

# What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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**O**n December 17, 1989 a new family appeared on television. The special Christmas program featured parents and three children who had bright yellow skin, and they quickly became one of America's most popular families. Twenty years later "The Simpsons" has become the longest-running prime time show in TV history.

When the show began, FOX was a young network. It was trying to establish itself, so it took a chance on a show that criticized American society. The show was a sharp contrast to earlier situation comedies that showed an unrealistic, ideal American family. The first episode of "The Simpsons" came on January 14, 1990.

Clearly the risk paid off, since the show now appears in 45 languages for people in 120 countries.

Quickly the show drew praise and criticism. In 1990 it won an Emmy Award for "Outstanding Animated Program." At the same time some schools were banning T-shirts that showed Bart Simpson and said "Underachiever and Proud of It, Man." In 1992 President Bush said that the American family should be "less like the Simpsons."

The show's creator, Matt Groening, based the characters loosely on his own family. His father's name was Homer and his mother's was Marge. He also had two sisters named Lisa and Maggie. He did not use his brother's real name, but chose the name Bart because the letters can be rearranged to spell "brat." The show's producer has said that the characters represent "the normal American family in all its beauty and horror."

As the typical father, Homer Simpson is the head of the family. He has a job at the local nuclear power plant, but he lacks intelligence, skills and culture. Unlike early TV fathers, he never knows best how to do things. The most important things for him are simple pleasures like TV, beer and doughnuts. Although he has many faults, he loves his wife and kids and they love him.

In many ways Marge plays the role of the typical 1950s stay-at-home mother. She always wears a dress, a pearl necklace and a ridiculous beehive hairdo.



She cooks and cares for her family, and she is the family's heart and conscience. However, Marge is not just cheery and loving. Sometimes she gets frustrated and angry as she keeps her family together. Her activities outside the home make her a more modern woman than used to appear in family sitcoms.

The older two children also play complex roles. In earlier sitcoms the son usually caused problems and the daughter was sweet and simple.

Bart Simpson lacks respect for rules and people in authority. However, he expresses enough regrets and little-boy insecurities to make him lovable. Lisa represents a thoroughly modern character. She is a

smart and strong girl who plays the saxophone and fights for human rights. Unfortunately, this makes her a social outcast with insecurities of her own. Little Maggie just sucks on her pacifier all the time.

Many things have led to the show's success. One is that viewers can relate to the family because the members have weaknesses. Another is that advertisers always have supported the show because it attracts many teenaged viewers. Finally, viewers appreciate the humorous criticisms of American society, from couch potatoes to fast food, religion, politicians, health care and TV violence.

"The Simpsons" has received many awards and honors. In 1999 *Time Magazine* named it the best television series of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2000 the Simpson family received a star in the sidewalk on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Homer's cry "D'oh!" entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2001, and in 2009 the U.S. Postal Service issued stamps that showed the family members. The show has won a total of 25 Emmy Awards for television excellence.

Soon "The Simpsons" will show its 500<sup>th</sup> episode. Through the years adults and young people have enjoyed the show, even if for different reasons. Although every episode brings new problems, the family sticks together. In the end the animated family with yellow faces may present a more realistic view of families than earlier shows ever did.

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When the show began, FOX was a young network. It took a chance on a show that criticized American society. The show was different from earlier situation comedies that showed an ideal American family. The first episode of "The Simpsons" came in January 1990. Clearly the risk paid off, since the show now appears in 45 languages for people in 120 countries.

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The show's creator based the characters on his own family. His father's name was Homer and his mother's was Marge. He also had two sisters named Lisa and Maggie. He did not use his brother's real name, but chose the name Bart because those four letters also spell "brat."

As the typical father, Homer Simpson is the head of the family. He has a job, but he lacks intelligence and culture. Unlike early TV fathers, he never knows best how to do things. The most important things for him are TV, beer and doughnuts. Although he has many faults, he loves his wife and kids and they love him.

In many ways Marge plays the role of the typical 1950s stay-at-home mother. She always



## The Simpsons Make History

wears a dress, pearls and a beehive hairdo. She cooks and cares for her family, and she is the family's heart and conscience. However, Marge is not just cheery and loving. Sometimes she gets frustrated as she keeps her family together. Unlike women in old sitcoms, she has activities outside the home.

Bart and Lisa also play roles different from those in earlier sitcoms. The son usually caused problems and the daughter was sweet and simple. Bart lacks respect for rules and adults. However, he expresses enough little-boy insecurities to make him lovable.

Lisa is a modern character. She is smart, plays the saxophone and fights for human rights. Unfortunately, this makes it hard for her to have friends.

Many things have led to the show's success. One is that viewers can relate to people who have weaknesses. Another is that advertisers always have supported the show because it attracts many teenaged viewers. Finally, viewers enjoy the funny criticisms of American society, from fast food to religion and TV violence.

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Soon "The Simpsons" will show its 500<sup>th</sup> episode. Through the years adults and young people have enjoyed the show, even if for different reasons. Although every episode brings new problems, the family sticks together. In the end the animated family with yellow faces may present a more realistic view of families than earlier shows ever did.

# Background Information

“The Simpsons” was the first FOX program to reach the Top 10 in ratings. It was the first series with cartoon characters to be on during prime time since “The Flintstones” in the early 1960s. TV historians credit the show as being the program that established FOX as a network.

Before “The Simpsons” appeared in its Christmas special in 1989, the family had been appearing in shorts since April 1987 on a FOX variety program called “The Tracey Ullman Show.”

Each episode contains about 24,000 individual drawings and takes at least six months to produce. The movie that appeared in 2008 took four years to make.

Springfield is a common name for towns in the U.S. Twenty-eight states have a Springfield, and Wisconsin has five. It is the name of the capital of Illinois, and also the name of the town in the old radio and television series “Father Knows Best.”

In 1994 *Ms. Magazine* recognized Lisa Simpson as a feminist role model. The magazine called her “animated and liberated.”

The series has had many celebrities supply voices, most often for their own characters in an episode. Michael Jackson appeared on the show, as did the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. However, no current or former U. S. president ever has accepted an invitation.

“Gunsmoke” used to be the longest-running series in prime time.

A global positioning system has contracted to use Homer Simpson’s voice as one of the voices that gives directions. Homer says things like “Take the third right. We might find an ice cream truck!” Upon arrival at the destination he cries, “Whoo-hoo! You have reached your destination, and you can hold your head up high because you are a genius!”

In 1999 a U.S. Congressman from Pennsylvania, Joseph Pitts, blamed Homer Simpson for contributing to the decline of fatherhood in America.

In one episode Homer goes on a hunger strike to prevent the local baseball team, the Springfield Isotopes, from moving to Albuquerque. When the real minor league team in Albuquerque, NM, changed its name in 2002, two-thirds of the 120,000 fans voted to change it to the “Isotopes.”

## Topics for Discussion and Writing

### Pre-reading:

- Tell why you think the “The Simpsons” has been a popular TV series.

### Comprehension:

- Describe the ideal American family that many older series showed.

### Beyond the Text:

- Compare how the Simpsons interact as a family to some other family you see on TV.
- What advantage is there that the characters have stayed the same age?
- Rank the Simpsons (excluding Maggie) in the order that you like them and explain your reasons for your first and last choices.

## Vocabulary (\*advanced article only)

*Article-specific:* prime time; network; situation comedy; animated; brat; beehive; insecurities; outcast\*

*High-use:* to feature\*; to establish\*; contrast\*; episode; criticism; to ban; to base on; to lack; culture; complex\*; authority\*; to issue\*

## Sources

*The Guardian* (London) October 24, 2009

*Plain Dealer* (Cleveland) October 18, 2009

*Calgary Herald* October 8, 2009

*Boston Herald* June 17, 2009

Museum of Broadcast Communications [www.museum.tv](http://www.museum.tv)

## CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

### English-Language Arts

*Reading* 1.0 Vocabulary Development  
2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

*Writing* 1.0 Writing Strategies  
2.0 Writing Applications

### ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension  
Writing Strategies and Applications  
Listening and Speaking

### History-Social Science

11.5; 11.8; 11.11