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'Gilligan's Island' as, well, literature

*It may seem a stretch but it endures
in reruns*

With last week's premiere of "The Real Gilligan's Island" on TBS, and the strong viewership it pulled, someone who's never watched the original might assume the cable network was playing off one of the classic shows of an earlier decade.

The show was certainly a classic but not in the way one might think.

When the original "Gilligan Island" premiered on CBS in 1964, it was considered the emblem of everything that was wrong with television. The premise was inane, the writing sophomoric, and the lead character, played by Bob Denver, was a complete imbecile. TV critics and even network executives blasted the show.

Yet there was a disconnection at work. If viewers were listening to critics, they were ignoring what they heard. "Gilligan" was a top-20 hit, especially among younger viewers, in each of its first two seasons.

Embarrassed by the show's success, then-CBS programming head Jim Aubrey couldn't wait to cancel "Gilligan." That opportunity came in 1967, when the ratings for the show, while still respectable, were in decline.

"Gilligan" was on the bubble, but so was "Gunsmoke," the venerable western, which had just completed its 12th season on CBS.

For Aubrey, it was a no-brainer. He dumped "Gilligan" and moved "Gunsmoke" into the sitcom's Monday 7:30 p.m. timeslot. He figured the new timeslot would attract younger viewers to the aging western and that "Gilligan" would go quietly off into the sunset.

Aubrey was half right. "Gunsmoke" lasted another eight seasons but "Gilligan" did not fade from memory.

Quite the contrary, it found a whole new life

in reruns, such that to this day it's still a huge hit in syndication. And in that time it has also ascended to become an indelible part of contemporary literature.

Yes, when you think about it, "Gilligan's Island" is literature in the truest sense of the word. It is that simply because it has survived, despite the critics and despite the uppitiness of TV executives who thought they knew better. It has survived as literature, if light literature, in the minds of the people who matter, TV viewers.

This is not to say it is Sophocles or Shakespeare, though in its slapstick it shares more with the latter than many would like to think.

Literature is that which resonates with people from generation to generation. It engages us in ways that bring us back to it, for one reason or another. We write about it, refer to it in conversation, and we keep it alive to the point where it becomes a permanent part of our culture.

That's what makes "Gilligan's Island" literature, beyond the show's earworm theme song or whether you prefer Ginger over Mary Ann.

It's also a lot more literary than one might think. Series creator Sherwood Schwartz, a well-read man, originally saw "Gilligan" as a social microcosm of the modern world, and he intended it to touch on timeless literary themes.

One is the notion of tossing complete strangers and opposites into challenging situations to see how they react. This has become a staple of reality TV, most notably with CBS's "Survivor" but no less with TBS's "The Real Gilligan's Island," which represents a completed circle.

The idea of placing people in difficult situations to see whether they rise, becoming greater creatures, heroes in a classic sense, is a theme running through great literature for thousands of years.

The shipwreck on "Gilligan's Island" forces the characters to adapt to their new environment and work together to survive. Defoe wrote about this in "Robinson Crusoe," as did James Barrie in "The Admirable Crichton." Countless films and television shows before and since "Gilligan" have also explored this idea, from "Paradise Lagoon" to

"Lost."

"Just as [the castaways on 'Gilligan'] had to learn to get along with each other, that's how the countries of the world eventually are going to have to get along with each other,"

Schwartz told author Sylvia Stoddard in "A Companion Guide to Gilligan's Island" (St. Martin's, 1996).

"Now, that was never openly stated when I originally pitched the idea to the networks, but with comedy you can sometimes have a subliminal message," Schwartz said. "That really was the message of the show."

This sort of social awareness, though lost on critics, pops up in other places. The ship, S.S. Minnow, was named after then-FCC chairman Newton Minow, who in 1962 so famously blasted television as "a vast wasteland," a mindless procession of game shows, violence, "formula comedies about totally unbelievable families," cartoons, endless commercials, "and most of all, boredom."

Minow's comments were fresh on Schwartz's mind when he began developing "Gilligan" in 1963. A witty man who established himself as a writer on "The Red Skelton Show," Schwartz couldn't resist naming the ship after the FCC chairman, knowing full well that his show represented everything Minow was railing against.

Finally, it's important to remember that "Gilligan's Island" was a product of a time, and it was a time when expectations for TV were quite low. Most people saw television as a temporary escape from the troubles of the workaday world.

"Gilligan" may have been simple-minded, but so were a lot of other shows in 1964: "Bewitched," "My Favorite Martian," "Andy Griffith," "Petticoat Junction" and "McHale's Navy."

It was a time of great upheaval in this country, when people were still in shock over the assassination of JFK. Vietnam was building, and the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing. TV was called the boob tube but not entirely derisively.

"Gilligan's Island" is still here to remind us of that time.

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