

## **FRASIER: A CULTURAL HISTORY**

Joseph J. Darowski and Kate Darowski  
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017

### **ROBERT MURTAGH**

Universidad de Almería  
r.murtagh@live.ie

---

177

Part of independent publisher Rowman & Littlefield's "Cultural History of Television" series that (according to their website) "will focus on iconic television shows" from the 1950s to the present that have had a lasting impact on world culture, *Frasier: A Cultural History* joins a collection of extant publications on defining sitcoms such as *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad* and *Star Trek*. The authors of the text in question, Joseph J. Darowski and Kate Darowski, are self-confessed *Frasier* fans with a background in different ambits of cultural study (the former as editor of the "Ages of Superheroes" essay series and author of *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books* and the latter having researched the history of decorative arts and design). Above all, they share a mutual appreciation for all things Crane.

From a structural perspective, the book is divided into two parts: "Part I: Making A Classic" and "Part II: Under Analysis". Each section is further subdivided into four separate topics. The first deals with: the evolution of *Cheers* to the emergence of Frasier Crane; the story behind the eclectic cast; character profiles of Frasier, Niles, Martin and Eddy; and finally, a discussion of Daphne and Roz. The second part, as the name suggests, is more academically inclined with chapters examining ongoing character development in the Crane household; an in-depth look at Frasier's apartment from structural and aesthetic perspectives, as well as in contrast to Niles's home at the Montana; an analysis of set decoration, particularly chairs; and lastly, the representation of women, gender and race.

Furthermore, the book features a brief introduction and conclusion (subtitled “Goodnight, Seattle!”) that bookend the aforementioned parts. Finally, before the chapter endnotes and index, the book would not be complete without an episode guide. Here the authors provide, in their own words, a “subjective opinion about all 264 episodes of *Frasier* on a 4-star scale” (153) in a section aptly named “The Episodes: An Opinionated Compendium”.

As the authors rightly point out, several books were published on *Frasier* during the show’s run that include an official companion book (Graham 1996), an unauthorized guide to the series (Bailey and Martyn 1998), a trivia book, entitled *What’s Your “Frasier” IQ: 501 Questions and Answers for Fans* (Bly 1996), a cookbook called *Café Nervosa: The Connoisseur’s Cookbook* (Fisher 1996), and even an autobiography ‘written’ by Moose, the dog who played Eddie on the show (xiii): *My life As a Dog* (Hargrove 2000) —coincidentally a project that was brought to fruition by David Hyde Pierce’s husband. That said, there still exists a critical dearth when it comes to detailed analysis of the hit comedy series beyond mere trivia. Graham’s official companion is the only serious contender (and indeed a worthwhile read for Frasierphiles, but as it was published in 1996 and covers only the first three seasons, it is no real competition). To Darowski and Darowski’s credit then, *Frasier: A Cultural History* is unique in that it addresses this oversight in an analysis that draws on an admirable amount of secondary sources from Kelsey Grammer’s autobiography *So Far ...* (1995) to scriptwriter Ken Levine’s blogpost and much more further afield.

178

In spite of all its originality and promise, however, the book not only fails to adequately contextualize Rowman & Littlefield’s “Cultural History of Television” series (a customary acknowledgement and brief explanatory note on the part of the publisher would have sufficed) but the authors’ introduction also prefaces the book with little to guide the reader as to its aims and objectives save the unelaborated question “So what made *Frasier* great?” (xi). As a consequence, the book seems to lack a clear focus. By extension, it is not surprising that the tone of the book is equally ambiguous. While presented throughout as objective academic research (with detailed referencing that includes a total of 37 pages for the book’s end notes, bibliography and index, as well as two academic bios), there is so much subjective adoration that it is impossible to exclusively render the book as one or the other. The book’s overuse of the adjective ‘perfect’, for instance, sits uncomfortably with classification as impartial scholarship. Nor, on the other hand, is the book ever expressly classified as fan study. It does not necessarily follow that fans of the erudite psychiatrist will be disappointed by this inconsistency —indeed, many may well approach the book with the same confluence of interests in mind— it nevertheless limits its critical potential as we shall see and might unsettle the

more academically minded readers. What is more, there is a notable glossing over of a number of inconsistencies that complicate an otherwise ‘perfect’ sitcom. The ambivalence surrounding Frasier’s having studied at Oxford for instance, or the appearance as if from nowhere (at least to fans who are not familiar with *Cheers*) of another ex-wife, Nanette, also referred to as Nanny G. On the other hand, while the authors do make a passing reference to continuity errors, or as they call them “hiccupps in the storytelling” (33), they seem intent on nit-picking moments that are clearly comedy-driven and appeal to the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief. Indeed, the commentary all too often tends to impose a critical standard (particularly in “Gender ... and Race?”) that forgets that Frasier was a fictional television character in a comedy show whose principal aim was surely not to champion racial inclusivity or gender equality, but to make people laugh.

Unfortunately, the text is more about *how Frasier* is great rather than *why*; as a consequence, it is mostly descriptive rather than analytical. Consider the use of David Isaacs’s method for screenwriting students as cited in the book to define a character by asking for ten words to describe it (39), which is used for every character descriptor in Part I and offers little exegetical value to our understanding of either the characters or the show as a whole. Even at its best moments in Part II of the book (such as the discussion of class conflicts in chapter 5), the analysis proves truncated and does not follow a logical structure that would allow for extended elaboration on the original question the book attempts to answer. In “Curating the Spaces” for example, there is considerable weight given to the history and evolution of chairs in society which divagates to a point that many will most likely find tedious.

That said, there are moments of great insight that are worth noting. A cursory glance through the episode compendium reveals little more than a subjective opinion of every *Frasier* episode across its 11 seasons. However, Darowski and Darowski’s *modus operandi* for arriving at each star rating (on a scale of 1-4) is particularly interesting. Thus, there is a clear criterion for high quality: “A 4-star episode provides genuine laughs but also has thematic unity and substance” (153). Taking the episode “The Innkeepers” (where Frasier and Niles buy a restaurant) as an example, the critics establish the organic alignment of random comedy around a particular theme—in this case, the question “What do we do with old things?” (154)—as the defining characteristic. From Niles’s rare book to Orsini’s dilapidated restaurant and the octogenarian waiter Otto to ‘old man Crane’ (Martin), each in their own way present a meditation on the theme in question.

For such a convincing system however, it is regrettable that the episode guide that follows does not always adhere to the same procedure of quality assessment. Often, there is no way of knowing why or how it assesses a certain episode, given such

terse synopses. Granted both one- and four-star rated episodes are given an extra line or two about their rationale, most assessments remain a far cry from the guide's ambitious underpinnings. Consider the episode "Daphne Hates Sherry" being rated four stars because "The chemistry shared by Jane Leeves and David Hyde Pierce shines" (171) and "Ask Me No Questions" from the same season being given one star on the basis that "Montages are not a strong stylistic choice on *Frasier*" (171). There is no mention of thematic unity anywhere, and these are not unique instances. One need not highlight the irony of the book's lack of thematic unity itself in this regard. This further illustrates the detrimental consequences of the book being torn between fandom and criticism.

Nevertheless, *Frasier* aficionados will no doubt revel in this analysis of the show despite its flaws for it is the only complete source on the hit comedy series. From an explanation of the closing credit sequence music to the meaning of the letters in KACL and the extra who appeared in the first and last episode to the one and only object Kelsey Grammer took with him after the show ended, there are tidbits that even the most diehard of fans will be surprised to learn. Much more than trivia, however, *Frasier: A Cultural History* encourages us to reflect upon our cultural icons both past and present and to ask ourselves what makes them great. If it achieves that alone, it is a worthy read.

180

## Works Cited

---

- BAILEY, David and Warren MARTYN. 1998. *Goodnight, Seattle: The Unauthorized Guide to the World of Frasier*. London: Virgin Books.
- GRAHAM, Jefferson. 1996. *Frasier*. New York: Pocket Books.
- BLY, Robert W. 1996. *What's Your "Frasier" IQ: 501 Questions and Answers for Fans*. New York: Citadel Press.
- GRAMMER, Kelsey. 1995. *So Far ....* New York: Dutton.
- FISHER, Julie. 1996. *Café Nervosa: The Connoisseur's Cookbook*. Birmingham, AL: Oxmoor House.
- HARGROVE, Brian. 2000. *My Life as a Dog*. New York: Harper Collins.
- ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD. "The Cultural History of Television". <[https://rowman.com/Action/SERIES/\\_/RLCHT/The-Cultural-History-of-Television](https://rowman.com/Action/SERIES/_/RLCHT/The-Cultural-History-of-Television)>. Accessed August 21, 2018.