

Jason Jacobs. *Deadwood*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 194pp.

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Premium cable network Home Box Office (HBO) has succeeded in living up to the distinction set out in its slogan, “it’s not television, it’s HBO.” The network’s original programming embodies the prestige of a once maligned medium, perusing adult, long-form storytelling freed to indulge in the sex, violence, profanity and complexity that has historically made terrestrial networks and advertisers shudder. *Deadwood* (2004-2006) initially seems an unusual choice as the first HBO original program to receive a dedicated monograph within the BFI Television Classics series, having failed to accrue the ratings or longevity of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) or the ubiquitous praise of critical darling *The Wire* (2002-2008). Yet, Jason Jacobs makes a compelling case for its inclusion and the show’s status as a classic.

A revisionist Western, *Deadwood* follows the residents of the historical gold mining settlement through its annexation from the Dakota Territory during the late 1870s. The first season establishes a conflict for authority between reluctant sheriff Seth Bullock (Timothy Olyphant) and saloon-owning pimp Al Swearengen (Ian McShane). As the seasons progress these once acrimonious neighbours grudgingly unite to resist industrialisation and the rising threat of corporate and national control of their independent town, represented by mining magnate George Hurst (Gerald McRaney).

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Jacobs does not dwell overlong on the minutia of factual differences between Deadwood the historical town and *Deadwood* the show. His analysis of the seemingly anachronistic extreme profanity of the show positions *Deadwood* in an artistic tradition that seeks to revise sanitised pictures of history, but he dismisses the notion that the show primarily seeks to present the past as it “really was.” While many of the characters have historical referents, Jacobs sees this historical grounding “grist for the mill in character development in the service of a larger artistic design” (23): an exploration of the origins of law, order, civilization, community and America itself.

Jacobs’s interest in this larger artistic design leads him to advocate for *Deadwood’s* status as classic not through its relationship to the traditional Western genre (originally the show was planned to be set in Nero’s Rome), but rather on *Deadwood’s* similarity with works from the literary cannon that also muse on these themes. As such, Jacobs’s chapters – focusing on contexts or character pairings - use epigraphs from the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson through to Ernest Hemmingway as tools to unpick and illuminate *Deadwood’s* transcendent themes.

One could accuse this unexpected analytical tool of playing into the hands of the HBO slogan by praising *Deadwood* for its similarity with anything but its own oft-derided medium. However, Jacobs makes a convincing case for this comparison in his focus on its creator and show runner David Milch. Enabled by archival research and script access at Red Board Productions along with interviews with Milch, a former research assistant at Yale University for Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B Lewis and Robert Penn Warren, Jacobs is able to show that a dialogue with this cannon was a conscious decision during production. Providing a history of Milch’s career at Yale and in television alongside his personal struggles, Jacobs reads Milch as the sole auteur of *Deadwood* and the show – his first made while sober - a highly personal

work, steeped in Milch's passion for literature, language and his love of the juxtaposition of the sacred and profane.

Jacobs provides his most eloquent advocacy for *Deadwood* as a crafted work of art through his use of a favourite quotation among *Deadwood's* writers on storytelling from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: the "meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze."[†] Jacobs connects the "glow and the haze" to the show's stylistic signature of rack-focus, the camera's tendency "to shift focus within a shot from one plane to another to clarify or blur as a means of providing emphasis and revealing context" (68) and into *Deadwood's* fascination with the way characters across the series move from being isolated individuals into participants within their spaces and, in turn, form a community. Jacobs deftly applies this to the conflicting patriarchs at the heart of *Deadwood* as well as the subjugated characters that emerge from the periphery to become central agents in the town's development. In particular, attention is paid to the ways in which wealthy widow Alma Garret (Molly Parker) and Swarengen's favoured prostitute Trixie (Paula Malcomson) come to help found the tentative community and become defenders of Deadwood.

Succinct and stylish in his championing, one is left so convinced of the extraordinariness of *Deadwood* only to puzzle over its slow ebb from screens across several years of protracted promises of a return. While this process is recounted, concrete viewing figures might have helped to explain HBO's decision not to renew after the third season. Regardless, this is a supremely detailed production and reception history that takes an unexpected and unconventional approach to assessing television drama. With eloquent and rich prose, the work is infused with a spirited and

[†] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.8.

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infectious enthusiasm for *Deadwood* and more than justifies the show's inclusion within the Television Classics series.