Stephen Faller. *Reality TV: Theology in the Video Era.* St. Louis: Chalice, 2009. 105 pages. $16.99.

In the interest of full disclosure, I like television but loathe "Reality TV." That's not quite true. I have been faithfully watching several reality shows for decades: *This Old House*, *Victory Garden*, and more recently *Antiques Road Show*. Real Reality TV has landed like a viral tsunami on the shores of television programming, drowning much in its way. English nannies supervise dysfunctional families; husbands swap wives in the most unlikely matches; bachelors and bachelorettes choose soul mates while sharing the most intimate details under the watchful eyes of a television crew; celebrities apprentice themselves under the harsh scrutiny of The Donald. Is there anything less real than Reality TV? And yet…. Remember the parents who created a hoax about their son trapped in a run-away balloon so that the family might get a shot at being on a Reality TV show? Reality TV has become an imposing force in American media and in American culture, since media reflect, shape, commodify, and then market our culture back to us. The shows have become an important source of whatever meta-narrative we hold to in this postmodern era. Financial success largely trumps critical acclaim. Reality TV is cheap to produce and it sells ads. Little else matters. Faller makes a credible case, however, for paying some attention to these shows as mirrors of the culture.

"Reality TV could not have become the global phenomenon it is today unless it truly meant something to the people who watch it" (6). But what meaning(s)? Faller claims that Reality TV is real because the characters are not actors assuming fictional roles. This seems to overlook the impact that being recorded and having an audience has on the behaviors of the participants who often assume archetypal roles. He refers to the contestants as "ordinary people." But some fictional television shows (*The Simpsons*, for example) seem much more realistic in their portrayals of human foibles and the complexities of human life. He comments about a show that features dysfunctional families, "By observing these families that were chosen for the sake of extreme contrast, the viewer realizes that there is a whole spectrum of what is considered 'normal'" (41). But do we necessarily include them as normal? Or could the opposite effect result, that we judge that they are not like us at all.

The book is structured around a series of chapters that gradually move from description to prescription. Each chapter is accompanied by two sets of questions. The first set is intended to provoke discussion in small groups who might be using the book. The second set is for self-reflection. There is sufficient latitude in both sets that everyone should find something that gets them thinking. The questions do presume, however, that the reader actually watches Reality TV with some regularity and attentiveness. Faller makes some comparisons to biblical storytelling and parables as ancient versions of Reality TV.

With reference to *Oprah's Big Give*, Faller claims that programs "that affirm the community are poignant reminders that the marketplace is not without conscience. Such programs stand as potent sources of social justice" (81). The small town in which I work has had an *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* event. The community built a house for a deserving family. As I understand, labor and materials were largely donated by locals. Fair enough. Good things can happen even on commercial television; that's Faller's point, I guess. But again, the bottom line is that the show is relatively cheap to produce,

and it sells ads. The show's producers never mention feelings of resentment on the part of those who donate the materials and do most all of the work

The final chapter is a closer analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Reality TV. He lists three characteristics of Reality TV which might be exploited for positive usage. "Reality TV is dynamic, popular, and transformative" (99). Each is explored in somewhat greater depth, but I would have appreciated a harder-edged analysis. "One of the most exciting things about Reality TV is its ability to inspire people and motivate people to change" (102). What is the evidence that it does? He then lists potential weaknesses, including its inability to form community. To combat the weaknesses, Faller suggests that Reality TV creates opportunities to understand with greater depth how television works (media literacy) and then further suggests we find occasions to discuss its impact. I have seen this suggestion applied to television for decades, but has it ever really worked in, for example, a home setting? I so wish Faller had used much more space writing about media literacy in this book, deconstructing Reality TV, going into greater depth about what makes for a successful show, and why people watch them. All in all, this book serves as a good start on the discussion, but more yet is called for.

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