If contemporary scholars themselves remain divided as to whether popular culture merits critical attention, it is hardly difficult to imagine how much more confusing the debate can be for students. In her new book *Interrogating Popular Culture*, though, American Studies professor Stacy Takacs offers readers an additional means of entry into the debate. Rather than retreading familiar arguments for the relevance of cultural, media, and/or genre studies, Takacs takes a reflexive and methodological approach that endorses critical thinking about popular culture and gives students the background and terminology to help them undertake their own critical thinking.

Takacs explains the reasoning behind this approach in her introduction: readers should be able to take what they need from the text in order to understand popular culture as both a phenomenon and a field of study, and *Interrogating* “will pay as much attention to these social relations as it does to the meanings and pleasures of the forms themselves” (p. x). Takacs begins by placing popular culture within a nexus of definition, method, influence, identity and disposition, and environment, and asserts that the reflexive form models critical thinking and helps readers avoid “imposing our assumptions and biases on these encounters” (p. ix). She also emphasizes the importance of making students aware that their own experience stems from tensions between the producers and the users of cultural resources (p. ix). With these opening ideas, Takacs fosters a commendable and unusually deep awareness on the part of her readers.

From here, Takacs opens the first chapter by providing a foundational overview of the term “culture,” noting how the contemporary definition builds from a number of different critical fields and eras of history. The following chapters are developed with the same intense focus and lack of fanfare: each begins with a question and proceeds in a conversational but educational tone with full introductions to notable cultural studies scholars, seminal works, and critical terminology. The book’s ten chapters thus examine the definition, functions, and relations of popular culture through questions such as “Is popular culture a modern phenomenon?” (ch. 2) and “Does popular culture make us smarter or dumber?” (ch. 10).

Since Takacs intends it to be either a textbook or supplementary course reading, *Interrogating* is structured in a recognizably classroom-oriented format complete with headers, boldfaced vocabulary terms, and conclusive summaries. With its cultural studies approach to the topic, though, *Interrogating*’s immersive blend of critical theory and contemporary examples would make it a complex but interesting and relevant text for most humanities courses that teach critical thinking, introduce theory, and/or require independent research.

While Takacs’ areas of inquiry are noticeably similar to John Fiske’s *Television Culture* (1987) and *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), or more recently, Dominic
Strinati’s *Introduction to Studying Popular Culture* (2000), *Interrogating* certainly keeps less experienced readers and scholars in mind. Takacs seems to aim her work at an introductory student audience with advanced capabilities: she creates a dense list of references, offering succinct introductions to an impressive array of theorists from Bakhtin (p. 55) to Barthes (p. 97) to Butler (p. 143) and a range in between that includes including Marx, Saussure, Propp, Bechdel, Jenkins, and Adorno and Horkheimer. Her intended audience is also obvious in the way she offers definition and context for basic critical terminology, including cultural authorization (19), othering (p. 19), the carnivalesque (p. 19), and hegemony (p. 102) as well as more culturally-oriented or practice-based terminology such as appropriation (103), gatekeeping (p. 116), self-identification (p. 145), and fandoms (p. 182). She writes as though this will be her audiences’ first experience with these terms and names, but at the same time her distillations are not oversimplified or trivialized.

Similarly, Takacs’ reflexive methodology and structure are also reminiscent of Richard Pfefferman *Strategic Reinvention in Popular Culture* (2013). However, where Pfefferman proposes a specific reflexive model as a means of examining popular culture and its artefacts, Takacs instead encourages and applies more general reflexive examination. Though both authors work similarly, and both offer case studies to demonstrate methodology, Pfefferman is focused on demonstrating a single model for critical use where Takacs is introducing the field to new entrants.

While Takacs’ reflexive approach and textbook arrangement attempt to keep critics and criticism relatively accessible, though, *Interrogating* can still feel intimidatedly dense at points. The type is spaced too compactly for either skimming or long periods of comfortable reading, and any text that attempts to introduce Marx or Adorno and Horkheimer in a sentence apiece must resort to more name-dropping than strictly comfortable. Similarly, although Takacs specifically aims for a text that can be read in pieces as necessary, each chapter’s sub-sections are difficult to read apart from the rest of the chapter. Readers will need the full chapter to understand Takacs’ references in each section, and oftentimes, even chapters refer to predecessors or future counterparts.

Despite these potential shortcomings to Takacs’ hopes for a modular text, *Interrogating Popular Culture* can still offer students and instructors an effective point of entry into the contentious field of popular culture studies. Takacs’ range of examples is helpfully wide-ranging, with references encompassing recognisable music icons, film franchises sports teams, role-playing games, and her approach to these examples fosters readers’ understanding of the topic’s complexity. *Interrogating Popular Culture* will help readers to realise that popular culture is not just a phenomenon, a weapon, a resource, or a field of ideological engagement, and that it is not created solely by institutions, values, or people: instead, as Takacs puts it, popular culture is a combination created by and from all of the above, and our everyday engagement with and in it will be helped by our knowledge of this fact.

*Maria Alberto, Cleveland State University*