our young stars, but we condemn parents for pushing children to the breaking point in the name of stardom.

The selections you are likely to critique will be those, like Ryan's, that argue a specific position. Indeed, every argument you read is an invitation to agree or disagree. It remains only for you to speak up and justify your position.

MODEL CRITIQUE

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Writing 2
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A Critique of "We Are Not Created Equal in Every Way" by Joan Ryan

Most freshmen know how it feels to apply to a school and be rejected. Each year, college admissions offices mail thousands of thin letters that begin: "Thank you for your application. The competition this year was unusually strong. . . ." We know that we will not get into every college on our list or pass every test or win the starring role after every audition, but we believe that we deserve the chance to try. And we can tolerate rejection if we know that we compete on a level playing field. But when that field seems to arbitrarily favor some candidates over others, we take offense. At least that's when an ambitious mother took offense, bringing to court a suit that claimed her eight-year-old daughter, Fredrika Keefer, was denied admission to the prestigious San Francisco Ballet School because she had the wrong "body type" (A29).

2 In an opinion piece for the San Francisco Chronicle (12 December 2000), Joan Ryan asks: "Does [a ballet school] have the right to give preference to leaner body types?" Her answer is a firm yes. Ryan argues that institutions have the right to set whatever standards they want to ensure that those they admit meet the physical or intellectual requirements for professional success. But she also believes that some parents push their children too hard to meet those standards. Ryan offers a questionable approach to protecting children from the possible abuses of such parents. Overall, however, she raises timely issues in discussing the star system that produces our world-class athletes and performers. The sometimes conflicting concerns she expresses reflect contradictions and tensions in our larger culture.

3 The issue Ryan discusses is a particularly sensitive one because the child's mother charged the ballet school with discrimination. As a society we have made great strides over the past few decades in combating some of the more blatant forms of discrimination--racial, ethnic, and sexual. But is it possible, is it desirable, to eliminate all efforts to distinguish one person from another? When is a standard that permits some (but not all) people entry to an institution discriminatory and when is it a necessary part of doing business? Ryan believes that schools discriminate all the time, and rightly so when candidates for admission fail to meet the stated criteria for academic or professional success. That UC Berkeley does not accept every applicant is discriminating, not discriminatory. Ryan recognizes the difference.

4 She maintains, correctly, that the San Francisco Ballet School, like any other private institution, has the right to set standards by which it will accept or reject applicants. Rejection is a part of life, she writes, expressing the view that gives her essay its title: "We Are Not Created Equal in Every Way." And because we are not created equal, not everyone will be admitted to his or her number one school or get a turn on stage. That's the inevitable consequence of setting standards: Some people will meet them and gain admission, others won't. Ryan quotes the spokesperson who explained that the San Francisco Ballet School is "'not a recreation department'" (A29). In other words, a professional ballet school, like a university, is within its rights to reject applicants with body types unsuited to its view of success in professional ballet. The standard may be cruel and to some even arbitrary, but it is understandable. To put the matter bluntly, candidates with unsuitable body types, however talented or otherwise attractive, are less likely to succeed in professional ballet than those with "classical" proportions. Female dancers, for example, must regularly be lifted and carried, as if effortlessly, by their male counterparts--a feat that is difficult enough even with "leaner body types." Ryan points out that candidates without the ideal body type for ballet are not barred from professional dance: "[t]hey just have to find a different type of dance . . . just as athletes have to find sports that fit certain body types" (A29).

5 The San Francisco Ballet School is not saying that people of a certain skin color or religious belief are not welcome. That would be discriminatory and wrong. But

the standard concerning body type cuts across all people, rich or poor, black or white, Protestant or Jew, male or female. Such a broad standard could be termed an equal opportunity standard: If it can be used to distinguish among all people equally, it is discriminating, not discriminatory.

6 Ryan's parallel concern in this essay is the damage done to children by parents who push them at an early age to meet the high standards set by professional training programs. Children placed onto such star tracks attend special schools (or receive home schooling) in order to accommodate intense training schedules that sometimes lead to physical or psychological injuries. In healthy families, we might expect parents to protect children from such dangers. But parents who manage what they view as their children's "careers" may be too single-minded to realize that their actions may place Johnny and Susie at risk.

7 Ryan disapproves of a star track system that puts children into professional training at a young age. In pursuing a career in dance, for instance, a young "child has thrown all her eggs into this one little basket at an age when most kids can barely decide what to wear to school in the morning" (A29). The law makes no provision for protecting such elite performers in training, writes Ryan: "There is no safety net for them, no arm of government that makes sure that the adults in their lives watch out for their best interests" (A29).

8 Like the rest of us, Ryan assumes there are appropriate and less appropriate ways to raise children. While she does not explicitly share her preferred approach, she uses

language effectively (both her own and her subjects') to suggest what does not work: pushing an otherwise "quite happy" eight-year-old who "relishes" dancing into professional ballet school. Ryan is subtle enough not to attack Krissy Keefer directly, instead letting the mother undermine herself with a comment few could take seriously: "My daughter is very sophisticated, so she understands why we're [bringing a lawsuit]." No eight-year-old could fully understand the motivations behind a lawsuit, and the statement suggests a mother pursuing her own--not her daughter's--agenda. Ryan suggests that Krissy Keefer has succumbed to "the skewed logic of elite athletics and dancing" that has damaged too many young people. When Ryan points out that "no arm of government" looks out for children like Frederika, she implies the need for a Department of Youth Services to supervise parent managers. This is not a good idea.

9 There is no sure way to tell when a parent's managing of a child's dance or athletic schedule is abusive or constructive. Intense dedication is necessary for would-be elite athletes and performers to succeed, and such dedication often begins in childhood. Since young children are not equipped to organize their lives in pursuit of a single goal, parents step in to help. That's what the parents of Tiger Woods did on recognizing his talents:

> [H]is father . . . [started] him very early. . . . [Tiger] was on the Mike Douglas show hitting golf balls when he was three years old. I mean, this is a prodigy type thing. This is like Mozart writing his first symphony when he was six, that sort of thing, and he did show

> unique ability right from the beginning. And his life has been channeled into being a pro. His father has devoted his life to bringing him to this point. His father hasn't worked full-time since 1988. That's what it's been all about. (Feinstein)

10 Ryan would point out, correctly, that for every Tiger Woods or Michelle Kwan there are many child-athletes and performing artists who fall short of their goals. They may later regret the single-minded focus that robbed them of their childhood, but there is no way to know before committing a child to years of dedicated practice whether he or she will become the next Tiger or an embittered also-ran. We simply do not have the wisdom to intervene in a parent manager's training program for her child. And Joan Ryan is not going to find an "arm of government" to intervene in the child rearing of Fredrika Keefer, however much she may "pay the price for" (A29) her mother's enthusiasm.

11 The tension in Ryan's essay over high standards and the intense preparation to meet them mirrors a tension in the larger culture. On the one hand, Ryan argues persuasively that elite institutions like the San Francisco Ballet School have the right to set standards for admission. At such institutions, high standards give us high levels of achievement--dancers, for instance, who "can float on air" (A29). We cheer brilliant performers like Tiger Woods and Michelle Kwan who started on their roads to success while still children. The star system produces stars. On the other hand, Ryan condemns parents who buy into the star system by pushing their children into professional training programs

that demand a single-minded focus. We are horrified to learn that Macaulay Culkin of the Home Alone movies never really had a childhood (Peterson). Of course Culkin and others like him didn't have childhoods: They were too busy practicing their lines or their jumps and spins. If Ryan defends high standards in one breath and criticizes parents in the next for pushing children to achieve these standards, she is only reflecting a confusion in the larger culture: We love our stars, but we cannot have our stars without a star system that demands total (and often damaging) dedication from our youngest and most vulnerable citizens. That parents can be the agent of this damage is especially troubling.

12 Joan Ryan is right to focus on the parents of would-be stars, and she is right to remind us that young children pressured to perform at the highest levels can suffer physically and psychologically. Perhaps it was better for Fredrika Keefer the child (as opposed to Fredrika Keefer the future professional dancer) that she was not admitted to the San Francisco School of Ballet. For Keefer's sake and that of other child performers, we should pay attention to the dangers of the star system and support these children when we can. But without clear evidence of legally actionable neglect or abuse, we cannot interfere with parent managers, however much we may disagree with their decisions. We may be legitimately concerned, as is Ryan, that such a parent is driving her child to become not the next Tiger Woods but the next admission to a psychiatric ward. In a free society, for better or for worse, parents have the right to guide (or misguide) the lives of their children. All the rest of us can do is watch––and hope for the best.

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CRITICAL READING FOR CRITIQUE

- ***Use the tips from Critical Reading for Summary on page 5.*** Remember to examine the context; note the title and subtitle; identify the main point; identify the subpoints; break the reading into sections; distinguish between points, examples, and counterarguments; watch for transitions within and between paragraphs; and read actively.
- ***Establish the writer's primary purpose in writing.*** Is the piece meant primarily to inform, persuade, or entertain?
- ***Evaluate informative writing. Use these criteria (among others):***

  Accuracy of information

  Significance of information

  Fair interpretation of information

(Continued on next page)