

READING AND SPEAKING

Friends past

1 Discuss the questions.

- 1 What kind of TV programmes are these?

soap opera	sitcom	quiz show
documentary	reality TV	current affairs

Think of examples of each in your country. What are your favourites?

- 2 What American programmes are on TV in your country? Do you watch any of them?

2 T 9.6 Listen to the theme tune of *Friends*, one of the most successful American sitcoms ever. Can you remember any of the lines?

- 3 What do you know about *Friends*? Why do you think it was so successful?

4 Read the first half of the article and answer the questions.

- 1 What line in paragraph 1 summarizes the stories in *Friends*?
- 2 How long did the series last?
- 3 Why, according to Steve Beverly, was the show so popular?
- 4 What is so enviable about the *Friends*' lifestyle?
- 5 *Zeitgeist* is a German word meaning *the spirit or feeling of a period in history*. How did *Friends* capture the zeitgeist? Give two examples of how it defined it.
- 6 Why did *Friends* become more popular after 9/11?
- 7 How did the series change our language, hair, and drinking habits?

5 Read the second half of the article.

- 1 Who is related to who? Who is in love with who? What is the mixed emotion described at the end of the article?
- 2 What is each character like? Find some examples of their behaviour that illustrate the kind of person they are.

6 T 9.7 Listen to people describing a character in *Friends*, but without saying who it is. Which character is being described?

Language work

Match a word from the first part of the text in **A** with a similar word in **B**.

A	B
the small screen	looked for
trials	met
trendy	feeling deep sadness
encountered	difficulties
grieving	television
sought	fashionable

What do you think?

- Who is your favourite TV character? Why?
- Describe one of your closest friends.

IT WAS THE AMERICAN SITCOM THAT DEFINED A GENERATION – and introduced one of the world's most famous haircuts. The six stars of *Friends*, among the longest-running, most successful series ever to hit the small screen, went their separate ways after 237 episodes and a decade together as flatmates, sharing the trials of their lives, loves, and careers in a trendy New York apartment. The last episode was seen by an estimated world audience of over 100 million viewers.

'*Friends* had a huge influence on American TV history,' said Steve Beverly, professor of communication arts. 'This group of six reflected a microcosm of what people their age encountered in their daily lives. Viewers related to them. We *all* wanted a life like theirs – the cool New York flat with table football and easy chairs, and the social circle of beautiful, supportive friends.'

We also wanted to drink endless cappuccinos. Interestingly enough, the first New York Starbucks store opened in the same year that *Friends* started. The dual rise of coffee culture and *Friends* was one example of how the show captured the zeitgeist. At other times it defined it. The 'Rachel' haircut was copied by millions of women.

The series has even been credited with influencing how many of us speak. Researchers analysed every episode to explore whether popular culture influenced how we speak. Prior to the series, the commonest way to intensify an adjective was by using *very* or *really*. On *Friends*, the most common intensifier was *so*. 'This guy is like so cool,' they said, and now we all say.

The show enjoyed a huge surge in ratings after the 11 September terrorist attacks, as grieving New Yorkers struggled to make sense of the real horrors that had unfolded around them. In the familiar comforts of the show, they sought the return of a feel-good factor, according to Robert Thompson, professor of television and popular culture. '*Friends* is set not in the real New York, but in the New York of some Utopian fantasy where the rooms in the apartments are huge, everybody leaves their doors unlocked and people don't fly planes into buildings,' he said.

FRIENDS PAST

It was much more than a brilliant comedy, says Claire Rooney – it changed our language, our hair, and even our drinking habits



So who are these characters?

Ross has been in love with Rachel, the best friend of his sister Monica, since childhood, and throughout the whole series they have an on-off romance. In the final episode they actually do get back together again. Ross is a bit of a bore and a geek. He's always whining.

Chandler, a computer programmer, used to share an apartment with Joey. He's constantly telling jokes and making everybody laugh. He had a few relationships throughout the series, mostly disastrous because he would always find flaws in the women he dated, but then married Monica.

Joey is a New York Italian. He's an actor who manages to spend most of the series unemployed. Nevertheless he has total belief in his talents. He's rather dense, but lovable and charming. He'll cheer himself up with food or women. Either will do, but both at the same time is best.

Rachel is a spoilt little rich girl who gets a job in the local coffee house, and later becomes a fashion consultant. She is terrible in a crisis, and will throw her arms up in despair. Rachel and Ross get together so many times, but things keep going wrong, until they finally make it permanent in the last episode.

Phoebe is the group hippy. She is wild and very eccentric, and she's always smiling. She is a spiritual masseuse, who is always communicating with the dead and chanting about auras. She is best known for her unique guitar playing – her most famous song is *Smelly Cat*.

Monica, hard as it is to believe, used to be fat. She is a deeply insecure character and is always tidying up. She's also bossy, and has to have her own way. Her desire is to find her dream man, get married, and have babies. Eventually she settles down with Chandler.

More like a way of life

Friends is more than just a sitcom, it's a way of life. Our attitudes to the *Friends*' lives is a mixture of envy – 'How do they get to sit on sofas all day sipping coffee and being witty?' – and disdain: 'Don't they have anything better to do with their time, like earn a living to pay for that Manhattan apartment?'

They were supposed to be in their mid-twenties, with lives untroubled by work and responsibility. With the cast approaching forty, the show had to come to an end. But of course, *Friends* will last forever.

