THE DONNA REED SHOW

Joanne Morreale

TV MILESTONES SERIES

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Wayne State University Press Detroit

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Morreale, Joanne, 1956–
The Donna Reed show / Joanne Morreale.
p. cm. — (Contemporary approaches to film and media series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8143-3508-6 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8143-3808-7 (ebook)
1. Donna Reed show (Television program : 1958–1966) 2. Women on television.
3. Women in popular culture—United States. I. Title.
PN1992.77.D725M67 2012
791.45'72—dc23
2012015782

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to all of the people who made this book possible. I'd like to thank the acquisitions editors, Annie Martin and Kristina Stonehill, who shepherded this book from initial conception to its completion, as well as the series editors Barry Keith Grant and Jeanette Sloniowski and the two anonymous reviewers who made this a stronger book. I'd also like to thank Maya Rhodes for her patience and Yvonne Ramsey for her meticulous copyediting. I'm also appreciative of Mary Owen, who read chapters, helped with photographs, and gave me insight into her wonderful mother.

My friends and colleagues at Northeastern University—Marcus Breen, Murray Forman, Kumi Silva, David Monje, and Craig Robertson—provided me with fortitude, inspiration, and good cheer throughout the writing of this book. They deserve a special thank you. Most of all I'd like to thank my daughter Isabel Lewis, who watched every episode with me and shared her analytic abilities. I couldn't have written this book without her. Emma Lewis also has my gratitude. Her endless energy and exuberance motivate me in all of my endeavors. Richard Lewis inspires me every day. I am ever grateful for his wisdom and generosity.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge Donna Reed, who quietly created new possibilities for women whether on, behind, or off the screen and who inspired such devotion among those who knew her. Most importantly, I'd like to express my thanks to my own mother, Jennie Morreale. She was a working mother at a time when this was not so common in suburban middle-American households. She created new possibilities for me.

Introduction

The Donna Reed Show

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When most people think of the classic 1950s' television domestic situation comedy, *Father Knows Best* (1954–60), *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63), and perhaps *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–66) typically come to mind. Somehow *The Donna Reed Show* rarely comes up first and often doesn't get included at all, even though it had a longer run (1958–66) than either *Leave It to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best.* This isn't because these shows were more popular than *The Donna Reed Show,* as all of these had solid but not outstanding ratings throughout their runs. Familiarity isn't the answer either, as *The Donna Reed Show* aired in twenty-six countries and was syndicated in the United States up until 1994, first on ABC Daytime and then on Nick at Nite and TV Land. Perhaps *The Donna Reed Show* escapes our cultural memory because it does not entirely fit our nostalgic image of the classic 1950s' sitcom.

When *The Donna Reed Show* is mentioned in popular accounts, it is often to posit Donna Reed (rather than her character, Donna Stone) as a complacent supermom. During its run, talk show host David Susskind famously referred to it as "the Madonna Reed Show" (Dern 1963, 11). In *The Erotic Silence of the American Wife,* written in 1992, author Dalma Heyn claims

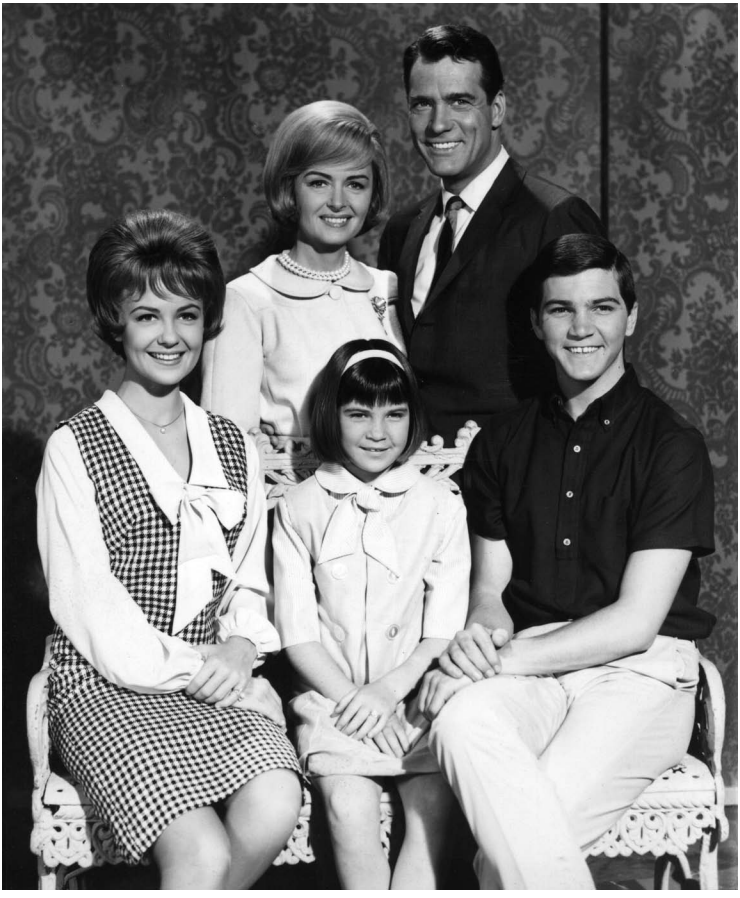
that a woman's personal fulfillment "rests on the murder of Donna Reed" (Fultz 1998, 131). A 2010 poem published in the *Missouri Review* titled "When I Was *The Donna Reed Show*" conveys images of domestic servitude (Seaton 2010, 117). Television shows as disparate as *Cheers, The Nanny,* and *The Gilmore Girls* refer to Donna Reed as the epitome of the perfect mother.[1] Yet what is most striking about popular accounts, beyond the conflation of the character and actress, is that actually watching Donna Reed play Donna Stone reveals that Donna Stone is a complex, even contradictory, character that both is and is not the idealized image of the perfect television mom. Critic Dana Heller's (1995, 47) observation is particularly insightful: "What makes *The Donna Reed Show* a pleasurable narrative spanning generations of viewers is this excess of gender performance, our knowledge of the dark side that threatens to reveal itself, and our trust that in the end Donna will adhere to the script that our collective fantasies of the perfect mother have provided her with." Heller succinctly describes the joys of watching Donna Reed play Donna Stone as she teeters on the edge, constantly threatening to break out of the mold of the 1950s' mom but always incorporated back into the warm embrace of the nuclear family. Perhaps we collectively experience what George Lipsitz (1990, 79–80) refers to as "memory as misappropriation": we remember the past as we wish it had been rather than as it was. Donna Stone is not solely a contented and perfect wife and mother, and the Stones are not the ideal American family. But we don't want to know that.

The Donna Reed Show's protofeminist sensibility may have been due to the fact that Donna Reed was herself a working mother: she was not only the star with four children of her own, but she also had a great deal of creative input into the show. She co-owned and produced the show alongside her husband, Tony Owen. (Screen Gems and Screen Gems executive Irving Briskin were also coproducers.) Todon, the name of the Owen-Reed production company, was an amalgam of both of

their first names—a clear homage to Desilu. While Tony Owen handled the financial details, Donna Reed was responsible for the day-to-day production details such as writing, directing, and overseeing sets and costumes. Donna Reed was one of the first female television executives, although her work, like that of so many women in the 1950s, was largely uncredited.[2]

The pilot for *The Donna Reed Show* was sold to ABC for the autumn 1958 season, with Campbell's Soup as its sponsor. Initially the show aired on Wednesday nights at nine o'clock—not a great time for a family comedy even though it followed *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. The first-season ratings for *The Donna Reed Show* were poor: the Neilsen rating for the first show was 8, with 20 a mark of success for a new show. In those days, however, a sponsor could keep a show on the air, and Campbell's Soup, aligned with a family sitcom for obvious reasons, maintained its support for the show. It may also have helped that *The Donna Reed Show* was up against *The Kraft Music Hall* featuring Milton Berle on NBC at a time when comedy-variety shows were losing popularity. Although *Kraft Music Hall* was cancelled after a few months, *The Donna Reed Show* lasted for eight seasons. In the second season it was moved to eight o'clock on Thursday nights, which was a better time for family viewing. By its third season, it was firmly established in the eight o'clock Thursday evening slot, where it remained throughout its run.

According to some accounts, by 1966 Donna Reed was tired and decided that it was time to stop (although according to Screen Gems executive William Dozier, she routinely—and wisely—made this claim from season 3 on, just prior to her new contract negotiation) ("Wheeling and Dealing" 1962, 20). More likely, *The Donna Reed Show* was a victim of changing times. Ratings had begun falling in the autumn of 1965, and with the industry-wide switch to color television, ABC retired both the long-running *Donna Reed Show* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* rather than incur the expenses of making the



1964 Cast Photo. (Courtesy of The Donna Reed Foundation)

switch. Their demise marked the end of the classic black-and-white television sitcom that portrayed an idealized suburban nuclear family. The new domestic sitcoms that emerged in the mid-1960s portrayed "strange" families on the margins of suburbia—shows such as *The Addams Family, The Munsters, My Favorite Martian, Bewitched,* and *I Dream of Jeannie.*[3] In the 1970s,

beginning with the troika of *M*A*S*H, The Mary Tyler Moore Show,* and *All in the Family,* the sitcom became far more political, and families became far more complicated, even venturing out of the home and into the workplace. Sitcoms such as *The Donna Reed Show* were thought to be representative of a bygone era of television history.

Yet it is time to reclaim *The Donna Reed Show* as a television milestone. The show is an important but overlooked text that provides insight into the interplay of representation, industry, and culture. The series run, from 1958 to 1966, marks a key moment of cultural transition from the conservative 1950s to the more liberal 1960s, and the tensions that accompany this shift are readily observed in the narrative content of the show, particularly with regard to gender and family dynamics. Throughout there is trouble in the text that marks conflicts and contradictions. While none of the 1950s' sitcoms were as conformist and complacent as popular memory would have them, *The Donna Reed Show* was doubly aberrant: in a social and political era known for sitcoms that supported a patriarchal family structure, the show not only starred a woman who headlined her own series but also focused on the mother rather than the father or the children. It was an anomaly to have a woman take the lead, literally and metaphorically, in a family sitcom. Moreover, Donna Reed was an Oscar-winning film actress who crossed over to a television situation comedy as both star and producer. The resultant *Donna Reed Show,* like Donna Reed herself, represented a merger of Hollywood and television and as such provides insight into the relationship between the film and television industries in the late 1950s. It was a Hollywood sitcom that exemplified the synergy that was developing between media industries: *The Donna Reed Show* brought a cinematic aesthetic to the television sitcom, used plot devices to promote the film industry, and manufactured singing careers for its two teenage stars. The show also illustrates the interrelationship of discursive representations from television's past

to present. Over the years the show has remained relevant, as indicated by sitcoms that have revisited themes addressed by *The Donna Reed Show.* Overall, *The Donna Reed Show* illuminates the multiple ways that television texts engage in dialogue with their wider cultural contexts.

The Donna Reed Show and Counterreadings of the Sitcom

On the surface, *The Donna Reed Show* is a classic example of the middle-class domestic sitcom that came to dominate television in the 1950s and on into the 1960s. The Stones are a typical nuclear family of the era. They live in the anonymous suburb of Hilldale, somewhere in middle America. Donna Reed plays housewife Donna Stone, while Carl Betz plays her husband, pediatrician Alex Stone. Paul Petersen, who had previously been a Mouseketeer, is twelve-year-old son Jeff, while fourteen-year-old Shelley Fabares, who had been acting since the age of three, is daughter Mary.

Plots are trivial, problems are slight, and many story lines revolve around domestic negotiations or the trials and tribulations of children growing up. The comedy usually involves some mishap that threatens to disrupt familial harmony or the social order, but the problem is always alleviated at the end of the episode. In this particular series, dilemmas are usually resolved by Donna's words or actions. In the series pilot, for example, Donna and Alex's plans for a weekend trip are thwarted when Alex doesn't want to leave a patient who has a mysterious illness. Donna not only finds another doctor to fill in for Alex, but she also determines that the young boy's illness is psychosomatic, a diagnosis that eludes her well-meaning husband. During eight seasons and 275 episodes, there are few plot developments apart from Mary and Jeff's passage from high school to college. There is a narrative reboot in season 5 when the Stones adopt a runaway orphan, Trisha (played by Paul Pe-

tersen's sister Patty), after Shelley Fabares left the show. The addition of a new family member is a device frequently used to rejuvenate situation comedies faced with aging children. There is also a slight plot arc in the same season when Alex's friend and colleague Dave Kelsey and his wife Midge move in next door to the Stones. According to Paul Petersen, "ABC thought we needed new neighbors to add a twist to the plot after Shelley left" (Tucker 2007, 114). The Kelseys became part of the show's opening credits in season 6, although they were dropped when Bob Crane, who played Dave Kelsey, left the show the following year to begin work on *Hogan's Heroes*. After Crane left, Ann McCrea, who played Midge, stayed on the show, and Dave Kelsey was simply written out of the story line. Similarly, after Shelley Fabares left the show, Mary's name rarely came up, although her departure was initially explained because Mary moved away to college. There are some recurring neighbors, friends, boyfriends, and girlfriends, but for the most part there are few references to past episodes or unresolved narrative arcs that continue over a number of episodes. There are even inconsistencies in Donna Stone's on-screen biography: she supposedly married at eighteen but somehow had gone to college and worked as a graduate nurse when she met Alex. Accounts of Donna and Alex's courtship also vary, and one episode—"The First Time We Met"—even addresses their conflicting memories. Viewers can tune in and out and follow along effortlessly.

Yet because the situation comedy is a part of the machinery of television involved in making meaning, it is open to multiple interpretations. A recurrent question with regard to sitcoms is whether they are ideologically incorporative, subversive, or capable of both inflections. As noted by Daryl Hamamoto (1989, 27), the situation comedy has always offered oppositional ideas, depicted oppression and struggle, and reflected a critical consciousness that stops just short of political mobilization. For example, Lucy Ricardo, Gracie Allen, and Alice Kramden challenge the domestic constraints imposed on the housewife in

early 1950s' television, even though all three rebellious women are consistently put in their places by the narrative's resolution in order to conform to the sitcom's requirement for a return to equilibrium. Even Harriet Nelson, Margaret Anderson, and June Cleaver occasionally chafe at their domestic constraints, though not as consistently as Donna Reed. Paul Wells (1998) writes that subversive discourses often occur within the closed, formulaic, light conventions of the situation comedy, which renders them less threatening while providing a safe site to rehearse the altered roles.

Situation comedies such as *The Donna Reed Show* are thus always open to negotiation, always sites of contestation. While their overt messages may be ideologically incorporative—that is, they may reinforce traditional gender roles, the values of the nuclear family, or the normativity of the medium of television—they may also be open to counterreadings that illuminate their ideological tensions. Lipsitz (1986), in his classic article "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television," has taught us that television programs illuminate societal tensions even though they may resolve them in ideologically complacent ways. He has written extensively about the urban ethnic working-class comedies on television from 1949 to 1957 and specifically cites two early texts—*The Goldbergs* (1949–56) and *Mama* (1949–57)—that served an important function in arbitrating tensions about family identity, consumption, ethnicity, class, and gender roles resulting from economic and social changes in postwar America. A brief foray into the workings of one of these texts—*Mama*—will both contextualize *The Donna Reed Show* and provide insight into the ideological operations of both. *Mama* went off the air just before *The Donna Reed Show* appeared, thus marking the transition from ethnic urban sitcoms to the middle-class domestic sitcom. While *Mama* was more concerned with the conflicts between tradition and modernity, other conflicts, such as those concern-

ing gender and the family in the postwar domestic economy, remained central in *The Donna Reed Show.*

Mama was about a Norwegian family, the Hansens, living in San Francisco at the turn of the century. Specifically, Lipsitz (1986, 1990) argues that these programs about ethnic families helped to transform class and ethnic identities into consumer identities by negotiating the cultural transition from an economy of scarcity to one of abundance. This typically played out as a conflict between traditional and modern values. While the resolutions of episodes seemed to reinforce the value of tradition, in the postwar context of modernization and the rise of consumer culture, modern values and commodities were often displayed in the course of the narrative, and the tensions between tradition and modernity often remained unresolved.

For example, in "Mama's Bad Day," youngest daughter Dagmar feigns a stomachache to avoid going to school, daughter Katrin procrastinates about practicing the piano, and husband Jake puts off repairing a set of drawers. When Mama complains to her friend about having to do so much housework, she finds a pack of cigarettes in her son Nils's pocket. She spends all day cooking a meat loaf, only to find that Jake's boss has taken him to lunch at a restaurant and he is not hungry. There is much discussion of eating out at restaurants, which the children see as exemplifying modern life but which Mama sees as a threat. Exasperated with her family, Mama decides to play cards with her friends, an invitation she had declined earlier because her family needed her. Yet as the evening progresses, she becomes overwhelmed by guilt and can't concentrate on her card game. She returns home to find everyone obediently fulfilling their tasks. On the surface it appears that tradition is restored. Yet throughout the narrative viewers have seen Mama's discontent, which is not resolved; have seen the younger generation rebelling against the parents; and have heard about the modern delights of eating in restaurants as opposed to home-cooked