

## A Note on the Text

APART FROM A FEW PARAGRAPHS of a piece about *Mad Men* which first appeared in the *Weekend Australian Review* in 2009, and perhaps a few opinions from a piece about *The Pacific* that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 2010, everything in this book was written in these recent years of my illness, while it went on happily refraining from being fatal. With memories in my head of how *Twin Peaks* had once held my attention with its long story even though I could barely understand its briefest episode, I sat down with my younger daughter Lucinda to watch a big box of *NYPD Blue* right through. We had seen it all before, but as in a glass, darkly. Our recurring discussion of the magnificence of Andy Sipowicz set a tone that struck me with its potential for one day becoming a useful critical style. This tone was abetted by reports of water-cooler conversations that Lucinda brought home from her

work as a civil servant, and from dinner table conversations in my elder daughter Claerwen's kitchen, where I found myself matching her admiration for Starbuck in *Battlestar Galactica* with mine for Wilma Deering in *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*. It occurred to me, perhaps because of my medicated state, that a new critical language was developing itself to deal with the onrush of creativity coming to us in the form of box sets: a system of distribution that still strikes me as something new, even though it is already being overtaken by systems that download material directly into the computer. By the time this book is published, the DVD might be as obsolete as the dodo. But the number of shows, if not their quality, can only go on increasing: and the way we talk about them can only become more compulsively attentive than it was a few years back, when I first noticed that Allison Janney in *The West Wing* was getting the kind of detailed analytical praise that Maria Callas used to get when she sang in *Tosca* at Covent Garden. I could hear the same fluent critical inventiveness from the discussion groups of writers on *Slate* when they talked about the first few episodes of *Orange Is the New Black*: some of the writers sounded as if they were having at least as much fun talking as they did writing.

Since I have always thought that the spontaneous response of the delighted consumer outranks the more ponderous consideration of the professional student of culture, I took this to be a welcome development, and tried to hang on to the sense of irresponsibility when I sat down to write. Though my tone is conversational, however, I have tried as always to stick to the fixed grammatical rules on which free expression depends, and I would have written “boxed sets” for “box sets” if the neologism had not already become standard. Back in the eighteenth century, I might have agreed with Swift that the word “idololatry” was etymologically correct and that “idolatry” was a barbarism to be staved off at all costs. We would have lost, however: and today there is a good reason for at least acknowledging popular usage when talking about popular culture. Not to do so sounds too aloof. Sometimes the subject is grim, but we wouldn’t even be discussing it if its presentation were not entertaining. When Deirdre Serjeantson gave me a box set of *Veronica Mars* for Christmas, I wondered briefly what Theodor Adorno would have said on the subject of American schoolgirl detectives, but after watching a few episodes I realized that I didn’t give a damn what Theodor Adorno would have said: I only wanted to see more of

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what Kristen Bell was doing with the title role. Throughout the text, I have taken care to name the actors, who should always, I think, be given at least that much reward for their work. All too often we think of them as having chosen their roles. They hardly ever get that chance. In that regard we viewers live in a dream world, being guided toward reason by people who live in a world of harsh reality.

—Cambridge, 2016

Play All

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