

# On Box-Sets, Binge-Watching and Biblical Stories:

*some random musings*

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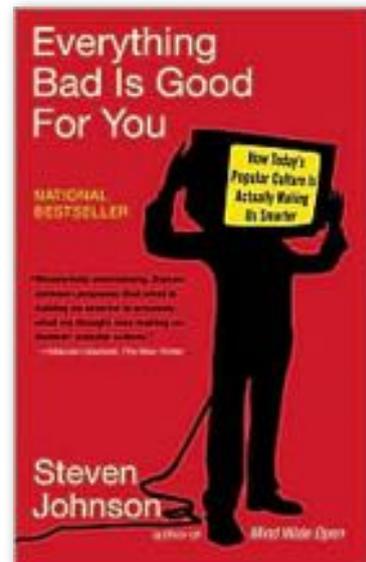


Growing up in 70s London, one of my favourite programmes was BBC's children's shows, *Why Don't You?*, the purpose of which was abundantly clear in the theme song chorus: 'Why Don't You Just Switch Off Your Television Set and Go Out and Do Something Less Boring Instead?' Viewers could write in and suggest supposedly fun things to make or do, which the crew, made up of kids, would then try out. Naturally, the irony of this being on TV was completely lost on me, but it did make the point (reinforced by my parents on countless occasions) – watching too much TV is bad for you.

Now, I'm not denying that (the operative word being the little word 'too'). It's a valid point, perhaps even more so today. But before

bathwater starts carrying babies off, some aspects of contemporary TV culture are emphatically not evidence for the end of civilisation (and the operative word there is, of course, 'some'). An excellent case was made by Steven Johnson in his fascinating book, *Everything Bad Is Good For You - Why Popular Culture Is Making Us Smarter* (Penguin, 2005). The book has dated a little (especially his analysis of the internet) but his main contention has not. It is very simple: far from pandering to dumbed down audiences, the money people have realised that it's complexity and sophistication that sells. What was true a decade ago, is surely even more pertinent now that we can stream everything.

But hang on! Surely we should encourage everyone to read books? Isn't that much better for everyone than TV? Isn't that much more *civilised*? Well, actually, it depends. It depends on the content of your reading, your preferred learning styles, your



experience of education, and even your physical posture and stamina. Nevertheless, Johnson acknowledges that reading does indeed develop several important faculties:

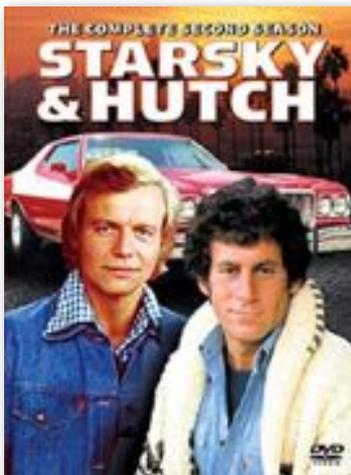
...effort, concentration, attention, the ability to make sense of words, to follow narrative threads, to sculpt imagined worlds out of mere sentences on the page. Those benefits are themselves amplified by the fact that society places a substantial emphasis on precisely this set of skills. (p23)

His question, however, is this: Might other media develop similar benefits, perhaps to levels more advanced even than reading? After analysis of popular video games and box sets (or [boxed sets, if you want to be pedantic](#)), Johnson insists that they might. For example,

To non-players, games bear a superficial resemblance to music videos: flashy graphics; the layered mix of image, music and text; the occasional burst of speed, particularly during the pre-rendered opening sequences. But what you actually do in playing a game—the way that your mind has to work—is radically different. It's not about tolerating or aestheticising chaos; it's about finding order and meaning in the world and making decisions that help create that order. (p62)

I'm not enough of a games-guy to say whether or not that is still true. It is what he says about TV that particularly interests me. It's all to do with how technological change has affected story-telling, in particular plot complexity alongside the number of characters we have to track.

### *The Format of the Classic Shows*



Consider the long-running shows of the 60s and 70s: *Ironside*, *Hawaii Five-0*, *Starsky & Hutch*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, and so on. Watch episodes today and they feel very dated. That's not simply because of the old cars and fashions. A key factor will be the relatively low demands they make on the viewer. For one thing, the plot will be very easy to follow. It will relentlessly chart a course through one story line.

The only real variation tended to be those series that added a subplot via the prologue and epilogue—that concluding moment when the characters all have a jolly laugh together (so perfectly satirised by the *Police Squad/Naked Gun* teams). But that was about as sophisticated as it got.

The reason was primarily commercial. Programme makers needed advertising revenue in order to make them, so did all they could to attract and retain viewers. Their solution? A formula that never changes (once discovered). That might be the interactions of a tightly-knit group of characters (like a family or an office), and/or a puzzle to solve (*Columbo* or *Mission Impossible*), and/or a mission to accomplish (*Star Trek* or *The A Team*) The point is that each episode can stand alone (it doesn't matter if you miss a week), yet you still come back for more because you know what you're going to get.

#### ■ *The Video Effect*

So, what changed? Initially, it was the arrival of video in the late 70s, immediately followed by the format wars between Betamax and VHS in the 80s. It was now possible to record shows you would otherwise have missed. To begin with, however, Hollywood was the main beneficiary. It was now possible to consume movies at home, thanks to the local rental store. Filmmakers therefore had two bites at the cherry. Some in TV saw the opportunities, though. One of the first shows to reject simplistic formatting was *Hill Street Blues*, first aired in 1981. Not only did the average episode contain several, interweaving plot lines, but there were some plot lines that extended over several episodes. In other words, missing an episode would make some plots harder to understand. That's why you would



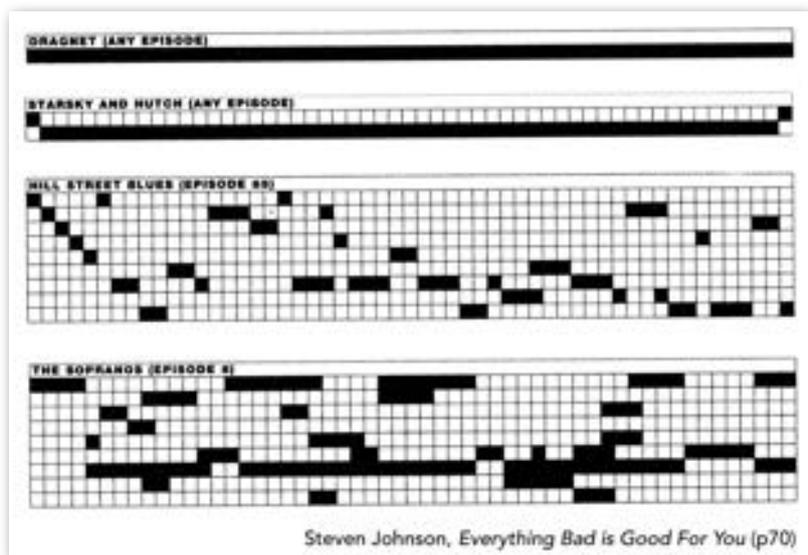
video them. Now of course, soap operas had always done that. The change was exploiting that device in more intellectually demanding ways. It would be used to explore challenging social or ethical issues, for example. It was like *The Wire* ahead of time.

#### ■ *The Box Set Effect*

Strangely enough, TV quality was most affected when another technology changed what happened after shows were aired. DVDs arrived adding quality and convenience; now an entire series could be packaged together and easily transported. The age of binge-watching was truly beginning. Why was this significant? Now, screenwriters could make serious demands on the audience, on the assumption that they might watch several episodes at once, even on consecutive nights. The first shows to exploit this were *The Sopranos* and *The West Wing*—and thus, what's been dubbed 'the golden age of television' had arrived. Both shows had multiple plot lines, with differing lengths and complexity, with a huge range of characters (some returning episodes apart). A

set up for an important plot point might be dropped in one episode while its payoff might only come after fifteen more episodes. Such subtlety was unthinkable with *Starsky and Hutch*. That is why, as a nerdy West Wingnut, I love *The West Wing Weekly* podcast with Joshua Malina and Hrishikesh Hirway – admittedly this is an indulgence for true believers only since each podcast episode spends an hour discussing each *West Wing* episode (they’ve now reached the end of Season 5). One of the things the presenters love doing is spotting minute narrative threads that even cross over between seasons. I can’t imagine a podcast doing the same for *The A Team*, can you?

Johnson demonstrates these developments in graphic terms: What we see on the screen is represented by the progress of shaded boxes from left to right. The different rows represent different plot lines. The revolution brought about by *Hill Street Blues* is immediately apparent: in this episode, the viewer had to be aware of ten separate lines. By the time we get to *The Sopranos*, it is complicated still further.



Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good For You* (p70)

Another way of mapping this complexity is to analyse the social networks explored by a show. Notice the contrast between *Dallas* (itself much more complex than its predecessors) and season one of *24*.

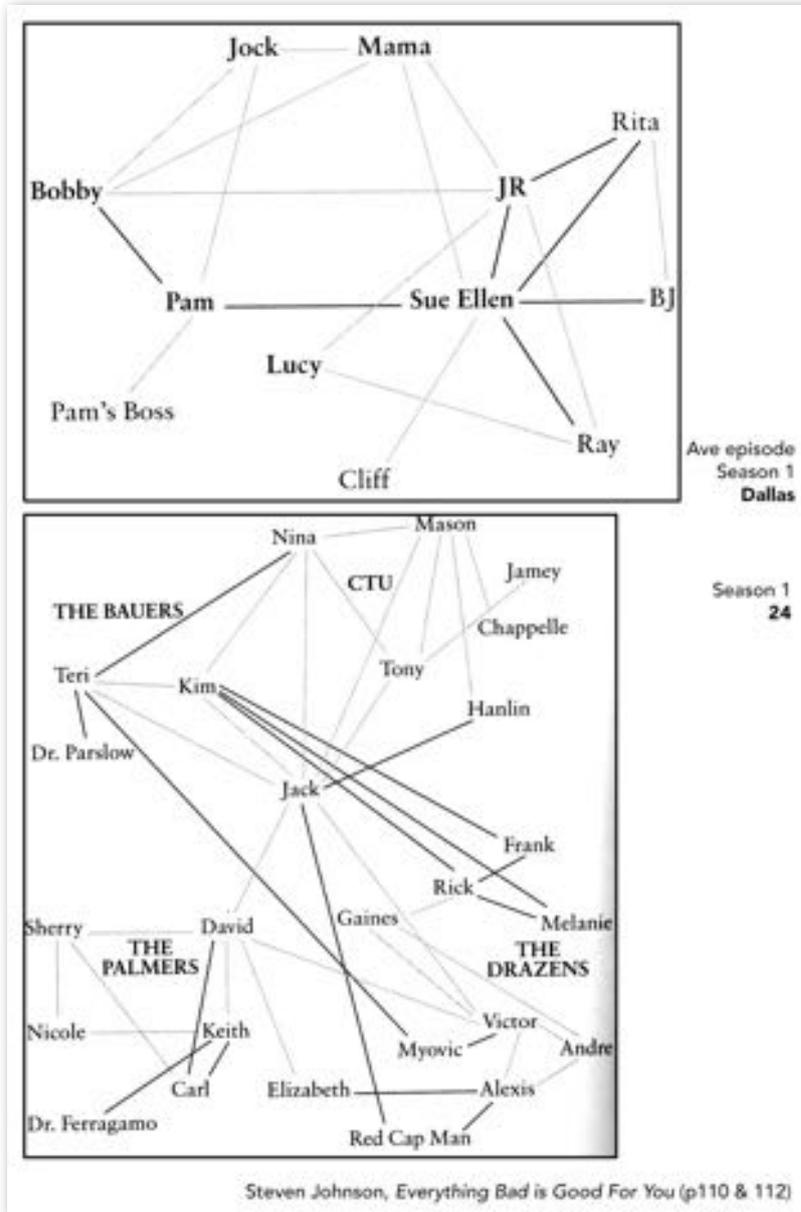
Modern viewers need to hold a huge range of characters in their heads. These are the shows that now rake in the millions. Complexity and sophistication now rule. Who’d have thought it?

Johnson thus summarises:

Neil Postman announced [in the late 70s] that two of television’s golden rules were: “Thou shalt have no prerequisites” (meaning that no previous knowledge should be required for viewers to understand a program) and “Thou shalt have no perplexity.” Postman had it right at the time, if you ignored the developing narrative techniques of *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*. But twenty years later, many of the most popular shows in television history regularly flaunt those principles. (p162)

*But what's that got to do with anything...?*

Many voice despair at the decline of reading in the west. There are genuine reasons for concern, not least for the potential loss of all the understanding, virtues, and habits that reading brings. Like the reformers before us, we



probably need to do much better at teaching people to read. Yet remember that all is not lost. Some of these virtues can be gained in other ways. They are not identical ways and we can debate the relative merits of different media. But they can be gained nonetheless. Above all, it is clear that increasing numbers are able to follow and enjoy increasingly sophisticated narratives, even without having ploughed through *War and Peace*, *David Copperfield* or *Les Misérables*.

Which quite naturally brings us to the Bible! One of the real church disasters of recent decades is the widespread failure to tackle biblical illiteracy even among

Sunday regulars. No wonder so many regard it as dull and remote. This is not to deny the many questions it raises---those need tackling for sure. But *dull* it most certainly isn't. Not when you remove it from the "statements, assertions and propositions" category, and restore it to its rightful "story" category. Even Leviticus becomes interesting then! For the Scriptures offer us a remarkably sophisticated and intricate narrative. It has a cast of thousands, extends the

narrative over centuries, with unpredictable twists and turns. It even has tiny narrative drop-ins that take generations to pay off. The bible's writers are far too good at story-telling to do it any other way. That is how you hook people and keep them hooked. So the David Chases and Aaron Sorkins of this world are hardly the first to do that.

Let me give a couple of examples. Take Joseph's bones.

- *Genesis 50:20-22*: And Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.'
- *Exodus 13:19*: Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.'
- *Joshua 24:32*: And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants.

Why do we get this trail of breadcrumbs? It might help to think of each of these biblical books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua) as consecutive seasons of a very sophisticated TV show! We can only make sense of the crumbs by grasping their context within that cross-season narrative. In short, it is all part of the story of what God promises his people—a promise Joseph trusts will be fulfilled. In case we missed the point, the New Testament nails it, centuries later.

- *Hebrews 11:22*: By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

He believed the people would enter the Promised Land.

Or how about Elijah? Have you ever wondered why people might have thought that Jesus was Elijah returned? He was clearly a person of interest for Mark when he wrote his gospel:

- Mk 1:6 What's with John's weird fashion sense?
- Mk 6:15 Who is John the Baptist?
- Mk 8:28 Who is Jesus?
- Mk 9:2-8 Elijah at the Transfiguration
- Mk 9:11 Teachers: Why must Elijah come first?
- Mk 9:12-13 Jesus: Elijah HAS come!

- Mk 15:35-36 ...he's calling Elijah... let's see if Elijah comes to take him down

There are certainly puzzles to get the reader thinking here. What is clear, though, is that Mark expects us to have a sense of the story's big picture. I'll leave you to follow these breadcrumbs for yourself (with one or two handy hints).

- 2 Kings 1:8
- 2 Kings 2:1-18
- Malachi 4:5-6 (note context of Mal 3-4: God comes to bring judgment on his own temple and people - compare with Mark 11:1-26)

This is a very roundabout way to make a very simple point. People love stories. They always have. They always will. It's in our wiring. And as we have seen, they can be sophisticated, time-consuming and mind-bending. People will still give them time. That's not an earth-shattering revelation, I grant you. But if millions are prepared to invest money, time and mental energy in hours and hours of complex TV shows, then there is nothing intrinsic about the Bible that should prevent them doing the same with that. Our confidence in the greatest story should be renewed—especially when we are tempted to despair that attention spans are dwindling or bright lights distracting. Perhaps it just boils down to this.

It's the way you tell 'em. Or read 'em.

