Downton Abbey

reviewed by Jason Byassee in the May 16, 2012 issue

“I’ve been telling everyone who’ll listen how great *Downton Abbey* is,” I said in a sermon that was technically about evangelism. I was illustrating St. Augustine’s point that when people love, say, a great actor they tell others about him—and so how much more should we tell others about the gospel. A week later I learned how (un)successful that point had been.

“I’ve watched every episode,” a parishioner said. “Now what was it you were trying to say about that show?”

Maybe just that it’s really, really good. The TV series made in Great Britain, which completed its second season this winter, has been a hit around the world. A third season is in production and talk about a fourth is under way. All this attention is being showered on a costume drama (the series is set in the era of World War I), which usually appeals only to stodgy, BBC-watching nerds. In the ultimate sign of pop culture respect, *Saturday Night Live* spoofed the show.

Cool aside, the show has some high-brow cred: *Slate* ran a series of eight essays, one after each episode during season two. Like Thomists arguing over fine points of the text, the critics pulled every episode apart with questions ranging from historical

(“Did World War I soldiers really get as much leave as these characters do?”) to ad hominem (“Is Lord Grantham really as awesome as he thinks he is?”).

Downton, it must be said, is a soap opera. It follows an aristocratic family named the Granthams, which includes a dowager countess (played brilliantly by Dame Maggie Smith); the head of the family, Lord Grantham; and his three unmarried daughters. You may have already detected the key plot device—Grantham has no sons to inherit his title and estate.

The first episode opens with a dramatic portrayal of the Grantham family learning about the sinking of the *Titanic*. The tragedy touches this family more deeply than most, for two male cousins were on board. The inheritance thus passes to a distant and far less aristocratic cousin, Matthew Crawley, who suffers the indignity of actually having to work for a living (as a lawyer). *Downton* works partly as a shipwreck in slow motion. It shows a way of life that is passing away.

The show switches between those who live in luxury upstairs at Downton Abbey and the servants who work downstairs. Julian Fellowes (a Tory member of Parliament) wrote an earlier movie with similar themes called *Gosford Park*. In the case of *Downton*, the life upstairs is less eventful than the one downstairs, where footmen betray one another in an effort to become valets and servants fall in love with one another.

Sometimes the lightweight themes thicken into a meatier morality play, with the downstairs servants much more interesting than the whiny ladies and lords upstairs who are unable to dress or feed themselves. Two of the best downstairs characters are Thomas, a footman so keen to be a valet he’ll trip a disabled fellow servant to humiliate him, and Mrs. O’Brien, a maid not above hurting her ladyship to get revenge for a slight. The two cravenly plot together at least once an episode. The show is unafraid to say “Behold your villains!” as loudly as it acclaims its heroes. These downstairs dramas are the show’s genius. Great as Jane Austen is, how often does she show us the interior lives of servants?

Upstairs the soap opera revolves around Lady Mary, the eldest daughter, who falls into a one-night stand that could ruin her and her family’s name. She becomes engaged to a particularly sordid newspaper man—think Rupert Murdoch, slightly younger and handsomer—who can protect her. Matthew, who is due to inherit the house and title, comes back paralyzed from World War I and has to tell his fiancée,

“We can never be married. Not properly.” This is an age when a key social issue was the presence or absence of a male heir, but an engaged couple could not talk directly about sexual dysfunction.

One of the best elements of *Downton* is that it shows moral transformations. During the war, the spoiled daughters stop being quite so bored and spiteful (willing even to ruin each other’s marriage prospects) and turn into able nurses, tending to wounded soldiers. After violently disapproving of daughter Sybil’s marriage to a commoner, Lord Grantham grudgingly accepts this innovation, humbled perhaps by his awareness of his own moral failings with one of the maids. Lady Mary changes from being an impossible drama queen (“She’s like a child—she thinks a toy will be there when she comes back for it,” her father observes as a suitor storms off) to someone who cares about the feelings of others. An image of goodness and of honor is held up in this show; many characters fly from it, while others do the hard moral work of trudging toward it.

The story line is often overpowered by the sheer style of the show, especially its rendition of details at the breathtaking Yorkshire estate (actually Highclere Castle), where servants stand when a superior enters the room and race to answer when the little bell by their name rings. When Matthew goes off to fight in France, he takes a valet. (Can’t be expected to charge in the Somme without being properly dressed, can you?)

Tensions between English and Americans play out in the series. We learn that Lord Grantham had to marry an American heiress to have enough money to keep Downton going for another generation. He gets her money, and she gets to be called Lady Cora. (Her ladyship’s American mother, played by Shirley MacLaine, is slated to appear in season three.) When the dowager countess, almost falling out of a swivel chair, asks Matthew what sort of new contraption this is, he explains, “Thomas Jefferson invented them,” indicating that it’s not so new. She responds, “Every day it’s another fight with an American.”

In some ways, the show is like the church at its worst: it plays on nostalgia for a gauzy “better” time that never really was. One the other hand, it lovingly portrays people, some dressed in jewels and some in maids’ bonnets, who struggle toward something like virtue. And that’s the only really interesting story line there ever is.