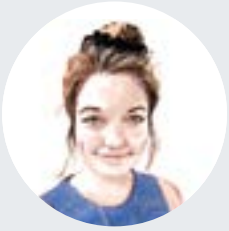
WHY YOU SHOULD WATCH...

GLOW



By Anna Leszkiewicz

You might think a TV show about women wrestlers pretending to fight each other in neon spandex for entertainment is not for you. But you might be wrong. Netflix's GLOW (that's the Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling) is a show within in a show: a comedy drama following the people behind the women's wrestling programme that was a real Eighties television hit. Struggling actress Ruth (Mad Men's Allison Brie) doesn't think it's the show for her, either – at first. It's trashy, cartoonish entertainment – and yet Ruth finds that the world of wrestling allows her to play more fun parts than mainstream roles ("secretaries telling powerful men their wives are on line two").

GLOW has its focus away from the glitz and glamour of the televised fights themselves: the series is set mostly in a slightly dingy rehearsal ring, slowly building towards the production of the Ladies' pilot. But the camp, theatrical spirit of the world it explores remains. Marc Maron plays Sam Syliva – the testy, arrogant director with "a moustache full of coke"– with next-level cantankerousness. Singer Kate Nash gives the loveable British goof Rhonda a more exaggerated cockney accent than she had on "Foundations", while Jackie Tohn drips with flirtatious energy in her role as the hypersexual party girl Melrose. It's a risky premise, but the strength of the ensemble cast makes up for it.

GLOW is from the creators of Orange is the New Black, and the shows share a few similarities. A ragtag group of unconventional women? Check. An entitled protagonist on a journey of "self-discovery"? Check and check. It doesn't pack the emotional punches of OITNB, but it doesn't need to: GLOW has a lighter tone, and, with each

Open the door, Homer

Daisy Dunn

An Odyssey: A Father, a Son and an Epic
Daniel Mendelsohn

William Collins, 304pp, £18.99

When his elderly father comes to stay, Daniel Mendelsohn buys instant coffee. The 81-year-old has made his feelings about the Nespresso machine abundantly clear. Jay Mendelsohn, a mathematician, is the kind of man who wears cologne with "a smell as synthetic as that of dry-cleaning fluid" and fails to notice when people scorn his table manners. To his classicist son's perpetual embarrassment, he pronounces Ovid as "Ohvid" and, worst of all, thinks that Homer's Odysseus is a wimp.

There's a moment early on in the *Odyssey* when Athena says, "Few men resemble their fathers. Few sons are better, most are worse…" The elderly Nestor says something similar in the *Iliad* when he describes how much mightier men were in previous generations. This Homeric idea lies at the heart of Daniel Mendelsohn's memoir of his father's final months. Only, neither Mendelsohn can quite agree that it's true.

The book begins with Jay, aged 81, enrolling on the *Odyssey* course that his son teaches at an American liberal arts college. Surrounded by students a quarter of his age, he quickly acquires a reputation for his contrarian views. Odysseus, a mighty hero? He loses his men, cheats on his wife and spends years weeping on the shores of Calypso's island. "I was in the army," says Jay, "and I knew some guys who were real heroes. And I can tell you, nobody cried."

Naturally, Daniel feels that he's fighting a losing battle. Teaching his father initially seems to teach him only how little they have in common. Jay is a scientist through and through. He can tell strangers that his wife is beautiful, but never his wife, who sums him up simply as "undemonstrative". Daniel is open, artistic and gay, with two sons and a female "parenting partner".

If any subject can dissolve their differences, it is Classics. As Mendelsohn recalls, Friedrich August Wolf, the late-18th-century German philologist who proposed that the Homeric epics were composed orally and only later written down, made a strong case for classifying the interpretation of Greek and Latin texts as a science. Mendelsohn's lecture room becomes the place where science and the humanities engage in battle.

From this *Iliad*-like setting, the narrative proceeds to its sequel when the two Mendelsohns embark on a "Retracing the *Odyssey*" cruise. In one of his enjoyable etymological digressions, Mendelsohn reminds us that the word "travel" is a cousin of "travail" ("painful or laborious effort"), which derives from the medieval Latin word *trepalium*, meaning "instrument of torture". Odysseus's journey is torturous indeed, his name bearing echoes of *odune*, the ancient Greek for "pain".

The Mendelsohns' journey falls short of an odyssey in this sense. But everyone who embarks on an Odyssean quest must fail in his own way. In *The Mighty Dead: Why Homer Matters* (2014), Adam Nicolson interwove literary criticism with a gripping account of his own odyssey. *Harry Mount's Odyssey* (2015) used an exploration of Odysseus's islands as an opportunity to laugh at himself as he failed to match the hero's feats. For the Mendelsohns, failure comes in having to turn back before reaching Ithaca when the Corinth Canal is closed. The author doesn't fail to achieve Odysseus's heroism so much as regress by framing himself as Telemachus, the hero's son.

The book that results from this journey describes a son's questioning, sentimental, often touching mission to understand his father. At times, Mendelsohn overestimates the interest of his parents' words. A "funny exchange" that he relates to his class runs as follows: "So the other day I asked my mom, how does it feel to be so old? And she said, 'It's so strange. Every morning I look in the mirror and think, who is this old woman staring at me? Inside, I'm still 16!'"

The appeal of the book lies in the lacunae between Mendelsohn's understanding of his father and ours. The "complicated shame" he feels about Jay is often hopelessly misplaced. Far from being "put off" by his father's "gruff attitude towards the text and confused by his evident disdain for my teaching of it", Mendelsohn's students see past the things that irritate him, not least the old man's appearance (a "bald and withered old man hunched in the corner", scruffy in a "baggy white sweater").

But Mendelsohn, Jr, emerges as the exception to Athena's rule that sons are inferior to their fathers. In a charming and thoroughly Odyssean conceit, he questions what it takes to recognise the qualities of one's kin. Can a son see himself in a father who dresses like a beggar? Can he recognise a father he has never met? Can a son ever know his father at all? It is to Mendelsohn's credit that he poses these questions before it is too late. ●

Daisy Dunn is the author of "Catullus' Bedspread" and "The Poems of Catullus: A New Translation" (William Collins)