

**Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids.** Edited by Heather Hendershot. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004. 304 pp. ISBN 0814736521.

Heather Hendershot's anthology *Nickelodeon Nation* opens with a testament to the strength of Nickelodeon in the children's media marketplace. Noting that *The Rugrats Movie* grossed over \$100 million, officially qualifying it as a blockbuster, and that the Nickelodeon television channel (coolly referred to as "Nick") has repeatedly ranked number one in daytime ratings in the U.S. since 1996, Hendershot establishes Nickelodeon as a powerful competitor to Disney with an incredible amount of influence in the realm of children's culture. Despite Nickelodeon's growth, in the field of children's culture and media the major focus of academic scholarship has been the Disney Corporation—and rightly so, given the massive influence of the company in the sphere of children's culture. But Nickelodeon has largely been overlooked as a site of study. Hendershot's anthology fills this void in the literature on the commercialization of children's culture. It begins by asking how Nickelodeon became so successful.

Instead of turning strictly to the usual group of scholars in the fields of children's culture and television studies, Hendershot is committed to including the perspectives of individuals who have been integral to the formation of Nickelodeon. Industry insiders' personal accounts of the workings of Nick during its early stages of development are woven through almost the entire anthology. There are two chapters written by industry insiders, one of which is an article by Linda Simensky, a former director of the animation department at Nick, that gives a behind-the-scenes account of the development of three early animation series during the franchise's formative years of 1988 to 1991. Simensky walks the reader through the actual process of developing eight creator-driven shows (as opposed to shows driven by toy companies and marketers), only three of which made it to air. What is so fascinating about this article is that Simensky reveals how historians and academics of animation have wrongly assumed that the company knew exactly what it was doing when it developed the three successful shows. Other "insider" articles include interviews with Geraldine Laybourne, a former network president whom Hendershot credits as being largely responsible for Nickelodeon's "Golden Age," and an article written by Ellen Seiter and Vicki Mayer that relies on more than 20 interviews with various members of the children's television industry.

As Hendershot rightly claims, in the field of children's media culture, there is a lack of work on individual television producers or production companies like Nickelodeon (p. 4). The goal of *Nickelodeon Nation* is to fill this void and to increase the understanding of both the television industry and contemporary children's culture (p.4). Hendershot is successful in meeting these goals, as the anthology provides detailed, first-person accounts of the trials and tribulations of developing a television station, along with an in-depth critique of the increasing commercialization of children's culture.

The book is organized into four sections. The strength of this work really lies in the first two sections. The first section is dedicated to economics and marketing. Its premise is to provide the nuts and bolts of the company; the three chapters of this section cover the basics of who has owned Nickelodeon, how it has been branded, and how the development of Nickelodeon has taken place within the wider context of a changing children's television industry in the mid-1980s. The second section highlights the processes of production, taking the reader "behind the scenes to examine the Nickelodeon production process" (p. 5). It is in this section that the voices of those actually involved in the production process are heard most loudly. This section provides the critical core of the book and is what makes *Nickelodeon Nation* stand out from other books written on children's media. The third section, entitled "Programs and Politics," focuses on specific shows such as *Ren & Stimpy*,

*SpongeBob SquarePants*, and *Rugrats*. Hendershot's own essay on *SpongeBob SquarePants* in this section is a brilliant dissection of the popular children's television show. Hendershot argues that the success of the show has been due to its ability to blur the boundaries between the child and the adult while appealing to both simultaneously. With only one chapter, the fourth section, which deals with the question of how to conceptualize young viewers, is very thin. Relying largely on developmental psychology, Daniel R. Anderson, the author of this chapter, argues that children can be "active intellectual participants in television" as opposed to passive victims (p. 265).

What is missing from these four sections is any real analysis that harnesses the voices of the viewers themselves. For the most part, reflection on the viewers is either based on industry audience research or on observational analysis. None of the authors has actually asked the child viewers such questions as why they watch Nickelodeon or how they watch it.

As a Canadian I cannot help but distill a small subtext to the work that would be interesting to Canadians. According to *Nickelodeon Nation*, a great deal of the early content of Nickelodeon relied on television programming from our country. The Canadian import *You Can't Do That on Television* was Nickelodeon's breakthrough hit in 1984 (p. 48), a useful piece of ammunition when our undergraduate students bemoan the irrelevance of the Canadian television industry beyond our own borders. Unfortunately, the fact that in its early years Nickelodeon relied on programming from outside the United States is not assessed or critiqued; it is simply dropped in as a fact at various points in the anthology. Furthermore, there is the underlying assumption that American television constitutes the television industry. At one point in the introduction Hendershot states "as everyone knows, it is the only channel for kids" (p. 4). It may be the only American channel for kids, but it is not the only channel. For example, Canada's YTV launched in 1987.

Despite the oversights mentioned above, *Nickelodeon Nation's* unique blend of academic analysis and the voices of real people involved in the process of developing the network makes it a robust anthology that would contribute to any study on the workings of the television industry or the increasing commercialization of childhood.

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