

# Book Review: Armchair Nation: An Intimate History of Britain in front of the TV

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2013/11/21/book-review-armchair-nation/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2013/11/21/book-review-armchair-nation/)

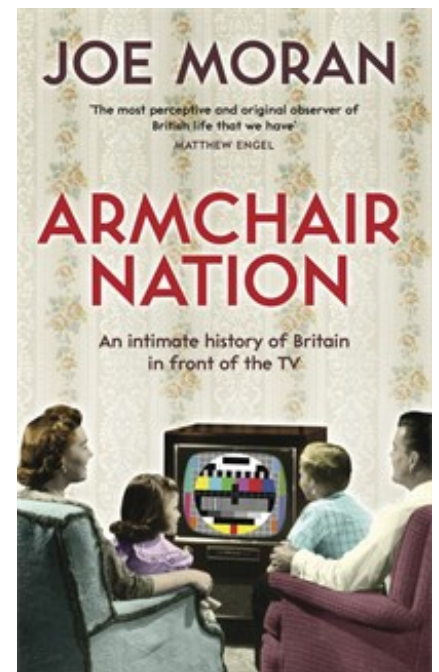
Blog Admin

*Armchair Nation* aims to reveal the fascinating, lyrical and sometimes surprising history of television, from the first demonstration by John Logie Baird in Selfridges, to the fear and excitement that greeted its arrival in households, the controversies of Mary Whitehouse's 'Clean Up TV' campaign, and what JG Ballard thought about Channel 4's *Big Brother*. We are offered many insights into British post-war society and our relationship with media today, writes **Fiona Chesterton**.



**Armchair Nation. Joe Moran. Profile Books. August 2013.**

Find this book:



kindle edition

amazon

To misquote T.S. Eliot, our lives are measured out, not in coffee spoons, but in television programmes – so suggests *Armchair Nation*, an engaging social history of Britain through the prism of TV. From *What's My Line* to the *X-Factor*, the author [Joe Moran](#) – Professor of Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University – tells an insightful and evocative tale. He combines scholarly techniques with an eye for telling detail which will have a very personal impact on many readers, especially those who grew up with TV in the post-war years – and that includes this reviewer. As we mark the half-century since the Kennedy assassination, this book explains why that epochal event (though there is only a passing reference) had such impact: it was the first to play out directly in our living rooms.

*Armchair Nation* may have black and white illustrations – and so much of TV history was monochrome – but Moran brings great colour to his story. He starts with the American, Harry Selfridge, who was looking for something new and alighted on John Logie Baird's Heath-Robinson type contraption. As one of the million people who visited the Oxford Street store while it was on show recalled: 'It was a little disappointing really because there were black lines sort of wiggling across it. And it jumped up and down... we were all rather frightened of television. We believed if they could make this film, they could see into our houses.' If modern market research had been applied, maybe Baird's prototype might never have seen the light of day.

We are offered many insights into British post-war society: a yearning for entertainment in routine and often austere lives; a cultural battle waged between those who saw the potential of the medium for enlightenment and education,

and those who saw it as subversive and a 'dumber-down'; a driver of both national and regional identities, with what some described as a metropolitan elite imposing its tastes on the rest. Plus, of course, what social history of Britain could tell its story without reference to class? Interestingly, Moran attributes TV's mass uptake not so much to the Coronation broadcast as to changes in hire purchase (making TV affordable for working people) and to the televising of the 'Stanley Matthew' Cup Final.

While the early days were ones of engineering and technical skill and ingenuity, it was the programmes, live and sometimes chaotic, that drove public enthusiasm. *What's My Line*, a panel show, created the first TV celebrities, like Gilbert Harding, even though he was as far from a Hollywood matinee idol as could be imagined. Then there were the programme interludes: The Potter's Wheel and the early ITV advertisements with their soon-familiar jingles, like that for the too-good-to-hurry Murray Mint, which the anthropologists of children's games, the Opies, reported was still being used as a skipping song 20 years after it first appeared.



Credit: [Sarah Reid](#) CC BY 2.0

Moran's narrative is generally acute and not always predictable in its choice of programme. He uses the rival early police dramas, *Dixon of Dock Green* and *Z Cars*, to tell the astonishing story of how the then Chief Constable of Lincolnshire joined Mrs Mary Whitehouse, the Clean Up TV campaigner, in opposing *Z Cars*' grittier depiction, even advocating civil disobedience against the BBC's licence fee in protest.

As the story reaches the mid- 1970s, my perspective on the book changes from that of viewer to producer, as this is when I started work at the BBC. This is at a point when the Government's General Household Survey 'showed the extent to which TV now dominated people's waking lives'. In 1976, colour licences outnumbered black & white for the first time. Moran also relates 'as colour TV crossed from luxury item to near-universal symbol of affluence in the middle of a recession, a press campaign about welfare 'scroungers' ... focussed on how they were wasting their handouts on colour TVs.' So a very different world, then.

I worked on *Nationwide*, a programme which Moran somewhat irritatingly again associates with the skateboarding duck and for 'coralling the nation into imagined togetherness'. I would say it celebrated regional diversity and used what was still then new technology to connect studios live around the country and so ensure that stories were told from a non-London perspective. Oh, and for interested readers, it was also *Nationwide* – and not the famous Bill Grundy interview which Moran recounts – that gave the Sex Pistols their first TV studio outing. The fact that the BBC debut has been forgotten is surely to do with the creation of what's now seen as a totemic punk moment by the tabloid outrage around it, not the broadcast itself. The BBC had been sure to contain the possibility for teatime upset by recording the performance of *Anarchy in the UK* and letting their canny manager, Malcolm McLaren, do the

talking. That video recording was inevitably not kept – but it does illustrate the perils of telling history just from recorded sources.

Maybe, by contrast, there is simply too much recorded material from the 1980s on and too much that is familiar, but I found the later chapters less rewarding. While the launch of the Sky revolution is well-told, there are many omissions. There's little, for example, about Channel 4 pre-*Big Brother*, including its role in testing boundaries and reflecting the profound social and sexual revolution playing out, including the depiction of homosexual love on *Brookside* and *Queer as Folk*. Then there's the fracturing of 'family viewing' with the disruptive challenge of the internet and so much more. That Moran ends his book with an evening walk through a Northern city still hearing the strains of Coronation Street sounds a nostalgic, not a true note.

---

**Fiona Chesterton** worked as a Producer, Editor, and Commissioning Editor at the BBC and at Channel 4, primarily in News and Current Affairs. She was made a Fellow of the Royal Television Society in 2008.[Read more reviews by Fiona.](#)