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## Review of Berke, Their Own Best Creations

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Berke, Annie. *Their Own Best Creations: Women Writers in Postwar Television*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. 301 pp. \$85.00 (hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-0-520-30078-1, \$29.95 (paperback) ISBN-13: 978-0-520-30079-8

Reviewed by Cynthia B. Meyers (College of Mount Saint Vincent)

Many scholars seek to uncover and even celebrate the usually anonymous workers in the culture industries whose contributions have been overlooked or uncredited. Successful explorations of the hidden recesses of the film and television industries have illuminated the complexity of cultural production in for-profit, collaborative, competitive, and ever-changing environments.<sup>1</sup> In Annie Berke's recent book, *Their Own Best Creations: Women Writers in Postwar Television* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), she seeks to understand the lives, careers, and writings of certain women who wrote for television in the immediate postwar period. Their scripts, she argues, can be seen as "self-ethnographic" accounts and can illuminate "a common set of professional objectives and narrative themes across writer, series, and genre" and so display "the complicated, often ambivalent, gender politics of early television and of postwar culture" (p. 5). Their works, in Berke's view, did not exemplify 1950s gender stereotypes, instead they were "precursors of second-wave feminist rhetoric and identity" (p. 7), promoting second-wave feminist interest in "professionalism and self-actualization" (p. 13). In other words, these women, through their scripts, exemplified that which we value today.

Attempting to fill large gaps in the historical record, Berke digs through archives, trade publications, news reports, and memoirs to tell the stories of a few key women in early television. She profiles the careers of, for example, Selma Diamond, who wrote for Groucho Marx, among others; Lucille Kallen, a writer on the live comedy-variety program, *Your Show of Shows*; Irna Phillips, creator of many soap operas, including *The Guiding Light*; Gertrude Berg, creator of the "ethnic" situation comedy, *The Goldbergs*; Peg Lynch, creator of the domestic sitcom *Ethel and Albert*; Janet Wood, a story editor for *Studio One* and *Playhouse 90*; and Joan Harrison, producer of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Each of these women worked in a different genre or industry context. Some, such as Berg and Phillips, were highly dependent on their sponsors' approbation; others worked for networks or within production companies contracted by the networks or were freelancers. Some, as Berke notes, worked in television when, like radio before it, the programs were broadcast live and controlled mostly by advertisers, such as Berg and Phillips; others, such as Harrison, worked in Hollywood, helping to write and produce telefilms for which she was answerable to an executive producer-filmmaker, Alfred Hitchcock in her case, rather than

an advertiser or network. Some of these women, such as Berg and Phillip, were well-known inside and outside the industry; others, such as Janet Wood, were barely known even within the television industry.

In a chapter on story editors, Berke struggles to find evidence of the names and careers of women story editors in order to “rewrite the histories of television authorship” (p. 149). While acknowledging the collaborative nature of script production in television (single-authored programs had been rare since the early days of radio), Berke nonetheless seeks to attribute more credit to story editors to rectify what she views as past injustice. She blames the “blurring of administrative and creative work” (p. 151), which she sees as being gendered as feminine, as contributing to these writers’ contributions being overlooked. Berke argues that the collaborative nature of script writing marginalized and obscured women’s contributions (p. 45). But, as Catherine L. Fisk shows, all film and television writers have struggled to receive on-screen attribution; how often lack of attribution was due to sexism is difficult to determine.<sup>ii</sup> Advertising, another collaborative cultural industry that played a direct role in radio and television production, never allowed public attribution, assuming it would undermine an ad’s effectiveness, so copywriters and script writers worked anonymously whatever their sex. To be sure, story editors had a role in the final shape of the program; but what the role might have been is impossible now to prove: *ex post facto* accounts tend to be self-serving, and contemporaneous sources are almost always lacking.

Berke relies on fictional scripts as windows into the inner lives of these women: she represents Kallen’s script for an Imogene Coca skit (p. 70) and Lynch’s for “Fixing up the Den for Albert” (p. 100) as nascent expressions of what would later be seen as feminism, without establishing those particular episodes as representative of their authors’ work in general, or as unlike the work of their male colleagues. Berke sometimes turns to other programs and films, unrelated to these women, to “fill in significant historiographic gaps” (p. 167). A character in the film *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), for example, is discussed as a depiction of a woman script reader in Hollywood (pp. 166-169), but how do we know if it is accurate?

No doubt women in 1950s workplaces endured sexism, both overt and subtle; no doubt mainstream postwar American culture nudged or shoved women into gendered roles at home and the workplace. In lumping together, solely on account of their sex, the famous with the unknown, the producer-creators with the story editors, and by relying on interpretations of fictional texts to stand in for documentation, Berke’s approach does not clarify the past. But that is not her primary purpose. Instead, she wishes us to view “the

woman television writer as a product of capital and culture, a producer of culture and a cultural text herself" (p. 223) in order that we "can better advocate for women writers in film and television today" (p. 224).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, Peter Labuza, "When a Handshake Meant Something: The Rise of Entertainment Law in Post-Paramount Hollywood," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 4 (2021): 61-84; Susan Ohmer, *George Gallup in Hollywood* (Columbia University Press, 2006); Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line: Producer and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Tom Kemper, *Hidden Talent: The Emergence of Hollywood Agents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Donna Halper, *Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in Broadcasting* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Catherine L. Fisk, *Writing for Hire: Unions, Hollywood, and Madison Avenue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).