

Why Not A Book?

TV's fall lineup makes a good case for reading

We'd probably all be better off if the new fall lineup on television were completely disappointing. Then maybe we'd find the time to read a book once in a while, take our spouses out to dinner, play games with our children, or sit out on the front stoop and visit with the neighbors. More likely, we would simply lower our standards and keep watching.

As usual, however, there are one or two bright spots on the video horizon. Of course, most of the new shows will fail to generate any significant interest among jaded television viewers, and some — *Life With Lucy*, for one — will set new standards for the bomb. A rare few — *Our House* and *Crime Story* appear to be this season's most likely candidates — will carve out audiences for themselves sufficient to perpetuate their existence and may even achieve that most refined state of video-realization, syndication.

Ars Longa, TV Brevis

The question — whether art imitates life, or life art — can, if one devalues the terms, be applied fruitfully to television. It is apparent from even a cursory viewing of the new programs that demographics is king. There are more shows consciously directed at "today's" woman, and the so-called senior citizen will have no trouble finding crotchety but loveable "gray panthers" to identify with. Single parent families remain a staple, having made their television debut many years ago either as a matter of plot convenience or as a cheap trick for winning instant sympathy for the main character (*Bonanza* and *My Three Sons* come to mind). Gone are the "typical" American families of *Leave It To Beaver*, *Ozzie And Harriet*, and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Nowadays, only minority families are allowed to remain intact on television. (*The Bill Cosby Show* is a good example, though *Cosby* is to be commended for transcending ethnicity.)

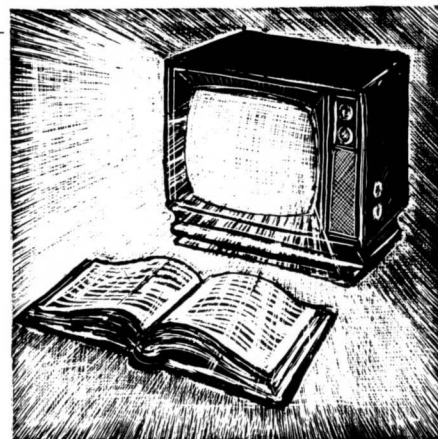
It may be impossible to answer the question: Which comes first, the broken home on television or the broken home

in real-life? Nevertheless, the number of broken homes on TV is disproportionately high and constitutes a distortion of reality, intentional or not. The type of the aggressive woman seems also to be found in greater abundance inside the television set than out. The aggressive woman and the broken home have multiplied together on television (by what sort of reproduction, it is hard to say), and they have been accompanied by a discernible increase in grief mongering. What in public schools today goes by the name of "Death Education" has wormed its way into prime time programming as well. Those single parent TV families that have not resulted from divorce presuppose the death of one of the spouses. The immature viewer made anxious by contemplating the prospect of his parents' divorce is also encouraged to dwell on the even grimmer possibility of their demise.

A Fine Romance

The related phenomenon of casual sexual practices appears to be giving way to a more formal and traditional approach, as manifested in the revival in recent seasons of the kiss that never comes, the *osculatus interruptus*. In the waning days of *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest* we are still titillated by gratuitous displays of flesh and simulated carnality, but the trend now seems to be in the direction of unsatisfied desire (as exemplified in the old days by *Lois Lane*). More and more, we are seeing couples thrown together in professional settings who develop attractions for each other and find themselves continually on the brink of an embrace, only to draw back at the last moment. *Cheers*, *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, and, more recently, *Moonlighting* and *Who's The Boss?* have resurrected and perfected this gimmick.

This season's contributions to the anticlimax for anticlimax's sake include *Sidekicks* and *Jack and Mike*, the latter featuring a husband and wife too busy for intimacy. (Last season, the title characters in *Magruder and Loud* enjoyed similar frustration as husband-and-wife



ROBERT E. SWIFT, JR.

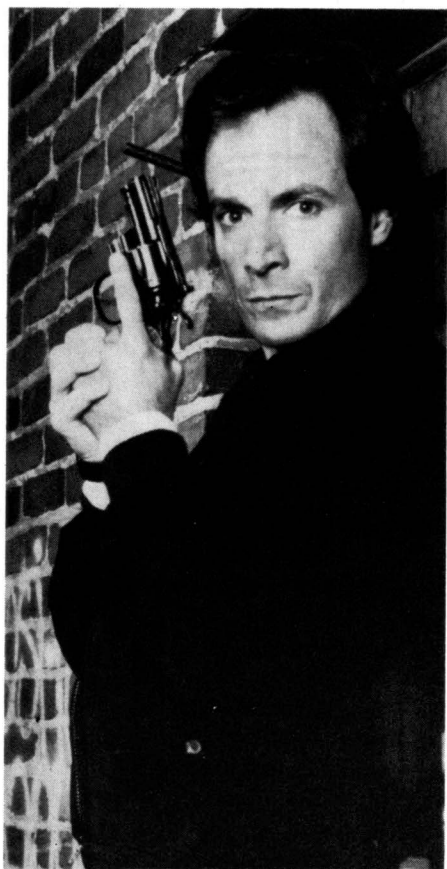
members of a police force that prohibited intradepartmental marriages.) Relatively speaking, this is a wholesome development, one to be preferred, certainly, to the exaltation of indulgence that has prevailed of late.

If raunchiness enters a well-deserved decline, it will more than likely take the multiple-plot format with it. The two very often go hand in hand, for they both pander to the demand for immediate gratification. The mature, loving relationship and the sophisticated, sustained plot require a keener insight into human nature and a greater attention span than are commonly possessed by people who respond to mental images primarily with their sweat and salivary glands. With their incessant jumping from one rapidly developing plot to another, and the endless permutations of "relationships," the nighttime soaps — *Dallas*, *Falcon Crest*, *Dynasty*, etc. — are custom-made for the impatient hedonist. Also properly classified in this category are programs like *Hill Street Blues*, notwithstanding that their formats are similar to those of *Adam 12* and *Dragnet*, which were meant to simulate the fragmented schedule of the real-life policeman.

Nutshell reviews of some of the season's new shows follow. All program times are Eastern Standard Time:

I Loathe Lucy

By far, the worst new show of the season is *Life With Lucy* (SAT 8 PM, ABC), which might have been more aptly titled "Some People Don't Know When To Quit." The inspired lunacy that made *I Love Lucy* an early television classic is nowhere apparent here. A Cuban band-leader and the world's most endearing next-door neighbors couldn't salvage this one. Even in her heyday, Lucy was



"Heart Of The City"



◀ **"The Ellen Burstyn Show"**

Photos courtesy of
Capital Cities/ABC Inc.



"Life With Lucy"



known to fall back on a well-worn gag, but somehow she usually managed to give a fresh approach to the old material, making it uniquely her own. Now the joker is as old as the jokes, and, before the half hour's over, the viewer will be as tired as the shtick. This is one of the few shows with an intact family (Lucy has moved in with her daughter, her son-in-law, and their children), but this supporting cast is about as entertaining as a backdrop.

Lucy is no longer a tough act to follow, and that's a mixed blessing for Ellen Burstyn, for it's hard to imagine anybody having the stamina to sit through the first program in anticipation of the second, no matter how good. *The Ellen Burstyn Show* (SAT 8:30 PM, ABC) has potential, but one does have to wonder why three generations of intelligent, good-looking women have to live in a household together without men. Ellen is in the middle, surrounded by her mother and her adult daughter. All three women are competent actresses, and the writing is above average, if smark-alecky. But, in an era when relations between the sexes are as strained as they are today, it is hard to recommend a program that

exacerbates the alienation.

After an hour of pushy women, what more could one ask for than a sensitive male who must play part-time mother to his two troubled teens? *Heart of the City* (SAT 9 PM, ABC) begins with the death of policeman Wes Kennedy's wife. With his frequent flashbacks to that horrible moment, ABC offers its viewers ample opportunity to participate in sensitivity training with no out-of-pocket expense. If you've been wondering what ever became of the old *Queen for a Day* program, wonder no more. This guy and his two kids have revived the competition to see who's the most deserving of pity.

Scarecrow and Rumpelstiltskin

In this age of miniaturization, it was only a matter of time before Hollywood realized the potential of the micro-star. Hervé Villechaize opened the door for minority midgets playing second banana to Ricardo Montalban on *Fantasy Island*. With top billing in *The Wizard* (TUES 8 PM, CBS), David Rappaport has dwarfed his more vertical co-stars, whose average heights do not compensate for their average ability. The gadgets and gizmos that the wee wizard invents are the real

co-stars here. This is strictly kids' stuff, but be advised that kids and adults alike will find more entertaining trolls in *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Why not turn the set off and read one together?

If *My Favorite Year* had been a cop show, it could have been a pilot for *Crime Story* (TUES 9 PM, NBC). If you long for the days when men were men and cars were cars, when heroes and villains were clearly delineated and violence was all that was needed to keep the latter in check, then this is the show for you. You may feel a bit sheepish about admitting that all the things you rejected in the 70s — tail fins, straight-legged pants, teased hair, and corny lingo — are really cool after all, but *Crime Story* makes a pretty convincing case for all those neat old things. It's set resolutely in the early 60s, in Chicago, and it's strictly for adults who were kids 20 years ago. Lots of violence, but at least it's not the real-life kind that we see every night on the evening news.

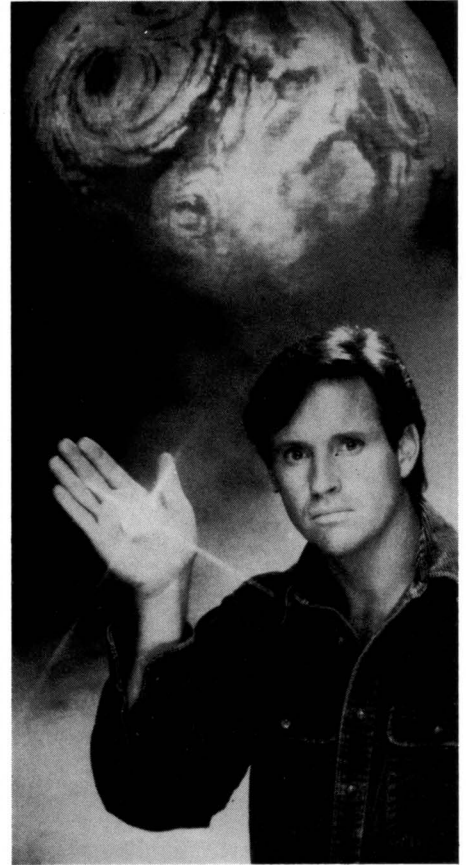
Shelley Hack was the angel who got a *Charleyhorse* when she tried to fill Kate Jackson's shoes. Kate has since done quite well as the second half of Scarecrow and Mrs. King, Farrah Fawcett surfaces periodically in made-for-television mel-



"Sidekicks"



"Jack And Mike"



"Starman"

odramas and shows definite signs of one day learning how to act, Jaclyn Smith has presumably fallen back on shampoo commercials, and it's anyone's guess what's become of Cheryl Ladd — who is no doubt paying the penalty for the hubris she displayed in accepting the part of Grace Kelly in a TV biography. Shelley Hack got her start as a model, and she continues to bring a two-dimensional quality to all of her acting roles. *Jack and Mike* (TUES 10 PM, ABC) is no exception. Jack and Mike are married, but that's okay, because Mike's a man and Jack's a woman, even if she does like to wear a necktie every once in a while. Hack is Jack. Jack and Mike don't spend much time together. Maybe if she changed her name. . . . Look for Hack in a new series next year; this one won't make it.

Energy Crisis

Like *Heart of the City*, *Sidekicks* and *Starman* (FRI 9 & 10 PM, ABC) are both child-oriented programs that make their debuts with deaths in the family. Broken homes are thereby ensured, and they're off to a good start. In *Sidekicks*, a 10-year-old karate expert whose guardian

grandfather has died is adopted by a slovenly policeman who begins a fruitless relationship with the child's social worker. From his grandfather, the boy has inherited certain mystical powers, and a magical bandanna, and now for a half-hour each week he can indoctrinate your children in Oriental abstractions. When they start tuning you out to tap into the "energy," you'll know where they got it from. *Starman* promises to fill their minds with similar gibberish. He's a bandanna-less alien who gets his "energy" from a pinball that he carries in his pocket (somewhat in the manner of Captain Queeg). He gets his scripts second-hand from *The Fugitive*: *Starman* is always one step behind the mysterious person he's chasing, and one step ahead of the government agents chasing him. Let your kids stay up late and watch reruns of David Janssen's classic series instead.

If you already believe that all lawyers are men of loose ethics or that the only principled people in the world are broken women, you should be *writing* for *L.A. Law* (FRI 10 PM, NBC), not watching it. This one shares the multiple plots and the soapy emotions of daytime drama

and will no doubt find favor with women who have flunked out of law school. An evening at night court would be more realistic, and more entertaining.

If the network executives would get together and combine all the programs with husbandless mothers and wifeless fathers, they'd have several programs with two-parent families and lots of air-time left over for new shows. In the meantime, we'll just have to go on feeling sorry for characters like Jessie Wither-spoon, a mother of three who has been obliged to move in with her father-in-law, Gus, following the death of her husband. Notwithstanding the tragic loss that serves as its pretext, *Our House* (SUN 7 PM, NBC) quickly establishes itself as a program with a personality similar to Gus's — gruff but tenderhearted. Much like *The Bill Cosby Show*, *Our House* has a leisurely pace and simple storylines, relying on likeable characters to sustain viewer interest. Those who get excitement out of watching a clock tick will turn to *Sixty Minutes*, but those who believe that certain moments can transcend time will make themselves at home at *Our House*. ■

— F. R. DUPLANTIER

The Season in a Nutshell

More reviews of television's new fall lineup

"Serious television" is a contradiction in terms. The medium simply does not have the capacity to offer the depth of knowledge and the sustained examination of a subject necessary for the serious consideration of anything. It is inherently an entertainment medium and, when confined to the presentation of adventure or comedy, it can be quite effective. But writers and producers are prone to abuse the medium in two ways: Either they fail to recognize its inherent limitations and try to pass off superficial drivel as serious programming, or they exaggerate the limitations of their audiences to justify the production of programs with totally inane premises and characters, this season's prime examples being *Life With Lucy* and *Amen* with Sherman Hemsley as Deacon Frye.

Sherman Hemsley has made a career out of playing pinheaded neanderthals in "blaxploitation" programs like *The Jeffersons* produced by enlightened white folk with low opinions of black intelligence. His new show is called *Amen* (SAT 9:30 PM, NBC) because that's what any self-respecting viewer will say when it's finally over.

Viewers may have every right to expect more from Jack Klugman and Valerie Harper than they do from Sherman Hemsley, but they will be sorely disappointed with *You Again?* (WED 9:30 PM, NBC) and *Valerie* (SUN 8:30 PM, NBC). In the former, Klugman plays a stupid man with a stupid son, a stupid housekeeper, and a stupid secretary. The result — surprise! surprise! — is a stupid show. Harper is the star of what appears to be a half-hour Procter and Gamble commercial, playing the sort of frazzled housewife who exults at seeing her reflection in china plates and linoleum floors. She has three sons and a Zeppo-like husband (he's not real funny, but he is related) whose occupation as an airline pilot mercifully allows him to be written out of most of the scenes. Her two younger sons are dissimilar twins — one normal and stupid, the other with a birth defect: intelligence. Naturally, the smart

one overcomes his social maladroitness by mimicking the cretinous antics of his dumb brother.

Kotter Country

To the extent that stupid characters are funnier than smart ones, it is not surprising that the former should predominate in the situation comedy. But how to explain the consistency with which the rare intelligent character is made to recant his superiority and adopt the boorish habits of the apes around him? Has stupidity been elevated to a virtue? A case in point is *Better Days* (WED 8:30 PM, CBS), in which a white teenager transplanted from California to Brooklyn discovers that he must disrupt his classes and make a nuisance of himself if he is to be accepted by the black "students" at his new high school. Never mind getting an education and preparing for the future: Fitting in is what it's all about.

Intelligence, it seems, is a grave impediment to socialization. That, at least, is the message of *Head of the Class* (WED 8:30 PM, ABC). Any student who has ever enjoyed the dubious advantage of being selected for an "honors" course, only to discover at the end of the term that the mere earthlings he left behind have been far more productive in the unaccelerated course, will have no qualms about awarding a big fat "F" to *Head of the Class*. The young "geniuses" in this high school honors program are not going to learn any history or science from their Kotteresque teacher (Howard Hesseman), because the latter clearly doesn't know any. What he does know is how to help these misguided overachievers get in touch with their feelings — an ability they will make full use of upon discovering after graduation that they have been cheated out of an education and must now learn to cope with feelings of inadequacy and resentment. Unfortunately, *Head of the Class* is a pretty fair representation of many an honors program. If nothing else, it may convince promising but unwary young students to

Worth Watching

Program times are Eastern Standard

Family Comedies

- ★ *Perfect Strangers* (WED 8PM, ABC)
- ★ *ALF* (MON 8PM, NBC)
- ★ *Our House* (SUN 7PM, NBC)
- ★ *Downtown* (SAT 8PM, CBS)

Adult Drama

- ★ *Matlock* (TUES 8PM, NBC)
- ★ *Crime Story* (TUES 9PM, NBC)

think twice before accepting enrollment in academic programs designed to recognize excellence and then stifle it.

Television's virulent anti-elitism is manifested in the skewering of the rich as well as the intelligent. In *Easy Street* (SUN 8 PM, NBC) a wealthy widow invites two bums to share the good life at her mansion just so she'll have the satisfaction of making her more refined in-laws uncomfortable. Despite the excesses of democratic sentiment, Loni Anderson and the two stooges manage to make *Easy Street* a palatable light comedy.

Mish Mash

Racial distinctions are as pernicious as intellectual and economic differences, so we are told. Therefore, in addition to dumbing down the honors courses and redistributing the wealth, we must mongrelize the family too. The latest edition of the multi-ethnic television "family," the Randalls, makes its debut in *Tgether We Stand* (WED 8 PM, CBS), which *TV Guide* described, only too aptly, as "a whole UN in one house!"



"Perfect Strangers"

Enough said.

The only ethnic group not represented in the Randall family is the alien life form (ALF), but the UN has not yet recognized the furry extraterrestrial, and so, for this season at least, the Tanner family will retain its monopoly on *ALF* (MON 8 PM, NBC). *ALF* is a hairy munchkin from another planet whose spaceship has crashed into the Tanners' garage. A screwball combination of *E.T.* and *Bewitched*, *ALF* is an offbeat and pleasantly corny program that the whole family can enjoy.

If you think *ALF* is a victim of culture shock, you haven't met Balki Bartokomous. Balki is something of an alien life form too. He's a shepherd from a small Mediterranean island who has immigrated to America and moved in with his "Cousin Larry" in Chicago. Though distantly related, Balki (Bronson Pinchot) and Larry (Mark Linn-Baker) have never met, and their hysterical attempts at cultural exchange make *Perfect Strangers* (WED 8 PM, ABC) a strangely perfect comedy. Not since *The Honeymooners* have two comic actors displayed such impeccable timing and the knack for playing off of each other so winningly. If you can't remember the last time you saw two comedians having so much fun with their material that they had to struggle to keep straight faces (perhaps Tim Conway and Harvey Korman on *The Carol Burnett Show*?), it's time you met these perfect strangers.

The four parolees thrown together under the supervision of Los Angeles policeman John Forney in *Downtown* (SAT 8 PM, CBS) are also perfect strangers,

but they quickly establish a camaraderie, and a habit of "helping out" with their parole officer's policework. *Downtown* is an appealing mixture of absurd comedy and cop show action that should prove popular, even without a catchy title.

Sledge Hammer (FRI 9:30 PM, ABC) does have a catchy title, a clever premise, funny characters, and a sycophantic laugh track — still, it goes nowhere. *Sledge Hammer* is Dirty Harry, Mike Hammer, and Fearless Fosdick all rolled into one, but either his aim is off or his gun isn't loaded, because this show just keeps missing.

Ms.-ing the Point

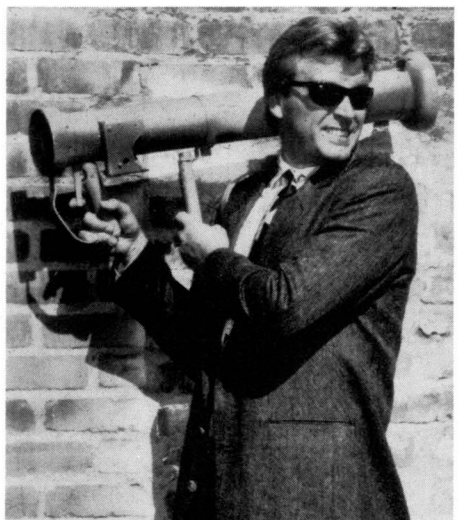
My Sister Sam and *Designing Women* (MON 8:30 & 9:30 PM, CBS) also go nowhere, but, since neither one seems to have any potential, there is no cause for lamentation. Sister Sam's teenage sister Patti moves in with her and complications arise — that's the exciting premise of *My Sister Sam*. The designing women are four 20th Century Scarlett O'Haras who exchange catty remarks about each other's ages and sexual proclivities while working together as interior decorators. This Southern-fried version of *The Golden Girls* is a flimsy excuse for a battle of limp one-liners; you'll hear wittier dialogue in a shopping mall cafeteria.

In contrast to the cynical *Designing Women*, *Kay O'Brien* (THURS 10 PM, CBS) may be a bit too earnest (or is it, earnestine?). True, young doctors are a self-righteous lot, but "Kayo," the second-year resident, has an application in for sainthood, and it's doubtful that this sanctimonious nighttime drama will last

long enough to accommodate her canonization. It's a man's world, you see, and the deck is stacked against women. Kayo has to be better than all the male doctors if she wants to succeed, but her single-minded dedication to her career is a real turnoff for her boyfriend. What rubbish! Kayo is indeed a knockout, and she projects an intelligence and a warmth that few men could resist. Such women have no trouble rising to the tops of their professions; nor do they have any trouble finding steady dates or husbands. In her real life, series star Patricia Kalember will have no trouble either. Why then must she give her stamp of approval to the feminist propaganda that her own career belies?

Charlene Matlock doesn't seem to have any problems coping in a man's world. She's an attorney and she can hold her own with any man. Of course, she does work with her daddy, that famous Southern lawyer renowned for his courtroom theatrics, Benjamin Matlock. *Matlock* (TUES 8 PM, NBC) is a *Perry Mason* in Dixieland, and it's doubtful that anyone other than Andy Griffith could pull it off. It's a pleasure to see this television veteran in a starring role again, bearing witness to Jackie Gleason's dictum that a good comic actor is almost invariably a good dramatic actor as well. Some of the plots lack complexity, and some of the wily attorney's solutions seem too facile, but Griffith is the main attraction here — and criticisms of the show's minor shortcomings are, as Hamilton Burger would say, incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial. ■

— F.R. DUPLANTIER



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"Sledge Hammer"



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"Head of the Class"