

IT'S ALL RIGHT TO CRY (AND NEEDLEPOINT)

Rosey Grier, football hero and unlikely craft god

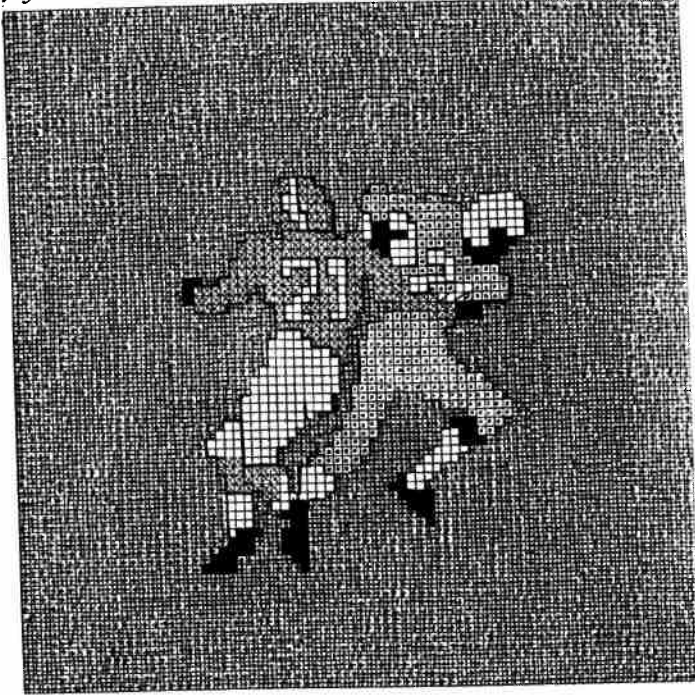


ALL NEEDLEPOINT FROM THE BOOK ROSEY GRIER'S NEEDLEPOINT FOR MEN, WALKER AND COMPANY, 1973.

Unbeknownst to me, the man responsible for delivering this upbeat musical sermon was not only adding a new dimension to his then-massive athletic stardom, he was also thwarting the norms of something that I would eventually learn to identify as masculinity: the often bizarre script of cultural practices and performances that people tend, mistakenly, to view as “natural.”

As someone who has successfully played the roles of football star, husband, father, singer, actor, tv guest star, Christian minister, community leader, political campaigner, and senatorial bodyguard (for Bobby and Ethel Kennedy), it's perhaps not surprising that Grier—all 6 feet 5 inches and 290 pounds of him—never saw being a man as a role that could be played in only one particular way. This was made abundantly clear in the early 1970s when, just a few years after retiring from the NFL, the former defensive tackle not only lent his voice to *Free to Be... You and Me*, but also became the nation's most famous male crafter with the publication of 1973's *Rosey Grier's Needlepoint for Men*. In the how-to primer, Grier enthuses over needlepoint's aesthetic appeal (“The somewhat traditional-looking duck floats on an outrageous geometric lake—a design that men can really dig”), profiles other male needleworkers, and includes a chapter on needlepoint creations “for the ladies in your life.”

Long before I ever knew of Roosevelt “Rosey” Grier’s illustrious careers as both a professional football player of the 1950s and ’60s and a one-man web of American popular culture, his was one of the many voices that sang to me through the crackles and pops of my first record player. I distinctly remember clutching the bright pink record sleeve of *Free to Be... You and Me* and hearing his deep, melodic voice reiterate one of my mom’s early life lessons: “It’s all right to cry.”



As a feminist and the son of a professional football player and coach, I've long been fascinated with these particular aspects of Grier's life and hoped for a chance to someday ask him about them. In May 2010, he was gracious enough to give me that opportunity.

I've seen your name popping up in a lot of interesting places on the Internet in recent years. There are a number of women, in particular, who have posted pictures from your 1970s needlepoint book (on blogs like Feministe and Craftivism), and made references to you as both a famous male crafter and an example of a man who defied gender stereotypes. I wanted to start by asking you about how you got interested in needlepoint and macramé—hobbies that aren't exactly considered "normal" when it comes to professional football players.

The way I got involved in needlepointing was, well, I was driving down the street in Beverly Hills and I saw these ladies going into this store. It was a needlepoint shop. I pulled my car over, took out my guitar, and went into the store. I saw what they were doing, but I didn't really know *what* they were doing. I saw these canvases and I started walking around and evaluating their work. The woman running the store came over to me and said, "You don't know anything about needlepointing, do you? Well, why don't you let us come show you some stitches so you'll be better off talking to these people about their work." I started going [for lessons], and they were teaching me the Continental stitch. I worked on that until I finally got to where I was interested in learning about different kinds of canvases, and the kind of artwork you need in order to needlepoint. So that's what I started doing, and I really had a great time.

One day the owners of the store asked me to come over and take a picture with one of their customers. The next thing I know, that picture is in the society section of the *New York Times*. And all my football friends

All my football friends started calling me, saying, "What in the world are you doing?! What about your picture in the paper?" And I said, "Yeah, what about it?"

started calling me, saying, "What in the world are you doing?!" And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" They said, "What about your picture in the paper?" And I said, "Yeah, what about it?" And they said, "Man... you're an athlete!" I said, "It ain't got nothing to do with me being an athlete, so what's the big deal?" They were taken aback, but it was just something that I was into doing.

Was it your idea to do the needlepoint book?

What happened was that after that picture came out in the paper, a lady called me and said that they'd like to do a book on me and needlepoint. And I said, "No way. I just do that for fun—I don't want to do a book about it!"

[But] in a year's time she got me to see that maybe, by doing the book, it would free a lot of people. Again, you find out that there are many men that were doing needlepoint but wouldn't tell anyone because they thought it would not be good publicity for them. One day, *Life* magazine approached me and said they were writing a story about all these men that were doing various arts and crafts and they'd like to take a small picture of me and put it in there. [It turned out to] be a centerfold in this big magazine! [Laughs.] It was okay though, because I was still the same person and it didn't change anything. I am who I am.

Did Marlo Thomas get in touch with you for *Free to Be...You and Me* because she saw the articles about your needlepointing?

I already knew Marlo; I [had done] a tv series with her dad. I was working at the Playboy Club in Atlanta, singing at the club, and I got a call from Marlo. She said she was putting out this album called *Marlo Thomas and Friends*, and had a song they wanted me to do. And I said okay.

One of my earliest memories is listening to that song.

Well, you talk about [phone] calls then! [People] said, "Man...men don't cry!" I said, "Man. I cry all the time." Sometimes from things I read in the paper, or just because something happens to someone and it is incredibly sad. I just cry. Men have feelings just like women, so why not be able to shed tears? Well, that became another area where people would call me and ask me to come to do needlepoint, or to talk to kids about having the right to cry.

Was it interesting for you to be speaking to an entirely different crowd?

I can't believe the different doors that it opened, [with people who]

CONTINUED ON PAGE 21 »

wanted me to share those aspects of my life that weren't about football or acting. I never expected that kind of reaction. I'm saying, "Well, wow! You mean to tell me that people are caught up in all this stuff?" I guess I've heard that people tell their children "Big boys don't cry," and stuff like that. But when you realize that kids are doing everything they can to not cry, [and] they've got this pent-up emotion. Why not let it out?"

What's the best memory that you associate with the *Free to Be... You and Me* record?

It kind of awed me. I was in awe of the fact that there was such a reaction to "It's All Right to Cry," and to the album for that matter, and how much that album meant to a lot of lives. I see people today who tell me



I consider myself a human being who loves human beings.

that they were raised on that album and that they raised *their* children on it. There were a lot of very interesting sayings in the record that made them feel better about themselves...taught them to appreciate themselves more. It was just amazing to me how much people are in need of encouragement and love.

The *Free to Be... You and Me* record was associated with *Ms. Magazine*. I'm curious about what you think of the term "feminism" and whether you consider yourself a feminist.

I consider myself a human being who loves human beings. I don't buy into all these names that people use to try and divide you up into little parts and little cells. I just believe in the human rights of all individuals and I think that when someone is treated wrong, it's just wrong. And that doesn't categorize me as anything other than someone who cares about the welfare of mankind.

Do you think that people's ideas about masculinity and being a "tough guy" have changed at all since the 1970s?

I don't think so.

How did you get the nickname "The Gentle Giant"? It's very fitting.

I don't know where it came from. It popped up one day...it came up somehow by some creative person, probably. But it wasn't me. I just think of myself as a person that loves everybody. **B**

Zack Furness is assistant professor of Cultural Studies at Columbia College Chicago, and the author of *One Less Car: Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility*.

But then *Flavor of Love* hits the scene and all of a sudden you have full casts of African-American women and Latina women. A lot of people wanted to support *Flavor of Love* because it was the only reality show that you saw black people on. But that visibility in an entirely contentious, misogynist, racist setting is not a blessing. *Flavor of Love* increased the quantity of people of color on reality tv, but it did so by reviving the minstrel show for modern-day media culture.

You've described reality TV as a stealth genre. I know you're not suggesting that we never watch TV again. But what are your suggestions for pushback or critical viewing?

On the website for the book (realitybitesbackbook.com) there are Reality tv Mad Libs that are designed to increase media literacy. There is also a "Deconstruction Guide" with questions that people should keep in mind when they're watching reality shows—or when they're engaging with any other kind of media. There are tips for parents about how you can talk with your children about media literacy and how to let the kids guide that discussion. There are a lot of how-tos that make it fun to explore media literacy, so it's not just medicine that you take.

***Reality Bites Back* doesn't demand that readers agree with you. The bottom line is that you're really asking people to think for themselves.**

I got a lot of quotes from key advertising directors who talk to each other in *Advertising Age* and at advertising conferences, who say very frankly that it's the job of advertisers to create insecurities that they can pretend to alleviate with their products and the idea of consumption [in general].

I'm really glad that's what you got from the book, because that's what I want people to take away. I want *Reality Bites Back* to be accessible for gender studies students, pop culture critics, reality fans. This is a book for everyone. **B**

Visit realitybitesbackbook.com for more.

Shira Tarrant is an associate professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at California State University, Long Beach. She is the author of *Men and Feminism* (Seal Press) and *Men Speak Out: Views on Gender, Sex and Power* (Routledge).