

**Susan Lever. *Creating Australian Television Drama: A Screenwriting History*.  
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Screen histories tend to fall out from production-centred or directors' perspectives, with screenwriters figured in transitory roles. Susan Lever's aim to write 'a history of Australian television drama from the writer's point of view, treating the script as central to the creation' (1) is a welcome flip of perspective that is coupled with the aim to address the 'neglect of television drama in literary history' (7). The research is largely based on interviews conducted by Lever for the Australian Writers' Foundation (AWF) Oral History project (2008 to 2013) and her additional interviews with selected writers. The resulting book is an inventory of shows and genres interlaced with mini-histories of their creation by many notable writers for Australian television since its advent—Tony Morphett, Bevan Lee, Sue Smith, John Alsop, Debra Oswald, Peter Yeldham, Sonia Borg, Geoffrey Atherden, Andrew Knight, Deb Cox, Chris Lilley, Cliff Green, Ian David, Ann Brooksbank, Wayne Blair, David Williamson, Alison Niselle and more—and many other influential television producers.

With this range of creatives, a diverse array of shows appear together: *Bellbird*, *My Name's McGooley*, *What's Yours?*, *Homicide*, *The Sullivans*, *Certain Women*, *The Box*, *Scales of Justice*, *Phoenix*, *Against the Wind*, *Sword of Honour*, *Packed to the Rafters*, *Bastard Boys*, *Rake* and *Redfern Now*, to name just a very few. The commentary does not greatly dwell on theoretical debates, or the impact of technological paradigms. The first four chapters cover early ABC and networked commercial television, and the role of the Crawford and Grundy studios as formative workshops for writers, and, too briefly, the business models of freelancing and writers' production companies. The later chapters unfurl a quasi-chronology of genres and formats that frame histories of scripts, and which criss-cross commercial and public broadcasters: 'Light Entertainment to Sitcom 1964–1990'; 'Big Stories, Literary Adaptations, Historical Mini-series 1975–1985'; 'Sketch Comedy and Comedy Drama After 1990'; 'New Histories and Docudrama'; 'New Perspectives on Crime'; 'Indigenous Television Drama'; and 'Contemporary Life and Longform Drama.'

Readable and reflection-stirring, it contains many leads for future researchers. I really enjoyed the opening chapters and commentary about the simultaneous New Waves in theatre and film in the 1970s that overflowed into television with the movement of writers between the forms. Lever argues that whereas film and stage were revival media, television was new and 'rapidly changing' (33). I soaked up the below-the-radar interchanges of writers for the ABC and Crawford studios and other insights. Some of this information is available in disparate sources, but Lever's approach of circling film, theatre and television is rare. In the later chapters, I found the discussion of crime drama the most illuminating comparison between early and contemporary television.

The promised writer-centricity is somewhat elusive at times, however. Writers' names do not appear in chapter titles and only occasionally in sub-headings, and the later chapters construct a thesis about the literary potential of television drama. Lever argues that the canon-forming scholarship on both Australian film and literature has overlooked the canonical potential of television (246), particularly, from the 1970s, Australian historical drama (54). By the 1990s, she argues, 'it was clear that television drama had taken over one of the major roles of the Australian novel—the fictionalizing of history' (160). While she does not engage with the

'history wars' of the 1990s, Lever traces the prevalence of historical drama and its mutation through small-screen formats—mini-series, literary adaptations, docudramas—across decades, arguing that some of these shows are 'as important as the Australian novels of the period' (181).

The predominance of realism as a dramatic mode since the 1950s supplements the thesis about the literary value of television. Citing Patrick White's criticism of the 'dun-coloured' realism that heralded new modernist Australian literary tropes (160), Lever detects a loose repertoire of television realisms: 'Backyard realism' and 'bush realism' (John McCallum's terms for stage modes) that enter 1970s television (17), the 'digressive realism' of crime drama in the 1990s (193), the social realism of portrayals of Aboriginal Australians since Sonia Borg and Maris Hyllus's *Women of the Sun* (207), and docudramas like John Alsop and Sue Smith's *The Leaving of Liverpool* and Smith's *Mabo* all form parts of this realist repertory. Chapters on comedy break away, and more recent trends away from realism are canvassed through Ryan Griffen's creation *Cleverman* (219–21) and Alsop and Smith's ahead-of-its time *Bordertown* (174–76). While I wanted more critique of the realist propensities of tv drama and why fantasy and gothic television have risen to prominence more recently, Lever's picture of the stolid historical-realist sediment of tv drama launches productive questions.

Still, I wanted a stronger overall sense of how individual writers use(d) television for their aims, and the method by which candidates for discussion were chosen. Aiming to treat screenwriters like 'literary authors' in interpreting their work over a 'whole career' (244) leads to many engaging vignettes about the genesis of various productions. But there is some inconsistency in the way careers are narrated, and the book's conclusions serve the aspiration for screenwriting to be recognised as literature with the effect of somewhat subordinating the scripts to this abstract aim. The Acknowledgements note that the late Tony Morphett chose the interviewees for the AWF Oral History project (vi) but do not mention the basis of Lever's additional choices (vii). Some writers, like Cliff Green, receive more overall attention because their activities span a wide period or are notably diverse, while close profiles—such as the ones on Tony Morphett, Bevan Lee, Geoffrey Atherden and Sue Smith, for instance—are relatively few and sometimes linked to particular shows or genres.

As a resource for further research, the book is an asset. The Works Cited and Further Resources lists a range of publications on screenwriting that inform Lever's approach, and there is a consolidated list of interviews. Information about the AWF Oral History project is in the Acknowledgements pages where Lever also mentions that full videos of the interviews now reside with the National Film and Sound Archive, and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, and gives a website where selected clips are available online (vii). Regrettably, there is no consolidated filmography of the many television shows. If the aim to centralise writers is not always congruent with the goal of seeing television as literature, the book still achieves a commendable assemblage of names that are barely known outside of the screen industries yet whose works widely and profoundly affect Australian identities and ideas. With its valuable leads and commentary it is a handy book that can fuel much-needed future research on writers for the small screen.

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