

Los Angeles Times

To the judges:

If American television programming were reliably rewarding, we might not need Mary McNamara at all.

But need her we do. Whether she's acting as a historian of the medium or your plain-talking sister at the other end of the sofa — and she does both, often in the space of a sentence — McNamara thinks and writes with striking insight and precision. She'll spot that split-second of transcendence, or that long moment of hypocrisy. And she'll speak truth to network power.

There's no denying that our infatuation with television is growing, that the small screen is challenging the big screen in the race for pop culture dominance. McNamara is unusual because she can participate in this great cultural conversation but doesn't fall victim to the hype machine that proclaims "television is the new cinema." The new TV is, simply, the new TV. It's a raucous, glorious, frustrating medium.

McNamara is at once chatty and thought provoking. She writes frankly from the point of view of an educated, liberated woman, but she is not doctrinaire.

She often seems to be saying what you were about to think, but more powerfully. Frustrated by some of the stunts on HBO's edgy series "Girls," McNamara reported that the second-season finale made her feel "impatient in a vaguely maternal way, like when you see a lovely but irritating wild child running naked around the playground, shouting 'vagina' at everyone and peeing in the sandbox."

And when Paula Deen tried to huff her way out of trouble after being caught uttering a racial slur, McNamara wickedly counseled that "with personal outrage, as with buttermilk, less is more."

Yet from the sandbox, hospital and kitchen, McNamara leaps easily to Wharton, Woolf and Ibsen (in a discussion of female protagonists that also takes in Julianna Margulies and Amy Poehler). She's ready to dissect the flawed rollout of Al Jazeera America ("Forget slick, Al Jazeera America, we'll settle for groomed."). She bemoans the absence of zombies in the Emmy nominations, horror being "the hardest genre to sustain with depth and dignity."

Often, she reaches her conclusions through unexpected journeys. To better understand how new media came to the rescue of ABC's "Scandal," McNamara probes the Twitter stream of creator Shonda Rhimes. To inform an analysis of "The Sopranos," the series that "made it possible for men to obsess about a TV show and not feel like a geek," she listens in on sports radio.

Even McNamara's plot summaries bristle with wit and self-awareness. Recounting the women-and-jail setup of "Orange Is the New Black" from Netflix, she writes: "It's always amusing, and uncomfortably revealing, to watch a middle-class white American stripped of the privileges too often considered rights."

Now and again, she'll send a flaming arrow into a network executive suite, often when it comes to the treatment of female characters. But McNamara's great strength is drawing connections that reach farther and mean more than most inside-baseball stories about the industry. She's looking for a bigger picture on that flickering screen, and when it comes to sharing what she's seen with readers, she's a rare talent.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Davan Maharaj". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Davan Maharaj
Editor