



The Jews of Prime Time

David Zurawik

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How did it happen that in a time when networks were run by Jewish men, and many television shows were written by Jewish writers, there were so few identifiably Jewish characters on television? In his provocative book, David Zurawik marshalls compelling evidence to suggest that, during television's first thirty-five years, its primarily Jewish power brokers actively suppressed Jewish characters and Jewish themes from appearing on the small screen.

Beginning his investigation in the early days of television with Gertrude Berg and *The Goldbergs*, Zurawik, an award-winning journalist, shows how the Jewish founders of the three major networks—William S. Paley (CBS), David Sarnoff (NBC), and Leonard Goldenson (ABC)—dictated the kinds of shows Americans would watch from the late 1940s until they sold their broadcast empires in the mid-1980s. Under the auspices of these incredibly powerful men, the television industry either distorted or eliminated entirely images of Jews from prime time at the very moment when television came to hold center stage in mainstream American life. In fact, creating a cookie-cutter image of American life was so important to the top Jewish executives that they fabricated a brief, which circulated among the networks and became legendary in the industry. It claimed that CBS had “research” that indicated Americans were not interested in seeing Jews (or divorced people, people from New York, and men with mustaches) on the small screen. Zurawik convincingly argues that Paley and the others were ambivalent about their own Jewishness, and fearful, in the post-Holocaust, pro-assimilation, red-baiting 1950s, that their shows not appear “too Jewish.” The ironic result: with few exceptions, shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver* came to represent American family life, while Jewish identity was presented as something that had to be obscured or hidden away.

Only when the moguls sold their interest in the networks and moved on did things begin to change in a sustained way. Serious shows with leading Jewish characters began to appear in series like *thirtysomething* and *Northern Exposure*, which dealt with issues of tolerance, intermarriage, and assimilation. But in many of the programs that followed, particularly the sitcoms of the 1990s, Jewish men and especially Jewish women fell into stereotypical roles that Zurawik describes as “nebbishy boyfriends lusting after non-Jewish women” or “Jewish-American princesses and smothering mothers.” And, although Jewish characters are now plentiful on television, many are very nominally Jewish, or Jewish in name only. Despite the best efforts of the successors of Paley, Sarnoff, and Goldenson, the culture of Jewish self-consciousness and censorship lives on in network television today.

Based on more than one hundred interviews gathered over ten years with network executives, producers, and actors, Zurawik's book gives voice to these insiders—who reveal, for the first time, how and why the depiction of Jews on television has followed such a strange, unpredictable course.

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