



INTRODUCTION

I have a friend, a painter and a very fine one. Some years ago, he agreed to join a few fellow artists who were renting a New England farmhouse for part of the summer. The plan, besides escaping the city heat, was to spend their days capturing on canvas the pastoral surroundings, the hills and dense green woods, the sloping pastures, barn-dotted. I should say that my friend is a deeply urban creature, born and raised in Queens, someone whose need for both high and popular culture is akin to his need for oxygen. So he hesitated before accepting the invitation, and it was well into the group's first day of work when one of his housemates left her easel and walked a distance through the field to where he'd set up his, in order to compare their versions of nature. Once she reached him, they nodded greetings and she stepped around to view his canvas and saw that he was painting a montage of television sets.

I love this story for what it says about my friend's stubborn sensibility, but I tell it here because it gives me the chance to say that from its birth, television has for good and ill been a deeply

embedded feature of the landscape. I mean this in a larger sense, of course—not only do we see the cultural landscape on television, we see the influence of television everywhere in the landscape—but it's still a groaningly bad pun of a metaphor, I know. It just serves my purposes too perfectly to resist.

Since this perception of TV, as both a reflection of and a force that shapes the culture, is hardly original, I asked some of the finest writers of our time to make it so. I was sure that by inviting them to chronicle life's occasions through the prism of television, to tap some savored moments from their viewing and real lives, the result would be a rich collection of wise and witty and uniquely personal accounts.

Thanks wholly to their talents, that's precisely what this book is.

But I'd also had a hunch that it might be something much more: a kind of social mosaic of the past half century, the pieces, brought together, making a highly entertaining anthropology. And I'm delighted to say it's that as well—an eclectic gathering of autobiography, memory, and blade-sharp observation, all wonderfully bound by the common experience of watching lives on television while living one's own, and the intimate intermingling of the two when there's a particularly keen need for inspiration or escape, counsel or company.