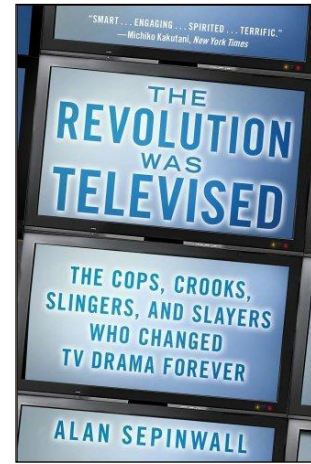


Alan Sepinwall, **The Revolution Was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers, and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever**, New York, NY: Touchstone, 2013, \$16.99 (paperback).

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In reviewing Alan Sepinwall's *The Revolution Was Televised*, it must first be noted that this is most assuredly not an academic work. Sepinwall, a television critic with a particularly devoted following—note his 60,000 Twitter followers and high-ranked podcast—sets out, first and foremost, to entertain (though informing is not necessarily out of the question). Nonetheless, Sepinwall's key status within both the television fan community and the critical discourse surrounding television makes this a fascinating text for media scholars, particularly because it was so successful as a self-published text that it was eventually acquired by the Simon & Schuster imprint Touchstone. As Dave Itzkoff of *The New York Times* noted at the time, the pickup was "a bit of history," for it continues to be "the rare self-published author to be picked up by a major press." (*The New York Times*, 2013, p. C2). What, a curious academic might ask, is all this fuss about?



Let us begin with the structure. Following a brief introduction and prologue, the book proceeds to cover 12 different television shows over 12 different chapters—attempting to trace a loose evolutionary path showing the increasing sophistication of television dramas in recent years, starting with HBO's prison-drama, *Oz*, and ending with AMC's crime-drama, *Breaking Bad*. Each chapter reads like an extended feature article on the selected show and, more often than not, the focus is on developing an abbreviated history of the selected show. Drawing upon interviews with the shows' creators and other industry figures, Sepinwall again and again traces how these programs transformed from loose ideas into "the best and/or most important shows of the era" (p. 5). The chapter on *The Shield*, for instance, begins by telling us that the show "came about almost by accident," as it "was never intended to be a series, simply a writing exercise by a young producer named Shawn Ryan who was looking to branch out" (p. 136). Of course, this "creative exercise" turned into a hit that helped define the up-and-coming FX network. In the process of developing these narratives, Sepinwall not only brings in numerous anecdotes and insights from the shows' creative teams, but also gets into the specifics of the shows' narrative arcs, attempting to describe how each one continued to push the medium forward. In the process, the reader receives brief reflections on television genres, such as when Sepinwall describes *Battlestar Galactica*'s relationship with science fiction, and is also treated to what Sepinwall sees as the highlights and lowlights of each show's development over time. Much, for example, is made of *Lost*'s various "missteps" in its middle seasons (p. 182). In fact, Sepinwall goes so far as to declare that during one season, three episode of *Lost* were "such a mess . . . one might ask whether it was planned that way" (p. 179). Suffice it to say, Sepinwall is not afraid to insert his opinions into his writing.

On the whole, Sepinwall's book does a number of things very well. Undoubtedly, it is a breezy read. By turning each show into a mini-narrative, Sepinwall keeps things moving swiftly forward. Additionally, the use of the historically oriented narratives gives each chapter its own three-act structure that not only gives all readers an easy entry into these shows—even if they have never seen them before—but also provides for something like closure by the end. The chapter on *Lost*, for example, begins with the story of ABC executive Lloyd Braun coming up with the idea for the show while on vacation in Hawaii. Thirty-five pages later, it closes with Braun looking back on the show years after it has come and gone—and years since it helped skyrocket the careers of individuals such as J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof. "When I look at the entire series, I think what those guys did, it was brilliant television—groundbreaking television," Braun comments. "They took a crazy network executive's idea, and they turned it into something amazing" (p. 190). Closing with such a quote is certainly schlocky, but it is also certainly easy to digest.

Another reason that the book reads so easily is Sepinwall's skill in summarizing and critiquing a show's individual episodes or even entire plotlines or seasons. It is in these moments that Sepinwall's many years of recapping television shows becomes apparent. As Josh Levin explained in a 2011 *Slate* piece, Sepinwall has become a legend within the world of TV criticism for pioneering a new form of television criticism that is increasingly everywhere on the Internet—episode-by-episode analyses of shows that are a bit like the snarky recaps made famous by *Television Without Pity*, but that also aim to unpack subtext and the hidden meanings buried within the programs. Levin describes the new television criticism as combining "traditional criticism, plot recap, what-will-happen-next punditry, and unadulterated fanboyism" (2011, para. 7). As Levin notes, these types of commentaries can now be found at *Gawker*, *Slate*, *The AV Club*, and countless other popular culture sites. As a result of his popularization of this now ascendant form, Levin writes that Sepinwall has played a key role in transforming the very nature of television criticism, shifting the emphasis away from telling viewers which shows to watch and instead helping them to understand the shows in which they are already invested. So, clearly, Sepinwall has some practice describing television. In the book, that becomes apparent as Sepinwall quickly dashes off explanations of a show's various arcs, always infused with some wit. The messy transition between *Friday Night Light's* strike-hampered second season and its barely renewed third season, for instance, is quickly summed up as follows: "The writers decided that a clean break from that season would be best for all involved. The story resumed the following fall, all the dangling plotlines were ignored . . . and like a penny in a fountain, wishing that second season hadn't happened made it so" (p. 291). Although Sepinwall's recaps in the book are now interspersed with quotes from writers and executives and he is tasked with summing up entire series instead of individual episodes, his chapters definitely retain the traces of his popular writing style.

But even if Sepinwall's book is often an entertaining read, it can also be a frustrating one. To begin with, Sepinwall consistently takes uncomfortably reverential attitudes toward the industry figures he covers in the course of the book, particularly the showrunners. On one level, this manifests itself through Sepinwall's refusal to critically interrogate any of their statements. In the chapter on the *Sopranos*, for example, Sepinwall explains that showrunner David Chase "hated the idea of just giving viewers exactly what they wanted, and would at times deliberately steer away from the conflicts that seemed obvious precisely because he knew it was expected" (p. 47). Sepinwall here ascribes a lot of intent and knowledge

to Chase and refuses to question the validity of his claims, instead taking Chase's statements at face value. Again and again, this trend of taking the showrunners' words as gospel repeats. Even more troubling, though, are the chapters that veer into hagiography. The clearest example of this issue is the chapter on *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, which is less an analysis of the show than a loving tribute to Joss Whedon. Unable to secure an interview with Whedon himself, Sepinwall fills the chapter to the brim with quotes from former colleagues praising Whedon's unending brilliance. Even acknowledged missteps—such as a clumsy Whedon-directed pilot episode—are used as testament to Whedon's stunning ability to quickly master things he initially struggled with. A quote about Whedon from his *Buffy* co-showrunner David Greenwalt is typical: "He's the only honest-to-God genius I've ever met. Joss was amazing" (p. 198). *Buffy* producer Gail Berman, meanwhile, is quoted as saying that the crew worshipped "at the altar of Joss" (p. 198). Although Sepinwall is merely the messenger when it comes to quotes like these, it is significant that he does nothing to challenge or qualify these hyperbolic accounts. Instead, he structures his entire narrative around Whedon's extraordinariness. By the end of the chapter, a reader can only imagine that Whedon will one day reveal himself able to walk on water.

Another problem with the book involves the way it ignores wider conversations around television. To a large extent, Sepinwall is writing in a bubble; as a reader, you get many quotes and stories from industrial sources involved with the programs at hand, including numerous showrunners and network executives, but you're also primarily in Sepinwall's mind, treated almost solely to his own original insights and takes on these shows. Often, this is a pleasure, for Sepinwall has some clever comments to make and is frequently funny as he both praises and denigrates these shows. However, it also becomes a bit disturbing how disconnected Sepinwall is from the other discourses that surround the shows in question. This is even more frustrating given how frequently Sepinwall mentions these other discourses. As an example, we might refer again to the chapter on *Lost*. At several points in the chapter, Sepinwall refers vaguely to fan dissatisfaction with the show's direction and the ways in which fans shaped the show's evolution, but Sepinwall never actually gives voice to these fans. Instead, they are always captured with sentences such as "many *Lost* viewers grew impatient with the show's stinginess with answers" (p. 186). Statements of this sort raise a number of questions. Who exactly are these fans? Where are they voicing their thoughts? However, Sepinwall provides no answers. Curiously, Sepinwall also tends to ignore any of the work produced by his fellow television critics.

It is similarly disconcerting how Sepinwall notes the existence of an academic discourse around certain shows, but then chooses not to dig into the content. For example, toward the end of his chapter on *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, Sepinwall quickly notes that "the show has inspired a cottage industry of scholarly books" (p. 202). He makes no mention, though, of what might be in these books and whether their insights might be helpful toward his endeavor. Sepinwall's refusal to engage with scholarship—even superficially—is all the more befuddling given the overriding themes of his book, which all essentially boil down to the types of "quality TV" arguments that have been going on within media studies for years. Sepinwall is offering his own take on the subject here—after all, few media scholars have offered this sort of close access to showrunners such as David Chase and David Simon, not to mention network executives such as Chris Albrecht and Kevin Reilly—but for those readers familiar with the academic conversations, the book cannot help but feel either out-of-step or slightly redundant. Of course, Sepinwall is not aiming

for an academic audience and no one expects him to begin citing in APA style, but even a basic acknowledgment of the content of relevant works might help make the book feel less insular.

A related issue—and by far the biggest problem with the book—is that it fails to connect its various shows in any truly meaningful way. What Sepinwall lacks is any sort of theory—any sort of unifying explanation for why these shows were special or remarkable in ways others were not. Implicitly, Sepinwall suggests that these shows all benefitted from changing industrial circumstances and brilliant individuals, but even these types of connections—both vague and trite—are not put forth in any significant way. Instead, Sepinwall lets each of these shows stand alone as solitary examples of genius showrunners coming along at just the right time. Although I have no doubt David Simon is a smart man, the world hardly needs yet another piece of television criticism ascribing to the David Simon great man theory—a theory, it must be noted, that seems to most often flow from the mouth of Simon himself. The cumulative effect of Sepinwall's book, then, is rather unremarkable. Although each of the chapters is full of interesting nuggets, there are few big takeaways other than "television has gotten more sophisticated."

Undoubtedly, then, this book will not be particularly useful for media scholars, despite its occasional panache. Lacking much material that digs into thornier issues beyond a given show's genesis and plot maneuverings, the end result is something rather inert. And, for some, such shortcomings will necessarily stir thoughts of what might have been. For example, having obtained access to so many key industry figures, one is bound to wonder what might have been the result if Sepinwall had asked trickier questions—even if this line of approach may have quickly ended such access. One, too, might ask if this book could have potentially been an entertaining accompaniment to introductory television studies classes, if only Sepinwall had engaged with more material beyond his own and spent additional time connecting the shows he has chosen as case studies. But these "what ifs" have to remain just that, and the book must remain a simple amusement.

References

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