

'Not In Front Of The Kids'

Author

Keys, Wendy

Published

2006

Journal Title

The Australian Literary Review

Rights statement

© 2006 The Australian Literary Review.

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/11663>

Link to published version

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20615578-25132,00.html>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>



Illustration: David Follett

‘Not in front of the kids’

Wendy Keys

Australian Literary Review Issue 3 Vol 1 November 2006 pp 5-6.

November 01, 2006

Bloodbath: A Memoir of Australian Television

By Patricia Edgar

Melbourne University Press, 480pp, \$45

MANY tantrum tears have been shed, wounds inflicted and feet stamped in the sandpit of children's television industry development. Patricia Edgar, in her perverse though aptly titled book *Bloodbath*, names perpetrators, bodies buried and weapons wielded while chastising the bitter, fragmented, agenda-driven, resource-hungry TV industry. The first woman to be appointed to a national role in TV regulation and founding director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, Edgar trod on many toes as she bravely climbed the slippery-slide of the policy playground. As a consequence, and to state the bleeding obvious, in a career spanning more than 30 years there was bound to be plenty of drama.

Bloodbath is a riveting read despite the book's genre confusion. Is it a memoir, a policy polemic or an industry history? The book combines all these elements using personal anecdotes, policy rhetoric and rigorous historical accounting. Whether you're interested in the intricacies of Australia's TV industry or not, the energetic drama and first-hand witnessing of dastardly behaviour during Australia's early TV years delivers amusing and poignant moments. The story also elicits frequent gasps of astonishment and despair.

However, the book is not all about the TV industry. It is also a personal account of an Australian woman's life from the 1940s onward. It begins gently as a tale of a country lass, the youngest in a family of three girls growing up in Mildura in Victoria, with a best friend advising her to stop picking her nose. By the time she becomes a young wife and mother, and despite finding Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* life-changing, ("no other single book had such a profound influence on my life"), Edgar declares: "I was never a bra-less, unshaven feminist -- Doris Day was more my model and lipstick something I wanted to wear."

In the 1960s, with two young children in tow, she follows husband Don Edgar to California and completes a masters degree in communication, finding campus life a stimulating contrast to suburban Greensborough in Melbourne. "The years Don and I were students at Stanford with our two young children were the best times of my life." It was at this point in the book a question arose. How did she manage, practically and emotionally, the childcare arrangements for her two young daughters while she and Don were studying and forging careers? Disappointingly, not only for myself, I imagine, but for many women rearing children and building careers, this question remains unanswered in the autobiographical narrative.

On return to Australia, "the land of desperate housewives", Edgar embarks on an academic career at La Trobe's newly established school of education and centre for the study of media and communication. She takes up a teaching position and completes a PhD in record time, struggling against animosity from male colleagues. Here she deals with ugly politics, backstabbing and a faculty "populated in considerable measure by drones and parasites". Apart from a few close allies, Edgar was not supported, relinquished her position as chairwoman of the centre and "left the running of universities to those that had little interest in contemporary Australian media politics". She believes the years spent in the "poisonous atmosphere of university politics" were responsible for the devastating health problems she suffered soon after.

Although Edgar's memoir is written in large part about children and programming, it is also a story about the broader world of TV in Australia and globally, and is a timely contribution to the marking of 50 years of free-to-air broadcasting in this country.

Edgar is a key figure in the history of policy development, nurturing through the decades a close though often rocky relationship with members of government bodies and the TV industry. She was appointed to the Australian Broadcasting Control Board in 1975 just two months before the sacking of the Whitlam government. The book rightly highlights Edgar's role in Australia during this time in making the first attempt anywhere in the world to design a system of regulation to improve the production of programs made specifically for children. Indeed, the most detailed and imposed broadcasting regulations in Australia are those pertaining to "the child". The Australian Content Standard, together with the Children's Television Standard and the C classification introduced in 1979, were imposed with the intention of ensuring Australian children have access to quality, age-specific Australian product.

Recalling her own extensive experience as a children's TV presenter and producer, Dina Browne told me in a 2001 interview that "children's TV was down there with God and gardening as far as money for production". Browne believes that regulation

introduced in 1979 made children's TV "more visible" and "shifted industry concern towards production values". A significant benefit of this regulatory environment was the development of a local children's TV production industry and the establishment of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, producer of programs such as *Winners*, *Round the Twist* and *Lift Off*.

As director of the ACTF for 20 years, Edgar was inevitably praised and denounced, sometimes as much for her public persona as policy approach. She was single-minded in her determination to take the ACTF from a "child-oriented charity institution" to "a major production house" (as TV producer Ebsen Storm puts it), and to enact her core philosophy that Australian children should be able to consume quality, age-specific, culturally relevant TV.

Edgar's blunt pursuit of these goals was publicly supported and admired by many. In 1998, Anna Holmes of the BBC, referring to the international success of the ACTF's *Round The Twist* series and its controversial inclusion of bodily functions, signalled Edgar's maverick status by commenting: "What do you say about a woman who has spent many working hours defending the cultural validity of a how-high-can-you-pee competition? Patricia is a gamekeeper turned poacher; that is, a regulator who became a producer. She has done a fantastic amount to raise standards and awareness of children's TV in Australia and around the world."

But for all her supporters Edgar has also had detractors among Australia's independent TV producers. At the first World Summit on Television and Children in Melbourne in 1995 industry players reportedly were enraged by an alleged "lack of free participation" in summit sessions. Australia's industry magazine *Encore* referred to the event as "The Pat Edgar World Summit" and quoted complaints by independent producers that programs produced by the Edgar-run ACTF catered to a particular middle-class definition of childhood.

These complaints echo Simon Townsend (remember Simon Townsend's *Wonder World*?) years earlier when he commented on Edgar's regulatory role on the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's children's programming committee. Townsend believed the committee insisted on "elitist programs for kids whose parents' walls are lined with books", while he was "after the kids in the western suburbs".

Blood-boiling stuff, but important because public debate on issues of class and cultural maintenance, and about what knowledges and experiences children should or should not have access to, are in fact debates about values and much broader moral and political concerns.

Edgar clearly has scores to settle in this book and her defence regarding accusations of elitism and power-mongering are articulate and insightful. This strong defensive vein in *Bloodbath* includes Edgar's response to complaints about her insistence on creative control of projects and the evolving role of the ACTF as a competitive production house. In interviewing TV producers for my doctoral dissertation it was easy to sympathise with people who admired Edgar but were also irritated by her self-aggrandising statements and approach.

Posie Graeme-Evans (of Hi-5 fame) described the ACTF under Edgar's directorship as "a kind of 600-pound gorilla" and while praising Edgar -- "She got off her bum and made it happen and so honour must be paid" -- in 2000 Graeme-Evans expressed concern about the appropriate role and function of the ACTF. Jonathan Shiff (Ocean Girl), a self-confessed "love child" of the Children's Television Standards, has also made contradictory statements regarding Edgar, the ACTF and the money-starved independent production sector.

In 1998, and again in 2001, some producers called for a review of the ACTF, arguing the government-funded foundation was depriving them of funding rather than supporting and nurturing the industry. Edgar chastised these dissenting voices and called for a unified stance, writing, "a lack of unity in the ranks stems in part from the fact that those crying loudest for more welfare were not of the age when the lobbying for quotas and subsidy took place". Edgar's response clearly demonstrates her belief that many producers lack historical knowledge of the struggle to establish the industry.

In *Bloodbath* she continues to lament that Australian TV has failed to deliver for children, landing her punches on the usual suspects. These include certain independent producers and the commercial networks that continue to viciously resist economic commitment to Australian children's programming.

Continued industry disunity over how best to sustain and develop children's programming was again brought into sharp relief during the recent debate about the free trade agreement between the US and Australia. Sections of the industry questioned content quotas, believing the removal of trade barriers created a system where "if there is a demand for a particular type of programming, it will exist regardless of whether there are quotas in place".

Pointing to the commercial networks' poor track record in screening quality children's programs, in particular expensive live-action drama, Edgar yet again argued for continued regulation and incentives, as children's programs are unlikely to be economically successful and therefore cannot rely on market forces.

To date, the Australian Communications and Media Authority's retention of mandatory standards for children's programming is evidence of the Howard Government's recognition of the conflict between broadcasters' commercial imperatives and the public interest. However, many producers have felt constrained creatively because of what they see as conservative early childhood development and psychological approaches to assessing scripts submitted for classification to the ACMA (and, before it, the ABA). As writer Chris Anastasiadis explained, "I wanted to make *Twin Peaks* for pre-teens and I ended up with sanitised Disney."

Many of the problematic issues that existed for the TV industry in the '70s, when Edgar first made her impact, remain. Edgar's memoir confirms children's TV is a contentious, highly competitive business dependent on government regulation and support for its existence. To achieve the Government's social and cultural broadcasting objectives for children, policy instruments such as minimum quotas, subsidies and incentives are required. Without such requirements for quality, age-specific Australian programs the industry would have difficulty sustaining itself.

Admire her or admonish her, Edgar's contribution to the existence and quality of Australian children's programming nationally and internationally has been innovative and inspirational. And no doubt skirmishes will continue to be fought and bodies buried in the children's TV sandpit as the industry struggles on the digital battlefield. Edgar, I hope, will continue to offer her experienced commentary and assist in strategically deploying Australian TV industry forces in evolving global media territory.

After finishing Edgar's saga of wounded struggle and scarred success I was left yearning for an answer to that nagging question regarding child care. Having also worked full time while completing my masters and PhD degrees and rearing two children, I'm acutely aware of the complexities facing working parents. How do you balance the rights and needs of your children with a healthy desire for intellectual fulfilment and purpose in a world of limited institutional and cultural support? I would have appreciated Edgar's input into this debate. How did she do it all, albeit in a slightly bloodstained fashion, and survive to tell the tale?

(A quick note for researchers: the book's index, use of primary resources and rigorous, accurate referencing is invaluable.)