

## REVIEW AND COMMENT

## Christmas on Television

By Diane Werts

*Praeger, Westport, CT*  
(272 pages, \$39.95)

By Paul Noble

**C**hristmas and television were made for each other. The best and worst elements of both become even more apparent and yet even more appropriate as December twenty-fifth approaches.

Christmas, with its “promise of perfection—of peace, brotherhood, warmth, and generosity, of good things to come, and bad things kept at bay,” also brings us “crass consumerism.” And television, at that time of year, balances its sometimes tawdry taste and everyday commercialism with programming that truly touches the spirit and provides a place “where people put aside their differences, where all is right with the world.”

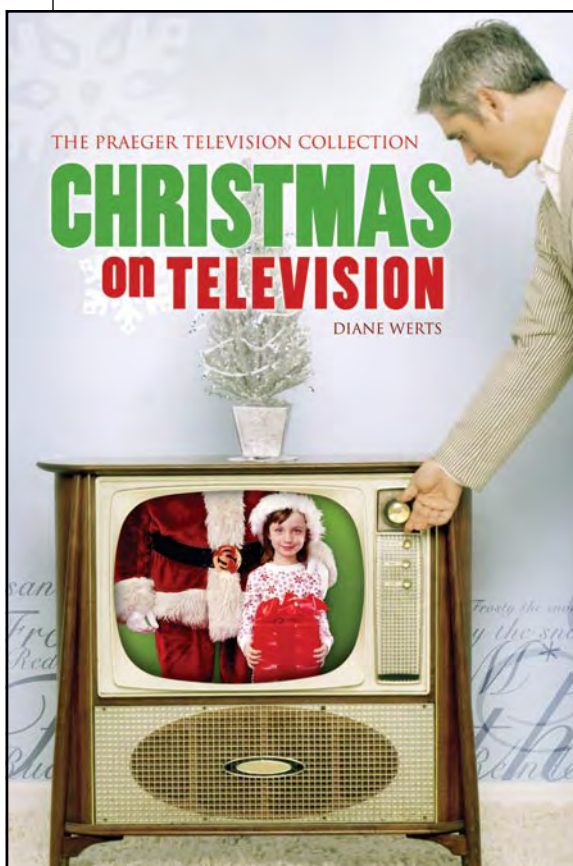
Diane Werts, the respected television writer for *Long Island Newsday*, is elevated to the role of holiday guru with the publication of her very unusual and all-inclusive retrospective of television’s contributions to America’s favorite holiday. *Christmas On Television* is the latest in the Praeger Television Collection books, and it is literally indispensable for anyone—viewer, fan, or fanatic—who wants a complete catalogue of the medium’s

yuletide output over the past sixty or so years.

Ms. Werts has been taping (now TiVo’ing) Christmas shows for the past twenty years, and she now has access to DVD’s and cassettes from syndicators and producers. How she managed, however, to amass enough episodes from far-flung series and specials from over the years, is a miracle of dogged investigation.

While I’m not the target audience for all of the sitcoms, hour dramas and television events she enumerates, I’m surprised at how many of the program descriptions she provides rang a bell with me.

First and foremost was the brilliant



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"It's a Wonderful Life", James Stewart and Donn Reed, 1946 (left)  
Kirk Jordan and Rosemary Kuhlmann in "Amahl and the Night Visitors" (right)

NBC Christmas eve premiere (1951) of the Gian Carlo Menotti opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. I'll never forget seeing that moving and lyrical hour. Of course it was live, as most television was in those days, but it was also original. And to those of us who were able to share that intimate presentation, we'll never be able to duplicate the thrill of such a creative and satisfying event. "It was an enormous sensation for a medium barely half a decade into its existence," Ms. Werts writes. "[It] was lauded for both its cultural and emotion impact, telling of a lame boy who follows the three magi to the manger of Christ and offers up his crutch as tribute. That such an artistic work could be seen by millions of Americans in one night—and present such a high level of creativity—marked a turning point in perceptions about television."

Television didn't just accommodate Christmas; TV enveloped it, developed it, and literally re-invented it. For many

people, pre-television family traditions were eclipsed by what television provided. Bing Crosby and his family serenaded us; Bob Hope visited our troops in war-torn locations around the globe; movies which had been made for theater audiences became rituals; books and stories were adapted, re-imagined and reborn in animation, musicals and dramas. America's greatest performers became the focus of annual holiday gatherings, from Perry Como, Judy Garland, Red Skelton and Liberace to Andy Williams, Dinah Shore, Arthur Godfrey, Kate Smith, Rosemary Clooney, Eddie Fisher, Mitch Miller, and, of course, Lawrence Welk.

As someone who worked in programming in both local television (Channel 5 in New York City) and basic cable (Lifetime), I can tell you that each summer we worked feverishly to acquire the Christmas-themed episodes and the two-hour films which would make the month leading up to Christmas more enticing and powerful than the previous

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year's holiday period.

I would say that Diane Werts' focus on the Christmas themes in the episodic half-hour and hour series is what makes her study most impressive. By analyzing the nature and content of those programs, she, in effect, provides a very enterprising history of network television's most celebrated shows and their contributions to the American way of life.

For example, her chapter "Christmas With a Conscience: Time for Social Statements," she demonstrates how Archie Bunker's bigotry can show the real meaning of Christmas and how the divisive issue of Vietnam could be put to rest; how *M\*A\*S\*H* could have an anti-war attitude and yet still "respect the efforts of those forced to fight." She looks at the Christmas efforts of *Highway to Heaven*, *21 Jump Street*, *Touched By An Angel*, *Nothing Sacred*, *My So-Called Life*, *The West Wing*, and *E.R.*, which touched on issues from organ donations, domestic abuse, homelessness and gang warfare to hate crimes, cultural clashes and substance use.

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the old Yule standby before television, became perhaps the greatest source of stories for writers and producers, and Ms. Werts describes the episodes and films which derived their strength from it. Scrooge has been portrayed in one show or movie or another by everyone from Susan Lucci to Mr. Magoo to Jack Klugman (as Felix Unger in *The Odd Couple*), Kelsey Grammer to George C. Scott to Cicely Tyson.

From the literally hundreds of shows which the author quotes, I offer a generous selection of my favorite lines which help define the shows, the characters, and the

holiday themes, as well as the stresses, tensions, greed, nostalgia, caring and sharing. Do you remember them?

Tim Allen, *Home Improvement*: "Christmas is not about being with people you like, it's about being with your family!"

Brad Sullivan, *Nothing Sacred*: "I don't care much for Christmas myself. Expectations—they're too high. My mother always wanted us to be so joyful. And Father would drink himself into a rage. Now it doesn't even feel like Christmas until the first punch is thrown."

Stockard Channing, *The West Wing*, describing the holiday rancor of her relatives: "We were never Currier and Ives."

Alan Alda, *M\*A\*S\*H*: "You know, between decorating the tree with thermometers, and Radar singing those Christmas carols on the PA, and that little below-zero nip in the air, this place really manages to capture that good old-fashioned Christmas depression."

Lucille Ball, *The Lucy Show*, angry at Vivian Vance's choice of a tree color: "Well, I might have known anyone who'd have a white tree would be a goose-eating package peeker!" (The retort from Viv, "What else would you expect from an evergreen-loving chestnut stuffer!")

Doris Roberts, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, about her bragging cousin Teresa: "You'd think she pulled the Pope out of quicksand or something."

Kelsey Grammer, *Cheers*: "By this time tomorrow, millions of Americans knee deep in tinsel and wrapping paper will utter those heartfelt words: Is this all I got?"

Bob Newhart, *Newhart*: "Let me get

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this straight. This is Christmas Eve, and you show up with a pregnant wife and there's no room at the inn... On behalf of innkeepers everywhere, I think we owe you one."

Carroll O'Connor, *All In The Family*, responding to atheist son-in-law: "All over the world, they celebrate the birth of that baby, and everybody gets time off from work. Now if that ain't proof that He's the son of God, then nothing is."

Bart Simpson, *The Simpsons*: "If TV has taught me anything, it's that miracles always happen to poor kids at Christmas. It happened to Tiny Tim, it happened to Charlie Brown, it happened to The Smurfs, and it's gonna happen to us."

*Christmas On Television* also pays attention to the counterparts to the holiday, factual (Chanukah, Kwanzaa) and fictional (Festivus and Chrismukkah). And to the usurper of *A Christmas Carol*, the Frank Capra film *It's A Wonderful Life*. Not only has the movie become the standard against which all holiday programming is measured, but it has generated dozens of plotlines and has shown up in the background of many television episodes. In the words of the Baileys' young daughter, "Teacher says that every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings!" Congratulations, Clarence!

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Paul Noble is a five-time New York-area Emmy winner for discussion and documentary programs. He has produced programming at WGBH-TV Boston and for Metromedia and Fox in New York. Now retired from his position as vice-president of film acquisitions and scheduling for Lifetime Television, he serves on the board of the Palm Beach County Commission on Film & Television.

## Reality Television

By Richard M. Huff

*Praeger, Westport, CT*  
(200 pages, \$39.95)

By David Marc

Somewhere between the impenetrable analyses of academic theoreticians and the breathless praise of incorrigible fans there is a readable, informative television criticism that helps viewers understand what they have been watching and how they might connect it into a bigger picture than the one in their home theater entertainment environments. Richard M. Huff, who covers television for the *New York Daily News* and teaches journalism at Manhattan's New School, is a TV critic working in just that elusive zone. In his new book, *Reality Television*, part of Praeger's Television Collection series, Huff combines the resources of a working journalist with scholarly perspective to offer readers a survey of the reality TV phenomenon.

Like many critics, Huff marks the seminal moment of contemporary reality as the unexpected summer success of CBS's *Survivor* in 2000. Unlike many of his colleagues, however, Huff understands that reality programming has been an element of network TV schedules since the earliest days of the medium, and capably demonstrates the heritage of reality shows, subgenre by subgenre. Ted Mack's *Original Amateur Hour*, for example, was presenting show business hopefuls competing against each other on the DuMont network half a century

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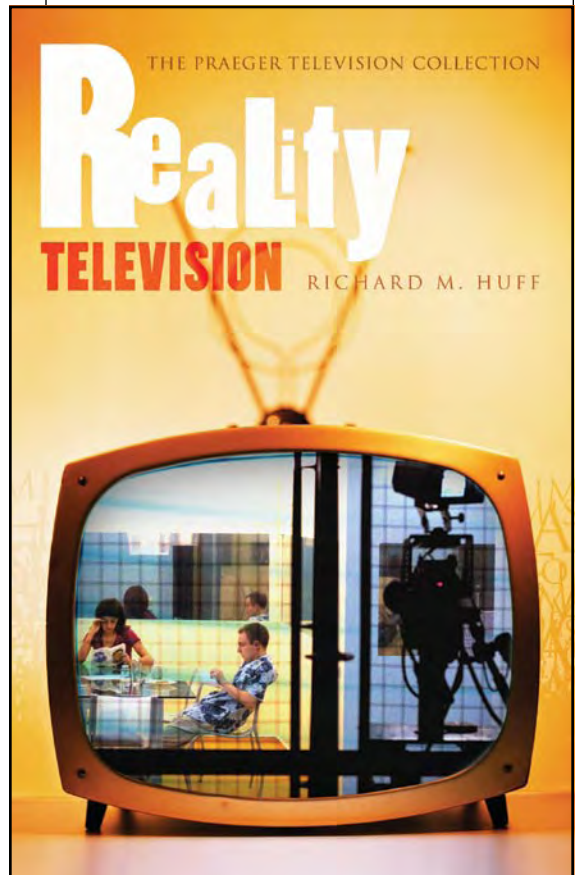
before Simon Cowell's *American Idol* premiered on Fox. *The Dating Game*, a Chuck Barris production, pre-dates *Blind Date*, *Elimidate*, *Next*, *Greed* and other cutting-edge matchmaking vehicles by almost as many decades. Makeover shows? *Queen for a Day* (NBC, 1956-60; ABC, 1960-64), in which studio audiences rated the pathos of winning sob stories by means of an applause meter, is the mother of them all.

So what's so new about reality? Is it possible that the genre universally touted as the most revolutionary commercial television phenomenon of the 21st century is, in reality, just a series of repackagings of well-proven products, just like all the other popular TV genres? Well, sort of.

Art Linkletter, who created, produced and hosted a string of early television hits—not one of them a sitcom or scripted drama of any type—goes so far to claim that he and Ralph Edwards (*This is Your Life*) invented reality television during the 1950s. In Linkletter's long-running prime-time series *People Are Funny* (and in ancient daytime game shows, such as Mark Goodson's *Beat the Clock*), non-celebrity contestants were routinely called on to perform ridiculous stunts. This sounds a lot like *Fear Factor*, but as Linkletter notes, "We never dreamed they would have people eating bugs on TV." And there, perhaps, is the difference between old reality and new. Why didn't they dream of having people eating bugs? Because they knew that Standards and Practices would never have allowed it. The disappearance of Standards and Practices (and, some would add, the disappearance of

standards) made it possible to bring back all those old concepts with such a "fresh" look.

Television, which was born as a mass medium during the McCarthy era, was a painfully timid medium during its first decades of existence. Reality in just about any form, whether it was human sexuality, original thinking, or ethical ambiguity, was not high on the list of network priorities. The stylized, painfully familiar genres of the broadcasting era looked sillier and sillier as cable widened the frontiers of content. Reality shows, beginning with Fox's *Cops* in 1990, offered the networks a way of dropping out of the "dramatic" reality they had been building for so long—and offered the added benefit



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of lowering overhead.

The most fetching chapter of Huff's book is titled, "Liars, Cheaters, and Scandals." In it, he reveals the extent of artifice necessary to create reality TV. *American Idol* contestant Corey Clark, for example, was cut during the second season of the series not for a lack of singing talent, but because he was facing charges of beating up his sister. A bit too real, even for the cable era? Morals clause, anyone? In the first case of a contestant striking back at a game show since Herbert Stempel took down *21* in the quiz show scandals, Clark claimed he had been having an affair with *Idol* judge Paula Abdul, who had grown tired of him. This was an especially egregious threat to the Fox mega-hit since Abdul had developed the reputation (or played the role?) of the fair and caring judge on *American Idol*. CBS had its lesson in the hazards of the hiring unrepresented, non-professional talent for prime time in 2000 when one of the housemates on *Big Brother* forgot to mention (on his 13-page application form) that he had a long history of making anti-Semitic speeches, and a web site full of the same, for anyone who wanted to read it. "The network reportedly spent more than \$100,000 on background checks for *Big Brother*, but failed to turn up Collins's past," writes Huff. "After word of Collins's background got out, viewers voted him off the show."

Reality-show fans are likely to enjoy reading Huff for his encyclopedic knowledge of the genre, including overall development of the genre and scores of particular factoids and anecdotes associated with individual programs, including both hits and failures. The book should serve as a reality check for

those who believe that the castaways on *Survivor* are in actual danger of starving, as well as for those who are convinced that every moment of MTV's *The Real World* is scripted.

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David Marc is currently working on his sixth book, which concerns eros and cable. His most recent book, *Television in the Antenna Age* (Blackwell), was co-written with Robert J. Thompson.

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## Only Joking: What's So Funny About Making People Laugh?

By Jimmy Carr & Lucy Greeves

*Gotham Books*  
(288 pages, \$23.00)

## I Shouldn't Even Be Doing This: And Other Things that Strike Me as Funny

By Bob Newhart

*Hyperion*  
(256 pages, \$23.95)

### By David Horowitz

**T**rying to determine what's funny is a challenge. As E.B. White said, "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies."

Animal cruelty aside, British comedian Jimmy Carr and his colleague Lucy Greeves, authors of *Only Joking: What's So Funny About Making People Laugh?*, set out to answer the question, "what's funny?" Clearly, there's clearly no one, definitive answer, and therein lies the rationale for this wide-ranging, scholarly, fun examination of the answer(s) to that question. The authors of *Only Joking* aren't out for laughs in their discussion, but a comprehensive look at the theory and practice of humor.

Besides trying to determine what's funny and why, the biggest challenge facing Carr and Greeves is that reading about humor is not the same as hearing or seeing it. What's funnier, hearing a comedian tell a story about a guy walking into a bar with a frog on his head or reading about it?

*Only Joking* provides a broad survey of both the history of humor as it evolved from pranks of the gods in a variety of cultures to modern jokes. The book occasionally gets bogged down, especially in the early going, in a detailed examination of what could loosely be called humor—if your idea of a good laugh is watching the gods torment a member of the tribe.

# ONLY JOKING



*What's So Funny  
About Making People Laugh?*

JIMMY CARR  
& LUCY GREEVES

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Readers less interested in the totemic origins of humor in mythological trickster spirits than why people laugh will find a nice blend of articulate discussions of the “joke” and how and why people find them funny. As they note, “Jokes are partly an expression of the alienated outsider who lives in all of us... In a sense, every joke expresses something about what it feels like to see things from an extraordinary point of view: what it feels like to be a foreigner.”

The authors loosen up a bit when comparing how cultures can shape an individual’s perception of what’s funny and what’s not. It’s clear that the dry British humor found in many of that country’s television shows, for instance, doesn’t always translate directly with American audiences, but that’s what show doctors are for. Equally, some jokes don’t travel well simply because of local references.

Given the authors’ British background, they’re quite aware of this and their discussion of British versus American humor is quite perceptive. Some North American readers might find some of the references to less-well-known British comedians a bit confusing, but while this book is clearly directed to a U.K. audience, there’s plenty of content for North American readers.

According to conventional wisdom, all comedians are products of an unhappy childhood. Maybe they are, maybe they aren’t, but as might be expected from a scholarly examination of humor, the authors investigate the psychological aspects of comedy, with subjects ranging from Sigmund Freud to Lennie Bruce. Along those lines, the authors do a fine job of examining the mindset of a standup comic, from the desire to please to the

depths of rejection when a performance bombs.

The book’s strengths lie in the examination of modern humor and who makes it in chapters devoted to stand-ups, gender-based jokes, offensive jokes, ethnic jokes and political humor. Given Carr’s career as a standup comic and Greeve’s background as comedy writer, they’re on firmer territory here.

The discussion of what might make a joke offensive to some people and not others is particularly astute. Sure, many people don’t like bad language or jokes directed at stereotypes or minorities, but plenty of people do. Why? The authors come up with a number of interesting theories, although some readers might still get offended at a few of their examples. (There’s one word my mother wouldn’t say even if her mouth was full of it.)

What’s a book about humor without some jokes? There are literally hundreds of jokes that appear throughout the book. Despite the point that jokes don’t “read” funny as much as when they’re heard, their sheer volume and quality is a terrific counterpoint to the text.

And what’s a review about an examination of humor without a joke from the book? Here’s what the British Academy for the Advancement of Science determined what was the “world’s funniest joke” through online voting in 2001.

“A couple of New Jersey hunters are out in the woods when one of them falls to the ground. He doesn’t seem to be breathing and his eyes are rolled back in his head. The other guy whips out his cell phone and calls the emergency services.

“My friend is dead! What can I do?”

The operator, in a calm soothing voice, says, “Just take it easy. I’m here to help.

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First, let's make sure he's dead."

There's a silence, then a shot is heard. The hunter's voice comes back on the line.

"OK, now what?"

**N**ewhart, on the other hand, is much less interested in discussing theories of comedy. As he writes, "I'm not a fan of books that examine humor in a scientific fashion. If I ever see another book called *The Serious Side of Comedy*, I'm going to throw up."

No puking here. Newhart takes a low-key look back at his life, both on- and off-stage. The book clearly reflects Newhart's laid-back style, which he used to great success in early years as a standup comedian. In those days, his buttoned down mind... comedy albums were the first to top the pop charts. As expected, there are the requisite behind-the-scenes anecdotes about other performers like Johnny Carson and *Get Smart*'s Don Adams, as well as about Newhart's early years and later television shows.

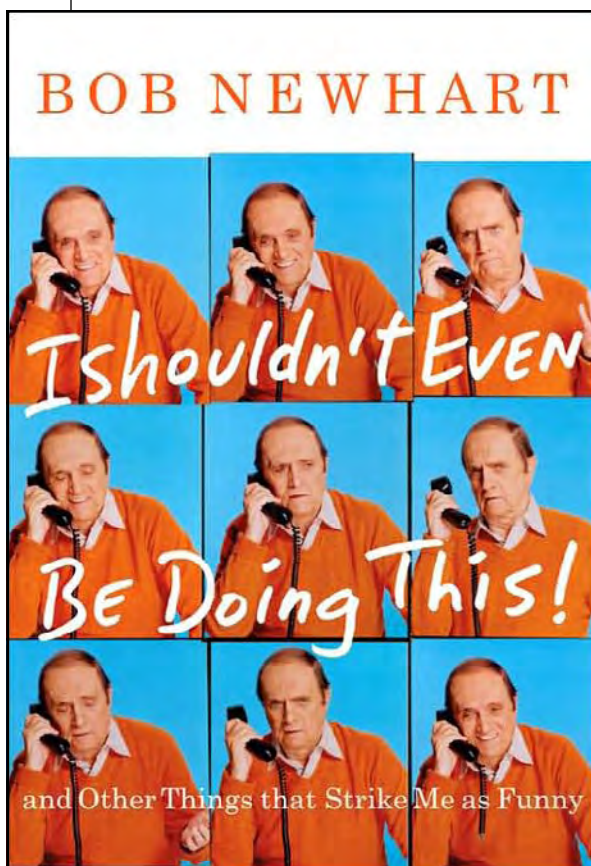
Some of the more pleasurable reads are transcripts of his early routines, like the classic conversation between Abraham Lincoln and his press agent: "Abe, you got the speech... Abe, you haven't changed the speech, have you... You what? You typed it! Abe how many times have we told you—on the backs of envelopes... I understand it's harder to read that way, but it looks like you wrote it on the train coming down."

Because Newhart's delivery is so familiar, readers can easily

imagine him doing these routines right off the page.

As many fans know, Newhart held a job as an accountant in Chicago before going into comedy full time. His practice in balancing the petty-cash books, for example, was simply to put in his own money if the account was short and take some out if the account was over. This is funny material, but Newhart covers it in just over a page.

Perhaps looking for deeper information about the man and his craft is the wrong approach, since the essence of Newhart's appeal is his everyman persona. Whether he's doing standup, sketch comedy or one of his "Bob" television series, he's just a guy who's



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doing the best he can to deal with what life has presented to him. As he writes at one point about his approach, "I've always likened what I do to the man who is convinced that he is the last sane man on Earth." Taken in that vein, there are enough vignettes in the book to satisfy even a casual reader, as Newhart is seemingly a bit more comfortable writing about his work than about who he is. To be fair, though, Newhart isn't too proud to offer some insights on his occasional overindulgences in alcohol and tobacco or his feelings toward some of the people he's met along the way.

For his fans, and for fans of comedy in general, one of the touchstones of Newhart's career was the last episode of the *Newhart* show, suggested by Newhart's wife, Ginnie, and named as one of the five most memorable moments in television history by *TV Guide*. In that series, Newhart played the owner of a Vermont inn. In what is arguably one of the most unexpected series final episodes, he awakens in the familiar bedroom of his previous series, *The Bob Newhart Show*, next to his TV wife in that series, Suzanne Pleshette, and starts telling her about his amazing dream that he had been running an inn in Vermont.

In all, the book is an interesting tour of the man's life, with details about his fear of flying, fun in Las Vegas, and golf. It might have been nice to have a little more excitement pop off the page, but then again, that's not Newhart's style. And millions of his fans are clearly just fine with that.

As for the title, it's the punchline to a joke: A guy is having an affair with his boss' wife. They are making mad, passionate love, and she says, "Kiss me.

Kiss me!" He looks at her very seriously and replies, "I shouldn't even be doing *this!*"

Glad you did *this*, Bob.

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David B. Horowitz is a free-lance writer and marketing consultant in Ann Arbor, MI, where he writes about electronic media and other topics. A 25-year TV veteran in the U.S. and Canada, he also teaches writing and advertising at Washtenaw Community College.

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### You're Lucky You're Funny: How Life Becomes a Sitcom

By Phil Rosenthal

Viking/Penguin, New York  
(243 pages, \$25.95)

#### By Earl Pomerantz

**P**hil Rosenthal was meant to create and run television sitcoms. Aspirants to that coveted but elusive position abound; I'm one of them. But Phil hit the jackpot. His successful and much-praised *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) yielded multiple awards, a loyal following and syndication immortality. Rosenthal's entertaining book, *You're Lucky You're Funny*, illuminates the mystery of how he pulled it off.

Let's start at the beginning. Common factors in professional funny people:

#### 1: Funny relatives.

Rosenthal had plenty. His grandmother, pointing to her nursing home's resident kleptomaniac furtively stuffing contraband into her purse, advises, "If I'm ever missing, look in there."

**2: A passion for quality comedy entertainment** and an ability to distinguish the good stuff from the shows about talking

cars. Rosenthal steeped himself in the classics: *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Taxi*.

**3: A good reason to stay indoors watching television.** Rosenthal's reason was neighbor kids who enjoyed hitting him in the head.

Combine these elements with a iron-willed determination and you're well on your way.

Rosenthal's education in comedy was augmented by an essential lesson in storytelling: Keep your comedy relatable by grounding it in identifiable human behavior: "Kindness. Love your family (no matter how crazy). Enjoy your life."

Creator and Executive Producer of **EVERYBODY LOVES RAYMOND**

PHIL ROSENTHAL



YOU'RE LUCKY  
YOU'RE FUNNY

How Life Becomes a Sitcom

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Any *Raymond* episode you look at will show that this lesson had a deep and enduring influence. Considering how the show's family members often treated each other, if it weren't for the loving, there might have been murdering.

Even for ultimate successes, however, the road to the top is rarely stumble- or humiliation-free. For me, the funniest parts of *You're Lucky You're Funny* are "The Early Years in New York," where Rosenthal gamely struggles to make his mark. We're told of a rocky stint as a museum security guard, his struggles as a clueless bartender, his leadership training experiences as a deli manager and a dog-sitting opportunity with strings attached. Though his passion was acting, Rosenthal learned that writing too, had its satisfactions. While devising and editing trailers for his employers, a small film-distribution company, Rosenthal discovered "It was a kick to have a whole audience laughing at something I wrote and put together." Sometimes, what you're meant to be is not what you want to be. But it can still turn out pretty good.

In L.A., terrible experiences on forgettable sitcoms had Rosenthal fearing he might be on the wrong track. But even while struggling, he was learning. He learned story structure, most importantly that "The story must be driving forward. The audience should not be aware of the structure while they're watching, they should just be entertained, but subconsciously, the strength of the story's structure will make the episode resonate with them far more than an unformed collection of jokes and funny faces." However disastrous, every experience helped sharpen his skills. Incorporating what he liked, rejecting what he didn't,

Rosenthal was gradually developing his style, taste and judgment. It would all come into play when his Big Chance arrived.

And arrive it did, on Page 72. A journeyman comic whose "act is relatable" was looking for a writer to collaborate with on a series in which the comedian would star. Rosenthal's meeting was the Mother of all Big Breaks. The luckiest thing that can happen to a writer is the chance to provide words for a performer who's pretty much exactly like him; like him in his view of the world, like him in his comic sensibility, like him in the way he puts words together – the funny way he says the funny things he observes. Phil Rosenthal, the writer, and Ray Romano, the comic, were very, very much alike. Their fortuitous pairing would result in one of the greatest, and truest, family comedies of all time.

When his chance came, Rosenthal knew exactly what he wanted. He decided "...if this was going to be the first show I ever created, I should write what I was comfortable with...[a show] that didn't depend on topical jokes, or the social rituals and foibles of the day, [a show] where the humor came from character, where the story came from character, and there was a story—beginning, middle and end." Rosenthal was inspired by the words of a former boss, Ed. Weinberger: "Do the show you want to do, because in the end, they're going to cancel you anyway."

Not that it was clear sailing. (It never is.) A number of Rosenthal's suggestions for the story that would serve as the pilot were shot down. It appeared the network was pushing the wrong actress to be cast as Ray's wife. When the show was sold,

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Ray was informed that they wanted him to be supervised by an experienced show runner. There was a studio executive determined to get him fired and take over his job. In every case, Rosenthal stood his ground and got what he wanted. It would be his show, for better or worse.

Fortunately, it turned out for better.

A substantial section of the book—season-by-season breakdowns of key episodes—is more suited to *Raymond* groupies than to the casual fan. There's also an extended retelling of a less than successful vacation at a Mexican resort, which, to me, seemed more whiney than hilarious. What's inevitably picked up is the clear sense that, through the run of the show, only one thing made Rosenthal truly happy—sitting in the Writers' Room, doing the work. On more than one occasion, Rosenthal admits he would gladly have done the job for free, and there's little doubt he would have. *Raymond* was his life, and his life brought him great joy and immeasurable satisfaction.

Not to mention vindication. A kid who was constantly told to leave the TV and go outside was finally proving everyone wrong. He wasn't wasting his time back then. He was learning. And now, it was all paying off.

Though disparaging the network requirement that all characters must be likable, Rosenthal's book substantially adheres to the requirement he disparages. He's likable all the way through. With perhaps one disclaimer. There is in Rosenthal's description of how he directs the actors and supervises the elements of the show a hint of micromanagement and a caring till it hurts. Consider this revealing Mission Statement: "Fred

Astaire would practice dancing until his feet were bleeding...so that when you watch it, it appears effortless. Same with this." Many in a similar position would stop short of the bleeding feet. But maybe that's what it takes.

I have only one reservation in recommending *You're Lucky You're Funny* as a study guide for creating great sitcoms for the future: the future may not include these kinds of shows. *Raymond* may be the last "well-made, traditional, classic type of sitcom" to grace the airwaves. The genre is failing and desperation has engendered an, as yet unrewarded, flight to the extremes. Though Rosenthal made light of (Inside the Actors' Studio's) James Lipton's saying about *Raymond*, "It's f---ing history, man", the pontificating interviewer may, in fact, have been right. The well-made, traditional, classic type of sitcom may very well be history.

What remains then are the reruns and this lively and informative book. That may just have to do.

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A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Earl Pomerantz was executive producer of *The Cosby Show*. His comedy-writing credits include *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Cheers*. He has won two Emmy Awards, a Writers' Guild Award, a Humanitas Prize and a Cable Ace award.

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## Prime-Time Television: A Concise History

By Barbara Moore, Marvin R. Bensman  
and Jim Van Dyke

*Praeger, Westport, CT*  
(260 pages, \$44.95)

### By Norman Felsenthal

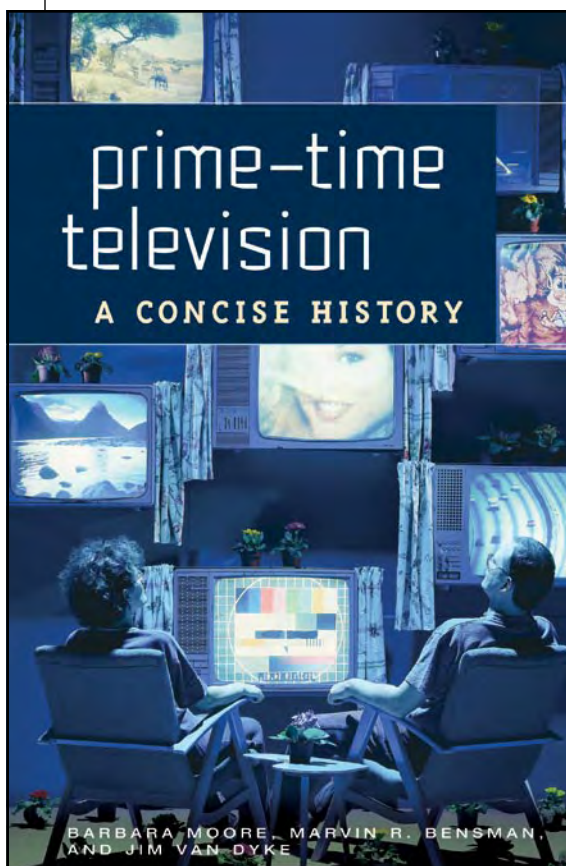
**P** *Prime-Time Television* is not a history of television, nor is it a book about programming. It is, however, a book about programs – over 800 of them. The authors, three academics, have written an eight-chapter book that traces the history of prime-time television by listing and, in most cases, briefly describing the genre and contents of specific TV programs. A few classic programs such as *I Love Lucy* and *All in the Family* are discussed at greater length, but the remainder – whether familiar or obscure – rate a few sentences or one or two paragraphs at most.

It's difficult to determine the audience for this book. Is it a supplemental textbook for students studying programming or the history of broadcasting? Or is it a trade book geared to a more general readership looking for a trip down television's memory lane. In a previous issue of *Television Quarterly*, Earl Pomerantz noted that: "academics seem determined to break into crossover publishing." *Prime-Time Television* appears, to this reviewer, to be one of those crossover books. In their attempt to cover so many different programs, the authors fail to generate

much real excitement for their topics.

The authors do try to relate the programs to the popular culture of the period. And they are not hesitant to probe relationships that are sometimes speculated. For example, was *Gunsmoke's* Miss Kitty (Amanda Blake) merely a saloonkeeper or the proprietor of a brothel? Was Della Street (Barbara Hale) simply Perry Mason's ever-loyal legal secretary or something more?

The four-page introduction is very good at stating basic principles and defining terms. This is followed by a 25-page opening chapter, "The Heritage of Radio Programming (1927- 47)," that lists programs, performers and genres that successfully crossed over from the



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audio to the video medium. A brief second chapter, "The Experimental Days of TV Programming (1939-47)," recalls a time when few people had television sets and few programs were aired by the fledgling networks. Among the most successful programs of this early period was a program featuring Arthur Godfrey that was simulcast on both radio and television.

"Finding an Audience (1948-52)" remembers Ed Sullivan and Milton Berle, children's programs like *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, the anthology dramas of a very brief "Golden Age," early Murrow and a number of primitive TV shows that pre-date the memory of most readers.

Chapter four, titled "The Rise and Fall of Live Drama and Quiz Shows (1952-59)," is self-explanatory. The section on the quiz-show scandals is particularly instructive because it clarifies how the scandals were exposed and analyzes the differing backgrounds of the principal protagonists, Charles Van Doren and Herb Stemple. Film and tape replace live TV as the production methods of choice and the adult western migrates from the movie screen to the television tube.

"Detectives, Cowboys, and Happy Families (1960-69)" is the longest, and for this reviewer, the most enjoyable chapter, probably because the programs are more memorable than those of earlier periods. During this period, the adult western peaked in popularity with *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza* leading a herd that included seven of the top ten programs in the 1958-59 season. TV programs may have gained technical polish and acquired sophisticated story lines, but it was also a period characterized by FCC Chairman Newton Minow as a "vast wasteland."

"Controversy in Prime Time (1970-84)" takes its name from the issue-oriented sit-coms (*All in the Family*), the innuendo-laden "jiggle" programs (*Three's Company*) and renewed concern about TV violence. Also discussed is the FCC's attempt to diminish network control of programming and open the marketplace to independent program producers by enacting both the Prime Time Access Rule and the financial interest/syndication rule.

One particularly amusing section creates eight different categories for situation comedies: happy family sitcoms (*The Cosby Show*), divorce in sitcoms (*One Day at a Time*), inverted family (*Maude*), workplace (*Cheers*), ethnic (*Bridget Loves Bernie*), independent woman (*Mary Tyler Moore Show*), nostalgic (*Happy Days*) and military-themed (*M\*A\*S\*H*). Dramas are grouped by similar categories: legal dramas, sports dramas, medical dramas, etc.

Chapter seven, "Changes in Competition (1985-1995)," deals with the emergence of the Fox network and expanding number of cable channels while the final chapter, "More New Voices (1996-2005)," examines network ownership changes, vertical integration, and the effect these changes have on programs.

The strongest portions of the book are the highly readable shaded inserts that examine specific program episodes in some detail. One such insert describes a *Gunsmoke* episode in which a hard-nosed "shoot-'em-all" U.S. marshal comes in conflict with Matt Dillon's more moderate rule-of-law orientation. Another relates the plot of an amusing *Bewitched* program where Samantha uses her witchcraft to

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deal with a demeaning dinner guest. Still another links *77 Sunset Strip* to 1960s America and describes Kookie, one of the well-remembered if tangential characters, as a “hipster, too late in historical time to be a beatnik but too early to be a hippy.”

One particularly thought-provoking insert recalls a *Twilight Zone* episode during which the Conalrad early-warning system has been activated and a group of neighbors, fearful of the impending nuclear disaster, vent their anger on one another, become a mob, and try to force their way into the single 10-foot-by-10-foot bomb shelter built by the one prescient member of the community. Later Conalrad announces a false alarm and the neighbors, filled with chagrin, apologize for their actions. Rod Serling, off camera, delivers the central theme of the episode: “No moral. No message. No prophetic tract. Just a simple statement of fact: if the civilization is to survive, the human race has to remain civilized.”

One of the disappointing elements of this book is the photographs, stock pictures of television actors and casts from the Photofest archive collection. These photos are reprinted in a muddy black and white that lacks detail and frequently obscures the images. The best portions of the book are the sections that explain the “why” (audience and economic factors) rather than the “what” (the programs themselves).

The book restricts its examination of programs to those aired by ABC, CBS, NBC and later Fox. No attempt is made to discuss PBS programs, nor would such programs fit into the classification categories used by the authors. Programs created for cable networks are also not discussed.

Near the end of the book, the authors recall a basic rule of programming. “If a program is cheap, easy to produce, and successful, it will be imitated quickly, if not especially well.” They also provide a useful warning against the nostalgia that makes us think more fondly of past than current programs. “The truth is that there has been no one time when TV programming has been wonderfully superior to all other times. Certain genres have blossomed and others have failed over the decades, but the overall content has remained, with a few exciting exceptions, determinedly mediocre.”

This book reminds us of the many programs that have filled our prime-time screens and encourages us to savor those few exceptional programs.

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## A Great Feast of Light: Growing Up Irish in the Television Age

By John Doyle

*Carroll & Graf, New York*  
(336 pages; \$15.95 paper)

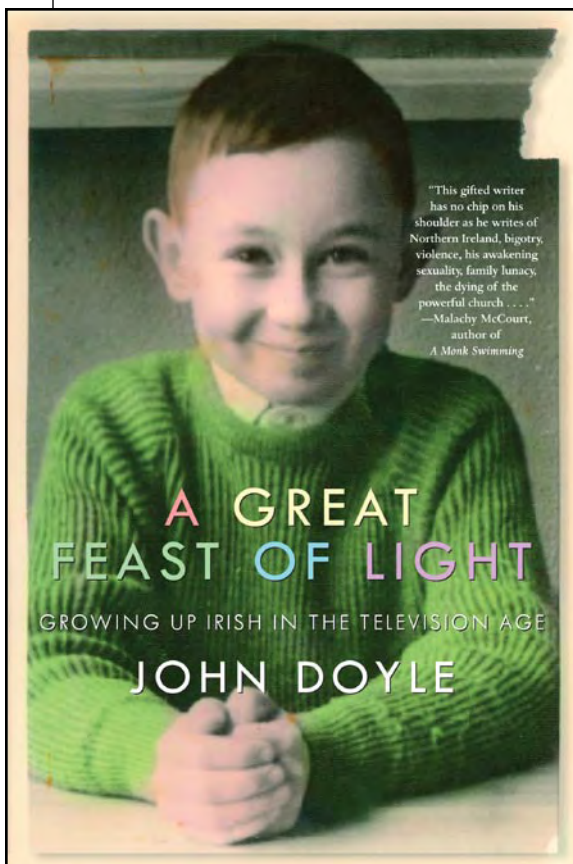
By Fritz Jacobi

**T**his is an absolutely wonderful book. Whether or not you have the slightest interest in Ireland or television, this coming-of-age memoir is completely captivating as it provides a three-dimensional portrait of a country and its people in the 1960s and '70s. And John Doyle's prose is pure poetry—graceful and elegant, with a real Irish lilt.

Doyle was six years old and living in the small town of Nenagh, County Tipperary, when his father, who sold insurance policies, brought home their first television set. It profoundly affected his life from then on. A fan of *Gunsmoke* from the start, the author notes that when he was punished in school for a crime he didn't commit, "the injustice stung like the red welt on my hand. Bat Masterson might laugh it off but Marshal Matt Dillon wouldn't stand for it. He'd sort out the truth and make sure that innocent people weren't blamed for a crime they hadn't committed. You could rely on the truth coming out in Dodge City."

And from the start Radiotelevis Eirann was great company to the

Doyle family, "a boon on fall and winter afternoons, warming the house with talk and music as darkness settled." But at Easter television almost disappeared completely. "Then RTE would just close down until Easter Sunday morning. It was to remind us that the anniversary of the resurrection of Our Lord was more important than anything going on in the world...Nenagh was full of religion. The town seemed to have an army of priests, Christian Brothers and other organizations devoted to the Church... They were hard men, the mission priests. Spittle and foam flew from their mouths as they promised hell to people who listened to foreign music and danced to it. Television was to be used for the news



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only, and for important announcements by bishops and cardinals. Everything else on television was rubbish and filth to be avoided.”

Yet despite such intolerance young Doyle was profoundly and permanently affected by television, whether it originated in Ireland, England or America. “Television arrived,” he writes, “and with it the hints of glamour, modernity and sophistication. The angelus bells still rang on Irish television to remind everyone of the faith of their mothers, fathers and forefathers, but in my house the angelus was only an interruption between entertaining programs and stories.”

From television he learned about Ireland’s bloody history, on which he trains a brilliant spotlight. Television broadened his horizons: “When people saw *The Donna Reed Show*, *I Love Lucy* or *Jack Benny*,” he writes, “they saw people comfortable in their skins, untrammelled by Church expectations and traditional pressures.” When sex reared its appealing head on the popular RTE *Late Late Show*, the program was attacked by the conservative politician Oliver J. Flanagan, who famously declared that “there was no sex in Ireland before television.” Television made Doyle immediately aware of Ireland’s fight for civil rights, with the sight of deadly riots and men being dragged off to internment camps. Television brought him Monty Python, whose “comedy was an assault on everything that made the Irish angry at the British establishment.” Television for young Doyle was living history.

Television introduced Doyle to *The Muppet Show*, whose two ancient hecklers, Statler and Waldorf, “were ideal for the Ireland of the time.” And *Dallas* was an

instant hit in Ireland. J.R. was the man everybody knew and secretly admired. “Holy mother of God, but that J.R. Ewing was a rogue,” Doyle writes. “From the beginning, I watched [*Dallas*] with greedy attention, and it was wonderfully broad television, its luxurious quality delectable in pinched and gloomy Ireland.”

Television finally changed John Doyle’s life forever. His professors at University College Dublin—where he was studying English, philosophy and history—had been encouraging him to continue his education in the United States or Canada. One night an RTE documentary about Canada focused on the charismatic politician Pierre Trudeau, who reminded Doyle of Bat Masterson, “swinging through the doors of a saloon, looking for trouble and afraid of nothing.” Transfixed by Trudeau’s candor and charm, Doyle looked at the screen and said to himself, “I’ll go there.”

And he did. Today John Doyle is a television critic for the *Toronto Globe and Mail* and is one of Canada’s most popular newspaper columnists,

Deservedly so.

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Fritz Jacobi is the editor of *Television Quarterly*. He has been writing about television since the days (and nights) of Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, *Howdy Doody* and *Victory at Sea*.