

## MEDIA REVIEW: TELEVISION

### E.R. Why is it One of the Top Rated Shows in the Country?

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By Barbara St. Clair  
Continental Cablevision

E.R. ended the 1995 viewing season not only as the highest rated new television program in the country but as one of the highest rated programs on network television. Its season finale was softened a bit from most of the earlier episodes. There were no teenagers with their chests blown open in gang shootings, no young victims of child abuse and like many other TV season finales, it had a wedding.

But in typical E.R. fashion, even this softer hour had its sharp edges. A mother decided to forego an operation that would have postponed the death of her AIDS' stricken son. Dr. Lewis' troubled sister, Chloe, seemingly abandoned her baby. The wedding of nurse Carol Hathaway was canceled after Yuppie doctor "Tag" left his wedding-dressed bride and her guests at the altar.

Sound like a soap opera? It is. But with a twist. Unlike its day (and night) time counterparts, E.R. is peopled with men and women who are united, if not at times consumed, by their burning desire to help others. In every episode the doctors and nurses of E.R. reach across the expanse of illness and anger. They reach across the demilitarized zone of tragedy, indifference, misunderstanding and many, many times they reach across the actual boundaries of the human body

to repair, rebuild, provide succor, sustenance, wisdom and often love to the human beings who need them.

What's more, these helping professionals aren't in it for the money. The screen writers have made it a point and sometimes built an entire episode around letting the audience know that E.R. residents earn somewhere in the twenty or thirty thousand dollar range.

They carry thousands of dollars of student loans. The live in hovels like the wretched bungalow under the Chicago elevated train that Chief resident, "Dr. Green," used to share with his wife and daughter before they were separated. Nor do they have much in common with Marcus Welby or their other TV medical predecessors. They are neurotic. Sometimes mean-spirited. Incommunicative. Self-destructive. Careless. They have lousy marriages. Crazy sisters. Trouble with intimacy. They sleep around, have inflated egos and are experts in the art of self-sabotage.

In short, they are just like the rest of us in the nineties. Foolish. Overwhelmed. Struggling to keep their heads above water, do their jobs, take care of their families. Maybe that's why we like them so much. They are far from perfect and their struggles and pains are familiar. Compare E.R. to Chicago Hope, the CBS vehicle that was



supposed to clean E.R.'s clock.

With Mandy Patinkin and Adam Arkin, Chicago Hope had a heavy cast and heavy story lines. Patinkin as Dr. Jeffrey Geiger implanting a baboon heart in a dying man. Arkin's Dr. Aaron Shutt nearly freezing a man's blood to do brain surgery. In between their horrendously technical and alienatingly massive operations on patients the audience seldom got to know, we learned all about their middle age angst and about the sexual escapades and traumas of the people around them.

Yawn.

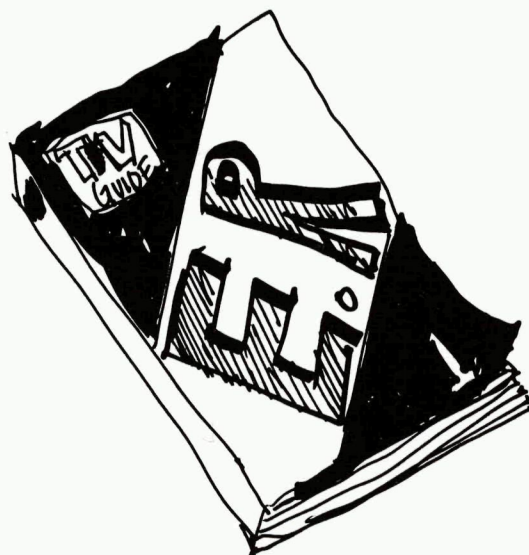
If that explains why E.R. has a larger audience share than Chicago Hope it still doesn't answer just why E.R. is and has been so popular from New York City to Peoria.

The nation's Heartland is where TV shows earn their ratings. When advertisers buy an audience it's a pure numbers game. The more eyeballs on the TV set, the more money the network can earn on that 30 second bit of air time it has to sell. Only shows that play in the nation's great middle (both geographic and economic) can arrive and then stay at the top of the ratings heap and command top dollar.

If the Heartland is watching, the Nielsen numbers are high and so is the price to be there. When the numbers are low time gets sold at a discount. It's true that shows like Hill Street Blues and L.A. Law made it big going after that vaunted

"25 - 49" urban audience. In fact, that is the exact audience critic's and TV analysts expected E.R. to win. It also explains why for weeks after it started blasting to the top of the ratings charts, E.R. was described as a "surprise hit."

Truly E.R.'s popularity is a surprise. Conventional wisdom suggests it's urban Chicago setting, ethnic diversity, young characters, gritty story lines and "in your face" would be more



likely to drive middle Americans away from the TV set then to pull them in. Middle America doesn't like big cities, with big city problems. It is uncomfortable with diversity, doesn't trust young people and doesn't have much sympathy for the gritty reality of American life.

Middle Americans also voted in the Republican Revolution. Now, with their support, those same Republicans are rewriting national law and gunning for the Constitution.

Under Speaker Newt

Gingrich, the newly Republican congress is gutting welfare, education, arts, job-training, Medi-care, slashing benefits for immigrants (both legal and illegal) and emasculating programs that help those in real need.

In the Heartland, the people seem to be saying "about time." This is where E.R.'s overwhelming popularity becomes interesting. How is it that the same people who voted so conservatively in the last election — who seem ready to abandon children, single parents, the mentally ill, the elderly, the under-educated, the struggling, the hurting — how is it that these same people love E.R.?

The answer brings it full circle. E.R. is about people who are devoted to helping others. When the E.R. doctors are helping patients they are transformed by their work. Transformed as in transcendent. They are saving others and they are saving themselves.

The United States is a nation built upon the ideal of transcendence. By engaging in concrete and productive activity in your own life, said our founding father's you can create a new republic. By marrying rugged individualism to the notion of the common good you create a democracy.

The message of E.R.'s popularity is that these founding ideals and principals have a resonance for Americans even today. Somewhere outside the anger, alienation and blame that have been poisoning political

discourse, is the knowledge that as a people we are capable of something better. That something more is required.



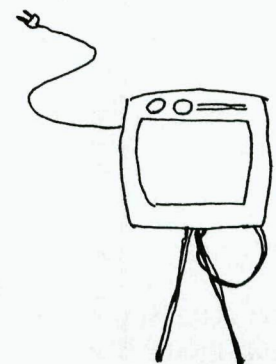
in the Windy City, is the most loved and respected network television program in the nation.

Maybe for people in the helping professions and for those who have a vision of America where the sick and the injured, the young, the dependent, the hurt, the people in need are taken care of by individuals who believe in what they are doing, E.R. offers some Chicago hope after all. □

This belief is as strong (if not stronger) and it has been with us just as long (if not longer) than our attraction to conformity, our comfort in the notion "one nation under God," the appeal of "family values," the allure of "protecting unborn life," and the temptation that the only "right" expression of sexual love is that between a man and a woman.

If Newt Gingrich and his supporters represent the base and narrow side of the American psyche, than E.R. may represent the transcendent and idealistic side of our culture. Both notions are very popular. Both are within us and within our nation, from its very beginnings and in its founding documents. Both sets of values have been at war a long time.

Today with the number of people in poverty, with our new technologies and a changing world economy, the stakes of that war are higher than before. There is reason to worry. Perhaps there is reason for faith as well. E.R., which ostensibly takes place in an urban hospital



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