In the summer of 2020, in the midst of a chat about future projects, a senior scholar asked me for recommendations of exemplary studies of individuals in media contexts. As a well-known scholar of the television industry, she wanted to turn her attention to the individuals who created and experienced cultures of production from the inside. Certainly, such studies exist—many of them influence my own work on aging stars—but none came to mind in the moment. Today, dear scholar, I’d like to suggest Annie Berke’s *Their Own Best Creations: Women Writers in Postwar Television* as a sterling addition to that category.

Berke’s book, published in January 2022 by the University of California Press, is notably the first in the new Feminist Media Histories book series edited by Shelley Stamp. Like the journal for which that series is named (also founded by Stamp), *Their Own Best Creations* seamlessly bridges the fields of media studies and feminist studies via a rich and lively exploration

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2 Read more about the series on the University of California Press website: https://www.ucpress.edu/series/fmh/feminist-media-histories.
of the women who scripted the first Golden Age of television. In contrast to luminaries such as Lucille Ball and Gracie Allen, most women who worked in the nascent television industry are forgotten today, their names and contributions perhaps briefly acknowledged yet quickly vanishing from the archival register. These neglected talents include Gertrude Berg, writer-star of The Goldbergs (CBS, 1949–1956); Irna Phillips, writer-creator of multiple famed soap operas, including Guiding Light (CBS, 1952–2009) and As the World Turns (CBS, 1956–2010); and Madelyn Pugh, writer of many iconic episodes of I Love Lucy (CBS, 1951–1957). Berke covers their work and that of others in her well-researched history of early television’s women writers, whose experience of and perspective on the gender politics of their eras necessarily inform the industry’s depiction of them. “The book’s title, Their Own Best Creations,” Berke writes, “reveals my investment in looking at these women writers’ scripted lives, their personas and creative output, as formative presences in postwar femininity.”

The author’s interest in these figures reads as neither purely biographical nor simply a righting of media historiography’s failure to spotlight such women until now. Instead, Berke shows that women writers—as well as producers, story editors, and analysts—not only understood their place in a burgeoning industry but also experienced, in retrospect, a significant tension between their series’ portrayals of postwar sociocultural pressures on gender and femininity and “second-wave feminism’s emphasis on professionalism and self-actualization.”

Throughout the book, Berke separates individual subjects from personal politics by drawing comparisons between televisual text and private writings, ultimately crafting an argument that frames each figure through a necessarily feminist lens. Textually and interpersonally, the women who make up Berke’s study represent a range of positionalities vis-à-vis gender, politics, and labor. For example, in chapter 3, early domestic sitcoms written by and featuring Berg and Peg Lynch, the writer-star of Ethel & Albert (NBC, CBS, ABC, 1953–1956), are read by Berke as “allegorical plays about women television professionals,” a framing that enables their onscreen representation as both “the woman at home and the woman at work, suggesting that smart, motivated women might not have to choose between career and family.” But Phillips, a trailblazer of soap opera narratives that Berke argues “subtly undermined postwar discourses of sexism and misogyny,” rejected the label feminist and did not overtly adhere to such politics in her public persona. Berke references Phillips’s obituary notices, which cite the writer’s belief that “women are happier being dependent on men.” Yet, as Berke shows, Phillips’s early soaps, situated as they are within the domestic sphere and family life, also demonstrate how the writer “invented herself as someone equipped to express the needs of American women,” inventing complex narratives

4 Berke, 13.
5 Berke, 81.
“about white, middle-class women struggling to find their place in postwar culture.”

From its earliest pages, *Their Own Best Creations* recoups contributions by women whose work ultimately shaped not only the television industry but also cultural conceptions of television itself. Chapter 1 homes in on the “gendering of the television writer” in trade discourse and popular media coverage of the industry in the mid-1950s, emphasizing the labor conditions and sociocultural pressures that created specific opportunities for white, middle-class, educated women. Likewise, in chapter 2, Berke turns to the male-driven comedies of the early 1950s, examining how the dramatization (or comediﬁcation) of *Your Show of Shows* (NBC, 1950–1954)—which notably launched the careers of giants Sid Caesar, Mel Brooks, and Carl Reiner—formulated the archetype of the woman television writer. Lucille Kallen, herself the lone woman in the series’ writers’ room, became the model for Sally Rogers (Rose Marie), the wisecracking, forever-single writer-secretary in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961–1966). Beyond this, however, Berke points out that women such as Kallen were among the most significant contributors to the comedic innovations of these iconic series. Discussed not least for how these shows portrayed menial, or feminized, labor, the “female mischief” featured in these episodes demonstrate how the medium was changed by women’s presence behind the scenes.

Later on, in chapter 6, Berke analyzes the women behind *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (CBS, NBC, 1956–1965), including associate producer Joan Harrison and story editors Charlotte Armstrong, Marian Cockrell, and Helen Nielsen. Though Berke does not specifically mention the rote misogyny of Hitchcock’s cinematic oeuvre (or his sets’ working conditions for female talent), it remains the subtext for one of her most striking claims: that in adapting an “Anglophone literary tradition” to the small screen, these women’s scripts “transformed misogynistic subtext into text and switched narrative perspectives from male to female, all while crediting a man as the story’s ostensible originator.”

This chapter relies particularly heavily on textual analysis to support such claims, as Harrison, Armstrong, Cockrell, and Nielsen are evidently missing from archival records of the series. The structural interweaving of text and production history is one aspect of the book that seems occasionally unbalanced. But where Berke’s deep archival work reveals major gaps, her research into industry discourse—such as *Variety* articles and coverage of public events—more than makes up for it.

To wit, chapter 5, the briefest in the book, both introduces the figure of the “woman story editor” and demonstrates the limits of crafting a historical argument by archival traces. “In the effort to understand these editorial support positions as inherently creative, rather than sheerly administrative,” Berke writes, “historians can only refer to the documents these women left behind.” This chapter notably features something of a smoking gun regarding women’s status in the television industry: story editor and associate

7 Berke, *Their Own Best Creations*, 144.
8 Berke, 174.
9 Berke, 160.
producer Dorothy Hechtlinger’s scathing memo to higher-ups on *The United States Steel Hour* (ABC, CBS, 1953–1963). In it, Hechtlinger calls out her recent exclusion from an important production meeting and, in so doing—in Berke’s words—“asserts her authorial significance” and “demands access” to critical conversations in the future.\(^{10}\) Berke also notes additional episodes of overt sexism experienced by Hechtlinger’s contemporaries, but these passages would have benefited from more direct discussion of methodology, particularly the institutions and circumstances that enabled Berke’s investigation. Such context might have been useful to historians working in related areas. Chapter 5 also contains a rare mention of a nonwhite woman television executive, Theatre Guild co-director and supervising producer Armina Marshall, “one of the few (if not the only) Indigenous women of color working in postwar television.”\(^{11}\) The challenges of documenting women’s labor in the early industry are well demonstrated throughout *Their Own Best Creations*, yet Marshall is a common presence in theater-related archival correspondence.\(^{12}\) An expanded discussion of Marshall’s contributions and experience may have gone far to address the limits of this study—namely, that it acknowledges but does not significantly interrogate the whiteness of its subjects (or, indeed, the nascent industry as a cultural institution).

Each chapter of *Their Own Best Creations* builds on the author’s fluency with television historiography. Berke’s central endeavor is equally in conversation with foundational works of media history and newer contributions to the field, a quality that renders this book particularly useful to graduate and undergraduate readers. Early chapters of the book resonate with Lynn Spigel’s discussion of popular assumptions about sociocultural progress in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, wherein her aim is to recuperate the feminist potentiality of the sitcom by focusing on televisual intertextuality and periodization. She laments her students’ readiness to “produce a rather predictable teleological historical narrative that derides the 1950s” and questions “the logic of popular memory . . . and the role that television plays in providing young women with a sense of women’s history.”\(^{13}\) Though it does not directly cite the earlier text, Berke’s work markedly complicates Spigel’s argument. Berke revels in the fact that the creators and series her book covers are not well known to modern audiences, and she acknowledges that the stories she uncovers are critical to rethinking these common understandings of what the television industry was and is. In this especially, Berke’s work is also often in conversation with *Never Done*, Erin Hill’s 2016 study of below-the-line women workers in the Hollywood studio system.\(^{14}\) Hill’s landmark investigation of feminized labor in the film industry charts a similar methodology to Berke’s

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\(^{10}\) Berke, 165.

\(^{11}\) Berke, 164.


work in early television. In both cases, the growth of these industries, and their establishment as cultural institutions, led to a “professionalization” of women’s roles that ultimately foreclosed women’s contributions—or at least their credit for ongoing participation. Berke’s recuperative intent is most clearly felt in chapter 3, as Berke notes that shows such as Berg’s *The Goldbergs* are “unlikely to find a place in a Criterion boxset collection” much like *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–1964). Nevertheless, she credibly insists that “female-driven slice-of-life serials demand to be put in conversation with such work, with attention to both the ways in which they echo one another and how they meaningfully diverge.”

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15 Berke, *Their Own Best Creations*, 91.