

PRIME TIME

CANCER'S SMALL SCREEN JOURNEY

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Robert Thompson just might have the coolest job in academia; he gets paid to study – and opine to nosy journalists at length about – what we all watch on television.

As head of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Pop Culture, there's little Thompson doesn't know about the small screen and its impact on America. But there's one type of television he's often avoided in more than two decades as a professional couch potato. TV programs dealing with cancer.

That's because Thompson was the primary caregiver for his mother when she was dying of cancer in the 1980s. And back then, he recalled, it wasn't hard to avoid television programs dealing with such an illness, in a TV universe which mostly avoided the problems of real life.

"TV was all about flying nuns and talking horses and escaping from reality," Thompson said. "For a long time, it was considered impossible to talk about cancer on a TV show without risking your audience."

Flash forward to modern times, and it seems there are few boundaries left in how television depicts cancer.

A major character on NBC's family drama *Parenthood*, Monica Potter's suburban mom Kristina Braverman, spent an entire season of the show fighting breast cancer. Viewers saw Kristina and her family struggle with her loss of energy, disappearing hair, debilitating chemotherapy treatments and much more.

And there have been two recent series centered on characters who had cancer throughout the run of the program: Showtime's *The Big C*, and AMC's breakout hit about a high school science teacher with lung cancer who becomes a methamphetamine-making drug lord, *Breaking Bad*.

On *The Big C* in particular, producers and star Laura Linney wanted to focus the show's drama on all the changes and choices someone is forced to make when struggling with a

terminal illness. Light years removed from the days when TV shows barely acknowledged the details of the disease, *The Big C* focused like a laser on a suburban wife and mother's process of figuring out how to spend her last months, weeks and days.

"It was important to me that you actually see what's happening to her, that you see the cancer, and you can see



how it changes people,” Linney told the public radio show *Fresh Air*, noting that she accepted the role of cancer patient Cathy Jamison not long before her father, playwright Romulus Linney, died of the disease.

“There is something about what happens to the soul of a person as they are battling with an illness; the days when they’re feeling weak, the days where they’re strong, how that shifts and changes, what happens to the voice, how the body moves,” she added.

Experts say people tend to absorb and believe health information depicted in TV and movies more readily. So modern TV’s evolution toward a more realistic and detailed depiction of cancer can mark a major evolution in how the public views serious illnesses and the people who struggle with them. 🗣️



THE IMPACT OF BRIAN’S SONG

When talk turns to early depictions of cancer, it’s tough to avoid 1971’s landmark, made-for-TV movie, *Brian’s Song*.

Featuring James Caan as Chicago Bears running back Brian Piccolo and Billy Dee Williams as teammate Gayle Sayers, *Brian’s Song* recounts the two players’ close friendship, which lasted until Piccolo died at age 26 of cancer.

Thompson, who still shows the film to his classes at Syracuse University, said the movie reflected how TV often handled portrayals of cancer back then: the process of treating and living with the disease was rarely shown, and the illness was treated as a death sentence.

“It was almost the opposite of the *Parenthood* storyline,” the professor added. “Perhaps cancer is a little less scary in modern times, because we understand it a little better.”

Other notable cancer depictions from that era included a storyline on CBS’ *All in the Family* in which character Edith Bunker mistakenly thought a lump in her breast might be cancer and a 1978 TV movie, *First You Cry*, featuring Mary Tyler Moore as a TV anchor who gets breast cancer.

Even on the groundbreaking 1980s medical drama *St. Elsewhere*, one storyline featured a cancer patient who was shot to death by a relative, seemingly put out of his misery. But the rise of popular, creatively strong medical dramas such as *ER* and *Chicago Hope* helped add to more realistic depiction in the 1990s and beyond.

“*ER*...was a realistic prime time drama and huge ratings success, showing people were not turned off [by depictions of serious illness],” said Sheila Murphy, an associate professor at the University of Southern California who has written studies tracking the evolution of health depictions in television. “*ER* was unique in that it had actual [medical doctors] as writers and producers and these MDs typically wanted more realistic storylines.”

Later, TV shows such as *thirtysomething*, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Grey’s Anatomy* would feature storylines with major characters fighting cancer. But it wasn’t until *Breaking Bad* in 2008 and *The Big C* in 2010 that major TV series were centered on a starring character with cancer – and both those shows were on cable channels with smaller audiences than broadcast networks.

“[TV shows] still have to make cancer interesting and not off putting,” Murphy added. “Which is why most medical dramas [still] have ancillary characters get cancer.”