

Review: *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century* by Amanda Lotz (New York University Press, 2014), 251 pages.

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AMANDA LOTZ'S STUDY, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century*, is an examination of the contested site at which male characters define and—more appropriately—*struggle* to define, acceptable forms of masculinity. It focuses on the expression of masculinities within a society that historically carries a narrow definition of hegemonic masculinity—an image of masculinity correlated with heteronormativity. In its introduction and first chapter, Lotz's study carefully delineates the frame of the discussion, clarifying the limits of such theoretical terminology as “hegemonic masculinity” and “post-second-wave” feminism, naming the constraints of industry factors relating to cable versus free-to-air broadcast, and explaining her idiosyncratic selection of television programs for analysis.

In chapter two, Lotz focuses on programs concerned with both the personal and professional aspects of their male protagonists's lives. This is reflected in the issue of how to be a good father, whose persistence in these programs Lotz attributes to the rising influence of feminism in “redefining hegemonic masculinities.” Moreover, Lotz argues that the connection between male identity and fatherhood is constitutive of these “male-centred series.” A central tension arises from the protagonists's desire for companionate marriage and

active involvement in parenting, and their longing to hold on to a patriarchal masculinity, which designates the husband or father as a strong provider. Thus Lotz identifies the anxieties of the post baby-boomer generation. Raised by fathers with a strong conceptualisation of patriarchal masculinity, the protagonists of these series face a crisis of definition, since they have also been raised in a culture that increasingly reflects the influences of second-wave feminism.

Chapter three focuses on the struggle of the “Straight White Man,” offering detailed analyses of *Breaking Bad*, *Hung*, *Dexter*, *Sons of Anarchy* and, to a lesser extent, *The Shield*. Lotz focuses on how the protagonists in these series operate outside the law in order to affirm, reclaim, or build a sense of identity in a world of shifting gender scripts where patriarchal masculinities are consistently interrogated. Lotz argues effectively that these challenges reveal the increasing influence of feminist masculinities, and the evolving nature of orthodox masculinity in the twenty-first century.

Turning to homosocial relationships, *Cable Guys*'s fourth chapter explores how conversational dynamics can serve to reinforce elements of heteronormativity. Significant in Lotz's consideration of homosocial relations is how homosexuality is discussed (or not discussed) in *The League*, *Entourage*, *Men of a Certain Age*, and *Rescue Me*, where the question of sexual identity becomes a means of policing masculinities. Consideration is given to the negotiation of “straight panic,” the different values ascribed to transgressive humour, and the uneven acceptance of women into homosocial groups. However, a gap in the study emerges at this point, as the issue of misogynistic talk within homosocial groups is not addressed in detail. Lotz notes earlier that both misogynistic and homophobic talk dominates depictions of conversation in homosocial settings, so a greater attention to the issue at this point of the study would seem appropriate.

Chapter five, the final chapter, explores the representation of intimate, dyadic friendships between men. Lotz consciously broadens her examination of programs to include broadcast series *Boston*

Legal and *Scrubs*. The conclusions that *Boston Legal* has a claim to challenging heteronormativity, while *Scrubs* explicitly endorses it, are well supported by Lotz's detailed analyses of these contemporary shows. As Lotz acknowledges,

It is utterly counterintuitive that the depictions of the most intimate friendships originated from broadcast networks that have been excluded from analysis up to this point for lacking the novel masculinities examined here.

In drawing attention to this exclusion, Lotz identifies the real challenge for her idiosyncratic approach to these subjects. While the distinction between cable and broadcast series has some value, Lotz implies a dichotomy only to draw attention, in this chapter, to its falsity. Lotz's study could negotiate this challenge by acknowledging that, if post-second-wave influences have permeated the television culture, then they have done so at all levels of television broadcasting, albeit in different ways.

Despite restricting her study to the terms of "post-second-wave feminism," Lotz defines "hegemonic masculinities" as those which are presented as acceptable within the narrative under discussion. Thus Lotz always consciously keeps the influence of third-wave feminism at the periphery of her study—even though it also defines her approach to masculinities. In her introduction, Lotz asks "How might audiences make sense of emergent gender dynamics relative to the contradictions of a cultural medium that remains full of characters that offer up old patriarchal norms?" But this question serves as the ground for further discussion, as the question of the audience is not the focus of her text. Although *Cable Guys* could have restricted its text selection to provide a more in-depth focus, the breadth of the texts that Lotz considers enables her to make broad claims on the changing nature of masculinities on American television in a way that is accessible. A point of criticism may be made, however, of Lotz's choice to quote Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America* in her book's conclusion. Lotz defers to Kimmel's suggestion that the "biggest shift in American masculinity has taken place quietly." Such

a view undercuts the far-from-quiet struggles that Lotz has clearly observed in her work on the difficult negotiation of masculinities on American television. And even if there has been something quiet about the continuing negotiation of masculinities in society, certainly there has been nothing quiet about the explicit depiction of these contested masculinities on contemporary American television.

A review copy of *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century* was kindly provided by **Footprint Books**. See www.footprint.com.au for this and other titles.