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The decade of smoke and mirrors

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff | November 1, 2008

For many years the Peace Corps billed itself as "the toughest job you'll ever love." Something of the same could be said of parenthood.

It takes a lot of work to survive the daily decathlon of family life, and most parents are never quite sure they're doing it right. Perhaps one day your child will praise you in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, but the thing that keeps most parents going is the hope that their kids will look back fondly on their childhoods - and on good old mom and dad.

"Mad Men" suggests they should not count on it.

Plenty has been written and said about the machinations of the advertising agency executives, secretaries, and housewives in the AMC drama, which is set in the early 1960s. It is the show's subtext involving parent-child relations, though, that makes contemporary parents wonder how they will be depicted one day.

The children of "Mad Men" are seen only in glimpses, but those glimpses put to rest any idea that baby boomers enjoyed idyllic childhoods, and that their parents were selflessly devoted to family above all. This week's season-ending episode showed the two young children of Don and Betty Draper, an estranged couple, watching "Leave It to Beaver" in the hotel room where Don had lived since he and Betty separated.

The scene neatly illustrated the gulf between myth and reality. "Leave It to Beaver," of course, is the rose-colored lens through which many boomers have chosen to remember the past. But under the vision crafted by Mathew Weiner, the creator of "Mad Men," childhood is a bleak landscape and the parents are largely portraits of indifference.

Now, one of the iron laws of history is that every generation gets to tell the story of the one before it. This can be disconcerting for the generation being put under the microscope of the young 'uns. There were probably old-timers in ancient Greece muttering about how that snotty Herodotus punk got it all wrong.

Even so, it's a stinging indictment "Mad Men" delivers of the parenting styles of the "Greatest Generation" and their slightly younger counterparts. In the episodes before the Drapers separated, Betty would sit at the dinner table when Don was late arriving home from work, smoking a cigarette, lost in her own sullen reverie, neither looking at nor talking to her children. (The adults in this series smoke incessantly around their kids, which was common back then but now makes us wince, as if we are witnessing child abuse.)

When the Drapers decided to host a dinner party, Don turned his little daughter into a virtual bartender, training her to mix drinks. When he took the child to his ad agency, he left her in the care of a secretary, who ignored her. (The unsupervised child sampled some of the office's free-flowing booze and passed out.) As his star rose, Don treated himself to a brand-new Cadillac, and Betty escaped the constraints of family life by horse riding. There were few signs they were spending much money on what we nowadays would call "enrichment activities" for the kids.

Granted, it's just a TV show, but "Mad Men" is likely to make boomers wonder: Were things really that grim on the homefront? Sampson Lee Blair, an associate professor of sociology at SUNY-Buffalo, says yeah, they often were. "The general public, when they think of the post-World War II era, commonly rely on these images of 'Ozzie and Harriet' and 'Leave It to Beaver,' that it was a period when you had an abundance of love and nurturance given from parents to their children," said Blair. "But it wasn't that way."

In fact, Blair says, the increases in family income in the 1950s were accompanied by an equally sharp spike in

alcohol consumption. As the number of children per household soared during the baby boom, Blair says, the quality of parenting sometimes suffered.

Still, today's parents shouldn't feel smug. Odds are most of the parents of the baby boomers thought they were doing the best they could, just like we do. "Mad Men" serves as a reminder that we don't get to control our own stories. You may be giving the job of parenthood your all, but remember that the toddler pushing a toy truck around your living room will get the last word.

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