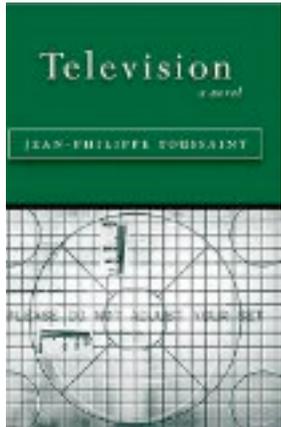


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### March 2005

#### [Veronica Bond](#) [fiction](#)

#### *Television* by Jean-Philippe Toussaint

I am a big fan of television. I always have been and I've never been ashamed to admit it. I have my weekly schedule, I still watch *ER*, even though it's obviously in decline, and I watched *Dawson's Creek* all the way from the first episode to the last. That being said, I have often found myself watching the most random of shows, ones that I wouldn't normally watch in order to avoid doing school work or, say, writing a review for a web magazine. So, I can completely identify with the unnamed narrator in Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Television*, the story of a man who, in resolving to give up television completely, does everything but that.

Toussaint's narrator is a man in his forties spending the summer alone in Berlin while his significant other, their son, and their as yet unborn daughter pass the time away in Italy. He has separated himself from his family in order to work on his manuscript, a monograph using the research he's done on the artist Titian. Complications arise, however, when the narrator cannot decide what name to call his subject. Will it simply be Titian? Or Titian Vecelli or Titian Vecellio or any of a number of names the artist has gone by? After all, how can he write about someone when doesn't know what to call them? This detail is only the beginning of a downward spiral of nitpicking and stalling the narrator engages in to keep him disengaged from his work.

The decision to quit watching television is done almost as a dare to himself: "...although I never tried it, I was always quite sure I could give up watching television anytime, just like that, without suffering in the least, without the slightest ill effect -- in short, that there was no way I could be considered dependent." One would assume that having given up television, the narrator would feel freer to concentrate on his manuscript, but the exact opposite occurs. He finds himself taking care of his neighbors' plants as they vacation for the summer, he spends time with a friend and sees his psychiatric patients, and he spends

a great deal of time justifying that not working and preparing to work are just as important as working itself. Of course, through all this, he becomes obsessed with *not* watching television.

Toussaint's narrative is a nice one. It flows well and he gives good descriptions of his character and how his narrator perceives them. The author is able to convey comedic irony through his narrator's thoughts. Just as the narrator is delineating the things that must be done in order to successfully set oneself to the task of writing, we are sure that he will soon go astray of his own plans. "You have to hurry straight home with it, because as long as it's still alive it might take advantage of any little lull in your attention to flee and vanish forever," he says of the inkling to work. "You have to run home, then, preserving that ephemeral treasure in the sealed shell of your hands, feeling its light, living wings quivering like inspiration within the cage of your curved palms." What happens when makes it home? The telephone rings and this attempt at work is, as he's justified, lost. Never over the top, Toussaint has infused these passages with just enough irony to garner a chuckle or an eye roll from his reader, but never so much that we become exasperated with each dashed attempt. It is nearly impossible not to sympathize with the narrator's plight and remember the times we have behaved in similar ways.

More than an amusing story of a procrastinating writer, however, Toussaint's novel works equally well as a commentary on the ubiquity and adverse affects of television. At one point the narrator concludes that roughly three percent of the population does not own a TV, but that the same three percent is also homeless so that the cessation of watching TV is not so much a desire as a lack of access to a TV. When he has turned it off, the narrator is consumed with thoughts of what might be on, as though it were a ghost haunting him with its potential powers of entertainment. The reader may be tempted to question why television, instead of books, is of the narrator's primary concern and he explains it as such: "For where books, for instance, always offer a thousand times more than they are, television offers exactly what it is, its essential immediacy, its ever-evolving, always-in-progress superficiality."

The greatness of *Television* is that any writer, whether a novelist or simply a college student with a term paper to turn in, will identify with the narrator's struggle. It's a humorous one, funny because it's true and because there are a hundred things we can think of turning to when faced with a less than appealing task. Whether it's Instant Messenger, a phone call from a friend, or taped episodes of *The O.C.*, there will always be something there, ready to detract a writer from his or her work. Toussaint knows this and he lovingly pokes fun at the writer who has fallen prey to distraction. In doing so he comments on the ramifications this pervasive social practice: watching television.

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