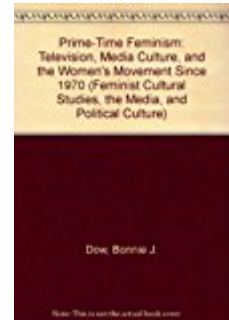


**Bonnie J. Dow.** *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement since 1970.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. xxvi + 240 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-3315-5.



**Reviewed by** Carolyn Kitch

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In *Prime-Time Feminism*, Bonnie Dow has provided a comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of televisual representations of women since the "second wave" of the American women's rights movement. This book will engage readers inside and outside the academy: it is both intellectually grounded in cultural theory, and politically contextualized, in a discussion of the real-world move from feminism to postfeminism.

The author, an assistant professor of communication at North Dakota State University, considers the rhetorical strategies employed in five popular shows: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *One Day at a Time*, *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. These programs, she argues, have collectively offered a "powerful and popular vision of liberated women ... a journey through phases of popular consciousness over the past quarter century." She further maintains that "[t]elevisual entertainment, as much as a sociological study, can tell us what we like about feminism, what we fear about feminism, and, perhaps most interesting, what aspects of feminism we

simply refuse to represent in popular narrative" (p. xxii).

By treating her specific choices as part of a larger representational trajectory, Dow offers a broad view of TV imagery that will be useful not only to feminist scholars, but to all media critics. She makes a persuasive argument that fictional television shows are important forms of cultural production, a primary terrain on which political and social notions about American life are tested and contested. Indeed, she treats each show as a complicated set of messages (not merely a single statement about feminism of its era) and considers the evolution of characters and plots over time. She also notes the intertextuality of these programs, particularly (as Jane Feuer and other scholars have similarly noted) the strong connections between *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown*.

Dow's survey of women's images on television would have been even more compelling had she devoted more attention to their historical precedents in other media (images that also were linked to fluctuations in women's political status);

nevertheless, she provides more of a historical perspective than do most works on contemporary women's media representation. Some scholars of commercial culture might wish that she had further explored a sub theme she only occasionally mentions: the role of advertisers (their desire for demographically-desirable female markets) in how women have been portrayed on television, in decisions about what is allowed inside and what is left outside the picture.

Overall, though, *Prime-Time Feminism* is a highly satisfying read. Bonnie Dow makes a clear argument in extremely readable prose. She also makes a valuable contribution to feminist and popular-culture scholarship, offering a useful overview of the most recent women's rights movement while weaving specific media texts together in a broad and insightful analysis of the function of television in American culture.

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