**The Ultimate Event TV: How *Happy Valley* Defies Ageism and Sexism in the Television Industry**

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**Bio**

Lucy Brown is an award-winning practitioner and educator. She has worked for the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Nickelodeon, and Disney, with multiple BAFTA and RTS credits to her name. Brown is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and an Executive Board member of the National Association for Higher Education in the Moving Image. She is the Founder of Women in Screen and the Trailblazing Women On and Off Screen conference and sits on the Editorial Board for Representology, The Journal of Media and Diversity. Brown is also a co-author of the influential text ‘The TV Studio Production Handbook’.

**Abstract**

The return of the crime thriller Happy Valley to BBC1 after a seven-year hiatus has been a momentous event in British television drama, hailed by critics as a masterpiece of the twenty-first century and dubbed Yorkshire's answer to The Wire. At the heart of the show's success lie two remarkable women, both in their late fifties: Sarah Lancashire, who delivers a captivating performance as the lead character, police sergeant Catherine Cawood, and Sally Wainwright, the creator and writer of the series. Despite the evident talent and contributions of women in the television industry, the field remains largely dominated by men. While women tend to occupy administrative positions such as heads of production and commissioning editors, they remain underrepresented in key craft roles, such as writers and directors. A study conducted by the Writers Guild of Great Britain revealed that only 28% of UK television episodes are written by women, resulting in a dearth of substantive roles for women over forty, which dwindles to a mere 3% for women over sixty. However, Happy Valley's runaway success as a high performing network programme, with over seven million viewers, offers a glimmer of hope that archaic sexist and ageist tropes can be challenged and that audiences can enjoy a vast array of original stories that accurately reflect the diversity of women at every stage of their lives.

**Images – attached separately**

Figure 1: Screenshot of Sarah Lancashire as Catherine Cawood, BBC/Lookout Point/AMC in Series 3 finale trailer: Happy Valley[**https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f0vy26**](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f0vy26)

Figure 2: Screenshot of Sally Wainwright, Writer, Director and Executive Producer of Happy Valley. BBC/Lookout / AMC in Happy Valley: Bringing Back a Global Hit [**https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f0vy26**](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f0vy26)

“Chilling,” “a dark delight,” “magnificent,” “triumphant,” “explosive” are all words that have been used to describe the British police crime thriller *Happy Valley.*[[1]](#footnote-1) First screened in 2014 it reached an audience of over 8 million and became a hit with critics and the audience alike. The second series followed in 2016 growing its audience to over nine million, with a third of viewers tuning in, marking a record high audience share.[[2]](#footnote-2) After a seven-year hiatus, the series returned with a bang on New Year’s Day 2023 and has been watched by over eleven million people. To grow an audience against a backdrop of broadcast channel ratings declining is a remarkable feat but perhaps not surprising given it has been hailed by critics as one of the greatest television dramas of the twenty-first century,[[3]](#footnote-3) Yorkshire’s version of *The Wire[[4]](#footnote-4)* and “the ultimate event TV.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

*Happy Valley* follows the story of Catherine Cawood, a police sergeant, as she navigates through personal and professional challenges and struggles to protect her community and grandson Ryan from her nemesis, Tommy Lee Royce, Ryan’s father and a violent rapist, murderer and psychopath, who is responsible for her daughter’s suicide. The series expertly weaves together intricate plotlines, compelling characters, and outstanding performances, earning five BAFTA awards and sustaining viewer investment and engagement over the course of 18 episodes spanning nine years.

Of prime importance to the success of the series are two middle-aged women; on-screen, Sarah Lancashire who plays the lead, sergeant Cawood and behind-the-camera, creator, writer, director and executive producer Sally Wainwright. It should be irrelevant that these two brilliant women are in their fifties. Yet TV drama is the domain of men. Television’s lack of diversity in terms of class, race, disability, etc.[[6]](#footnote-6) is well known. For this reflection, I will focus on the persistent pattern of gendered ageism that permeates the industry. Women over 40 are invisible from our television screens or relegated to minor roles and portrayed as unattractive and weak. The percentage of leading female characters drops from 42% in their 30s to only 15% in their 40s. This underrepresentation of older women perpetuates harmful stereotypes that women of a certain age are obsolete when they are deemed too old to serve as a love interest or a mother.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Behind the scenes, the television industry can also be an unwelcoming environment for middle aged women, with an exodus of female workers aged 35 plus, pushed out by the culture of long working hours, stressful conditions, casual hiring practices and lack of family friendly policies.[[8]](#footnote-8) Roles within the television industry are also highly gendered and whist women represent just under half of all television workers in the UK, they are more likely to be in administrative roles such as production secretaries, heads of production and commissioning editors and less likely to be found in key creative roles such as writing, directing and producing.[[9]](#footnote-9) Wainwright is acutely aware of the lack of opportunities for women writers and directors on prime-time British television and has been vocal about the challenges she faced as a female writer trying to break into a male-dominated field. In an interview with the *Big Issue* in 2020 Wainwright referred to her early experiences of being one of a handful of women in the writer’s room as “a misogynistic bloodbath.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

According to a research by the Writers Guild of Great Britain just 28% of UK television episodes are written by women, and this figure drops to a mere 14% of primetime programming.[[11]](#footnote-11) Equally a report by Directors UK found that women directed only 25% of British television episodes and a mere 17% of drama and comedy programmes (2018).[[12]](#footnote-12) Despite a number of initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive practices, such as unconscious bias training and mentorship schemes, little progress has been made. The latest data from the Creative Diversity Network Diamond report shows that women still account for only 26% of all directors and 33.4% of writers.[[13]](#footnote-13) Charlotte Moore, then BBC1 controller has worked to address this by championing female voices and doubled the number of drama commissions from female writers to 45%.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, more needs to be done and Wainwright has noted it is not sufficient to reel off the same big names, more women need to be trusted to tell their stories and provided with an equal opportunity to succeed in the industry.

We are living in what is regarded as a golden age of television, but the overwhelming mass of content is male-orientated. It is still rare to find good series about women. We know what they are – *Unbelievable* on Netflix, things like *The Marvellous Mrs Maisel* and hopefully *Happy Valley* and *Gentleman Jack*. But you can’t just turn on the TV and know you will find something that isn’t about men and guns and power.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Whilst there is a tradition of female detectives within British television from *Juliet Bravo*[[16]](#footnote-16) to *Prime Suspect*.[[17]](#footnote-17) Cawood played brilliantly by Sarah Lancashire has been referred to a one of the best TV characters in television’s history. She is complex and nuanced and Lancashire's performance has been widely praised for its sensitivity and emotional depth, and her portrayal has been revered for helping to challenge stereotypes about middle-aged women on screen. Wainwright has said “It is always a shock to me to realise what I write is unusual because I put women at the forefront.”[[18]](#footnote-18) She wrote the character of Catherine Cawood for Lancashire, having worked *together on Last Tango in Halifax* [[19]](#footnote-19) and has spoken about their connection as women of a similar age, and both from the North.

*Happy Valley* serves as an outstanding example of how women can make an impact both on and off screen, presenting a unique perspective on the female experience and showcasing older women who are often marginalised. The outstanding results of the collaboration between Wainwright and Lancashire shows how vital it is for the future of the television industry to support more creators from diverse backgrounds. *Happy Valley* embraces the complexity of middle-aged women, offering a nuanced and authentic portrayal of Cawood that is both refreshing and necessary and provides a much-needed counterbalance to the youth-obsessed culture of the entertainment industry.

The success of *Happy Valley* as a television drama has demonstrated the audience's appetite for original stories that challenge their expectations and broaden their perspectives. It offers hope that the industry is beginning to shift away from outdated sexist and ageist stereotypes, allowing audiences to benefit from a plethora of diverse stories that reflect women at all stages of their lives. The final episode of series three provides a longed-for happy ending for Cawood and now we must take up the fight to ensure that women working on both sides of the lens can have their happy ending. This requires taking action to challenge and dismantle biases and power structures, providing support to those who are marginalised, and investing in diverse storytelling to create a truly inclusive future for the television industry.

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