

Duck Dynasty: Walks and Talks Like a Hit

Unless you have only recently emerged from a Louisiana swamp, you have probably already heard the news: There's this reality show on A&E called ***Duck Dynasty*** and, well, it's kind of a big deal. One of the biggest deals around, actually.

Now in its fourth season, *Duck Dynasty* has—on four different occasions—beaten its own record as the most-watched show in the history of the **A&E Network**. The show's ratings have increased steadily and significantly each season, and last month the show established itself as a bona fide pop culture phenomenon when it became the most watched nonfiction telecast in cable television history. Regardless of how you define “nonfiction,” this is an impressive accomplishment.

In **Hollywood**, as in any industry, numbers get noticed, and *Duck Dynasty* has been putting up numbers that are impossible to ignore. The show's unprecedented ascent has led pundits and studio heads alike to ponder how this happened, why it hasn't happened sooner, and—most importantly—how they can get it to happen again.

Put one way, *Duck Dynasty* sounds like a reality show we've seen a hundred times before. It's a vaguely scripted depiction of the purportedly “real” lives of a wealthy **American** family. Episodes are peppered with all of the wacky antics, funny accents and regional oddities expected from Reality TV. **Beards** and **Bibles** have replaced botox and spray tans, but there is much about the show that feels familiar.

Much of this familiarity is a function of the genre itself. The fact is, you don't get your life turned into TV shows unless there is something weird or unique about you, and—in case you couldn't tell from photos—there is plenty of things

unique about the **Robertson** family.

This is why it's a little amusing to hear the *Duck Dynasty* cast celebrated as standard bearers for "traditional family values." At first glance, there is very little that is "traditional" about the Robertsons. They're **millionaires**. They have beards to their belly buttons. They wear nothing but camouflage and drive trucks taller than my house. They have Uncle Si, the family jokester who provides a lot of the comic relief.

If you can look past the gimmicks and the Reality TV shenanigans, you will find, as ABC News said it, "a family that despite their looks, may not be so different from your own."

For all of their peculiarities, the Robertsons are a stable and loving family who actually enjoy one another's company. The men—despite their bellowing—love their wives. The women—despite their rolled eyes—love their husbands. The children—despite their ages—respect their parents. They are a family that works together, plays together, and—oh yes—prays together, and it is for these reasons that the Robertsons feel so familiar to so many people.

Whereas Reality TV has made a living for the past decade shining a light on all that is dysfunctional and grotesque in America, the Robertson family has broken ratings records and raised eyebrows by being, well, normal.

Grantland's Any Greenwald aptly summarized the show's success in this way: "A&E, a former non-starter of a network, managed to figure out a cheaper way to provide exactly what great swaths of the country never stopped wanting in the first place."

What is it that they want? Well, for at least 11.8 million people it appears to be a show that peppers its episodes with dusty but reliable themes like faith, family, patriotism, and

hard work. Old-fashioned fare like this may not play well in pitch rooms, but *Duck Dynasty* has shown that they still play exceptionally well in American living rooms. In this sense, *Duck Dynasty* serves as an important reminder, not just to studio heads, but to the public as well.

With darker fare like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter* and others dominating the award show circuit and pop-culture conversation, it's easy to forget that there are large portions of the TV-watching public who don't necessarily want to be depressed, terrified, or disgusted every time they turn on their TV.

Enter the Robertsons—the lovable, personable, backwoods millionaires next door. They may have earned a show and a fortune by being bizarre, but they have earned a following by being familiar.

With ratings like these, it doesn't appear they'll be leaving the TV neighborhood anywhere anytime soon.