

How You Could Lose Your Shirt by Watching Reality TV

Reality TV. A genre about as broad and fuzzy as, well, TV programming. I never really could figure out why *Survivor* was called Reality TV, for instance. I mean, what's so real about it? Oh, when I heard its premise for the very first time, you betcha it was intriguing. Back then, I was thinking along the lines of *Lord of the Flies*, the anticipation of such I admit had me salivating in a Stephen King-ish sort of way.

But the first few episodes quickly revealed unapologetically that not only was the show not even close to *Flies* or even *Flies-lite* for that matter, it was totally made-up goofy. But I stuck through that whole first season; it was, after all, different from what passed for normal TV fare, and that alone made it minimally interesting.

Boy, got over that silliness pretty darned quickly.

Then there are shows like *American Idol* which, again, I'm not quite clear why it's Reality TV when back in the day, it simply would have been called a Really Long-Assed Singing Contest. To its credit, it's more real than that thing with the "Tribal Council" (oh please), but still, Reality TV? Then why aren't all game shows and competitions Reality TV?

And how about the Kardashians, huh? Sad to say that I have sat through one full episode of their *Keeping Up With...* thing, and have caught bits and pieces of various installments. Not ashamed of that admission as I otherwise would be for the simple fact that the remote wasn't in my hand. I wasn't even on the couch when it first caught my eye, just walking past as my wife demonstrated a really weird magnetic attraction to the show in its earlier days. Ergo, not my fault and not my shame to bear.

Anyway, the Kardashians, Reality TV? Jeez, there are at the very least two glaringly visible things that take it out of the realm of the real. The first: Huge house, big family, and I've never ever seen the Kards lift a perfectly manicured exotically beautiful finger to clean or tidy up an iota, and yet the whole freaking place is spotless, military neat and tidy at all times, and yet I don't ever remember seeing a cleaning lady -- sorry, I just realized that was sexist, so let me change that to the more PC "cleaning illegal alien" -- hovering about once, let alone live-in constantly which is what I expect would be needed to keep that household in that condition. So, not only are they rich and beautiful, if what I see on TV is even remotely close to real, they're also *the cleanest and tidiest people in America*.

That's one. Here's the second: The padre de familia is Bruce effing Jenner! Yeah, that Bruce Jenner. Actually, seeing him as I walked past the couch is what grabbed me and sat me down to watch a full episode.

Me: Is that who I think it is? Yeah, it is! That's Bruce Jenner! What's he doing there?

Wife: He's Kim's dad. Stepdad, rather.

Me: But that's Bruce Jenner!

Wife: So?

Me: Do you even know who Bruce Jenner is?

Wife: Yeah, he's Kim's dad.

Bruce Jenner is in the freaking house!

Real. Yeah right. Reality TV, in other words, is about as surreal as it gets. But now is not the time to get into all that, and hopefully, that time will never ever come to pass where I'm concerned since, c'mon folks, it's been obvious from day one that they're just making this sh*t up as they go along, and more importantly, the Nielsens have revealed that although the American viewing public has no freaking clue what Reality TV really is, they're eating it up. That's just the long way to say, "There's money there, boys and girls!"

Whatever. There is, however, a segment of Reality TV programming that I -- and many others too, it looks like -- find quite fascinating. Not enough personally for me to go out of my way to actually schedule and plan to watch ahead of time -- I honestly do not know when any of these shows are regularly scheduled to appear. Nor would I even know what network does what show if it weren't for Wikipedia. So how do I get to see them? By bored out of my skull accident, that's how, as I browse through my cable TV company's 500 million channels late at night trying to look for something that doesn't start with *CSI*, *Law & Order* or *Dateline*.

So, what shows am I talking about? Well, it's probably a good bet that they have an official moniker that identifies this subgroup of Reality TV shows, something I am proud to say I am totally ignorant of and have come to personally simply call eBay Reality TV. These are the ones with all the wheeling and dealing, often under the premise of converting some found, worthless piece of junk into something a collector would pay a left reproductive organ for. Of course, the shows don't all follow that exact story line, but they all pretty much cover the same basic idea: turning sh*t into gold.

Even better: This stuff feels *educational*. No-need-to-shower-after-watching-it-because-I-feel-so-dirty educational. I mean, get and watch a few seasons of the stuff on DVD over a weekend marathon and you'll wonder why you wasted time and money getting a college degree kind of educational.

But it's also a kick you in the balls when you're down kind of education. Don't you make the mistake of forgetting that. Ever. You've really got to be careful with this stuff. Bear with me, and it'll all be crystal.

OK then, let's all zoom in and take a closer look at one particular show of the sub-genre, *Storage Wars* on the A&E network. I was going to say it's one of the better shows in its niche, but frankly, I have no freaking clue whether it is or not. I've barely watched this one, and the others even less if at all. I never would have even taken a look, frankly, had my friend Steve not emailed me a couple of months or so ago to bring it to my attention. He knew I used to run a decent [golf equipment buy & sell operation on eBay](#), and he figured this would pique my interest. It did, enough at least for me to take a look through a few DVR'd episodes one late night.

Just so you know, *Storage Wars* follows a few regular real world professionals (supposedly real anyway, since again, heck if I know or care) who go to these auctions held by self-storage establishments that try to sell off the contents of repossessed storage units. I've heard and seen ads for these kinds of auctions for some time now. Apparently, you pay for the privilege of being a bidder, then the auctioneer opens the door to the unit so each potential bidder one after the other can take a look inside -- without setting one foot in there, mind you -- and study its contents for a set amount of time. We're talking just minutes here, and we're often talking about piled up boxes you can't see into... or behind of.

So, much of the fun comes from watching these pros speculate and set a bid value on what may be stored in the unit based on what few clues may be visible and available to them; then, when they win the unit, discovering what's actually in it, since there's usually some unexpected item or other that could be worth a pretty penny (otherwise it'd be a yawner of a show); and then doing a final tally after calling in their expert contacts who can put a dollar value on the found items, to determine if they made a profit or not. ("Honey, the bones we found behind these boxes are worthless, but this blazer and double-knits with the *Jimmy Hoffa* brand tags in the quirky handwritten font, you think that vintage clothing store on Dupont will give us a few bucks for it? I think those Hipsters will eat this sh*t up!")

So, after a couple late night hours watching this sort of thing, all while munching away on my son's stock of ice cream sandwiches "made without real milk" that -- surprise! -- he doesn't like to eat, but I have to try and clear from the freezer before we can get anything else because my wife couldn't resist the Costco deal for an endless supply, my interest was tapped out. I thought that was the end of it, until I got a call from Steve a few days later. He wanted to know if it was something I'd be interested in doing with him, bidding on repossessed storage units.

Me: Not really.

Steve: Why not? We could make a killing!

Me: They don't tell you everything, you know.

Steve: Huh? They lied?

Me: Now did I say that? What I'm saying is that if you think they show you everything you need to know to make a go of doing the same thing, you're majorly screwed. They leave out the most important stuff!

Steve: Huh?

Old Stevie's never really been all that quick on the uptake.

Me: OK, let me put it this way -- you know how you tell your kids they need to get a college degree to get a good job and career?

Steve: Yeah?

Me: But you didn't tell them about all the money they'll spend on Chapstick because they'll be kissing beau-coup butts, right? Same difference.

Steve: Oh. Sh*t.

Stevie needed more info than that, of course, so I pointed out how although they show us how to acquire the junk, making it look all dramatic and complex but really, it's the easiest thing in

the world to figure out on our own how to do, they always quietly skip over the most critical part, the stuff that really would be great if we could get a mentor for, giving us some crucial info that we literally could take to the bank. *They never tell us how to sell the sh*t.*

Oh, they'll bait us along, making it look like this part of the biz is so easy obvious, it's a mystery why we aren't all doing what they're doing in our spare time instead of schlepping the kids around from one meaningless every-lazy-obese-video-game-playing-slob-of-an-entitled-snot-of-a-kid-gets-a-trophy-whether-the-lump-wins-or-loses soccer match to another, insinuating that if we were smart enough to do what they do, we can afford to pay someone else to do that lump-schlepping for us, and still we'd have enough left over to produce more lumps ("How do you think the Duggars do it? "). But look closely -- it's all just wishful thinking... on our part. They don't even bother to lie or cover up anything... they just leave the sh*t out, and most of us just don't effing notice!

That's selling, liquidating the crap into cold hard cash. But even the valuation part's a mystery. The part where they figure out how much an accidentally found "rare, collectible" item is worth in the "marketplace." This, I think, is where the folks who make these shows reveal a bit of their true genius -- because *they actually show us* these living and breathing experts and dealers, bringing them in towards the end of an episode to do a pretty impressive analysis of the item, along with a "Hey, that's fascinating, I didn't know that"-type of quick background history and explanation on why the item is rare and worth such-and-such. Usually it's some older guy, with eyes full of experience and wisdom, often sporting a full but neatly trimmed beard but no mustache. If not an old guy, then some really fat dude, presumably so passionate and engrossed in devoting every waking minute of his life on the study and acquisition of said rare item, he doesn't have time to hit the gym, but we know the real reason for the weight issues is Mr. Passionate just likes to put away those Costco "real milk" ice cream sandwiches.

Anyway, these scenes with the experts come suddenly, after the storage unit buyer makes some flippant, seemingly matter-of-fact statement to segue into the scene. Like, "So, we found this metal carnival horse head, and I think we should just sell it for \$10, maybe \$15 to the scrap metal guy so our losses won't sting too much, but what the hey, I decided to call up one of my contacts who then gave me the number of the president of some-esoteric-club-of-carnival-horse-head-collectors-but-only-if-it's-made-of-this-special-metal. So, I called him, and what do you know, here he is."

Me: Contact what now who now? Backspace backspace backspace dude! Dude, who'd you call and gave you the lead? Dude!!!

Most everyone else watching the show: Man, that was easy. I can do this!

Of course you can do it. Anyone can. Never mind that these professionals are bringing years of experience and whatever else they know and have to the table. And never mind the question: Why aren't the self-storage establishments doing it themselves?

And don't forget the biggest question of all: What the hell's Bruce Jenner doing with the Kardashians?

