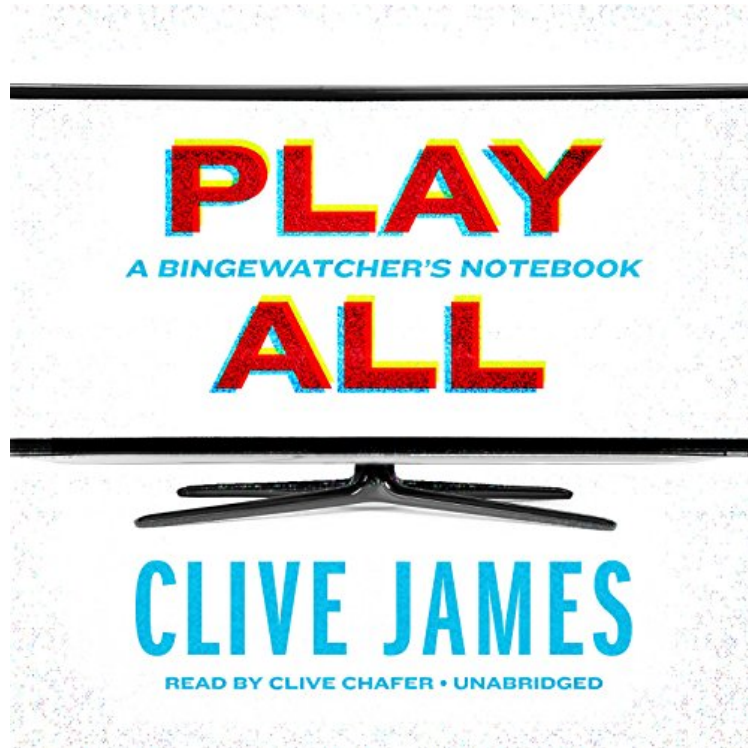


Play All: A Bingewatcher's Notebook

Clive James

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Clive James : Play All: A Bingewatcher's Notebook before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Play All: A Bingewatcher's Notebook:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Ridiculous. By Lesley Jenkins Play All is James' reflection on binge-watching box sets (yes, he says 'box sets'. Perhaps he eats 'fry rice' while watching). He differentiates between a television drama in the "old sense" of a network weekly serial which just happens to have been boxed-up (box up?) such as *The Good Wife*, and a box set drama in the "new sense", such as *Game of Thrones*. He adores both and watches 3, 4, 5 episodes of either in one sitting with his daughter. He sees "the main advantage that a long-form tv show has over a movie" as affording "room to search souls", and explains the addiction: -"very soon the show works the magic trick of any successful myth, and convinces you that the phantasmagoria you see in front of you is real and inevitable, and that the major characters are aspects of your own complex personality". As he says so very rightly, proper grown-up adults are no longer interested in going to the cinema because "most of the new movies are blockbusters scaled-up from Marvel comics or video games". Is "binge-watching" a thing? you may ask. James puts the term and its critiques into context: "We have merely labelled part of an evolutionary process with an ad hoc descriptive term, an only slightly less than usually misleading specimen of the academic nomenclature that divides up the history of anything into manageable chunks". "There is a bad tendency among instant commentators on the media to suppose that all qualities began with the new wrinkle: but most of those qualities wouldn't have gone there without being inherited from the old wrinkle" In that vein, James puts the 'new sense' box-set drama into its place in the

evolutionary grind from movies through made-for-tv-series to wherever this whole streaming thing is going. And here's one of his arbitrary and personal theories - he quite seriously asserts that the ultimate tv genetic ancestors of these box sets with their long narrative arcs and linear themes are - wait for it - you won't believe it - The Rockford Files and Shogun. By the time we get to "NYPD Blue you can watch the single-episode procedural story morphing into the over-arching serial story of the complete season, and the seasons themselves becoming chapters in the total narrative arc." Like Giles De'Ath in Love and Death on Long Island, James' open-mouthed adoration of certain actors seems to have arisen from not having really understood the idea of acting until quite recently. De'Ath - "For is it not the case that when we are in the habit of viewing a film...more than once, assisted by that technological aide-memoire the video player, then a remarkable phenomenon presents itself. We see...that what, at first, appeared to be merely accidental or unrehearsed...becomes on subsequent viewings an indelible part of the film's texture. A distant landscape, a blurred face in the crowd, even a banal message on a T-shirt. So, the largely unrecognized art of film acting...depends entirely on the ability of the actor--or, indeed, actress--to make everything about himself-- or herself-- seem equally permanent. When, thus, an actor is called upon to smile, he must try to select a smile from a collection--a repertoire--a whole file of smiles, as it were. Nave, rueful, sly, sarcastic...and so on." James (on Peter Dinklage in Game of Thrones) - "he suddenly made all the other male actors in the world look too tall...his face is a remarkable instrument of expression over which he has complete professional control, and his voice is a thing of rare beauty, as rich as Chaliapin singing Boris Godunov...Tyrion is the embodiment, in a small body, of the show's prepolitical psychological range." James admires them all - Gandolfini, Michael Imperioli, Martin Sheen, Kevin Spacey and Dennis Franz (NYPD Blue). Just think if Giles could see Charles Dance in Game of Thrones through James' eyes: "you get enough of him and it still isn't enough...There never was a more profoundly thoughtful transmitter of bitterly cured wisdom". Or James Gandolfini as Tony Soprano. His "face is creased with effort on its various levels and terraces. He is wondering where the ducks have gone. Is he reflecting that they must have left for the winter, or has it occurred to him that he too, might be subject to divine will?...It helps that the face belongs to James Gandolfini. It is massive." That's the male players. Some of the female ones are really excellent, James says, even though they are not attractive to him, and so there is no real reason for them to be there - Nancy Marchand, Allison Janney and Robin Wright - are honoured. It has to be dealt with, so I shall do it now. James waxes lyrical and ridiculous about women whom he sees as sexy. He has no reason to watch a show if there is no-one in it for him to drool and swoon over. His language is typically excessive. Here are just a few of his paens - The young Lorraine Bracco in Someone to Watch Over Me, "played a cop's wife so attractive that not even Mimi Rogers in distress could tempt him away for long" Olivia Munn has the face of a "wicked angel...her bewitching eyes and her figure fit for the swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated". Milla Jovovich has "the most beautiful face in creation", although the "equally striking" Julianna Margulies is "built to walk on clouds." Keri Mathett is "pitilessly arousing." Sofia Helin is "very comely." Nathalie Baye is "divine." "(be still, my beating heart)." Keri Russell is "impossible not to adore." Ammet Mahendru is "insanely lovely." Claire Danes is "beautiful" and in Romeo and Juliet "was a lyric poem all by herself." Kate Mara is "alluring." Carole Rousseau is "cool and graceful" and apparently, if it weren't for her we might not watch whatever it is that she hosts, just as apparently, we might not watch The Good Wife if it were not for the striking Julianna Margulies strolling about on water vapour. Natasha Henstridge in a teddy is the only reason to watch John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars (and the only reason to mention it at all, apparently). Alexandra Daddario is "extravagantly gorgeous". Not only is it a "relief" when she takes her shirt off, it has "startling visual impact." Archie Panjabi from The Good Wife "keeps us, and half the characters whether male or female, erotically fascinated throughout the show: a vamp for all seasons, and it isn't even her fault. Her eyes were made for us to drown in, and for her to watch us struggle." This drivel from just a few pages, made this reader feel queasy, inadequate, bored and annoyed. James invokes his daughters to show us that he knows what woman like; he praises women's increasing importance in production; he calls out the inequities in nude presentation still invoked by the Hollywood rules, and he even occasionally refers to a man as 'handsome'. But it's hard to see why, in James' world, any human who is not simply an adolescent (heterosexual) boy would want to watch anything at all. The one and only reason he had for watching Breaking Bad (more of this later) was Jane Margolis as played by Krysten Ritter. He pretends to address the "vexed question of eye candy" but his heart isn't in it. It's just possible that Lena Dunham may not be as flushed with joy as she should be to read that James describes her as adventurous and brave for daring to go on the telly despite being "not especially amazing to look at". James' prose is overwrought, easy to read and fast. He is funny - "Very few of [Frank] O'Hara's poems get far beyond the condition of not being prose". Steve Buscemi's teeth are "so clearly designed for biting the head off a live chicken". The Coen brothers "can make you wonder if even George Clooney is quite all there." Kevin Spacey's features "just happened, like a Rorschach blot". Despite her beauty, Claire Danes as Carrie in Homeland attempts "to be unobtrusive by looking around like a Tourette's victim and shaking her head like a dervish". Having praised The Wire for (what he considers to be) a rare attempt to explain technical matters, James says of Enigma, "Nobody cracks the actual enigma code except by looking tense. They might as well be sucking pencils." James is particularly scathing and funny about Scandinavian programmes, which he says are basically clean. "Basically but not reassuringly. Far from it: under the cleanliness there is a current of angst, like someone weird softly reading aloud

from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*". He says, "I blame Wallander, who has been boring the world for so long now that three different actors have played him if you count Kenneth Branagh. Of the two Swedish Wallanders, Rolf Lassgard tries to make the character interesting by looking around a lot often approaching the looking-around record that Ben Kingsley established in *Species*..." "Frighteningly, but not surprisingly, given the place in history which he assigns to *The Rockford Files*, James adores (and I mean adores) those mediocre 'old form' programs, *NYPD Blue*, *The Good Wife* and *The West Wing* and their players. Did I say overwrought? James considers Martin Sheen as *The West Wing*'s President Bartlet to be "an exemplary use of the charismatic central hero...an intellectual president...bringing articulacy to his tightly argued humanist speeches". "All these real-life presidents [Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, FDR, Truman, LBJ, Nixon and Obama] were smart, but even with their reputations rolled together they don't add up to Jed Bartlet, who in any number of illustrative scenes, gives us an account of exactly why developments in the cultivation of wheat present a decisive objection to Malthusian theories about imminent world starvation". "The only comparable presidential figure in American history is Lincoln, whose brilliance was confined to the English language". Sorry Abe, you suffered the disadvantage of being real. Bartlet can orate in Latin, is "omniscient, energetic, an ethical giant, a poet king." Forget elections, political science and gravity - "The West Wing has taken the supremacy; it is our first frame of reference for thinking about the presidency". "Martin Sheen is terrifically good at being classy; he can't make himself tall, but he knows just how to make himself look as if he has a connoisseur's respect..." Sheen's Bartlet is "so intensely human", "he pays for his superior gifts with high anxiety...he has an aching sense of responsibility". "He knows he is the best man for his job because he is the best qualified for analysis and decision; but...he knows history too well". At least, unlike Giles D'Ath, James is aware that there is a writer or writing team behind all this searing wonderfulness. The West Wing's Aaron Sorkin is his favourite, being "inspiringly good at making a questioning, troubled intellect...with its probing dialectical treatment of every liberal issue..." "When it comes to the 'new sense' of long-form content, James adores (yes, I use the word judiciously) *The Sopranos*, *Band of Brothers*, *Mad Men* and other series which are not widely known in Australia. He holds out on the big one - "Like anybody both adult and sane, I had no intention of watching *Game of Thrones*..." When describing the worlds of *Game of Thrones* he says, "There is icy cold instead of sandy heat, but still the level of tediums is very high..." I understand this, having a violent aversion to any film with a lot of sand in it (a permanent effect from having watched "*The English Patient*" and "*Lawrence of Arabia*" in the same century). Nor is James a fan of George R R Martin: "I picked up one of his books and fell down shortly afterward, and I wasn't even ill that day." But of course he succumbs and watches an episode or two. Horrifyingly, he sees "a not especially stunning princess" with a "not especially maddening form". What's she doing here? Why go on? "I'm still looking for all the reasons why it would have been right not to watch", but it's alright because he does persevere and is rewarded with a reason to do so - "As for the top woman of the realm, she is a beautiful expression of arbitrary terror, which is probably the first way to think about female beauty, if not the best. In a cast list where almost everyone stands out, the evil queen Cersei Lannister stands out most among the women, for she combines shapely grace with limitless evil in just the right mixture to scare a man to death while rendering him helpless with desire." Oh, hang on, perhaps James hasn't made himself clear. Being "superbly equipped by the cold edges of her classically sculpted looks to incarnate the concept of a femme fatale, Lena Headey beams Cersei's radiant malevolence at such a depth into the viewer's mind that she reawakens a formative disturbance." But wait. It's really really ok because when it comes to sex in *Game of Thrones*, "some of the female participants looked too gorgeous to be probable, but the same improbability occurs in everyday life, where chance dictates that you will sometimes see *Venus Anadyomene* at the supermarket checkout counter." Oh for God's sake, Clive. James doesn't like *Breaking Bad*. Here are his ostensible reasons - he finds Walt dull and hard to sympathise with; doesn't like to see Walt walking about in his underpants with his mouth open (I feel that way about women, strangely enough Clive); Jesse is an unbearable punk with too oft-bared and unnaturally perfect teeth. He also says it is 'underpopulated' and neither light nor quick, unlike - and here he gives himself away - the "witty beauty" Jane Margolis, played by Krysten Ritter, upon whose death James says, "I could just about put up with the loss of cheesecake". He complains too that it turned into a "bad action movie" at the end. To the real reason for James' derision - the lack of female nudes - we can add James' overwhelming preference for bad-guy heroes of the Don Draper sort, "tall, handsome, enigmatic and effortlessly dominant", or Stringer Bell (Idris Elba) in *The Wire*, not Walter White. Remember what James said earlier about wanting more technical exposition? He says that Nucky's organisation in *Boardwalk Empire* "burgeons to little purpose and with not much in the way of planning. We need to see the criminal mastermind's superiority as a strategist...For dramatic purposes, it has to sound intricate even if it isn't". There's plenty of technical show-and-tell in *Breaking Bad* and a long, subtle strategy unfolds, wrinkle by wrinkle, in Walter White's brain; but it's just not worth sitting-through if it is presented by Walt and not Jane, or even Idris Elba, if we must. Similarly, James dismisses *The British House of Cards* because Ian Richardson's female victims are (in James' mind) insufficiently alluring to attract his fatal intentions". There's no Beatrice, in other words, to Clive's Dante. Yes, it is all a matter of personal preference, but any real critic should be able to pick the fault in James' high opinion of *Underbelly* and *Rake*, two Australian series. He says, "the reason is simple: they're gripping, and that always has to be the first consideration. Without that, complication and sophistication count for nothing, or else you'd actually be enjoying the later novels of Henry James."

Clearly this is objectively and patently wrong. Anyone with a scintilla of sensibility would indeed rather eat the later novels of Henry James or indeed Henry James himself, than watch such turgid, clichéd trash. James makes some perceptive points about 'box-set' shows. The advertising executives in *Mad Men* don't question their methods and ethics, although James points out that those would have been active issues at the time depicted. His explanation for this has the tang of reality - "we revel in the opportunity to look back and patronise the clever for not being quite clever enough to be living now." "Mad Men is a marketing campaign and it sells a sense of superiority." And he has cleverly picked up that "the daughter is often the moral pivot in a box set drama, and all too often she is the irritating daughter." He develops these into the "category of Irritating Daughter and the category of Possibly Kidnapped Daughter." James says that this form of show will be popular around the world because of its "globally recognisable frame of reference". Ironically he says that exotic geography isn't necessary if the story is strong enough (but says nothing about female nudity not mattering). Finally he has something to say about the geo-political situation today. James opines that the "popularity of the gangster show in the Western countries might have something to do with a growing fear that in a battle against absolute evil a leader without an evil streak might get us killed." [Peter adds: I love Clive's TV reviews of the 1970s and early 1980s. Alas, I fear that Clive has degenerated into a horny boy again, whose TV is a joy forever. He has always had an unerring and hilarious sense of cant, but a fatal weakness for a pretty girl (much like Otis Elwell in *Sweet Smell of Success*). Lesley tells it like I fear it is, but we both hope he gets better soon.] 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Very entertaining and smart By M. M. Thomas Being a bingewatcher myself, although less concerned with deeper threads and issues of cultural context, I found CJ often on target and even where I think he misses the point worth making, readable and articulate. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Clive James still has it By Customer James was the Observer TV critic in the 80s and looks at television as a real art, not something to distract. He brings his wit and cool eye to today's box sets. Great writing makes for great reading of good viewing.

[Read by Clive Chafer] Television and TV viewing are not what they once were -- and that's a good thing, according to award-winning author and critic Clive James. Since serving as television columnist for the London Observer from 1972 to 1982, James has witnessed a radical change in content, format, and programming, and in the very manner in which television is watched. Here he examines this unique cultural revolution, providing a brilliant, eminently entertaining analysis of many of the medium's most notable twenty-first-century accomplishments and their not-always-subtle impact on modern society -- including such acclaimed serial dramas as *Breaking Bad*, *The West Wing*, *Mad Men*, and *The Sopranos*, as well as the comedy *30 Rock*. With intelligence and wit, James explores a television landscape expanded by cable and broadband and profoundly altered by the advent of Netflix, Amazon, and other "cord-cutting" platforms that have helped to usher in a golden age of unabashed binge-watching.

"Eminent literary and cultural critic James comes back to an old beat: reviewing the offerings on the small screen . . . Part of the critic's work is to tell us precisely what we should wish to watch, of course, and here James, though doffing high-toned intellectualism, settles for the more elevated fare, about which he writes with unflinching insight . . . A gentler companion to Harlan Ellison's *The Glass Teat*, the only flaw of which is that it's too short, leaving readers wanting more." --Kirkus sAbout the Author [Read by Clive Chafer] Television and TV viewing are not what they once were -- and that's a good thing, according to award-winning author and critic Clive James. Since serving as television columnist for the London Observer from 1972 to 1982, James has witnessed a radical change in content, format, and programming, and in the very manner in which television is watched. Here he examines this unique cultural revolution, providing a brilliant, eminently entertaining analysis of many of the medium's most notable twenty-first-century accomplishments and their not-always-subtle impact on modern society -- including such acclaimed serial dramas as *Breaking Bad*, *The West Wing*, *Mad Men*, and *The Sopranos*, as well as the comedy *30 Rock*. With intelligence and wit, James explores a television landscape expanded by cable and broadband and profoundly altered by the advent of Netflix, , and other "cord-cutting" platforms that have helped to usher in a golden age of unabashed binge-watching.