

D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

Book Review

*HBO's Treme and the Stories of the Storm: From New Orleans as
Disaster Myth to Groundbreaking Television*

By Robin Andersen

ISBN: 9781498519892, Lexington Books, 2017.

As a fan of the show, I was eager to read this book as it comes from UDC member Robin Andersen of Fordham University. *Treme* was conceived and produced by David Simon and Eric Overmyer, as a follow up to their critically received *The Wire*. The intention of the story in *Treme* was to look at a working-class neighborhood in the aftermath of the 2006 hurricane and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans. The show premiered in 2010 and lasted 36 episodes over 4 seasons.

In *Treme*, the outcomes were not scripted as Simon and Overmyer used the real story of New Orleans to determine the direction *Treme* would take. One could call it a dramatized realism that had more reality than the average ‘reality TV’ show. That was the challenge in producing this show—a daunting challenge that probably accounts for some of the negative reviews of the show by television and cultural critics.

The book is thorough and knows its subject very well as Andersen was able to conduct interviews with several of the show’s staff and cast. Coverage of the show in the book is supplemented by a great deal of New Orleans history—food, music, police abuse which provides a lot of the details which enrich viewing of the show. A chapter on policing after the storm details the considerable corruption (and attempts to expose it) while a chapter on the Mardi Gras Indians adds a great deal of detail to the whole history of this African American homage to Native Americans.

Andersen spends considerable time on the show as a critique of the neo-liberal recovery citizens of NOLA were subjected to without much say. It’s not a stretch to say it is a storytelling take on Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. This is noteworthy as television does not tend to do structural critiques of social issues because our culture is so oriented toward individualism, privileging a psychological understanding of issues. I also think that is something some of the critics of the show either don’t get or don’t prefer to see in televisual storytelling. It also may help account for the drop off in audience as the most of the stories aren’t happy. For me, it is the groundbreaking element of the show.

Three subplots capture this well: a “developer” who comes in from Houston, an “entrepreneur” who offers to save a struggling chef and her restaurant and a manager who signs a local street musician to a contract are portrayed in the show as examples of outsiders/predators coming into exploit the aftermath of Katrina. All of them reflect the tendency of neoliberal economics to commodify everything and drain it of its authenticity. They represent a business and politically corrupt elite as well as general opportunists who promise the world and deliver much far less, and serve as “seeming” angels willing to swoop in and “help” the struggling industries of restaurants, music and urban “redevelopment.”

The research for this book is very impressive—use of local media materials and critiques give the book substantial heft. There is some integration of theoretical perspectives from sociology, psychology and communications which are used more to tie together a complete picture of the storm and flood politically and how corporate and financial power excluded black, poor, and working-class interests in their neo-liberal remaking of a city.

I was most skeptical about asserting the music in the show serves as a character. Music proliferates in the show and is the subject of several meaningful subplots. (Several soundtracks were released and the showrunners made efforts to boost the recovering music scene.) I understand and appreciate the important role music plays in the show and it was worth a whole chapter. It was a worthy attempt to convey just how much music mattered to the Treme neighborhood.

The audience for this book spans rather wide. It will help budding scriptwriters to learn how elements of a program, especially elements that capture a critique of neo-liberalism, are configured and integrated to tell a story both verbally and visually. Sociology courses could use the book as an examination of contemporary American society and its critique of neo-liberalism as discussion starters. Communications courses would benefit from the book's discussion of the controversies surrounding the show. It is also an excellent read for fans of the show

James H. Wittebols (jhw@uwindsor.ca) is a professor of political science at the University of Windsor.