

Toni Johnson-Woods, *Big Bother: why did that reality-tv show become such a phenomenon*, University of Queensland Press, 2002, pp 237, pb \$19.95. ISBN 0702233153.

A lot has been said and written about the worldwide *Big Brother* phenomenon and 'Reality Television' more generally. Significantly though, those who have no interest and seemingly little knowledge of this media marvel have generated much of the dialogue. Within this context, Toni Johnson-Woods' *Big Bother* offers a refreshingly rigorous, and often reverent, work of research that is concerned with the production and reception of series one of Australian *Big Brother*.

Big Brother has been a constant presence in popular media and talkback since it began in the Netherlands in 1999. Its popularity is testified by the numerous companion books and videos published (in the UK especially). Jean Ritchie has penned *Big Brother: The Official Unseen Story* (2000), and *Big Brother 2* (2001) — companion guides to the UK first and second series. There is also Ritchie's *The Big Brother Quote Book* (2001) (the best quotes from series 2), and her forthcoming *Inside Big Brother* (2002). Jules Stenson provided another popular critique — *Big Secrets from Big Brother* (2001) — an unauthorised discussion of series 2.

Big Brother has received critical attention in Australia via Catharine Lumby's short articles on *Big Brother's* Sarah-Marie and reality television in the *Bulletin* (2001), and on-line in *M/C Reviews'* feature on reality television (2001). The significance of Johnson-Woods' *Big Bother* is that it marks the first full-length study of an Australian reality television programme. The proliferation of reality television, the commentary that surrounds it and the issues it raises (power and corporatisation, authority and self-representation, the representation of winners and losers — to name just a few) suggests that this attention is well warranted.

Big Bother attempts to answer the question in its subtitle: 'why did that reality-tv show become such a phenomenon?', and satisfies this enquiry via a useful methodology that traverses textual and intertextual analysis, cross-cultural comparisons, and audience surveys. The book's eight chapters are divided between these different methodologies, exploring the various stakeholders who affected the *Big Brother* phenomenon. These stakeholders include the original creators of *Big Brother*, its international predecessors, the Australian producers, Channel 10, those who worked on Australian *Big Brother*, and the broader television industry — for example those responsible for the marketing of *Big Brother*. Johnson-Woods' book also reviews responses from the gatekeepers of Australian television and media, and the importance of the audience for *Big Brother* — the television audience, web viewers or the real-life audience present at live evictions.

Johnson-Woods examines *Big Brother* within its generic context, amid the broader proliferation of reality television; she also provides summaries of what occurs on the *Big Brother* programme — including episode summaries. The release of this book is timely (clearly no coincidence) — arriving at the time when the second series of *Big Brother* is being broadcast in Australia and along with numerous claims that interest in the programme is fading. This timing may be the cause of the book's primary failing. *Big Bother* is perhaps a victim of the proliferation of media attention that has affected *Big Brother* in the past three years. In attempting to provide an overview of the first Australian series, alongside information about the range of *Big Brothers* around the globe, Johnson-Woods' research struggles with containment. It is not that the book contains too much information; rather, it contains too much superfluous information (for example, background on Australian television, the genre and development of reality television, and television classification information). The result is

that *Big Bother* seems unaware of its audience, the extent of their engagement with the programme, and their level of knowledge of *Big Brother* and its intertexts. If the expected audience is fans, media critics and scholars (and the tone of the book seems to provide a nice balance for such an audience) then the majority may be familiar with much of the information contained in the early chapters of *Big Bother* — particularly the programme's foundations, the particulars of reality television and the episode summaries of Australian *Big Brother*.

Having suggested this, when *Big Brother* is retired to the annals of Australian television history, and our memories of the events and characters have lapsed, Johnson-Woods' *Big Bother* will provide a quick reference point for these long forgotten details. It will also prove to be a useful resource for international scholars seeking detailed information about the Australian chapter of this media wonder. *Big Bother* will also be a viable teaching tool for anyone involved in teaching media, cultural or Australian studies subjects in which *Big Brother* may rate a mention.

Though *Big Bother* holds together well in its entirety, the strongest chapters are chapter six (the contestants), chapter seven (the audience) and chapter eight (the media). Each of these chapters offers useful and original insights into *Big Brother* and it is in these chapters that Johnson-Woods' potency as a media commentator and researcher shine through. In reviewing media responses to *Big Brother*, the author deconstructs much of the empty criticism that has been levelled at the programme, offering fresh and well-founded insights of her own. For example, in 'watching' the media who watched *Big Brother*, Johnson-Woods explores the common criticisms of the programme (such as those commentators who referred to the programme as 'boring') in light of viewing figures, and investigates why *Big Brother* was so heavily derided by the popular media. These chapters also offer much of *Big Bother*'s 'new' information, for

example, the specific ways in which the editing of the programme affected the representation of the different *Big Brother* players.

Unlike other writing on the subject of reality television, *Big Bother* seems to be a labour of love for its author. Johnson-Woods, a lecturer in the Contemporary Studies programme at the University of Queensland (Ipswich campus), writes from the perspective of a genuinely interested observer who has engaged with this programme and its surrounding media. Johnson-Woods regards *Big Brother* as a text worthy of attention. Unlike many analysts who forecasted that *Big Brother* would be the beginning of the end for television, Johnson-Woods' blend of academic inquiry and detailed yet accessible reportage contextualises this media event (rightfully) within its broad web of stakeholders. There is much within *Big Bother* for both media analysts and fans of *Big Brother*. This book makes a useful contribution to the growing scholarship on reality television and to the genre of the 'cross-over text'— its accessible style should result in it having appeal beyond the academy.

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Gina Mercer, *Parachute Silk*, Spinifex Press, 2001, pp 209, pb \$24.95. ISBN 187675611X.

In this first novel by accomplished poet Gina Mercer, the reader is drawn into the personal worlds of forty-somethings Molly and Finn through their candid and eloquent letters to each other. There is an abundance to enjoy here and as a writer Mercer is both generous and passionate.

Through the eyes of two long-term friends, Mercer explores a wide range of issues. What's more, she is not afraid to challenge stereotypes or cherished myths. Here are women of substance, painfully grappling with the contradictions and tensions of their lives and relationships. Finn, now in a monogamous heterosexual