Episode Book

EPISODE #5823

Why Soap Operas Never End

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HOSTS	Corn, Herman
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BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:40 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Coronation Street debuted in 1960 to reviews predicting it would last three weeks. It has since aired nearly 12,000 episodes. Guiding Light ran for 72 years across radio and television. Unser Sandmännchen has produced over 22,000 episodes — more than anything else in television history. This episode counts the episodes, traces how a single Australian format traveled through the Netherlands into Germany, and asks the question underneath the numbers: what does a show that never owes you a conclusion actually do for the people who watch it?

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

I want to open with a confession. There is a programme I have watched exactly four times in my life, in four different years, and each time I understood everything that was happening within about ninety seconds.



Herman

That's the whole pitch, isn't it. You could have watched it three hundred times in between and it wouldn't have mattered either way.



Corn

That's what Daniel is asking about. He's got a name for it — mental chewing gum. Television that gives the brain just enough to occupy it without asking anything back. He wants the international roll call of shows that have run for absurd lengths of time, the episode counts, the formulas that let them churn out storylines forever, and then the real question underneath it, which is why any of this works on us. Whether there is something good for you in a programme that makes no demands.



Herman

And Daniel's own example of the genre's strange mercy — you could miss three hundred episodes, come back five years later, and somebody is still arguing with their neighbour about something that happened in 1987.



Corn

Which is not a bug. That's the format. But there's a real question of what you call this category before you start counting episodes, because "long-running" isn't actually the defining feature. Plenty of long shows ask a great deal of you.



Herman

Right. Something like The Wire runs for sixty episodes and demands your full attention for every one of them. Miss a scene and you're lost. So the thing that makes it a category is consequence, or the deliberate absence of it. A fixed fictional community. A rotating cast of archetypes who are more like positions than people — the busybody, the troublemaker with a good heart, the put-upon husband. And storylines that reset rather than resolve.



Herman (continued)

You can miss three hundred episodes because nothing that happens in them is load-bearing.



Corn

The characters age. The sets get new wallpaper. Nobody accumulates.



Herman

And that's the thing — a prestige drama is a story about change. These shows are a story about stasis. The whole pleasure is that the world holds still.



Corn

And the archetype for the whole thing is Coronation Street. Cobbled terraced street, fictional Weatherfield, Greater Manchester. Debuted the ninth of December, nineteen sixty. The creator, Tony Warren, built it as a largely matriarchal world — the women run the street, the men are mostly there to be managed.



Herman

The early reviews were not kind.



Corn

The early reviews were not kind, you say. How not kind?



Herman

The Daily Mirror printed that the programme was doomed from the outset, and complained there was little reality in this new serial which apparently they had to suffer twice a week. A columnist called Ken Irwin predicted it would last three weeks.



Corn

Three weeks. And where is it now?



Herman

Roughly eleven thousand nine hundred and fifty episodes. Averaging about four million viewers an episode as of last year. It became the world's longest-running TV soap opera in twenty ten, confirmed by Guinness, when As the World Turns ended and vacated the title.



Corn

So the critics lasted three weeks. The show has lasted sixty-six years. Let's count the episodes, because the numbers stop being numbers after a while.



Herman

Coronation Street hit its ten thousandth episode on the seventh of February, twenty twenty. Sixty years of it. And there is one man who has been in it since the first episode — William Roache, Ken Barlow.



Corn

Since episode one.



Herman

He is the longest-serving soap actor in the world. One count puts him at four thousand nine hundred and twenty-four episodes. For context, the population of a mid-sized town has come and gone in the time he has been standing in that pub.



Corn

What's the actual proportion there? Four thousand nine hundred episodes out of eleven thousand nine hundred?



Herman

Roughly forty percent. He has been in about four in every ten episodes ever made. Which means if you picked a random moment from the entire history of Coronation Street — any moment at all, from any decade — there's a better than one-in-three chance Ken Barlow is standing in it, saying something mildly disappointed.



Corn

And the peak audience?



Herman

Twenty-six point nine three million in March nineteen eighty-nine. To put that in proportion, a quarter of the country watched a fictional street have a bad week.



Corn

Now cross the Atlantic, because the Americans were doing this before television existed.



Herman

Guiding Light is the record-holder. It started as a radio serial on the twenty-fifth of January, nineteen thirty-seven. Moved to television on the thirtieth of June, nineteen fifty-two. Ended in September of two thousand nine. Seventy-two years in total, fifty-seven of them on television, somewhere in the region of fifteen thousand seven hundred and sixty-two television episodes. The longest-running American soap opera ever made.



Corn

It predates the medium it's remembered for. That is the part I keep circling. The form was fully formed on radio, and television just inherited the furniture.



Herman

And two American ones are still going. General Hospital, set in the fictional Port Charles, New York, around a hospital. Debuted April nineteen sixty-three. Fifteen thousand seven hundred and sixty-six episodes. It aired its fifteen thousandth on the twenty-first of June,



Herman (continued)

twenty twenty-two. Guinness lists it as the longest-running American soap opera still in production, and the third-longest-running scripted drama in the world, behind The Archers and Coronation Street.



Corn

Third. So two of the top three are British.



Herman

Two of the top three are British, which tells you something about how the form embedded here. Days of Our Lives is the other one. Roroughly fifteen thousand four hundred episodes. It ran on NBC from November nineteen sixty-five until September twenty twenty-two — fifty-seven years on the same network — and then moved to streaming on Peacock. The eleventh thousandth episode aired in two thousand and nine.



Corn

A show older than most of the people watching it, that survived the death of its own broadcast model and just quietly relocated. Now do the southern hemisphere, because I have a suspicion about it.



Herman

Neighbours. Ramsay Street, fictional Erinsborough, Melbourne. Nine thousand three hundred and sixty-three episodes. Created by Reg Watson, who got the idea while working on a show called Crossroads and watching Coronation Street — so it's a copy of a copy, and it's a better copy than the original in one respect, which is the export.



Corn

The export.



Herman

Sold to more than sixty countries. On the twenty-sixth of January, nineteen ninety, it drew over twenty-one million viewers in the UK alone. That is more people than live in Australia being inconvenienced by the residents of a cul-de-sac.



Corn

And it was cancelled after four months in nineteen eighty-five.



Herman

By Seven. Rescued by Network Ten, where it became the longest-running drama in Australian television history by nineteen ninety-seven. Then cancelled in twenty twenty-two, revived in twenty twenty-three with new episodes for Amazon, and cancelled again in twenty twenty-five.



Corn

Twice. Cancelled twice, and it still gets a longer obituary than most shows that never died.



Herman

Stefan Dennis, who plays Paul Robinson, said when it first ended that drama on free-to-air television is dying a rapid death because viewers are used to watching what they want when they want. Then he said the survival of these shows is in the viewers' hands.



Corn

Which is a polite way of saying it's the only genre where the audience is expected to vote every night with a remote control.



Herman

Home and Away is the other Australian one. Summer Bay, New South Wales, since July nineteen eighty-eight. Eight thousand eight hundred and thirteen episodes, sold to over a hundred and forty countries.



Corn

More countries than Neighbours.



Herman

And Ray Meagher, who plays Alf Stewart, is the only remaining original cast member — he holds the Guinness record for the longest-serving actor in an Australian drama. He has been saying "flamin'" on national television since before the Berlin Wall came down.



Corn

Which brings me to the thing I actually find fascinating, which is that this is not a British or American genre. It's an exportable template.



Herman

Beautifully demonstrated by the German case. Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten has been on RTL since nineteen ninety-two. Eight thousand seven hundred episodes. It's based on an Australian format called The Restless Years — and here's the part that gets me — the German production reused the first two hundred and thirty episode scripts, heavily rewritten, from the Dutch adaptation.



Corn

So the same two hundred and thirty storylines went Australia, then Netherlands, then Germany.



Herman

And the Dutch version, Goede tijden, slechte tijden, has been running since nineteen ninety. Seven thousand and twenty-seven episodes of its own. The German one peaked at over seven million viewers for its two thousand five hundredth episode in two thousand and two.



Corn

Two and a half thousand episodes in, ten years in, and it's still growing an audience. That is the format doing exactly what it's designed to do.



Herman

The wider list is staggering if you just read it out. Emmerdale in the UK, nineteen seventy-two onwards, ten thousand three hundred and thirty-four. The Young and the Restless, thirteen thousand and three. The Bold and the Beautiful, nine thousand three hundred and fifty-six. Pobol y Cwm, in Welsh, since nineteen seventy-four, around eight thousand. Fair City in Ireland, five thousand one hundred and seventy. Shortland Street in New Zealand, eight thousand three hundred and thirty-nine. Unter uns in Germany, seven thousand four hundred and seventy. EastEnders, six thousand nine hundred and seventy-three. Hollyoaks, six thousand and fifty.



Corn

And the all-time leader isn't a soap at all.



Herman

Unser Sandmännchen. East German children's programme, nineteen fifty-nine to the present, over twenty-two thousand two hundred episodes. The thing that has produced more episodes than anything else in television history is a puppet who tells children to go to sleep.



Corn

Of course it is. Herman, what actually allows a show to generate storylines indefinitely? Because that's the engineering question in all of this.



Herman

It's the reset. A prestige drama builds a tower, season by season, and then has to knock it down, and when it's knocked down there's nothing left. These shows build nothing that can fall. A marriage breaks up, and after a decent interval it un-breaks. A character dies — occasionally they do — and the community absorbs it and the next week is about somebody's kitchen.



Corn

It never owes you a conclusion.



Herman

It never owes you anything. And if you accuse it of formula, the defence is interesting. Daran Little, who was the Coronation Street archivist, said the original characters — Elsie, Ena — were the first of their kind ever seen on British television. And if later characters are stereotypes, it's because they came from the same original mould. Which is a way of saying the formula is the point, not the failure.



Corn

But hold on. Doesn't the reset eventually stop working? Because the audience notices. If a marriage breaks up and un-breaks and breaks up again, at some point the viewer has to feel the strings.



Herman

That's the tension the writers live with. The trick is that the reset happens at a different level each time. The marriage resets, but the characters don't quite return to the same starting position. Ken Barlow has been married four times. The marriages reset. Ken doesn't. So there's a slow sedimentary accumulation underneath the episode-to-episode stasis — and that's what lets a sixty-six-year-old show still feel like it's about people.



Corn

So the show is static at the surface and glacial underneath.



Herman

And the count itself is a moving target, which is almost perfect for this genre. Every source disagrees.



Corn

Give me the spread.



Herman

Wikipedia's list says eleven thousand seven hundred and forty-six for Coronation Street. The show's own page says eleven thousand nine hundred and fifty-three. Radio Times says eleven thousand seven hundred and seventy-one. Nobody can pin it down because it keeps moving while you count. Which is honestly the most Coronation Street fact available.



Corn

Let's talk about why anyone watches it, because I suspect the answer is not what the phrase "guilty pleasure" implies.



Herman

The strongest work on this is Jaye Derrick's, at the University at Buffalo. Two studies, an experiment and a daily diary, published in Social Psychological and Personality Science. The finding is that re-watching a favourite show restores depleted self-control and willpower.



Corn

Restores willpower. Say that again.



Herman

In the experiment, participants who wrote about a favourite television show performed better on a difficult puzzle afterwards than people who hadn't. In the diary study, people who'd done effortful tasks during the day were more likely to go looking for a rerun — and doing so restored their energy.



Corn

So the show isn't stealing energy. It's returning it.



Herman

And here's the specific part, which is what makes it real. She found the effect is not generic. Watching whatever happens to be on does not provide the same benefit. And — this is the counterintuitive one — watching a new episode of a favourite show for the first time doesn't provide it either.



Corn

Only the reruns.



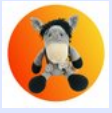
Herman

Only the familiar thing.



Corn

Which explains why a soap's endless recycling is a feature. The audience doesn't need novelty. Novelty is a cost.



Herman

Derrick calls the mechanism social surrogacy. A fictional relationship where you already know what the other person is going to say and do, and all you have to do is sit there and enjoy it. She notes that thinking about a favourite show makes people more willing to forgive others, more willing to help a stranger, more willing to make sacrifices for their romantic partner.



Corn

So the least demanding programme on television is measurably making its viewers more generous. That is a wonderful reversal of the entire cultural script around this.



Herman

And it connects to something more recent. There's a study in Psychology of Popular Media last year on ambient television — watching while doing other things. A pilot of thirty-nine, then a survey of two hundred and seventy-eight. It found five motivations. Energization, irritation, enjoyable relaxation, mindfulness, and companionship.



Corn

Irritation is a motivation?



Herman

Sometimes you want the television to be mildly annoying so it doesn't pull you in. And the two that correlated with satisfaction were energization and enjoyable relaxation. That's not people numbing out. That's people using a programme the way you'd use a background hum.



Corn

There's a 2025 review on what they call volitional reconsumption. Deliberately rewatching already-seen content, now a large and economically significant behaviour because streaming made it trivially easy. Same mechanism Derrick identified, scaled up.



Herman

And what I find striking is the gap. Nobody has actually done a dedicated peer-reviewed study on soap operas specifically as comfort viewing. The closest work is Derrick on re-watching in general, and the ambient television study. The genre that is the purest expression of the phenomenon is the one nobody has pointed a study at.



Corn

Maybe because it's too obvious to be interesting, which would be exactly the wrong conclusion. Herm, there's a tension here, and I want to sit on it. Because the thing that makes these shows restorative to watch is also what makes them fragile to make.



Herman

The economics are brutal. Neighbours cancelled twice. Guiding Light ended after seventy-two years. As the World Turns ended. And Coronation Street has been cutting cast per storyline to save money.



Corn

You have four million people a night and still can't guarantee a future.



Herman

Free-to-air drama is expensive to make and the advertising that used to pay for it is scattered. And the scheduling tells you how they're responding. From January this year, Coronation Street moved to five thirty-minute episodes a week at eight thirty, paired in an hour-long block with Emmerdale. ITV's stated reason was that half-hour episodes are more streaming-friendly.



Corn

Five half-hours instead of a couple of hours. Which is the same amount of story in smaller, more portable pieces.



Herman

And as of the twenty-seventh of September, ITV confirmed that Nations League football coverage will disrupt both the Emmerdale and Coronation Street schedules. Sixty-six years of a fictional street being moved for a football match.



Corn

Which is oddly reassuring. The genre has survived the end of radio being the main medium, the death of the networks, and the arrival of streaming, and it can still be displaced by a Tuesday night football fixture. Nothing about it is sacred, and that's why it lasts.



Herman

There's something in that. A show that never resolves anything never has to end. It can just be moved.



Corn

Herman.



Herman

Mm.



Corn

Panasonic NV-HS860. Three hundred and eighty pounds. I want to say that up front because I have been biting my tongue for forty minutes.



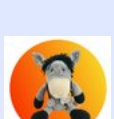
Herman

What's the three hundred and eighty pounds for?



Corn

That was what Rita paid for the first one. There were four in total, over the years. She had a cabinet built. It has a glass front and a small brass lock, and inside there is a label-maker field, because everything in that cabinet is labelled.



Herman

How many tapes?



Corn

Two thousand one hundred and forty. Plus a separate crate for the ones she called the good ones, which was a different system entirely and I was never shown it.



Corn

You're telling me this like it's a normal amount of information to know about a person's video cabinet.



Herman

She taped every episode for thirty-one years. If she was out, the machine caught it. If the power cut, she wrote the date on a card and put the card in the cabinet. There were cards in there from nineteen ninety-one.



Corn

So somewhere in that cabinet there is a card from nineteen ninety-one that says nothing happened.



Herman

Something did happen. The power went out. That's the interesting episode.



Corn

Hilbert, what happened when she actually missed one?



Herman

Six minutes. Sorry, I'll fix that. Where was I. Right.



Herman

She missed one episode. Whole thing, gone, a power cut that lasted six hours. She did not watch the next three weeks of programmes. Would not. Sat there with the machine running and the screen off, taping them so the archive stayed complete, and refused to watch any of it until she found the missing one.



Corn

She was three weeks behind and still taping.



Herman

Still taping. Found it eventually at a car boot sale. Tape cost her fifty pence and it had the episode on it, plus the back half of an episode of a completely different soap that she had no interest in whatsoever.



Corn

Did she keep the tape?



Herman

My brother-in-law has it. He keeps it in a climate-controlled cabinet in the garage — forty percent humidity, twenty degrees, and he checks the hygrometer every Sunday whether it needs checking or not. I know where the cabinet is. It is not at my house.



Herman

The physical version of this is that somebody has to be at home with their finger on the record button every afternoon for three decades, and that is the part the psychological papers do not model.



Corn

What I'm taking from that is that the show's whole promise is that nothing is owed. She was keeping a record of a thing that owes her nothing, and the one episode she could not get back was the one that mattered most. Which tells you the format doesn't actually lack



Corn (continued)

consequence. It just postpones it forever — and that's the trick, isn't it.



Herman

It is. If the restorative effect really is specific to familiarity, then the future of the genre depends on a streaming industry whose entire incentive is to push unfamiliar things at you. That's the collision coming, and nobody has resolved it. The shows that survive will probably be the ones that keep adapting — the five half-hours, the streaming-friendly pieces — while holding on to the only feature that matters: that nothing much happens, and that is the point.



Corn

The research gap is still sitting there. Nobody has done the study on the soap opera specifically — the endless, consequence-free community as a psychological object. Somebody should. It's an obvious question that has been left alone for sixty-six years, which is very much in the spirit of the subject.



Corn

That's our producer Hilbert Flumingtop, who has been at the desk the entire time and had a very particular memory about a very particular cabinet.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you have a long-running serial you abandoned for five years and rejoined without missing a beat, or a relative with a labelling system, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Corn

We'll be back soon.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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