

TV BOOK REVIEW

A MARTIAN WOULDN'T SAY THAT By Leonard B. Stern & Diane L. Robison

By Mike Peck

To: Aspiring TV writers
From: Michael Peck, Reviewer
Re: The care and feeding of network execs

Consider the plight of the network executive. No, he didn't consider you when he cancelled *Farscape* or *Firefly*, but humor me, will you?.

He's worked his way up from the assistant level or worked his way in from accounting. He's said the right things in all the meetings, laughed at the right jokes at the holiday parties, and finally gotten a plum parking spot. No small feats, those. But now that he's landed the job, he actually has to *do* it, which means figuring out what will keep us in front of our TVs long enough to justify the rates he's charging his advertisers.

Consider, but by all means don't pity him. After all, he wrote the memos featured in Leonard B. Stern and Diane L. Robison's *A Martian Wouldn't Say That!!!* (Tallfellow Press). And if you want in on this business, you're doing to spend your days and nights making him happy; when you don't, you'll be reading his thoughts on why.

Should you attain your dream, aspiring TV scribes, you, too, will be the recipient of notes: suggestions and outright commands to "improve" your work. That's one of the rules of this world. When you're in a falling elevator, you can't save yourself by jumping up just before it hits bottom. You can't write a check for a million dollars if you don't have it in your account. And you can't make TV without notes from the network.

Now, to be fair, there have been reams of helpful, creative and well-reasoned dispatches from talented executives who manage to add something to the mix. That's another book.

Think you're safe because your main character's an alien, so no one could possibly challenge the integrity of your portrayal? Wrong! Hence the title, which is a direct quote from a network vice president to the producers of *My Favorite Martian*. Someone at the network is paid to know — or convince his boss he does — and to make sure you don't get it wrong.

Working from a classic? So was David Wolper when putting together a miniseries based on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Yet that didn't stop the memo from the development executive asking him if he thought the story would hold up.

Even when you've managed to please the right person, he has to turn around and please *his* right people, just like the exec who wrote this gem: "In my opinion, a funny script, subject to the consensus of our comedy group."

Which is the whole point. Your work is not funny or worthwhile until the next person up the line says it is. Then the critics and the Nielsen families weigh in. It's the nature of collaboration, friends, from writer to audience, and if you're going to go anywhere in Hollywood, get used to the feedback now.

Which is where this little tome comes in handy. Other books tell you what it's like to be in the thick of the industry via pages of personal experience. Nothing wrong with that. *Martian* and its unwitting contributors manage to do it in an 80-page read. Pick an issue: Devotion to quality? One exec praises a submitted script, then admits that it doesn't pass muster because all he's buying this year is crap. Age discrimination? One memo denies that it exists, pointing out that many of the writers employed by this particular operation are in their *late 30s*. Integrity of the message? One VP notes that you can't buy a BMW with a message.

And so it goes. Just as *The Elements of Style* is "the good book" of overall writing, let this be the good book of the TV subset whenever you need to be reminded what you're getting yourself into. ("This is the best script of the *The Addams Family* we've read in a year," wrote one happy suit. "Attached are the notes for the rewrite.")

My Favorite Martian's Uncle Martin was from Mars. But here is the proof, in black and white, that some executives may well be, too.