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□ Davis, Glyn & Kay Dickinson (Eds):

Teen TV: Genre, Consumption & Identity

London, BFI (2004). ISBN 0-85170-999-0 (pbk), pp. viii + 197

Particip@tions Volume 1, Issue 3 (February 2005)

A Review by Dee Amy-Chinn

To begin, in Foucauldian style, with a confession: I was disposed to look kindly on this book from an initial glance at the contents page, which reassured me that I was not the only adult who had ever watched the TV show *Roswell* and found it strangely compelling. *Roswell* features prominently in two chapters of this book. In Chapter One *Roswell's* protagonist, Max Evans, is considered alongside the teenage Clark Kent in the series *Smallville*, both being seen as representing a new type of hero in teen male melodrama. In the penultimate chapter *Roswell* is used as an example of what its author, Neil Badmington, calls 'Alien Chic' – a celebration of the extra-terrestrial that ends up reinforcing the principles of humanism, suggesting that:

Against all odds, an apparently harmless example of teen television offers a radical challenge to traditional ways of understanding who 'we' and 'others' might be (p. 173)

The attention given to the series *Roswell* highlights one of the many strengths of this book in that, while it does reference *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (which the editors recognise has received the lion's share of academic attention when it comes to teen TV), it gives due attention to other key series in the genre such as *Smallville* and *My So-Called Life*.

But the series that features in this book more prominently than any other is *Dawson's Creek*. The editors begin their introduction with dialogue from the penultimate scene of episode 323 ('True Love') that they believe encapsulates the essence of contemporary teen drama. This they define as:

... a use of language which is too sophisticated for the age of the characters; frequent intertextual references; recourse to a sense of community based on generation; a blunt, somewhat melodramatic use of emotion and aphoristic psychological reasoning; and a prominent pop music soundtrack (p. 1)

As they rightly note, a scene with these elements could have come from any one of the teenage dramas that became cult viewing from the mid 1990s to the present day. Such a definition of teen TV could have provided the springboard for a series of articles based around the active reader of the text and the construction of meaning, but this obvious route is eschewed in favour of a series of essays that offer us a much richer analysis of the teen TV phenomenon (that, of course, attracts a fair share of adult – academic and non-academic – viewers).

The book is divided into three parts (as the title suggests). Part I deals with genre, Part II consumption, and Part III identity. It is the genre section that, in a chapter by Miranda Banks, locates *Roswell* and *Smallville* in the tradition of the teen male melodrama but with heroes who are gender-enlightened and effortlessly in touch with their feminine sides (p. 26). *Dawson* features in a chapter by Matt Hills that suggests the show offers a flexibility and sophistication that forms part of its bid for cultural value and marks the show as both cult and quality TV (pp. 54-55).

Moving on to consumption, questions of political economy – too often absent from discussions of popular culture – receive due attention. Valerie Wee notes that:

The culture industries are targeting teens in response to industry and advertiser interests and demands rather than out of any altruistic motivation to service the global teen audiences' entertainment needs (p. 95)

The result, as she demonstrates, is that teen TV shows are never just TV shows – rather they serve as a springboard for the proliferation of a range of products that an affluent (predominantly white and middle-class) teenage audience are all too willing to spend money on. Hence *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was not only a successful TV series that existed in syndication, on video and DVD, but also revived the fortunes of the original film on which it was based and spawned soundtrack albums, spin-off novels, magazines and comics based on the show, a *Buffy*-inspired clothing line, dolls and posters, a computer game and many other items (p. 91).

In the early 1990s it was fashionable to see fans of cult TV shows as textual poachers, reading the text against the assumed authorial intent and creating their own cultural products from the raw material of the TV series. Critical to this work was the notion of fan culture as a site of resistance to the dominant narrative. However, as Part III of this book acknowledges, producers of teen TV must now be seen as active accomplices in this work of creation, quite consciously sowing the seeds of alternative readings liberally throughout the text. In a fascinating footnote to the chapter on queer teen identities, Glyn Davis notes how in *Smallville* the cast are clearly aware of the erotically charged relationship between Clark and Lex Luthor and how this has – on at least one occasion – spilled over to rehearsals between Tom Welling (who plays Clark) and Michael Rosenbaum (who plays Lex).

If I were to suggest one area that the book might have addressed but didn't I would point to the absence of any reference to witchcraft as a key theme in teen TV aimed at the female demographic. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* gets mentioned in Valerie Wee's chapter on synergy in teen TV, particularly with reference to the appearance in the show of Britney Spears, and the Willow/Tara romance from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* features in Glyn Davis' contribution on queer teens. But while Max and Clark are considered as representations of a new teen masculinity none of the authors address the function of the *Charmed* Ones (Prue, Piper, Phoebe and Paige) as icons of a post-feminist sensibility – even though there has been much recent scholarship on Wicca as a site of female teen

empowerment (for example, Moseley 2002). And, unlike many of the series dealt with in the book (*Dawson's Creek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Roswell*), *Charmed* (which has been running since 1998) is still going strong. Rather, the book revisits the eponymous Buffy as the site of the new teen heroine with a chapter by Jenny Bavidge on the way in which the show offers up an interrogation of the social and cultural construction of female adolescence (sadly ignoring the alternative narratives offered by Willow and Anya in the show).

Overall, however, this is a small gripe over what is otherwise an excellent book that covers a wide range of material that will be of interest to an academic audience and attractive to undergraduates.

References

Moseley, Rachel (2002) 'Glamorous witchcraft: gender and magic in teen film and television', *Screen*, 43.4, pp. 403-422

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