

Bread, Circuses, and The Great British Baking Show

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 18 April 2017 10:47 - Last Updated Wednesday, 19 April 2017 05:16



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In ancient Rome, the powers-that-were relied on “bread and circuses” to keep the masses distracted from politics and the goings-on of their corrupt government. The emperors – some of whom had no clothes – figured they could do exactly as they pleased as long as they kept the people fed and entertained. They gave away bread to satisfy the first part of that formula, and for part two there were chariot races, gladiatorial games, Christian/Lion face-offs, and other festive spectator sports.

This was long, long ago in a land far, far away – before the age of 24/7 news coverage and social media. The ancient Roman rulers surely never dreamed of a time when the government and its escapades would actually *be* the “circuses” – the entertainment most favored by those very same masses they aimed to distract and subdue.

Today, we follow CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, Twitter and Facebook, like so many Roman citizens crammed into a virtual coliseum. It’s much comfier on our couches, of course, and there are better snacks, but the coming of social media – which took our private living room conversations public – has revealed an unsettling truth about us modern humans: we have not evolved that much since early AD. Though violence-for-fun is no longer officially sanctioned – unless we’re talking football, our other favorite pastime – we still enjoy our “gladiatorial” sports with a relish that borders on bloodthirsty.

I say “we” because that’s what one does in an egalitarian society, but in reality, some of us are less comfortable with this raucous state of affairs than others. There are those of us who

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don't like watching football or 'Hardball' anymore, who've grown bone-weary and heart-heavy – or, even worse, numb – in this topsy-turvy, dystopian global community with its macabre mediascape of fun-house mirrors and carnival barkers and never-ending “circuses.”

Fortunately, for us, there is still bread.

This spring, my family and I have become escape artists. We often flee the nightly barrage of bad news, bad faith, and bad attitudes, by tuning in to regular episodes of *The Great British Baking Show*.

Have you seen it? Probably so. I'm always the last to discover the hidden treasures of Netflix. That was the case here in my own home, in fact, where my husband and daughter had already watched half of the first season before I even knew the show existed. (This is what I get for going to bed early most nights with my true love, Kindle Fire.) In their defense, it probably never occurred to either of them that someone with my resolute (and regrettable) indifference to culinaria would be remotely interested in a show about baking.

But one night I stayed up with them. And on a whim, I watched. And somehow – even against my own kitchen-resistant will – I was hooked.

The Great British Baking Show is everything the noisy, angry, competitive “circuses” of cable news, social media, and reality TV are not. When I settle in for an episode, I immediately feel my blood pressure drop and my heartbeat slow down. My soul just . . . exhales.

The green slope of the English countryside . . . The wildflowery meadows and cotton swaths of sheep . . . The manor house garden where Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood daintily feast on each episode's “technical challenge”. . . The frequent rain showers . . . The wonderful British accents and the terrible British teeth . . . It's all so comforting to me. Like coming home.

Which is strange, since I've never been to England.

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Maybe the show speaks to something deep in my Anglo DNA? Or maybe just my inner English Major? I half expect to see Mr. Darcy, or Edward Rochester, or even Heathcliffe show up one night as a celebrity judge. But then I remind myself: This is *The Great British Baking Show*, not *American Idol*. The producers would never do something as crass and flashy as to invite a celebrity judge.

And why should they, when they have their own Byronic hero, Paul Hollywood, he of the flashing blue eyes, bad-boy swagger, and mad scone-baking skills? I only recently learned Paul's last name, and was temporarily chagrined. But after ruminating on it a bit, I realized that "Hollywood" is a lovely, bucolic word (holly + wood) completely in keeping with the show's pastoral character. The fact that his name has been Americanized and now bears very different connotations is not Paul's fault, and I shall not hold it against him. (Though, like a true Byronic hero, Paul can be an arrogant jerk. That I *do* hold against him. A little.)

Then, there's the show's other judge, Mary Berry, whom I adore for many reasons, not the least of which is that she uses the word "scrummy" in almost every episode. (A combo of "scrumptious" and "yummy," I suppose?) I love her kind, ladylike gentility – she always lets the contestants down easy when they've failed to impress – and her merry face full of unabashed wrinkles. In fact, everybody on *The Great British Baking Show* looks refreshingly real. (*Real* real. Not *reality show* real.) There are crow's feet, messy hair, smeary make-up, crooked glasses, the aforementioned imperfect teeth, and the occasional jowl on display.

It's so beautiful.

Oh, and get this: There is no grandiose "prize" involved. Nobody wins a giant pile of money or a job at a world-famous bakery or a TV show on The Cooking Channel. I think there is a trophy. Maybe? But mostly, these regular English folk – who are realtors and doctors and students in "real life" – are vying for nothing more than bragging rights: the chance to call themselves "the best baker in Great Britain."

As I watch them duke it out in the baking tent, episode after episode, my heart melts like butter on a homemade English muffin, because here's the thing: There's no actual "duking it out" going on. Yes, the contestants are competing against each other. But most of all, they're competing against themselves – striving for their own personal best. It's mesmerizing to watch

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ordinary people doing what they love to do – even when it's not what I love to do – and becoming more skillful and creative with every challenge. And it's moving to see the friendships that develop between the contestants as the competition progresses. There's none of the bitchy backbiting or ganging up or tribe-forming you often see on other reality shows. Just good will, empathy, and mutual support. Each week, one of the bakers is weeded out and sent home by the judges, and the further along we are in the season, the harder the tears flow down the faces of the remaining contestants, who've genuinely come to love each other.

Here in the 21st century global community – which all too often feels like the Late Roman Empire – this quiet, beautiful little show is more than just a distraction, more than just another circus. It's a true delight and a healing balm.

Give us, Lord, our daily bread.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. (Read more of her [Rants & Raves](#) or visit her blog at

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