**WHY REALITY TV WORKS**

*In this passage, the writer explores some of the reasons for the popularity of reality TV shows such as “The X Factor”.*

It is a Saturday night in the northernmost fringes of London. Outside an anonymous building with blanked-out windows, a discarded plastic bag swirls in the breeze.

At first glance it seems a miserable place. But in fact this is where dreams are made and broken. Because this is where, every weekend, The X Factor goes live.

5 The X Factor, brainchild of Simon Cowell, is the most popular programme on Saturday

night. Each week, hundreds make the pilgrimage to be part of the live audience, and

millions of us tune in at home to watch.

As a result, many of us will spend more time in the virtual company of the contestants

than we do with our real-life friends and family. In a modern world in which local

10 communities have become increasingly fractured, where relatives live further apart

from each other than ever before and where one in five of us will never speak to our neighbours, Cowell’s creation seems to be filling the void.

And yet despite the fact that more of us seem to be tuning in than ever before, relatively

little is known about who watches and why. All we know is that The X Factor—whether

15 it signifies the reinvigoration of weekend family viewing or the disintegration of civilised society—is a reality-television phenomenon.

So why, after a decade of phone-in rows, vote-rigging accusations and celebrity-hungry wannabes with bloated egos, does the British public remain so in love with reality

television?

20 By now most of us know that the version of reality on offer is one shaped by a

multimillion-pound business with slick production values, and yet we willingly suspend

our disbelief week after week, month after month, in the name of entertainment. Is

there something lacking in our daily lives that draws us so inexorably into Cowell’s web?

We do get swept up in it, wanting to be behind somebody, wanting them to do well.

25 That’s why producers will make the hard-luck story—those little snippets of someone struggling in a dead-end job—because that enables us to feel we have a sort of connection.

And perhaps, in a world increasingly dominated by Facebook and Twitter, where

friendships are made and broken at the click of the computer mouse, we feel more comfortable engaging with someone on the other side of the screen rather than chatting

30 to them over the garden fence, as our grandparents might once have done. If we are

already sharing the details of our private lives in Tweets and status updates, are we also becoming more accustomed to the notion of putting our intimate selves on display for

the entertainment of others?

It’s no coincidence that our love affair with The X Factor is so potent right now, more

35 than ever before, as Britain endures a period of relative austerity. In a time of economic hardship, we are seeking out the simple and cheap—family entertainment that makes

us feel part of something bigger. But the popularity of such shows may be traced back

even further—to the emergence of 19th-century periodicals which relied on reader contributions. Reality TV is merely a manifestation of a very, very old craving. We

40 love sentimental stories, such as Dickens’ Little Nell; we love a tear jerker, and shows

like The X Factor are no more crass or exploitative than cheap sensational 19th-century fiction.

Yet it seems that 21st-century viewers are looking for more than just simple entertainment. Part of the attraction is the sense of control The X Factor gives us: the sense that we

45 can put right wider social wrongs by voting for our favourite contestants and that

although our lives are being shaped by forces beyond our control—such as government cutbacks, widespread job losses or social deprivation—the ability to have a say in what happens to others in reality TV shows gives us back a much-needed sense of power.

The most popular contestants almost always have a backstory of personal triumph over

50 adversity which enables us to feel that we are helping them succeed, that we are giving

them a break even if no one else will. And perhaps this is why Susan Boyle, who grew

up in a council house and was bullied as a child for her learning difficulties, has proved

such an enduring figure.

Of course there are less noble motivations for watching, too: for every Susan Boyle there

55 is a caterwauling teenager who cannot hold a tune and yet remains convinced he or she

is destined for stardom. A part of us just loves it when people are awful and embarrass themselves—but human nature is contradictory like that, and reality television allows

us to have it both ways.

In fact, most of us know we are being manipulated and that our emotional buttons

60 are being shamelessly pressed every time there is a lingering close-up of a tear-stained contestant’s face recounting the traumatic time their grandmother’s budgerigar died.

But because we have become so accustomed to such televisual shorthand, we are

increasingly willing participants in the charade. We become, along with the contestants,

part of the performance.

65 Do we care that reality television is not actually real? That question misses the point.

Reality television is a completely constructed premise. None of the people would be in

it if we were just showing their normal lives. But what it does do is take human flesh and blood and challenges it in situations that bring out a person’s true personality. That’s

why shows work, because the public is after authenticity . . . They want to support

70 people with talent and for them to win, but they punish pretension and two-facedness.

On the whole, the public are positive, but they are judgemental.

Perhaps this, in the end, is the key to Cowell’s success: he acknowledges that we crave

the appearance of reality, but that we also want the reassurance of a happy ending for

those who deserve it and retribution for those who do not.

75 Either that or we just want to laugh at the man with the comb-over singing an out-of-

tune Mariah Carey song.

Adapted from an article by

Elizabeth Day, in *The Observer*

QUESTIONS

1. Look at lines 1-4. **In your own words**, identify the contrasting ideas the writer conveys in

the opening lines of the passage. 2

2. Explain **in your own words two** reasons why there is a “void” which “Cowell’s

creation seems to be filling” (line 12). 2

3. Look at lines 20-26, and then explain how two examples of the writer’s use of language

creates a sense of importance for reality television. 4

4. Look at lines 34-42, and explain **in your own words three** reasons the writer gives in

this paragraph for “our love affair with *The X Factor*” 3

5. Explain fully why the sentence “Yet it seems that 21st-century viewers are looking for

more than just simple entertainment”. (line 43) works well as a link at this point in the

passage. 2

6. Re-read lines 43-53, and then explain **in your own words** why the writer chooses Susan

Boyle as an example to support her argument. 3

7. Look at lines 54-64.

With reference to three examples of **word choice** from these lines, show fully how the

writer makes clear the dishonourable side of *The X Factor*. 6

8. Re-read lines 65-71. Show how the writer’s **sentence structure** conveys the writer’s

contempt towards reality television, and then **using your own words** sum up **two** points

she makes about the nature of reality television. 4

9. Look at the last two paragraphs (lines 72-76), and then list the key points the writer makes

about *The X Factor*. 4