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Julia Child's The French Chef

Dana Polan
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Mention the name Julia Child in almost any crowd and you'll get smiles, nods, and stories about favorite episodes of her cooking show, *The French Chef.* Child has become an icon in America, a symbol of our collective desire to find transcendent beauty in those daily tasks—like cooking—that so often fall prey to a sense of the mundane.

While plenty has been written about her life—and, of course, her cookbooks offer a clear window into her enthusiastic approach to food—little has been said in respect to her television show. Dana Polan, professor of cinema studies at New York University, fills that gap with his comprehensive exploration of Child's foray into the then-new media and the effect it had on audiences and on television itself.

Child's cooking show debuted in 1962. While hers wasn't the first cooking show on TV, as many people believe, her dynamic personality and effervescent joy at preparing tasty food made her especially entertaining to audiences. She was also groundbreaking in that she refused to aim her show at housewives; her cooking instruction sparked interest in many different populations, including men and even children.

Recognizing that any serious discussion of a cultural phenomenon cannot be conducted in a vacuum, Polan provides an extensive background discussion of the cooking shows that came before Child's, and of television shows that ran contemporaneously with hers. He also shares his technical knowledge in explanation of the sets, cameras, and scripts—the behind-the-scenes activity most viewers take for granted.

The author also includes such endearing details as the cost of the taxi Child used to visit her hairdresser. He manages to piece together the demanding daily schedule Paul and Julia Child endured when their show was in production; their dedication to the show and her career is made evident in a 24/7 commitment.

In less capable hands, Polan's dissertation could have slipped into the dry academia that wouldn't have managed to jump the gap to food for the masses, but his writing is consistently engaging, whether he's discussing chicken carcasses being made to dance along the counter or the technical implications of a dropped soufflé. He also brings a steady influx of humor and interesting tangents to his account, often slipping into the first person to highlight a particular aspect of Child and her work: "My favorite among Paul's drawings is a delightful rendition of male and female lobsters with the symbol for their sex next to each one." Asides such as this add an element of whimsy to the text.

Thoroughly researched and wonderfully illuminating, Polan's book will earn admiration in both readers interested in television and those interested in Julia Child.

ANDI DIEHN (September / October 2011)

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