

Why a Radical Libertarian Can Enjoy a Show About a British Monarch

I like to avoid labels. They're simplistic, they carry a lot of invisible baggage and connotations when people hear them, they enforce groupthink, and they tend to shut down conversation. But now, for the sake of this blog post, I'm going to have to label myself – or at least my political views.

You could call my thoughts on politics *radically libertarian*. I believe that one foundational requirement of good society is that no one should violate the person, liberty, or property of another. To understate things a tad, this puts me at odds with governments in general. Groups of people who routinely make themselves exceptions to the rules of justice are not my cup of tea.

All this is true, and yet somehow my current favorite television show is *Victoria*.

Here I am, a radical libertarian, enjoying a show whose protagonist is the monarch of one of the world's brutal and oppressive empires. How do I square that circle?

It has nothing to do with some secret libertarian message in the show. This post won't be about political philosophy at all but about human understanding.

Let's leave aside that *Victoria* is a stunning show. The performances of actors like Jenna Coleman and Rufus Sewell make you want to cheer. The set pieces are beautiful and detailed. If the writing misses any beats, I hardly notice it. This show – another Masterpiece Theatre production – may be a worthy successor to *Downton Abbey*. Any history fan could love to travel back in time with the show producers. These are all reasons enough to love a work of art, but they don't explain why I can set aside my own convictions about politics to relate to the young Victoria as a protagonist of a story.

It's the insight into human nature which makes this show really valuable for me. Through a drama like this I can come to see my supposed philosophical enemy – a British monarch – as a sympathetic young person who is not very different from me after all. She has to overcome the challenges of being a young leader, getting out of the shadow of those who would control her, and learning the hard lessons of the real world just like anyone else. She has to learn how to do the right thing instead of following her wishes. She has give up on love and then give love to someone else.

Over time and through many stories and many histories I've come to learn that people aren't all that different across time, cultures, and positions. They don't change very much either. All of that means that, however much I might not like to admit it, I might have

something to learn from someone like Queen Victoria. Her struggles took a different form and different conditions, but they aren't separate from the main thread of human life.

Understanding how Victoria acts in the face of those struggles helps me think in new, creative, and more ethical ways about how I can face my own struggles. It's a kind of stretching or exercise of my moral compass. **As I've written before, this is for me the main practical value of fiction.**

Beyond just the entertainment value I get from them, this is one reason I watch *Game of Thrones* episodes. In my life I don't give a damn who sits on the Iron Throne, and I would laugh if someone told me I owed fealty to some feudal lord. But in the world of *Game of Thrones*, I root for the young Robb Stark to win because he's the King of the North, by the gods (the old and the new!), and he's going to be a *right proper* ruler. Again, this makes no sense with my actual political philosophy. But there's a reason I like Robb and a reason I like *Game of Thrones*. In Robb's struggle and the struggles of other characters like Tyrion, Jon, and Daenerys, I see the universal human battles.

The story is the same with war movies. I don't believe in violence except in self-defense, and even then things are pretty gray. I am against every war that has ever happened for that reason (despite whitewashing, you don't have to dig far to find aggression on either side). Yet I frequently watch war movies or shows like *Band of Brothers* or *Generation War*. I do it for a same reason I like watching *Victoria* or *Game of Thrones*: I want to understand what human beings are and can be like in all circumstances, including the very worst. The imagination of the experience of war somehow makes me better able to appreciate a reality that I hope I never have to experience firsthand. Perhaps by experiencing something like war secondhand I'll become wise enough to prevent it from coming any closer.

So clearly it's possible in art to suspend your own inclinations to cheer for a protagonist you might not even shake hands with in real life. But it may even be a requirement. Because if you fail to put yourself in the shoes of people like you and yet not like you, you might miss the grand sweeping sight of what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn called "the battleline between good and evil [that] runs through the heart of every man." The moment when you realize that it's there for everyone – that's when the beauty really starts to kick in.

I realize at the end of the day that with a few chance changes, I might have been living any of these lives. I might have been someone in a situation not unlike Victoria's, or Jon Snow's, or Major Dick Winters'. I like to think that by understanding their lives, experiencing their lives, and imagining their lives, I can come to understand the threads and struggles that tie all human lives together. I want to understand how to be good, true, and beautiful in all times and all places and yes – all people.

This is what good storytelling will call you to do, even if you are a radical libertarian and

you're stuck bingewatching a PBS show about Queen Victoria.