

'Til Series Finale Do Us Part?: Fan Commitment and the Long-running Series

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Sticking With the Soap

While this roundtable is ostensibly focused on primetime series, I couldn't help but think of daytime soap operas when considering how my own spectatorial experiences relate to its questions. There is no denying that my engagement with soap operas has declined in recent years in terms of sheer hours clocked watching them. However, due to the contemporary developments delineated in the latter part of the roundtable question, I have maintained a committed engagement with the ABC soap *One Life to Live*. Ten years ago, I watched 2-3 full episodes of *One Life to Live* per week; now I catch, at best, one hour total of *One Life to Live* per week. And yet I still consider myself not only a viewer but a devoted fan of *One Life to Live* (a claim worth debating further). My DVR lets me watch the characters and storylines I most want to see, ABC.com enables me to catch an episode when I'm out of town, online recaps fill me in on plot developments I've missed, sites like soapoperadigest.com keep me up on spoilers and gossip, and message boards and Twitter embroil me in fan discussions. Though it's harder than ever to bring new viewers to soaps, it has never been easier to be a soap fan. However, I have dropped my commitment to *One Life to Live*'s ABC partner *All My Children*, both of which I began watching with my mother beginning in my teens. Ten years ago, I watched 2-3 full episodes of *All My Children* per week; now, I watch nary a minute. As for why, most obviously, the storylines on *All My Children* were gradually no longer engaging to me. I found myself frequently fast-forwarding through nearly everything, not just a few storylines. However, it's striking to consider that this point of no return viewing came after two decades of viewership and presumably numerous previous stretches of boring storylines and anemic characters that I tolerated. Did the show really get so much worse suddenly? That's actually a possibility given the widespread fan dissatisfaction with headwriter Charles Pratt Jr.'s tenure from 2008-09. But digging more deeply, I offer three additional explanations. First, having the ability to fast-forward through uninteresting storylines makes me all the more aware of textual insufficiencies and my ability to avoid them, meaning my DVR has likely molded me into a more discerning viewer with higher expectations. Second, my lack of interest infected not only my television viewership of *All My Children* but also my other consumptive experiences of it: I did not enjoy keeping up with recaps, engaging with other fans (even in anti-fandom Pratt-hating), or seeking out spoilers to see if future storylines would be more to my liking. This leads me to speculate that I am no longer content to follow a soap opera, or perhaps any series which requires long-term investment, only via my television set. If the ancillary and extratextual experiences fueled by the show aren't fully engaging as well, I'm more likely to drop out as a television viewer. Finally, as the title of this roundtable highlights, primetime serials offer the promise of a declarative endpoint, a culmination of the viewer's emotional investment and thus a definitive incentive for experiencing each episode prior to it. Conversely, I'm certain that I can return to *All My Children* at any point and have little trouble catching up, due to soap narrative redundancy and the long tenures of core characters (it's just a matter of figuring out who Erica Kane is married to now). And thus, with the additional factor of my more limited time in recent years to invest in multiple soap operas, it was easy to set *All My Children* aside while still keeping my *One Life to Live* viewership active. This glimpse into my personal viewing habits ultimately

indicates that our decisions to separate with shows we've been watching for as much as half of lives are freighted with such interrelated catalysts as formal quality, genre convention, intertextuality, technology, and even the everyday rhythms of modern life. With the future viability of soap operas in question and the genre as dependent on long-term viewer commitment as any, one hopes that the surviving shows and any new incarnations can find ways to best capitalize on these factors as television moves forward.