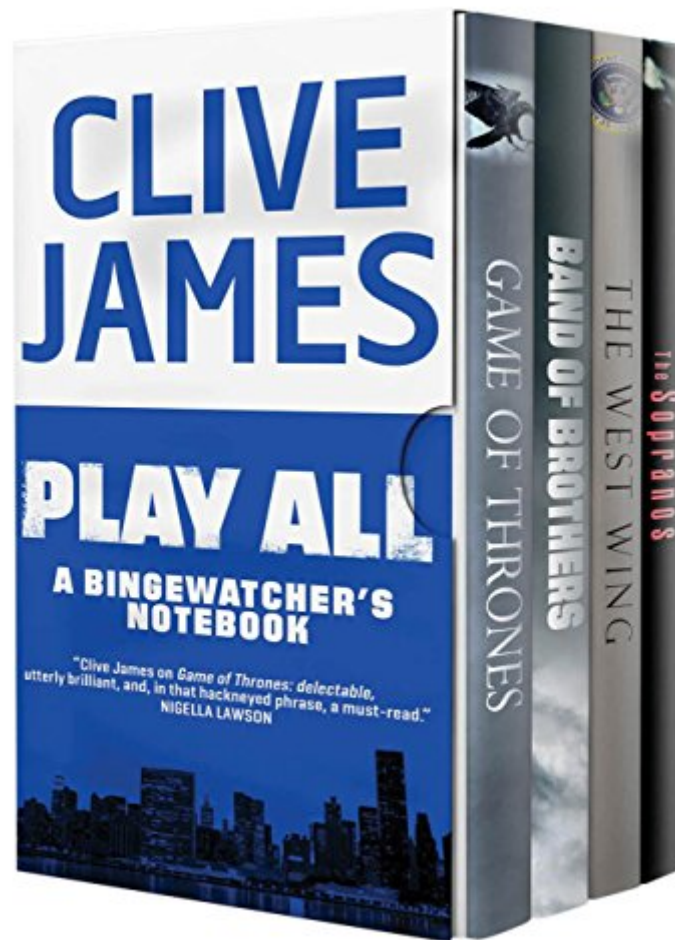


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# Play All: A Bingewatcher's Notebook



## Synopsis

Television and TV viewing are not what they once were—and that’s a good thing, according to award-winning author and critic Clive James. Since serving as television columnist for the London Observer from 1972 to 1982, James has witnessed a radical change in content, format, and programming, and in the very manner in which TV is watched. Here he examines this unique cultural revolution, providing a brilliant, eminently entertaining analysis of many of the medium’s most notable twenty-first-century accomplishments and their not always subtle impact on modern society—including such acclaimed serial dramas as *Breaking Bad*, *The West Wing*, *Mad Men*, and *The Sopranos*, as well as the comedy *30 Rock*. With intelligence and wit, James explores a television landscape expanded by cable and broadband and profoundly altered by the advent of Netflix, , and other record-cutting platforms that have helped to usher in a golden age of unabashed binge-watching.

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## Customer Reviews

I am embarrassed to say that I had not read anything by Clive James before picking up this volume about bingewatching TV. I instantly felt that here was a kindred soul, someone who like me was

intellectually inclined, splitting time between reading the great works of literature and classic films, but also delving keeply into many of the many long story arc TV series of recent years, what in Britain is known as long-form TV, as opposed to short-form, which we in the US call episodic TV. The few things that I have published have almost all dealt with narrative television, about what makes even an average series like THE OC or SMALLVILLE suck you end, as well as the great shows in the genre, like BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER, BATTLESTAR GALACTICA, FARSCAPE, THE SOPRANOS, GILMORE GIRLS, and many, many others. I've been a film buff most of my life, but I've been overwhelmed by the long, complex, and compelling stories that narrative television can achieve. A film typically has 120 minutes to develop a character, while a 22 episode TV series has over 920 minutes a season, so that a show like has six full seasons of 920 minutes along with a first season of just over 550. No film can compete with this in exploring every aspect of character. I don't see eye-to-eye with James on all the shows he writes about, but after reading this I believe I'll see many of the shows that I watch in a new light. Most of the shows James writes about I did not bingewatch, but viewed each week as they came out. But there are few things more engrossing than binging on a new show. Just last week I watched the second half of GOTHAM and all of the new series MR.

One of this book's core theses is one i've harbored for a while, that long-form TV (which is to say, multi-season series that build from episode to episode rather than having each stand alone) fills a role in society now that was once filled by Great Novels. They provide a common experience that can be discussed at the water cooler (do companies even have water coolers anymore?), the gym, the dinner table. They provide a view of life that may or may not be accurate, that may or may not match the viewer's real-life circumstances, but provide a comparison and starting point for discussion regardless. Where once the literati sat in salons discussing the works of Shelley or Tolstoy or Shakespeare, now the viewerati (apologies) dissect every aspect of Walking Dead or The Sopranos on internet fora. I have to admit, i watched TV much for years and hasn't binge-watched anything since Stargate: Universe went off the air. Huge swathes of this book are foreign to me. I've never seen a single episode of the Sopranos, or Band of Brothers. I have, however, watched a great deal of other shows mentioned or focused on, like West Wing and Battlestar Galactica. This left me in an interesting place. For example, when the author discusses the relationship between Dr. Melfi and Tony after Melfi's assault, he suggests Melfi feels 'attraction' to Tony due to his alpha male status. Since i know only what the author tells me about the relationship between these two, i'm left in yet a third space: not the character, not the viewer, but the observer of the viewer. The

author is, it seems based on his name, male. As a not-male person, I find myself dissecting the author's dissection of this dynamic.

Clive James has spent his career as a cultural critic and public wit, providing an insightful perspective on the world of the arts (and beyond) from London and Australia. Suffering through various ailments allowed him the opportunity to experience the glories of the "boxed set" of DVDs that contain entire seasons of TV shows. "Play All" serves as a compilation of his critical takes on the self-proclaimed Golden Age of Television, including most of HBO's most acclaimed library while also spending time with shows such as "Breaking Bad," "Mad Men," "Justified," and even "The West Wing," a rare treat from the wheezing traditional networks. Reading a book of criticism that is focused on accessible pop culture is a dangerous thing. When written by lesser writers, your enjoyment is often limited to the degree of the critic's agreement with your opinions. You don't learn much, but if the critic generally supports your views, it's comforting if not edifying. Other critics simply rage against everything - if I read one more review of Peter Jackson's Tolkien films that includes the phrase, "Jackson doesn't know the first thing about . . ." I will scream. (If you know so much more than Peter Jackson, why are you denying the world your artistic genius by playing the critic? Get out there and make art? Or are you afraid of pulling a Roger Ebert and having to endure the shame of having created "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls" for the rest of your life? End sidebar.) James falls into neither camp.

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