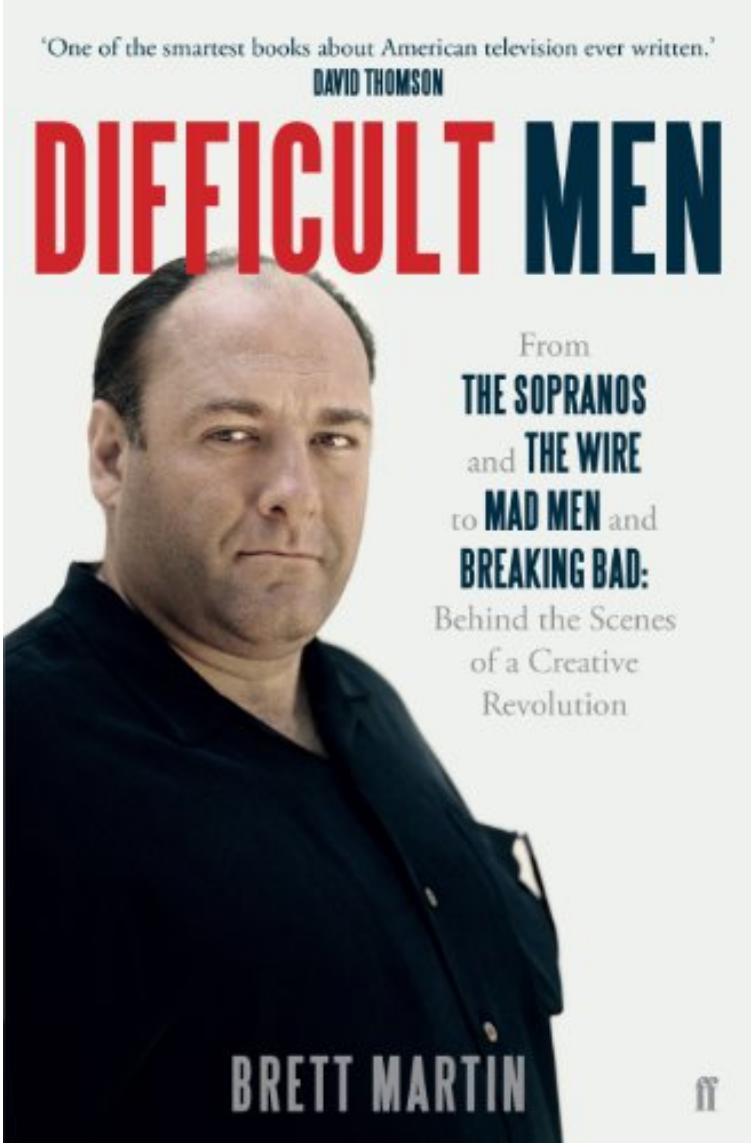
Difficult Men: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad (English Edition)



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Par Brett Martin : Difficult Men: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Difficult Men: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad (English Edition):

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn the late 1990s and early 2000s, a wave of TV shows, first on premium cable channels like HBO and then basic cable networks like FX and AMC, dramatically stretched television's inventiveness, emotional resonance and ambition. Shows such as The Wire, Breaking Bad, The Sopranos, Mad Men, Deadwood, The Shield tackled issues of life and death, love and sexuality, addiction, race,

violence and existential boredom. Television shows became the place to go to see stories of the triumph and betrayals of the American Dream at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This revolution happened at the hands of a new breed of auteur: the all-powerful writer-show runner. These were men nearly as complicated, idiosyncratic, and "difficult" as the conflicted protagonists that defined the genre. Given the chance to make art in a maligned medium, they fell upon the opportunity with unchecked ambition.Difficult Men features extensive interviews with all the major players, including David Chase and James Gandolfini (The Sopranos), David Simon, Dominic West and Ed Burns (The Wire), Vince Gilligan (Breaking Bad), Matthew Weiner and Jon Hamm (Mad Men), David Milch (NYPD Blue, Deadwood) and Alan Ball (Six Feet Under), in addition to dozens of other writers, directors, studio executives and actors. Martin takes us behind the scenes of our favourite shows, delivering never-before-heard story after story and revealing how TV has emerged from the shadow of film to become a truly significant and influential part of our culture. Brett Martin is the author of The Supranos: The Book(2007). His work has appeared in The New York Times, The New Yorker, Food and Wine and Vanity Fair. Difficult Men is an insightful history of popular US TV drama which traces the emergence of shows such as The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, Mad Men and The Wire, and explores their engagement with important social issues around love, sexuality, race and violence.ExtraitSPOILER ALERT:IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES, I DISCUSS A GREAT MANY PLOT POINTS OF A GREAT MANY TV SHOWS. PrologueYou think its easy being the boss?TONY SOPRANOOne cold winters evening in January 2002, Tony Soprano went missing and a small portion of the universe ground to a halt.It did not come completely out of the blue. Ever since The Sopranos had debuted in 1999, turning Tonyanxiety-prone dad, New Jersey mobster, suburban seeker of meaninginto a millennial pop culture icon, the characters frustration, volatility, and anger had often been indistinguishable from those qualities of James Gandolfini, the actor who brought them to life. The role was a punishing one, requiring not only vast amounts of nightly memorization and long days under hot lights, but also a daily descent into Tonys psycheat the best of times a worrisome place to dwell; at the worst, ugly, violent, and sociopathic.Some actorsnotably Edie Falco, who played Tonys wife, Carmela Sopranoare capable of plumbing such depths without getting in over their heads. Blessed with a near photographic memory, Falco could show up for work, memorize her lines, play the most emotionally devastating of scenes, and then return happily to her trailer to join her regular companion, Marley, a gentle yellow Lab mix.Not so Gandolfini, for whom playing Tony Soprano would always require to some extent being Tony Soprano. Crew members grew accustomed to hearing grunts and curses coming from his trailer as he worked up to the emotional pitch of a scene by, say, destroying a boom box radio. An intelligent and intuitive actor, Gandolfini understood this dynamic and sometimes used it to his advantage; the heavy bathrobe that became Tonys signature, transforming him into a kind of domesticated bear, was murder under the lights in midsummer, but Gandolfini insisted on wearing it between takes. Other times, though, simulated misery became indistinguishable from the real thingon set and off. In papers related to a divorce filing at the end of 2002, Gandolfinis wife described increasingly serious issues with drugs and alcohol, as well as arguments during which the actor would repeatedly punch himself in the face out of frustration. To anybody who had witnessed the actors self-directed rage as he struggled to remember lines in front of the camerahe would berate himself in disgust, curse, smack the back of his own headit was a plausible scenario.It did not help that the naturally shy Gandolfini was suddenly one of the most recognizable men in Americaespecially in New York and New Jersey, where the show filmed and where the sight of him walking down the street with, say, a cigar was guaranteed to seed confusion in those already inclined to shout the names of fictional characters at real human beings. Unlike Falco, who could slip off Carmelas French-tipped nails, throw on a baseball cap, and disappear in a crowd, Gandolfinisix feet tall, upward of 250 poundshad no place to hide.All of which had long since taken its toll by the winter of 2002. Gandolfinis sudden refusals to work had become a semiregular occurrence. His fits were passive-aggressive: he would claim to be sick, refuse to leave his TriBeCa apartment, or simply not show up. The next day, inevitably, he would feel so wretched about his behavior and the massive logistic disruptions it had causedakin to turning an aircraft carrier on a dimethat he would treat cast and crew to extravagant gifts. All of a sudden thered be a sushi chef at lunch, one crew member remembered. Or wed all get massages. It had come to be understood by all involved as part of the price of doing business, the trade-off for getting the remarkably intense, fully inhabited Tony Soprano that Gandolfini offered.So when the actor failed to show up for a six p.m. call at Westchester County Airport to shoot the final appearance of the character Furio Giunta, a night shoot involving a helicopter, few panicked. It was an annoyance, but it wasnt cause for concern, said Terence Winter, the

writer-producer on set that night. You know, Its just money. I mean, it was a ton of moneywe shut down a fucking airport. Nobody was particularly sad to go home at nine thirty on a Friday night.Over the next twelve hours, it would become clear that this time was different. This time, Gandolfini was just gone.The operation that came to a halt that evening was a massive one. The Sopranos had spread out to occupy most of two floors of Silvercup Studios, a steel-and-brick onetime bread factory at the foot of the Queensboro Bridge in Long Island City, Queens. Downstairs, the production filmed on four of Silvercups huge stages, including the ominously named Stage X, on which sat an endlessly reconfigurable, almost life-size model of the Soprano familys New Jersey McMansion. The famous view of the familys backyardbrick patio and swimming pool, practically synonymous with suburban ennuilay rolled up on an enormous translucent polyurethane curtain that could be wheeled behind the ersatz kitchen windows and backlit when needed.A small army, in excess of two hundred people, was employed in fabricating such details, which added up to as rich and fleshed out a universe as had ever existed on TV: carpenters, electricians, painters, seamstresses, drivers, accountants, cameramen, location scouts, caterers, writers, makeup artists, audio engineers, prop masters, set dressers, scenic designers, production assistants of every stripe. Out in Los Angeles, a whole other team of postproduction creweditors, mixers, color correctionists, music supervisorswas stationed. Dailies were shuttled back and forth between the coasts under a fake company nameBig Box Productionsto foil spies anxious to spoil feverishly anticipated plot points. What had started three years earlier as an oddball, what-do-we-have-to-lose experiment for a network still best known for rerunning Hollywood movies had become a huge bureaucratic institution.More than that, to be at Silvercup at that moment was to stand at the center of a television revolution. Although the change had its roots in a wave of quality network TV begun two decades before, it had started in earnest five years earlier, when the pay subscription network HBO began turning its attention to producing original, hour-long dramas. By the start of 2002, with Gandolfini at large, the medium had been transformed.Soon the dial would begin to fill with Tony Sopranos. Within three months, a bald, stocky, flawed, but charismatic bossthis time of a band of rogue cops instead of mafiosiwould make his first appearance, on FXs The Shield. Mere months after that, on The Wire, viewers would be introduced to a collection of Baltimore citizens that included an alcoholic, narcissistic police officer, a ruthless drug lord, and a gay, homicidal stickup boy. HBO had already followed the success of The Sopranos with Six Feet Under, a series about a family-run funeral home filled with characters that were perhaps less sociopathic than these other cable denizens but could be equally unlikable. In the wings lurked such creatures as Deadwoods Al Swearengen, as cretinous a character as would ever appear on television, much less in the role of protagonist, and Rescue Mes Tommy Gavin, an alcoholic, self-destructive firefighter grappling poorly with the ghosts of 9/11. Andrew Schneider, who wrote for The Sopranos in its final season, had cut his teeth writing for TVs version of The Incredible Hulk, in which each episode, by rule, featured at least two instances of mild-mannered, regretful David Banner hulking out and morphing into a giant, senseless green id. This would turn out to be good preparation for writing a serialized cable drama twenty years later.These were characters whom, conventional wisdom had once insisted, Americans would never allow into their living rooms: unhappy, morally compromised, complicated, deeply human. They played a seductive game with the viewer, daring them to emotionally invest in, even root for, even love, a gamut of criminals whose offenses would come to include everything from adultery and polygamy (Mad Men and Big Love) to vampirism and serial murder (True Blood and Dexter). From the time Tony Soprano waded into his pool to welcome his flock of wayward ducks, it had been clear that viewers were willing to be seduced.They were so, in part, because these were also men in recognizable struggle. They belonged to a species you might call Man Beset or Man Harriedbadgered and bothered and thwarted by the modern world. If there was a signature prop of the era, it was the cell phone, always ringing, rarely at an opportune time and even more rarely with good news. Tony Sopranos jaunty ring tone still provokes a visceral response in anyone who watched the show. When the period prohibited the literal use of cell phone technology, you could see it nonethelessin the German butler trailing an old-fashioned phone after the gangster boss in Boardwalk Empire, or in the poor lackeys charged with delivering news to Al Swearengen, these unfortunate human proxies often bearing the consequences of the same violent wishes Tony seemed to direct to his ever-bleating phone.Female characters, too, although most often relegated to supporting roles, were beneficiaries of the new rules of TV: suddenly allowed lives beyond merely being either obstacles or facilitators to the male heros progress. Instead, they were free to be venal, ruthless, misguided, and sometimes even heroic human beings in their own rightthe housewife weighing her creature comforts against the crimes she knows her husband commits to provide them, in The Sopranos and Breaking Bad; the prostitute insisting on her

dignity by becoming a pimp herself, in Deadwood; the secretary from Bay Ridge battling her way through the testosterone-fueled battlefield of advertising in the 1960s, in Mad Men.In keeping with their protagonists, this new generation of shows would feature stories far more ambiguous and complicated than anything that television, always concerned with pleasing the widest possible audience and group of advertisers, had ever seen. They would be narratively ruthless: brooking no quarter for which might be the audiences favorite characters, offering little in the way of catharsis or the easy resolution in which television had traditionally traded.It would no longer be safe to assume that everything on your favorite television show would turn out all rightor even that the worst wouldnt happen. The sudden death of regular characters, once unthinkable, became such a trope that it launched a kind of morbid parlor game, speculating on who would be next to go. I remember watching, sometime toward the end of the decade, an episode of Dextera show that took the antihero principle to an all but absurd length by featuring a serial killer as its protagonistin which a poor victim had been strapped to a gurney, sedated, and ritually amputated limb by limb. The thing a viewer feared most, the image that could make ones stomach crawl up his or her rib cage, was that the victim would wake up, realize his plight, and start screaming. Ten years earlier, I would have felt protected from such a sight by the rules and conventions of television; it simply would not happen, because it could not happen. It was a sickening, utterly thrilling sensation to realize that there was no longer any such protection.Not only were these new kinds of stories, they were being told with a new kind of formal structure. That cable shows had shorter seasons than those on traditional network televisiontwelve or thirteen episodes compared with twenty-twowas only the beginning, though by no means unimportant. Thirteen episodes meant more time and care devoted to the writing of each. It meant tighter, more focused serial stories. It meant less financial risk on the part of the network, which translated to more creative risk on-screen.The result was a storytelling architecture you could picture as a colonnadeeach episode a brick with its own solid, satisfying shape, but also part of a season-long arc that, in turn, would stand linked to other seasons to form a coherent, freestanding work of art. (The traditional networks, meanwhile, were rediscovering their love of the exact oppositeprocedural franchises such as CSI and Law Order, which featured stand-alone episodes that could be easily rearranged and sold into syndication.) The new structure allowed huge creative freedom: to develop characters over long stretches of time, to tell stories over the course of fifty hours or more, the equivalent of countless movies. Indeed, TV has always been reflexively compared with film, but this form of ongoing, open-ended storytelling was, as an oft-used comparison had it, closer to another explosion of high art in a vulgar pop medium: the Victorian serialized novel. That revolution also had been facilitated by upheavals in how stories were created, produced, distributed, and consumed: higher literacy, cheaper printing methods, the rise of a consumer class. Like the new TV, the best of the serialsby Dickens, Trollope, George Eliotcreated suspense through expansive characterization rather than mere cliff-hangers. And like it, too, the new literary form invested in the writer both enormous power (since he or she alone could deliver the coal to keep the narrative train running) and enormous pressure: In writing, or rather publishing periodically, the author has no time to be idle; he must always be lively, pathetic, amusing, or instructive; his pen must never flaghis imagination never tire, wrote one contemporary critic in the London Morning Herald. Or as Dickens put it, in journals and letters to friends: I MUST write!The result, according to one scholar writing of Dickenss The Pickwick Papers, the first hugely successful serial, certainly sounds familiar: At a single stroke... something permanent and novel-like was created out of something ephemeral and episodic. Moreover, like the Victorian serialists, the creators of this new television found that the inherent features of their forma vast canvas, intertwining story lines, twists and turns and backtracks in characters progresshappened to be singularly equipped not only to fulfill commercial demands, but also to address the big issues of a decadent empire: violence, sexuality, addiction, family, class. These issues became the defining tropes of cable drama. And just like the Victorian writers, TVs auteurs embraced the irony of critiquing a society overwhelmed by industrial consumerism by using precisely that societys most industrialized, consumerist media invention. In many ways, this was TV about what TV had wrought.Certainly this was the view of the only man on the fourth floor of Silvercup Studios more crucial to The Sopranos success than its missing star. For all of the shows accomplishments, its creator and executive producer, David Chase, was at best ambivalent about his career in television, at worst as tormented as Gandolfini. Chase had grown up worshipping Film with a capital F. His heroes were the auteurs of the European New Wave and the 1970s American filmmakers inspired by them. These men were mavericks, artists who sacrificed the easy path to realize their vision on-screen. Television was for sellouts and hacks.Yet any of the directors Chase idolized would have killed for a fraction of the godlike powers over

an ever-expanding universe that he exercised from his office overlooking the Queensboros off-ramp. Every decisionfrom story direction to casting to the color of seemingly insignificant characters shirtspassed through that office. In the halls of Silvercup, his name and its power were so often invoked, usually in whispers, that he came to seem like an unseen, all-knowing deity.This, too, was part and parcel of the wave washing over television: the ascendancy of the all-powerful writer-showrunner. It had long been a truism that in TV, the writer is king, accustomed to power and influence unheard of in the director-dominated film industry. Now, that power would be wedded to the creative freedom that the new rules of TV afforded. And the men who seized that roleagain, they were almost all men: Chase, David Simon, Alan Ball, David Milch, Shawn Ryan and, later, Matthew Weiner, Vince Gilligan, and otherswould prove to be characters almost as vivid as the fictional men anchoring their shows.It was not an especially heroic-looking bunchnot a barrel-chested Balzac or Mailer-like wrestler of words among them. Generally speaking, they conformed to the unwritten television rule that the more power you have, the more aggressively terribly you dress. A similar working-class ethicpart affectation, part genuine (it is, after all, a business dominated by teamsters)combined with a fatalistic sense of any shows provisional life span, prevailed in showrunners offices. Some of the most powerful men in television worked in digs that would draw a labor grievance from assistant editors at lesser Cond Nast magazines.And being writers, they were not necessarily men to whom you would have automatically thought it prudent to hand near total control of a multimillion-dollar corporate operation. Indeed, this story is in many respects one of writers asked to act in very unwriterly ways: to become collaborators, managers, businessmen, celebrities in their own right, all in exchange for the opportunity to take advantage of a unique historical moment.If that occasionally led to behavior that was imperious, idiosyncratic, domineering, or just plain strange, it could perhaps be understood. The thing youve got to remember is theres a lot of pressure to deal with when youre running one of these shows, said Henry Bromell, a longtime TV writer and sometime showrunner himself. Youd probably be better off with a Harvard jock CEO-type guy. But thats not what you got. You got writers. So they react to pressure the way most people do; they internalize it or they subvert it. They lash out.Or as another television veteran put it, This isnt like publishing some lunatics novel or letting him direct a movie. This is handing a lunatic a division of General Motors.What all the showrunners sharedand shared with the directors whom Chase held in such esteemwas the seemingly limitless ambition of men given the chance to make art in a once vilified commercial medium. And since the Hollywood film industry had long been in a competitive deep-sea dive toward the lowest common denominator, chumming the multiplexes with overblown action events and Oscar-hopeful trash, Alan Ball, the showrunner of Six Feet Under, was entirely justified in his response to hearing Chases stubborn assertion that he should have spent The Sopranos years making films.Really? said Ball. Go ask him, Which films?What all this added up to was a new Golden Ageby most counts the third in televisions short lifetime, the first being the flowering of creation during the earliest days of the medium, the second a brief period of unusual network excellence during the 1980s. This isnt bad for a medium with a reputation somewhere beneath comic strips and just above religious pamphlets. It might be more precise to call it the First Wave of the Third Golden Age, since whether the age is indeed over remains an open question. At the time of this publication, two of the six or seven major shows on which it focuses were still in production; all the major players were still actively working. Several of the conditions that sparked the revolutionprimarily a proliferation of channels (both broadcast and Internet), all with a fierce hunger for contentwere still in place. At the same time, there can be no replicating the creative fecundity that comes with a genuine business and technological upheavalfrom people not knowing what the hell to do and thus being willing to try anything. That is what distinguished the generation of cable drama that lasted roughly from 1999 through 2013.I was able to enjoy most of the Third Golden Age as a lay viewer. I have never been a television critic or someone inclined toward rabid fandom. I remember taking a VHS advance copy of The Sopranos out of the free bin at the magazine where I was working in the late 1990s. I watched about half before dismissing it as a carbon copy of a Harold Ramis film being advertised at the same time: Analyze This, starring Robert De Niro and Billy Crystal as a mobster and his shrink. In retrospect, the knee-jerk comparison (in favor of Analyze This) was based solely on the fact that one was a film and the other merely TV.Then, in 2007, I was hired by HBO to write an official behind-the-scenes companion to The Sopranos, then preparing for the second half of its final season. By that point, Id long since recanted and become a fan of the show, which, with or without my endorsement, had been accepted by the outside world as a canonical accomplishment in the history of television. A representative from the Smithsonian Institution visited the set one day when I was there, to discuss which iconic props they might seize after the final wrap.I hung

aroundon set, around the makeup trailers, in meetingschatting with everyone from actors to parking supervisors. (A singular exception was Gandolfini, who did not acknowledge my presence for weeks and sat for a half-hour interview only on my very last day in the building.) I found myself entranced by the world into which Id parachuted. It was, first of all, exciting to suddenly be at the white-hot center of the pop culture universe, to have intoxicating access to rooms into which the rest of the world feverishly wanted to peer.More than that fascinated me, though: I have spent my working life in magazinesa place, like television, in which the demands of art and commerce are in constant, sometimes tense, negotiation. In that wider war, this was a battlefield on which art had seized the upper hand. After eight years, there was plenty of fatigue among the shows staff and crew, along with the complaining youd find in any huge organization, but there was also a universal understanding that everyone from writers to set designers to sound editors was being allowed to do perhaps the best work of their professional lives. The satisfaction was palpable and heightened only by a truth that Breaking Bad showrunner Vince Gilligan later confirmed for me: The worst TV show youve ever seen was miserably hard to make. It was entirely possible, even likely, to have a long, highly successful career in television without ever working on a show one felt truly proud of; here, at least for a brief time, the product was undeniably worthy of the talent and effort.I left the world of The Sopranos convinced that something new and important was going on. The feeling deepened as I continued to watch David Simons The Wire, HBOs other masterpiece, and a new show from one of the writers of The Sopranos, Matthew Weiners Mad Men. The ambition and achievement of these shows went beyond the simple notion of television getting good. The open-ended, twelve- or thirteen-episode serialized drama was maturing into its own, distinct art form. Whats more, it had become the signature American art form of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the equivalent of what the films of Scorsese, Altman, Coppola, and others had been to the 1970s or the novels of Updike, Roth, and Mailer had been to the 1960s. This is a book about how and why it happened.Attempting to keep up with the flow of great and good programs to come out of the Third Golden Age often felt like trying to get ones arms around a rushing torrent of water. For the purposes of this book, I needed to set parameters: The shows on which I concentrate are all an hour long and appear in short seasons of between ten and thirteen episodes. All are categorized as dramatic (though I cant think of any that dont incorporate a strong dose of humor). All appear on cable, as opposed to traditional network TV.More subtly, all employ an open-ended, ongoing mode of storytelling that distinguishes them from either of their closest precedents: the largely episodic quality network dramas of the 1980s and early 1990s (Hill Street Blues, thirtysomething, St. Elsewhere, and so on) and the closed-ended high-production-value miniseries of the BBC.These rules eliminate, at least from a starring role, not only a handful of noteworthy network shows of the same period (Friday Night Lights foremost among them), but also several fine cable shows that are very much the product of the TV revolution but are essentially structured as season-long mysteries that are solved, or at least put temporarily to bed, at the end of each cycle, rather than remaining deliriously, riskily unresolved. Im thinking in particular of the early seasons of Dexter and of Damages, shows Im sad not to spend more time on.It also more or less segregates a parallel generation of half-hour-long comedies that did nearly as much to define the era and the networks on which they appeared. At least one of these, Sex and the City, helped to pave the way for the revolution by establishing HBO as a destination for distinctive original programming. Many would, like their dramatic counterparts, push the definition of what had previously been thought possible on the mediumeven if those boundaries had, by the nature of comedy, been easier to push. (Married... with Childrens Al Bundy pioneered awful fathering on network TV long before Tony Soprano made it a staple of cable.) These showsCurb Your Enthusiasm, Its Always Sunny in Philadelphia, and Louie, to name a fewshared many of the themes of the dramas, including that of the deeply flawed, usually male protagonist; but on the whole, they did not partake of the formal innovations of the dramas on which I focus. Moreover, comedy was the one area in which the traditional networks actually kept some sort of pace with cable, albeit sometimes seemingly against their will, with smart, multilayered, and provocative shows like The Office, Arrested Development, Community, and 30 Rock.Another kind of half-hour program emerged during this time, and that was the cable show (not necessarily a sitcom) that centered on women rather than men. It was comic itself, this chauvinism of the clock: a male suburbanite turned drug dealer was worth sixty minutes (Breaking Bad), while his female counterpart (Weeds) warranted thirty. Only with the advent of Damages did a female-centric show break through this new glass ceiling.This is only one reason for a plain fact: Though a handful of women play hugely influential roles in this narrativeas writers, actors, producers, and executivesthere arent enough of them. Not only were the most important shows of the era run by men, they were also largely about manhoodin particular the contours of male power and the infinite varieties of

male combat.Why that was had something to do with a cultural landscape still awash in postfeminist dislocation and confusion about exactly what being a man meant. It may also have had something to do with the swaggering zeitgeist of the decade. Under George W. Bush, matters of politics had a way of becoming referenda on the nations masculinity: were we a nation of men (decisive, single-minded, unafraid to use force and to dominate) or girls (deliberative, empathetic, given to compromise)?Or the answer could be much simpler. Peter Liguorithe executive who developed the first wave of FX programming and, later, House M.D., a Fox network show that mimicked the kinds of heroes suddenly successful on cablewas candid enough to look inward. He had turned forty in 2000. At one point, he said, I was looking at the body of shows I was associated with and I realized, Oh, my God, Vic Mackey: forty-year-old guy, flawed. Screwed up. The two guys from Nip/Tuck, same descriptor. Rescue Me, same thing. Dr. House, same thing. It was like I was looking at Sybil.In other words, middle-aged men predominated because middle-aged men had the power to create them. And certainly the autocratic power of the showrunner-auteur scratches a peculiarly masculine itch. The auteur theory, Pauline Kael wrote in one of her attacks on that orthodoxy, is an attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and adolescencethat period when masculinity looked so great and important...Or as Barbara Hall, herself a showrunner, said of her male counterparts: Big money, big toys, and a kind of warfare. Whats not to like?Truthfully, Id hoped to avoid the clich Golden Age, redolent as it is of fusty Greatest Generation nostalgia for the playhouse dramas and vaudeville comedies that dominated the mediums earliest years. (There was plenty of garbage on television in 1950 and would undoubtedly have been much more had there been twenty-four hours and five hundred channels to fill.) However, no other term adequately expresses the sense of bounty, the constant, pleasurable surprise, that being a TV watcher during this period entailed. The shows came one after the other, with startlingly consistent quality: first HBOs astonishing run, with Oz, The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, The Wire, and Deadwood; and then the migration to other pay channels and basic cable, with The Shield, Rescue Me, Damages, Dexter, Mad Men, Breaking Bad, and more. Even if not all of these were to your liking, none could be dismissed as anything but new and challenging in the television universe. Sunday night, when the majority aired, became something akin to a national, communal holiday.And the revolution in what we watched was inseparable from a revolution in how we watched. DVDs were barely in use when The Sopranos debuted. By the time it ended, not only had DVDs represented a significant extra revenue stream for HBO, butalong with TiVo and other digital video recorders, online streaming, on-demand cable, Netflix, file sharing, YouTube, Hulu, and morethey had introduced a new mode of television viewing. Now you could watch an entire series in two or three multihour, compulsive orgies of consumptionmarathon sessions during which you might try to break away, only to have the opening credits work their Pavlovian magic, driving you forward into yet another hour. Or for those who resisted the binge method and watched in real time, there was its opposite: the unusual sensation of actual suspense, delayed pleasure, in a world of instant gratification.About those creditsor, to use the industry term that better hints at their epic quality, those main titles: These were no minimalist flashes of music and graphics. (Think Seinfelds rippling bass line.) Nor were they the melancholic credit sequences of the 1970s and 1980s (Taxi, The Rockford Files, WKRP in Cincinnati, Welcome Back, Kotter) that promised more depth than their shows ever delivered. They were expansive little movies in their own right, guides to the vocabulary and palette of the show to come.Here, as in so much else, The Sopranos set the template. Arriving in an era of Friends frolicking dumbly in a fountain, it began with a characteristic David Chase jokeGood news: Theres a light at the end of the tunnel. Bad news: Its New Jersey!and went on to present, in Tonys drive home, nothing less than a minute-and-a-half-long representation of Italian American progress in New Jersey: from the working-class apartments of Newarks old North Ward, up Bloomfield Avenue into starter homes in the Oranges, Glen Ridge, Verona, and finally to the Promised Land of the Caldwells. By the time Tony crankily slammed the car door in his driveway, it was clear that he was not a character who would be there for you when the rain started to fall, or any other time, for that matter. As for the TVs themselves, perhaps every new generation of televisual technology sounds like science fiction when its introduced, but, good God: liquid crystals, 3D plasma, Blu-ray. This is the stuff of dreams. The sets themselves became objects of beauty, downright sensual delights to watch. And TVs directors and cinematographers, suddenly freed from the restrictions imposed by the old grainy square boxestablishing shot, close-up, close-up, establishing shot, close-up, close-up, camera always on whoever was speaking, everything flooded with lightseized on the possibilities. Now they could work with shadows and darkness; hypnotic depth of field; beautiful, endless wide shots; handheld pyrotechnicsthe entire toolbox once seen only on the big screen.

While shooting the pilot of Breaking Bad in Albuquerque, New Mexico, cinematographer John Toll gave a bewildered local Circuit City employee an outraged lecture on the correct picture settings for the flat-screens in his showroom. Do you realize how long I spend lighting these things? he said. The small screen had gone big, only without the indignities of modern moviegoing: extortionary prices, cell-phone-chatting strangers, and, in an ironic switch, relentless advertisements.All of this conspired to create a remarkable new intimacy between show and viewer. Even the most inveterate gorger on season-long blocks of a show might find him- or herself slowing down as the number of remaining episodes dwindled, hesitant to say good-bye, a victim of something very much like separation anxiety. After all, by that point he would have spent at least as much sustained time with those fictional characters as with his own friends or family.With the simultaneous rise of the Internet, a new breed of fan-cum-critic was born. Once, a TV critic might review the pilot episode of a new series and then never revisit it. Now, just as TV evolved into a true serial formmaking it necessary to watch an entire season, or even multiple seasons, before assessing the work as a wholeit became paradoxically common to review each and every episode as soon as it aired or even, via live blogging and live tweeting, in real time. It became common to watch TV with a so-called second screen, a smartphone or tablet, open and at the ready. Deep into the night and the wee hours of Monday morning, the keyboards would click, turning out heroic rafts of prose, parsing each nuance, pouncing on each inconsistency, speculating on what might come next. After one episode of the FX comedy Louie, one fan-critic tellingly tweeted: Lets have a sleepover right now only instead of going to each others houses we just sit here and tweetconverse about #Louie till sunrise.The most diehard, or smitten, took to the strange practice of recappingwhich became the dominant way of talking about these shows on the Internet. Recaps were precise, moment-by-moment retellings of an episode just aired. They may have been an opportunity for editorializing and snarkiness, but they also smacked of ritual reenactmentnot unlike a young writer fastidiously typing out a favorite short story, word for word, in an attempt to commune with its author.Through all this, an unusual bond was formed, not only between viewer and show, but between viewer and network. A new drama on HBO or AMC was deemed all but automatically worthy of the recap treatment and of hopeful goodwilla level of brand loyalty and affection never granted, say, CBS or Paramount Pictures.If it had once been axiomatic that audiences might tolerate difficult characters at the safe remove of the movie theater, but not in their own bedrooms, it turned out that the result was nothing less than a kind of overwhelming, seismic love. Is it any wonder James Gandolfini might have felt just the tiniest bit of pressure?Understandable or not, Gandolfinis absence was becoming increasingly worrisome at Silvercup. The production team had already performed all the acrobatics it couldswitching the schedule around to shoot those few scenes that could be done without its star. The whole operation had been nervously treading water for days; many began to expect the worst. Terence Winter, driving into work, heard a newscaster report, Sad news from Hollywood today... , and his heart stopped. It was some drummer for a band, Winter said. But I thought, Holy shit! Hes dead. Sooner or later, the press, hungry for The Sopranos gossip at the best of times, would get hold of the story, and the upper echelon of producers at Silvercup and at HBO began to prepare a damage control strategy.Then, on day four, the main number in the shows production office rang. It was Gandolfini calling, from a beauty salon in Brooklyn. To the surprise of the owner, the actor had wandered in off the street, with no money and no identification, asking to use the phone. He called the only number he could remember, and he asked the production assistant who answered to put someone on who could send a car to take him home.The Sopranos would go on. And so would the world it had created.PART IOneIn the beginning, there was the Vast Wasteland. And it was bad.Already this is easy to forget: that for the overwhelming majority of its existence, the idea that television was an artistic dead zone would have been self-evident. The very term quality television, used by academics to denote anything that rose above the level of brain-dead muck, betrayed the very lowest of expectations. But to understand just how revolutionary the notion of good television wasand how voraciously those who had a chance to make it on cable between the late 1990s and the early 2010s attacked the opportunityits useful to revisit the utter depths in the publics perception from which the medium had to rise. And its worth looking at a prior generation of producers and writers who were given a brief window in which they, too, could do good work and wound up paving the way, in many cases directly, for the Third Golden Age.There had, of course, been the so-called First Golden Age, that brief, early period in the 1950s of televised Shakespeare and opera and brilliant, original anthologized drama. But in retrospect, that was just a technology finding its legs. In those early days, quality was a default, born of technological limitation (clunky, immovable cameras and limited recording capability made broadcasting live theater a natural starting place) and low stakes: in

1950, a television set cost several weeks worth of an average salary and could be found in only a fraction of generally affluent, well-educated homes. Television was, of all thingsif only for the briefest momentan elitist technology.By 1954, however, 56 percent of American households had TV sets. And from the moment TV became a mass medium, it was a reviled medium. Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow coined the phrase vast wasteland in a 1961 speech to the National Association of Broadcasters, but policy types were hardly the only ones with disdain for TV. Perhaps intuiting its power, other artists took every opportunity possible to slag the new medium. In the same way that novelists thank God for short-story writers, short-story writers thank God for poets, poets for more experimental poetsall for making their own career choices seem like models of sober-minded life managementTV might have been invented by moviemakers for the express purpose of allowing them to point to any commercial art form more degraded than their own.Most striking, though, is the degree to which TVs own practitioners have joined in the hate fest. No other medium contains such a matter-of-fact strain of self-loathing. HBO, indisputably a television network, made its bones declaring it was not TV.The criticism, furthermore, has always transcended mere snobbery and included something more primitive and superstitiousas though these boxes of pulsing light and sound had dropped out of the sky into our pristine forest clearing. The exposure to artificial light, its been said, inhibits cognitive development; the flickering images replicate hypnotism. Television has been accused of being addictive, corrupting, responsible for driving otherwise perfect, well-behaved children to violence and depravity.Which is to say that TVs crimes have never been merely aesthetic, but also moral, even metaphysical. The set, with its sinister, alien antennae, its ubiquity, became the very symbol of American vacuity and anomie, pouring an unstoppable sludge of false reassurance and pernicious advertising into suburban homes. At best, it was the glass teat dispensing anesthesia to the conformist masses; at worst, it was a sinister conspiracy of the capitalist Mind Control Machine, designed to keep us fat, sleepy, and spending. The rhetoric could become nothing short of apocalyptic: Ray Bradbury branded TV that insidious beast, that Medusa which freezes a billion people to stone every night, staring fixedly, that Siren which called and sang and promised so much and gave, after all, so little. E. B. White prophesied, We shall stand or fall by televisionof that I am quite sure, while, rounding out this unlikely troika, Frank Zappa sang (from the point of view of TV itself):You will obey me while I lead youAnd eat the garbage that I feed youUntil the day that we dont need youDont go for help... no one will heed youYour mind is totally controlledIt has been stuffed into my moldAnd you will do as you are toldUntil the rights to you are soldOf course, such awestruck hate could only have its source in a kind of love. Orson Welles, as good a man as any to address the nexus of commerce and art, might have had the last word: I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I cant stop eating peanuts.Or as Steven Bochco said: Its always been fashionable to say at cocktail parties, I never watch TV. Thats nonsense. Everybody watches TV.The existential fear and loathing of television may have reached its apex with the 1978 publication of a volume titled Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, written by an exadvertising executive by the apparently real name of Jerry Mander. Mander described his career at a high-powered San Francisco firm, commuting coast to coast weekly, taking five-day vacations in Tahiti, eating only in French restaurants, jetting to Europe for a few days skiing. This Master of the Universe idyll was interrupted by a scales-falling-from-his-eyes moment in 1968, experienced while sailing through the Dalmatian Straits, amid craggy cliffs and azure seas: Leaning on the deck rail, it struck me that there was a film between me and all of that. I could see the spectacular views. I knew they were spectacular. But the experience stopped at my eyes. I couldnt let it inside me. I felt nothing. Something had gone wrong with me. That something, he came to believe, was the same something that afflicted the rest of the modern world: television.Having awoken from the machines hypnotic spell, Mander urged the rest of us to follow suit, laying out his indictment in such chapters as War to Control the Unity Machine and How Television Dims the Mind and How We Turn into Our Images. In one chapter he listed thirty-three Inherent Biases of Television. Among them: War is better television than peace. Lust is better television than satisfaction. The one is easier than the many. The singular is more understandable than the eclectic. Any facts work better than any poetry. Superficiality is easier than depth.This cannot be changed. The bias is inherent in the technology, Mander asserted with the absolute confidence of a zealot. The notion of television redeeming itself was as absurd as speaking of the reform of a technology such as guns.As it happens, almost simultaneous with the publication of Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, an event took place that would begin to challenge Manders ironclad assumptions. In early 1978, Steven Bochco went to work for Grant Tinker.The veteran TV writer and showrunner Henry Bromell once sketched a family history of quality TV. After starting at the bottom with The Sopranos, The Wire, and Mad

Men and a handful of other recent shows, he quickly moved upward, along a spreading spiderweb of connections that filled the page. At the top, alone, he wrote one name in capital letters: Grant Tinker.Four decades after he left an executive position at 20th Century Fox Television to form MTM Enterprisesnamed for his second wife, Mary Tyler Moore, and created to produce her eponymous sitcomTinker remains that rare, if not unique, creature: a television executive revered by television writers. If you know anything about the species, you may be able to guess that writers loved Tinker because Tinker believed in the importance of writers.This has by no means ever been a given in Hollywood. Certainly not in the movie business, which had long granted power and prestige to directors while regarding writers as, at best, regrettably necessary inconveniences: in the immortal words of Jack Warner, schmucks with Underwoods. From the beginning, the ongoing nature of television programmingthe mediums merciless hunger for a constant flow of new materialmade writers a more valuable commodity than they had ever been. Still, by and large, producers remained in charge of TV through the sixties and seventies, with writers either working freelance or saddled with the peculiarly diminished title of story editor.*Theres a condition, common among executives and other TV suits, that involves the secret conviction thatif only they were less damnably good at making money and more willing to spend their time mooning about, wearing rags, and making up storiesthey could write and create at least as well as any of their writers.Mike Post [the prolific TV-theme composer] used to say, Everybody is an expert on two things: their jobs and music. The same is true of television, said Stephen J. Cannell, one of the most successful writer-producers of the seventies and eighties. Why? Because weve all watched so damned much of it. Its like saying, I fly first class all the time. I think I could land this thing.Crucially, Tinker appears to have been immune to this particular disease. By the time he started MTM in 1969, hed already spent two decades working for NBC, Radio Free Europe, Universal, Fox, and the ad agencies McCann Erickson and Benton Bowles. Along the way, hed developed a faith in creative talent that could easily pass for common sense. From my earliest days around and about television, he wrote in his memoir, Tinker in Television, its been clear to me that good shows could only be made by good writers.He became known as an indefatigable advocate for his writers and a tireless defender of their work against meddlesome networks. Both John Falsey and Joshua Brandwho would create St. Elsewhere at MTMremember sitting in Tinkers office, listening to one side of a phone conversation with NBC Entertainment president Brandon Tartikoff, who was apparently unhappy with the ratings performance of a particular show. But is it good, Brandon? Tinker said over and over. Is it good?Of course Tinker, for all his genuine appreciation for and support of writers, wasnt running a nonprofit artists collective. He believed that his approach was not only good for art, but good for business. This was the era of Fin-Syn, the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules, enacted in 1970, that among other things prohibited the big three TV networks from producing and owning their own programming. Until their repeal in the 1990s, the Fin-Syn Rules bestowed enormous power and profit on independent producers, who maintained ownership over their programs and syndication rights. Not only would happy writers produce profitable programs, Tinker believed, they would also attract a steady stream of more good writers. He proposed a show business axiomThe best creative people love to work with other best creative peopleand described the ensuing magnet effect that made recruiting talent surprisingly easy.In this, Tinkers studio provided a blueprint for what HBO would become in the late 1990s and early 2000s. MTMs offices in Studio City became the place writers wanted to benot necessarily because it was where theyd get the most money, but because theyd have the freedom to do good work. Said Tinkers son Mark, who began his own career as a director and producer at MTM, It was the gig in town.Several dramas to come out of MTM had direct bearing on the generation of TV to follow. The studios second drama, The White Shadow, about a white exNBA player coaching at an inner-city high school, turned out to be one of those strange intersections in television history at which a disproportionate amount of talent ends up working on a show that doesnt necessarily reflect that talent. By the nature of the business, people working on good TV shows almost always got there by working on bador at least less goodones; at one point, the list of past credits assembled in the writers room of The Sopranos included The Incredible Hulk, The New Adventures of Flipper, and Xena: Warrior Princess. All TV credit sheets look terrible, said HBO Entertainment president Sue Naegle.No show or producer, however, would have the impact of the studios fourth dramatic series, Hill Street Bluesin terms of both what was on the screen and how it got there.Steven Bochco was thirty-four when Tinker hired him, a veteran of the Universal Television script mill, where he had specialized in churning out scripts for cop shows but had failed to break through with a real hit. Bochco arrived at MTM with no small amount of self-confidence but little interest in doing another police serieseven less so when his first effort for the studio, Paris, starring James Earl Jones as

a detective, flopped after a single season on CBS.Nevertheless, even at MTM the customer had some power, and what the customerin this case NBC president Fred Silvermanhad set his mind to in early 1980 was a police drama. Silverman dispatched Brandon Tartikoff to pitch the idea to Bochco and Michael Kozoll, a fellow Universal alum, at a meeting at La Scala in Beverly Hills. The pair were reluctant. It was late in the cycle and they were desperate. So we had some real negotiating leverage, Bochco remembers. He and Kozoll agreed to write a police pilot if Tartikoff would grant them autonomy. And Tartikoff, on behalf of NBC, agreed.What he and Kozoll delivered, ten days later, was nearly the Platonic ideal of a form that would define quality television well into the Third Golden Age: the Trojan horse. That is, a show that by nominally fulfilling a networks (or viewers) commercial demands allowed its creators the freedom to sneakily achieve something far richer.In this case, NBC got its police show but also something quite different. The pilot, then called Hill Street Station, in many ways owed more to MTM sitcoms than to the cop genre. It portrayed the workplace as surrogate family. It married comedy and drama. Its multiple, character-driven story lines took on social and political issues. (The unglamorous look of its station house was inspired by another sitcom: Barney Miller.) Meanwhile, the shows visual stylegritty and hyperrealistic, with a restless camera and overlapping sound trackshowed the marks of the decade of new American filmmaking that had just passed.Even now, the first moments of the Hill Street pilot, which aired January 15, 1981, feel shockingly modern. As would be the convention for much of its run, the show opened as the cops of Hill Street station, located in an unnamed city that resembled New York, gathered for morning roll call. The handheld camera roved over a vast assemblage of characters, with no conventional cues as to which deserved more of the viewers attention than the others. It was an unkempt, sleepy-eyed group, black and white, male and female. The muddy din of dialogue could have been lifted from a Robert Altman film. Finally, the duty sergeant, played by Michael Conrad, calls the gathering to order with a rundown of the previous nights news and todays advisories. The mood seesaws giddily from hoots (over a drag queen purse snatcher) to grave silence (news of two gang killings and probable reprisals). Finally, Conrad announces a new dictate from district command, barring the carrying of bizarre and unauthorized weapons by the officers of this precinct. With much grumbling, the cops shuffle forward to surrender their arsenalswitchblades, clubs, nunchucks, and guns of every possible varietyuntil it becomes a sight gag worthy of the Marx Brothers.Okay, lets roll, says Conrad, setting up the shows most famous recurring line: Hey, lets be careful out there. Whereupon the cops matter-of-factly collect their weapons and begin their day.Little in the scene would seem out of place on an episode of The Wire or The Shield. Likewise the rest of the episode, which includes the Mad Menlike coy reveal of the police captains ongoing affair with the public defender and the possibly fatal shooting of two cops who, until that moment, have appeared to be around primarily for comic relief.Unsurprisingly, NBC was perturbed. An internal memo from May 1980 provided a neat accounting of their concerns. It cited focus group testing:The most prevalent audience reaction indicated that the program was depressing, violent and confusing.... Too much was crammed into this story.... The main characters were perceived as being not capable and having flawed personalities. Professionally, they were never completely successful in doing their jobs and personally their lives were in a mess.... Audiences found the ending unsatisfying. There are too many loose ends....In other words, it was an entirely unwitting blueprint not only for what made Hill Street Blues such a historic program, but for all the shows that make up the Third Golden Age.Bochco was never shy about invoking his autonomy, often threatening to walk rather than follow a network note. That the creation of a television show is largely a state of outright scorched-earth warfare with the very people paying for said creation was an item of faith for Bochco, and he pursued it with the zest of Sun Tzu.I probably did come off as an arrogant asshole, he said. But you had to be. We were bucking a system. And the reason I slept fine at night, despite having all these terrible wars and knowing how resentful they must have been, was that it was in the shows best interest and, ultimately, the networks best interest. I always felt that part of my job was protecting them from themselves.That position wasnt the only legacy Bochco left for the next generation of showrunners. He and his team wound up producing thirty-eight hour-long episodes in Hill Streets first year and a half. That breakneck pace might have been common for shows with contained episodes, but this shows sprawling canvas demanded the invention of new systems.Traditionally, TV dramas had been either written by a small group of producer-writers or farmed out to a network of freelancers. The idea of a writers room was mostly a comedy phenomenon. Hill Streets ongoing story lines necessitated an institutional memory, so Bochco assembled a full-time staff that included Jeffrey Lewis, Michael Wagner, and, for season three, an old Yale roommate of Lewiss, David Milch. (Kozoll left the show after its second season.) Together, steeped in the world of the show, they became

responsible for a sprawling saga.Since he was spending so much time with the writers, Bochco deputized an executive producer whose job it was to oversee shooting on set and all other production issues, leaving him free to concentrate on scripts. And since no director popping in to direct a single episode could be expected to know the full backstory, or what might be important three or four or more episodes down the line, he instituted what would later come to be known as tone meetings. These are conferences at which the writers, director, and production staff all come together to pore over the complexities of each script in fastidious detail. The meetings are also, implicitly, displays of obeisance on the part of the rest of the production staff to the writer. Bit by bit, Bochco was institutionalizing the role of the autocratic writer-showrunner.It wasnt just Tinkers support or the quality of Hill Streets writing that made this possible. For starters, NBC was in terrible shape. The network had but one show in the Nielsen ratings top ten (the seventh season of Little House on the Prairie, tied for ninth place) and was the object of much ridicule for a prime-time lineup that included both B.J. and the Bear, about a trucker and his chimpanzee, and its spin-off, The Misadventures of Sheriff Lobo. Fred Silverman had a hopeless mans incentive to run in the opposite direction and take a risk. In this case, that meant sticking with Hill Street Blues even after it debuted to dismal ratings. If NBC had been flush, said Bochco, I dont think we would have seen the light of day.The television business was also changing. By 1980, nearly a fifth of American homes were hooked up to cable TV, a growing portion of those paying even more for premium stations such as the newly born HBO. Cable not only cannibalized network viewers time and attention, it trained them to seek out different kinds of programming on different parts of the dialsports on ESPN, news on CNN, and so on. Television was becoming a kind of food courtmade up of many kiosks selling individual cuisinesrather than a one-size-fits-all cafeteria pumping out a slurry of least objectionable grub. Quality, it seemed, could be another niche.Meanwhile, the explosive rise of VCRsfrom 1.1 percent of TV households in 1980 to 20 percent in 1985encouraged viewers to accept more serialized stories, since they could now catch up at their leisure. It also began the process of importing film, and the expectation of filmic production values, onto the blocky screen in the living room. And it sliced the number of viewers any one show could expect ever thinner.As a result, the numbers that had defined success in a three-network world were being drastically reduced downward; a show could succeed with many fewer eyeballs. More important, networks were becoming ever more sophisticated at measuring the quality of those eyeballs rather than simply their quantity. Instead of aiming to attract one-third of all viewers (which was becoming increasingly impossible in any event), networks now targeted specific demographicsrich, young, educated, male, and so on. The fragmentation of the American audience had begun. And, as it would again twenty years later, that meant good things for quality TV.To be young, talented, and well compensated at MTM in those years was a beautiful thing. It became even more so when Bruce Paltrow began producing St. Elsewhere, which transplanted much of the Hill Street formula to a Boston teaching hospital. The shows offices were one floor below Hill Streets. There was great excitement, said Milch. It was as if everyone felt as if he or she had been caught doing something wrong.We were just a group of guys, all in our mid- to late thirties, and suddenly, because of the power Grant had given us, we were changing the business. We were becoming the business, Bochco said. It was very, very thrilling. To suddenly have the sense that you could be proud of what you were doing, that you could begin to use the word art. We began to tentatively say, Were artists. In this maligned medium.Across Hollywood and New York, TV writers stood up and took notice. As important, so did those in MFA programs, theater workshops, journalism programs, and elsewhere. Look at what else was on the air that season, said Andrew Schneider, who was a producer on the The Incredible Hulk at the time. Go watch an episode of Simon Simon. We were toiling along on shows like that, and then Hill Street came out and said, This is possible. I remember coming to work the day after the pilot aired and everybody was like, Were going to get to do stuff like this!And yet, the window that MTM had thrown open would remain so only briefly. Grant Tinker would leave the studio in 1981 to become head of NBC. Bochco was fired from his own show by MTMs new regime, for chronic cost overruns. Hed continue his career with LA Law, NYPD Blue, and a host of variously successful shows at 20th Century Fox Television. The regulations and incentives of Fin-Syn would be eroded in the early 1990s and finally abolished in 1995, drastically sliding power away from independent producers and toward the networks while at the same time spurring the proliferation of new, smaller networks like the WB and UPN. Cable would march inexorably forward, along with video games, the Internet, and more, exploding the audience into ever smaller fragments. Network TV, on the whole, would remain a dismal landscape. Indeed, the networks would run in the other direction from the new writer monarchy the first moment they had the chance, seizing instead on programming that dispensed with writers altogether in favor of reality.Yet before

long, strikingly similar circumstances would conspire to continue what Tinker and his writers had started: new, disruptive technology, an anxious, shifting industry, a network with little to lose, and men who had labored long and hard in the Wasteland, sniffing the air hungrily for the chance to call themselves artists.TwoDavid Chase never liked Hill Street Blues. Or St. Elsewhere. The rest of the world may have been thinking that television was rising from the muck, but not him. I thought it was getting worse, he said. It was just more cops and doctors.But then, David Chase liked almost nothing about televisionnot even the paychecks, each one of which reminded him that he was a sellout, too weak and compromised, he imagined, to follow the path of the renegade filmmakers hed come of age idolizing. If ever a man who spent his entire career in television could claim intellectual, emotional kinship with Jerry Mander and his campaign to eliminate the medium itself, Chase was that man.Look, I do not care about television. I dont care about where television is going or anything else about it, he said three years after the finale of The Sopranos became one of the signal cultural events of the decade. Im a man who wanted to make movies. Period. Even the title showrunner annoyed him:It sounds like some kind of Jet-Ski, he said.In a generally triumphant story, this is one of the small tragedies: that the Reluctant Moses of the Third Golden Age, the man who, by example, opened the door for so many writers, directors, actors, and producers to work in television gloriously free of shame, was unable himself to enter the Promised Land.Gloom, pessimism, anxiety, paranoia, grudge holding, misanthropysuch were the highlights of most David Chase stories, including those he told about himself. Which is why it was so flummoxing to hear his own self-assessment, so difficult to tell whether he was being coy, oblivious, or simply pugnacious in yet another iteration.Maybe I come off as a depressed, morose guy, he said, complaining about a 2007 Vanity Fair cover profile that quoted a constellation of colleagues and acquaintances on his negativity. Despite calling The Sopranos one of the masterpieces of American popular culture, on a par with the first two Godfathers, Mean Streets, and GoodFellas... or even European epics such as Luchino Viscontis The Leopard, the piece continued to irk Chase. Maybe people find me that negative. I just dont see it, he said. Because the truth is, in my experience, when Im in a room, I hear a lot of laughter.As a child, he dreamed of nuclear apocalypse under the suburban stars of Passaic and Morris and Essex counties. Perhaps this was reasonable for someone born August 22, 1945, sixteen days after Hiroshima, a charter baby boomer. He was the only child of second-generation Italiansfamily name DeCesarewho had more or less made the journey he would later replicate in The Sopranos opening credits. His father, Henry, owned a store, Wright Hardware, in Verona. His mother, Norma, well, youve met her: insecure, passive-aggressive, fearful, domineering. As embodied by the actress Nancy Marchand, she would become one of the more idiosyncratically terrifying and funny characters to ever appear in American living rooms: Livia Soprano.Revue de presse"[A] wonderfully reported and thoughtful exploration Difficult Men is grand entertainment, and will be fascinating for anyone curious about the perplexing miracles of how great television comes to be."Wall Street Journal"Martin is a thorough reporter and artful storyteller, clearly entranced with, though not deluded by, his subjects In between the delicious bits of insider trading, the book makes a strong if not terribly revelatory argument for the creative process."Los Angeles Times"Martin offers sharp analysis of the advances in technology and storytelling that helped TV become the 21st century's predominant art form. But his best material comes from interviews with writers, directors, and others who dish about Weiner's egomania, Milch's battles with substance abuse, and Chase's weirdest acid trip ever."Entertainment Weekly"Enjoyable, wildly readable."Boston Globe"An engaging, entertaining, and utterly convincing chronicle of television's transformation Martin operates with an enviable fearlessness, painting warts-and-all portraits of autocratic showrunners such as David Milch (Deadwood), David Simon (The Wire) and Matthew Weiner (Mad Men) Anyone interested in television should read this book, no matter how much or how little they know about the shows it chronicles."Newsday"Difficult Men, with its vigorous reporting and keen analysis, is one of those books that crystallizes a cultural moment and lets you savor it all the more."Dallas Morning News"Martin's analysis is intelligent and his culture commentary will be of interest to fans of many of today's better-written shows."Christian Science Monitor"Masterful unveils the mysterious-to-all-but-insiders process that takes place in the rooms where TV shows are written."New Orleans Times-Picayune'Difficult Men delivers what it promises. Martin had good access to actors, writers and producers . . . Difficult Men is an entertaining, well-written peek at the creative process."Fort Worth Star Telegram"A vastly entertaining and insightful look at the creators of some of the most highly esteemed recent television series Martins stated goal is to recount the culmination of what he calls the 'Third Golden Age of Television.' And he does so with his own sophisticated synthesis or reporting, on-set observations, and critical thinking, proving himself as capable of

passing judgment, of parsing strengths and weaknesses of any given TV show, as any reviewer who covers the beat in short, the sort of criticism that must now extend to television as much as it does to any other first-rate art."Bookforum "[Showrunners are] as complex and fascinating in Martins account as their anti-hero protagonists are on the screen Breaking Bad, The Shield, and Six Feet Under have dominated the recent cultural conversation in the way that movies did in the 1970s. Martin thrillingly explains how and why that conversation migrated to the erstwhile 'idiot box.' A lucid and entertaining analysis of contemporary quality TV, highly recommended to anyone who turns on the box to be challenged and engaged."Kirkus (starred)"Martin deftly traces TV's evolution from an elitist technology in a handful of homes, to an entertainment wasteland reflecting viewers' anomie, to 'the signature American art form of the first decade of the twenty-first century.'"Publishers Weekly"Brett Martin lays out the whole story of TVs new Golden Age lucidly and backed by awesome reporting (and TV watching) Difficult Men delivers the inside story of the creation of these landmark TV shows, along with Martins astute take on how these series fit into the larger pop cultural landscape of the early 21st century If I were you, Id pre-order this terrific book on my Kindle or Nook. It should be among the most talked-about non-fiction titles of the summer."ctnews.com A New Yorker "Book to Watch Out For"A Vulture "Beach Read"A Christian Science Monitor "10 Best Books of July""This book taught me a thing or two about how a few weird executives enabled a handful of weirder writers to make shows I still can't believe were on TV. But what I found more interestingand disturbingis how it helped me understand why an otherwise lily-livered, civic-minded nice girl like me wants to curl up with a bunch of commandment-breaking, Constitution-trampling psychosand that's just the cops."Sarah Vowell,New York Timesbestselling author ofUnfamiliar Fishes,The Worldly Shipmates, andAssassination Vacation"Aptly titled, and written with verve, humor and constant energy,Difficult Menis as gripping as an episode ofThe SopranosorHomeland. Any addict of the new 'golden' television (or extended narratives on premium cable) will love this book. Along the way, it is also one of the smartest books about American television ever written. So don't be surprised if that great creator, David Chase (ofThe Sopranos), comes out as a mix of Rodney Dangerfield and Hamlet."David Thompson, author ofThe Big ScreenandTheNew Biographical Dictionary of Film"Brett Martin has accomplished something extraordinary: he has corralled a disparate group of flawed creative geniuses, extracted their tales of struggle and triumph, and melded those stories into a seamless narrative that reads like a nonfiction novel. With characters as rich as these, you can't help but reach the obvious conclusionDifficult Menwould itself make one heck of a TV series."Mark Adams,New YorkTimesbestselling author ofTurn Left at Machu Picchu"The new golden age of television dramaaddictive, dark, suspenseful, complex, morally murkyfinally gets the insanely readable chronicle it deserves in Brett Martin'sDifficult Men. This group portrait of the guys who madeThe Sopranos,Six Feet Under,The Wire,Deadwood,Mad MenandBreaking Badis a deeply reported, tough-minded, revelatory account of what goes on not just in the writers' room but in the writer's headthe thousand decisions fueled by genius, ego, instinct, and anger that lead to the making of a great TV show. Here, at last, is the real story, and it's a lot more exciting than the version that gets told in Emmy acceptance speeches."Mark Harris,New YorkTimesbestselling author ofPictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood"Sometime in the recent past the conversation changed. My friends were no longer talking about what movie they'd been to see, but what television show was their latest obsession. Brett Martin's smart and entertaining book illuminates why and how this happenedwhile treating fans to the inside scoop on the brilliant head cases who transformed a low-brow medium into a purveyor of art."Julie Salamon,New York TimesBestselling author ofThe Devils CandyandWendy and the Lost Boys