

landscapes, weathers, houses, times of day, pieces of furniture, odd obsessions, dominant colors, even centuries. Move the character (or characters) around in these details. See what happens.

#### Angel (saw)dust

Recently, I've just been writing a scene in a novel. For a long time, I'd been thinking about a man who believed he was an angel. I saw the iridescent sheen of his wings, imagined him spill numinous light over his lovers. When I finally put him in a real room, the first thing I smelled was sawdust! It turned out he wasn't an angel, but a mad trapeze artist who enjoyed wearing sculpted wings and making love in dangerous situations. I'm not sure what I'm going to do; I may pummel him back into shape. On the other hand, he may lead a new character to a form of love-making she's never known. Or the three of us may strike some unfathomable compromise.

When working with scenes, try this:

1. Ask yourself what most excites you about people.
2. When you walk into a strange house, what do you notice first? If you could snoop what would you most want to see?
3. What are your own secrets? Your own obsessions?
4. What places fascinate you? What weathers? What times of day?
5. Instead of reciting the known, linear history of your day, record a few key images. Soon you'll have your own private lexicon of obsessions and concrete images. These may help create a matrix for forming scenes.
6. If you're frightened about making a strong commitment to a scene, see if you can work with the fear by turning it into excitement. Invent your own techniques.

The scene is the smallest principality in the country of the story. It's where objects of the imagination assume a life of their own. A scene is the beginning of your story's journey. ■

*Thaisa Frank is the co-author of Finding Your Writer's Voice (St. Martin's Press).*

# Turning Off the Tube

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ABANDONED IN THE WASTELAND: CHILDREN, TELEVISION, AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT, BY NEWTON N. MINOW AND CRAIG L. LAMAY; HILL AND WANG; 237 PAGES; \$20

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TALKING POLITICS: CHOOSING THE PRESIDENT IN THE TELEVISION AGE, BY LIZ CUNNINGHAM; PRAEGER; 174 PAGES; \$19.95.

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*Reviewed by Paul Signorelli*

Many of us feel that late playwright Paddy Chayefsky had the right idea about television when he had the fictional newscaster in *Network* tell people to "turn it off." Two new books by authors who decided to leave it on provide divergent views of how well television meets its obligations to benefit the public interest.

Television does not serve the public, according to Newton N. Minow and Craig L. LaMay in *Abandoned in the Wasteland: Children, Television, and the First Amendment*. This conclusion will come as no surprise to those who remember Minow from his days as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission during the Kennedy Administration. Speaking to members of the National Association of Broadcasting in 1961, he predicted that anyone watching television without interruption would "observe a vast wasteland...a procession of game shows...mayhem, violence, sadism, murder." Minow has lost none of his "blood and thunder" approach to television in the ensuing 34 years. He and co-author LaMay get only a few pages into the intro-

duction of their book before quoting conservative pundit Peggy Noonan as saying, "You have to be a moral retard not to know that this is harmful, that it damages the young, the unsteady, the unfinished."

The central point of *Abandoned in the Wasteland* is that the congressional mandate that broadcasters serve the public interest demands (among other things) excellent, educational programming for children—a challenge that is not being met. By failing in this, the authors maintain, programmers are receiving the "quid" of free access to the airwaves without providing the "quo," and the resulting programming is harmful to children.

#### Ad TV

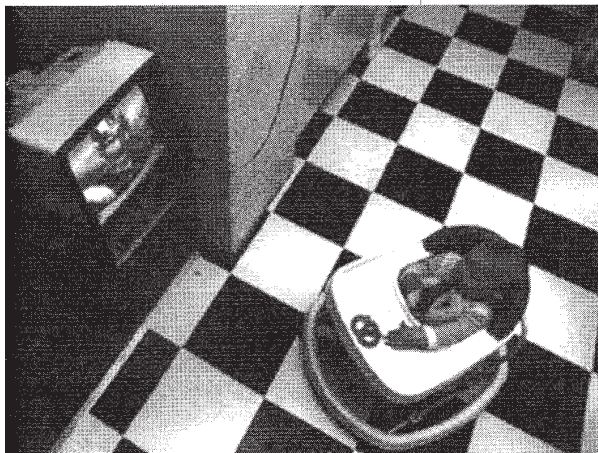
Minow and LaMay suggest that concrete steps must be taken to "end television's commercial exploitations of children," since "there is virtually no disagreement...that small children do not understand the difference between programs and commercials." Their solution is a proposed "Bill for Children's Telecommunications," which would be amended to the 1990 Children's Television Act. It would require a minimum amount of "educational and informational television programs for children" and "afford greater control to parents to deal with violence in television programs."

*Abandoned in the Wasteland* is well-written and well-researched, and the authors' assessment of how television programming developed and led to the current problems with children's television is hard to argue with, but they restrict themselves to a legislative solution when easier answers exist—the most obvious being to "turn it off."

**Watch what you watch**

One seemingly insurmountable problem with the authors' recommendation is how hard it is for our government to reach agreement on controversial issues. Try obtaining a definitive, acceptable resolution to the question of whether or not to teach "family values" in classrooms. Setting both exhaustive and tolerable standards for programming in the public interest—or even deciding what the public interest actually is—appears to be just as inconceivable. "Every son-of-a-gun and his brother has a definite idea about the way it should be handled," one reformer laments in Minow and LaMay's book. The real solution may well be to acknowledge that children will be better served when their parents follow Minow's advice to sit in front of the television, without other distractions, and watch what their children watch.

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journalist Liz Cunningham provides a less alarmist view of television and its ability to fill a public need in *Talking Politics: Choosing the President in the Television Age*. The material for Cunningham's book is a series of ten interviews with media figures including Robert MacNeil, Larry King, Pierre Salinger, and Tom Brokaw, as well as with former vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro. The result is an insider's view of how television representatives and those they cover

have responded to criticism of television news coverage of presidential politics.

A recurring admission from the news anchors in this book is that the 1988 presidential campaign was poorly covered, and, furthermore, that they allowed themselves to be manipulated. Their solution in 1992 was to stop allowing the candidates to determine what was covered, and to spend more time focusing on what they considered to be the "real issues". What Cunningham's interviews rarely explored is how—or even whether—the "improved" coverage of 1992 in any way served the public interest, as is supposedly the aim of television broadcasting.

**Dead duck**

Cunningham does occasionally succeed in drawing out interesting comments from her subjects. Talk-show host Larry King, for example, has no qualms about responding to Cunningham's question as to

whether "talk-show formats are much more susceptible to manipulation by some sort of demagogue."

"Absolutely, but what do you want to do about it?" King retorts. Television, he adds, has also "helped to break down a demagogue. It brought down Joe McCarthy." His conclusion is that nothing can be done to prevent demagogues

from using the medium: "Television is the way we communicate today. You don't communicate on television, you're a dead duck."

Cunningham, by refraining from commenting on the individual interviews, does allow some questionable statements to stand unchallenged. NBC Nightly News anchor and managing editor Tom Brokaw, for example, says the networks covered the Gennifer Flowers story with "good judgment" and "restraint." (MacNeil/Lehrer

NewsHour contributing editor and essayist Roger Rosenblatt recalls it differently, however: "The press pursued Gennifer Flowers and the draft business pretty hard to the point where in New Hampshire it was really make or break on those things.") While the author achieves her stated goal of presenting "the viewpoint of each person," she is less successful in avoiding repetitive stories and questionable statements such as Brokaw's Gennifer Flowers comment.

The interviews in *Talking Politics* are ultimately only as interesting and ephemeral as anything appearing on talk shows or evening news broadcasts. As soon as they are digested, they are promptly forgotten as we move on to the next quick fix. ■

*Paul Signorelli is the director of Volunteer Services for the San Francisco Public Library. He ran an author series for the Library in 1994.*

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