



Growing Up with Television: Everyday Learning among Young Adolescents. JoEllen Fisherkeller. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002. 224 pp.

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JoEllen Fisherkeller approaches television-unusually-not as a negative force in the lives of young people, nor even as a vast, hegemonic capitalist institution dedicated to profit: she does acknowledge, however, the problem that the medium is "imbued with mainstream ideologies" (p. 12). Fisherkeller approaches the topic of young people's relationship with TV from an anthropological, rather than a political or a behavioural perspective-and this means suspending the value judgments. She points out: "Viewers interpret all media from within a structure of identifications, such as gender, age group, family, class, race or ethnicity and nation" (p. 13). Fisherkeller is interested in "identity projects," her label for "the work in which a self engages to make sense of her or his particular social positions and life circumstances" (p. 14), and she proposes that television has a central role in such projects.

Fisherkeller pursues this thesis through three detailed case studies: the first is "Marina," a 12-year-old Latina girl who lives in a Manhattan neighborhood where, in Marina's words, "there are a lot of shootouts and things like that" (p. 34). The second is "Christopher," a 12-year-old African American living in Harlem, who, despite a troubled family background, is an extremely promising student. The third is "Samantha," a 13-year-old blonde, blue-eyed Irish-Jewish American living in the Bronx. These cases were selected for detailed analysis from a wider sample of teenagers surveyed in a New York School.

Fisherkeller's technique with her chosen subjects is to describe their physical appearance in some detail and to get them (particularly the two girls) to talk about how they feel about their bodies and appearance. She also gives detailed information about their family backgrounds, and their feelings towards, and relationships with, parents, siblings, and wider community. As Fisherkeller probes their attitudes and emotions, she encourages the young people to talk about television as a way of expressing and illustrating aspects of their lives. For example, Samantha likes "the lady who plays Murphy Brown. She puts a little spice into her" (p. 94). Fisherkeller then gives a commentary on the teenager's comments explaining that Samantha's love of debating at school "partly explains the appeal of the Murphy Brown character, a sitcom person who wrangles on screen with almost everyone she encounters" (p. 94). Similarly, Christopher's choice of the nickname "Wolverine" (a character from the *X Men* comic books) reveals his need to be seen as "a popular strong and do-good character" at school (p. 68). Similar aspirations are shown by



Christopher's desire to be a "little bit like the Fresh Prince of Bel Air" (p. 69).

Although these revelations-about growing up, sex, gender, race, relations with parents, and identification with fictional characters-are perfectly convincing as evidence of the ways in which adolescents play out their anxieties, the level of psychological analysis seems to me a little superficial. Although Fisherkeller frames her case studies in a useful and scholarly analysis of television politics and history, the attempt to assert general principles of identity formation based on material as ephemeral as television is problematic. If students do assert their identities through *Murphy Brown* or *Beverly Hills*, already these programs have retreated into history, and many readers will likely have only the sketchiest idea of what these young people are talking about.

The other problem of generalization from such a sample is not only its small size, but also its extreme particularity. Fisherkeller is talking about urban American teenagers, and inevitably urban American teenagers and their experiences are going to be fairly well represented on American television, which produces a circular argument. Young Americans are the prime demographic for TV marketers, and accordingly the schedules are saturated with shows about US teenagers. But what about other teenagers? If Fisherkeller is trying to make anthropological assertions about how adolescents negotiate their identities, locating herself within the traditions of Mead and Geertz, she has made it difficult for herself by focusing on such a very specific cultural product as American commercial TV fiction.

Fisherkeller's project would benefit from more critical accounts of the programs themselves, and it would also be helpful to know more about the identity-value of the other cultural tastes of these young people. Why just television? Why not books or, as in Christopher's case, comics? Or music? Why not look at their cultural formations generally, including the place of television within a whole range of possible cultural determinants of identity? One gets the sense from reading these transcripts, interesting though they are, that the young people are giving Fisherkeller what she is after, by talking at length about television. They may be withholding other information, however, that might be just as significant in determining who they are, so as not to disappoint her.

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