

Review and Preview

Vaccinations, lower levels of COVID-19 infection, and reduced death rates are enabling our lives to return to something closer to normal. We are again enjoying exercising, holding meetings, dining with friends, and engaging in activities, such as getting an espresso and using our magnificent library. However, we are not fully back to normal; caution continues to be in order, and many of us will still be in our apartments reading a great deal and watching more television than previously. Thus, this *Tower Talk* issue has recommendations by Anne Turner for good reads and Sugar Caen suggests streaming TV shows. The issue also includes an article on legacy TV's (ABC, CBS, NBC, Discovery, etc.) death spiral, and KQED's demise may not be far behind.

But even as COVID-19 issues subside, other problems are emerging, particularly regarding crime and homelessness in our immediate neighborhood. Hence, *Tower Talk* has a section on local politics and suggests that at least one currently active recall is justified. There is an observation about the coarse nature of today's youth culture, and Austin and Van Ness, strangely, seem to be on the same page with regard to British royals.

The Residents' Association Video Archive contains all previously aired *Your San Francisco* interviews as well as other historical presentations at The Towers. Click [THIS LINK](#) to open the archive, enter *pres.sft-ra.website* in the address line of your browser.

Politics: Real and Imagined

James W. Guthrie

Disappointed, possibly desperate, Trump supporters cling to a fantasy. They dream that he, now a Florida resident, will run for Congress in 2022. Once claiming his likely win, a newly emerged Republican congressional majority will elect him Speaker. An ensuing impeachment will remove President Biden and Vice President Harris,

and, in accord with 25th Amendment succession provisions, Speaker Trump will complete Biden's term and be eligible to run in 2024. Whereas this is constitutionally possible, it is highly improbable. Terrific movie script, however.

I am seldom predisposed toward using recall as a political instrument. I am glad the opportunity exists legally as a last-ditch democratic method for protecting ourselves. However, in most instances, I think elected officials, even if I disagree with them, deserve the right to serve their terms and prove to the public that they are well-intentioned and effective. Presently three separate state and local recall efforts are underway. They are not connected and are not orchestrated.

California Governor Gavin Newsome is likely facing recall. He was slow in opening up our state from the COVID-19 quarantine, and his inaction may have unnecessarily hurt the economy. Still, it is not clear that his deficiencies justify his recall. He likely will surmount a challenge, and the added election cost, running into the millions, will be a waste of public resources.

On the other hand, there is little doubt regarding reasons to recall Chesa Boudin, San Francisco's District Attorney.

A District Attorney is charged with enforcing existing law, not making new law. That role belongs to a legislative body. Boudin's unwillingness to adhere to current law and prosecute criminals is routinely putting SFT resident safety at risk. Were it not for San Francisco's ill-considered "Rank Voting" scheme, he would not have gained office, and a far more highly qualified and conventional candidate would have won. Pro and anti-recall proponents are a mix of individuals and organizations from San Francisco and from across the nation. Boudin's removal from office is far from assured. Meanwhile, crimes, including personal assaults are spiking.

The recall petition, while available online (Recallcheseaboudin.org) is more complicated than first appearing. One can download, complete, and submit all on your own, but you

might want to await recall advocates visiting the Towers in late May when they can personally assist those who chose to sign the petition

Then there is the San Francisco School Board, the biggest collective of certifiable crazies we have seen in public office in a long time. They are venomous and ill-mannered among themselves, censuring and suing one another, spewing counter-productive policies, such as curtailing admission to academically high-powered schools, striving to rewrite history, and costing millions by renaming schools and attacking internationally proclaimed decorative art. All current incumbents should be removed from office. More on this topic in subsequent *Tower Talk* issues.

Just Sayin': Easter Sunday Observation

Sugar Caen

In the late afternoon on Easter Sunday, I found myself out for a short walk on Franklin Street. The sun was shining, but it was windy and cold. As I proceeded south, I noted that two young women were behind me, talking. I turned, looked over my shoulder, and saw that they were approximately 25 to 30 years of age, maybe recent college graduates, and, from their conversation, they were headed home after shopping at Whole Foods. They were wearing their masks, but they still spoke so loudly I could easily overhear them.

What was telling about their conversation was how seemingly every sentence contained some reference to "Fuck." This is the word that populated every idea, regardless of the topic. On the rare occasions when they were not dropping the "F" bomb, they would say "Like, you know." I know how to swear. I was a teenage boy. My father was a naval officer. I know what the words mean, and I could use them if I chose.

These did not appear to be low income, educationally deprived, stereotypical ghetto youth or criminally inclined gang members. From every apparent indication, they were middle class college educated and fully employed white girls. Still, they had little ability to express themselves in a courteous and cultured manner.

I have commented previously about what a coarse period of history we now occupy. These young women would have been embarrassing to an 18th-century British sailor. Moreover, I particularly noted their Easter Sunday attire. Each was wearing grunge jeans, tight-fitting purposely threadbare at the knee, and ragged at the cuff. Even though it was chilly, they wore scanty halter tops.

I could not help but recollect an Easter Sunday in a time long gone. The War was in place, and my dad was at sea. We lived in Virginia, but my mother took me on the train to New York City for Easter. She thought we would just have a good time. We stayed at the Plaza Hotel, and on Easter Sunday my mother put on her wide-brimmed hat and we walked up Fifth Avenue. Other women were wearing hats and showing off their Easter finery. No one was swearing, no one was wearing grunge outfits, even though it was wartime. People were upbeat and civil.

Someday the historic cycle will evolve, and civility will return. I doubt that I will be around to see it, and it may be that our Chinese competitors will impose courtesy upon us when that happens.

For the moment, I think I might feel safer, more at home, less stressed, and more grateful for life if I were walking down a street in Shanghai or Hong Kong than here in my hometown, San Francisco.

Legacy TV's Death Spiral

James Guthrie

TV executives, even if booked in first class cabins, are still headed for a fatal iceberg. Most readers have grown up with legacy television. Initially we used rabbit-ear antennae; then we gravitated toward the more reliable coaxial cable for program delivery. We watched Ed Sullivan, Walter Cronkite, sports, westerns, and endless *Law & Order* crime shows. All of that appears to be withering.

The revenue model used by ABC, NBC, CBS, and other conventional channels is outmoded. These networks depend upon advertising revenues for their continued existence. However, the advent of streaming video with its never-ending

supply of original shows, something new every week, is siphoning off cable channel viewership in huge numbers. In the absence of viewers, legacy channels have no choice but to run more advertisements. The more advertisements they air, the faster their viewers abandon them. Then, it gets worse. Reduced revenues, leave little funding to develop new programming. That is why they offer rerun after rerun, and rely heavily upon game shows, talent shows, reality shows, and sporting events. These cost little to produce. And, around and around it goes, audience loss, more ads, dull programming; then streaming network \$10+ per month subscription fees seems reasonable to avoid the disruptive ads on legacy channels.

Particularly Disappointing: Local Public Television

I know a great deal about Public Television. While working as a Special Assistant to President Lyndon Baines Johnson, I drafted the Public Broadcasting Act and, under his tutelage, lobbied it through Congress. I am aware of the high hopes we held for it at the time. It was to do for our society what commercial interests could not do well for us.

It got off to a terrific start. Stations in Washington DC, New York, and Boston produced fulfilling programs. News anchors such as Robin O'Neill and Jim Lehrer set a high standard for accuracy and non-partisanship. Some legacy programs are great, such as *Antique Road Show* (even the endless reruns), *Nature*, *Nova*, and, now and then, *Frontline*. *Finding Your Roots*, with Henry Louis Gates Junior, also is valuable.

Our local PBS television station, KQED, is but a hollow shell. It is not deserving of viewer financial support. Judy Woodruff has hijacked the *Nightly News Hour* and turned it into an openly partisan news show. KQED produces little of its own content. Were it not for the programs purchased from the BBC, we would often be bereft of anything to watch whatsoever. If one has lived in an East Coast city or even in the Midwest or Las Vegas, by comparison you can see how tawdry and weak KQED is.

During this pandemic year we have repeatedly seen 60's and 70's rerun shows featuring The

Beach Boys, Dolly Parton, *Inspector Morse*, *Vera*, *Father Brown*, *Call the Midwife*, the Bee Gees, Fleetwood Mac, eating the right micro-nutrients, forestalling the aging process, and endless Suzie Orman on how to invest your money. Very little new, uplifting, or worthy of our financial support, particularly in a city which boast literally dozens of billionaires capable of floating the whole thing to a high standard if they chose.

TV Worth Watching

Sugar Caen

It is possible that the World's largest-ever quantum of television watching has taken place over the last 12 months. While banished to our apartments, and after weeding out closets, organizing files, and ensuring advanced medical directives and wills are in order, what was left to do but watch television?

Legacy-channel TV programs worth watching have almost disappeared. Were it not for a few athletic events and Sunday night's *60 Minutes*, there would be a little reason to tune in ABC, CBS, or NBC. Does anyone really care about Emmys, Oscars, Golden Globes, *Dancing with the Stars*, *The Bachelor*, and *America's Got Talent*?

And, if you want your news filtered by politics or if you otherwise simply cannot think for yourself, you can always watch Fox, CNN, or MSNBC.

Fret not. The content void has been filled with what we have learned to label "Streaming Video." This comes from service providers such as Netflix, Apple, Disney, Kanopy, Peacock, Showtime, HBO, Britbox, Hulu, Xfinity, YouTube, and Prime. These providers are a differently structured service than the TV with which most of us grew up. Viewers pay monthly for the service or pay a fee per film and avoid disruptive commercials that now render legacy channels obsolete. All of these services have a few good programs. Netflix has the most programs and the worthiest programs, by far. However, Netflix is not infallible. Its serial *The Sinner* is simply terrible.

This provokes Sugar into a risky endeavor, a rating of streaming TV series. Readers are

invited to submit their reactions and revisions to the following observations. Xfinity (Comcast) claims to provide a free app that would give you access to all of the following. You can acquire the app by voice command from your TV remote.

British programs and subjects seem to dominate streaming TV. This is understandable when it comes to mysteries. Sherlock Holmes has been tough to beat for over a hundred years. BBC even offers some cooking shows. This seems ironic in light of centuries of jokes about English food. *Downton Abbey* reruns are good for at least three watchings. This may be the all-time most watched TV series, and it deserves the attention.

- » Netflix produced *The Crown*. It is a factually accurate portrayal of Queen Elizabeth II's legendary reign as the longest serving British monarch. The only way it could be better would have been to cast Helen Mirren, not Gillian Anderson, as Margaret Thatcher, England's longest serving and most revolutionary Prime Minister. Mirren could have done justice to the Thatcher, Anderson does not. Hard to imagine, but Queen Elizabeth II turned 95 on April 21.
- » Even though appearing in 1999, long before COVID-19, HBO's *The Sopranos*, with the regrettably deceased James Gandolfini as its star, rates highly. One critic wrote the following

Christopher (Michael Imperioli), Paulie (Tony Sirico), and Sil (Steve Van Zandt) form Tony's trusted inner circle, through whom Tony's business deals are played out. The themes of identity, guilt, and denial are highlighted by the selective acknowledgment of the harsh realities of Tony's crime world by his wife, Carmela (Edie Falco), and the Sopranos' children, Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler) and Anthony Jr. (Robert Iler). The masterful complexity of Gandolfini's portrayal of Tony Soprano and the uneasy juxtaposition of brutality and sensitivity on display challenge the viewer to step inside Tony's world and examine his choices from an intimate and personal perspective.

It is worth re-watching, if you have not already seen it two or three times, and violence does

not overwhelm you as Tony Soprano's better-self repeatedly succumbs to his dominant psychopathic personality. In real life, Gandolfini was paid \$10 million per season

- » AMC's *Breaking Bad*, a 62-episode series, traces the dangerous double and sometimes triple life of Walter White, a cancer-ridden high school chemistry teacher who morphs into a meth manufacturing kingpin, always and nervously scrambling to keep his illicit activities secret from his family and his DEA-agent brother-in-law.
- » In *Prime Suspect*, Helen Mirren, as Chief Detective Tennison, fights crime, misogyny, and personal problems simultaneously and overcomes most of them. Best "Who Done it" series since Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot.
- » *Inspector Morse*, an Oxford detective, is good too, but is wearing thin for having been around so long. Besides, it's hard to believe such a small city could have so many murders, ranking Oxford on a par with Chicago as a modern murder capital. Morse's never used first name, *Endeavor*, a prequel, is a winner.
- » *Breaking Bad* star, Bryan Cranston, also has made a Showtime series *Your Honor*, an interesting story of a judge who sullies his professional oath by trying to hide his own son's murder of another boy. This is an OK, but not great series that reveals Bryan Cranston, while good, not to be excellent. He is far too predictable. Great stars, e.g., Mirren and Gandolfini, do not play stereotypical roles. Helen Mirren can play Detective Chief Inspector Tennison, constantly battling gender stereotypes and male prejudice, and then easily switch to play Queen Elizabeth and do so even down to flawlessly mimicking her majesty's gestures and gait. Similarly, John Travolta, who has made some terrible "B" movies, can play roles as diverse as a criminal in *Pulp Fiction* or Bill Clinton in *Primary Colors*. Bryan Cranston appears in *Your Honor* to be Walter White of *Breaking Bad* all over again. His gestures, poses, and facial expressions do not change from his drug dealer role to being a guilty New Orleans judge.

» *Defending Jacob* is the story of a Prosecutor who foregoes his job in the District Attorney's office to defend his son against a murder charge, a charge that on occasion his wife, the accused boy's mother, thinks just might be true.

Little is on the same level with the above listings. There are literally dozens of others such as: *Suits*, *Succession*, *The Affair*, *Walking Dead*, *Jessica Jones*, *Sinners*, *Forever*, *Castle Rock*, *Red Oaks*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Gracie and Frankie*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *Lead Town*, *Innocent Man*, *Black Mirror*, and on and on. When in doubt, watch anything about Henry VIII.

A theme runs through most of these series to which a potential viewer should be attuned. These are, generally, "deeply dark" shows. Little about them is uplifting to the spirit. Most are pathos-saturated psychodrama that paint humans at their worst. Perhaps they are products of and reflect our coarse and debased contemporary culture.

Lockdown Reading

Anne M. Turner

Last September I wrote an article about reading during the shutdown in which I said I found it depressing to read my collection of books on the plague. I also said I had been entertaining myself by rereading the books of my youth, of which I have a surprisingly large collection: Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, Noel Streatfield's shoe books (*Ballet Shoes*, *Theater Shoes* etc.) and best of all, the Betsy books by Maud Hart Lovelace.

You've forgotten these? Well, Lovelace wrote ten in the series, which traces Betsy and her friends Tacy and Tib from their little girlhoods through their high school years and concludes with Betsy's tour of Europe (*Betsy and the Great World*) and Betsy's Wedding, in which she is happily married to her longtime love, Joe Willard, and she tortuously learns to cook. Betsy wants to be a writer. As author and journalist Anna Quindlen points out in an introduction to one of the last books, the delightful thing about the series is that everyone assumes that if Betsy wants to be a writer, that's what she'll be. This was in a small Minnesota town before 1917, for heaven's sake. No police shootings back then.

That small Minnesota town was called Deep Valley, but really it was Mankato, as I discovered in the 1980's when I walked into the local public library to give a training session for the staff. I found myself confronting a wall-wide mural featuring many of the places Betsy and Tacy had treasured—the high school, the 'Big Hill', and so forth. "Is this really Deep Valley?" I asked a staff member. "Yes," she said in a tone that indicated she had answered this question approximately 5,000 times in the last few months.

I've given a fair amount of thought to why I love the Betsy books so much. One reason is certainly that Lovelace was a very good writer; her stories zip along, and the people portrayed all have individual, interesting characters. Betsy herself is by no means a perfect person, but she manages to learn from her mistakes, and she invariably has fun with her 'crowd' of high school friends.

In fact, she is the very opposite of what I was at the same age, and I suppose that gets to the heart of the matter. I wanted to come from a happy family like Betsy's, but I didn't. I wanted a mother who loved giving parties and thought carefully about clothes, but mine didn't. I wanted a lot of friends, but I didn't have any. I wanted an opera cape and an older sister who would put up my hair in a daring French roll.

I've read some other interesting books during this pandemic year, including *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson's stunning account of the mass migration of Black people from the South to the North in first half of the 20th Century. But none have been as satisfying the Betsy stories. Sinking into the doings at Deep Valley High for a couple of hours blots out all things that these days are driving me crazy: Trump's refusal to concede the election, Ruth Bader Ginsberg's death, new admission procedures for Lowell High School, a School Board that wants to rename forty schools, but can't get any of them reopened.

I suppose that others are engaged in serious study courses or topping off their days by watching exciting Indiana Jones DVDs, but me, I'm comfortable pretending (at least for a little while) that I live in Deep Valley.

Entrez Nous

Austin and Van Ness reside in SFT 1501. They frequently bicker. Let's listen:

Aus: Prince Philip died, just short of 100. Isn't that sad?

Van: Not so sad. He lived a long life.

Aus: Ouch! That's all you can muster? What do you have against Prince Philip? He certainly was handsome when he put on those gorgeous uniforms.

Van: He was restricted to a supportive role, but he knew what he was signing up for; he was to be the consort of the world's wealthiest woman and he had access to some really terrific real estate. Not all bad I would say.

Aus: Is there anything about the monarchy you like?

Van: Whoa! You have me all wrong. I love the monarchy. I wish we had the same tradition. Today's silly, overly partisan politicians can rant and rave, but with a monarch the public has something stable around which to rally. The monarchy represents glamour, hope, fantasy, and with marvelous Queen Elizabeth at the helm, a guiding hand like few other nations have ever had.

Aus: I think we're on the same page. Queen Elizabeth has done her job remarkably well, at great personal sacrifice, I am sure.

Van: She made only one major mistake.

Aus: Really! What was that?

Van: She was tone deaf when it came to Princess Diana. She could not hear, see, or feel that Diana was of the people and that on many dimensions she was the monarchy's greatest asset. To his credit, Prince Phillip was quite sympathetic to Diana.

Aus: I agree about Diana. What do you think went wrong? You know she never had a mother or some loving person to guide her.

Van: She naively thought Charles loved her. She did not understand it was an arrangement with Camila not very far off in the wings, but always to be around. Diana was an old-style romantic who thought she was going to get a loving and lasting husband. Poor dear!

Aus: When will Charles become King?

Van: Probably never if his mother has her way. The Queen somehow senses that even though he is quite smart, he is lacking something: perhaps a spine.

Aus: Do you ever wish the U.S. had a king or queen? Jackie Kennedy was something of a queen. She was regal and had exquisite taste in virtually all matters. Does Jill Biden have a chance in this regard?

Van: Surely you jest. First Lady Biden will have her hands full trying to maintain the public image of the oldest President in history who clearly does not possess all his faculties. She might end up like Woodrow Wilson's wife, Edith, throwing up a protective screen, but she will never be anything but a footnote in history.

Aus: What's for lunch today? More dreaded cheese and mushroom raviolis?

Tower Talk is published solely by San Francisco Towers' resident, James W Guthrie. It is distributed electronically. Printed copies are provided upon request. Its purpose is to enhance a sense of community via provision of accurate information, airing of responsible opinion, and now and then an effort at humor. It is not aligned with any partisan organization and, if at all predisposed, it favors "The Underdog." It neither seeks nor bears managerial endorsement and does not rely for production or distribution upon San Francisco Towers' resources. The publisher is individually responsible for content, welcomes dissenting views, and eagerly accepts submissions of original literary works and opinion. Production depends crucially upon Jennifer Hamilton and Peter Hertzmann. Anne M. Turner is a Contributing Editor. Print archives are maintained by John Darby. All past issues, beginning with Volume I, No.1 are available free of charge by visiting jameswguthrie.com.