

REVIEW AND COMMENT

The Prime-Time Presidency: *The West Wing* and U.S. Nationalism

By Trevor Parry-Giles and
Shawn J. Parry-Giles

*University of Illinois Press, Urbana and
Chicago*
(248 pages, cloth \$50; paper \$25)

By **Bernard S. Redmont**

Nationalism represents one of the great evils of the modern world, spawning wars and terrorism. This being so, Americans rarely think of the U.S. as nationalistic.

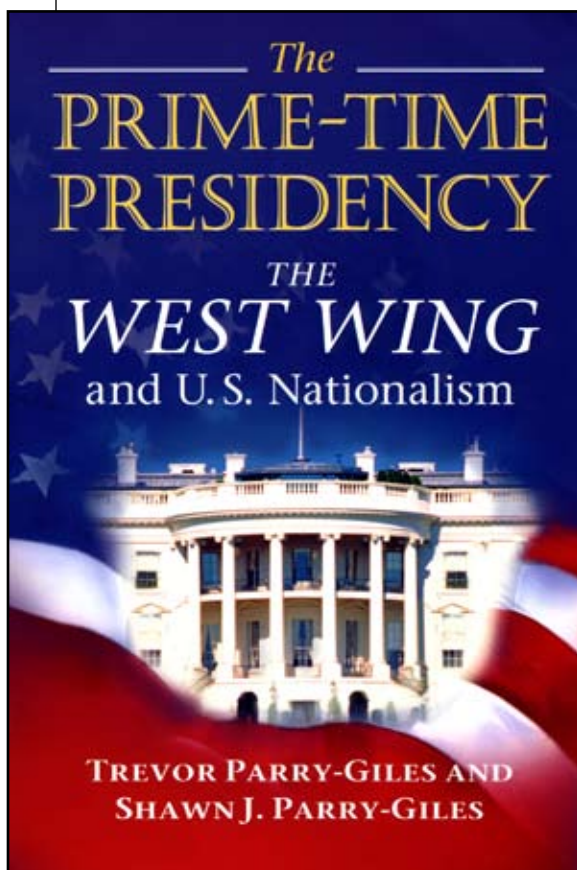
Now we have two American scholars who enjoy a rare double specialty—U.S. nationalism and *The West Wing*. They have come up with a startling and original work linking the two subjects, and in the process, the American presidency.

The two researchers, Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, are a husband-and-wife team, professors of communication at the University of Maryland. They have spent endless hours dissecting—and enjoying—one of the most popular prime-time programs in the history of American television, *The West Wing*. Avid viewers since the debut in 1999, they followed it through its critical acclaim that included Emmy

awards in 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003 for Best Drama, two Peabody Awards, several Golden Globe nominations and three Television Critics Association Awards.

The NBC show created by Aaron Sorkin is history now. But its authentic, behind-the-scenes glimpse of what life is like in *The West Wing* captivated the public for years. Many reveled in its sophisticated blend of tackling U.S. political complexities, probing into the national identity and showing the interaction of gender, race and military pressures around the presidency.

Critics on the right saw the program as a forum for the expression of “decidedly liberal politics.” *The West*



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Wing's president and hero Josiah "Jed" Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen) is a liberal Democrat, and Republicans and conservatives are often portrayed in negative ways.

At the same time, *TWW* has been criticized for offering an overly conservative message. One critic on the left (*The Progressive* magazine) asserts that it demonizes Arabs and underrepresents minorities in the White House.

It's not that simple. The central premise of the authors of *The Prime-time Presidency* is that "the drama reflects the ideological history and contestations of U.S. nationalism from the country's inception through its contemporary conflicts." They situate the drama "in the sweep of commitments to nationalism prevalent in U.S. history and politics."

Dictionaries define nationalism as "devotion, often chauvinistic, to one's own nation and to its political and economic interests or aspirations, social and cultural traditions, etc. It is the belief or doctrine that among nations, the common welfare is best served by independent rather than collective or cooperative action."

The authors don't make a judgment in the right-left orientation debate. They do conclude that *TWW* is "a nationalistic text," although they concede it doesn't present "a single, patriotic, pro-American vision of the United States."

For the authors, *TWW* offers a multilayered, complex but romantic vision of the U.S. presidency. They go on to examine what they call "the gendered, racial and then militarized implications of U.S. nationalism as reflected in *TWW*."

Strong women are shown in powerful roles, such as press secretary C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney) and First Lady Abigail Bartlet (Stockard Channing), but they are "routinely sexualized," and "the presidency is defined quite clearly in the show as a patriarchally dominated family."

The entire senior staff is depicted as white, but in response to criticism, the producers chose an African American, Charles Young (Dulé Hill), to play the personal assistant or "body man" to the president.

TWW's President Bartlet appoints a Latino, Roberto Mendoza (Edward James Olmos), to the Supreme Court, has an African-American woman, Nancy McNally (Anna Deavere Smith), as national security advisor, and an African American, Adm. Percy Fitzwallace (John Amos), as Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In the authors' view, nationalism "perpetuates and reinscribes the power of the U.S. presidency in international affairs." It emphasizes the president's commander-in-chief role.

They give us little direct allusion to the George W. Bush Administration, but there is a curious reference to President Bartlet's self-doubts and moral concerns about fighting terrorism when the book says the program offers "an alternative to the moral certainty of the Bush Administration."

TWW originally was not supposed to be about the president, the book reveals. The initial focus was on the staff, but then shifted to the presidency, held by an individual who was "simultaneously heroic and human, romantic and flawed." The result, say the authors, was a version

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of the U.S. nationalism that “sees the world as chaotic and in need of guidance from the president individually and from the United States more generally.”

Arguing against the view that *TWW* is liberal, the authors point to incidents in the drama in which communications director Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff) belittles protesters and criticizes peace movements. They cite other story lines that demonstrate cold war attitudes. They say that *TWW* validates a view that presidents should use their covert powers to ferret out communists infiltrating the government and committing espionage.

Even though women are shown in important positions, the authors point to many examples of sexism in the script. C.J., for example, is sexualized and portrayed as lacking the knowledge of her male counterparts. Politics is seen as men’s business.

For the authors, nationalism, militarism and presidentiality “assume a symbiotic relationship.” The drama highlights America’s superiority and the president’s mythic force, they contend.

“Militarism is conflated with masculinity and masculinity with romantic heroism, which are integral components of U.S. nationalism.”

In other sequences, say the authors, the script upholds militarized nationalism “by giving it a powerful extended justification so it overrides all other civic concerns such as freedom or speech and freedom of religion.”

As academics, the authors tend to over-analyze on the one hand, and on the other, fail to critique some common complaints of ordinary viewers. Nowhere in the book is notice taken of the fact that dialogue in *TWW* is often garbled

or inaudible. Characters often speak too fast and over each others’ lines, shout while rushing past each other, and articulate poorly, until it becomes gibberish. It’s as if producers decided to sacrifice clarity for verisimilitude and authenticity. Better direction could have avoided this common complaint.

The language of the book is not oppressively academic, but ordinary readers will have occasional griefs with the scholarly jargon.

On the plus side, TV professionals, researchers and simple mavens will be grateful for two unusual appendix listings—an episode directory and a character directory.

All in all, the Parry-Giles team recognizes for us the powerful role television plays in fostering cultural beliefs. The book is well worth reading, provocative as it is, for it analyzes *TWW* as a site of meaningful discourse about presidential leadership and national identity.

Bernard S. Redmont is Dean Emeritus of Boston University College of Communication and a former correspondent for CBS News and other media outlets. A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, he is also the author of *Risks Worth Taking: The Odyssey of a Foreign Correspondent*.

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Impresario: The Life and Times of Ed Sullivan

By James Maguire

Billboard Books, New York
(352 pages, \$24.95)

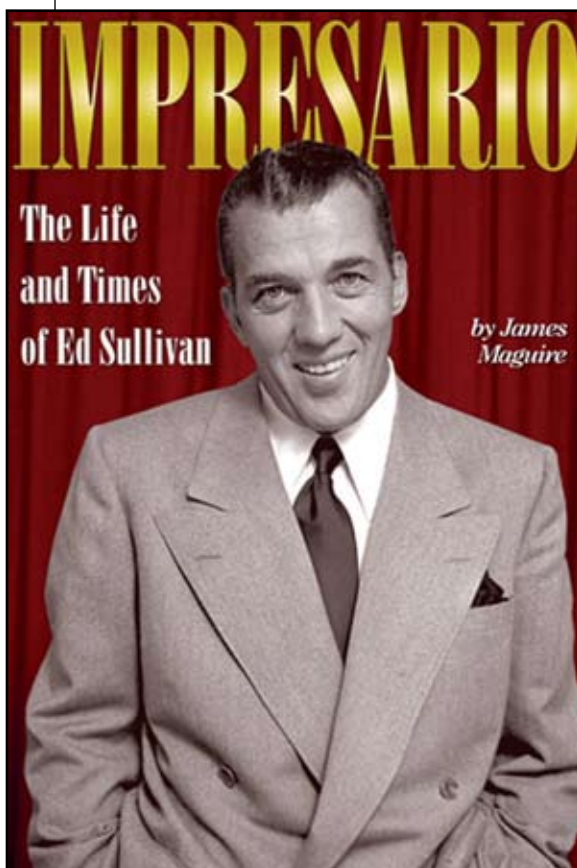
By Ron Simon

Ed Sullivan was an axiom of the three-network era of American television. Although awkward and fumbling, he hosted the definitive and longest-running variety series in history (1948-71). *The Ed Sullivan Show* became a Sunday-night institution on CBS and fulfilled the democratic mandate of the variety genre: to entertain all of the audience most of the time. But Sullivan himself was an enigma. Without any performing ability, he relished showmanship and had a keen eye for emerging talent, but was so wooden in posture and speech that every impressionist did a parody of Sullivan's robotic movements and his "really big shew" lingo. Alan King once quipped that "Ed does nothing, but he does it better than anyone else on television."

As columnist and master of ceremonies of charity shows, Sullivan had been a fixture on Broadway since the early thirties. But, until now, the only books published about "the great stone face" have been reminiscences of his legendary TV show. James Maguire,

a commentator on culture, technology and the American scene, has engagingly written the first major biography of the host who helped to shaped entertainment in postwar America. *Impresario* reveals the man in front and behind the curtain, a Wizard of Oz-like manipulator who was full of contradictions, very much like his show.

Sullivan was middle-aged when he became host of *The Toast of the Town* (renamed *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1955) Maguire devotes more than 100 pages to examining Sullivan's career up to his television debut when he was not actually the toast but a would-be player in Manhattan. Born in hardscrabble Harlem, Sullivan had a burning desire



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to be noticed. As a fledging sports reporter, he covered the games by day and frequented nightclubs by evening, nattily attired in hand-tailored suits. In the early thirties he replaced his lifelong nemesis, Walter Winchell, as gossip purveyor at the *New York Evening Graphic*. The success of his wise-guy column, *Ed Sullivan's Broadway*, led to a short-lived radio show, in which Sullivan introduced Jack Benny for the first time to a radio audience. He regained influence by writing five columns a week for the *Daily News* and even had a stint in Hollywood covering the movie business. Maguire effectively brings to life Sullivan's growing ambition to not only write about but also participate in celebrity culture, a sort of real-life *Sweet Smell of Success*.

In 1948 Sullivan was hired as a stopgap host because CBS could not find anyone else to compete with Milton Berle. CBS head William Paley, who was born on the same day as Sullivan (September 28th), was hopeful he could eventually buy the services of a professional host and signed the newspaperman to a contract that could be canceled with a two weeks notice. But Sullivan surprised the entire corporation by devising an updated vaudeville show that would appeal to an entire nation. From the premiere show on, Sullivan adroitly alternated contrasting acts, briskly mixing highbrow and lowbrow, old masters and ambitious neophytes. Critics, especially Jack Gould of the *New York Times* ("the choice of Ed Sullivan as master of ceremonies seems ill-advised"), were not impressed, but the American public was fascinated by this electronic grab bag.

Although Sullivan seemed the

respectful host, Maguire documents how as the show's producer he "took dictatorial control over every aspect of its production." He not only chose and sequenced the acts, but often demanded what material the artists performed. He shortened and changed routines immediately after dress rehearsal, even reshaping animal acts, which became especially hard on the tigers or monkeys who worked by rote. Throughout his career, Sullivan relied on his time-tested instinct, shaped by "his long education" in show business.

But the seen-it-all showman could not have predicted the rise of rock 'n' roll, an outgrowth of the burgeoning baby-boom generation. According to Maguire, Sullivan tried to play it both ways, keeping his big tent as inclusive as possible. At first dismissive of the Elvis phenomenon, the headline-conscious host signed the explosive singer to the biggest contract of any guest, a whopping \$50,000 for three guest appearances. But to assuage the fears of the more square members of his audience, he was very careful in how he used the Pelvis, infamously only shooting him from the waist up during his last appearance. In the end, Sullivan helped legitimize rock as a cultural force in American society.

By the time of the Beatles, Sullivan was more into mythmaking—his own. He claimed that he first encountered the hysteria of the Fab Four at a London airport when the group was coming back from a concert tour. It was a great serendipitous story that Sullivan retold many times: the wise impresario literally spotting the next trend of entertainment with his own eyes. Maguire separates fact from fiction by demonstrating there

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was never an overlap between Sullivan's stay in London and an airport ruckus. Sullivan probably discovered the Beatles by reading the press clipping sent by his European talent scout, Peter Prichard, who was later quoted as saying "if it would have happened, he would had a photograph of himself there."

Despite his appreciation of public taste, Sullivan is portrayed by Maguire as essentially a loner, an introvert with few friends. Much of the texture and color of *Impresario* comes from placing Sullivan in a larger cultural context; he was not a man of psychological depth or spiritual warmth. He was succinctly, in Maguire's words, our "Minister of Culture," a puritanical guardian of the show-biz tradition.

Impresario reads like a tale of yesteryear, when one man could define culture each week for an entire nation. The Vietnam War, which fractured the country politically, also splintered the democratic assumptions of Sullivan's vision. The instant gratification of the new technologies also made the variety show seem antiquated: there was no reason to wait for a favorite act when you had immediate access to any programming desired. But Sullivan also helped to create our appetite for celebrity, and Maguire paints a resonant portrait of a man who was a mirror and mediator for his time, an era when 40 million people hungered for his taste.

Ron Simon has organized several retrospectives of *The Ed Sullivan Show* at The Museum of Television & Radio, where he serves as curator for both media. He also teaches at Columbia and New York universities.

I'm Proud of You: My Friendship with Fred Rogers

By Tim Madigan

Gotham Books, New York
(208 pages, \$20)

By Carla Seal-Wanner

"L'essential est invisible pour les yeux."
(What is essential is invisible to the eyes.)

This phrase from *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, hung on a wall in Fred Rogers' office, writes Tim Madigan, as he sets out to convey how this penetrating idea describes Fred Rogers the person, the theologian, the children's television creator and host of the signature PBS Series *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Through the story of their friendship he reveals what Fred Rogers himself described as; "A lifelong search for what is essential, what it is about my neighbor that doesn't meet the eye."

This compelling tribute to Fred Rogers the mentor, friend and "television neighbor" to children of all ages is a must read for anyone who admired and/or was mystified by this endearing anomaly in the children's media industry. The author, a Texas journalist who met Fred Rogers when he wrote a profile of him for *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, writes movingly about the evolution of the life-long bond that developed between them. This pocket-sized treasure of a book takes you on the intellectual and personal

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journal that resulted in these two men sharing everything from readings in theology to discussions of the state of the world, family, marriage, love and death. Almost as a public thank-you to Fred for his love and guidance, the author “plays forward” this generosity by eloquently demonstrating that “*Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* revealed only a fraction of his human greatness.”

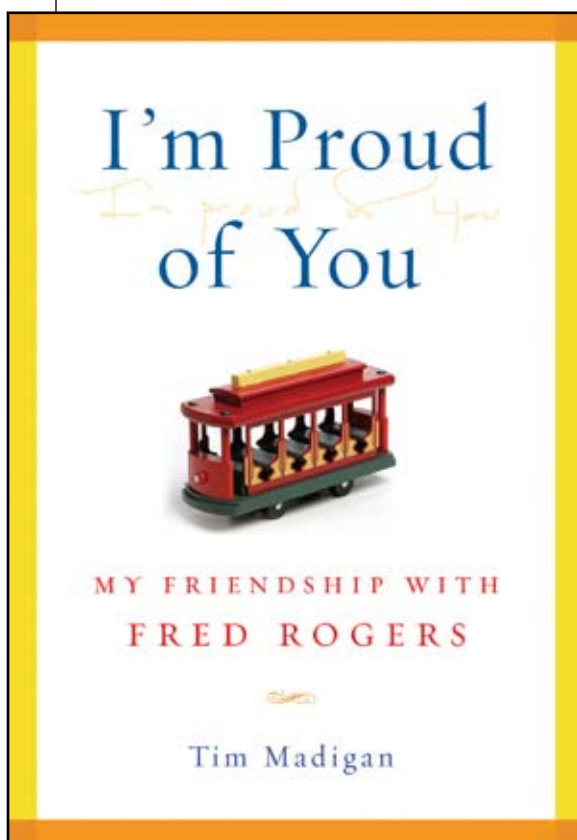
Fred Rogers the person and the television presence touched lives across ages, professions and continents. His familiarity is so widespread that he is the only children’s television host to become a regular satirical character on both NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* and NPR’s *Prairie Home Companion*. Yet what do we know about Fred Rogers the person?

If any of us, diehard Fred Rogers fans or not, ever doubted that the character he played on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was different in true character than the real man under those vintage wool cardigans, Tim Madigan puts those doubts to rest.

This book had special meaning for me as a developmental psychologist, children’s television professional and long-time admirer of Fred Rogers. Since I was a graduate student in the late seventies I have thought a great deal about the unique contributions of this brilliant man and *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, a presence on PBS since 1967. It is, much like the quote from *The Little Prince* implies, a program crafted around what Fred Rogers deemed *the essential* experiences early learners should have to help them develop into clear-thinking, feeling,

giving, loving and loved citizens of the world. And Tim Madigan gets it just right; it all boils down to the fact that for Fred Rogers, “neighbor” was a spiritual concept.

His concept spanned both the literal and figurative definition of neighbor. In *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* he meant it literally; everything was literal because that is the developmentally appropriate way to present information to this young audience of two-to-five year olds. However, the more philosophical way he used the concept of neighbor did not escape thoughtful adult observers. The brilliant metaphoric vehicle for the neighborhood, which, by the way, has stood the test of time over the many seasons that this program has delighted



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young viewers, symbolized much more. Fred Rogers meant neighbor in an almost biblical sense; a synonym for brother or fellow traveler. As such, we were all worthy of an intimate commitment from him—child or adult, friend or stranger. In his words and work for children on and off television he symbolized the political activist's mantra "*act local* (with your neighbor), *think global* (it will have universal impact). Namely, you will improve the world with each small act of humanity. Watching Mister Rogers made us notice the sad fact that in our fast-paced lives our actual neighbors are often the least likely people with whom we develop close relationships.

Worrying that some may think Fred Rogers approach was too innocent or naive, Tim Madigan wrote this book in part to describe the depth and breadth of the philosophy of life that drove his creative and personal contributions. "He was a man fully of this world, deeply aware of and engaged in it difficulties, speaking often of death, disease, divorce, addiction, and cruelty and the agonies those things wrought on people he loved," writes Madigan. The recipient of many national awards for his public works, the praises sung for Fred Rogers by the author provide a rare glimpse into how his philosophy of life manifest itself "behind the scenes."

It is these qualities that led Fred Rogers, for example, to study the work of such educational scholars as Jonathan Kozol. Kozol has devoted his life work to addressing the causes and consequences of poverty on the educational attainment of America's most disadvantaged

children. He and Rogers became friends and colleagues working on this issue in their different spheres of influence. In a speech given at the recently established Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media, William Isler, a friend and former colleague of Fred Rogers, and the executive director of the Center at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, PA, said; "He was especially intrigued by the fact that Jonathan never flinched from the responsibility to let people know about the struggles which some children have to live, the struggles of the adults who are closest to them, and the responsibility all of us have to them and to our own children."

These same values are the terra firma of the themes explored on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Through Mister Rogers' unique direct-to-camera delivery no child watching the television version of this "insistence on intimacy" could feel anything but "special." Mister Rogers spoke directly to his young audience about the things that mattered most to them. He modeled for them the love of learning and discovery, of exploring the realms of the imagination through fantasy, and most of all the love of self and others.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood started out and remained a unique entity among increasingly fast-paced and less educationally grounded formats in the children's schedule. Through his performances as the host or as the voice of Daniel Tiger, Fred Rogers inspired children in the real world as well as the world of make believe that they so often frequent while growing up. He indulged the naturalness of using your imagination to leave reality for a while to see things

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from a different perspective. Although his approach seemed traditional on the surface, it was actually quite radical – he never forgot to communicate to children from their point of view.

As I was writing this review my 15-year-old daughter (a long time *Mister Rogers* fan who has now moved on to other media heroes) was watching Michael Moore's stunning film, *Bowling for Columbine*, for possibly her 20th time. In this film the director ponders why many thousands more people die from gun violence in American than in any other country. In the context of this query, he interviews a Canadian teenager about why Americans lock their doors and most Canadians do not. The teen replies, "I guess Americans don't trust their neighbors." Fred Rogers would no doubt agree with this assessment. He devoted his life to making the world a place where neighbors would be as trusted as family and as worthy of our generosity. Tim Madigan's book provides an up-front-and-personal view of what Fred Rogers extolled on television and in life:

"It's such a good feeling, a very good feeling. The feeling you know that we're friends. Won't you be my neighbor?"

Dr. Carla E.P. Seal-Wanner is the founder/president of @access4@ll, a public-interest advocacy organization promoting universal access to quality interactive media for children. A former professor at Columbia University, where she created and directed the graduate program in instructional technology and media, she received her doctoral and master's degrees in developmental psychology from Harvard and her BA in psychology from Hampshire College.

Desperate Networks

By Bill Carter

Doubleday, New York
(389 pages; \$26.95)

Seinology

By Tim Delaney

Prometheus Books
(280 pages, \$19)

By Earl Pomerantz

It's always somebody. The network Boss Man (or Boss Woman) – the only person who matters – holding the show creator's future in the palm of his (or her) hand. The names change over the years, but the question remains the same, always asked with anxiety and trepidation:

"What did Freddie say?"

"What did Harvey say?"

"What did Brandon say?"

"What did Stu say?"

"Stu's out. It's Jamie."

"What did Jamie say?"

"Jamie's out. Stu's back."

"What did Stu say?"

"What did Warren say?"

"You mean Scott."

"Who's Scott?"

"The new Warren. Or is that Garth?"

"What did Scott and/or Garth say?"

"What did Jeff say?"

"It's Kevin."

"Not Jeff?"

"Jeff was promoted. He appointed Kevin."

"What did Kevin say?"

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“What did Steve say?”

“He answers to Bob.”

“What did Bob say?”

“But Steve can decide.”

“What did Steve say?”

That’s how it feels from the outside, creative people at the mercy of the “suits” who hold total sway over their fates. Who are these all-powerful television executives? How did they get where they are? What goes on behind the scenes that results in their crucially important decisions?

Bill Carter’s highly readable *Desperate Networks* illuminates those mysteries. If you’ve been on the creative side or you’re just curious about the inner workings of network TV, *Desperate Networks* is for you.

I’ve read some negative reviews of *Desperate Networks*, which criticize the book for underemphasizing the rapidly evolving technologies. Bottom line, success in television is not about technologies, but as James Carville might have put it he’d worked in television, “It’s the programs, stupid.” To me, Carter’s focus is the correct one.

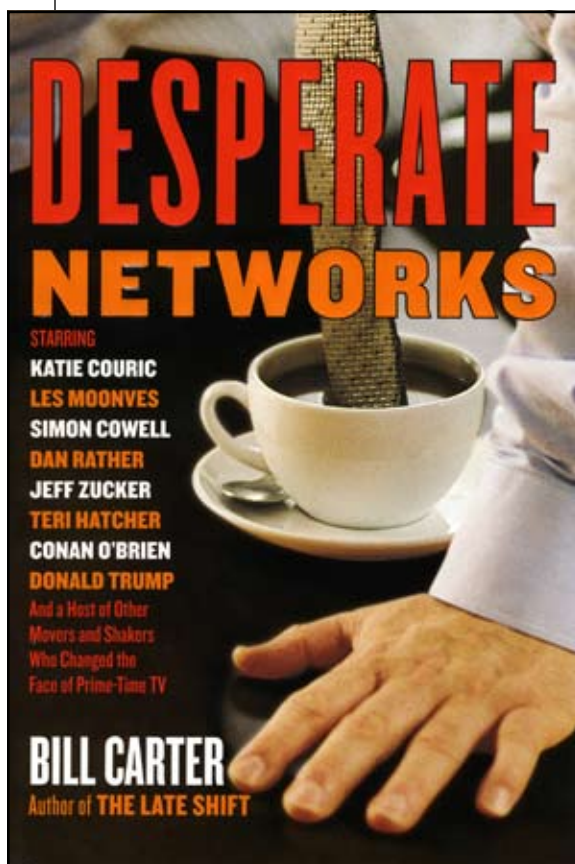
Desperate Networks is about people and, more importantly, about hits. Hit shows can rescue schedules and resuscitate networks. Paid-for rebroadcasts merely reinforce their significance; nobody buys rebroadcasts of a flop. As Les Moonves, who runs the CBS Corporation, tells us, “Content is essential.” “If anything, [the television business] is going to be more hit-driven than ever.”

Every year, television executives sift through hundreds of series

“pitches”, trying to ferret out The Next Big Thing. *Desperate Networks* chronicles their efforts.

The bad news: NBC passed on *Desperate Housewives*; ABC passed on *Survivor* twice; and everyone including the lowly UPN passed on *American Idol*, (which may never have gotten on at all if Fox’s owner, Rupert Murdoch, hadn’t barked “Don’t look at it, buy it. Right now”). The good news is that these and other tough-sell hits-to-be (*CSI* and *The Apprentice*) ultimately got on the air.

Still, a lot of executives missed a lot of boats. I saw a cartoon once where an angry child cried out to his father, “Why did you have me?” to which the father replied, “We didn’t know it was going



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to be you.” A similar dynamic seems at play in the television selection process: “Why did you pass on *Survivor*?” “We didn’t know it was going to be *Survivor*!” The difference between a parent dealt the genetic crapshoot of an offspring and a network executive misreading the potential of a future hit is “Why didn’t you know?”

Here’s one reason why. Before the proliferation of genres, television executives could measure the proposed series against a reliable template. Not anymore. The aforementioned mega-hits are significantly different in their formulations, nothing from another planet, but different. “Different” scares executives. (Peter Tortorici, former CBS Boss Man, now an independent producer: “Anytime you’re doing anything that’s not on the air, no matter how many times they tell you, ‘Well, that’s what we’re looking for,’ it’s not.”) Executives can get fired for championing a risky show that flops. The problem is they can also get fired for passing on a risky show that becomes a hit at another network. As someone once said in a different context, it may have been me, “There’s gotta be an easier way to make hundreds of thousand of dollars a year.”

Another factor leading to executives’ mistaken decisions is the essential natures of the individual networks. *Desperate Housewives* had no chance at macho-oriented NBC. CBS would not even look at “that dark stuff that Les hates.” ABC was hamstrung by a “labyrinthine and maddening decision-making process”, and Fox offered divided considerations. Sandy Grushow, one-time head of the Fox television studio and network: “I, personally, would

rather fail with quality than succeed with garbage.” Mike Darnell, Fox’s head of “alternative series”, encompassing everything from *American Idol* to *When Animals Attack*: “It’s best not to have an opinion about a show until you see how big the ratings are.” Gail Berman, former head of Fox Entertainment, fell somewhere in the middle but with one deal-breaking proviso: “No one dies on my watch.” It’s good to have standards.

Of course, there’s always the issue of money, where being cheap can be extremely costly. In the early nineties, *Friends* was rejected by Fox because of a hundred and fifty thousand dollar penalty fee that Fox would be required to pay if the script wasn’t ordered to be made as a pilot. Fox balked at this demand. NBC said “No problem.” They snapped up *Friends*, their decision bringing them mountains of money, not to mention a ten-year juggernaut on Thursday nights.

Characters abound in *Desperate Networks*, show business historically serving as a haven for people who’d have considerable difficulty fitting in anywhere else. Among these fascinating figures are Marc Cherry, a legitimate “rags to riches” story; Mike Darnell, a diminutive troublemaker with outlandish programming tastes; and former Las Vegas tram driver, Anthony Zuiker, whose first network pitch finds him “literally bouncing up and down on the couch with excitement.”

The “Title Card” pits CBS’s Les Moonves against NBC’s Jeff “Morning Boy” Zucker (“Morning Boy” because he made his reputation running *The Today Show*) whom Moonves, apparently needing an adversary, routinely referred to as “Zippy.” The bout is a serious

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mismatch, since Moonves' achievements at CBS were formidable, while Zucker oversaw NBC's steep rating decline; Zucker's most noteworthy achievements in programming included suggesting, "Why not just make our good shows longer?" and paying the *Friends* ensemble millions of dollars not to leave. One senses a Moonves-favoring in this recounting – and in the book in general – as if, responding to Zucker's only meaningful challenge, "in the press coverage department", Moonves had made himself more available to the writer. At least twice Carter mentions that Moonves and his now-wife, *The Early Show* co-anchor Julie Chen, were truly in love when nobody was suggesting otherwise.

A chapter on the precipitous disappearance of network news anchors and a section on NBC getting back NFL football, as well as a retelling of the Janet Jackson "wardrobe malfunction" fiasco, seem extraneous to the concept of the book. Also, as an unintended consequence, though a handful of "creatives" are mentioned – *Housewives'* creator Marc Cherry, *CSI's* Anthony Zuiker and *Lost's* J.J. Abrams – by focusing on the efforts of network executives, the book oversells their significance to the process. The essential credit belongs to the people originating and executing the concepts, not to the people whose PR machines siphon off the attention.

Desperate Networks entertainingly describes savvy executives withstanding the heat and making difficult calls. But if it weren't for their "creatives," their scheduling boards, delineating programs and their time slots, would be totally empty.

When I was a kid, a friend told me about the time his cooking-challenged father fixed him dinner. The dinner he prepared was potatoes and corn. That was the whole dinner – potatoes and corn. Staring at the meal his father set before him, the son bewilderedly asked, "What kind of a dinner is potatoes and corn?" The father replied very simply: "You like potatoes and you like corn. What could be bad?"

For me, Tim Delaney's *Seinology* is like potatoes and corn. I thoroughly enjoyed *Sociology* in college, and I adore *Seinfeld*, in my view the greatest half-hour comedy of all time. Potatoes and corn. What could be bad?

Well, let's see.

Academics seem determined to break into crossover publishing; that's because there's no money in textbooks. So, we get Metta Spencer's *Two Aspirins and a Comedy* – a book I reviewed in the last issue of *Television Quarterly* – which championed propaganda through programming but was marketed as breezy entertainment. And now there's *Seinology*.

The smartest comedies (and comedians) chronicle the patterns and behaviors of everyday life. *Sociology* does the same thing. So, the thought must have arisen, why not travel that road together? *Seinfeld* borrowed from them. In "The Apartment" when considering the issue of whether men wearing wedding bands have an easier time attracting women, Jerry remarks, "That would make an interesting sociological experiment." If *Seinfeld* can hijack sociology for comedic purposes, why can't sociology co-opt *Seinfeld* for purposes of its own?

And that's what Delaney does. Like

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the dullard who brings a comedian along on a date to insure that his girlfriend will be properly entertained, Delaney guides us through a myriad of sociological ideas accompanied by the funniest show in history so we won't feel we've been suddenly kidnapped and taken to college. Trekking through sociological terrain, Delaney references no less than 153 episodes of *Seinfeld*, some as many as five times, and one, "The Foundation," six times.

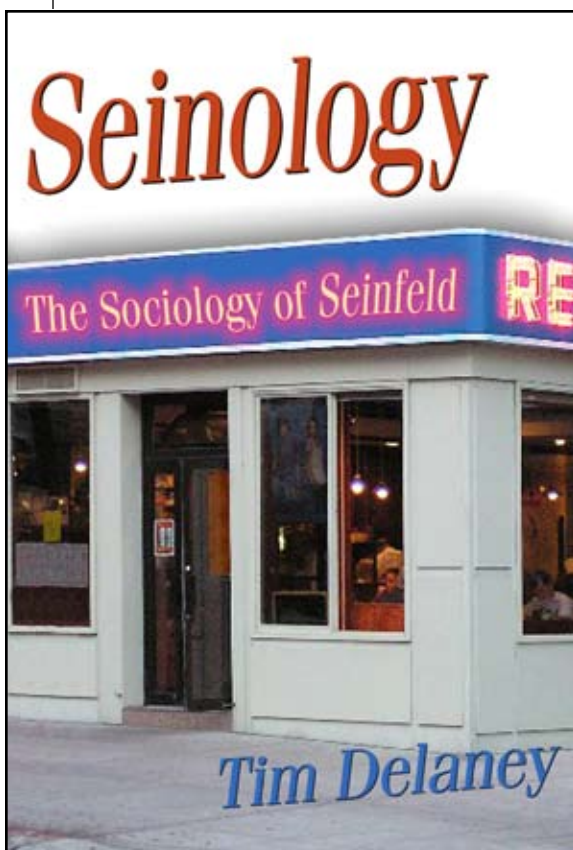
"Some of the material covered by sociologists is boring because some aspects of life are boring," Delaney admits. There you have it – the motive for bringing an iconic comedy along for the ride.

"As with *Seinfeld*, sociology is a discipline about everything, including the study of culture, socialization, groups and organizations, sex and gender, race and ethnicity, crime and deviance, marriage and family, religion, health and fitness, aging and death, and sports and leisure." These topics form the chapters in Delaney's book. Each represents an area of sociological exploration, and is made up of a mixture of Delaney's lecture material, supporting citations from the superstars in the field – Marx, Durkheim, Goffman and Parsons, among others – and, adding a spoonful of landmark comedy sugar to help the medicine go down, relevant examples from episodes of *Seinfeld*.

The examples are carefully chosen and appropriately applied. "The Wizard," the episode Delaney reveals, "led to the idea of writing

a book on the sociological relevance of *Seinfeld*," is selected as a springboard for an examination of the thorny subject of race. "The Suicide" introduces us to Durkheim's four types of suicide, linking each to the degree of integration into, or regulation by, society. Appropriate social behavior, a ubiquitous *Seinfeldian* theme, offers dozens of examples for evaluation such as (again from "The Suicide") the question of "coma etiquette," as in "How long do you have to wait before dating the girlfriend of a comatose man?"

Seinology is at its most imaginative in using selected episodes to illuminate sociological concepts. In "The Boyfriend" episodes, we remember Keith Hernandez, a sports hero and Jerry's new friend, asking Jerry to help him



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move too early in their relationship, a blatant example of “boundary jumping.” “The Label Maker” examines the subject of “re-gifting.” And after George’s set-to in “The Implants,” who of us will ever “double dip” a chip without at least considering if it’s socially acceptable to do so or if “that’s like putting your whole mouth right in the dip”?

The book’s writing is serviceable and relatively jargon-free, the episode summaries clear and succinct. Sometimes, however, the relationship between the sociological point and the episode is noticeably strained. One example of a “stretch” is “The Opposite,” wherein Elaine inadvertently foils a takeover of her employer’s publishing company by the Japanese; Delaney uses this as an opportunity to offer an extended discourse on globalization, a subject only peripherally related to the story. The Costanzas’ retirement to Florida in “The Money” is linked to the fact that “The median net worth of older white households in 2002 was at \$205,000. The statistics paint a gloomier picture for older black households as their net worth is estimated at \$41,000.” Tangential in the extreme to “The Maid” is a list Delaney provides us of occupations with the highest number of fatalities per year, the most dangerous job being – stop reading if you don’t want me to spoil the surprise – logging. Delaney’s blending of sociology and comedy is not consistently smooth.

Then there’s the “Duh” information, obvious yet still deemed necessary for the author to include. “A ‘bookie’ [is] someone who takes illegal bets.” “At the top of the medical hierarchy are doctors.” “Adultery occurs when a married person

has sex with someone other than their spouse.” Helpful definitions and distinctions are also found in *Seinology*, but information known to say, everyone, could easily have been left out.

Finally, from a stylistic standpoint, Delaney makes some questionable choices. At one point, Delaney turns into a shameless cheerleader for his chosen field: “There is no other discipline that equals the level of expertise on the study of sex and gender than sociology.” At others, he abandons his discipline’s signature objectivity, mutating into a middle-aged scold: “Oddly, young people think smoking makes them look cool – it certainly does not.” Delaney also engages in the peculiar habit of ending chapters with a wish. The chapter entitled “Health” ends with “Here’s wishing everyone good mental and physical health.” “Population, Aging and Death” ends with “Here’s hoping life is filled with many moves before the final one arrives.”

One disagreement with the author: *Seinology* maintains from the beginning that “...*Seinfeld* was much more than an entertaining show about nothing. It was a show about everything.” I don’t believe it was. *Seinfeld* was a show about funny occurrences. When I once met Larry David and asked him about his process, he responded, “I’m just looking for the funniest situations. ‘What’s the funniest thing that could happen?’” That’s the comedy writer’s Holy Grail, looking for the funniest possible situations and developing them into stories. But, and this is what made *Seinfeld* stand out, the situations were required to be identifiably real. When in the episode “The Pilot,” George explains the show

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is about nothing, what he means is it's about the funny things that happen in everyday life, as opposed to the ridiculous contrivances of standard sitcoms. "The boss is coming and I burned the roast." "My kid swallowed the car keys." "I accidentally slept with my sister-in-law." *Seinfeld* was never about these things—the things that only happen in sitcoms—but it was never about everything. It wasn't about politics; it wasn't about the economy; it wasn't about world affairs; it was barely about anyone beyond Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine.

What it comes down to in the end is a question of context. As a textbook, *Seinology* is an entertaining introduction to the study of sociology. But crossover marketing requires a tastier offering than potatoes and corn.

An award-winning television comedy writer, Earl Pomerantz is the author of "What's So Funny?" in this issue of *Television Quarterly*.

Watching Wildlife

By Cynthia Chris

*University of Minnesota Press,
Minneapolis*
(320 pages, \$19.95)

By Geoffrey Hammill

Growing up during the 1950s, I had two passions: baseball and animals. The former was addressed on sandlots with friends, a bat, a ball and a glove. AM radio helped me stay in touch with my adopted team (the Cleveland Indians) while early television added the occasional visual connection (in dusty black and white). The live play-by-play over the airwaves reinforced the aliveness of the game—here was something in which a boy could be involved regularly and actively. But my other passion—animals—could not be addressed so actively. Our family dog and parakeet gave me a tiny window to actively pursue this interest. But it would be up to books and, most vitally, television to fill my desire for information about wild creatures.

I'm not certain where the fascination with animals came from but I know how that interest was nurtured. By Marlin Perkins' *Zoo Parade*, grainy Frank Buck "Bring 'Em Back Alive" films, Tarzan movies and *Ramar of the Jungle*. Any show that had images of wild animals had my rapt attention. In the Cleveland area there was also a local animal expert, Jungle Larry, who appeared on local kids' shows with his menagerie of wild animals. All of this plus any book I could

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find at the library filled my imagination with gazelles and chimpanzees and lions and eagles.

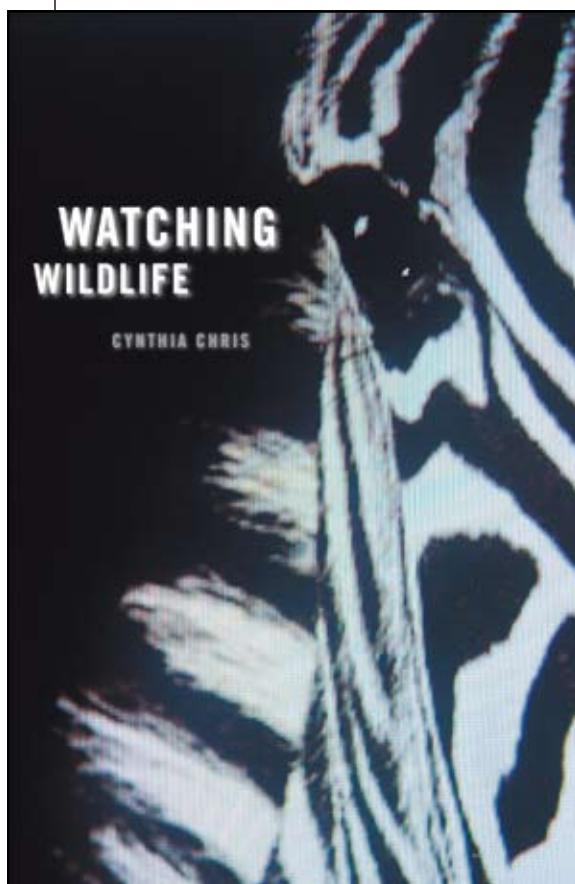
In *Watching Wildlife*, author Cynthia Chris has undertaken a broad examination of wildlife films and television programs. She explains the origins and evolution of this genre and provides a context for it which transcends the zoological and draws in the cultural, anthropological and ideological as well. Her text provides a cogent history of the genre from the earliest still representations of animals (incorporating Muybridge and Marey and their early motion studies) through to the contemporary glut of reality television programs as presented by the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet among others.

Chris' five chapters are arranged to detail the development of the genre. Chapter One presents the fascinating earliest years of wildlife study as affected by visual media beginning with panoramas and dioramas in museums and exhibitions. These precursors to film had a persuasive effect on their audiences.

Her discussion of the cultural implications of the earliest camera-hunter and expedition films provides a concise summation of the powerful effects of these images upon the European and American audiences who were "shown" that the wild animals and primitive peoples were characters in a world existing for the examination and understanding of what was seen as the eminently superior European world. The films of Martin and Osa Johnson, Cherry

Kearton and others, while no-doubt presenting some legitimate images from exotic locales, succeeded mostly in reinforcing the concept of a white male hegemony in which both "Others" and women were relegated to the same level as the animals which were the primary objects of the films. Examining Paul L. Hoefler's *Africa Speaks*, Chris notes the obvious use of editing to create such a statement, observing that "... it tacitly devalues African human life as expendable, fueled by the same racist bravado that pervades the Johnsons' films."

The "Disneyfication of Nature" began in 1948 with animal films that were "sentimental, anthropomorphizing, and



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steeped in postwar ideologies of progress and individualism, homeland prosperity, and so-called family values.” From this point, animal films would be focused on animals without the presence of humans. The films would examine either a single species’ life cycle or the wildlife of a given area. In this, the genre moved closer to the films of today that allow the audience to identify the “protagonist” and “antagonist” and to imbue the animals with human attributes. In a later discussion of the film “March of the Penguins,” Chris joins others in commenting on how the Christian right anthropomorphized the penguins and identified them as a representation of family values. “Here, the penguin is understood (even if it was not so intended by the filmmakers) as not only a signpost for the ‘natural,’ but a sign of the holy, however removed from its own daily experience is the concept.”

Chapter 2 traces the evolution of television wildlife programming focusing largely upon the shows of Perkins, Jacques-Yves Cousteau and David Attenborough, noting that their shows also conveyed some of “the aspects of ideologies of race, sexual difference, and the exploitation of nature” of pre-television wildlife films. Chris here and in Chapter 3 engages in necessary examination of the development of the technology and business of the television and cable industries as necessary to the evolution of the genre. In particular, she makes the point that PBS’ *Nature* followed the Disney tactic of removing humans from the images, thereby “both ensuring its reusability in future projects and helping the filmmaker evade controversies over

land use or issues like human poverty that might turn away audiences looking to be entertained or uplifted.” Indeed, the business of television has had a significant role to play in the evolving genre of wildlife film/television and Chris addresses this well. Her detailing of the development of the Discovery Channel (and its corporate brethren) and the National Geographic Channel, their programming and the subsequent globalization of these channels and their subject matter is well-done and essential. So is her examination of the development of sensationalized wildlife programs such as *Fangs!*, *Crocodile Hunter*, *When Animals Attack* and *When Good Pets Go Bad*. Chris manages to touch on the several sub-genres and the varying recombinations within the genre to good effect.

The need to draw audience is at the root of the subject of animal sex, to which a chapter is devoted. “Part of the human fascination with images of animals is voyeuristic, deriving from curiosity about sexual activity, theirs and ours.” This chapter also deals with sociobiology, the field that arose in the 1970s which suggests that human behavior can be understood through the understanding of animal behavior. The author does an admirable job detailing the impact of this academic theory upon wildlife films and of pointing out how the theory has been embraced by many wildlife filmmakers. Some shows, like *When Animals Attract* make distinct claims about the similarities of human and animal mate-selection. Others are more restrained but sociobiology obviously has been an influence on wildlife filmmakers in dealing with

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sexually-oriented topics. From courtship through mating to birthing and raising young, the genre appears to offer the animal world as a tool to understand human behavior.

Chris touches briefly upon issues of “rape” and homosexuality as topics for wildlife film producers. Elements of feminism enter the discussion throughout the text but particularly in this portion as the author deals with the difficulty of language use (is “rape” the correct word for “resisted mating” among animals?) *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* comes into play in the discussion of “gay” penguins at New York’s Central Park Zoo. Using this satire as the springboard, the author examines the tendency of the genre to avoid same-sex issues which occur regularly among some species.

The tone becomes more geo-political in the chapter about pandas. Arguably one of the most media-friendly animals, Great Pandas have been used to define international political relations and to generate revenue for zoos. While interesting, this chapter tends to diverge from the book’s focus upon wildlife films although Chris certainly details television’s on-going fascination with the animal and the attempts of humans to help it propagate in captivity.

Chris has done an exhaustive job researching her topic. Her notes include a wide array of sources from the fields of media, biology, cultural studies, anthropology, zoology and more. One criticism would be the lack of a comprehensive list of cited sources and other resources. With this many sources, it is necessary. But this is a minor (if important) drawback. The book is well-

researched and generally well-focused (the panda chapter notwithstanding) and it consolidates a lot of other research into an accessible volume. The genre of wildlife films is one of long-standing. Indeed, animal films were among the first to be created (Edison and Howe among early producers). And animals have long been significant draws for audiences, both cinema and television. Humans have relied upon moving images to inform them of animals and their worlds and, as Chris points out, the genre has frequently misled us. Internalized images of Africa, India, South America, and Asia and their people and animals have formed the realities of millions of people and the images have usually been manipulated unrealistically. Wildlife filmmakers have used their medium to reinforce cultural, spiritual and political imperatives. We have assigned human motives and meanings to animal behaviors and we have used animal behaviors to explain human activities. While there has undoubtedly been truth to much of this content, there has also been much misrepresentation.

For a young boy growing up in the U.S.A. in the 1950s, television brought an eye-opening world of exotic animals and places full of adventure and danger. Wildlife footage from the 1930s and earlier which was incorporated into Tarzan movies and “jungle” TV shows taught me about a world I might never encounter. Like everyone, I never questioned the validity or the accuracy of what I watched. Seeing was believing. That confident acceptance continued through the National Geographic specials and PBS shows (*Nature* and others) of the 1960s and 1970s. But an

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insight gained from age and experience is the awareness that television is a business that packages programming primarily to attract audiences. Enlightenment is secondary if it is truly a consideration at all. So the cable and network animal shows that started appearing in the 1980s began to resemble nothing so much as network comedies and dramas complete with good guys, bad guys, comic relief and easily-digested morals.

Watching Wildlife will open the eyes of those who might cling to the naïveté of Disney's True-Life Adventures. More importantly, it will enlarge the scope of media scholars and those interested in the place of wildlife film in our mediated world. Chris has written a volume which necessarily places the genre within its proper historical, cultural and ideological context. While the book, as written, will not reach the youngster watching a network or cable animal show, it certainly adds to the weaponry of those who would become more media literate; the better to remind us all that our mediated messages are products of a variety of influences and that nothing is as simple as it is made to appear.

Geoffrey Hammill is a professor of electronic media and film studies at Eastern Michigan University. He specializes in media criticism and media literacy.