



## Message from the President

# A Cool Drink

**M**oments after receiving the letter accepting my proposal for my first PCAS/ACAS conference, I ran into a favorite graduate professor and told him the news. My paper would be a trial balloon of sorts for the idea I was considering for my dissertation, and I was more than a little excited that someone, somewhere—some PROGRAM CHAIR!—had found the topic worthwhile.

“Popular Culture?” he questioned, pronouncing each word crisply.

“Yes,” I said. A regional association of the national group. Their conference is in Birmingham this year.”

“But *popular culture*?” he repeated, flattening his pitch to register his distaste for the concept plainly. “Rob, isn’t that something of an oxymoron?”

Caught off guard and a little wounded by the judgment embedded in the tone and content of my professor’s question, I flushed quickly and tried to muster a sensible response. But as words

failed me, and as the air in the hallway began to feel stuffier than usual, I retreated into nervous laughter as I backed my way towards a door that would lead me out of the building.

In the thirteen years since that moment, I have told the story of the “professional” reception of my affiliation with PCAS/ACAS many times—even to the professor who asked that slightly cynical but, I later realized, utterly provocative question. I like the story because it reminds me of the reason that I began my association with this organization, and why I have kept it up even as I have happily let others (the MLA being a notable recent example) lapse without remorse.

PCAS/ACAS is an organization of enthusiasts. Our conference is a place where inquisitive scholars, devoted teachers, and even serious students get to pursue topics out of passion: ideas that that intrigue, obsess, or vex us. It’s a place where the literature scholar can study foodways,

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## Sea Turtle Inn hosts conference

The 33rd annual Popular Culture/American Culture in the South 2003 Conference will be held at the popular Sea Turtle Inn, Atlantic Beach (Jacksonville) Florida, October 2-4, 2003. The abstract deadline is May 30, 2003.

Papers, discussion panels, performances, and presentations on any aspect of popular culture or American culture in the South are invited. The conference is a joint meeting of the Popular Culture Association in the South and the American Culture Association in the South.

The conference welcomes a broad range of topics. Papers are limited to a maximum reading time of twenty minutes.

Graduate students are invited to submit papers. In order for students to compete for the annual awards given to outstanding graduate student papers, they must identify themselves as students on their abstracts, submit a sponsoring faculty member’s phone number and email address, and supply three copies of their papers to the Executive Secretary no later than September 10, 2003.

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## Book Reviews

***The Greenwood Guide to American Popular Culture*, Edited by M. Thomas Inge and Dennis Hall. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002.**

This four-volume “revision, expansion, and modification of the reference work formerly known as the *Handbook of American Popular Culture*” is a superb collection of articles on most of the major forms of popular culture. It ranges across the fields of popular culture from “Almanacs” to “Young Adult Fiction.” Probably the editors thought of including an entry on “Zoos” but couldn’t find a Marlin Perkins to write it. Even though this guide doesn’t take us all the way to Z, it does a marvelous job with all of its entries.

This *Guide* is also an excellent showcase of the sorts of intellectual work that members of the PCAS/ACAS do. Its editors, M. Thomas Inge and Dennis Hall, are both past presidents and long-time active members of PCAS/ACAS. Other active members of PCAS/ACAS who have contributed to the *Guide* that I recognize are Michael Dunne, who contributes the chapter on the study of popular culture; William Klink, who is co-author of the article on automobiles; Lucy Rollin, who is co-author of the article on children’s literature; the late Elizabeth Bell, who is author of the article on do-it-yourself home repairs and remodeling. Robert Holzclaw co-authors the film article; Sara Lewis Dunne authors the article on “foodways”; David

Fillingim writes on “self-help and popular religion”; Rhonda Wilcox on television; Tom Inge on comics; and Dennis Hall on museums and collecting. There may be other members of PCAS/ACAS that I have missed, and, if so, I apologize to them; but clearly this *Guide* is a fine representation of the organization and should be promoted by it.

In his “Introduction,” which appeared in the *Handbook*’s second edition and “is retained for historical interest,” Inge addresses the issue of why study popular culture and provides a number of definitions of popular culture, concluding with his own: “popular culture is what we do by choice to engage our minds and our bodies when we are not working or sleeping.” He also takes up the debate concerning “high” and “low” cultures and resolves that “there are no distinctions between what we call high culture and popular culture.... What we have is simply American culture.” Does this mean that perhaps we should change the name of our organization to simply “American Culture Association in the South”?

Michael Dunne opens the *Guide* with an essay on the study of popular culture that is elegantly self-reflexive: “I engage,” he says, “in the study of popular culture even as I attempt to define it through examples.” He explores film, music, print media, television, and the theorists, beginning with Gilbert Seldes’ *The 7 Lively Arts*, and progressing through T.S. Eliot, Dwight Macdonald, Herbert Marcuse, Susan Sontag, Ray Browne and Russel B. Nye, Molly Haskell, Emily Toth, Greil Marcus, John G. Cawelti, Leslie Fiedler,

Henry Nash Smith, Richard Slotkin, Jane Tompkins, and, of course, the French such as Roland Barth, and the Russians, especially Bakhtin.

Each of the individual chapters follows a similar format: a chronological survey of the medium or topic, followed by a critical guide of the standard and the most useful reference and critical works, and concluding with a description of existing research centers and collections of primary and secondary sources. In others words, each chapter is a guide to the subject and the research devoted to it.

As there are 58 different topics that average a little over 30 pages per chapter, I am not going to critique any one of them. Their focus, despite some attention to history, is mostly on the popular culture of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, which seems the right emphasis. Some of the chapter topics are surprising. I hadn’t realized, despite

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## PCAS NEWSLETTER

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*The Farmer's Almanac*, that almanacs were all that popular, or "Big Little Books." Many of the chapters are on the print media, but then Americans do read a lot, don't they? Still, there is no way that the editors could have gotten everything that constitutes American popular culture into the *Guide*. As it is, there is plenty here for nearly everyone.

I really only have one complaint about the four volumes and that has to do with the index. Although it is over 250 pages long, if you are looking for a particular popular culture item such as hula hoops or an activity such as horse racing, as I was, you won't find either in the index, but you'll find a photograph of people playing with hula hoops on the cover of volume two, and you will find horse racing discussed in the chapter on sports, though the coverage of that item seemed skimpy at best.

Enough of the complaints. Every library in the United States ought to have a copy of *The Greenwood Guide to American Popular Culture*; it is that useful. When you see Tom Inge and Dennis Hall at the PCAS/ACAS meeting in Atlantic Beach this fall congratulate them on a job well done.

Larry Vonalt  
University of Missouri-Rolla

If you are interested in contributing a book review, or if you have recently published a book or an article in a book relating to popular/American culture, please contact Shelley Aley at the following email address:  
aleysb@jmu.edu

***This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos.* Edited by David Lavery. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.**

I have seen most episodes of *The Sopranos*, and I have frequently wondered why I am drawn to it. The series does, as many complain, promote Italian-American stereotypes, and the characters are, as many also complain, extremely brutal, crude, racist, and sexist. Perhaps its pull is something like that of road kill: As we approach it, we can't help but look.

However, road-kill-compulsion viewing can lead to simplistic assessments as to whether or not the series is good or bad for our society, and many cultural critics have taken that route. Fortunately, the essays in *This Thing of Ours* avoid facile value judgments. Instead, they offer insightful critiques of *The Sopranos* for its cultural influence and intertextuality. For example, in her essay, "Our Mobsters, Ourselves," Ellen Willis finds the series to be "a meditation on the nature of morality, the possibility of redemption, and the legacy of Freud" (2). The series, Willis contends, problematizes the recent conservative trend toward "reinstating an essentially religious vocabulary of absolute good and evil as the only legitimate framework for discussing social values" (5). Whereas the gangsters' violence can be labeled "evil," it "is impelled by positive virtues—loyalty, respect, friendship, and willingness to put one's life on the line"—thus "'moral relativism' is simply moral complexity" (4). While viewing *The Sopranos*, we experience this complexity through our repulsion at protagonist

Tony Soprano's violence when he's "working" and our sense of connection with him when he struggles to maintain his marriage and raise his children.

Like Willis's essay, Albert Auster's "*The Sopranos: The Gangster Redux*" also touches on the moral complexity of the series. "No matter how appealing Tony is," says Auster, "and as played by the hulking, bearlike [James] Gandolfini, he is certainly that, there is a moral dimension to his actions that can't be ignored" (13). Yet our assessment of Tony's morality is constantly in flux, as we see in one episode when Tony, while accompanying his daughter, Meadow (her name alone complicates our response to Tony), on a college tour, "stumbles across a Mafia informer in the witness protection program and brutally garrotes him" (13). Willis's and Auster's essays are necessary reading for series fans and for those unfamiliar with the series, because their summarizing aspects provide background for the theoretically specific approaches in the sixteen essays following them, far more essays, unfortunately, than can be reviewed in this space.

Within the section titled "The Media Context," David Lavery's and Robert J. Thompson's "David Chase, *The Sopranos*, and Television Creativity" explores series creator David Chase's late-career success in television and the cultural critique he provides via the series. In "Way North of New Jersey: A Canadian Experience of *The Sopranos*," Dawn Elizabeth B. Johnston analyzes ways in which the series "challenges conventions of Canadian television in a way that

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[Canadian] viewers have rarely—if ever—seen before” (41); and in a related essay, “One for the Boys? *The Sopranos* and Its Male, British Audience,” Joanne Lacey “sets out to explore what makes *The Sopranos* appealing to a male audience” (95). Lacey, through an ethnography of male responses to the series, “identified a number of key areas of interest that emerged across interviews. These [areas] relate to men’s relationships to dramatic structures on television, questions of fantasy and identification and the negotiation in daily life of the structures of work, family, and leisure” (107). Also, Johnston’s and Lacey’s essays provide United States’ readers of *This Thing of Ours* with informative perspectives on the series from viewers outside the United States.

While many of the essays touch upon the cultural functions, and transgressions, of the female characters, two essays do so exclusively. Kim Akass and Janet Macabe (“Beyond the Bada Bing!: Negotiating Female Narrative Authority in *The Sopranos*”) explore how the series’ “complex women come to guide, reshape, and reorder, for better or worse, the complicated narrative world of Tony Soprano brought to television” (148). Focusing on Tony’s wife, Carmela, and his psychiatrist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, Akass and Macabe demonstrate that, whereas “Tony is [certainly] the center of the narrative,” the narrative space carved out, often through silence, by the female characters makes him “uneasy about this position” (160); this is an uneasiness viewers would

not expect to see expressed by the character Michael Corleone in relation to his wife, Kay, in *The Godfather* movies.

In “‘I Dread You’?: Married to the Mob in *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and *The Sopranos*,” Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward discuss the evolving roles of female characters in the Mafia movie and television genres. In contrast with *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*, *The Sopranos* depicts women with significantly more agency, at least in domestic space. In earlier expressions of the genre, Mafia bosses completely control the spaces they enter, such as “Don Corleone’s study or Las Vegas hotels” (64), and they seldom enter domestic spaces. Tony Soprano, however, “cannot distance himself from a very 1990s domestic exurbia in which he hangs around the house for a good part of the day” reading the paper, watching TV, and snacking as his wife “watches him with alternating tenderness and disgust” (64). Tony, as noted above, even has a female psychiatrist who prescribes Prozac for his depression—one can’t imagine Michael Corleone visiting a psychiatrist, taking Prozac, or answering to his wife. Conversely, Tony, much to his frustration, does have to answer to the women in his life—“they all break my balls” (qtd. in Donatelli and Alward 65); however, he still maintains, and exercises, the power to rein in their transgressions. What makes female characters in *The Sopranos* different from female characters in past iterations of the genre is not that they have more equality, but that they have more ability to influence the actions of the still strongly patriarchal male characters than their earlier counter-

parts. If these two essays have a fault, it is that their authors overestimate female power in relation to those earlier counterparts. Tony would never strike Carmela or Dr. Melfi (though he would have Melfi killed if, for example, she turned FBI informant), but he does emotionally brutalize them. However, as even infrequent viewers can’t help but notice, virtually all the other female characters, including the wives and girlfriends of “made men,” risk and often receive both emotional and physical abuse for transgressing women’s traditional roles.

Readers of *This Thing of Ours*, especially those who seldom or never watch *The Sopranos*, will gain an understanding of the diverse ways in which the series now permeates our cultural conversations. And while it may seem strange to mention an appendix in a book review, Appendix C (“Intertextual Moments and Allusions in *The Sopranos*”) demonstrates how culture permeates the series. Perhaps this appendix should be the non-viewers first stop, for the eighteen-page list of intertextual allusions is informative and often surprising. The list includes Albert Camus, Carlos Castaneda, and Kurt Cobain; Martin Heidegger, *Hogan’s Heroes*, and Edmund Husserl; Dale Evans, *Gilligan’s Island*, and Gunga Din (correctly alluded to in a complex metaphor by Tony’s mother, Livia). My personal favorite, for its Coleridge reference and its wonderful malapropism, is when Tony’s father, John, calls his wife, Livia, a “fucking albacore around my neck.”

If they do nothing else, the essays in *This Thing of Ours*

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demonstrate the deep interlacing of popular culture and *The Sopranos*. For critical readers and viewers, this book and the series open possibilities for both moral and cultural contemplations and critiques. For road-kill-compulsion viewers, *This Thing of Ours* offers reasons to keep on rubbernecking.

**Kenneth R. Wright**  
**James Madison University**

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where the sociologist may contemplate the visual arts, where the historian might explicate music, where communications specialists test theories not in laboratories but in analyses of the so-called Real World.

The people who attend our

conference deplore boxes. We defy merely academic specialties, and we do so proudly, believing there is no reasonably asked question that is beyond, beneath, or above us. We are academic democracy in action. We like space—room to permit thoughtful speculation about artifacts and phenomena that matter. In deciding what topics to propose for our presentations each year, we relish the conventional clash of terms like *popular* and *culture*. We take inspiration from the ambiguity and imprecision of a phrase like *American culture*.

In October 2003, our conference convenes again in what is certainly one of its most gorgeous locations: Jacksonville Beach, Florida. As I write this, our beachfront conference hotel, the Sea Turtle, has just been featured in an inviting story in *Southern Living*. The story reviews the

shopping (from bookstores to home furnishings), the art galleries, the bars and restaurants, the beach community, the \$6.5 million dollar renovation of the “sparkling” Sea Turtle itself.

All of this sounds like a cool drink. And that is what PCAS/ACAS is to me each October—a restorative. It’s not a conference I have to attend. It’s one I always *want* to attend, because of the fine people and the amazing energy and interplay between seriousness and adventure that characterize our program every year.

So, a fall academic conference, treating popular and/or American culture, on the sunny coast of Florida? Implausible? Possibly oxymoronic, even? Perhaps. But bring the doubters with you. I’ll see you all at the beach.

**Robert L. McDonald**  
**Virginia Military Institute**

**2002 Conference Highlights**

Co-Chairs Elizabeth Cummins and Larry Vonalt (pictured below) hosted the 32nd annual PCAS/ACAS



conference in Charlotte, NC, Oct. 3-5, at the Hyatt Charlotte.

The 2002 winner of

the Ray and Pat Brown Award for the best student paper presented at the PCAS is Jennifer Dickey.

The title of her paper is “Death Takes a Holiday: Celebrating Elvis with Light in August.”

This award is named for the couple instrumental in the founding

of the Popular Culture and American Culture associations.

The winner of the Roger Rollin Award for the best student paper presented at the 2002 meeting of the ACAS is James Hare (pictured below)



for his paper “Bin Laden vs. Bush: A Dramatistic Perspective.”

This award is named for a former president of both PCAS and ACA.

The winner of the *Studies in Popular Culture* Whatley Award is Dennis Hall for his essay titled

“Modern and Postmodern Wedding Planners: Emily Post’s *Etiquette in Society*



(1937) and Blum & Kaiser’s *Wedding for Dummies* (1997).”

Linda Rohrer Paige (pictured above with a copy of the journal) is the new editor of *Studies in American Culture* following the death of former editor Liz Bell.

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150 words, and requests for audio-visual equipment to one of the PCAS/ACAS Program Chairs: Mary Alice Money or Rhonda V. Wilcox; Humanities Division; Gordon College; 419 College Dr.; Barnesville, GA, 30204.

For online submission, go to the organizations' website, <http://www.pcasacas.org>.

Those submitting abstracts may ask to be considered for inclusion in the Liz Bell Special Session on Gender and American Culture.

Participants are invited to submit completed papers for consideration by the associations' journals, *Studies in Popular Culture* and *Studies in American Culture*.

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