

Simpsonology: A Short Study of the Show that Changed TV

by Dr. Karma Waltonen

On April 19th, 1987, as a girl of 13, I was watching *The Tracey Ullman Show*—a new show on a new network—Fox. A weird yellow family appeared in a series of “bumpers”—short cartoons between the show and the commercial break—created by Matt Groening. Homer and Marge Simpson were putting their kids to bed—Homer was unable to answer Bart’s question about life, Marge scared Lisa by mentioning bed bugs. And then Marge sang “Rockabye, Baby” to Maggie, who pictured the disturbing lyrics (“And down will come baby, cradle and all”).

I’ve always known that song was messed up, I thought.

I was in love.

It was hard not to be. *The Simpsons* was unlike anything that had been on television before. It was a cartoon, but it was for adults. It was also strikingly different from everything else on television—which featured perfect families who never watched TV. This family wasn’t perfect—like mine. This family watched TV—like mine.

And when the Simpson family got their own show on December 17th, 1989, they transformed the TV world in another way—they didn’t have a laugh track (even a lot of kids’ cartoons like *Scooby Doo* had laugh tracks back then). Instead, the jokes were fast and layered—including jokes one might not get until a second or third viewing.

The show was immensely popular, and like every new art form, it was attacked. People said it was ruining TV. My grandmother said it shouldn’t be allowed to be on, since Bart talked back to his father. George Bush and his wife both publicly criticized the show, believing it was “dumb” and that it set a bad example for American families.

However, *The Simpsons* won. *Time Magazine* named *The Simpsons* the most important television show of the 20th century (of course, there wasn’t television before the 20th century). It paved the way for the television we enjoy now, from *South Park* to *Arrested Development* to *Archer*. *South Park* has even had an episode about how *The Simpsons* pushed all the envelopes first: “Simpsons Did It.”

If I used Homer’s magic time-travel toaster (from “Treehouse of Horror V”) to tell that 13 year old girl how much this show would change TV, would change the viewing audience, and would change her, she probably wouldn’t believe me. In what world would any primetime show last for 27 years and counting? In what world would I be able to teach classes on this? To write books and articles on this? To give a sermon on *The Simpsons* and spirituality? In what world would a cartoon unite the world, giving its fans a way to connect with citizens of so many nations? In what world would a cartoon become part of a Presidential campaign?

In a Simpsonized one.

I’m often asked if I think the show has lost its edge. *The Simpsons* is very much like it was almost thirty years ago (it’s edgier in subject matter and language use, in fact), but we see it as tame because *we’re* so different.

By changing TV, *The Simpsons* changed us—by asking us to be a more sophisticated audience (one that didn't need to be told when to laugh and who can get a wide range of jokes—from highbrow to lowbrow) and by asking us to see our society anew by looking into a yellow mirror.

Karma Waltonen has been teaching at UC Davis since 2000. The former President of the Margaret Atwood Society (and current editor of the peer-edited journal *Margaret Atwood Studies*), Dr. Karma (as her students call her) has a wide variety of interests, most of which are incredibly nerdy/geeky. For example, in 2010, she co-authored *The Simpsons in the Classroom: Embiggening the Learning Experience with the Wisdom of Springfield*. Recently, she has published on time travel in *Star Trek* and on the ethics of religious cults in *Doctor Who* and on asexuality in *Sherlock*. She is completing an article on postmodernism in *The X-Files* and working on a collection of essays on *The Simpsons* with her Simpsons partner, Denise Du Vernay. She also speaks at various ComicCons and at international conferences. Dr. Karma's classes include 18, 101, 102D, 102J, 102L, 104F, and courses for the Freshman Seminar Program, including "The Simpsons: Satire and Postmodernism" and "Writing and Performing Stand-Up Comedy."

Education:

- PhD, UC Davis (Literature)
- MA, Florida State (Literature)

Awards:

- 2015 Academic Federation Excellence in Teaching, UC Davis

Selected Recent Publications:

Books

- *The Simpsons in the Classroom: Embiggening the Learning Experience with the Wisdom of Springfield*. McFarland. April 2010. (co-authored with Denise Du Vernay).

Edited Collections

- *Writing Assignments in Context* (co-authored with Melissa Bender). McFarland. Forthcoming.
- *Margaret Atwood's Apocalypses*. Cambridge. 2015.

Refereed Journal Articles

- "Loving the Other in Science Fiction by Women." *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction* 1.1 (2016). Web.

Book Chapters

- "Scully, Mulder, and Lord Kinbote: Postmodern Tangents on the Quest for Truth." *The X-Files and Philosophy*. Ed. Robert Arp. Open Court. Forthcoming.
- "Sherlocked: Homosociality and (A)Sexuality." *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes*. Ed. Nadine Farghaly. McFarland. 2015. 192-207.
- "Religion in Doctor Who: Cult Ethics." *Time and Relative Dimensions in Faith: Religion and Doctor Who*. Eds. Andrew Crome and James McGrath. Darton, Longman and Todd. 2013. 145-160.
- "To Boldly Go When No One Has Gone Before (or After)—Trek's Timelines." *Star Trek and History*. Ed. Nancy Reagin. Wiley. 2013. 158-175.