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I'm Still Living in Al Bundy's America

By WALTER MOSLEY

AL BUNDY is my hero. He's a working-class loser who's defeated by life but refuses to lay down and die. He is stupid but wily. Deeply dissatisfied with family, fatherhood and his work as a shoe salesman, he's still proud of his name and the pitiful patch of earth he calls home. His favorite room is the toilet and his pet peeve is the French.

He weeps watching old westerns like "Hondo" and "Shane." His favorite television show is "Psycho-Dad." His cultural life is limited to Strippers of the World night at the nudie bar. He's wished for death so often that once the Grim Reaper herself visited for an evening.

Al Bundy, the maladjusted father of the brilliantly vulgar sitcom "Married . . . With Children," is working-class America with all of its ignorance, misogyny and resentment. His wife doesn't love him, his children don't respect him, the neighbors would celebrate his demise.

From the first day I watched "Married . . . With Children," I was enchanted. It was the one show that didn't feel the need to redeem the working-class American with middle-class pretensions. What man married for 20 years rushes home to have sex with his wife? And where else on television are all of those Americans who distrust foreigners, the federal government, the law and anyone with a smile on his face? And those families whose daughters sneak in boys in the dead of night? When Al was given the choice of sending his son to visit the president or enrolling his daughter in a sleazy beauty contest to win a year's supply of Weenie Tots, it was a no-brainer.

Tonight Al reappears on Fox, the network that carried his show from 1987 to 1997. A "Married . . . With Children" reunion is being shown at 9 p.m. (8 Central), to accompany the 300th episode of "The Simpsons," the other irreverent flagship comedy from the early days of Fox. I can hardly wait.

Al Bundy is my hero because he knows that there is no hope. He's my hero because he is only interested in what he cannot possess. He's my hero because he ogles beautiful women but is helpless at striking up a conversation with them. He's my hero because he's flat broke, like most of us are, and always will be.

But there's more to it than the pessimistic and scornful tone of Al's life. There's also something redemptive in the way that he comes home every night, driving the same old Dodge that he's driven since high school. There's something in the way that he survives in spite of his misguided notions and lack of love.

Every night Al walks in, hangs up his insubstantial wind breaker and says, "A fat woman came into the shoe store today . . ." No one is listening. No one cares about his day or his complaints. There's no dinner on the table. The dog won't even bring him his slippers. This is the show's comment on the sad reality of American life.

Al sleeps with Peggy's knee on his spine and her hands at his throat, but he would never think of leaving. She is unloved, unsatisfied and humiliated by her husband, but she sits at home every night waiting to ignore him. The children, grown by now, are disgusted by their parents. But like so many children of America's working poor, even they can't find a way out of the house.

It's often said that television sitcoms are designed to help us escape our problems. I've always had trouble with that idea. How can I escape if the trap I'm in is a mystery to me? Before "Married . . . With Children" came along, most sitcoms just made me laugh. I never identified with the problems. What I wanted was a show to help me understand the hopelessness that so many Americans, and I, live with.

Peg and Al, Bud and Kelly explicated the world that I knew, that I've lived in for most of my life. Al coming home to an empty refrigerator is me coming home to our president's state of the union address. His willingness to fight for the paltry scrap of dignity he has managed to maintain gives me hope that I too will be able to stand tall.

Walter Mosley is the author of 16 books, most recently "Six Easy Pieces" (Atria Books) and "What Next: A Memoir Toward World Peace" (Black Classic Press).