

The Platinum Age of Television: From I Love Lucy to The Walking Dead, How TV Became Terrific

By David Bianculli

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Television shows have now eclipsed films as the premier form of visual narrative art of our time. This new book by one of our finest critics explains—historically, in depth, and with interviews with the celebrated creators themselves—how the art of must-see/binge-watch television evolved.

Darwin had his theory of evolution, and David Bianculli has his. Bianculli's theory has to do with the concept of quality television: what it is and, crucially, how it got that way. In tracing the evolutionary history of our progress toward a Platinum Age of Television—our age, the era of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* and *The Wire* and *Homeland* and *Girls*—he focuses on the development of the classic TV genres, among them the sitcom, the crime show, the miniseries, the soap opera, the western, the animated series and the late night talk show. In each genre, he selects five key examples of the form, tracing its continuities and its dramatic departures and drawing on exclusive and in-depth interviews with many of the most famed auteurs in television history.

Television has triumphantly come of age artistically; David Bianculli's book is the first to date to examine, in depth and in detail and with a keen critical and historical sense, how this inspiring development came about.

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Editorial Review

Review
"A wonderful overview of the history of television. . .What makes this book so much more than an examination of the history of TV is the personal touch that Bianculli adds when he recounts why he fell in love with particular shows or how he was influenced by what he saw on the screen. He also interviews the creators behind the shows he considers the best of the best, and getting insight from legends such as Carl Reiner, Norman Lear and Steven Bochco truly captures why television continues to be the place where quality writing and imagination can reside. . .This book is a must for anyone who has been enthralled by the images and stories on television."
?? **Jeff Ayers,** ***Associated Press***

"The Platinum Age' sweep[s] this reader from one era to another, turning the subject of so much binge watching into binge-reading….Bianculli loves TV and his passion shines throughout these pages. Again and again, he displays genuine enthusiasm for what's current and what's ahead….always thoughtful and comprehensive….Anyone even casually acquainted with beloved TV series – and that covers just above everyone – will want to read Bianculli to see what he thinks of their favorites while also learning about other shows to sample….the range here is all but endless."
?? **Erik Spanberg,** ***Christian Science Monitor***

"I have a small shelf full of histories of the television industry, none of them as complete, sharp-witted, and entertaining as David Bianculli's new book, titled (take a deep breath now) *The Platinum Age of Television: From I Love Lucy to The Walking Dead, How TV Became Terrific* (Doubleday). Bianculli's title raises the stakes in TV-era quality…. As I said, I have a lot of TV histories on my shelf, but it's most likely Bianculli's I'll pull down when I want to not only get a fact correct but also obtain a terse critical perspective. And once you open it up to read about, say, the origins of The Mary Tyler Moore Show, you're liable to get irresistibly pulled into other areas you hadn't come to explore….In other words, this is history to get happily lost in."
?? **Ken Tucker,** ***Yahoo TV***

"The Platinum Age of Television is an effusive guidebook that plots the path from the 1950s' Golden Age (which [Bianculli] covered in his 1992 book, "Teleliteracy") to today's era of quality TV. Bianculli defines the Platinum Age as the period from 1999 — the year "The West Wing" and "The Sopranos" debuted — to 2016 and beyond. But he reaches back to TV's early days to trace the development of 18 TV genres with five notable shows in each category. For instance, animation evolved from "Rocky and His Friends" to "South Park"; variety shows moved from "The Ed Sullivan Show" to "Saturday Night Live"; and family sitcoms grew from "I Love Lucy" to "Modern Family..."A high point of this history is the author's interviews with Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks, Norman Lear, Bob Newhart, Matt Groening, Larry David, Amy Schumer and many others...Bianculli has written a highly readable history."
?? Amy Henderson, ***The Washington Post***

*"*Readers eager to binge on TV history will be as satisfied as those who choose to surf through chapters and genres on demand and in the order of their choosing."
?? **Melanie McFarland,** ***Salon***

"Laid out encyclopedically and ranging from the 1950s through today, [Bianculli's] account of TV's evolution is as dizzying in scope as it is intimate in detail — and it highlights television's undying

appeal against a broader backdrop of culture and history….He writes big, but he's also not afraid to get personal….Through its dozens of whip-smart yet personable entries, *The Platinum Age* weaves a narrative about how television connects us, not just to each other, but to the culture at large. More than a mere guidebook, this is Bianculli's bible of TV — a wise, engaging celebration of a type of entertainment that's as much of an art form as it is a pastime."
?? Jason Heller, *NPR.org*

"David Bianculli sets the gold standard for *The Platinum Age of Television."*
??* Sloane Crosley, *Vanity Fair's Hot Type

"David Bianculli's excellent *The Platinum Age of Television* (Knopf/Doubleday) offers a rousing rundown of the history of the medium and how it became the pop-cultural, multi-platform programming colossus of today. Through thoughtful, engaging, entertaining essays on sitcoms, crime shows, soap operas, westerns, cartoons and late-night, plus a roster of exclusive interviews, he guides readers though an ever-changing road map of themes, formats, stars and styles for a comprehensive overview of an entertainment juggernaut that continues to grow and evolve."
?? Neil Pond, *Parade*

"For the discerning viewer, *The Platinum Age of Television* ($32.50, Doubleday) by veteran critic David Bianculli will score a bullseye. He lays out his theory of how TV evolved to its current rarified form in engagingly written, well-organized detail. There are sections devoted to genres including animation, Westerns and medical shows (for that, the dots are connected starting at "Dr. Kildare" and ending with "Grey's Anatomy"). Other chapters profile such vaunted figures as Carol Burnett, Mel Brooks and Norman Lear."
?? Lynn Elber, *AP Holiday Gift Guide*

***The Platinum Age of Television* does make a compelling case to couch potatoes everywhere that television, past and present, can be informative, engaging and provocative. And that the future of quality programming on small (and now not so small) screens may well be bright."**
??* Glenn C. Altschuler, *Tulsa World

"The Platinum Age of Television showcases Bianculli's prodigious knowledge of TV and is written in an easily consumed, conversational style. Like The Revolution Was Televised and TV (The Book), it can be turned to just about any chapter for an interesting excerpt as much as it can be read front to back."
?? Michael Malone, Broadcastingcable.com

"Impressively comprehensive….Because of the breadth of the subject matter, Bianculli covers a lot of ground, and he offers spotlights on show creators, such as Matt Weiner (Mad Men), Matt Groening (The Simpsons), and Larry David (Seinfeld), in order to delve more deeply into some of the most noteworthy shows in the history of television. Simply a must-read for TV lovers."
—Booklist

About the Author

DAVID BIANCULLI is a guest host and TV critic on NPR's *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross. A contributor to the show since its inception, he has been a TV critic since 1975. From 1993 to 2007, Bianculli was a TV critic for the *New York Daily News*. Bianculli has written three books: *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 2009); *Teleliteracy: Taking*

Television Seriously (1992); and *Dictionary of Teleliteracy* (1996). An associate professor of TV and film at Rowan University in New Jersey, Bianculli is also the founder and editor of the online magazine, TVWorthWatching.com.

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1?CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS

KEY EVOLUTIONARY STAGES

The Mickey Mouse Club1955–59, ABC

Captain Kangaroo1955–84, CBS

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood1968–2001, NET/PBS

Sesame Street1969–, PBS; 2016–, HBO

Pee-Wee's Playhouse1986–91, CBS

No matter where you grew up, and for the most part no matter when, your TV was most likely populated by local shows made especially for children. The earliest ones were hosted by earnest, often costumed adults, presenting old theatrical cartoons and/or interacting with puppets or marionettes. Some of these early homegrown pioneers "matured" into national shows presented by one of the major broadcast networks, such as NBC's Kukla, Fran, and Ollie, which had begun on local TV in Chicago in 1947. But others, from 1948's Junior Frolics (a cartoon showcase from Newark, New Jersey, hosted by "Uncle Fred" Sayles) to 1950's Popeye Theater (a weekday afternoon Philadelphia children's show hosted for more than twenty years by the "cowgirl" Sally Starr), remained proudly local for their entire runs. Wherever you lived, if television was a part of your early life, so was children's TV. I was born in Pittsburgh in 1953, and one of my first TV memories is of watching a local public television show called The Children's Corner, hosted by Josie Carey starting in 1954, and featuring her interacting with such puppets as Daniel Striped Tiger and King Friday XIII—puppets created and voiced by the show's producer and music composer, Fred Rogers, years before he would launch his own successful children's series, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood.

Technically, the earliest TV children's show host might have been Burr Tillstrom, the puppeteer creator and voice of the clown-like Kukla, the friendly dragon Ollie, and other whimsical hand-puppet characters. He and his puppets appeared on TV before there was broadcast TV, as featured players during RCA's television exhibition at the 1939–40 New York World's Fair. After World War II, when television production began in earnest, Tillstrom teamed with the Chicago radio personality Fran Allison in 1947 on a local children's show, giving her equal billing with two of his puppet creations. Within a year, Kukla, Fran, and Ollie was a popular national offering on the NBC network, where it lasted for an entire decade.

That show's NBC lead-in, running at five o'clock weekdays on the East Coast, was even more popular and ranks as TV's first runaway children's TV hit. It began as Puppet Playhouse in 1947, back when NBC's "network" of stations was limited to a few cities along the northeast corridor, and premiered at a time when the concept of using television as a babysitter, previously unheard of, was instantly embraced. In a rave review of the debut of Puppet Playhouse that today would incense child advocates and women alike, Variety wrote, "In the middle-class home, there is perhaps nothing as welcome to the mother as something that will keep the small fry intently absorbed and out of possible mischief. This program can almost be guaranteed to pin down the squirmiest of the brood." Puppet Playhouse was created and hosted by "Buffalo" Bob Smith,

but the show was quickly renamed Howdy Doody, after his marionette co-star. Like many children's shows that followed it, Howdy Doody featured a studio audience of overstimulated, sugar-engorged kids (called, in this case, the Peanut Gallery). It also featured a silent, horn-honking clown named Clarabell (played, over the course of the series, by three different actors, including the future Captain Kangaroo host, Bob Keeshan); the beautiful princess Summerfall Winterspring (played by Judy Tyler, who would go on to star in Jailhouse Rock opposite Elvis Presley); and a spineless character named Gumby, who was soon spun off into his own series. Give Howdy Doody credit, too, for the most unsettling finale in TV history: On the final show, Smith kept promising that Clarabell, then played by Lew Anderson, would have a special surprise. After thirteen years of silence, Clarabell ended the show, and the series, by staring into the camera and, in a choked whisper, saying, "Good-bye, kids."

Other early TV children's hits included ABC's Super Circus (like Kukla, Fran, and Ollie, going national in 1949 after starting in Chicago), hosted by Claude Kirchner and, later, Jerry Colonna and featuring the baton-catching, and eye-catching, baton twirler Mary Hartline. A singular children's star from the 1950s was Milton Hines, a.k.a. Soupy Sales, who had a unique career path by not only succeeding on network TV and in syndication but moving from one local market to another and conquering them individually. He started in Cincinnati, on a local 1950 show called Soupy's Soda Shop, then moved in 1953 to Detroit, where he simultaneously hosted a daytime kids' show (Lunch with Soupy Sales) and a slightly more mature late-night effort (Soupy's On, the surviving kinescopes of which include rare performance footage of the great jazz trumpeter Clifford Brown from 1956). The daytime show, with its pie-in-the-face comedy style (and I mean that literally), was so popular with kids ABC picked it up, renaming it The Soupy Sales Show. And when the host moved his base of operations again, this time to Los Angeles, the split-personality approach he had tapped in late-night Detroit TV sprouted in full bloom on his L.A. series. Even though he had the same furry, kid-friendly puppet sidekicks as always—including Pookie the little lion and the giant "dogs" White Fang and Black Tooth, who, except for their huge paws and arms, were heard but not seen—Soupy Sales attracted amazingly A-list adult guests, all of whom lined up eagerly to get cream pies in the face. Bob Hope, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin, even Frank Sinatra, all came by to support the show's antic level of anarchy, as well as to get pies in the face.

Other approaches to children's TV evolved as well, not just from local to national, but in substance as well as style. There were the anything-goes "clubhouse" shows for children, typified by 1950's Smilin' Ed McConnell and His Buster Brown Gang, which bounced around several networks and time slots, with as many titles, throughout the decade. When the host died, his Western sidekick Andy Devine was cast as his replacement, and the series was renamed Andy's Gang. The content remained the same, though, with affable Andy entertaining little kids by reading stories, showing old cartoons and film shorts, and interacting with puppets, including Froggy the Gremlin, who would bedevil poor Andy after being summoned by the same rude-sounding catchphrase uttered by the previous host: "Pluck your magic twanger, Froggy!" Elsewhere, the vaudeville spirit thrived when channeled, literally, to a children's TV audience, thanks to the wild shenanigans of Pinky Lee, a veteran comic whose Pinky Lee Show, an NBC offering from 1954 to 1956, had him entertaining kids while sporting a bow tie, a checkered suit, and a very childish attitude. Yet another popular children's TV franchise literally became a franchise, with a 1949 Los Angeles show, Bozo's Circus, evolving into Larry Harmon's Bozo the Clown broadcast business model in the mid-1950s, with each local station buying the rights to cast, produce, and present its own Bozo the Clown program.

Children's TV was full of such shows, emulating the basic formula and energy of Howdy Doody locally and nationally, but there were specialty shows, too. Live-action Westerns and sci-fi shows were big, from 1949's Lone Ranger on ABC to the same year's Captain Video and His Video Rangers on DuMont, a laughably cheap yet impressively durable weekday series that ran until the DuMont network itself collapsed in 1955. Captain Video encouraged its young viewers to sign up and receive special mailings—a practice copied by

Captain Midnight on CBS, where a quarter and the seal from a jar of Ovaltine would get viewers a special decoder ring, which could be used to decipher special on-air messages.

From the beginning of network television, in addition to Westerns and science fiction and puppet shows, there was a subcategory of children's shows that could loosely be grouped under the term "educational." The earliest of these TV shows for children were offshoots from existing radio programs: NBC's Juvenile Jury, starting on television in 1947, featuring a panel of problem-solving youngsters, and the same network's Quiz Kids, which came to TV via Chicago in 1949 and featured kids answering the same sorts of increasingly tough queries in their chosen categories as adult contestants on The $64,000 Question. Those were shows that tested and rewarded knowledge; other shows set out to impart it.

These were sincere, gentle shows, in which the hosts talked slowly and sweetly, either directly to the viewers at home or to an in-studio surrogate. The former public school science teacher Don Herbert explored and explained the wonders of science on television for decades, starting with Chicago's Mr. Wizard in 1950, which moved to NBC a year later. Yet another show originating from Chicago, aimed at an even younger audience, was Ding Dong School, hosted by a soft-spoken, matronly hostess identified as Miss Frances. At the time, she was chair of what is now Roosevelt University and felt strongly that the new medium of television had a special responsibility to preschool viewers. She stared straight into the camera and addressed viewers directly, pausing to give them time to answer. "Do you remember the three ingredients to the sandwich we made today, besides bread?" she asks, waiting patiently for the unheard interactive reply. "That's right. Peanut butter. Lettuce. And?.?.?.??banana!" (Was Elvis watching?) NBC began broadcasting Ding Dong School nationally in 1952, only a few months after it premiered in Chicago.

Another preschool TV show that broke the fourth wall was Romper Room, which began as a local show in Baltimore in 1953. The producer Bert Claster had the simple but ingenious idea of letting his wife, Nancy, a nursery school teacher, bring her young students into the TV studio to play and work, with youngsters at home invited to watch as part of the action. "Miss Nancy" would do arts and crafts, sing songs, tell stories, and even advise on proper and improper social behavior, which would earn the classification of a "Do-Bee" or a "Don't-Be." And when, at the end of each show, "Miss Nancy" held up her magic mirror and looked through it, she would call out names of some of the children she "saw" watching Romper Room on her TV set. "I see Bobby, I see Cindy?.?.?." For the next several decades, Romper Room would be franchised, like Bozo the Clown, with each local TV market presenting its own Miss Somebody. The show's "magic mirror" gimmick made it seem interactive to young viewers at home, even if your name was never called.

For interactive TV gimmickry, though, nothing came close to Winky Dink and You, which ran on CBS from 1953 to 1957. It's described in detail in the chapter "Animation," but it armed young viewers with a "Winky Dink" kit—a cloth, a box of crayons, and a see-through plastic sheet—and encouraged them to draw missing details from the show's animation onto the sheet, which covered the TV screen.

Of all the programs and people associated with children's and family TV programming in the 1950s, one name rises above all others—a man whose name was already established, and beloved, in the world of theatrical cartoons and full-length animated movies and who would very quickly achieve amazing success as host of a prime-time anthology series, co-creator of a daytime children's series, and the visionary behind a wildly popular family theme park. In time, the empire he built would launch its own cable channel for children, purchase and run the ABC network, and establish a powerful cinematic studio operation that, in time, would absorb and present the latest offerings from Pixar, the Muppets, and Star Wars. That man, of course, was Walt Disney, who had made his name with his first Mickey Mouse theatrical cartoon, Steamboat Willie, in 1928. In 1950, the year he first came to television, Disney's big-screen releases included not only a dozen cartoon shorts but the full-length movie Cinderella and the live-action feature Treasure Island. To cap

off that very fruitful year, Disney co-hosted, with the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and the dummy sidekick Charlie McCarthy, his first foray into TV: an NBC Christmas Day special called One Hour in Wonderland. The next year, he presented another Christmas Day TV special, this time for CBS, and this time with himself as the sole host: The Walt Disney Christmas Show.

Disney was eager to get into television because he recognized the value of cross promotion and being able to show clips from, and stoke audience interest for, his upcoming movies. He also had another pet project in mind, a massive theme park, and television could be a major source of both revenue and free publicity. NBC and CBS had already broadcast his Christmas specials, and when he proposed a weekly prime-time series, all the networks, even fledgling, low-rated ABC, were interested. Until that time, the major studios were boycotting television, and to get a regular TV series produced by the Walt Disney Studios would be a breakthrough. What resulted from Disney's interest in TV turned out to be revolutionary for children's programming as well.

Disney's first regular series on television, produced for ABC, was a 1954 prime-time anthology series called Disneyland, named after a California theme park of his that wouldn't open for another year. The opening installment of Disneyland was little more than a one-hour infomercial, but like almost everything else Disney presented in the 1950s, it caught on quickly and massively. One of the anthology show's first-season offerings was Davy Crockett, a Fess Parker miniseries that sold millions of coonskin caps to impressionable young kids and helped ABC land its first Top 10 series of that decade. By the end of the 1954–55 TV season, Disneyland was the No. 6 series on the air, proudly nestled between two long-established CBS hits, Ed Sullivan's Toast of the Town and The Jack Benny Program. And in the last half of 1955, Walt Disney enjoyed two other instant successes: his Disneyland theme park, which opened in July, and a new daytime children's show, which premiered in October and revolutionized children's television significantly.

THE MICKEY MOUSE CLUB

1955–59, ABC. Creators: Walt Disney, Bill Walsh, Hal Adelquist. Host: Jimmie Dodd, aided by Roy Williams. Stars: Annette Funicello, Bobby Burgess, Darlene Gillespie, Cubby O'Brien, Karen Pendleton, Doreen Tracey, others.

To help create The Mickey Mouse Club, Walt Disney turned to Bill Walsh, who had written and produced Disney's two TV holiday specials. For inspiration, he reached back much further into his company's past—to 1930, when the success of Mickey Mouse as a theatrical cartoon character had sparked a series of local Mickey Mouse Clubs all over the country. More than two million kids signed up during the Depression before Disney stopped the enterprise, but clearly he never forgot it. In the mid-1950s, ABC, already giddy over the success of Disney's prime-time series Disneyland, asked Walt Disney to produce a weekday children's show for late afternoons. He planned on a fifteen-minute feature, but ABC wanted an hour show, Monday through Friday, and got it.

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