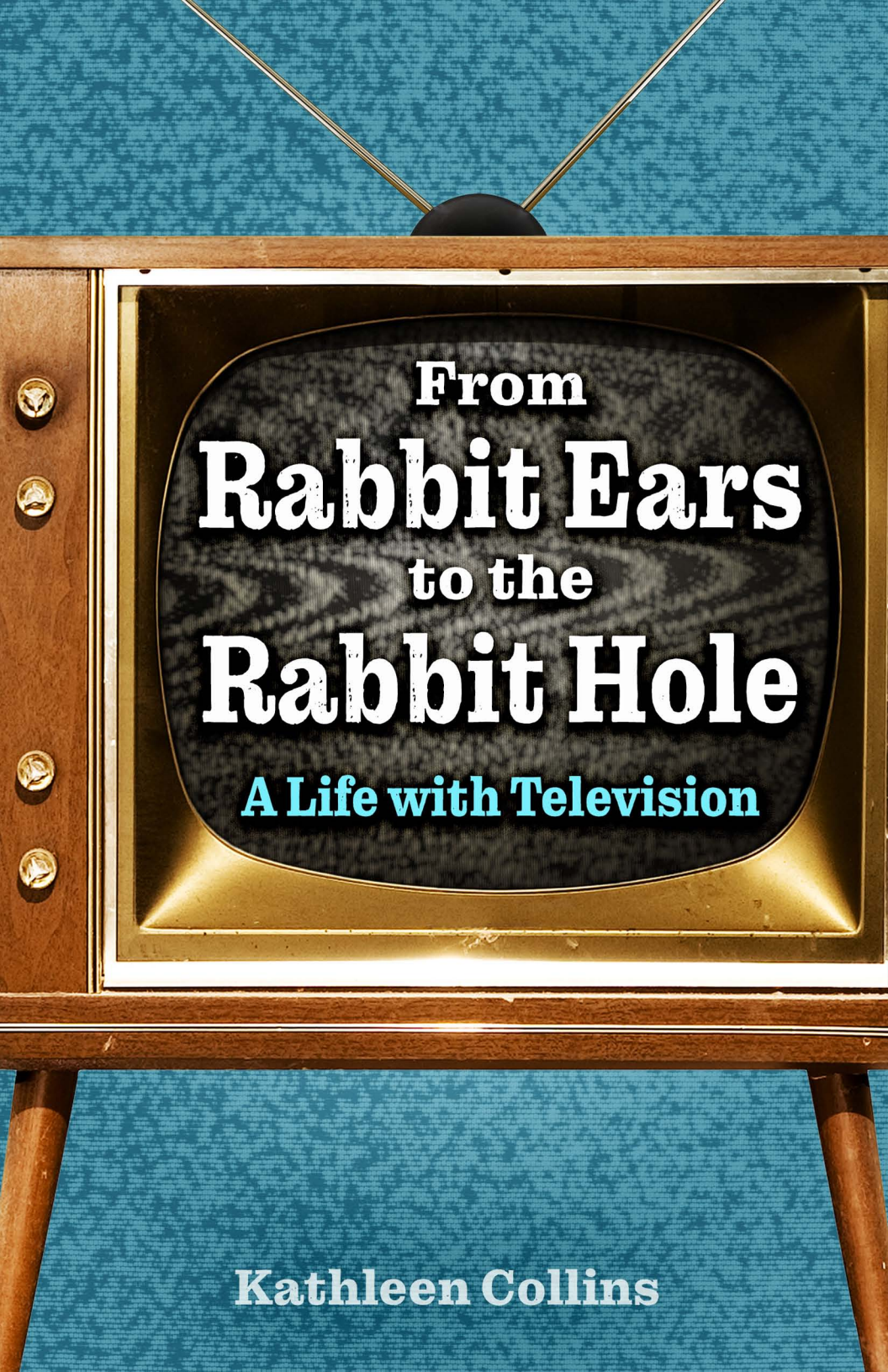
From
Rabbit Ears
to the
Rabbit Hole
A Life with Television
Kathleen Collins

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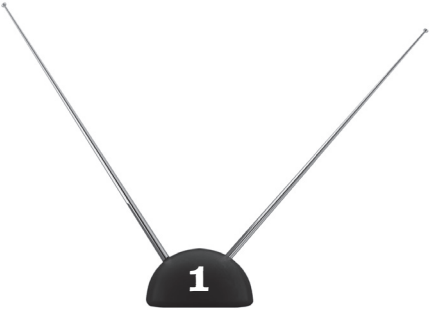

In the Beginning

On a Monday morning in June 1965, my mother was not watching *I Love Lucy*, an activity far more leisurely than the one she was engaged in, which was giving birth to me. She probably would have even preferred seeing trimnastics with Jack LaLanne or Vice President Hubert Humphrey expound on US foreign policy, which were also on the air as she was pushing me out in a Lamaze-free milieu. Later that day, there was a plethora of game shows to choose from—*Truth or Consequences*, *The Price Is Right*, *Password*; talk shows—*Girl Talk: Virginia Graham*, *Art Linkletter's House Party*; soaps—*The Guiding Light*, *The Secret Storm*, *The Doctors*; lots of news programs; full-on movies in broad weekday light, including *The Boy with the Green Hair*, about a bullied war orphan played by a preteen Dean Stockwell, and *Betrayed Women*, a 1948 drama about a women's prison. At the end of that exhausting and life-giving day, if Mom was up for it, during prime time she might have chosen from *I've Got a Secret*, the panel game show hosted by Steve Allen, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, or *The Honeymooners*.

The TV planet onto which I emerged might well have been in another universe, it was that different from the one onto which any given baby is born on any given Monday as I write this some fifty years on. Among the few options a viewer had on that June 1965 evening were the network offerings of the lively, star-studded *Andy Williams Show* or *The Danny Thomas Show*; or a viewer could go highbrow with the public broadcasting option of William F. Buckley debating James Baldwin on "the American Dream—has it been achieved at the expense of the American Negro?" There was the gamut, right there, something for everybody, if by "something" we mean a quite possibly ill-fitting program and by "everybody" we include a potentially apathetic viewer (or, per the laws of probability, in many cases a perfect match). Even so, you didn't hear people whining, "There's nothing on!" There was plenty, more than enough, and most were grateful and delighted. But I romanticize the yesteryears—intellectual debates popping up in prime time and Edward R. Murrow documentaries and British drama imports right there, unavoidable, in plain sight. But it was not all book discussions and classical music appreciation, lest we forget *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *My Favorite Martian*. These sitcoms got the eyeballs. And because TV was a relatively new culturally threatening upstart in the middle of the twentieth century, detractors at the time focused on the insipid, referring to the piece of furniture as the "idiot box" and the array of programming as a "wasteland." Perhaps until very recently, TV has continued to be reflexively referred to as lowbrow rubbish. But grocery stores have baby kale as well as Cool Ranch Doritos, and we don't call the supermarket a "junk food building."

Televisual content (henceforth shorthanded as TV, albeit technically inaccurate in many cases) has mushroomed, and there is a lot more good stuff and a lot more junk. One could

argue that we are in a more liberal place in the early twenty-first century because people watch shows for all different kinds of reasons. Consider, for instance, the existence of "hate watching." Indeed, we are less likely to feel or express shame and embarrassment about watching certain shows, and there is so much to consume—now there really is something for everyone—but you could argue even more convincingly that we are in a more confining space. While the same viewer who watched *The Honeymooners* in 1965 may well have watched the decidedly different-toned Buckley/Baldwin debate, she may have done so because there were far fewer screentime options, and she'd rather watch something than nothing; or maybe "hate watching" has always been a thing. Fifty years ago she would likely be passively consuming what was presented to her, whereas now she is installed in her media viewing bubble, proactively watching on demand whatever she wants. We think of the latter as technological progress, but—and here I go romanticizing again—I think it was the former that was magical. I'm nostalgic for the idea that a Ralph Kramden fan might serendipitously be introduced to the racial ideologies of the author of *Notes of a Native Son*, simply because she didn't feel like hauling herself off to bed.

The TV lineup on my first day of life was a pretty good bellwether for the era. I'm just mystical-minded enough to believe I might discover a clue from the TV universe I was born into that, in addition to my genetic material, explains me to myself. It sounds like hooey, I know, because I couldn't have watched with any kind of cognizance for a few more years, but I was in the room when others watched it and absorbed my parents' and grandparents' and various other adults' reactions to what was going on in the world and therefore on television. After the racial politics discussion on public broadcasting, a viewer could get up off the couch and switch the channel to escape

via *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* or wallow in some more Sturm und Drang with "The Berkeley Rebels," a special report from *CBS News with Harry Reasoner* about the UC Berkeley anti-establishment student activists. "You don't need any ideology to say that the society stinks!" said the promo for that special report in the newspaper TV listings. And that Reasoner special was not a one-off. What I was watching at the Paley Center that hot summer weekday was more in the same vein. On June 28, 1965, DJ Murray the K hosted a network special, *It's What's Happening, Baby*, sponsored by the bygone US Office of Economic Opportunities promoting its New Chance program—which hoped to nudge young people toward economic self-sufficiency—with a smorgasbord of big-name entertainers like the Temptations, Tom Jones, Ray Charles, Martha and the Vandellas, Marvin Gaye, the Dave Clark Five, the Supremes, and at least a dozen more. The kids were wild about it. Conservative congressmen, not so much. Later on, Murray's camp claimed to have inaugurated the concept of the music video with that broadcast. What is certain is that the program telegraphed a national issue in a bouncier manner than a history textbook or Wikipedia page would.

The real world and mine continued to coexist on parallel tracks with me mostly oblivious. As it happened, in fact, just days before the Apollo 12 moonwalk and the My Lai Massacre were announced on the network evening news in November 1969, history was being made over in the neighborhood where Mr. Fred McFeely Rogers had put down roots the previous year. I was there on the ground floor of *Sesame Street*'s debut, an early adopter, and a strong supporter from day one, if support can be measured in unblinking fixation. Its debut in the midst of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement was no coincidence; the show's creators were politically liberal advocates

of television's educational and activist potential. Thanks to the Children's Television Workshop, I learned to count to twenty in Spanish before I got to first grade and was introduced to diversity and creativity and the hippest of entertainers long before I would have otherwise. It was all so friendly and active and fun and education by stealth—how could that not have a prosocial effect on a mass scale? Of course it did, and there are piles of research to prove it, but a) I am not here to support my argument with hard evidence, and b) aren't anecdotal testimonies more convincing anyway?

I came up in a groovy era, for better or worse. Things that are now categorized as child abuse or neglect were, in the 1960s and 1970s, not given concern. Kids' domestic existence approximated that of indoor-outdoor pets. Seatbelts and an actual nutritious breakfast (not just a Pop-Tart sprinkled with colored sugar and trace vitamins and minerals) were rarely exercised options; we could stay alone in the car while our parents went into the store; bike helmets were worn only by (some) adults and only on motorcycles. And we sat mere inches away from the TV set, so close that our hair statically clung to the screen, crackling wondrously. I'm certain a passing adult occasionally admonished me, but I didn't heed, and she would be out of the room before the words "ruin your eyes" had passed the cigarette attached to her lip.

There were a lot of things we citizens of that devil-may-care era weren't afraid of that we should have been—first- and second-hand smoke, saccharine, the sun, Diethylstilbestrol, Bill Cosby—but also a battery of threats that gave me nightmares, terrifying scenarios of which no reasonable arguments could disabuse me. I was convinced that upon entering middle school, the "drug pushers" that my parents blithely, in my presence, tsk-tsked about with their friends would push me against the

lockers and shove pills down my throat (thank you, anonymous author of *Go Ask Alice*). Any time my parents visited boat-owning friends who lived near the ocean, I waited in a state of heightened agitation for the news from my godparents that Mom and Dad had been chomped to their gory death by a shark (Spielberg, you devil!). The now-legendary Double Initial Murderer was on a spree in 1973 in Rochester, New York, and guess where I lived? I was genuinely concerned not only for the safety of my friends Marybeth Miller and Susan Scheff but even more so for my own potential gruesome demise—how would I be spared by this insane criminal who was most assuredly choosing victims based only on phonetics?

Even though the lurking of the alphabet psychopath and all the other sensational bad news was brought to me by television, I didn't hate the messenger. Not even when we were subjected to a blood-curdling test of the Emergency Broadcast System. I don't even want to think about what my mom told me *that* was for. I loved TV with all my heart and soul. Nothing could tear us asunder. The positive far outweighed the negative. Besides, most of the content I consumed was of the kid-friendly variety, offered up in a safe, day-lit timeslot or publicly funded zone and blissfully above the fray of the real world.

Weekday mornings consisted of TV time as the sun rose, before we drove my dad to work, my mom's pink hair tape still holding her damp curls in place. I was supremely fond of *Captain Kangaroo* and *Romper Room* and had less room in my heart for *Underdog*, *Tennessee Tuxedo*, and *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*. Inexplicably, animation never sustained my attention (and never could—a crippling character weakness for when *The Simpsons* came around). Even though I am almost certain the cartoons, especially the Mel Blanc, Looney Tunes variety, were innovative and clever, given that they

contained subliminal literary references, I always leaned more toward the live-action types—*The Lost Saucer*, *Sigmund and the Sea Monsters*, *H. R. Pufnstuf*. *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones* were exceptions (and much later Comedy Central's *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist* and much, much later *BoJack Horseman* and Bill Burr's *F Is for Family*). These two were a class apart in my mental hierarchy. Maybe it was the space age and prehistoric settings, respectively, that made me feel like I was watching something approaching a movie, which overrode the juvenile animation. Would that I was attracted to the proto-MOOC, *Sunrise Semester*—who knows what variety of genius grants I would be boasting now? But I don't recall ever laying eyes on the thing, so resentful was I of the very unintelligible, un-fun-sounding phrase taking up valuable space in the TV listings, not to mention on the air.

The Art Clokey claymation joints were also in a separate column. *The Gumby Show* and *Davey and Goliath* mesmerized me simply for their visual appeal. I enjoyed these clay figures, I believe, for the same reasons I enjoyed pre-cable cooking shows—they were slow and earnest, and suggested interesting textures. The content of these two series, however, I eschewed or forgot. I was no stranger to tuning out religious indoctrination—I attended CCD (indoctrination for public school Catholic kids) every week until I was confirmed at age thirteen—and I could not abide Davey's treacly, goody-goodyness. The fact that it was probably relatively progressive—they had a couple of brown clay kids in it—was lost on me. Gumby did not likewise bombard with morality, and though I remember nothing of the plots, I was happy to own my own Gumby and Pokey facsimiles, whose real-life tactile consistency was only mildly satisfying. It's not insignificant that these programs aired on the weekend, the bastion of endless cartoons. I gave Scooby

About the Author

Photography by Arpi Pap

Kathleen Collins writes about television, media, and popular culture, both historical and current. She is the author of *Watching What We Eat: The Evolution of Television Cooking Shows* (Bloomsbury/Continuum, 2009) and *Dr. Joyce Brothers: The Founding Mother of TV Psychology* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). Her work has also appeared in the *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, *Critical Studies in Television, Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, and *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*. Her collection of graduate degrees includes counseling psychology, journalism, and library science, and she is a professor and librarian at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.