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He rang

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Everyone has a favorite writer from our youth. Mine is Max Shulman.

Readers may recall that he created Dobie Gillis, a 17-year-old boy next door who was chronically penniless and congenitally unable to win any girl of his dreams.

From Shulman's short stories in The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis, a CBS television series began in 1959 that ran for 147 episodes over four years and is now available on DVD. It was America's first show targeting teenagers.

The television Dobie is more complex and funny than the character in Shulman's two Dobie books, the other being I Was a Teen-Age Dwarf.

Despite Dwayne Hickman's all-American-looking Dobie, the writers incorporated a few semi-subversive jabs between the lines of dialogue. This off-beat snarkiness resonated with Baby-Boom teenagers who were listening to Peter, Paul and Mary in the early 1960s after having had their fill of the Mouseketeer Club.

Shulman grew up poor in St. Paul where his Russian immigrant father painted houses—and not many of those during The Depression. Money is a constant theme in his fiction—not having it, pursuing it, failing to get it and suffering the consequences of not having, pursuing and failing.

The only other show where having no money is so central to its stories and characters was Jackie Gleason's, "The Honeymooners."

Gleason's Ralph Kramden could not escape being a working-poor bus driver living in a bare-bulb, Brooklyn tenement at 328 Chauncey Street. And each week, pathos, rage and comedy were wrung out of his failures to lift himself by his own always-flawed schemes.

As foils to Dobie's pennilessness, Shulman set up two stereotypical rich kids. The first season introduced Milton Armitage as channeled through Warren Beatty who considered the role beneath him and played it dismissively. He was followed, thankfully, by Stephen Franken as Chatsworth Osborne, Jr., who brought a self-aware good humor to his inherited privilege.

This wasn't exactly a Marxist story line pitting the class of have-nots against the class of haves. But the show did snipe at snobbery and old money through parody. You didn't see that on "I Love Lucy," "Timmy & Lassie" or "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet."

Shulman, however, denied that "Dobie" had a political edge. "As for the differences between rich and poor, that has always existed," he said. "I don't think you're going to find much sociological content in 'Dobie Gillis.'"

Perhaps this was self-protective camouflage to avoid attacks from network censors and Congressional snoopers looking for Soviet agents plotting revolution in Hollywood delicatessens. Or, perhaps, Shulman saw his Dobie comedy as just comedy, with "the other stuff" as just props for the story.

Shulman was not conflicted about making Hollywood money, but he could not shake being poor. It was the creative well in his oasis.

In the second season after Bob Denver had emerged as an equal star, he asked Max for a raise. Shulman said no, because, he explained, he was capital, and Denver was labor. If Denver didn't like what he was getting, Shulman said he would write him out of the show.

Maynard G. Krebs, the "G," Maynard insisted, "stood for Walter," was a "counter-culture" character before that term was invented. Denver's Maynard parodied the hipster-beatniks of media imagination in "like" language, dress, attitudes and behavior.

While Maynard protested that he was a "protestin' cat," it would have been far too radical in 1960 to actually show him demonstrating for civil rights or nuclear disarmament, the causes of the day. When asked, Maynard said he didn't know what he was protesting, but he thought it was right to be protesting nonetheless.

Maynard, as Denver crafted him, discovered a sweet spot in America's growing audience of moderately-alienated teenagers. The show's version of a beatnik turned Maynard into a loveable eccentric rather than a delinquent, which was the preferred media caricature.

Beatniks had a trendy cachet among liberal-but-conventional suburban kids, because they were seen more as non-conformist outsiders than scary outlaws. Maynard came on the scene when the boundaries of convention were being pushed outward. Maynard's off-beat charm expanded what was possible on network television.

Shulman's version of beat was innocence. No sex, no drugs, no alcohol, no black glasses, no black turtleneck sweaters and no opinions. It was style minus content.

Even so, Denver, a jazz follower, introduced Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk to an America locked in orbit around Lawrence Welk. Jazz itself was a little dangerous in those days.

Maynard -- the dumb, clueless, lazy and loveable antihero -- became the most popular character in the show. He was often assigned the task of rescuing Dobie from his latest get-the-girl scheme through his own conventional code of virtue expressed unconventionally.

Denver, who came to the show from teaching elementary school, wrote of Maynard: "He was... a bona fide beatnik and jazz fanatic. This was the late fifties and beatniks were the funkiest things around. I had been to coffeehouses in L.A. where beatniks hung out, and they fascinated me. I listened to their best poetry and jargon. I even tried to wade my way through the beats' bible, On the Road by Jack Kerouac. During the first year of playing Maynard, I was allowed to make up my character. Not too many of the writers knew what a beatnik was like."

Dobie and Maynard had chemistry between them and with their supporting actors. That quality beamed through even in black and white.

Herbert T. Gillis, a penny-pinching, always struggling, very-small grocer played by Frank Faylen, was the first multi-dimensional, in-depth antifather on television.

He was grumpy, hostile, rigid, in-your-face conventional, angry, frustrated and aggrieved. He loved his patient and sensible wife, but

constantly belittled his son for avoiding work, both hard and otherwise. Still, he showed a loving soft spot for his son who, he admitted, would never amount to anything at anything he ever tried.

His signature summary of Dobie in the show's first year was, "I gotta kill that boy; I just gotta." This was akin to Ralph Kramden's never-effected, fist-clenching threat to his wife: "One of these days, Alice... POW!!! Right in the kisser!" or "BANG, ZOOM! Straight to the moon!"

It would have been harder for Norman Lear to sell misanthropic Archie Bunker to CBS had not Shulman's Herbert T. Gillis greased the skids a decade earlier. Objections forced the "Dobie" writers to abandon the "gotta-kill-that-boy" line after one year.

Shulman evidently had some Herbert T. Gillis in him when he refused to open his cash register to give Bob Denver a raise.

Three other minor characters enlarged their off-center roles.

Sheila James played Zelda Gilroy, a tomboyish brain who pursued Dobie as ardently as he tried to avoid her limited charms. She brought to her role a lack of conventional femininity that did not wilt in the deep shadow of 16-year-old Tuesday Weld's money-grubbing gorgeousness.

Sheila James Kuehl went on to graduate Harvard Law and now serves on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors after serving in the California State Senate where she was repeatedly voted the smartest Senator. She was the first openly gay person elected to the California legislature and as an L.A. supervisor.

William Shallert played high-school teacher, Leander Pomfritt, a well-intentioned cynic who, despite misgivings and constant disappointments, persevered in trying to educate his "young barbarians."

Mr. Pomfritt carried on one shoulder the chip of being an unsuccessful novelist and on the other of having settled for the steady classroom paycheck over what he thought would have been the easy riches of selling air-conditioning or aluminum siding.

Steve Franken brought a self-mocking, over-the-top condescension to his playboy rendition of Chatsworth Osborne, Jr. He came across as being as trapped in his position as Dobie and Maynard were in theirs.

Indeed, the struggle and failure to escape from being trapped is, I think, what makes the comedy of all the Dobie characters and Ralph Kramden seductive and believable.

Shulman could take sarcasm and unconventionality only so far in 1959 in the face of anxious sponsors and timid network censors.

I've watched the first 40 episodes and found not one black face in either Dobie's hometown of Central City or Central High School. The only "non-white face" was Guy Lee's, who played Charlie Wong the owner of an ice-cream-parlor hangout. Despite small speaking parts, Lee was never given a credit on the crawls that I saw.

While Dobie was breaking new ground, much of what Shulman trod lay in his own youth from the 1930s and early 40s.

Dobie is a 1960 story about girls from a boy's perspective formed in those earlier years.

Teenage girls in "Dobie" are seen first as a collection of physical features and then as a personality quirk that always defeats Dobie's pursuit. Women don't come off well in Shulman's scripts, particularly beautiful women.

I think Shulman in his youth wanted to look like the tall, blonde, preppy Dobie Gillis so that he could win the Weld-type girls who bewitched him. But he was trapped in a five-foot-five body with dark hair and heavy features. He said: "I am squat and moonfaced."

Dobie's failure with pretty teenage girls had to reflect Shulman's own. And rather than show Dobie as the dark, stumpy not-very-attractive teenager of his short stories, Shulman insisted on showing Dobie as Dwayne Hickman, a guy with conventional, Hollywood good looks.

What youthful demon was Shulman working out with his TV Dobie?

Women don't come off well in Dobie's world. Shulman writes them as not much more than affection-objects—sex-object is way beyond Dobie's vision.

Tuesday Weld's Thalia Menninger is the most memorable of Dobie's unsuccessful campaigns. Aside from her starlet sensuality,

Thalia offers nothing of worth. She's greedy, petulant, money-obsessed, manipulative and disloyal.

Shulman's view of Dobie's girls was fearful and hostile. They always rejected Dobie for reasons he could not change. The girls he chased emasculated him.

The flip side of unremitting female rejection is Zelda's obsessive need to control Dobie and his future.

Female characters in Shulman's non-Dobie fiction are similar—they either reject or control.

As bizarre as many of the "Dobie" plots are, the show developed a large following because each of the non-love-object characters had and displayed genuine feelings. This is always the beating heart that great comedy needs, as Charlie Chaplin knew years earlier.

Although Shulman wrote novels both before and after Dobie's run on television, he never achieved much success with his later fiction. Shulman, like his characters, was trapped in his own circumstances—the success of his adolescent comedy.

Philip Morris was a principal "Dobie" sponsor in its first couple of years. A Marlboro display was next to the Gillis cash register in the grocery.

Marlboro also paid for his weekly column, "On Campus," that ran in 350 student newspapers in the 1960s. Shulman admitted that his column cut in what he called "limp or spongy" cigarette selling with his freshman humor.

It took guts for him to write Anyone Got a Match?, an anti-tobacco, anti-cigarette novel in 1964, the year the U.S. Surgeon General's Report first linked cigarette smoking to specific diseases.

In 1971, he published a semi-autobiographical novel, Potatoes are Cheaper. It's an aggrieved comedy about a poor, untalented boy's need to marry up as his one opportunity for success.

These books have deprivation-based anger at their core. But Shulman insisted that he was good at humor because "life was bitter and I was not. All around me was poverty and sordidness. But I refused to see it that way. By turning it into jokes, I made it bearable."

I guess a writer can “turn” his pig’s ear into a silk purse, but it’s still a pig’s ear when you turn it inside out.

I never met Shulman, but I think he spent his writing life working out the slings and arrows of his misfortunate youth.

It’s in Max Shulman’s fiction that you can see this writer as he knew himself to be.

I still read his stuff, because it’s witty and erudite.

Max Shulman died at 69 of bone cancer in 1988. I wonder what he would write today.