

Reviews

Sunny Days: The Children's Television Revolution That Changed America.

By David Kamp. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020. Pp. ix + 326, foreword, introduction, notes, bibliography, index.

David Kamp's *Sunny Days: The Children's Television Revolution That Changed America* examines the moments in television history that elevated children's programming from the vapid *Howdy Doody* to the research-informed *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, and *The Electric Company*. This golden age of children's television brings into focus other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as racial equality, gender parity, and the shifting American family, which makes this text an excellent choice for courses on media, the American child, or modern American culture.

Musician and cultural commentator Questlove provides a forward for *Sunny Days*; he is a skilled student of popular culture and an excellent touchstone for younger students. *Sunny Days* is an excellent example of how popular culture writing can be simultaneously rigorous and engaging. The early chapters of *Sunny Days* illustrate the environment that inspired the likes of Fred Rogers, Joan Ganz Cooney, Lloyd Morrisett, and Jim Henson to improve children's television. This section examines the television landscape for children in the 1950s and 1960s, which had limited impact in the long term. Most shows were light on educational content and existed for pure entertainment or commercial value. At the same time,

pre-school education was still not widely appreciated, especially in urban centers where it could cause financial hardship to many families. These two conditions provided the ideal gap for public television to fill, especially *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street*. This chapter is essential for contemporary readers and those who study children's television because of *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers'* longevity in American culture. It is easy to forget that over 50 years ago, programs of this high caliber did not exist, and the television programming aimed at children was unquestionably the foundation of Newton Minow's "vast wasteland" (Minow, "Television and the Public Interest," 1961). Kamp takes time here to clearly illustrate the rapid rise of television in the post-World War II years, as well as the medium's influence on all aspects of American life.

Kamp also introduces Jim Henson and other members of the Muppet creative team and shows how Henson developed his own career in television, which was not focused on children's entertainment. Through these television projects, Henson meets Frank Oz, Jon Stone, Jerry Nelson, and Joe Raposo, with whom he will develop many of his future projects, including *Sesame Street*. *Captain Kangaroo*, often overlooked, also factors into the journey of *Sesame Street* in two ways. First, this show was a departure from most early American children's television, but it also served as a training ground for the creative teams that worked on *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers'*. Kamp quotes director Jon Stone in saying that Captain Kangaroo "[addressed] the child at home like a thinking, reasoning person" (Kamp

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2020, 35). This observation illustrates the intellectual bridge between early children's television and these later pivotal programs. The early chapters of *Sunny Days* also outline the unique conditions that existed in the political realm to allow for the funding and overall support of American public television.

Chapters five through twelve of *Sunny Days* focus heavily on the progress and introduction of *Sesame Street* to the masses, as it was the program most responsible for the major shift in children's educational television. The rise of public broadcasting, and with it the development of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, is concurrent with this time, bringing all the threads of the first part of the book together to illustrate the level of change happening on television. This section emphasizes how unique these shows were to the American television landscape. In showing the programs' success, Kamp notes, "Rogers, this world's creator, would prove irresistible to parodists as his popularity grew. In a loud, fast, cynical time, he was dulcet, unhurried, and beatifically calm: through an adult lens, a total weirdo" (Kamp 2020, 71). Despite the shows' obvious benefits to children, American culture at large would come to see *Mr. Rogers'* and *Sesame Street* as pivotal programs through nostalgia as much as improved reading scores.

The final section of the book looks more at the immediate results of the programming pioneered in the 1960s. As the success of *Sesame Street* continued throughout the 1970s, other programs both at PBS and beyond took note of what worked for children's programming. *The Electric Company* was created as a sister show to *Sesame Street* for school-age kids, focusing on more advanced reading

skills. While the show only ran for a few seasons, partly because the actors almost universally went on to star-studded careers, its effectiveness was similar to *Sesame Street*. *Zoom* was another public television program that looked at the social-emotional and creative needs of school-aged kids. Another focus of this last third of *Sunny Days* is the Marlo Thomas special *Free to Be...You and Me*, which examined the changing idea of childhood and family life in the United States. Thomas recruited numerous actors, singers, and authors to her cause, and the style of the show was very similar to *Sesame Street's* short segments and catchy song formula.

David Kamp's *Sunny Days* is a strong example of primary source scholarship, relying almost completely on direct interviews or archival material. While *Sesame Street* has long been part of the discussion of children's television, it was not seen as worthy of academic study as a larger cultural text until the early 2000s. Kamp opens the book with an engaging narrative introduction, but he sets the personal aside throughout the rest of the book, illustrating a strong use of storytelling throughout. This text would be a welcome addition to any television studies course, as it thoroughly covers the first thirty years of children's television history, but it would also find a home in an American studies or cultural history classroom, both accessible for undergraduates and detailed enough for graduate students.

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