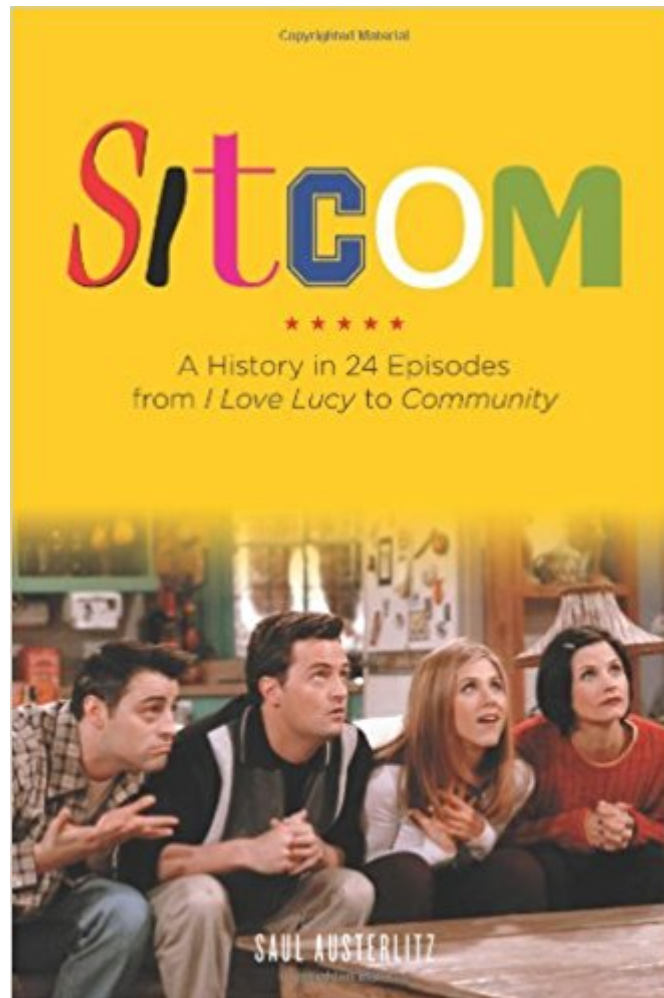




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# Sitcom: A History In 24 Episodes From I Love Lucy To Community



## Synopsis

The form is so elemental, so basic, that we have difficulty imagining a time before it existed: a single set, fixed cameras, canned laughter, zany sidekicks, quirky family antics. Obsessively watched and critically ignored, sitcoms were a distraction, a gentle lullaby of a kinder, gentler

America—until suddenly the artificial boundary between the world and television entertainment collapsed. In this book we can watch the growth of the sitcom, following the path that leads from *Lucy* to *The Phil Silvers Show*; from *The Dick Van Dyke Show* to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*; from *M\*A\*S\*H* to *Taxi*; from *Cheers* to *Roseanne*; from *Seinfeld* to *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; and from *The Larry Sanders Show* to *30 Rock*. In twenty-four episodes, *Sitcom* surveys the history of the form, and functions as both a TV mixtape of fondly remembered shows that will guide us to notable series and larger trends, and a carefully curated guided tour through the history of one of our most treasured art forms.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Astute and bursting with information—an entertaining treat for sitcom fans and a valuable contribution to TV history.”  
“Kirkus Reviews” A compulsively readable and often laugh-out-loud funny study of the American sitcom.”  
“Starred review, Library Journal” “[...] Austerlitz ingeniously and persuasively uses the genre of situation comedy as an American Rosetta stone, showing it to be capable of decoding itself (thanks to its endless self-references) and of making intelligible an entire social archaeology, [...] Bottomless in

its depth of research but as light in touch as the best of its subjects, Sitcom belongs in any home that has a sofa and a TV set. "Stuart Klawans, the Nation" [Austerlitz] is capable of delightfully mischievous prose." The New Republic "A smart new book" The New Yorker "Austerlitz writes with a direct and punchy style that makes for compelling reading." Paste

Saul Austerlitz is the author of *Another Fine Mess: A History of the American Film Comedy*, named by Booklist as one of the ten best arts books of 2010, and *Money for Nothing: A History of the Music Video from the Beatles to the White Stripes*. His work has been published in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Globe, Slate, and elsewhere.

Sitcom is an odd but entertaining semi-history of the Situation Comedy. I say odd because each chapter is supposed to focus on a single episode of each of 24 classic sit-coms, but the attention span is erratic. Sometimes it does explore that episode in some detail (the Mary Tyler Moore classic "Chuckles Bites the Dust") but other times it name checks the episode then talks more about other episodes or the show in general (it barely touches on the chosen Seinfeld episode "The Pitch", instead sensibly spending more time talking about the much superior "The Contest"). It does a good job of discussing the strengths of each series, how it helped evolve the genre, and discuss what other shows at the time followed in its footsteps. At the end it provides a cohesive presentation of how an entertainment form as seemingly trivial as the sitcom has occasionally not just aspired to greatness, but reached it. I had lots of good memories reading it, and some good Netflix suggestions as well.

Very good

You are not going to get any "inside" information on your favorite Sitcom. What you do get to is a view of the Sitcom as an American Art Form.

I did not Like his Book as much as i thought i would i only got through half of it and then quit reading it

This isn't just a stroll down memory lane with your favorite sitcoms: author Saul Austerlitz argues that the sitcom's sixty-odd year history is "a capsule version of the twentieth century arts." Realism --

all about the instability at the heart of 1950s conformism, and the gradual disintegration of that conformism through the '60s and '70s -- was the age of Ralph Kramden, Lucy Ricardo, Beaver Cleaver, Gilligan(!), Mary Richards, and Archie Bunker. The modernist sitcom played to a mass audience while blurring the lines between comedy and drama (M\*A\*S\*H), peppering soap opera romance with jokes (CHEERS, FRIENDS), making shows mimic the pointless, plotless minutiae of real life (SEINFELD), or exploding the sitcom format's boundaries altogether (THE SIMPSONS). The postmodern sitcom -- arch, cerebral, self-reflexive, formidably well versed in the history of its genre -- plays to a dwindling audience of hipsters, critics, and intellectuals. While ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT, CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM, 30 ROCK, COMMUNITY, and THE OFFICE play to their hip, literate niche audiences, viewers who don't feel as if they're in on the joke are probably still watching CBS (the old people's network), where sitcoms haven't evolved since 1990. I like this book. Rather than merely tickle our nostalgia and call it a day, Austerlitz makes the case that the sitcom is both a frequently embarrassing TV genre, and a pop art form that actually matters. It shows us ourselves, as what we aspire to, and as what we are.

This was such a comforting book to read, like junk food in book form. It didn't hurt that I read it while I was sick in bed for a few days. It was like having a marathon of all my favourite TV shows in one easy read. Even though Austerlitz chose episodes from 24 different TV shows to illustrate the history of American sitcoms, he mentions many more throughout the book. And don't worry, he did remember to exclude your favourites, just to annoy you. Or as he puts it: "Like any mix tape worth its salt, there will be grounds for complaint over what is left off as much as what is included." I think the mixed metaphor bothered me more than the missing TV shows. The episodes he chose are arranged chronologically according to when the series first aired and there aren't a lot of surprises, in that all of the shows represented are TV classics in their own right (except The Phil Silvers Show. Does anybody remember that show?). He seems to have chosen the shows for their impact on television history, but the individual episodes for how much they exemplify the state of the medium itself. So a lot of the episodes he discusses are ones that are increasingly self-reflexive and self-referential. The story Austerlitz is telling is that of sitcoms as an American art form that has increased in self-awareness as it becomes more and more a part of its viewers lives. When discussing The Honeymooners, for instance, he mentions that in a scene in which Ralph Kramden is supposed to be painting a wall, the paper-thin set wall shakes when he touches it because "they hadn't learned to hide those imperfections from us yet." Fast forward a few decades and Tina Fey and Alec Baldwin of 30 Rock are so aware of television conventions and viewer expectations that

they deliberately subvert them as part of the joke. "Remember all those times..." they muse, prompting the viewers to wait for the inevitable flashback sequence. Instead the characters stare off blankly for a few beats, remembering. Of course some of the author's choices are no doubt informed by his own personal tastes. Was *Sex and the City* REALLY a sitcom or did he want to include it because he liked the show? Was *Friends* REALLY the "last sitcom to be so inclined...to hold the splintering masses together--or to want to"? Is *Modern Family* such a "deeply conservative reimagining of the classical sitcom decorated with contemporary touches"? And could he not find it in his heart to include an episode of *Three's Company* in the list? Or *Maude*? Or *The Facts of Life*? Or *Good Times*? Or anything starring Bob Newhart? And has he seen *Archer*? But I digress. And sure, there are times when I wanted to nitpick and say, "But wait! That's not so!" His claims about the post-sitcom lives of the stars of *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, for instance, seems to include Julia Louis-Dreyfus' brilliant turn on *Veep* but ignore Lisa Kudrow's tour-de-force series *Web Therapy*. All right, I really am being nitpicky. But that's what television does to us. It turns us all into furious experts, arguing over how many episodes there were of *Star Trek* or whether we ever accepted the "new Becky." I may not agree with Austerlitz's assertion that the sitcom is a uniquely American art form (he doesn't include any British shows, though he does mention a few) nor that it's in its last stages of decline. But I do agree that it is a uniquely unifying art form. Even though more than half of the shows he talks about in the book aired before I was born, I can attest that I have seen every single one of the 24 episodes he lists (except *The Phil Silvers Show*. Seriously, what was that?) For more about this and other books, please visit my blog, *Cozy Little Book Journal*.

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