

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

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A Wonderful Window

The Cold War made the '50s a grim, gray time, when uniformity was prized and difference was suspect. But amidst all the paranoia, the era had one characteristic that I thought was absolutely wonderful: television. It was an invention whose time had come, entering people's houses and soon becoming a focus of their lives.

My family didn't get a television right away when they became generally available. But when, finally, we did, it was a momentous event.

Partly that was because we got to be like everybody else for once. But mainly, it had to do with the nature of television itself. Unlike books, you didn't have to learn how to use it. You just plugged it in and turned it on, and it instantly brought all sorts of new things into your life.

When Timothy Leary later exhorted people to "turn on, tune in," it wasn't just about drugs. It was an allusion to the transportive property of television, its ability to show different realities. Or fantasies. Books suggested other possibilities, but television actually showed them.

Movies did that too, of course, but movies were shown in a space set apart from everyday life, sort of like church. The movie theaters from the '30s still extant in the '50s were in themselves exotic, rococo or art deco museums of a bygone era. But television was right there, in your own living room. Or family room, as the case might be. Wherever family life centered, that was where the television was.

For us, it was the living room. Our television set was a giant cube on thin metal legs, with an antenna called rabbit ears perched on top -- a modernist intrusion in an otherwise traditional room. Across from it was my father's rocking chair, with my child-size rocking chair alongside.

There we sat, my father and I, and watched westerns. Gunsmoke, which I liked, because of Miss Kitty and Chester and Doc (Matt Dillon, one of those chunky '50s monoliths, was the least interesting character). And Have Gun, Will Travel, which I didn't like at all, but was one of my father's favorites. I saw Steve McQueen get his break as the bounty hunter on Wanted, Dead or Alive. And Clint Eastwood as shy young

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

Rowdy Yates on Rawhide.

What titles they had, these television westerns. Evoking, even celebrating, violence, grit and death. My father, apparently feeling an explanation was called for, said he liked to watch them because of the horses. But since he seldom rode, although there was a bridle path a couple of miles from our house, I think there was more to it than that.

Title songs highlighted particular concepts. "'Have gun, will travel' reads the card of a man/ A knight without armor in a savage land" explained the muscle for hire wittily named Paladin, not so much a knight without armor as a condottiere without comrades. While "Riverboat ring your bell, fare thee well Annabelle/ Luck is the lady that he loves the best" was a gloss on the itinerant gambler Maverick.

These two series presented images of adventure, of untrammelled freedom and derring-do; of men, faithless but dashing, leading unsettled and exciting lives. For responsible family men, with office jobs and ordered lives, it was a chance for vicarious enjoyment. They had chosen the role of provider, taking on the burden of being the sole earner for a wife and children, but they evidently liked to see these alternatives. For my father, who had spent a long lifetime in a web of family obligation, it must have been especially appealing.

None of these shows were big on interiors. On *Gunsmoke*, for example, they were pretty much limited to the jailhouse or the saloon. But other kinds of programs dealt with space differently. Situation comedies like *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best* focused on the living room and kitchen of contemporary houses. These were the domain of the housewife, the role that so many women took on in the '50s.

Interiors could also be spaces of imagination. What I liked best about the *Thin Man* series, with detective couple Nick and Nora Charles, was their penthouse apartment in New York. I wanted one just like it when I grew up. And on a different level, I responded to their lifestyle: a couple who were comrades, who sleuthed together instead of going their separate ways, and had a pet instead of children.

I had other shows of my own, too. After-school and Saturday morning television were a little less white-male oriented than prime time. I liked

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

the original Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, which unfortunately was only on for a short time. And Broken Arrow, about the Apache chief Cochise. For once, Native Americans got to be the heroes. Then there was Sky King, about a rancher with an airplane -- and a niece named Penny, who got to fly too.

Two other programs I liked were more surreal, despite realistic settings: The Lone Ranger and Superman. One took place in the familiar landscape of conventional westerns; the other had an urban locale already somewhat remote from '50s' experience. But both focused on men in disguise, people with roles that transcended ordinary life.

They also transcended stereotypes, however covertly. There was a popular joke at the time, in which the Lone Ranger and Tonto were surrounded by armed warriors, braves on horseback. The Lone Ranger said, "Looks like we're done for, Tonto."

And Tonto replied, "What do you mean 'we', paleface?"

There was something subversive about Tonto, a quiet power that belied his supportive role. Apparently it made some people nervous; the joke itself is a product of anxiety. But it heartened others. The fact that Tonto was played by a Native American (specifically Canadian) actor, Jay Silverheels, gave him greater authority. Of the two characters, Tonto was the real person; the Lone Ranger was a phantom.

"Who was that masked man?" someone often asked at the end of an episode, as he rode off on his white horse. We never found out. We never saw the man without his mask, or learned his real name. And what information we did have about him was contradictory.

Unlike Paladin or Maverick, who traveled the West alone, the so-called Lone Ranger always had a companion. Preaching a message of harmony and tolerance that seemed heartfelt, he brought along silver bullets. He wore the uniform of a lawman, but hid his face like an outlaw. And the mask he wore was the mask of a Harlequin, or a fancy-dress ball. The Lone Ranger was a figure of his own fantasy, caught up in an obsessive quest whose origin was never satisfactorily explained.

With Superman, on the other hand, the premise was clear: He was here

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

to fight for "truth, justice, and the American way," as the voice-over at the beginning of each episode announced. Just why an extraterrestrial would choose to do that was less clear, but both his real identity and his alter ego were well-defined.

As a "strange visitor from another planet," Superman "came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men." Needing to fit in -- as who didn't, in the '50s -- he took on the persona of "mild-mannered reporter" Clark Kent (not quite the oxymoron it might seem today).

The real fascination of the series was not Superman's superhuman powers -- X-ray vision, incredible strength, the ability to fly -- but Lois Lane's all-too-human blindness. She was in love with Superman but scornful of Clark Kent, unable to see that they were the same person. A tough reporter herself, ignoring the cultural admonition to stay at home (perhaps because the character originated in 1930s comic books), Lois Lane still adored the hyper-masculinity that Superman represented.

Superman was all testosterone, without its nasty side effects; the epitome of the strong, silent type. While Clark Kent was self-effacing, articulate, and humorous. For nice young men of the '50s who lost dates to football heroes, it was perhaps consoling to see that Lois Lane had a problem.

But of all the series I watched, my favorite was Perry Mason, about the lawyer who never lost a case. The climatic scene of each episode took place in the courtroom, but I was fascinated by Perry's office. It always had art, even that rare form, sculpture, years before art became widely popular. Pieces varied over the years, but a bust by the door was a staple, and a mask on the wall behind Perry's desk.

The three main characters fascinated me too, Perry and Della and Paul. Della Street was Perry's secretary -- executive secretary, he called her -- a smart, capable, and caring woman. Strict feminist criticism would fault the fact that she was only a helper, not a lawyer herself. But then so was Paul Drake. Even though he was said to run a major detective agency in Los Angeles, he seemed to work only for Perry. At any rate, he was always instantly available whenever Perry needed his help, even if it involved flying to Mexico or Hong Kong.

And anyway, there were in fact few women lawyers at the time. These

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

were the days when Sandra Day O'Connor, later a Supreme Court justice, couldn't get a job when she got out of law school, despite a booming post-war economy. Although Bette Davis memorably played a lawyer in one episode when Raymond Burr was absent. She was condescended to by men but ultimately won the case -- despite being a corporate lawyer. And in at least one episode in the later years, there was a woman judge.

And then there was Perry himself, so solid and reassuring, a beacon of hope in the darkness of the '50s. While Senator Joe McCarthy conducted his witch hunts for Communists, chipping away at the First Amendment, Perry Mason was a countervailing force. A sign that things would turn out all right in the end, that justice would prevail.

He was as concerned for truth and justice as Superman, with no kryptonite to do him in. If he didn't have Superman's physical powers, he was a lot smarter. And he had Paul and Della to help him. They were a dedicated team and a group of friends. Perry was wily, too, skirting the edges of legality to help his clients. He was ready to help anyone in trouble, and he was always, always right.

The series was long-running, at a time when more series did have staying power. It was on for nine years, from 1957 to 1966. By the latter days, things had loosened up considerably, in response to changing times.

Gyrating teenagers began to appear in the background at restaurants, dancing to a different sort of music. Perry got a more casual haircut. When he and Della and Paul talked over coffee in the office, they drank from styrofoam cups, instead of the china service they had previously used. And, in the ultimate transformation, the last few episodes were even in color.