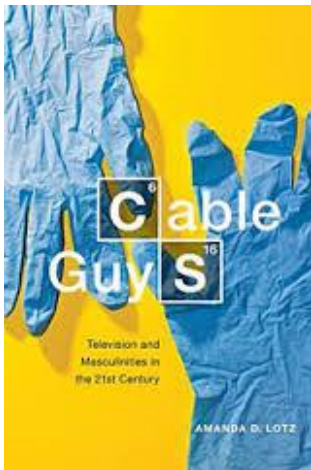


Amanda D. Lotz, **Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014, 251 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

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Ten years ago, television critics and scholars alike rang a death knell for quality television, which was said to be suffocating under an avalanche of reality shows and online user-generated content. How then can we make sense of the recent renaissance on cable channels of high-quality dramas that offer complex narratives, ambivalent characters, and moral ambiguity? Amanda D. Lotz's new book, **Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century** leads the vanguard of new scholarship that grapples with making sense of our contemporary television landscape. Lotz focuses on representations of masculinity in (mostly) dramas on (mostly) cable channels in the United States since 2000, looking at male protagonists in shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Breaking Bad*, *Entourage*, and *Rescue Me*. She rigorously explores these male characters and their relationships to investigate revised articulations of masculinity in the new century, and contextualizes these protagonists within current industrial, cultural, and television genre contexts.

Lotz builds on her robust earlier scholarship on gendered representations (*Redesigning Women*; Lotz, 2006) and postnetwork transformations in the television industry (*The Television Will Be Revolutionized*; Lotz, 2007) to produce a compelling and convincing analysis of contemporary cable masculinities. This century's new men are riven with tensions: They are both more emotionally available and morally ambivalent than their predecessors, they struggle with conflicting demands of their work lives and providing for their families, they love the women in their lives and blame their fathers, and they bond with other heterosexual men while needing to deflect aspersions of homosexuality. Lotz looks first to industrial conditions to make sense of these multifaceted characters. Protagonists who display interiority and emotional richness are demanded by the genre—drama—and its primary audience—women. *The Sopranos* offered a template for later shows by demonstrating two key assertions: The protagonist doesn't have to be good, and smaller audiences can be beneficial for television shows. Subsequent shows on both premium and basic cable met the demands of the new television landscape where niche cable channels must take risks with antiheroes in their competition for audiences.

Second, the protagonists exemplify the challenges of post-second-wave feminism, where men must become more emotionally available, embedded in family life, and domestically engaged while also trying to make ends meet within the pinched economics of the U.S. middle class. Yet as these characters explore the instabilities of contemporary masculinity in their relationships with each other, they also (usually) disavow the possibility of homosexuality that has become increasingly visible in television shows

and cultural life more broadly. These shows, third, exploit the generic shifts toward what Jason Mittell (2015) calls "complex TV," including multilayered plots, extended narrative arcs, and multidimensional characterizations to offer versions of manhood more challenging and, arguably, more satisfying than television has so far offered audiences.

The book is elegantly segmented into chapters that consider male protagonists in a number of relational contexts. In chapter 2, Lotz addresses male-centered series such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* that focus on "protagonists unsure of how to be men and of what is expected of them in a society substantially different from the worlds of their fathers," making them "endlessly bewildered" (p. 58). Strikingly, Lotz notes, even though these men struggle to navigate the competing demands of an emotionally engaged family life and providing for their families in uncertain economic times, they do not blame their female partners and colleagues for their predicament. Instead, they feel anger toward their fathers for leaving an "unsustainable legacy" (p. 21) of traditional patriarchal models of masculinity. In chapter 3, Lotz considers the moral ambiguity of many of these antiheroes who break the law to support their families. Things start to go very wrong when they make decisions without consulting their female partners.

In chapter 4, Lotz considers the "homosocial enclave." In shows such as *Entourage*, *Rescue Me*, and *Men of a Certain Age*, heterosexual men bond through new forms of male intimacy, using humor to police each other's performance of masculinity. Drawing on Eve Sedgwick's (1990) exposition of homosociality to describe all-male social spaces, Lotz notes that these male enclaves inevitably risk prompting "homosexual panic" for characters and audiences alike. These series work in various ways to contain homosexual intimacy, for example in *Entourage's* banter that stigmatizes not gay men per se, but gay sex acts.

Lotz's fifth chapter addresses those shows that flirt most directly with intimacy between men in male dyads, including *Nip/Tuck*, *Scrubs*, and *Boston Legal*. She acknowledges that the latter two shows are from network channels—the other series in the book are from cable—and considers why male dyads might be the vanguard of new forms of masculinity on network television. Drawing from Ron Becker (2006), Lotz appraises these male couples as examples of "queer straight masculinity" (p. 147). Here, the male best friends' relationships with each other are more important than those with the women in their lives. What makes these shows queer is that sexual coupling is not situated at the pinnacle of intimacy: "The greatest relational intimacy can be achieved without sexual intimacy in a manner that might disarticulate the differentiation of gay and straight from sex acts" (p. 159). Sometimes these shows ironically dismiss the threat of homosexuality invoked by queer straight masculinity, as in *Scrubs's* hilarious musical number "Guy Love." But other series entertain the possibility of physical attraction and sex, as in the ambiguity of Sean and Christian's bond in *Nip/Tuck*.

Lotz concludes the book by addressing the paradox that although these shows are structured in part through the gains made by second-wave feminism, they focus on male characters and their struggles, with fewer juicy roles for women as lead protagonists in series. She wonders whether critics and audiences "are ready to see female characters that are as deeply flawed as Walter White and Dexter Morgan as individuals and not as indictments of feminism, contemporary career women, and mothers" (p. 192). Male

protagonists are free to be bad in a range of compelling ways; women leads bring with them the burden of representing their gender. I would push back a little on this claim; emotionally complex, relationally challenged, and brilliant female protagonists in shows such as *Homeland*, *The Killing*, and *Top of the Lake* do offer new versions of televisual femininity, albeit still morally committed forms.

*Cable Guys* fills a significant gap in television studies scholarship by focusing largely on white, heterosexual male characters. Whereas there have been excellent studies on how television portrays women (including Lotz's own analysis [Lotz, 2006]), African Americans (Gray, 2004), Latinas (Molina-Guzmán, 2010), and gay people (Becker, 2006), white heterosexual masculinity has largely gone unmarked in the critical scholarship, even as its contours have changed radically in our new industrial and cultural contexts. *Cable Guys* also complements new research that addresses the recent rise of expensive fictional television from aesthetic and industrial perspectives (Mittell, 2015). Lotz makes a compelling argument for the range of institutional and cultural forces that prompted producers to explore complex masculinities, and offers a subtle analysis of distinct cable shows rather than trying to shoehorn all male characters into a single analytic category. She resists simplistic or deterministic arguments about why these representations have manifested at this time and mostly on cable. And as with her other work, this book is a model of elegant structure and clear writing. I would have liked to see a rather more sustained return in the concluding chapter to the industrial conditions that promoted these new examples of masculinity; in her efforts not to reproduce unhelpfully deterministic arguments about the conditions in which particular representations are possible, her concluding remarks come across as rather tentative. This minor quibble aside, *Cable Guys* is essential reading for students and scholars working in television studies and in the gendered politics of representation. The book is clear enough to be accessible to an undergraduate audience, while it is also sufficiently subtle and illuminating to be satisfying to more advanced students and scholars. As fictional television series continue to grow in number, audience size, funding, production values, and character and narrative complexity, *Cable Guys* offers a robust critique of the gendered dimensions of these shows.

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