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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn (College of Charleston)

My mother was a soda jerk in high school. Upon hearing this for the first time, she had to interpret this job title for me (in my defense, I was only nine years old when I heard the earliest stories of her teenage employment). A few years later, I learned that my father was a curve killer throughout prep school and college. While my folks have rarely followed trends and avoid fast fads, no one is ever immune to language fashion. The way in which society verbally communicates constantly evolves; though basic elements of modern English have existed for centuries, it is sometimes quick-lived expressions that we sprinkle into our vocabulary that add excitement and pizzazz to our speech.

Rosemarie Ostler pays homage to the rise and fall terminology in her book Dewdroppers, Waldos, and Slackers: A Decade-by-Decade Guide to the Vanishing Vocabulary of the Twentieth Century.

Ostler's introduction addresses the array of events and people that generate the creation of words and phrases: mechanical inventions, proper names, other tongues, conflict and combat, newsworthy episodes, and linguistic exuberance (to name a few). As its title suggests, Dewdroppers is divided into chapters by decade; the only exception to this categorization is the combination of 1900-1919 in the first chapter. Ostler prefaces each section with broad information about each era's major influencing factors upon language. Vocabulary words and phrases are then sectioned by varying major categories, the titles of which largely follow that era's language trends. For example, categories from the 1920's include "Something on the Hip" (words describing alcohol and then-illegal activities). "Lucky Lindy" (words describing aeronautics), and "Detectable Men" (words describing young, eligible bachelors). Amusing photographs and callout boxes with related text are scattered throughout the book. An extensive bibliography and detailed index conclude Ostler's work.

Two things about Dewdroppers strike me. First, it is enjoyable to learn about popular vocabulary from my grandparents' and parents' heydays. Somehow, knowing their lingo makes me feel more akin to them. Second, after reading through popular vocabulary from the 1970's through the 1990's, I am amazed at the number of words and phrases that have slipped away from my verbal repertoire. On top of that pair of observations, Dewdroppers is an entertaining, engaging, and often humorous read. It would be an excellent addition to a high school, public, or academic library.


Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn (College of Charleston)

Cheers to Joy Sperling! Her new book, Famous Works of Art in Popular Culture: A Reference Guide, is a well-organized and enlightening masterpiece. It is no surprise that Sperling's most recent publication is so thorough and mesmerizing; she received her doctorate from the University of California at Santa Barbara in the field of fine arts and is not new to the academic publishing trade. Sperling has penned another book as well as a handful of peer-reviewed journal articles covering a variety of art subjects.

Famous Works of Art in Popular Culture is broadly categorized into five artistic periods/genres: ancient monuments, modern world monuments, Renaissance art, nineteenth century art, and twentieth century art. Each section is introduced with an essay discussing what characteristics make art from that period iconiclastic. Within each section, works of art are briefly described and are accompanied by a black and white photograph. Sperling also explains the social and historical environment of each work of art. Her piece de resistance is the "original and changing meaning" of each artistic effort, in which she delves into the transition from art to icon. Notes and bibliographic information are given at the close of each section.

Sperling's "art biographies" are rich in detail and are, quite simply, fascinating. Upon reading Famous Works of Art in Popular Culture, I realized that I take popular pieces of art for granted by seeing them without paying attention to detail. Case in point: Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa is arguably the most recognized work in Western civilization. Twice I have been lucky enough to gaze upon her, and I have studied da Vinci's masterpiece in history and art history classes. Sperling discusses the mysterious matron with a combination of observation, narration, and summation of the literature surrounding the painting (both popular and academic). In six pages, Sperling presents an abundance of facts regarding the Louvre, da Vinci's training, the portrait sitter, and Mona Lisa mugs; yet, her writing style never seems overwhelming or forced.

Famous Works of Art in Popular Culture is, undoubtedly, a must-have for high school, public, and academic collections. Art lovers and those interested in popular culture will also want to add it to their personal libraries. Hopefully, a second volume is in Sperling's future.


Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn (College of Charleston)

Ask anyone who knows about my television viewing habits and they will inform you that I am addicted to crime dramas. "Law and Order," which airs in syndicate approximately four times a day on the cable channel TNT, is my favorite; in fact, I never tire of watching it, even if I have previously seen a given episode more than once (and I have seen at least 200 of its more than 300 episodes). I know continued on page 57
that, as a librarian, my ability to sit in front of my television, mesmerized in 60-minute blocks of time, might be considered unprofessional, lazy, or even rogue. My criminal addiction started at an early age; under the influence of my grandmother, I watched many an episode of “Columbo,” “Hunter,” “Mike Hammer,” “Murder She Wrote,” and “Spencer: For Hire.” By the time I was in grade school, I was watching “21 Jump Street” and “Moonlighting” on my own accord. Somehow, attending college seemed to refine my viewing preferences to edge, pulled—from-the-headlines productions: “In the Heat of the Night” and “NYPD Blue” were among my weekly television lineup. Another crime drama darling of mine was “Homicide: Life on the Streets,” which, sadly, ended its series run in 1999, to much critical acclaim. It is understandable, then, that when The Television Crime Fighters Handbook by Vincent Terrace came across my desk, I jumped at the chance to investigate it.

It is also understandable that when anyone sets out to accomplish such a formidable task as compiling over 9,800 details from 301 crime-fighting programs, he or she has creative license over the series that are included in said compilation. What is not understandable to me, however, are the crime-fighting staples that are absent from Terrace’s collection, without so much as an explanation or even mention in his introduction. Since he does not detail his selection criteria, the reader can only wonder why such popular and award-winning shows as “Homicide,” “Law and Order,” “NYPD Blue,” and “The Shield” are excluded from The Television Crime Fighters Handbook, while other shows—such as “Crossing Jordan,” “C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation,” and “Hack”—made the cut.

Nevertheless, Terrace has assembled a multitude of information about television law enforcers and the series to which they belong. Arranged alphabetically by show title, each entry summarizes main plot arcs and provides intriguing character facts. Information about related series, spin-offs, and projects is also detailed. Terrace offers two appendices: the first, “Television’s Experimental Crime Fighters,” briefs the reader on programs broadcast between 1937 and 1946; the second lists numerous unsold detective pilot films. An actor index completes the volume.

The Television Crime Fighters Handbook, while not exhaustive, is a respectable collection of interesting facts about a hefty number of small-screen series. Appropriate for high school, public, and possibly academic libraries, it will doubtlessly appeal to any patron with a bend for crime drama/comedy.