Book Reviews

did more than anyone to give it shape. He visited Lancashire, went out with the police and observed the sometimes difficult relations between the force and the community. The *Z Cars* format was his, and because he held the copyright he was paid a fee for every episode.

Cooke’s final chapter, ponderously entitled ‘The hostile waters of British television in a deregulated age’, reminds us how little Kennedy Martin has achieved since his great nuclear thriller, *Edge of Darkness*, appeared in 1985. Just four produced screenplays in more than twenty years seems a sad waste. He has not been idle but his CV for the past two decades is mostly a list of abortive projects, set out by Cooke in useful detail. One, which goes back to the late 1980s, is about global warming. Stressing throughout the institutional structures in which writers for television have had to operate, Cooke concludes that the advent of the multi-channel, ratings-chasing environment has ended for ever the autonomy enjoyed by Kennedy Martin and others in the 1960s. Even so, the critical and popular success of *Edge of Darkness*, which was quickly repeated on BBC1 after its first showing on BBC2, must have put Kennedy Martin in a strong position to realise other projects and his failure to do so is something Cooke cannot explain.

Although Cooke does not discuss Kennedy Martin’s personality or private life, there are hints of connections between life and work. His unlikely contributions to *Weavers Green*, a 1966 soap opera about country vets, came about at the invitation of his brother, Ian Kennedy Martin, who had joined the series as story editor. According to Ian, Troy was ‘broke’ and glad to have the money. Nine years later it seems that Kennedy Martin’s private life was in even greater disarray. Having created *The Sweeney*, Ian asked his brother to write for it. Kennedy Martin says he was in two minds but was also ‘divorced and broke’. While Kennedy Martin may have been prepared to write in order to bolster his meagre finances, on his own work, as Cooke points out, he is reluctant to compromise. That may help to explain why he abandoned *Z Cars* so soon, or why so many projects never made it to the screen. The human factor, unpredictable and difficult to quantify, should never be ignored.

Peter Waymark (Open University)
DOI: 10.3366/E1743452108000277


*Our Friends in the North*, shown on BBC2 in 1995, was one of the few shows during the 1990s that can be truly called ‘landmark’ television. The performances were magnetic, even if the ageing make-up
sometimes looked a little forced in the last episodes, but it was the sense of epic television which kept the audience coming back for more, the sense that this was something important, telling the audience who we came to be. A little later, in 1997, *This Life* seemed to have a similar power, taking the children of the 1960s generation and representing the chaos of pre-millennial Britain, answering the question ‘What happens when Thatcher’s children grow up?’ The target audiences for both programmes, shown in the pre- and post-*Newsnight* slots on BBC2, must have been remarkably similar: educated adults with some maturity. Not too young to have the hubris of inexperience but not too old to recognise the historical framework for the politics in either programme: this is why the children of the lead roles in *Our Friends in the North* have the function they do (they are the younger audience within the text) and the parents who appear in *This Life* operate as signifiers of the no less confused past. In the truest sense of the BBC’s remit, *Our Friends in the North* and *This Life* combined education and entertainment: they were didactic with the lightest of touches: the latter being erroneously labelled a British *Friends* but with more sex; the former having the scale of Dickens in *Bleak House*, its own plotting a megalosaurusian ribbon throughout the narrative in echo of Dickens’s complexities. It is this concept of the teacherly within Peter Flannery’s *Our Friends in the North* with which Michael Eaton begins his excellent discussion of the series: but it is the *Our Friends…* of the RSC in the 1980s which he paints: ‘This is explicitly epic theatre in the Brechtian sense, recognising the existence of its spectator, turning them into observers, setting out to influence their world’ (2).

Writing from a position within the industry, as a writer and producer, Eaton’s analysis of *Our Friends in the North* is detailed and should provide an eye-opener to those who did not know the series as a play or, if they did, recognise the play within the series. Deftly examining the long process from 1980 to 1995, Eaton reveals layer by layer how Flannery’s story developed from a story about the route to discontent, originally ending in 1979, to one which told the full story arc from Wilson’s entry to Thatcher’s exit and to the dying Tories of the mid-1990s. It had a temporal structure which altered the focus somewhat but also enabled characters to develop, most notably Mary, from housewife to politician, and provided a response to Thatcher’s constant berating of the 1960s. Hindsight is a powerful author but, as Eaton comments, considering the parallels between *Our Friends in the North* and *Heimat* (1986): ‘Both of these projects, in Germany and in England, are instances of the dramatic necessity to work upon memory’ (16).
Eaton’s memory is also important in the process of analysing the TV series: his own politics inflect the BFI Classic and his criticisms of the contemporary BBC, which he says could never produce a series like this again, strike hard in shaping his argument for the status of Our Friends in the North. Watching recent co-production series marketed as ‘Can’t Miss TV’, such as Rome or The Tudors, again being shown in the pre-Newsnight slot, one can have much sympathy with his opinion, especially if his definition of good television drama is one with which you agree:

Television drama should somehow continue to touch our lives far beyond the time of initial transmission. Until recently its immediate erasure has been nothing less than an amnesiac scandal. Now digital release and a proliferation of channels, means that our true ‘National Theatre’ and our real native ‘Film Industry’ can have some kind of afterlife. (115)

His sentiments are certainly ones which I recognise in my own responses to the new digital channels of the last few years, and indeed the role of memory in marketing some of the channels has become central to their success, most notably BBC4 and ITV4, which show re-runs of series twenty and thirty years old. Indeed, in November 2007, BBC4 categorically sold its Saturday night viewing upon the nostalgia of watching ‘Classic Dramas’ with a montage of everything from Persuasion and Northanger Abbey from the 1970s and 1980s to more recent costume successes against a narrative which clearly markets the evening’s shows to the audience who don’t go to a nightclub. BBC4 seems to be explicitly acknowledging its audience is not Generation X, just as Our Friends in the North looked to a similar spectatorship.

The depth and coverage of Eaton’s analysis – text, context, process and politics – is impressively handled in a book of this length and, just as his central theme, the Brechtian didacticism of Flannery’s story, is woven throughout his entire argument, so too does his text achieve some distanciation, making the reader consider these outside influences and the politicisation of television narrative, narration and production. As ever, the BFI Classic achieves its aim to encourage the reader to go back to the text but Eaton’s own role succeeds in making the audience look more closely at the television with which we are fed and challenge the polish Britain plc seems to have acquired in the years since the height of Thatcherism: ‘Twenty years on, the scars, personal and political, of this terrible conflict [the miners’ strike of 1984] have never been entirely buried by the transformation of slag heaps into artificial ski-slopes and nature trails’ (85). Is that contemporary TV drama? Is Rome an ‘artificial ski-slope’, telling the
Book Reviews

audience Roman society was like this, but all too plastic? Is The Tudors reducing all politics of that period to Henry VIII’s libido, leading the spectator on a ‘nature trail’ of his loins and his conquests’ flesh? It is sad if television drama cannot redeem itself from the stain of another kind of ‘amnesiac scandal’: one of arrogance and the lowest-common denominator.

Anna Claydon (University of Leicester)
DOI: 10.3366/E1743452108000289

Ben Walters, The Office (London: British Film Institute, 2005), pp. 184, 74 illus., ISBN 1 84457 091 6 (pb), £12.

In this compact and attractively presented book (it contains over seventy full-colour illustrations), Ben Walters, deputy film editor of Time Out and regular contributor to Sight and Sound, offers a useful and at times intriguing introduction to one the UK’s more interesting comedy productions of recent years, The Office (2001–3). The book is based not only on a detailed examination of the fourteen episodes of the series, but also on interviews with a number of the key players involved. These include Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, who wrote, directed and appeared in the series, as well as a number of figures at BBC2, the channel on which – with the exception of the Christmas specials, which went out on BBC1 – the series was aired: producer Ash Atalla, executive producers Anil Gupta and Jon Plowman, and BBC2 controller Jane Root. The book contains only three chapters, which are followed by an episode guide, a short but useful bibliography, and full credits for all the episodes broadcast. There is also an index.

In chapter 1, ‘Origins’, Walters traces the genesis of The Office from the ‘Seedy Boss’ short produced by Merchant in 1998 as part of the BBC’s Trainee Assistant Producer Scheme and featuring the unknown Gervais in the role of David Brent (the character he would play in The Office), through a pilot to eventual production of the first six-episode series in 2001. There is a wealth of insider detail here on the mechanics of having a series commissioned on BBC2 with its inevitable winners and losers (and offering, as an interesting by-product, frequent illustration of how varied different individuals’ recollections of the same event can be), and with a frank admission from all involved of the problems arising in the early stages from Gervais’ and Merchant’s lack of experience in directing. The author is extremely adept here at placing The Office in the history of British situation comedy generally, as well as in relation to its more immediate competitors, and is both