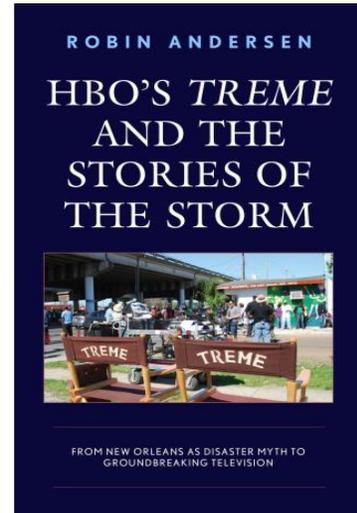


Robin Andersen, **HBO's *Treme* and the Stories of the Storm: From New Orleans as Disaster Myth to Groundbreaking Television**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018, 222 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover), \$44.99 (paperback).

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How can a book change how a person watches a television program? How can a book save the wreckage of a momentous disaster? In **HBO's *Treme* and the Stories of the Storm: From New Orleans as Disaster Myth to Groundbreaking Television**, Robin Andersen ambitiously tackles the media coverage, program structure, race, place, performance, music, and cuisine of a fictional program about post-Katrina. *Treme*, which aired from 2010 to 2013, portrayed several story lines of New Orleanians coping with Katrina's aftermath, such as Mardi Gras Indians (an African diaspora group) preparing for the first post-Katrina Fat Tuesday celebration, a civil rights attorney searching for a young man lost during the hurricane, and generations of musicians and chefs rubbing elbows with guest appearances of real-life contemporaries (e.g., Allen Toussaint, Donald Harrison Jr., Tom Colicchio, and David Chang). David Simon and Eric Overmyer cocreated *Treme*, and they cocreated *The Wire* too.



In *HBO's Treme and the Stories of the Storm*, Andersen argues that *Treme* challenges the initial coverage of Katrina. Rather than portraying black New Orleanians as threatening looters, assailants, and gang members, the program portrays them more realistically as survivors, victims, and witnesses. As background, Katrina's wreckage was not as much brought about by a natural storm or criminals, but by infrastructure deficiencies caused by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Indeed, the program's name, after the New Orleans neighborhood Tremé, carries with it the significance of the neighborhood's history in spearheading the civil rights movement. As such, Andersen summarizes *Treme's* story lines of the major characters as handling their post-Katrina lives with resilience and dignity. Andersen's main goals for *HBO's Treme and the Stories of the Storm* are to justify the import of the program and to respond to negative criticisms. For Andersen, in a nutshell, her book concerns "the best show on TV that nobody watched" (p. 142). She argues that the quality of the show derives from its artistic and social merit. For the most part Andersen accomplished those goals.

Andersen's book has many strengths, particularly its wide scope and its thoughtful response to *Treme's* critics. More than journal articles—national (e.g., Parmett, 2014; Thomas, 2012) and international (e.g., Lozano, 2013; Mayer, 2017)—that analyze *Treme* in limited topics and contexts, *HBO's Treme and the Stories of the Storm* approaches the program multidimensionally. Moreover, the book's wide scope is more focused than an anthological counterpart (Gendrin, Dessignes, & Roberts, 2017), as Andersen's chapters all serve to strengthen the book's thesis about *Treme's* accomplishments—for example, the program's esteem and authenticity in showing the Mardi Gras Indians (chapter 4); its use of music to

structure and color the program (chapter 5); and its integration of storytelling, local cuisine, and food criticism (chapter 6).

Throughout the book, especially in chapter 8, Andersen earnestly addresses *Treme's* critics. Andersen judiciously concedes valid points from those critics, such as academic Lynnell L. Thomas's (2012) point that *Treme* relied on paternalistic patterns. Andersen recognizes that *Treme's* first two seasons foreground two white male characters who spoke about the black dissent and music, respectively. "Creighton Bernette [John Goodman] and Davis McAlery [*sic*] [Steve Zahn] are anointed spokespeople for the black experience in New Orleans" (p. 172). When appropriate, Andersen presents evidence to add nuance—for example, adding complexity to author Rolf Potts's (2013) point that *Treme* is hostile to New Orleans tourism. Andersen describes scenes that contradict Potts's argument, such as a major character showing disapproval of an anti-tourist incident and scenes of tourists and locals partying. "It is one of the special moments of *Treme*, a scene of awkward acceptance and sheer enjoyment, as the white kids and black musicians find common ground and party all night long" (p. 146).

Nevertheless, Andersen's book has its limitations. The main area of improvement is to dig deeper in its treatment. For instance, its treatment of social justice could have more fully discussed the structural racism and classism in (post-)Katrina's New Orleans. While Andersen closely discusses the role of federal government negligence and New Orleans Police Department corruption and brutality, the book's treatment of white vigilantes' immunity from punishment deserved a more in-depth analysis. Andersen's account of these white vigilantes—white residents from the affluent Algiers Point arming themselves with guns and shooting at black residents and refugees, even killing them—departed very little from an article in *The Nation* (Thompson, 2008). In fact, scholarship exists of broader structural racist and classist patterns, where punishment was more serious for the black and the poor but not anybody else. Katrina led to doctors and nurses euthanizing patients, nursing home operators failing to evacuate residents and killing them, and evacuees outside of New Orleans being unfairly evicted from shelters (Allen-Bell, 2010; Hawkins & Maurer, 2012). Similarly to the white vigilantes, none of the wrongdoers in those cases were punished, while predominantly black and poor New Orleanians were sentenced to years of state prison (Allen-Bell, 2010).

That said, since HBO's *Treme and the Stories of the Storm* is a media studies book, it cannot fully address all the topics it mentions. Social justice is only tangentially related. Still, even in the book's treatment of media studies, it could dig deeper in media production. The book inconsistently compares different productions. On the one hand, Andersen argues that it is inappropriate for critics to compare *Treme* with *The Wire*:

while it is true that both programs were set in cities, both focused on an urban sense of place, and both programs were created by the Simon/Overmyer team, the programs could not be more distinct by almost any measures used in television analysis. (p. 151)

On the other hand, Andersen compares the viewership statistics of *Treme* with that of *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*). While all these three programs are produced and distributed by HBO, *Treme* is much more similar to *The Wire* than it is to *GoT* (Lozano, 2013). After all, the latter program is an epic fantasy set in medieval-like times.

Other than the above issue in the book itself, the book also could devote more space to addressing the context in which *Treme* was produced. The program—though set in the mid-2000s—was filmed on location in the 2010s, to take advantage of New Orleans’s urban planning, zoning, and tax incentives aimed at attracting media production (Mayer, 2017; Parmett, 2014). Taking this into account, Andersen could draw a fuller picture of why *Treme* had racial portrayal issues that relied on stereotypes, especially of black criminality. Although Andersen speculates that the racialized portrayals were due to the producers’ catering of broad audiences, if we take into account the production factors, *Treme* could be compromised by the productions’ close connections with New Orleans’s city entities.

In a final analysis, in *HBO’s Treme and the Stories of the Storm*, Andersen helps to build the television program’s goodwill through evenhandedly analyzing the program itself and its context and adding to the critics’ discourse. Through this work, Andersen supplements how a person may watch and enjoy *Treme*. However, as a book about *Treme* and Katrina, Andersen’s work does not fully justify how it aids in recovering from the momentous damage, much less of other storms.

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