NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Why I love 'Downton Abbey'

Heidi Schlumpf | Feb. 21, 2012

COLUMN

"Don't be defeatist, dear; it's very middle-class."

If you recognize this quote, you're probably a fan -- make that a *fanatic* -- of the PBS series "Downton Abbey." There are millions of us spanning several continents, making the Masterpiece Theater mini-series that just finished its second season a veritable pop culture phenomenon.

It's been parodied on "Saturday Night Live," won six Emmys last year and was the second most popular television program on the night of the Super Bowl 2012. There is a menu for a Downton dinner party on Epicurious [1] and a website devoted to the lamps of Downton Abbey [2]. Even The Onion has weighed in, joking that watching an episode of Downton is equivalent to reading a book [3].

We can only wonder what the Right Honourable Violet Crawley, Countess of Grantham (the "Dowager Countess" to those in the know), would have to say about all the fuss. So far, the series' most quotable character (played by Maggie Smith) has pooh-poohed electricity, telephones, weekends and anything American.

"I'm a woman," she says. "I can be as contrary as I choose."

And we love her contrariness, tinged as it is with snobbiness. A "Sh!t the Dowager Countess Says" video on YouTube [4] is devoted to her one-liners, and CafePress has T-shirts emblazoned with her best insults for sale.

All this hoopla has many wondering why a British period drama seems to have taken the world by storm. Is it merely the magnificent dresses and the long shots of the impressive Highclere Castle? Or is "Downton" just another soap opera, a "Desperate Housewives" with English accents for those who like to feel they're more cultured?

Catholic commentator Jesuit Fr. James Martin recently confessed to enjoying "Downton" as a guilty pleasure -- his Catholic guilt kicking in because the show celebrates income inequality, snottiness and *noblesse oblige*.

"It's hard to overlook the fact that we're watching a show about rich people who have poor people working for them. And don't seem to mind," Martin wrote in a piece for *The Washington Post* [5].

"Maybe I'm wrong, but the fact that these people are wonderfully titled, rather fabulously wealthy, have exquisite taste, live in magnificent old houses and possess vast tracts of land means that they get away with quite a bit," Martin says.

Some have speculated that Americans love Downton because we secretly long for a world neatly divided into aristocrats and servants. Others say the show is a critique, not a defense, of the world it portrays.

Indeed, the entire series is predicated on the problematic fact that a woman cannot inherit her father's estate.

That, and the fact that the downstairs characters get as much screen time as the upstairs ones, is offered as evidence for "Why liberals love 'Downton Abbey'" in a salon.com article [6].

I, too, have found myself wondering why I'm borderline obsessed with Downton. I am certainly not one to pine for the olden days when a woman's primary goal in life was to find a suitable spouse. Nor am I a closet royal watcher, though I can appreciate a fantastic ball gown as much as the next person.

No, I don't want to live "Downton Abbey." I just want to be entertained by it.

It turns out that Downton is just one of a number of Masterpiece series I've become addicted to since we cut the cable cord last year. Despite practically needing subtitles to understand British accents, I find myself replacing HGTV, TNT and even HBO with PBS.

"Sherlock" and "Lewis" are more cerebral than "Law & Order," and "Downton" trumps anything on the few other channels we can get with our digital antenna. There are no celebrity judges, no voting off the island. Instead, we get complex characters, historical settings and plots that assume we can pay attention for more than 22 minutes.

A bonus: Finally, television shows my husband and I can both enjoy.

Now in its 40th season, Masterpiece Theater entertains while examining deeper issues, such as class, gender and even faith.

In fact, Downton creator Julian Fellowes, who recently became vice president of the British Catholic Association of Performing Arts, has announced that Catholicism would be entering the storyline of the popular series in the near future.

As the Dowager Countess would say, "Oh, my dears. Is it really true?"

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