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Not So Prime Time: Chasing the Trivial on American Television

Howard Rosenberg
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Television is more than fifty years old. It is tempting to say that the medium is mature, that its strengths and limitations are understood. The problem with this viewpoint is that it is hard to say exactly what television is. Is it the lowest common denominator of public entertainment, or is it a magic medium that connects all people in tragedies and in triumphs? Because it can be both and everything in between, television is addictive and necessary, as well as an irritating, mindlessly chattering guest in the living room. This book reminds readers that television is both the village elder and the village idiot, and examines why this powerful medium so often descends into the mundane.

From 1978 to 2003, the author was a television critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1985 for criticism. *Not So Prime Time* is a collection of his television reviews, most of which were written between 1986 and 2003. The book is organized around four topics: News, Trash (popular programming), Politics and War, and True Heroes. The typical length of each column is three to four pages, making the book an easy, though provocative, reading experience.

Rosenberg obviously loves television, both for its dramatic potential and, less obviously, for its ability to create unintentional laughter. Consider this quote, triggered by a particularly ripe episode of *Dynasty*: “It reached far, far beyond merely being bad to that hallowed, rarefied area of TV programming so bad that it’s actually good. I was immediately hooked. If there was a Richter scale for trash, this hour would have hit 10 and kept soaring. It made *Dallas* look like *Hamlet*. It was glorious, euphoric, and simply inspired, a throwback to those exquisitely awful 1940s romantic movies that make such good parodies. Only this was no parody.”

This excerpt shows Rosenberg’s ability to critique the medium for its poverty and simultaneously appreciate its addictive quality. Throughout the book he criticizes, obsesses, blusters, targets the pompous, and exposes the unspoken commercial connections in TV news, political spin, and America’s obsession with celebrity. In these marvelously written pages he skewers and celebrates local and national news coverage, reality shows, public and television personalities, great actors and actresses, terrible acting and writing, and the real heroes of the medium, such as Jackie Gleason and Nancy Marchand.

More than a simple critique, each column highlights the idiom’s strengths and weaknesses and catalogues the insidious creeping loss of ethical center that is transforming news into “Newzac.” Prime, or not so prime, Rosenberg gives readers a reason to care about what will happen during the second half-century of television’s extended childhood.

PETER TERRY (August 18, 2009)

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