offer "faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence" (175).

2. *The Real World* devolved over time, eventually becoming known (like many a docusoap) for volatile participants encouraged by producers to act out. While the show launched by promising that things would "start getting real" when politeness failed, the jacked-up emotions of later seasons actually struck audiences as compromising their credibility.

3. See George Moore's tirade against the owner of Mudie's circulating library, calling him "an old woman" who caters to female readers—this because Mudie declined to carry Moore's naturalist novel (*Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals*, Vizetelly & Co., 1885). See also Frank Norris belittling the domestic nature of realism in Howells: "It is the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner" ("A Plea for Romantic Fiction," 1901, *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, edited by Donald Pizer, U of Texas P, 1964, pp. 75–78). According to Norris, Naturalism actually borrows from Romance in probing the vast, terrible, unquiet, and violent—*that*, not the ordinary and domestic, is *life*. Though I'm here to defend the realism of walking/calling/dining, it's worth noting the imprecision of Norris's description, especially regarding Howells's later novels. By 1885, broken teacups are increasingly joined by violently broken bodies; for Jason Puskar in "William Dean Howells and the Insurance of the Real" (*American Literary History*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2006, pp. 29–

58), Howellsian realism lies in the pervasiveness of “accident” and recourse to insurance as a response to “the dangerous instability of urban modernity” (31).

4. Though preceded by Ray Mears’ *Extreme Survival* (1999–2002), Les Stroud’s *Survivorman* is the better-known prototype, followed closely by Bear Grylls’s *Man vs. Wild* (2006–2011). The last decade has seen an explosion of similar shows: *Dual Survival* (2010–2016), *Yukon Men* (2012–2016), and *Ultimate Survival Alaska* (2013–2015), among countless others. Note that the influential show *Survivor* does not belong on this list; though participants rough it in remote locations, their primary survival challenge is social rather than physical. On a related subgenre displaying male prowess in the context of “dirty jobs,” see Burton P. Buchanan, “Portrayals of Masculinity in the Discovery Channel’s *Deadliest Catch*” from *Reality Television: Oddities of Culture*, edited by Alison F. Slade, et al. (Lexington Books, 2014, pp. 1–20) and William C. Trapani and Laura L. Winn, “Manifest Masculinity: Frontier, Fraternity, and Family in Discovery Channel’s *Gold Rush*” from the same volume (pp. 183–200). See also Gareth Palmer, “The Wild Bunch: Men, Labor, and Reality Television” (*A Companion to Reality Television*, edited by Laurie Ouellett. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, pp. 247–63). On another set of tough guy shows, performing masculinity via “gladiatorial” combat, see Lindsay Steenberg, “‘Get More Action’ on Gladiatorial Television: Simulation and Masculinity on *Deadliest Warrior*” (*Reality Gendervision: Sexuality & Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*, edited by Brenda R. Weber, Duke UP, 2014, pp. 192–210).

5. The realness of reality television has been much debated. For some, its focus on entertainment over education, individuals over issues, has meant a falling off from the sober, socially-conscious documentary tradition that helped to spawn it; see John Corner’s influential essay “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions” (*Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, edited by Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, NYU P, 2004, pp. 44–64), in which he dubs reality television “postdocumentary” (53). Others note that reality TV fans are well aware of editing and other non-real elements but do not see them as detracting from the genre’s authenticity. Annette Hill’s audience study, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (2005), found that viewers, far from being passive and naive, actively debate what is and isn’t real. Other studies suggest that audiences recognize contrivance but value reality shows for their *emotional* realism. See Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (2005); Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (2012); and Katherine Sender, *The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences* (2012). I share Brenda Weber’s sense in “Trash Talk: Gender as an Analytic on Reality Television” (*Reality Gendervision: Sexuality & Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*, edited by Brenda R. Weber, Duke UP, 2014, pp. 1–34) that the interest of reality TV may lie precisely in its complex hybridity (4, 20). Weber’s piece introduces her collection on gender and reality TV; Biressi and Nunn, Skeggs and Wood, and Sender are likewise concerned with the shaping of reception by gender.

6. As Barthes explains in *The Rustle of Language*, “the reality effect” is produced by seemingly gratuitous, concrete details—notations with no meaning in and of themselves *except* as signifiers of “the real” (141–48). I will be speaking a bit more loosely of various “reality effects” that serve to declare *this is real*—and that do so in keeping with a distinct view of what constitutes reality.

7. Notable examples include Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006); and Elaine Auyoung, *When Fiction Feels Real: Representation and the Reading Mind* (2018).

8. As the preceding paragraphs should make clear, my concern in this essay is with realist *forms*, not with taking a realist position in the philosophical sense or with employing any of the various “postcritical” modes of reading loosely allied with this position. My project is, indeed, an exercise in feminist critique; at the same time, it is reparative in the sense of aspiring to effect positive change.

9. On American naturalism as reproducing class hierarchy, see June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985); on its discursive participation in market values, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (1987); on its management of social turmoil and class instability, see Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988). For accounts within literary studies describing the pervasiveness of postmodern skepticism while also offering to complicate or counter it, see Matthew Beaumont’s collection, *Adventures in Realism* (2007) and *Revisionist Approaches to American Realism and Naturalism*, edited by Jutta Ernst et al. (2018). For an overview of the debate within television studies—centered on Colin MacCabe’s charge that realist shooting and editing techniques posit a single perspective as the objectively true one—see the “Realism” chapter of John Fiske’s *Television Culture* (1987). On the “neoliberal turn” in discussions of reality TV, see Misha Kavka, “Reality TV: Its Contents and Discontents” (*Critical Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2018, pp. 5–18), who dates this shift to Laurie Ouellette and James Hay’s 2008 *Better Living through Reality TV* (8). I, too, object to reality TV’s domestication of surveillance (Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* [2004]), exploitative labor practices (Andrew Ross, “Reality Television and the Political Economy of Amateurism,” *A Companion to Reality Television*, edited by Laurie Ouellette, Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, pp. 29–39), and makeovers touting normative notions of home, body, parenting, etc. Overall, however, I agree with those cited in note 5 who challenge simple domination views, credit audiences with the ability to engage critically, and do not discount their pleasure in reality formats. My own emphasis will be on the shows themselves, which I see as far from ideologically seamless.

10. Supporting this view, Jed Esty’s excellent “Realism Wars” (*Novel*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2016, pp. 316–342) notes a growing aesthetic and political appreciation for contemporary realist writers from around the globe: “[W]orldly realisms are emerging as central to newly forming literary canons insofar as they appear to move us beyond the stale paradigms of the late twentieth century such as postmodernism or magical realism and to offer more direct access to problems of social and economic justice at the global scale” (323). I am grateful to Esty for inspiring a title that riffs on his.

11. Feminist challenges to the realist/naturalist canon are many and longstanding. See, for example, Elizabeth Ammons, “Expanding the Canon of American Realism” (1995). Asking “Whose reality? And: Whose America?” (*The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, edited by Donald Pizer, Cambridge UP, 2006, pp. 95–114), Ammons’s revisionary answer ranges from Pauline Hopkins and Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Sui Sin Far and Anzia Yezierska. Jennifer Fleissner’s *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004) reconceptualizes naturalism’s view of determinism by putting female characters as well as writers at the center. Donna M. Campbell’s *Bitter Tastes:*

Literary Naturalism and Early Cinema in American Women's Writing (2016) builds on her earlier work to throw open the naturalist canon and recognize features such as sentimentalism and disability at odds with the classic emphasis on “physical and evolutionary strength” (4).

12. See E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993) and Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (1995) on this shift in normative masculinity. See Eva Boesenberg's “Gold and Genocide: Rethinking Money and Gender in Naturalism through Settler Colonialism” (Jutta Ernst, et al., pp. 97–116) on defensive notions of real manhood around 1900 as they intersect with debates about “real money” (paper versus gold).

13. See also Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915* (1997) on naturalists made anxious and competitive by “the encoding of realism and local color as feminine” (6).

14. On the reinvention of this ideology over time and across genres, see Richard Lehan's “Literary Naturalism and Its Transformations: The Western, American Neorealism, Noir, and Postmodern Reformation”; from London to Hemingway, it underpins tales of rugged manhood produced “by a frontier-like experience” (*Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2012, p. 233). As Lehan acknowledges, there are actually two frontiers in the naturalist imagination: “[T]he wilderness frontier of Frederick Jackson Turner and the urban frontier of the second industrial revolution” (228). Though most of his novelistic examples are, like mine, engaged with the former, this is not to deny the many works with characters beset primarily by social rather than natural forces—Zolesque stories of deadening jobs, unraveling marriages, urban poverty, prostitution, addiction, and crime.

15. As Norris recognized (see note 3), if American naturalists set out to capture a grittier reality, their attraction to extremes (wild landscapes, terrifying adventures, extravagant personalities) might also be seen as pulling in the direction of romance. While my concern here is with gender strife within realism, clearly this category is often under external pressure from modernist as well as romantic conventions. On this triangular dynamic, especially at moments of heightened anti-realism, see Esty.

16. For examples of commentary on Darwinism in London, see Lawrence I. Berkove, “Jack London and Evolution: From Spencer to Huxley” (*American Literary Realism*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2004, pp. 243–55) and Michael Lundblad, “Epistemology of the Jungle: Progressive-Era Sexuality and the Nature of the Beast” (*American Literature*, vol. 81, no. 4, 2009, pp. 747–73), both of whom point to ideological inconsistencies in London's deployment of Darwinian views.

17. An early version of the story was published in *Youth's Companion* in 1902. Six years later, London rewrote it for *Century Magazine*. Among other notable differences, the 1902 character survives his ordeal.

18. Taking this position in “‘You Were Right, Old Hoss; You Were Right’: Jack London in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*” (*American Literary Realism*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2011, pp. 191–197), Caroline Hanssen suggests that Krakauer's popular book promulgates a misreading of London, overstating his approval of macho self-reliance. Other scholars have pointed to London's adventurous wife Charmian Kittredge along with some of his less familiar novels, in particular *The Valley of the Moon* (1913), as

evidence of a later stance critical of traditional gender roles and positive toward the era's New Woman. See Clarice Stasz, "Androgyny in the Novels of Jack London" (*Western American Literature*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1976, pp. 121–33) and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, "Jack London's New Woman in a New World: Saxon Brown Roberts' Journey into the Valley of the Moon" (*American Literary Realism, 1870–1910*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1992, pp. 40–54). *The Oxford Handbook of Jack London* (Oxford UP, 2017), edited by Jay Williams, includes several pieces likewise bearing on the complexity of London's sexual politics (for example, "Jack London, Marriage, and Divorce" by Clare Virginia Eby [pp. 56–72] and "The Valley of the Moon: Quest for Love, Land, and a Home" by Susan Nuernberg, Iris Jamahl Dunkle, and Alison Archer [pp. 373–386]); Williams's selections suggest the wide range of current work in London studies.

19. As Casey Ryan Kelly explains in *Apocalypse Man: The Death Drive and the Rhetoric of White Masculine Victimhood* (2020), the Trump era brought simmering male grievance to a violent boil, producing "a politics of death" out to extinguish all that "threatens the white male ego" (4). Its adherents include "preppers," who hone survival skills for reasons both nostalgic and apocalyptic. Generally speaking, I do not see the shows I discuss as vehicles for this noxious right-wing survivalism. At the same time, Kelly's formulation, linking male insecurity to invocations of death, is not wholly irrelevant to our discussion below.

20. Buchanan, Trapani and Winn, and Palmer concur in tying the rise of macho reality programming to a perceived crisis in traditional masculinity. If programs like *Deadliest Catch* are wistful celebrations of working-class men on the job, those like *Gold Rush* are openly nostalgic for life among men on the frontier. I agree with Matthew P. Ferrari's astute analysis in "'Born' Survivors and Their Trickster Cousins: Masculine Primitive Ideals and Manly (Re)Creation on Reality Television" on survival shows as similarly nostalgic; though he doesn't reference naturalism per se, Ferrari points to their reliance on the "masculine primitive" ideal emergent in the late nineteenth century (see note 12). As far as I know, Ferrari is the only previous scholar to offer an in-depth discussion of the survival subgenre.

21. Purveyors of factual television on a global scale, The Discovery Channel was launched in 1985 and The History Channel in 1995. From an initial focus on popular science and military history respectively, both have drifted in recent decades toward reality programming. In keeping with topics already geared toward male viewers, they specialize in series centered on working-class men facing down danger, whether in the wild or on the job. Popular shows on Discovery include *Survivorman*, *Deadliest Catch* (see Buchanan, Palmer), and *Gold Rush* (see Trapani and Winn); popular shows on History include *Alone*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Mountain Men* (see Ferrari).

22. For examples of this discursive logic in postwar US culture—masculinity, anti-consumerism, naturalness, and authenticity linked in opposition to femininity, shopping, mass culture, and phoniness—see Sally Robinson's *Authenticity Guaranteed: Masculinity and the Rhetoric of Anti-Consumerism in American Culture* (2018).

23. As Ferrari explains, *Man vs. Wild* has admitted to staging some of the situations Grylls encounters, a fact leading the majority of fans to judge *Survivorman* the more authentic show (220).

24. For more on the way such settler colonial fantasies elide indigenous people while installing white men as “native,” see Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (2001). On this dynamic in the British reality show *Win the Wilderness*, see Hannah Manshel’s “Settler Fantasies, Televised” (*Public Books*, 14 Aug. 2020, web). Though not exonerating *Alone*, Manshel singles out this show for at least acknowledging and consulting with the Quatsino First Nation for the three seasons shot on Vancouver Island, which is tribal land.

25. Nicholas Ruddick’s edition for Broadhead is rich in paratextual materials tying Buck’s travels to real places, calculating the “actual” routes and distances covered, clarifying geographical matters on which London is vague. Much depends, it would appear, not only on Buck’s successful navigation of the wilderness but also on the book’s accurate mapping of it.

26. These results accord with Hill’s findings about perceptions of the inverse—the extent to which “people act up for the camera.” By this measure of *inauthenticity*, respondents placed “reality gameshows” and “life experiment” at the top; nature docs were at the very bottom, lower even than the news (*Restyling* 124–25).

27. Crafting a show from footage compiled by amateurs recalls the BBC’s *Video Diaries* (1990–1996), which gave ordinary people camcorders to document their lives. As Daniel Marcus explains in “From Participatory Video to Reality Television” (*A Companion to Reality Television*, edited by Laurie Ouellette, Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, pp. 134–54), the roots of this show and subsequent reality TV can be found in 1960s and 70s experimental film and video, which introduced less mediated, more inclusive, DIY approaches to production.

28. Since drafting this article, three more seasons have appeared: Season 7 in 2020, Season 8 in 2021, and Season 9 in 2022. Though space doesn’t permit me to comment on them here, suffice it to say that the series’ version of reality continues to be divided between modes of domination and modes of dwelling.

29. Of course women are far less apt to kick butt than be ogled for having one. The coy blurring of Callie’s butt during her swim and sauna crawl reflects this norm. In Episode 7 of Season 3, however, we get an alternative view. Bitten by a highly venomous spider, herbalist Callie, instead of tapping out, calmly applies a plantain poultice. She goes on to film herself, pants around her ankles, removing a bandage to reveal a swollen stretch of upper thigh and lower butt. As the camera zooms in on two ugly sores, Callie opines, “It seems like it’s getting better.” In this memorable moment, a woman’s ass is thus redescribed as the object of her own diagnostic gaze—site of expertise as well as fortitude.

30. Though finishing second and third on Season 3, let the record show that both Carleigh and Megan racked up more days in the wild than anyone else in *Alone*’s previous two or subsequent three seasons.

31. Notable among those who beat their earlier record (eighth-place in Season 3) was second-place finisher Britt, one of only three African-Americans (all men) to appear in Seasons 1–6. Britt’s near-win in Season 5 offered a rebuke to what Carolyn Finney describes in *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (2014) as the “racialized perception that when it comes to concern for the great outdoors, participation in outdoor recreation

in our forests and parks, and the environmental movement in general, African Americans and other nondominant groups are on the outside looking in" (2). Needless to say, perceptions of the real are also skewed by race, class, settler, and other biases as well as by gender ones.

32. For these and other viewer comments on Season 6, Episode 5, "The Kill," see the History Channel's *YouTube* video "Alone: The Moose Kill (Season 6)" (web).

33. As Peter Brooks notes, "The history of the novel often appears to take the form of successive generations claiming their work is 'more real' than that of their predecessors" (218); the same might be said of successive realisms generally.

34. On the concept of "shelter writing" and its relation to *Robinson Crusoe*, see my *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins*, pp. 20–22, and 25–30 (Columbia UP, 2017).

35. An emphasis on asserting women's equality contrasts with my emphasis above on redeeming qualities traditionally devalued as feminine. In the (still useful) terminology of 1980s women's studies, it represents an "equality" rather than "difference" approach to unseating patriarchy. Ann Snitow's "The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary" (*Conflicts in Feminism*, edited by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, Routledge, 1990, pp. 9–43) offers an especially clarifying discussion of these distinct but continually criss-crossing strains within feminist thinking. Though my work here and elsewhere has tended toward the latter, both are indispensable.

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