

Review: Jeffrey Stepakoff, Jeffrey. *Billion Dollar Kiss: The Story of a Television Writer in the Hollywood Gold Rush*. New York: Gotham Books, 2007.

The writers' room is a very mysterious, organic kind of place. You come in with a set idea, and very quickly watch it morph and change and bend into something new. Almost always something better.

Tim Kring, the creator of *Heroes*

Don't be deceived by that faux-lurid title (a reference to an unlikely writers' room decision that saved *Dawson's Creek*). *Billion-Dollar Kiss: The Story of a Television Writer in the Hollywood Gold Rush* is no Joe Eszterhas tell-all but rather one of the smartest, most in-depth behind-the-scenes accounts available on how television series get made.

"[W]hile screenwriters have the luxury of being monsters if they are so inclined," Jeffrey Stepakoff writes, "playing nice with others is a key attribute of a writing career in episodic television. Perhaps this is why there are lots of books written by insiders about the movie business, but no one wants to do the same about TV." That Stepakoff, now teaching at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, has nevertheless given us this insider tale is in part the result of his career change.

Every page of Stepakoff's book, part memoir, part engaging guide to the business of TV, is filled with illuminating reflections on

such subjects as the mysteries of the writers' room, spec scripts, fin-syn rules, upfronts, meet and greets, residuals, each of which he manages to make as compelling as the characters in the best television shows. The actual cast of characters in *Kiss*—agents, showrunners, EPs (executive producers), Gerald McRaney, David Milch, recently fired NBC chief Kevin Reilly, Steven Bochco—is likewise memorable. Having just taught a course on American Quality Television, I found myself wishing I had been able to assign *Kiss* as a foundational text.

For someone like myself, embarked on a long-term investigation into the nature of television creativity, *Kiss* stands as one of the most suggestive books I have encountered. In his telling remark that “what most showrunners really want is a writer who has a fresh and distinctive voice” while able to “suppress his or her fresh and distinctive voice and conform to the voice of the series” (77) or his very funny and perceptive multi-page dissection of the type of imagination that finds working in TV a natural home, Stepakoff lays the groundwork for real progress in understanding the medium's collaborative genius.

Kiss is also a history, a step-by-step account from the trenches of the “creative coup d'état” that resulted in a shift of creative control from influential quality conscious studios (like MTM), major players when Stepakoff went West as a young man, to the total domination of television by powerful media giants at the end of his time in Hollywood. When he observes cogently that “Removing the studio from the mix was like taking Congress away from the president. There were no advisors, no forum for debate, no creative due process. Dissent was disallowed and dealt with harshly” (203-204), the reversibility of the

simile can hardly be accidental in a book published at the end of the Bush era.

Stepakoff's time in country has not, however, turned him into a cynic. Television history, he is certain, is controlled by cycles. Things fall apart, but great television is still to be made.