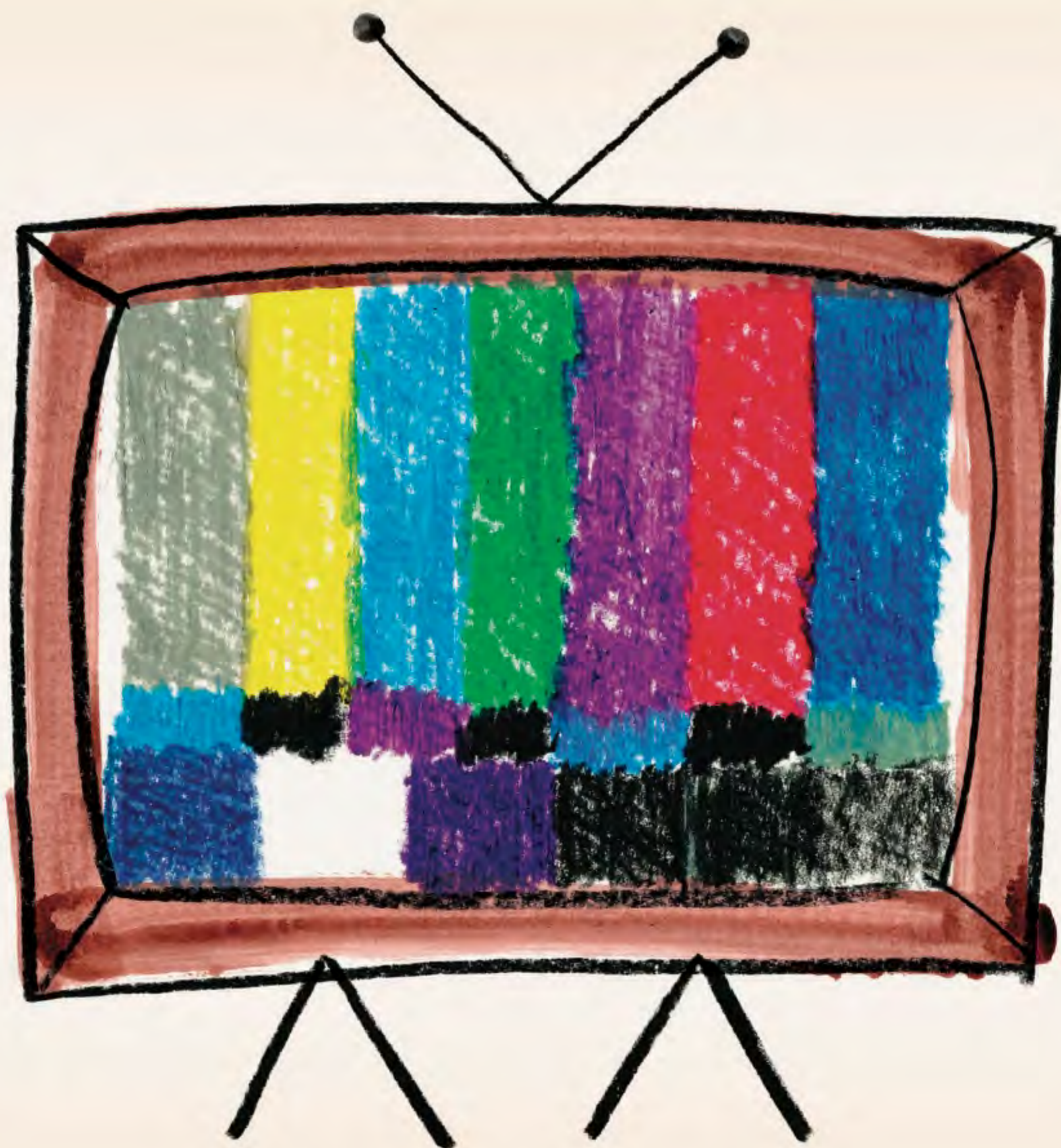


On writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

IN THIS ISSUE: JOEY MAZZARINO, NORMAN STILES, PETER HIRSCH AND SUSAN KIM



on writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

June 2010 | Volume #32

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

In 1969, the recently formed Children's Television Workshop produced a new kind of educational show for kids. Workshop Executive Director Joan Ganz Cooney described the experiment:

The techniques we're using at the Workshop are quite deliberately drawn from approaches which have proven effective on commercial television. Fast action, humor and animation have become established means of attracting children's attention to television, and we're using these same techniques to motivate children to absorb the curriculum content of our series.

The idea was to employ the same techniques advertisers used to sell products as a way to sell numbers and the alphabet to children. The show was called *Sesame Street*.

Forty years later, *Sesame Street* has become a staple of children's television, not just in the U.S., but all over the world. And the concept of making educational television as entertaining as commercial TV has given rise to an entire generation of children's shows, as well as cable channels devoted to children's programming.

In this issue, we talk to Norman Stiles and Joey Mazzarino—the former head writer and the current head writer of *Sesame Street*—and to children's television writers Peter Hirsch and Susan Kim. Though much of animated children's television is not covered under a Guild contract, the WGAE has an Animation Caucus actively working to change that.

On *The Back Page*, we have a humor piece by Mark O'Donnell called *Nick At Twilight: A midlife guide to classic boomer television*.

— Arlene Hellerman



Joey Mazzarino
AND Norman Stiles

NEW YORK CITY – SEPTEMBER 18, 2009

ON WRITING: There's a DVD set called *Sesame Street Old School* with early episodes of the show which I've been innocently watching with my 2-year-old daughter. And I have been chastised by both of you for bad parental oversight—

STILES: —Yes, it's terrible.

MAZZARINO: What are you doing?

STILES: It's filled with all sorts of negative modeling.

MAZZARINO: Remember the *Don't Lick the Outlet* bit? "Don't lick the outlet, use your tongue for other things. Don't lick the outlet..." You don't remember that?

ON WRITING: No.

MAZZARINO: Oh, it must be in Volume 2.

STILES: It's Volume 2.

ON WRITING: We haven't seen that yet. We're still licking outlets. So you chastised me and I spent a lot of time trying to guess what the bad things were.

STILES: There are many bad things.

ON WRITING: Like what?

MAZZARINO: You were there, Norman, you wrote those bad things.

STILES: Well, most of the things that were bad were already in the show when I arrived.

ON WRITING: The show started in 1969 and you arrived in '70?

STILES: Yes, but by the time I arrived they had already shot three seasons. They were shooting two seasons in a year.

ON WRITING: Wow.

STILES: Which was, at the time, 220 shows.

MAZZARINO: Those were the days.

STILES: And when I got there—I'm trying to think how many writers they had—it was either four or five writers—

MAZZARINO: —Four or five writers writing 220 shows. Do the math on that; that is a lot of shows.

STILES: Now, you're not writing the full hour.

ON WRITING: Because?

STILES: Because there's a lot of stuff in the bank—although at the beginning there wasn't that much. They were writing the segments that took place on the Street—

ON WRITING: —On Sesame Street?

STILES: On the Street itself, right. And segments that they called insert segments with puppets, things like Ernie and Bert segments and Cookie Monster segments that took place off the Street. All the major characters had been created before I got there with the exception of The Count—Big Bird, Oscar, Cookie Monster, Grover, Herry Monster, Bert and Ernie, Prairie Dawn—their personalities, their quirks, their obsessions had already been established before I got there. And the sensibility of the show was already there, it had evolved from [Jim] Henson's sensibility and from Jon Stone and Jeff Moss. Jon, Jeff and Dan Wilcox had come from *Captain Kangaroo*. And if you look at old *Captain Kangaroo* stuff, it's pretty funny.

MAZZARINO: Is it really?

STILES: Oh, yeah. They had things that were kind of obsessions where the Captain would get caught doing something—I think it was Bunny Rabbit who always used to trap him in a circumstance where he'd get ping-pong balls dropped on his head.

ON WRITING: Right.

STILES: And it was that kind of edginess—

MAZZARINO: —You're saying that *Captain Kangaroo* was edgy?

STILES: Yeah.

MAZZARINO: I didn't know that.

ON WRITING: I didn't know that, either.

MAZZARINO: I watched it when I was a kid.

STILES: There were subtle things. It didn't go quite as far as *Sesame Street* but you could see in a lot of the bits and in a lot of the characters two sides, one for the kids and one for the parents. And if you looked at the Captain, he was a wacky-looking guy. He's a kid's character but he's almost a takeoff on a kid's character if you really think about it. It was quite something as a regular thing every morning on CBS.

ON WRITING: Was that unusual?

STILES: Think about that for today. Would you have a kids' show on CBS in the morning?

ON WRITING: No.

MAZZARINO: So the sensibility came from the *Captain* show—

STILES: —*Captain* and from Henson.

MAZZARINO: And what happened on those first couple of seasons? What was the stuff that was the most outrageous that they stopped doing?

STILES: You know, it's interesting. I've been away from it for a while so I can only assume some of the things.

MAZZARINO: Well, I was looking up some old Super Grover pieces and there was one where he was trying to solve a kid's fight; there were two puppets fighting in the background and Grover's talking to the camera about how to solve it. And the puppets were pummeling each other. I'm saying, this is great, they're getting each other in headlocks. I asked a producer, "Why can't we do this anymore?" She said, "Because that

was a different time." It'd be great because puppets hitting each other is funny. But we would never do that anymore. I think they got away with a lot more puppet violence.

STILES: I can think of something else that you would not see today. It's *Monsterpiece Theater* with Cookie as Alistair Cookie. We did a whole series that was a takeoff on *Masterpiece Theatre*; it was created by Tony Geiss. The opening was a wonderful parody where the camera moved through pictures of various people and fancy books and then you had Cookie Monster who did the introduction and then said, "Now we watch." And he put a pipe in his mouth.

MAZZARINO: Oh, right, the pipe.

STILES: So that's one problem. And then at the end he said, "Tune in again next time for *Monsterpiece Theater*," and he ate the pipe. So for two reasons—

MAZZARINO: —Smoking.

STILES: Smoking. And choking on a pipe.

MAZZARINO: No smoking, no choking. That's the new rule: no smoking, no choking.

STILES: Negative modeling. But it's not that everything in *Old School* is not good for your kids, it's that there are some things that have been retired because they don't think they're right for kids today. Parents are much more aware of the influence television can have on their kids, and I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing. I think they need to be more media literate and be careful about what they're showing to their kids. And when they're watching with their kids, they should actually have discussions about what they're watching. Because kids, especially young kids, don't really have a handle yet on what's real and what's not real, and what's fantasy and what isn't fantasy. I think kids today may have a little better handle than kids did back then because there wasn't as much media. *Sesame Street* was the only show of its kind, there weren't other options. And that's one of the reasons it became so popular. It set the standard.

ON WRITING: I want to talk about that a bit. The *Old School* DVD set has the initial pitch that Joan Ganz Cooney made to sell *Sesame Street*, and in it she talks about the idea of deliberately using techniques drawn from commercial television to draw kids into learning: fast action, humor and animation. I didn't realize that this was a new idea.

STILES: Well, not only that, I don't know if she mentioned it, but they were also going to use techniques from advertising.

ON WRITING: Yes, she says the same way that advertisers sell products, they were going to sell the alphabet and numbers. So this was really the beginning of all that.

STILES: Oh, absolutely.

ON WRITING: And she keeps saying, "This is an experiment."

MAZZARINO: Lloyd Morrisett happened to watch his kid watching a test pattern—

ON WRITING: —Lloyd Morrisett?

STILES: He and Joan did this project together.

MAZZARINO: He noticed that his kid got up one morning and was just staring at a test pattern on TV—because in those days in the early morning that's all there was. And he realized there was something about this connection. Then he and Joan got together and started looking at what draws a kid to the television, and they came up with all these ideas.

STILES: One story that I heard from that time was that there was a commercial for Roloids—

MAZZARINO: —R-O-L-A-I-D-S.

STILES: Yeah, it said, "How do you spell relief?" And a person said "R-O-L-A-I-D-S." So kids actually thought you spelled relief R-O-L-A-I-D-S. It's really interesting because that's wonderful; it's a great indication of how powerful television can be to teach. But it also has the power to teach the wrong thing.

ON WRITING: So when you were first writing *Sesame Street*—and when you write it now—how do you integrate the educational stuff with the comedy? Because basically it's just great sketch comedy writing.

MAZZARINO: I don't know about the old days, but since I've been there, we have a curriculum document and Norman is the king of finding the curriculum. I'd come in with a comedy idea and say, "But Norman, I don't know what I'm teaching." "Don't worry. Page 36, right here, health and hygiene." He would just pull it out of the air. Norman was my teacher and my swami and everything else; it's really about teaching you how to write comedy. It's comedy first and character first and a damn good ending—he would always make sure we had an ending to our sketches. These are characters and they have to act true to what they want, and they all have very strong wants and very strong desires.

STILES: You can do funny things in lots of different ways but I think what Joey's put his finger on is that the thing that gives *Sesame Street* its longevity is its characters. You understand from the beginning what their personalities are, what their wants are and what their crazy intentions are because of the way they act



and the way they speak. The characters themselves have something that's funny about them, and unique and special that endear themselves to both adults and children. The other thing you asked is, "How do you incorporate the comedy into the education?"

ON WRITING: Right.

STILES: It's the other way around. You start with the education and you say, "I have to teach consequent events so that a child will be able to figure out what's going to happen next." So for instance, I wrote a bit for Ernie and Bert. Ernie is in bed about to eat cookies. Bert tells him not to eat cookies in bed because he'll get crumbs in his sheets. Ernie thinks out loud about the consequent events: The crumbs from the sheets will get in his pajamas, which will make him itch, and then he won't be able to sleep. He decides not to eat cookies in his bed ever again. Instead, he goes to eat cookies in Bert's bed.

MAZZARINO: I find that what we've done now with curriculum—well, they've always done this, I guess, but when we had 110 shows, if the curriculum was Native American culture, you could do 10 shows about Native American culture and we had 100 shows to play with. Now it's 26 shows.

ON WRITING: Wow.

MAZZARINO: So when they say we have to teach science as a curriculum, I say, "We have 26 shows. How many of these are going to deliver the science message?" And that really has been helpful for me as head writer to say, "Half of these shows are going to be science, so everybody start thinking science." So one thing in the curriculum this year is habitats and migration—great, we have Big Bird. We thought, maybe Big Bird is going to migrate away from *Sesame*

Street and it becomes an emotional story about leaving home. Then you learn about all these habitats and what migration is and everything else.

STILES: When Joey said emotional, that's the other thing. Every one of these things is connected to an emotion of some kind. So as he just said, if you're going to teach migration you can say, "Birds migrate. They go from here to there and they do this and that along the way." But if you tie that to Big Bird deciding he wants to be a migratory bird and that means he would have to leave *Sesame Street*—

MAZZARINO: —Yeah, so then you have emotion mixed in—

STILES: —And you have the character and the story connected to the curriculum.

ON WRITING: Who gives you the curriculum?

MAZZARINO: The research department comes up with a curriculum every year. I don't know who actually decides what the curriculum will be, but they plan it out in two- or three-year chunks. We're handling science for two or three seasons and then we'll do whatever they decide is the next curriculum. We've always been a whole-child curriculum, so we handle letters and numbers, but we have one focus every year where we shine a spotlight on a different curricular goal, and this year it happens to be science.

ON WRITING: And is that true for *Between the Lions*, too?

MAZZARINO: It's not only literacy? It's other stuff as well?

STILES: No, it's all literacy. But the way you go about



writing it is exactly the same. For example, one of the things that was important to teach was verbal blending.

ON WRITING: Verbal blending, what's that?

STILES: You take the beginning of a word and the end of a word, you put them together and they make a word. Like cat: c-at.

ON WRITING: So you created *Gawain's Word*.

STILES: Yeah, we needed to have an interesting visual way of showing how you could put words together, and we decided that two things charging together at high speed would probably be a lot of fun. And we said, "How about knights charging together at high speed as if they were jousting?" At the time *Wayne's World* was popular, so we had *Gawain's Word*. Gawain is the host, he's wearing a full suit of armor and holding a microphone up to his closed visor. And we'd have *Sir c* and *Sir at* charging together—

ON WRITING: —On little hobbyhorses.

STILES: Yeah, and they're also in full knights' outfits. They charge towards each other, and it's c-at, c-at, c-at—cat! And then you cut and they have little pussy-cats in their hands.

MAZZARINO: That's funny.

ON WRITING: I just want to explain that *Between the Lions* is one of the shows that Norman created since leaving *Sesame Street*.

STILES: The way that show was developed is a real example of how curriculum really does decide a lot of the creative direction. We knew that we wanted to do a show set in a library because, well, that's where reading takes place. And we could have the lion family and all that. But we really didn't know what the format was going to be. At the time we started doing the show, there was a war going on between the whole-language folks and the phonics folks. Whole language said, "All you need to do is read to your kids and they'll learn how to read. You don't have to teach

them how words work." The phonics folks said, "No, you have to teach them how words work. That's more important than anything, and you have to show them how short vowels and long vowels work—decoding." Because basically the language is a code. It's taking what you say verbally and creating a symbol. So the kids are learning a code.

MAZZARINO: Why is Q still there, Norman? You seem to know a lot. Why Q?

STILES: It's a wasted letter.

MAZZARINO: A wasted letter. We could have a succinct 25-letter alphabet. What do we need Q for? It doesn't work by itself—without U, it becomes a C.

STILES: We did a song on *Lions* called "Q—I'm Nothing Without U," written by Sarah Durkee and Paul Jacobs.

ON WRITING: And I think there also was a *Sesame Street* bit about that in *Old School*.

MAZZARINO: I didn't know that. I just think that Q is pointless.

ON WRITING: Clearly you're not alone.

STILES: So anyway, one of the ways they teach reading in the early grades is, they'll read a book to the kids, then they'll take a word out of that book and go through the letters in that word. Let's say it's *Cat in the Hat* and they take the word *Cat*. They'll take each letter in cat and show how it's a letter in other words. They'll play with that, and then read the book again. And they call it whole-part-whole. So we said, "Hey, let's do a show like that."

ON WRITING: I was going to say, that's what you do on *Between the Lions*.

STILES: We start with a book, take something out, do things with it, expand it, teach some stuff about the code and then, if we read the book again we'll do it a slightly different way because we don't want to actually repeat the entire book again.

ON WRITING: But still using whole-part-whole.

STILES: Yeah. So the show developed from the curriculum and the way teachers were teaching. It's different than *Sesame Street* in that it's a very focused curriculum. It's just trying to teach reading. *Sesame Street* is trying to do a lot more. So the structure of their show can't possibly be as linear.

MAZZARINO: That's true.

STILES: They're teaching letters and numbers and emotions and colors....

ON WRITING: So how do you structure *Sesame Street*, Joey?

MAZZARINO: We've changed it up a bit this year. It used to be sort of a hodgepodge, it was what they call magazine format, and anything could come in almost at any time. But then we realized kids were not following, and we started putting things together more thematically on the show. And now we're really making an effort to say, we have this hour of television real estate, how do we best parcel it out? What's the best way to use it? We have the Street story at the top of the show—

ON WRITING: —That's the opening sketch that takes place on the Street.

MAZZARINO: Yeah. Then we have *Elmo's World* at the end. Abby Cadabby has a new animated format that's seven or eight minutes. So we have these three things. And we thought maybe we should put in one more format so we have four blocks for the hour and during these blocks we'll teach in a certain way. For instance, there's going to be science in the top. Elmo really is science, it's pre-science—I don't know, is there such a thing as pre-science? But he's there. And then Abby is thinking-child curriculum; it's thinking through problems. Then we're trying to figure out another piece that we haven't really nailed down. But it's a floating piece.

ON WRITING: You have Murray.

MAZZARINO: Right, *Murray Has a Little Lamb* which is teaching school and the awareness of school. He follows a lamb to school everyday.

STILES: Oh, man. He follows the lamb to school?

MAZZARINO: Yeah, the lamb goes off to a different school everyday and then Murray sits in on the class and does short interviews with some of the kids and the teachers. We do it documentary style and it's the greatest thing to do as a puppeteer. Because we'd get Murray to try and do the stuff. So we'd go to gymnas-tic school, watch the kids do it and then we'd figure out, how can we shoot Murray on the rings? How can we shoot Murray in skates in ice-skating school?

ON WRITING: Wait, are you Murray?

MAZZARINO: Yeah, I play Murray. I started as a puppeteer on the show. So it's guerilla filmmaking, guerilla puppets; we would just figure out how to do all these physical things with the puppets.

STILES: That's the greatest.

MAZZARINO: One of the great things about puppets is you can do so much with them. They're so physical.

STILES: It's also one of the great things about the *Sesame Street* production team, they really are willing to experiment. I don't know if they still call it that, but for 20 years it was called the first experimental—

MAZZARINO: —Experimental season, yeah.

STILES: The second experimental season....

MAZZARINO: They stopped putting that on the document, but I still like to think it's an experimental season.

STILES: And what it does is it enables you to think about this as a continually innovative place. It makes the idea of workshop live.

MAZZARINO: Yeah, they really do let us play.

STILES: And it's one of the really wonderful things about that place.

ON WRITING: I want to talk about the Workshop and its relationship with PBS. Children's Television Workshop, now called Sesame Workshop, is the production company in the way that, for instance, MTM was an independent production company when they made *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

STILES: Yes, that's the idea.

ON WRITING: And they can sell a show to anyone?

MAZZARINO: Yeah, we can go to PBS—*Electric Company* is on PBS—but we can go to Playhouse Disney or Nick Jr. But it's different than working for a commercial network in that the Workshop itself dictates what's on the show. I've been there for 20 years and I've never heard PBS give us a note.

STILES: One of the reasons is that PBS isn't a network in the way other networks are. Other networks really are from the top down.

ON WRITING: And then PBS doesn't actually buy their shows, is that right?

STILES: No. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting might fund a show or the Department of Education might fund a show, but that funding usually goes away after the show is on for a couple of seasons.

ON WRITING: So each show has to be self-sustaining.

MAZZARINO: You see on a *Sesame Street* product it says, "Some of the money that you just spent is going back into...." If it's a Sesame Workshop product, that's true, it's either going back into that series or into another series or some other thing we're trying to get off the ground.

ON WRITING: Wow.

STILES: Right. Or they're funded in addition by foundations.

ON WRITING: But what about a show like *Curious George* that's co-produced by Universal?

STILES: Well, that's a different story.

ON WRITING: How do they get their money back?

STILES: Licensing is what they're hoping for.

ON WRITING: So it's a whole different way of functioning.

STILES: Totally.

ON WRITING: So for *Sesame Street*, you just have to hope that through donations—

MAZZARINO: —Donations or through product sales. We do a lot of that. But also the things you see at the beginning of the show, *Earth's Best*, they're putting money into the show.

STILES: It's all those things at the beginning of the show where you see "Brought to you by...."

ON WRITING: So people who are doing these shows have to be committed to what they're doing in a different way than with commercial television.

MAZZARINO: People are still in it to make money, I'm sure. Not on every show, but I'm sure people are hoping that something's going to become the next hit doll.

STILES: Yeah. WGBH, for example, would love *Between the Lions* to have a big merchandising program. One, it would help fund future episodes; two, it would help fund *them*. I would love it because it would help fund our company, Sirius, in future endeavors.

ON WRITING: Sirius co-produces the show.

STILES: Yeah. But it's not the same model as a for-profit company, where the only reason you do something is if it's going to make money.

ON WRITING: Has anything hit the way *Sesame Street* has hit?

MAZZARINO: *Dora the Explorer* is huge. *Barney* was huge when it had its day.

STILES: When *Sesame Street* started, nobody wanted to go into children's programming. It was nothing. All of a sudden *Sesame Street* starts to make some money on products. Everybody says, "Oh, we can make money at this." And then *Barney* hit and everybody said, "Oh, wait a second, now we can really make money." And so the whole idea of character-driven merchandising became a big thing. And then Nickelodeon came along—

MAZZARINO: —And stations like Nick Jr. and Playhouse Disney are real destinations for a parent who wants to get stuff done. Because when you put those channels on, you know there's stuff that's going to be for your preschooler pretty much all the time.

ON WRITING: What is the difference between what you guys do on PBS versus the kinds of things that are on commercial children's television, Nick Jr. or Playhouse Disney?

MAZZARINO: They're doing curriculum-driven shows on all those cable channels. Are they doing as much cognitive? I don't know.

ON WRITING: What's cognitive?

MAZZARINO: Letters and numbers. It's harder to do cognitive than it is to do social-emotional because all story is conflict and the conflict has to resolve, and most social-emotional stuff is resolution of conflict so it's sort of easy to marry the two.

STILES: Right. Whereas when you're doing cognitive,

you have to find an emotional way of teaching something that's cognitive, so you can hold the attention of the audience and have them connect with the characters.

MAZZARINO: That's why The Count, who Norman created, is brilliant.

ON WRITING: Oh, I love The Count.

MAZZARINO: His need for counting is like the way we need air. It's everything to the guy.

STILES: Well, it's Cookie Monster but with numbers.

MAZZARINO: Right, with numbers. Obsessive.

STILES: And the thing is with Cookie Monster, you can teach anything because you can put cookies—

MAZZARINO: —Everywhere, that's right.

STILES: You can teach an emotional thing, you can teach a cognitive thing. And you sort of could do the same thing with The Count.

ON WRITING: I have a couple more questions. How do each of your shows get written? Is there a writers' room?

MAZZARINO: No. *Sesame Street* is a great show to work on as a writer because you go off and come up with the story on your own, and then you pitch it to just the head writer. Not every executive has to read an outline and approve it.

ON WRITING: Who comes up with the overall curriculum?

MAZZARINO: As I said, the curriculum is set at the



beginning of the year. I'm trying to get 13 out of the 26 to be about science. So the writers can come in and pitch me a science show or they can pitch me something else out of the curriculum document.

ON WRITING: So there's never a time when all the writers are together?

MAZZARINO: At the beginning of the season we get together, and we try to do it every three weeks.

ON WRITING: You'll just sit in a room and pitch ideas?

MAZZARINO: Pitch ideas or say, "Hey, you know what? Belinda [Ward] wrote this great thing. Let's see if it has some legs. Let's do a couple more of them." If a character is created, we'll talk about that. We'll watch a couple of sketches if they've been taped to see what they're like. And we'll talk about what the curriculum is this year, are there any story lines that could go over a couple of episodes? But then when you're going to come up with your story, you go off on your own, you think about it, you pitch it to the head writer, the head writer and the writer work together to flesh it out, and then you go off and write.

ON WRITING: And then who puts the individual segments together into the show?

MAZZARINO: That is the producer's job, that's formatting the show after we're done.

ON WRITING: And what about *Between the Lions*, how is that written?

STILES: *Between the Lions* by necessity has evolved into more of—

MAZZARINO: —You write gang-style?

STILES: Well, not quite. One writer ends up writing a show, but before the writer gets to the point of sitting down to write, there's a lot more group input. But we start with a book.

ON WRITING: Who chooses the book?

STILES: All of us. The producers choose the book. In the case of *Stop That Pickle*, Sarah Durkee—who wrote the script—recommended that book because her kid liked it. But once you have the book, then you have to figure out, how are we going to come up with a story with the lions in the library? So we'll sit around the table and brainstorm.

ON WRITING: One more question: Do different countries run their own shows and are they all produced by Sesame Workshop?

MAZZARINO: Some countries pick up our version of the show, but for most countries, the kids there have different needs so we always go in there to help facilitate. We don't dictate what they put on.

STILES: It's a co-production. At least it was when I was there. And what level of input the Workshop demands in those co-productions, I have no idea.

ON WRITING: Could there be like an Israeli Elmo and a Palestinian Elmo that just get along?

STILES: They tried.

ON WRITING: And what happened?

MAZZARINO: It fell apart is what happened. They couldn't get the two productions to work together.

STILES: It started at a time when there was hope. I actually consulted one or two days when the Palestinian people came in and they were sitting across the table from the Israelis and were trying to work on it.

MAZZARINO: *Sesame* handles some serious issues around the world. Really serious issues. I went out and helped with the Palestinian production. They wouldn't send me to Ramallah, though, they sent me to Jordan. They didn't want me to go to Ramallah.

ON WRITING: Was this during the Israeli shelling?

MAZZARINO: This was three or four years ago. And a few years before that I was in Cairo working with

the Egyptian writers and we asked, “What unique needs do you want to address?” They said, “Well, a lot of buildings fall down here, maybe we could teach the kids about that.” No joke, there are 400-year-old buildings and kids can die when they collapse. Each country has its own problems. How do you deal with them and how do you help kids deal with them? And some you don’t broach because there’s no way to do it without scaring the kids.

ON WRITING: Are Palestinian and Israeli writers aware of the need to teach kids things like cooperation?

STILES: It’s very hard for them to do that.

MAZZARINO: They can’t be sort of cavalier and teach it in too easy a way. It’s not realistic. I think that was probably one of the problems with it. When I went out to work with the Palestinian writers, they weren’t talking about that but they were talking about, “How do we raise kids who enjoy life and who have fun?” They’re living under some harsh circumstances, and how do you raise kids who are not going to become angry militants? How do you raise kids who are going to see the world as a positive place? The same way we would try to raise kids with positive role models and everything else.

STILES: Yeah, under those circumstances.

MAZZARINO: Under very different circumstances.

STILES: Every country has its own way of looking at raising their children; they have unique and special things that are related to their culture that they want to talk about. And so, while they use *Sesame Street*’s puppet inserts and animated inserts, they create their own Street stories with their own sets and characters. You can’t just say, “Take the entire American version and just dub in your own language.” It wouldn’t work.

MAZZARINO: Cultural imperialism, we’re not in that business.

ON WRITING: But it’s good cultural imperialism.

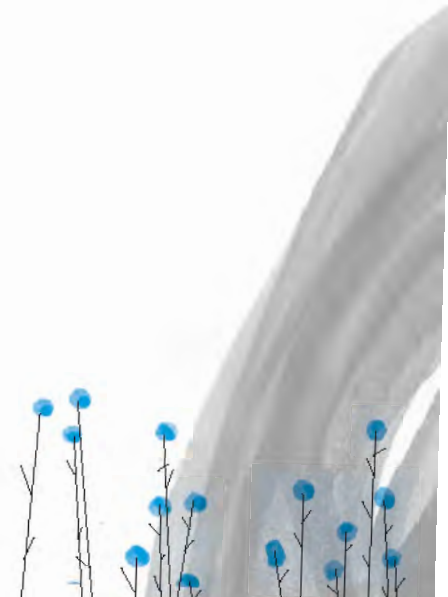
STILES: The interesting thing is, I think one reason that it works in so many different cultures is that the cognitive aspects of the curriculum are not cultural. Whatever the culture, parents want their kids to learn the cognitive basics. But the look of each Street, the characters, how they behave, what they do, what the cultural aspects are that hold all the cognitive material has got to be unique to each country.

MAZZARINO: And you take a lot of things for granted. I was going over story ideas in Egypt and there was one about ice cream and I had a joke where the ice cream went flying and landed on somebody’s head. You don’t waste food in a country like that. You just don’t do jokes about food being wasted because so many people are going hungry. You just don’t do it.

STILES: That’s not funny.

MAZZARINO: You know what’s funny? No matter where I go—mostly in the Middle East—the biggest thing is Tom and Jerry. And it makes so much sense. I think in Palestine especially, they’ve got the little mouse who was always getting the best of this big cat.

STILES: That’s interesting. Who’s the victim? It depends on who you identify with. **ow**



BIOGRAPHIES

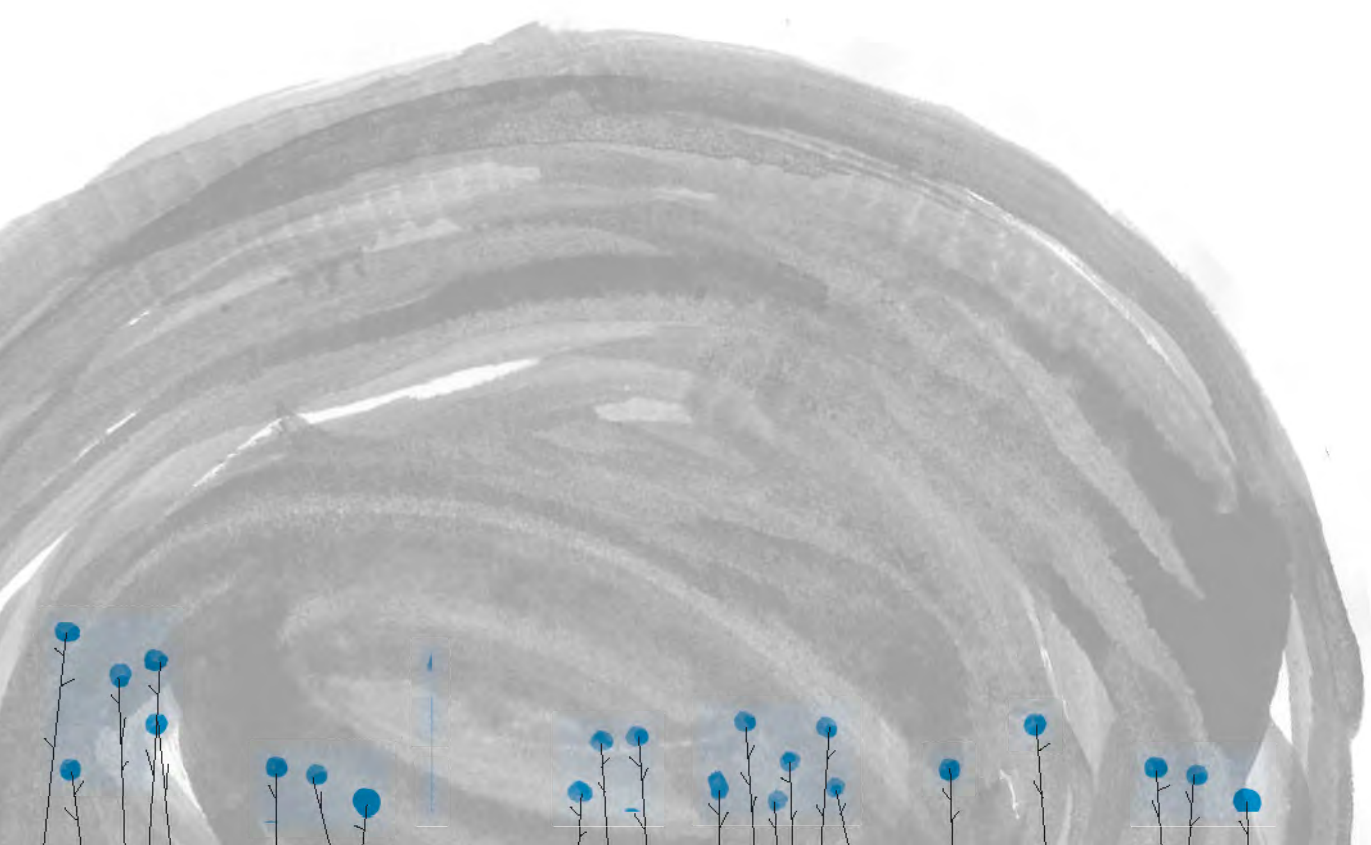
JOEY MAZZARINO has been writing, puppeteering and directing for *Sesame Street* since 1989, and is currently the show's head writer. He co-wrote the feature films *Muppets in Space* and *The Adventures of Elmo in Grouchland*. His other writing credits include *The Upside Down Show*, *Bear in the Big Blue House*, *Stanley* and *Sheep in the Big City*. In 2009, he received the Writers Guild Award for Children's Episodic & Specials for the ABC network special *Elmo's Christmas Countdown*.

NORMAN STILES started writing for *Sesame Street* in 1970 and became head writer in 1973. He left *Sesame Street* in 1975 to work with Mel Brooks as co-creator of the ABC sitcom *When Things Were Rotten*. He also co-produced and co-wrote episodes of a number of sitcoms and variety shows including *Fernwood 2-Night* and *America 2-Night*. He came back to New York and resumed his work as head writer of *Sesame Street* in 1980.

In 1996, Stiles co-founded Sirius Thinking Ltd., an educational entertainment company which created *Between The Lions*, co-produced with WGBH, and *Lomax, The Hound of Music* for PBS.

Stiles' other work includes: co-writer of the TV special *Free To Be A Family* and contributing writer to the companion book; contributor to *The Book Of Sequels*; co-author of *The Jewish Adventurer's Club*; co-author of *The Name Game*; co-author of *Historical Cats*; contributor to Marlo Thomas' *Thanks and Giving*.

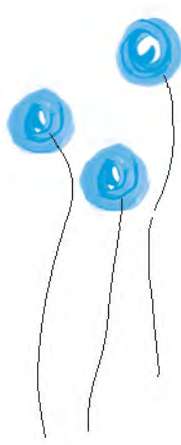
Stiles has more than 20 Emmy Nominations and 14 Emmy Awards for *Sesame Street* and *Between the Lions*. He also received the Television Critics Association Award for Outstanding Achievement In Children's Programming for *Between the Lions* in 2000 and 2001 and the Parent's Choice Award for *Between the Lions* in 2002 and 2003. In 2009, Stiles was awarded the Herb Sargent Award for Comedy Excellence and Mentoring by the Writers Guild, East.





Peter Hirsch
AND Susan Kim

NEW YORK CITY – OCTOBER 29, 2009



ON WRITING: Peter, you are currently the head writer for the show *Arthur* which airs on PBS, and Susan, you've written for a number of children's television shows including *Arthur*, *Martha Speaks* and *Word World*. So my first question is, what are the skills involved in writing children's television?

HIRSCH: I feel that being a good children's television writer is about brevity. It's being able to get to an issue quickly and lightly, and get out quickly and lightly. You're sort of a special ops writer. In terms of plot construction, I try to encourage writers to not do anything differently than they would if they were writing a play or a movie for adults. It should be as subtle and complex in structure, and hopefully subtle and complex in sentiment, if not message. Whenever I work with writers, I tell them to think about what they want to write and work from that, rather than work from what they think children need or should hear.

KIM: Another thing that makes a good children's television writer is an understanding of structure, that there's a beginning, there's a middle and there's an end—which seems simple but some people just don't have that. Also, people often have a very false notion of what it's like to be a child. If you spend time with children, and not as a caretaker or an authority figure, but if you're just listening to them and letting them come to you on their terms, their interaction is complex, it's detailed, it's funny, it's got a lot of nuance.

ON WRITING: It's sophisticated.

KIM: It's very sophisticated. Children are also capable of understanding far more subtlety and complexity in humor than not. And if they don't understand it, then they learn it. Everybody has a humor education as much as they have a vocabulary education.

ON WRITING: Is structure more important in children's television than in film or television for adults?

HIRSCH: Probably not. I think they're both equally important in kid stuff and adult stuff. But the bad

structure is going to be more apparent in a kid's show.

ON WRITING: Why?

HIRSCH: Because you have a lot less time. Many of these shows are 11 minutes. So think about telling a joke. If you have a limited amount of time to tell a joke, it has to be built correctly otherwise you're going to lose your audience.

ON WRITING: I just want to interrupt and say most shows have two episodes in each half hour, so each episode is 11 minutes.

HIRSCH: They vary, but for the age group we're talking about they tend to be two 11-minute shows.

ON WRITING: And what age group?

HIRSCH: This would be, I'd say, anywhere from 3 to 8 or 9.

KIM: If you listen to the curriculum advisers, there's preschool, school-age, older kid—and then you start getting into the preteen. But I think most writers I know really break it down pretty simply. Either you're writing for kids who don't know the alphabet and can't really speak, or for those who can. That's my rough breakdown. So you're either writing for the real preschool crowd or you're not.

HIRSCH: Yeah.

KIM: I would say one more thing in terms of being a children's TV writer: You have to be able to meet deadlines and to take notes from a lot of different people. Because you will get notes from, conservatively, five to eight groups of people and all of them will have conflicting notes. You have to incorporate them into your script and turn it around really quickly. It's just constant. And once you're finished, you've got another script to do and a different draft. You're working really fast.

ON WRITING: Let's say you're writing an *Arthur* script, Peter is the head writer. Who else talks to you?

HIRSCH: Well, let's take an *Arthur* script like Susan's, which was called *Book Club*. I will get notes from the producer, sometimes there's more than one producer—fortunately, in *Arthur* there's just one, but I've certainly been on shows where there's more. Then from the director. Then from the creator of the series, Marc Brown. And then I'll have my own notes. And then the show may have extra advisers, such as a literacy adviser or something like that. So all those notes will feed into the head writer and the head writer can cut and paste, put them in there and say, "The adviser said that but you can ignore that."

KIM: Some head writers don't filter it. They just dump everything—

HIRSCH: —They just forward the e-mails.

KIM: And then a lot of times you'll get e-mails from the network executive. A lot of times you'll actually get e-mails from, not just the director, but also the head animator. Someone who represents the animation house will say, "He can't jump in the water because that's too difficult to animate." Or sometimes a production coordinator-type will say, "You have too many voices here. We can only hire one extra voice." So you'll be getting a lot of different notes coming towards you.

ON WRITING: And they're not necessarily filtered through the head writer?

KIM: No, no, no. We've both worked on shows where the notes are unfiltered—because Peter also writes for shows as well as head writes. And that's one thing about children's television, it's the same 30 or 40 of us: sometimes people are head writing, sometimes they're writing.... It's like the Roadrunner and the Coyote punching in.

HIRSCH: Yeah, we sort of punch in and try and keep each other employed. Because, by and large, we don't have residuals so everybody knows who's hiring. It might be one of the first things we talk about if we get together.

KIM: Oh, absolutely.

HIRSCH: Who's doing what? Who's hiring? Oh, they're looking for—

KIM: —And are they all scripted up? Are they taking pitches? Who's head writing that? Oh, great. And have you done any? What's the show like?

HIRSCH: That's right. Oh, this one's a nightmare.

KIM: We all stay in loose touch with each other.

ON WRITING: I want to go back and ask about content. Do you have to be careful about covering certain topics for certain ages?

HIRSCH: I found that there are very, very few topics you cannot explore in children's television, really.

KIM: Well, especially in *Arthur*. Part of the reason is that it's been on the air for so long. There have been, what, 80 billion episodes? So there's a lot of story lines.

HIRSCH: There's a lot.

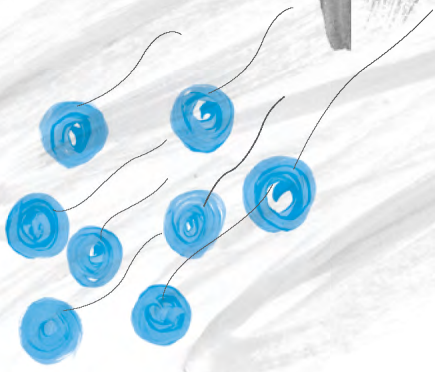
KIM: And when you write for *Arthur*, you pitch stories and you can come up with something really crazy: There's a time-travel machine that takes them back to the 17th century in Hamburg but then they find themselves in Finland. And Peter will say, "We did that."

HIRSCH: One of the things we like to do which is a lot of fun is mine great literature. I'm very proud to say that we've done an *Arthur-King Lear*, an *Arthur-Macbeth*, an *Arthur-Waiting for Godot*—

KIM: —You did a *Cherry Orchard*, didn't you?

HIRSCH: And an *Arthur-Cherry Orchard*, which was really hard. But what's nice about those shows is you go into the great work of literature and find what is its simplest element. And that's what I mean by brevity as well: what are the bare essentials of this story?

ON WRITING: Can you give an example?



KIM: Yeah, there are a lot of rules in children's television. A lot, a lot. I can't emphasize that enough to the

ON WRITING: Really?

KIM: I certainly know that Peter is open to that, so yeah, sure. If you said that at script meetings of other shows, they would laugh briefly and say, "Okay, seriously, what did you really bring?" Whereas Peter is one of the few people I could actually say that to. And it's delightful. You feel free to go that way. So many people who create and produce a children's show tend to very much see it in terms of limitations.

Salesman?

ON WRITING: Now, when you're pitching, Susan, would you come to Peter and say, "Let's do *Death of a*

Salesman?"
KIM: Oh, yeah, it's called modeling bad behavior. You learn that, it gets branded into your flank on the first children's TV script you write. You cannot model bad behavior. You can't have a kid melting down, you can't have a kid having a tantrum or being unreasonable, you can't have a kid hitting or fighting. There was a biting episode we were talking about with *Arthur* and it was like handling radioactive material. And of course anyone who's been near a child realizes that violence and frustration and strong emotion is just part and parcel of childhood. Frankly, of being alive, of being human.

HIRSCH: Yeah. She's told that her toys are getting all over the place and she has to get rid of some of them. And in a fit of rage she decides to get rid of all of her toys and give them to the friend who loves her best. So we reduced the play down to a very childlike occurrence. And that feels thrilling, because not only do you have a plot that's provided for you, which saves time, but you also feel like you're getting some insight into the work you're paying homage to.

ON WRITING: —D.W. is Arthur's 4-year-old sister—

HIRSCH: Even that, we've just shrunk it down into something elemental, which all of a sudden you can see could work for kids. D.W. is told—

ON WRITING: Right.

HIRSCH: We did a *King Lear* episode. In *King Lear*, Lear has to split his kingdom and out of pride does some very foolish things.

KIM: And it's difficult because, ultimately, I think if you care about writing for children, which we do,

HIRSCH: Yeah.

KIM: Oh, yeah, it's called modeling bad behavior. You learn that, it gets branded into your flank on the first children's TV script you write. You cannot model bad behavior. You can't have a kid melting down, you can't have a kid having a tantrum or being unreasonable, you can't have a kid hitting or fighting. There was a biting episode we were talking about with *Arthur* and it was like handling radioactive material. And of course anyone who's been near a child realizes that violence and frustration and strong emotion is just part and parcel of childhood. Frankly, of being alive, of being human.

HIRSCH: You could have a curriculum adviser and then you could have other sets of advisers. Say you happen to be dealing with a medical issue. Then you're going to have doctors and people advising on that. And then one of the rules that you're faced with often in children's television, especially public children's television, is that kids should not appear to be too mean.

ON WRITING: Curriculum advisers?

HIRSCH: Most shows will have a veritable army of advisers.

KIM: Oh, shall we start?

ON WRITING: Like what?

person transcribing. A lot of rules.

it's really hobbling you. Also, I feel you're giving the message to children that to feel these ways—to feel angry or jealous or bitter—is bad and wrong and you are bad for doing it.

HIRSCH: If you have a child have a big meltdown in *Arthur*, that's what your show is about, having a big meltdown. You wouldn't have someone peripherally having a meltdown. But it's important for writers to realize that you develop a relationship to these rules. It's kind of like the legal system, there are all sorts of ways to get around it. And the smart writers will convey what they need to have that character convey without kicking and screaming and biting.

ON WRITING: So you can have the emotion—

KIM: —But, as Peter said, it's something where it becomes the topic. And it's controlled and it's contained, and this is the way you deal with it. It's all about containment, as opposed to a plot device. So there are emotional constraints on writing, and there are language constraints in terms of the kinds of words you can use. Although I know a lot of little children, and many of them have really quirky vocabularies.

HIRSCH: Yeah.

KIM: And you're constantly told, "Oh, no, a 5-year-old wouldn't say that." And you think, that's not true because actually, I know 5-year-olds who say things like that and they're not geniuses, they're just people. So the language is a thing. Safety is a thing you have to be really careful about. I worked on a live-action show for Playhouse Disney that was exploring different objects and you couldn't have string or rope because they're too dangerous.

HIRSCH: Well, those are terribly dangerous. I don't allow them in my house.

KIM: I've noticed your creative belt.

HIRSCH: Yes.

KIM: His pants are taped to his stomach.

ON WRITING: Have the rules gotten more stringent over the years?

HIRSCH: I think so.

KIM: Absolutely. Certainly since those early hippie days of Joan Ganz Cooney.

HIRSCH: For example, in *Arthur* we used to have a character, we still have him, named Binky. When Binky started out—this was, I guess about 14 years ago—he was a bully and everybody was afraid of him. He'd say things like, "I'll clobber you," or, "Watch out or I'm going to box your ears." Never in a million years would we do that today.

ON WRITING: I want to ask about writing for a given curriculum. Actually, what is a curriculum?

HIRSCH: The simple explanation of a curriculum is, what's the show teaching? What's the provable bang for your buck for this show? So, say, for *Martha Speaks*, the curriculum is vocabulary. This show is going to improve your vocabulary and here's why we feel it's going to do this. That's a big binder. And that's not really for the writer. The writer gets a diluted form of that.

ON WRITING: The writer gets the here's how?

HIRSCH: Yeah. For *Martha Speaks*, for example, the writer gets a note saying, "You have to define these five words and use them at least three times each. These other words, secondary words, you don't have to define but you have to use at least four or five times." I forget the exact numbers.

KIM: It was really strangely difficult. Didn't you find it strangely difficult?

HIRSCH: I did, yeah. Some people were fine with it.

KIM: But you also had to define the words in an organic plot-driven way that made sense for the character, which is hard. Because some of the words took a little explaining and it was really hard to find a way the characters would do that naturally.

HIRSCH: It seemed in the plots that a lot of people were hard of hearing: “Oh, what a dilemma.” “A what?” “You know, a dilemma, a problem you have to solve.” But there were writers who were more artful at being able to do that.

KIM: It’s hard.

HIRSCH: I was under the impression that *Arthur* had dropped its curriculum, which was reading way back when. And then I was told this year actually that, “No, we do have a curriculum and every story has to have a moral.” And I had been oblivious for at least a good five or six years that this was at all important.

ON WRITING: So you don’t have a learning goal with each episode of *Arthur*?

HIRSCH: No, other than what would be loosely categorized as a moral. We very consciously take on specific social issues, such as one that’s airing now, an episode we did on cancer.

ON WRITING: I saw that two-part episode. Let’s talk about it a little bit. Was that given to you?

HIRSCH: No. There was a writer for *Arthur* named Leah Ryan—she was the one who wrote *The Cherry Tree*, our homage to Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard*—and she had leukemia. And she said, “You know what I’d really like to do is an episode about this f-ing cancer that I have.” I said, “Well, why not? That’s a great idea. We’ve done bed-wetting, dyslexia, head lice. There are a lot of kids out there with cancer.”

ON WRITING: Or kids dealing with adults who have cancer.

HIRSCH: Right. Basically, everybody has someone in their life with cancer. We went to the producer and said, “Hey, how about a cancer episode?” He said,

“I’d love to do it but is this really the right venue?” He wanted to, but he had reservations. Then we were doing a get-out-the-vote episode before the election and somehow we got Lance Armstrong involved. And Lance Armstrong said, “I’ll do this episode if you guys do an episode about cancer.” So then the producer came back and said, “Hey, guess what....”

ON WRITING: And you co-wrote that episode with the writer who had leukemia.

HIRSCH: Yeah. She actually died while we were putting it together.

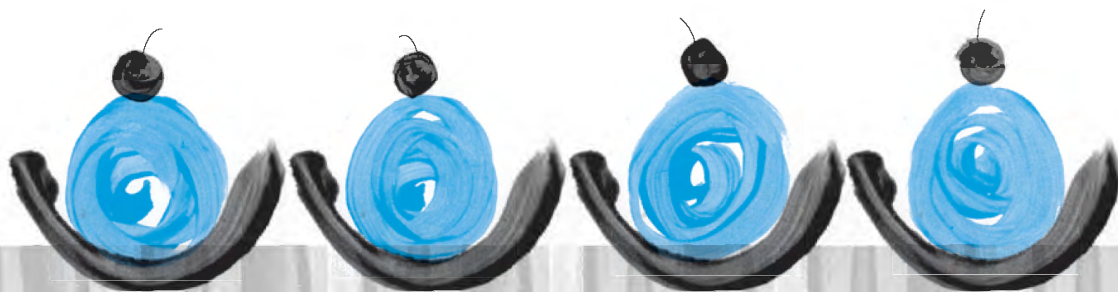
ON WRITING: I noticed at the end of that show there’s a dedication to her.

HIRSCH: I think, years ago, I thought of children’s television as a good gig. And then at some point it became a career. And then when the cancer episode came along, it became more of a calling almost. Anyway, it was a very hard episode for Leah and me to write. But I’m glad it’s out there.

ON WRITING: One thing that’s interesting about it is how the subject was dealt with in such a straightforward, unsentimental way. Whereas in a film or TV show for adults, I think it would have gotten much more emotional.

HIRSCH: Yeah, we knew we couldn’t hit a lot of the emotions head-on that you would normally get with a cancer show for adults. In other words, we weren’t going to have anybody breaking down and sobbing for the reasons that Susan was mentioning earlier. On some level that emotional reality is scary for kids, or so we’ve been told. So it forced us to find the emotional life of these kids in other ways.

ON WRITING: That’s interesting.



HIRSCH: And that's why writing for kids' television can be as challenging an art form in writing as you can get if it's done right.

ON WRITING: There was also a very funny joke in that episode I want to bring up. The rich character—

HIRSCH: —Muffy.

ON WRITING: It's Muffy's father's birthday and the butler gives him a copy of *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett.

HIRSCH: Oh, and then Muffy's father thinks it's a thriller. He says, "Sounds thrilling." That was Leah.

ON WRITING: Do you do jokes like that a lot?

HIRSCH: Oh, yeah, we try to.

KIM: You stuff it into the script and hope it stays.

HIRSCH: A lot of times it stays because people don't get the joke.

ON WRITING: And are you doing that for the parents who might be watching?

HIRSCH: I wish I could say yes, but no.

KIM: You write for yourself.

HIRSCH: Exactly.

KIM: When I write Peter a script, I want him to laugh. I want him to say, "This is really funny."

HIRSCH: Yeah, and vice versa. We just try and make ourselves and by proxy each other—

KIM: —Laugh. And it's competitive in the best way. You want to do really well. It's like, "Look at me! Look at me! I wrote a really funny script. Aren't I really funny?" Everyone says, "Yeah, you're really funny." And then they say, "Look at me, look at me!" You put as much as you can in, but a lot of times you put in some great jokes and they take them out.

HIRSCH: Yeah, when you watch it on TV—

KIM: —It's totally different.

ON WRITING: Oh, it gets rewritten?

KIM: Oh, yes.

HIRSCH: That often happens.

ON WRITING: Who rewrites it?

HIRSCH: The producer occasionally, or sometimes things will get cut for time. Occasionally I'll get called when something's getting closer to being produced and they'll say, "Hey, did you mean this or did you mean that?" but that's pretty rare.

KIM: It's really rare.

ON WRITING: What's the difference between writing a commercial television kids' show and a public television kids' show? Susan, I know you've done both. Have you done both, Peter?

HIRSCH: I have. I did a couple of stints at Disney.

KIM: It depends. I would say one of the most commercial cartoons I wrote was for the Cartoon Network. I wrote for *Courage the Cowardly Dog*.

ON WRITING: That was for adults, wasn't it?

KIM: Yes and no. I don't think people there thought it was for adults per se. I think it was for edgy little kids—edgy little kids to adults. There was a lot of violence in it that was very funny violence. And it would no sooner have been on PBS than I would be capable of flapping my arms and flying to Mars. That's my most anti-PBS show.

HIRSCH: One of the differences—and this may be less so now—is that with public television, you were sort of guaranteed a steady viewership for a longer period of time than you would have in network television. In other words, WGBH or PBS could put something on the air and know it was going to have at least two

years because parents were going to feel safe and they just wanted their kid watching it. For a lot of parents it was the only programming they'd allow their kids to watch. Having said that, now it's a very, very different world because there are many more networks who do children's television programming. They've adopted some of the PBS guidelines and sometimes they want shows that are curriculum-based. Especially if they have relationships with publishing houses. So there are more shows that are like *Arthur*.

KIM: I'd say a lot of the stuff that you find on Nick Jr. and Playhouse Disney is very curriculum-driven. There's real care being taken that these are considered good shows, that they're vetted by proper advisory boards, that you have good quality writers working on them.

HIRSCH: Yeah.

KIM: Which is terrific. I just worked on a show with Peter and his wife, Cusi, called *The Octonauts* which had an age-appropriate science curriculum for marine biology. It's being done for the BBC by Chorion, a production company here in New York. I think they're trying to get PBS interested in it, but I could easily see that on Nick Jr.

HIRSCH: Yeah, or Playhouse Disney.

ON WRITING: So the differences between commercial TV and PBS TV are sort of less and less.

HIRSCH: Less and less. But one of the things that's more difficult now is that some of the PBS shows got really good because they were given a long amount of time to develop. Nielsen ratings and things didn't matter to them. They had to get a certain share, but they were government-funded and they knew that they would have a viewership. Well, that's changed now. A lot of shows have a small portion that's government funded—a Ready To Learn grant or whatever—and they have to get money from underwriters like Juicy Juice or Lego.

ON WRITING: I see.

HIRSCH: So they've got to cobble together all this money and then the show actually has to do well in the first year. And that changes writing.

KIM: Yes.

HIRSCH: And all the forces that are behind TV for adults—for instance something that's a little faster-paced that catches you more quickly, or something that's a tiny bit shocking, even if it's just colors that are glaring. Keep those cuts quick. That begins to influence what we do now.

ON WRITING: Does it influence the older shows or just the newer shows?

HIRSCH: The newer shows. The nice thing about *Arthur* is, I'm under the impression—it's probably false—that we have a very small audience so we can do what we want. I'm not sure if that's true.

ON WRITING: People are watching.

HIRSCH: You're right, I think people are watching.

KIM: But the heat—

HIRSCH: —The heat is off.

KIM: Yeah, it's a proven entity. *Arthur* is in a really golden position. But another thing that's changed, even in the period of time I've been writing for children's television, is the emphasis on marketing and the toys, the jackets, the games, the nightstands, the wallets, the pencil cases.... Children's television is now seen as a way of getting a bigger platform for your marketing line. And marketing used to be a real dirty word. You couldn't talk about it 10 to 15 years ago. If you joked that, "This character would make a great doll," you'd be shut up and people would say, "No, no, we don't talk about that." I've had executives reprimand me for making a joke. But now I don't even think people pretend it's a secret.

ON WRITING: Is there a lot of children's TV writing based in New York?

KIM: There's some in L.A. But there's also a lot of hiring cross-country. I've worked on shows where the head writers were in L.A. and I never met them. It was all phone and e-mail. We've both worked on a couple of shows that are British shows.

HIRSCH: Yeah, I was going to say you're seeing that more often now, a lot of international co-development shows. So, Spanish-American—

KIM: Spanish, yes. *Pocoyo*.

HIRSCH: Canadian-American all the time because so much animation is done in Canada. And British, BBC....

KIM: And it's interesting, one thing that's hopeful for children's television writers is there's slightly more outsourcing to the U.S. for overseas shows than vice versa. You don't have American companies saying, "We're going to go to Spain and hire all our writers there." But as American writers, we actually do get hired on international productions.

ON WRITING: And as you've been writing over a period of time, you said that you sort of develop a relationship with the curriculum. Do you feel as if you know a lot about kids? Not so much you, Peter, because you don't have a curriculum.

HIRSCH: I don't have a curriculum.

KIM: No, but you have an agenda.

HIRSCH: I have an agenda, which I mustn't tell anybody.

ON WRITING: Is it a liberal agenda?

HIRSCH: Yes, it is. It's a sort of quasi-Buddhist liberal agenda. But I don't know if I know kids any better. I think I'm probably a sillier individual than I would have been had I been working in some other industry.

KIM: Yes, it encourages your goofiness.

HIRSCH: Something about silliness. I feel more child-like probably.

KIM: I would say that children's writers have a strongly developed sense of the child. Interestingly enough, I'd say the same is true of horror writers and people who have a real childlike sense of storytelling and what's interesting and fun. And they can tap into it very quickly. Stephen King had a terrific book called *Danse Macabre*, which was a nonfiction book about writing horror. And he said that horror writers look physically young because they spend so many hours of their days in this childlike place in their heads that their faces sort of relax into a childlike state and they don't have typical adult wrinkles. And he said there's a childlike quality to horror writers, which I thought was funny.

HIRSCH: That's very interesting.

KIM: But I think with children's writers there is a silliness and they can go there very quickly. And if you get a bunch of them together, then it can get very goofy.

HIRSCH: Yes. And I also find that when children's television writers get together, they quickly go to saying inappropriate things.

KIM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

HIRSCH: Because they've spent so much time not being inappropriate that they instantly talk about the worst, lewdest, horrible things.

KIM: Writers' meetings are hilarious because they're just so incredibly crass and vulgar.

HIRSCH: Every idea leads to some sort of horrible, unprintable quip.

KIM: Exactly. You just get it out of your system.

OW

BIOGRAPHIES

PETER HIRSCH is the current head writer and story editor of *Arthur*. He has written for *Curious George*, *Martha Speaks*, *Between The Lions* and over 15 other children's television shows in the past 15 years. He has won six Emmys and a Peabody Award.

SUSAN KIM has written for more than three dozen children's TV series, including *Wonder Pets!*, *Arthur*, *Martha Speaks*, *The Octonauts*, *Dragon Tales*, *Handy Manny*, *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*, *Reading Rainbow* and *Stanley*. She also won a Writers Guild Award for her documentary *Paving the Way*, which aired on PBS. Her stage plays, which include *The Joy Luck Club*, *Memento Mori* and *Dreamtime for Alice*, have been produced in Los Angeles and New York City, and are published by Dramatists Play Service and Smith & Krauss. During the strike, she co-wrote the nonfiction book, *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2009). With novelist and playwright Laurence Klavan, she also wrote two graphic novels that will be published this year by First Second Books: *City of Spies* and *Brain Camp*.



The Back Page

NICK AT TWILIGHT:
A MIDLIFE GUIDE TO CLASSIC BOOMER
TELEVISION

BY MARK O'DONNELL

2 Lassie

After Large Timmy buries the seventh Lassie, he's gripped by a sudden sense of his own mortality. Guest appearance by, amazingly, June Lockhart. Lassie Eight: a shiny red Lamborghini.

3 Leave It To Beaver

Wally's second wife burns his varsity jacket and baseball caps in the incinerator because she's embarrassed to see a 60-year-old man dress that way; Eddie Haskell buys the local television station and makes the series all about him. Last episode.

4 Store Trek

After City Councilman Kirk pilots the SUV into an unfamiliar mall's parking lot, he forgets where he parked, and unseen forces have stolen the little red ball he put on the radio antenna to help locate the vehicle. Kirk, Jr.: Jonathan Lipnicki. Repeat.

5 Lost In Space

Dr. John Robinson finally works up the nerve to ask his son to explain the ship's computers to him; Dr. Smith becomes a gay activist, but other gay activists object. Space slackers: Hanson.

6 Howdy, Doody

Constipated Buffalo Bob, Jr. tries taking extra doses of Metamucil, and eagerly looks forward to results the next morning. Plumber: Jane Withers, Jr. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

7 American Bandstand

Special guests: some skinny youngsters who are all too loud. Closed-captioned for the hearing impaired.

8 The Man Who Took Early Retirement From U.N.C.L.E.

With the collapse of communism and the rise of the global marketplace, Napoleon and Ilya are free to obsess narcissistically over their own trivial projects, such as finding flattering seamless bifocals or the perfect tiramisu.

9 Contested Bonanza

Little Joe, Hoss and the other, forgettable son all sue each other over the terms of their late father's will, aggravating Hoss' high blood pressure and alienating Joe's new step kids. The Widow Tatum: Martha Stewart. Slick city lawyer: James Cromwell.

10 CNN Headline News

Pragmatic world leaders, surprisingly, are your age; Haile Selassie and Everett Dirksen are no longer tenable punchlines; Rocky and Bullwinkle admit they're just drawings and don't even exist, but a jaded electorate sweeps them into office seeking a break from politics as usual. Entertainment Spotlight: sexy leading ladies and men who are all much younger than you.

11 Slightly Nearer My God To Thee

A half hour of spirituality for those who want to offer their children some sense of values, so those children won't murder them in their beds. Pastor "Secular" Sandy Papp coos. *Viewer advisory: Madonna (the pop star, not the mother of heaven) may be mentioned.*

12 Romper Room

Miss Barbara leads the class in marching in circles until everyone gets winded and breaks for some Chardonnay. Mediator Mouse: Alice Playten.

13 The Canterng Gourmet

Graham Kerr makes Coq au Vin and Baked Alaska while jaded viewers roll their eyes at such a corny idea of haute cuisine. Repeat.

14 Woodstock, RFD

Opie, distraught over the failure of his IPO and his hair plug implants, visits senile Andy in the old folks' home and tries to bully him into remembering where the assets have been hidden. That Old Woman: Marlo Thomas.

15 Sanford, Sanford and Sanford

Rodney Allen Rippe stars as the eldest partner in a Wall Street-based family law firm. Freddie Prinze, Jr. guests as a high-powered arbitrageur who is dizzied by recent decades' expansion of the middle class. Chinese sweatshop worker: John Lone, Jr.

16 MOVIE: Grumpy Old Rock Stars

(2006) Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton partner as two cantankerous oldsters who must drive a VW cross country together to make their concert dates after their tour bus crashes due to Jagger's weakening night vision. Groupie: Ann-Margret. Little Boy: Beck.

17 Beverly Hillbillies

Comedy becomes impracticable after Jed and Granny realize all the rich people in Los Angeles now dress and eat just the way country folks do. Hotshot bank customer: Billy Bob Thornton.

18 MOVIE: Gidget Gets The Change

(2004) Sally Field stars as the menopausal bundle of glum who gets impulsive cosmetic surgery when she finds it's not just her nose that crinkles when she

laughs. Doctor Zizmor: the late Jeffrey Hunter. Client X: Tina Louise.

19 Marcus Welby, M.D.

Dr. Welby has the unwelcome task of telling his own long-lost daughter she may have less than 40 years to live. Marcussina: Barbara Hershey. Malpractice litigant: Dr. Joyce Brothers.

20 The Brady Bunch

Alice, after recovered memory therapy, reveals that Mike and Carol Brady weren't widowed, they were both twice divorced and he used to swing; luckily, all six children are dead so no one has to be disillusioned. Social worker: Ellen Burstyn.

21 Antiques Roadshow

Suburbanites like yourselves might make big bucks selling their vintage Barbies, G.I. Joes, hula hoops, trolls and theme lunchboxes to collectors desperate to connect with a past they misremember as secure, except their moms threw all that stuff out when they went to grad school. Host: Marcel Proust, Jr.

23 I Only Said I Loved Lucy

Large Ricky tells his parole officer that the chronic lies his mother told his father, and her thwarted obsession with celebrity, were bound to warp any child's sense of honesty and rationalism. Dream sequence Lucy: Tilda Swinton.

24 The Outer Limits

A former astronaut looks into a mysterious antique mirror only to see a repulsive, overweight monster. Ron Ely stars. Repeat.

25 Correct Time Channel

Thou hast heard the chimes at midnight.



