PURPLE, THE COLOR THAT DID NOT EXIST

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Introduction: A Colour With No Alibi

Purple has always been a suspicious colour. It is the colour of emperors and bishops, of bruises and twilight, of grapes left too long in the sun. It is also, strictly speaking, a colour that nature hands out only sparingly. There is no purple pigment in the ordinary sense in most of the living world: what we call purple in flowers and feathers and sunsets is usually a trick of structure, of light bent and scattered, or of chemistry so expensive that for most of human history only kings could afford it. Tyrian purple, squeezed drop by drop from the glands of thousands of sea snails, cost more than gold.[1] To wear it was to announce that you did not live by the same rules as everyone else.

That is a useful thing to remember when we meet the three great purple figures of American popular culture. None of them is purple by accident. Grimace, the great soft blob of McDonald's; Barney, the great soft dinosaur of children's television; and the Flying Purple People Eater, the one-eyed, one-horned monster of Sheb Wooley's 1958 novelty song — each of them is purple for a reason, and each of them uses that purple differently. Put side by side, they form a small, strange taxonomy: the purple of appetite, the purple of affection, and the purple of appetite of a different and far more alarming kind. One eats milkshakes. One eats nothing at all, unless you count the viewer's attention. One eats purple people.

This essay compares the three. It asks where each came from, what kind of character each is, and what cultural work each one does. The comparison is playful, because the subjects demand it — you cannot write solemnly about a creature whose defining feature is that he has one horn and flies — but it is also serious, because these three figures, taken together, tell us something real about how post-war America imagined friendliness, childhood, and the monstrous. Purple, the colour that did not quite exist, turned out to be the perfect colour for beings that did not quite exist either.

1. Three Births: A Mascot, A Teacher, A Monster

The three figures arrive from three entirely different worlds, and those worlds explain almost everything about them.

Grimace was born in advertising. He first appeared in 1971, in the McDonaldland universe that McDonald's built around Ronald McDonald, as "Evil Grimace": a four-armed, milkshake-stealing villain[2] whose whole personality could be summed up in a single gag — he wanted your shake, and he had twice as many arms as you did with which to take it. Within a year the company softened him. The extra arms went, the evil went[3], and what remained was a large, pear-shaped, purple, essentially harmless creature: slow, sweet, a little dim, and devoted to his friends. The transformation is worth pausing over, because it is the whole history of the corporate mascot in miniature. A villain is interesting but frightening; a friend sells hamburgers. Grimace was redesigned not to be more truthful but to be more huggable, and the huggability worked. For half a century he has hovered at the edge of the McDonald's cast — never the star, always the gentle giant — until, in the summer of 2023, the Grimace Shake turned him, improbably, into a viral folk hero[4] for a generation that had grown up with him as background furniture. The shake was purple, the memes were purple, and a mascot invented to move product in 1971 found himself, fifty-two years later, the subject of mock-horror videos in which drinking his shake turned you into something else entirely. The audience had taken the character back and made him strange again.

Barney was born in a living room, or something close to it. Sheryl Leach, a former teacher from Texas, created the character in 1988 for a home-video series, *Barney & the Backyard Gang*, after noticing that her young son was captivated by dinosaurs but frightened by the ones on television.[5] She wanted a dinosaur a child could love without flinching. Barney — a purple *Tyrannosaurus rex*, two hundred million years old, six feet to six-foot-four tall, with a

green belly[7] and an enormous, unguarded smile — arrived on PBS in 1992 in *Barney & Friends*, and for the next eighteen years[6] he was one of the most recognisable figures in American childhood. His origin is the opposite of Grimace's: where Grimace was a villain sanded down into a friend for commercial reasons, Barney was designed as a friend from the first sketch. There was no evil Barney to rehabilitate. The purple was chosen, by all accounts, precisely because it was soft and non-threatening — a colour no real dinosaur had ever worn, and therefore a colour that announced, before a word was spoken, that this dinosaur would not eat you. He would, instead, sing to you.

The Flying Purple People Eater was born in a recording studio, in a joke. Sheb Wooley, a country singer and character actor who had already had a career as a western sidekick and is believed to have voiced the Wilhelm scream[10], recorded the song in 1958, and it shot to number one on the Billboard chart that summer.[9] The song is a first-person encounter: the narrator meets a strange creature who has come down from outer space, and the creature explains itself in the song's famous refrain. It is one-eyed and one-horned, it flies, and it eats purple people — a dietary preference that is, the song is careful to clarify, purely a matter of taste and not of prejudice, since it would presumably eat people of any colour if they happened to be purple. The creature's ambition is not conquest but show business: it wants to join a rock-and-roll band. The narrator, with the brisk pragmatism of the 1950s novelty song, helps it along. The People Eater is not a mascot and not a teacher. It is a punchline that learned to walk, a monster invented for three minutes of radio and then, by the mysterious alchemy of a hit record, lodged permanently in the culture. It has no franchise, no toy line, no curriculum. It has a song, and the song is enough.

Three births, then: the boardroom, the nursery, and the novelty record. Already the comparison is doing work. Grimace exists to make you feel warmly toward a restaurant chain. Barney exists to make you feel safe while you learn. The People Eater exists to make you laugh at the idea of being eaten. All three are purple, and the purple is doing different work in each case.

2. What Purple Does: Royalty, Unreality, Appetite

Before we look at the characters themselves, it is worth asking what purple is doing for them — because purple is never a neutral choice. If you want a character to feel ordinary, you paint him brown or grey. If you want him to feel natural, you paint him green. Purple says: this being does not belong to the ordinary world.

For Grimace, purple is the colour of appetite made visible and harmless. There is a long folk association between purple and food — grapes, berries, aubergines, the purple of a good wine — and Grimace's original crime, after all, was stealing milkshakes. He is the colour of the thing he wants. But the purple also distances him from any real animal: there is no purple mammal to confuse him with, no purple creature in the wild whose habits we might know. He is a blob, and his colour tells us that the blob is a friendly abstraction, not a beast. When McDonald's later made the Grimace Shake purple, the joke completed itself: drink the colour, become the creature, join the purple.

For Barney, purple performs almost the opposite function. It is the colour of unreality deployed in the service of safety. A real *Tyrannosaurus rex* is a killing machine; a purple one is a cuddly toy that happens to be six feet to six-foot-four tall. The colour is a disclaimer, written across the whole body: *do not be afraid, this is pretend*. It is also, and not incidentally, a colour with no strong gender coding in the toy aisle of the early 1990s, when pink was for girls and blue was for boys and a purple dinosaur could belong to every child at once. Barney's green belly softens the purple further, grounding it in something leafy and ordinary, but the purple is the point. He is a dinosaur who has been laundered of danger by colour alone.

For the People Eater, purple is the colour of the alien made legible. The song needs you to picture the creature instantly, on first hearing, with no image at all — only a voice and a band. "Flying purple people eater" does in four words what a costume department would need a week to do. The purple tells you that this is not a monster from the

woods or the deep, the familiar places of horror, but a monster from elsewhere: from space, from the far side of the colour wheel, from a category your brain does not have a drawer for. It is also, crucially, funny. Purple monsters are hard to take entirely seriously. A black monster is a threat; a green monster is a swamp; a purple monster is a joke that might eat you, and the uncertainty is the whole gag. Wooley's creature knows this, in the way that only a novelty-song monster can: it is polite, it explains itself, it wants a gig. The purple makes the politeness plausible.

In all three cases, then, purple is a technology of distance. It marks the creature as not-of-this-world, and then each franchise decides what to do with the distance. McDonald's closes it with friendship. Barney closes it with love. Wooley leaves it open, and lets the monster hover there, friendly and hungry at once.

3. Grimace: The Gentle Appetite

Let us stay a while with Grimace, because he is the strangest of the three in the most interesting way: he is a character whose entire history is a process of being made less interesting, and who became interesting again only when the audience refused to accept the simplification.

The original Evil Grimace, with his four arms, was a proper monster of appetite. He stole shakes because he loved shakes, and his extra arms were a visual joke about greed — more hands, more taking. The 1972 redesign removed the arms and the evil together, and what was left was a creature defined by a single trait: he loves milkshakes, and he loves his friends, and he is not very bright about either. His voice, in the commercials, is slow and warm. His body is a pear, or a gumdrop, or a great purple thumb. He does not scheme; he lumbers. He is the friend who shows up, eats too much, and is forgiven because his appetite is so obviously without malice.

That is a very particular kind of character: appetite without aggression. Grimace wants, but his wanting never harms anyone. He is, in this sense, the ideal corporate mascot for a fast-food chain, because he embodies the customer's desire while absolving it. You want the shake; Grimace wants the shake; wanting the shake is therefore a sweet and innocent thing, not a greedy one. The purple helps here, too — it is a colour of indulgence, of dessert, of the treat rather than the meal — and Grimace's whole body is the shape of indulgence: round, soft, without edges.

What the Grimace Shake summer of 2023 revealed is that audiences had never entirely believed the softening. The viral videos, in which a cheerful young person wishes Grimace a happy birthday, drinks the purple shake, and is then found sprawled in a purple puddle while the camera shakes, were a joke about exactly the thing the 1972 redesign had tried to remove: the idea that appetite has consequences. The joke worked because Grimace had been, in the cultural memory, both the gentle friend and, somewhere underneath, the four-armed thief. The audience restored the menace as play, and McDonald's, to its credit, let them. The purple that had meant "harmless treat" suddenly meant "what have you done?" — and the character was richer for it. Grimace, it turned out, had a shadow, and the shadow was purple too.

There is a second lesson in the Grimace Shake summer, and it concerns who owns a character once the character has lived long enough to belong to more than one generation. McDonald's invented Grimace, paid for him, and controlled his image for fifty years. But the people who made the shake videos were not working for McDonald's; they were working with a figure they had grown up with, and they were using him to say something the company had never said — that a mascot can be uncanny, that a birthday can be a horror film, that the purple shake might be doing something to you. The company could have objected. It did not. It understood, or at least it acted as if it understood, that a mascot who is only ever safe becomes invisible, and that a mascot who is allowed to be strange, even in a joke, becomes interesting again. The shake sold out in many places, which is the kind of evidence a corporation understands, but the more durable evidence is that Grimace, after decades as a background figure, was suddenly being talked about as a character with an inner life — a character who might have a motive, a secret, a past.

That is a strange fate for a blob invented to sell milkshakes, and it is worth comparing with the fates of the other two figures. Barney never got a second act of this kind, because his audience outgrows him too completely: the children who loved him become the teenagers who mock him, and the mockery, unlike the Grimace Shake videos, was never affectionate enough to be a revival. It was a rejection, and the character had no shadow to restore, because he had never had one. The People Eater, by contrast, never needed a second act, because he never had a first act in the franchise sense: he was a joke from the beginning, and jokes do not need revivals, only retellings. Grimace alone among the three lived long enough, and quietly enough, to be rediscovered — to be taken up by a new generation and made strange again, in purple, on camera, with a shake in hand.

4. Barney: The Teacher Who Never Leaves

If Grimace is appetite without aggression, Barney is affection without condition — and that, in its own way, is just as strange a character to build a franchise around.

Barney's defining features are all negations. He is a *Tyrannosaurus rex* who does not hunt. He is enormous and never frightening. He is ancient — two hundred million years old, by the show's own account — and yet he speaks in the simple, present-tense sentences of a preschool teacher. He has no enemies, no real conflicts, and no character arc in the ordinary sense, because a character who changed would be a character who had stopped being reliably safe. His job, episode after episode, is to appear, usually by the children's imagination, to sing a song about sharing or counting or brushing your teeth, to hug, and to disappear again with the promise that he loves you and you love him. The show's most famous song, "I Love You," set to the tune of "This Old Man,"[8] is a closed loop of reassurance: you love me, I love you, we are a happy family, with a great big hug and a kiss from me to you.

It is easy — and it was, for a generation of older siblings and tired parents, almost compulsory — to mock this. Barney became, in the 1990s, the target of an extraordinary amount of adult hostility: anti-Barney jokes, parodies, playground chants about what should happen to him. The hostility is worth taking seriously, because it tells us what Barney's cultural role actually was. He was not merely a children's character; he was a test of the boundary between the world of small children, in which love is unconditional and feelings are facts, and the world of everyone else, in which love is earned and irony is a survival skill. Adults who hated Barney were not really objecting to a purple dinosaur. They were objecting to being asked, by a children's show, to live for half an hour in a world without irony — a world in which a giant reptile could look at you and mean it when he said he loved you.

That is why Barney's purple matters so much. It is the colour of a world that is not quite real, and the show needs you to know that, because its emotional claims are so absolute. A real dinosaur could not love you. A purple dinosaur can, because he lives in the purple place, the place of imagination, where the rules are different. The show's great innovation was to treat that place as real enough to learn in: counting is counting, sharing is sharing, whether the teacher is purple or not. Barney's defenders — and there were many, mostly parents of the children who loved him — understood this instinctively. The purple was not a distraction from the lesson. It was the condition that made the lesson possible.

Barney differs from Grimace, then, not only in origin but in the direction of his energy. Grimace's energy flows inward: he wants the shake, he wants to be near his friends, he wants to be fed. Barney's energy flows outward: he wants nothing for himself, and everything he does is for the child watching. Grimace is a character you feed. Barney is a character who feeds you — not with food but with attention, song, and the repeated assurance that you are loved. It is a more demanding role, and a more exhausting one to sustain for eighteen years, which may be why Barney, unlike Grimace, never got a second act as a meme. You can make a joke about a milkshake. It is harder to make a joke about a hug without sounding like the kind of adult Barney was invented to protect children from.

5. The Flying Purple People Eater: The Monster Who Wants a Gig

And then there is the People Eater — the one who actually eats people, and who is, by any reasonable measure, the most honest of the three.

The song is a small masterpiece of comic negotiation. The narrator is walking through the woods — already a fairy-tale opening — when he sees the creature coming down, and the creature, instead of attacking, introduces itself. It has one eye and one horn, it flies, and it eats purple people. The narrator's first question, the question any of us would ask, is whether it intends to eat him. The creature's answer is a piece of deadpan brilliance: it only eats purple people, and the narrator is not purple, so he is safe — for now, and on a technicality. The threat is real but conditional, and the conditionality is the joke. The creature then states its real desire, which has nothing to do with eating: it wants to play rock and roll. It has heard the music on the radio, presumably, and it has come all this way to join a band. The narrator, seizing the opportunity with the entrepreneurial spirit of the 1950s, agrees to help, and the song ends with the creature on its way to stardom, its horn presumably providing the high notes.

What kind of character is this? It is, first, a monster who talks. That alone separates it from most monsters, who roar. It is, second, a monster with a specific and limited appetite: not people in general, but purple people in particular. The specificity is important, because it turns eating from a horror into a hobby — a preference, like a taste for a particular kind of cheese. And it is, third, a monster with an ambition that has nothing to do with its monstrosity. It does not want to conquer Earth; it wants a record contract. In this it is the most modern of the three figures, and the most American: an immigrant, of sorts, arriving from elsewhere with a strange appearance and a stranger diet, and asking not for tolerance but for a job in show business.

Compare that with Grimace and Barney. Grimace's appetite is for milkshakes, and his appetite is the joke that had to be softened. Barney's appetite is for nothing at all — he is appetite-free, which is part of his safety. The People Eater's appetite is for people, and the song refuses to soften it. It does not pretend the creature is a vegetarian. It does not give the creature a sad backstory. It simply adds, alongside the appetite, a second desire — for music, for belonging, for a stage — and lets the two desires sit side by side, unreconciled. The creature is both hungry and charming. The song's genius is that it never asks you to choose between those two facts.

The People Eater also differs from the other two in its relationship to time. Grimace and Barney are built to last: they are franchises, designed for repetition, for the next commercial and the next episode, for the child who will watch the same tape a hundred times. The People Eater is built for three minutes. It arrives, it explains itself, it leaves for a gig. It has no lore, no backstory, no expanded universe — or rather, it has exactly as much lore as a single song can carry, and that turns out to be enough for nearly seventy years of cultural memory. Children who have never heard Sheb Wooley know the phrase "one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people eater" as a piece of language, a tongue-twister, a Halloween costume. The song is a self-contained world, and the creature is free because it does not have to sustain a brand.

That freedom shows up in the song's details, which are worth listening to closely, because they are doing more work than a novelty record is supposed to do. The creature is not merely strange; it is strange in a particular, countable way — one eye, one horn — as if it had been assembled from a list of monster parts by someone who could only afford two. The counting is part of the joke: a monster with two eyes and two horns would be symmetrical, and symmetry is reassuring; a monster with one of each is lopsided, and lopsidedness is funny, because it suggests a creature that was made in a hurry, or by a committee, or by a songwriter who knew that the oddness itself was the point. The flying, too, is doing work: it is the creature's way of arriving without an invitation, of appearing in the woods as if from nowhere, and it is also, in 1958, the year after Sputnik,[11] a very current anxiety dressed up as a gag. Things were falling out of the sky that year, and not all of them were friendly. Wooley's creature takes that anxiety and gives it a horn and a melody, which is one of the oldest jobs of the novelty song: to take a fear and make it singable.

And then there is the matter of the purple people themselves, who are the song's great unexamined premise. Who are they? The song never says. They are not a tribe, not a nation, not a species with a history. They are simply the people who happen to be purple, and therefore the people the creature happens to eat. The vagueness is deliberate, and it is what lets the song be funny rather than cruel: because the purple people are never described, never named, never given a voice, the eating remains abstract, a dietary preference rather than a crime. Compare that with Grimace, whose victims are milkshakes — also never described, also abstract — and with Barney, who has no victims at all. All three figures, in their different ways, depend on an audience willing to accept a premise without asking for the details. Grimace steals shakes; we do not ask whose shakes they were. Barney loves you; we do not ask how a dinosaur learned to love. The People Eater eats purple people; we do not ask who they are, or whether they mind. The purple, in each case, is what makes the not-asking possible. It is the colour of the premise we agree to accept, so that the story can begin.

6. Three Kinds of Hunger

If we put the three side by side, the comparison sharpens into a single question: what does each one hunger for?

Grimace hungers for milkshakes, and his hunger is the hunger of the consumer: simple, repetitive, and satisfied by purchase. He is the only one of the three whose desire can be met by the institution that created him. You can buy the shake. You can drink the purple. The loop is closed, and the closure is the business model.

Barney hungers for nothing, and his hungerlessness is the hunger of the teacher: the adult who has put aside his own needs in order to attend to the child's. He is the only one of the three whose desire is entirely for someone else. You cannot buy what Barney offers, though you can buy the tape. The loop is open, and the openness is the point: the love is not a transaction, it is a gift, repeated every episode.

The People Eater hungers for purple people, and his hunger is the hunger of the monster: specific, unapologetic, and impossible to satisfy through ordinary commerce. He is the only one of the three whose desire is genuinely dangerous. You cannot buy your way out of it, except by not being purple. And yet he also hungers for music, for a band, for an audience — a hunger that is entirely human, and that the song treats as the more important of the two. The loop is left open in a different way: we never find out whether he gets the gig, or whether he eats anyone on the way there.

Three hungers, three economies. The consumer's hunger, the teacher's selflessness, and the monster's double appetite — for flesh and for fame. It is a tidy scheme, and like all tidy schemes it is a little too neat to be the whole truth, but it captures something real about why these three figures feel like a set. They are three answers to the same question: what do you do with a large purple being? You feed it, you learn from it, or you listen to it sing.

It is worth lingering on the differences inside that tidy scheme, because each hunger also carries a different relationship to satisfaction. Grimace's hunger is designed to be satisfied and then to return, on a schedule set by the restaurant: the shake is finished, the craving comes back, the customer returns. It is a hunger that can be managed, portioned, and sold by the cup, which is why it fits so neatly inside a business. There is no tragedy in Grimace's appetite, because there is always another shake, another birthday, another summer promotion. His hunger is a loop, and the loop is the point.

Barney's hungerlessness is harder to sustain, and the show knows it. A character who wants nothing is a character who cannot be surprised, and a character who cannot be surprised is a character who risks becoming a slogan rather than a person. The show solves this, episode after episode, by giving Barney small, borrowed hungers: he wants the children to learn the song, he wants the garden to grow, he wants the birthday to go well. These are not his hungers, exactly — they are the children's hungers, reflected back through him — but they give him something to do besides

radiate love. He becomes, in effect, a mirror: the children bring their wants to him, and he returns them in the form of a song. The mirror is purple, and the purple is what lets a child believe that the reflection is a friend rather than a trick.

The People Eater's hunger is the only one of the three that cannot be satisfied by the world the song gives him. He can get the gig — the song leaves that open — but he cannot stop being a creature who eats purple people, and the song never pretends otherwise. That is what makes him, paradoxically, the most adult figure of the three. Grimace's hunger is solved by commerce. Barney's hunger is solved by love. The People Eater's hunger is not solved at all; it is managed, negotiated, and carried alongside a second hunger that points in the opposite direction. He wants to eat and he wants to sing, and the song's final joke is that the second hunger may be the stronger one — not because it cancels the first, but because it gives the creature somewhere else to put his energy. He is a monster who has found a hobby, and the hobby may yet save him, or at least save the purple people in his path.

7. Three Kinds of Friend

The hunger question leads naturally to another: what kind of friend is each one? Because all three, in their different ways, present themselves as friendly — even the People Eater, who is friendly in the specific sense that he has not eaten you yet.

Grimace is the friend who is always there. He is not the leader of the group — that is Ronald — and he is not the clever one. He is the loyal one, the one who shows up, the one whose presence is itself the reassurance. His friendship is a matter of proximity: he is near, he is large, he is soft, and he will not leave. In the McDonaldland stories he is often the one who needs rescuing or the one who misunderstands the plan, and the other characters rescue and explain with the patience of people who love someone who is not very bright. That is a particular and very durable model of friendship: the gentle giant, the big friend, the one you protect because he cannot quite protect himself.

Barney is the friend who is always leaving. He appears when the children imagine him, and he disappears when the lesson is over, with a wave and a promise to return. His friendship is a matter of presence and absence in equal measure: he is there when you need him, and he is gone when you do not, and the going is part of the teaching — you can carry the song with you, you can remember the hug, you do not need the dinosaur in the room to know that you are loved. This is a more sophisticated model of friendship than Grimace's, and a more melancholy one. It is the friendship of the teacher, the grandparent, the imaginary friend: someone whose job is to make himself unnecessary.

The People Eater is the friend you make on the road. He is a stranger who introduces himself, states his business, and asks for help, and the narrator helps him — not because the creature is safe, but because the creature is interesting, and because helping a strange musician get a gig is the kind of thing you do in a song. His friendship is a matter of negotiation: I will not eat you, you will help me find a band, and we will both get something out of the encounter. It is the most adult of the three friendships, and the most conditional. It is also the most honest about the fact that friendship across difference — across species, across worlds, across diets — is a bargain, not a given.

Three friendships, then: the loyal companion, the teacher who leaves, and the stranger with a deal. Each one is purple, and each one's purple is a different shade of the same promise: I am not like you, but I am with you, for now.

8. The Audience: Who Is Each One For?

A character is also a relationship with an audience, and here the three diverge most sharply of all.

Grimace is for everyone, and therefore for no one in particular. He is a mascot, and mascots are designed to be recognised by the widest possible public: children who love the cartoon, parents who buy the meal, adults who remember the commercials from their own childhoods. His audience is the general public, and his function is to make that public feel a mild, undifferentiated warmth toward a brand. The Grimace Shake summer showed what happens when that broad audience decides to take the character seriously as a piece of culture rather than as a piece of advertising: they made him strange, and funny, and a little frightening, and the brand, for once, had to follow the audience rather than lead it.

Barney is for small children, and only for small children, and that narrowness is both his strength and his vulnerability. His audience is the child between two and five, and everyone else is, at best, a chaperone. The show's critics were almost all adults, and the show's defenders were almost all parents speaking on behalf of children who could not defend it themselves. That asymmetry — the people who loved Barney could not write reviews, and the people who wrote reviews did not love Barney — shaped his cultural reputation for decades. He was beloved and mocked in the same breath, often by the same household, and the mockery never quite touched the love, because the love belonged to children who did not know they were supposed to be embarrassed.

The People Eater is for the person who hears the song once and cannot forget it. His audience is not a demographic but a moment: the moment of first hearing, when the phrase "flying purple people eater" lands in the ear and refuses to leave. The song was a hit with adults and children alike in 1958, and it has been a hit with adults and children alike ever since, because its humour does not depend on age. A child hears a funny monster. An adult hears a joke about show business, about immigration, about the way America absorbs the strange and turns it into entertainment. The song works at both levels at once, and that is why it has outlasted so many other novelty records. It is not for children or for adults. It is for anyone who has ever met something strange and thought, first, *will it eat me?* and second, *can it sing?*

There is a second audience question, subtler than the first, and it concerns what each figure asks its audience to do after the encounter is over. Grimace asks you to return — to the restaurant, to the drive-through, to the next promotion. His audience is a customer, and the customer's job is to come back. The warmth he generates is meant to be converted, gently and without fuss, into a repeat visit. That is not a criticism; it is the job description of a mascot, and Grimace has done the job for half a century, which is longer than most pop stars manage.

Barney asks you to grow up and remember. His audience is a child who will, inevitably, outgrow him, and the show is built around that outgrowing: the songs are for learning, the lessons are for carrying away, and the dinosaur himself is designed to be left behind. The parents who defended Barney understood this better than his critics did. They were not defending a television show. They were defending a phase — a brief window in which a child could believe, without embarrassment, that a purple dinosaur loved them — and they knew the window would close on its own. Barney's audience is therefore the only one of the three that is defined by its own ending. You are supposed to leave him, and the leaving is the proof that he worked.

The People Eater asks you to repeat him. His audience is anyone who has ever found themselves humming the song in a supermarket, or reciting the description — one eye, one horn — to a child who has never heard it, or reaching for the phrase as a piece of language when no other phrase will do. He does not ask for your money or your growth. He asks for your memory, and for the small, social act of passing the joke along. That is why he has survived without a franchise, without a toy line, without a curriculum. He lives in the mouth, not in the shop, and the mouth is a cheaper and more durable place to live.

9. Purple as a Flag: What the Colour Declares

By now a pattern is emerging, and it is worth naming it directly. Purple, in all three cases, is a flag. It declares that the bearer is not ordinary, and it invites the audience to decide what to do with that information.

For Grimace, the flag says: *I am a treat.* For Barney, it says: *I am safe.* For the People Eater, it says: *I am strange.* Those three declarations — treat, safe, strange — are three different ways of managing the same problem, which is the problem of the large, powerful, non-human being in a human world. How do you make such a being acceptable? You make him delicious, you make him loving, or you make him funny. Grimace is delicious. Barney is loving. The People Eater is funny. And the purple, in each case, is the colour that makes the solution visible from across the room.

It is also worth noting what purple does *not* do in any of these cases. It does not make the creature realistic. It does not make the creature natural. It does not pretend that a purple blob, a purple dinosaur, or a purple alien is something you might meet on the street. The purple is an admission: this is made up, this is artificial, this is a colour we chose. That honesty is part of the charm. A brown dinosaur would be a lie — a claim that dinosaurs were brown and that this one is a dinosaur. A purple dinosaur is a truth — a claim that this is a dinosaur-shaped idea, and that the idea is what matters. The same is true of Grimace, who is not pretending to be an animal at all, and of the People Eater, who is not pretending to be anything but a song.

In this sense the title of this essay is literal. Purple is the colour that did not exist — not in the fur of any mammal, not in the skin of any dinosaur, not in the hide of any monster from the woods. It had to be invented, or at least reserved, for the things we invent. And the three purple figures are the proof: give a character a colour that nature never gave anyone, and you give him permission to be exactly as strange as he needs to be.

10. Conclusion: The Purple Commonwealth

What, then, do Grimace, Barney, and the Flying Purple People Eater add up to? Not a franchise, and not a movement. They add up to a small commonwealth of purple beings, each ruling a different territory of the imagination.

Grimace rules the territory of appetite — the world of treats, of birthday shakes, of the friend who wants what you want and wants it with you. His kingdom is the restaurant, the birthday party, the summer afternoon when a purple shake becomes a joke and the joke becomes a legend. He teaches us, if he teaches us anything, that wanting can be innocent, and that innocence, once established, can be played with.

Barney rules the territory of affection — the world of the nursery, the classroom, the song sung at bedtime. His kingdom is the child's imagination, where a dinosaur can be a teacher and a hug can be a lesson. He teaches us that love can be unconditional without being uncritical, and that a character who never changes can still change the children who watch him.

The People Eater rules the territory of the strange — the world of the song, the road, the encounter with something from elsewhere that turns out to want a gig. His kingdom is the three minutes of a novelty record, which turns out to be large enough to hold a monster, a negotiation, and a dream of stardom. He teaches us that the strange can be met with curiosity rather than fear, and that even a creature who eats purple people might, given a chance and a band, prefer to sing.

The three do not agree with each other. Grimace would eat Barney's birthday cake. Barney would try to teach the People Eater to share. The People Eater would look at Grimace, note with professional interest that he is purple, and

have to be talked out of it. That disagreement is the point. Purple is not one thing. It is a colour that can mean appetite, or affection, or alienness, or all three at once, depending on who is wearing it and what they want from you.

That is why the colour endures, and why these three figures endure with it. Purple did not exist in nature, so we had to make it — in dye, in ink, in song, in felt and foam rubber. And having made it, we used it to make beings who could not exist either: a blob who loves milkshakes, a dinosaur who loves children, a monster who loves rock and roll. The colour was the permission. The characters were the proof. And the proof, like the colour, is still with us — purple, improbable, and, against all the odds, beloved.

Archer Muse & Kizer Mars — a comparative essay in ten sections, on three purple figures and the colour that made them possible.

Notes

1. Tyrian purple was extracted from the glands of murex sea snails; the chemist Paul Friedländer found in 1909 that 12,000 snails yielded 1.4 grams of dye, and Diocletian's price edict of 301 CE capped a pound of purple-dyed silk at 150,000 denarii — about three pounds of gold. See "Tyrian Purple," World History Encyclopedia, https://www.worldhistory.org/Tyrian_Purple/.

2. Grimace first appeared in November 1971 as "Evil Grimace," a scaly creature with four arms whose purpose was to steal milkshakes. See "Grimace (character)," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimace_(character); McDonald's archivist Mike Bullington, quoted in "McDonaldland: The Rise, Fall, And Resurgence Of McDonald's Nostalgic Characters," Chowhound, https://www.chowhound.com/1949958/mcdonaldland-characters-mcdonalds-history-nostalgia/.

3. Within a year McDonald's removed the extra arms and recast Grimace as a gentle, good-natured friend. See "Grimace (character)," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimace_(character).

4. The Grimace Shake was sold in the United States from 12 June to 9 July 2023 for Grimace's 52nd birthday; the #GrimaceShake TikTok trend, in which users filmed themselves drinking the shake and then appearing in staged gruesome situations, passed one billion views by 12 July 2023. See "Grimace Shake," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimace_Shake.

5. Sheryl Leach created Barney in 1988 for the home-video series Barney & the Backyard Gang, after finding her young son was captivated by dinosaurs but frightened by the ones on television. See "Barney and Friends," Encyclopedia.com, https://www.encyclopedia.com/media/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/barney-and-friends.

6. Barney & Friends premiered on PBS on 6 April 1992 and ran until 2 November 2010. See "Barney & Friends," Wikipedia.

7. Barney is a purple Tyrannosaurus rex, two hundred million years old (two dinosaur years), with a green belly; sources give his height as six feet to six-foot-four. See "Barney," Barney Wiki (Fandom); "Barney the Dinosaur," Heroes Wiki (Fandom), https://hero.fandom.com/wiki/Barney_(Barney_%26_Friends).

8. The song "I Love You" is set to the tune of "This Old Man"; the lyrics were written by Lee Bernstein and published in Piggyback Songs: New Songs Sung to the Tune of Childhood Favorites (Warren Publishing, 1983).

See "I Love You," Barney Wiki (Fandom), https://barney.fandom.com/wiki/I_Love_You_(song).

9. "The Purple People Eater," written and performed by Sheb Wooley, was released in May 1958 and reached number one on the Billboard pop chart, holding the top spot from 9 June to 14 July 1958. See "The Purple People Eater," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purple_People_Eater.

10. Wooley is believed to have voiced the Wilhelm scream, the stock scream recorded for the 1951 film Distant Drums; the attribution rests on research by sound designer Ben Burtt and was supported by Wooley's widow, Linda Dotson. See "Wilhelm scream," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_scream; "Sheb Wooley," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheb_Wooley.

11. Sputnik 1, the first artificial Earth satellite, was launched by the Soviet Union on 4 October 1957. See "Sputnik 1," Wikipedia.