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# Book review : Contemporary British Television Drama

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James Chapman, *Contemporary British Television Drama*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020; 187 pp.: ISBN 9781780765228, £63 (hbk), 9781526125859, £22.99 (pbk), 978135015250, £16.55 (EPUB/MOBI).

**Reviewed by** Richard Hewett, University of Salford, UK.

Originally announced for publication by I.B. Tauris in 2018, *Contemporary British Television Drama* could more accurately be titled *Quality British Television Drama*. Chapman introduces this term early in his introduction to define the eight case studies examined, which he argues represent a period in the early 2000s when ‘the landscape of television drama in Britain was transformed by a cycle of high-end British drama series’ (p. 2). What follows is a persuasive case for UK ‘Quality’ TV that provides a refreshing counterpoint to the more frequently examined US genre. However, the fact that the majority of these programmes were launched prior to 2010 – with only two still in production as recently as 2017 – militates somewhat against claims to contemporaneity. What Chapman instead presents is a selection of programmes that represent a distinct historical shift in approach and production style for early twenty-first century small screen drama. While at times recalling the best of Britain’s rich television heritage, the shows examined represent a reworking and repositioning of some of its most popular genres for what John Ellis has termed ‘the era of plenty’ (2000).

Case studies are allocated one chapter each and are arranged chronologically. The book commences with *Spooks* (2002-2011) and concludes with *Broadchurch* (2013-2017), with the focus primarily on crime drama (*Life on Mars* (2006-2007), *Ashes to Ashes* (2008-2010) and *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-2017)) and period/heritage (*Downton Abbey* (2010-2015)), with *Foyle’s War* (2002-2015) neatly combining the two. The result is a catholic mix, the visually stylish *Spooks* contrasting for example with the more traditional and understated *Foyle’s War*, but Chapman justifies the inclusion of each as representing different aspects of

the ‘high concept’ production that increasingly found favour in the new millennium. One of the less likely entries is the confidence-trickster vehicle *Hustle* (BBC, 2004-2007), for which Chapman makes a convincing case as ‘quality entertainment’. While conceding that the series represents ‘the very definition of generic or formula drama’ (2020, p. 54), Chapman celebrates its inclusion of playful narrative devices such as breaking the fourth wall and fantasy musical sequences. Though stressing that these do not place it in the same postmodern rank as *The Singing Detective* (1986), he argues for *Hustle* as a ‘high concept drama [that] incorporates some aspects of more progressive forms into its conventions’ (p. 57), positioning it alongside *The Prisoner* (1967-1968), *The Avengers* (1961-1969) and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-1968) in the glossy tradition of David Buxton’s (1990) ‘pop series’ (p. 59).

British crime drama has recently been well served by both *Contemporary British Television Crime Drama: Cops on the Box* (McElroy, 2016) and *You’re Nicked: Investigating British Television Police Series* (Lamb, 2020). In addition, *Life on Mars*, *Ashes to Ashes* and *Sherlock* have all been the focus of edited collections (Lacey & McElroy, 2012; Stein & Busse, 2012; Porter, 2012). The originality of Chapman’s approach therefore lies less in his selection of case studies than his historical contextualisation, with the focus on production and reception. More than half the shows examined (*Spooks*, *Hustle*, *Life on Mars*, *Ashes to Ashes* and *Broadchurch*) originated with independent production company Kudos, indicating the marked shift away from in-house production that has taken place in the wake of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, while two others (*Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey*) are co-productions with Masterpiece, highlighting the increasingly international nature of UK television drama production. Other areas considered include the switch to digital filming, higher production values in the wake of High Definition, and the importation of the ‘showrunner’ model from

US television. In particular, Chapman's consideration of the industrial factors influencing Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's re-conception of *Sherlock* from a traditional series of six, one-hour crime dramas to a (slightly more cost-effective) limited run of feature-length episodes offers an intriguing perspective on the perceived need for product differentiation in an increasingly competitive global market (p. 117).

Chapman acknowledges that some of the material included is reworked from previously published chapters or articles and although the author faced a veritable Hobson's Choice in terms of selecting programmes for analysis, the book's publication somewhat later than originally planned means it could arguably have been brought more fully up to date, perhaps with a chapter on *Line of Duty* (2012-). The latter is instead included as a brief addendum to the *Broadchurch* chapter, along with Jed Mercurio's (credited here as Mercury (p. 153)) other recent success, *Bodyguard* (2018). Tantalisingly mentioned in the same section is *The Night Manager* (2014), another production that might easily fall under Chapman's 'Quality' label, perhaps via comparison to earlier le Carré adaptations.

Chapman makes no claims for *Contemporary British Television Drama* as a comprehensive overview of the field, and it is to be hoped that this intervention inspires television studies academics and publishers to follow his lead in taking this subject further. As the author indicates in the closing chapter, there now exist many productions with the potential to be examined under the lens of British 'Quality' television. That said, it would also be desirable to see a volume that engages with the broader scope of contemporary British television drama, perhaps encompassing genres such as soap opera and the anthology drama, both of which have seen significant changes over the last decade.

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