

Everything I Know, I Learned from TV

My fascination with television began before I'd even started school. With both parents working and Tammy in school, I stayed with my maternal grandma Eula in Kokomo during the weekdays, up to and through the year I attended kindergarten.

When she wasn't shopping or cooking, Grandma was glued to daytime TV talk shows and the soaps on NBC. Her favorite was *Another World*.

I vividly remember watching with her one Friday afternoon as "Rachel" was lured into a warehouse and shot down in cold blood. The music swelled as the screen faded to black.

"Oh no! Grandma!" I yelled. "Rachel's dead!"

"Oh, honey. No, she's not," Grandma explained. "She's the star of the show. She'll be back on Monday."

"But, Grandma, she just got shot! She's dead!"

"Oh, you little stinker. Don't worry. You'll see on Monday."

I couldn't wait for the weekend to be over to learn Rachel's fate.

As *Another World* began the following Monday afternoon, Rachel was rushed to the hospital, where she miraculously survived.

"See, honey?"

These aren't real people! I realized. *These are just grown-ups playing make believe!*

HOW COOL IS THAT?!

Television became an escape from the classmates who bullied me and a dad with whom I could not connect.

I watched reruns constantly, obsessing over one show, then another.

After discovering *Adventures of Superman* and *Batman*, I wanted to be a superhero. I became an avid DC Comics fan. I created a costume for a hero of my own, "Bullet Man," and actually wore it under my clothes occasionally at school.

I became obsessed with the idea of living in a bottle during my *I Dream of Jeannie* phase. I read everything I could find about witches while endlessly watching

Bewitched. *The Lone Ranger* created dreams of being a cowboy. *Gilligan's Island*, *The Addams Family*, *Flintstones*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. I literally learned to swim the breast stroke from watching Aquaman on *SuperFriends* – stunning my until-then dismissive PE teacher.

TV overshadowed all other interests. I had begged my parents to let me attend an acrobatics class on Saturday mornings. They agreed and paid the tuition. After just a few weeks, I realized I'd much rather stay home and watch TV.

One after another, I devoured and absorbed shows and inadvertently began to learn about the world that existed *outside* of Kokomo, Indiana – and about what existed *within* me.

Ever see the 1960s *Tarzan* movies starring Mike Henry? I did, at an early age, and I sensed *something*. *Tarzan* stimulated – *something* – some sort of nice emotion. But I couldn't define or name it; I didn't even try. I knew what *I* was before I knew what *it* was, all thanks to TV.

The original *Star Trek* was another major obsession. I particularly liked episodes when Captain Kirk took off his shirt. I remember having dreams, at no older than 7 or 8, of Kirk being abducted by aliens and subjected to tests that required he be stripped and connected to a something that resembled a cow-milking machine. I always woke up feeling – *odd*.

I read all the paperbacks about *Star Trek* published around that time. As I learned about the show, I absorbed the *concept* of TV – how shows were made, how networks worked. I read about the actor who played Captain Kirk – and for some reason, I plummeted into a depression when I read that he had a wife. I never confronted myself about *why* I would have such a reaction, nor did I have any sense that *what* I was feeling – what I *was* – was wrong. I couldn't connect that feeling to sex because, at the time, I had no concept of sex at all.

Television seemed to grow up a bit in the early 1970s, but it was still decades away from the era of “anti-hero” shows like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. In my childhood, the leads of TV shows were almost always good people. In a strange way, I subliminally gleaned my own sense of morality from what I saw on TV.

I watched as Mary Richards worked hard and made the right decisions (even though I identified more with Rhoda). And wait a minute! Did Rhoda just tell Phyllis that her brother is *gay*? *Really*?

Maude spoke out – loud – about the issues of the day, but even she never crossed the line into being “bad.” She even tried to save a neighborhood gay bar! *Whatever that was!*

One Day at a Time’s Ann Romano struggled to be an independent woman while raising two daughters and never acted like a loose woman or a bad mom.

What of Archie Bunker, you ask? Yes, he was perhaps TV’s first “anti-hero,” but when push came to shove, even *he* proved to be decent – comforting daughter Gloria when she miscarried, begrudgingly proving his love to his long-suffering wife Edith. Even when Archie baptized his grandson against Gloria and Meathead’s wishes, he still seemed somewhat noble.

Lead characters on TV didn’t cheat, didn’t use bad language, and didn’t gossip. If someone smoked, you automatically knew he or she was the villain. The good people always won. The bad people lost. All conflicts were resolved and the star almost always got what he or she wanted by the last commercial break. And the status quo was restored.

I wanted to be a lead character in life! I wanted *life* to be a TV show!

TV provided one opportunity to bond with Dad. He loved well-written sitcoms, particularly anything produced by Norman Lear. Laughing at the same jokes together while watching *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *Mary Tyler Moore* gave us common ground and something to talk about.

I read *TV Guide* cover to cover every week, back when it was a digest-sized newsprint magazine enveloped by glossy full-color pages in front and back. Its annual Fall Preview issue was like Christmas in September. Page after glossy page of new shows, color photos of the stars, news about the fall season. I particularly loved looking at the black-and-white show ads on the inner newsprint pages.

Mom thought I was nuts when I saved five weeks’ worth of allowance to buy *The Complete Directory to Prime-Time Network Shows 1946-Present* by Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh. She thought me crazier still when I proceeded to read the over-

1,000-page volume from cover to cover, not only absorbing detailed descriptions of my favorite shows, but learning the history of TV itself. (*There was a fourth network? TV shows used to be 15 minutes long?*)

“Leon, what’s on tonight?” Dad would ask on any particular night.

“Well, there’s *Partridge Family* then a Movie of the Week on ABC, *Emergency* and a movie on NBC. But, Dad! It’s Saturday! We watch CBS on Saturday night!”

One of my biggest TV obsessions up to that time, *The Carol Burnett Show*, was appointment-TV in our house, long before the term was coined. I struggled through *M*A*S*H* and *Bob Newhart*, trying to not fall asleep before 10 p.m.

I loved her opening Q&As with her audience, the commercial parodies, and the movie take-offs (even if I hadn’t seen the films they were spoofing). And those guest stars: Maggie Smith! Anthony Newley! Roddy McDowall! Betty White! I wasn’t crazy about the big musical numbers, but they *were* impressive.

Watching them struggle *not* to crack up during sketches was the best. They were having such fun. *How lucky they get paid to do this! I wish I could do that!*

My favorite bits were the “Family” sketches with Eunice, Mama, and Ed. For some reason, those bits really struck a chord with me – the small-town setting, Eunice’s unrealized big-time show-biz dreams, the hilarious accents, the vicious, ruthless attacks.

Cheryl and I would mimic Mama and Eunice endlessly on camping trips, driving our parents mad with our horrible imitation Southern accents.

Sometimes, I even managed to stay up for the first 30 minutes of a brand-new, very strange variety show called *Saturday Night Live*.

When I was 12, Dad had to attend a UAW convention in LA, and he took us along. Los Angeles was a huge disappointment, visually. The sky was a deep gray. The city seemed as flat as Indiana and even more vast.

The low point of the trip was riding in a car with a terrified Mom as she braved Southern California freeways all the way to “beautiful downtown Burbank” to see a taping of *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*. After what seemed like hours, we arrived at NBC. Mom was crushed when told kids under 16 weren’t allowed in the audience.

We begged Mom to go in without us; we told her we could wait in the car. But the *Tonight Show* was 90 minutes long in those days, and Mom was terrified to leave us alone that long. She feared we'd be kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), those wacky terrorists who'd recently snatched Patty Hearst. We got back into the car and drove back to the hotel, and she never did get to see Johnny.

The *best* memory was the Universal Studios tour. Touring the back lot, glimpsing “behind the scenes,” only fed my TV fever. The tour guide asked how many of us went to the movies once a week. A few raised their hands. She then asked how many watched TV once a week. Every hand shot up.

My TV mania intensified to a deeper level.

As I started junior high, I found a new best friend, Harry. He was a sissy boy and TV-fiend like me.

By the mid-1970s, *Bionic Woman* and *Wonder Woman*¹ eclipsed all previous TV obsessions, and Harry shared my madness for both. You could keep Charlie and his Angels. Harry and I would tape episodes on our cassette recorders. We kept volumes of scrapbooks, clipping out photos of Lindsay Wagner and Lynda Carter from magazines (bonus points if Ms. Carter was wearing her Wonder Woman costume!).

We'd write our own scripts – short little skits, ongoing “TV series” or “movies” – and act them out, recording them on our cassette recorders. Soon, we graduated to film. Using my mom's silent Super 8 camera, we shot 12 three-minute “episodes” of a “series” called *Wonder Twins*,² playing costumed superhero siblings continually targeted by a villain played by Harry's brother Mike (one of the other misfits who played with me in elementary school).³

I learned other things from TV.

¹ Decades later, a shrink told me I was attracted to these shows because they provided role models who were strong but not macho. Bingo!

² We were mad as hell months later when *SuperFriends* introduced two new characters named the Wonder Twins.

³ As modest and amateur as those shorts were, I learned a lot of the basics of filmmaking doing them.

I'd always been clumsy and insecure on top of a horse or mule,⁴ bouncing around and clutching the saddle horn. I had no "seat" as they say in horsey circles.

During summers, we'd go to "mule shows" in Red Rock, Iowa, where Dad competed (and often won). The first time we went, a runaway mule knocked me down and trampled me as it fled the arena. The resulting screams, and Mom's terrified expression as the officials ripped open my jeans to check the damage, were scarier than playing foot mat for a mule!⁵

That was enough! I watched the rest of the events from the safety of the sidelines.

The following spring, as Dad brought our mules out for the first time since winter, I couldn't wait to jump on my mom's mule Tuckerjack. I galloped around the yard as my parents watched, open-mouthed. They were amazed. I suddenly was a good rider; I'd found my seat. I had confidence in the saddle. *What had happened?*

That summer, I entered, alongside Dad, the "main event" in the Iowa mule show, a long race outside the arena across a mile-long field.

Oh, isn't that cute! That delicate little 13-year-old competing against all us old, seasoned mule breakers! Bless his heart.

I had no expectations – I just wanted to ride fast!

The race began. About 15 of us took off. Now, Tuckerjack always ran ahead of the rest whenever we were heading back to the barn or camp. But I was stunned as he lunged forward with more horsepower than he'd ever displayed before. It was like riding a rocket.

Suddenly, we were in third place. Then second.

I came up on Dad on his mule Shadrack, currently in first place.

"Dad!" I shouted as I approached. "Hurry or I'll have to pass you!"

Dad turned to look back, and broke out in a wide grin.

"Don't worry about me! *Go! Go!*"

And I did. Tuckerjack and I won the race.

Those grizzled, seasoned mule breakers were incredulous as I was handed the prize money and trophy.

⁴ For the uninitiated, mules are *not* donkeys. They're hybrids of a horse and a donkey. They're basically horses with larger ears, more common sense and stamina, and a hilarious signature bray.

⁵ Luckily, the mule stepped on my rear right thigh, not my back or ribs. It left a very impressive mark for months.

I'll never forget Dad's smiling face. I felt I'd made him proud of me at long last. It was a wonderful feeling.

I wasn't about to spoil it by telling him the truth – I acquired my newfound equestrian prowess by observing Wonder Woman riding a stallion to chase after a runaway horse.

By the late 1970s, the three TV networks' bloodthirsty battle for ratings supremacy became news. It even inspired the amazing, Oscar-winning *Network*. It fascinated me endlessly. My parents didn't share my interest. Coming home from *Network*, my dad exclaimed, "What the hell did we just see? I don't get it." But I did.

Many kids my age played "Dungeons and Dragons." With our TV geekdom reaching a fevered boil, Harry and I created our own game: "Fantasy Networks."

"What the hell is that?" you ask.

Harry had his imaginary TV network, WBS. My pretend network was UBC. We would each plan our "schedules," creating "shows" and deciding where they'd land on our respective line-ups. We'd then compare our programming slates and mutually decide which shows and line-ups were the "hits" and which would probably be flops. And we'd adjust our schedules accordingly.

You're judging me right now, aren't you? Admit it.

Like network TV at the time, many of my shows were copycats and rip-offs of real-life hits. Like *Hawaii Hotel*. "Filmed on location" with weekly guest stars, it was my answer to *Love Boat*. I capitalized on TV's current "jiggle" trend with *Svelte Sleuths*, about two high-fashion models who moonlighted as private detectives. And of course, I had my own version of *Wonder Woman* with *Ultra Woman*, a character I'd drawn in grade school.

Dallas debuted in 1978, so UBC had its own share of prime-time soaps. *Acres of Iowa* was basically the "Acords of Indiana," if we'd been filthy rich. *The Goodards* was a spin-off of *Acres of Iowa*, loosely inspired by Harry's family, about a middle-class family's struggles after oil is discovered on their Arkansas farm.

A few "original" shows I was particularly proud of: *Amazing Grace* followed *Sister Grace*, a middle-aged nun who always found herself solving murders. Think

Columbo in a habit.⁶ *Orion's Belt* was a sci-fi epic about the lonely crew of an intergalactic tanker ship assigned to a distant part of the universe. In the Norman Lear vein, there was *Yesterday*, a seriocomic sitcom about a group of cohabitating co-eds in the rapidly changing late 1960s.

We played this game for several “seasons.”

All of this nonsense with Harry – obsessing over TV shows and taping them on audio cassettes, filming *Wonder Twins*, playing network honchos – was a terrific escape from a school life I hated, and a diversion from a father I avoided as much as possible. My imagination was erupting, exploding. I was telling stories and creating worlds.

Maybe I could work in the TV business when I grow up.

Maybe I'll be a writer.

Hey! Maybe I'll be an actor!

But then, Dad bought the farm.

⁶ This was several years *before Murder, She Wrote*.