



SEVEN DEADLY SINS

BY TOM MATLACK '86

WITH NO JOB AND NO INCOME, MATT WEINER'S WRITING CAREER DID NOT HAVE AN AUSPICIOUS START. NOW HE'S THE CREATOR OF THE CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED SHOW, MAD MEN.

AS I SIT DOWN WITH MATTHEW WEINER '87

in his office at Los Angeles Center Studios, he proudly shows me a tray on display that was a wedding gift to his parents. This tray became a key prop on his Golden Globe-winning show *Mad Men* when one of the lead characters, Pete, traded it for a rifle.

Weiner is obsessed with the stylistic authenticity of *Mad Men*, his critically acclaimed television drama. Set in 1960, when Madison Avenue advertising executives were seen as masters of the universe, the show is both a brilliantly conceived period piece and a whole lot more. Weiner, not yet born in 1960, knows the era: its fashions and hairstyles, its haze of cigarette smoke and three-martini lunches in amber-lit bars, its electric typewriters, and its attitude. It was a time of brash assertion when ad men believed they could shape public opinion, like gods toying with mortals.

"There were seven deadly sins practiced at the dawn of the 1960s: smoking, drinking, adultery, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism," writes *New York Times* television critic Alessandra Stanley. "In its first few minutes, *Mad Men* on AMC taps into all of them."

Mad Men is Weiner's creation, and he's at the top of his game after writing 12 episodes of the *Sopranos* and becoming executive producer to creator David Chase. Wearing pristine white pants, he walks back into his office from the writers' room having given his team their marching orders.

The men of Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency ruled their world in the early 1960s, with leading man John Hamm as Don Draper (center). Hamm and *Mad Men* won Golden Globes for the first season.

Weiner talks fast, becoming more and more animated as he recalls his grandfather Max, a fur dresser born near Kiev, Russia. Max worked in Manhattan's garment district. "Grandpa Max was always a natty dresser," Weiner says. "When he died, he left me his sharkskin suits, skinny ties, two-toned shirts, and multi-colored socks. I wore them to high school and then through Wesleyan."

In high school Weiner found an academic mentor in Suzy Moser, a chain-smoking teacher who had an advanced degree in social thought from the University of Chicago. At a dinner, Moser introduced Weiner to a visiting poet, W.S. Merwin, who told him that he could be a writer. It was a formative moment and encouraged Weiner to pursue poetry.

While his academic record in high school didn't distinguish Weiner, the sense of humor he had inherited from Max did. His peers selected him as their commencement speaker. He gave a witty speech that caught the attention of a classmate's father, Allan Burns, the creator of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and a legendary TV writer. "That was really something," Burns told him. The two kept in touch and Burns would eventually get Weiner his first job in Hollywood.

Weiner has always understood what it means not to fit in. He grew up a Jew in a non-Jewish neighborhood. He attended Wesleyan to be a poet, but his work wasn't deemed good enough to get him into a writing class. For three years after he got married, his only financial contribution to the household budget was \$16,000 in prize money he won on the game show *Jeopardy!* And yet not fitting in has been his key talent as a writer, along with a keen sense of irony.

"Remember the mirror can be your best friend or your worst enemy," says Joan, the voluptuous head secretary. Meanwhile the men of the office take inventory behind a one-way mirror. Only Joan knows they are looking. "Has no taste, ugly dress, horrible wig." "They're brainstorming." "I wouldn't expect more than a few sprinkles." "I love it when they do that, my little blow-fish." A woman is puckering in the mirror. "Anybody mind if I take my pants off?" Finally Joan bends forward over a table provocatively to show off her curves, knowing the men are watching, causing one to exclaim, "I want to stand and salute that!" And he does.

Weiner is surprised by the idea that he, or his show, is sexist. "The treatment of women on *Mad Men* is the point," he says emphatically. "The women characters are informed not only by my mother, an attorney, and two older sisters, an attorney and a doctor, but by the philosophical underpinnings of what I learned at Wesleyan. It's right out of *The Feminine Mystique*. My show is saying "This is not right."

"The most exciting ideas on campus involved feminism," Weiner says. His eyes light up when he talks about the impact of his freshman poetry course taught by Professor of English Gertrude Hughes. He was one of two men in the class. "Like Emily Dickinson, I was drawn to the hormonal teenage experience of loneliness, of the reality of death, and of sexual awakening." In the poems of women—from Dickinson to Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Denise Levertov—he discovered a form for his exploration of the outsider who tries to don a mask of acceptability, but often fails.

The enduring hope in the world of *Mad Men* is embodied in the women and children, not the men, Weiner contends. Peggy (the "new girl" at the office) "shows that a good idea, in the end, will overcome sex, race, everything." Glenn, the young son of a divorced mother, is the other innocent. Glenn, played by Weiner's real son Marten, walks in on a woman in the bathroom and then asks her for a lock of her hair. "That really happened in Baltimore when I was 7 or 8 years old," Weiner says. "I had a crush on my babysitter and wanted to see her naked."

When viewers started saying the character of Glenn was odd, Weiner told his son that the bathroom scene was true. Ten-year-old Marten replied, "Dad, that's weird."

AT WESLEYAN, Weiner became obsessed with his dreams. They were so vivid that he sometimes recalled them as real. He dreamed about walking around campus at noon only to find it deserted; he dreamed about talking to his late Grandpa Max, about talking to an amalgamation of people in a single body, about talking to the sun.

Professor of Psychology J.J. Conley took him on in an independent study course to explore the biology, psychology, and literary explanations for his sleeping visions.

A decade and a half later, Weiner worked with David Chase on Chase's now famous 22-minute dream sequence in which Tony Soprano points a gun at his high school football coach, who berates him for the compa-

ny he keeps, the life choices he's made, and his lack of preparedness. When Tony pulls the trigger, the gun's silencer goes limp; he pulls it again and the clip falls out. Just before he wakes up, the coach tells him, "You'll never shut me up."

For Weiner, Tony's sordid life of murder and prostitutes would inevitably lead to the vivid dreams that reflected the turmoil in his subconscious mind and the feelings of inadequacy that echoed Weiner's own experience.

Although Weiner wrote poetry daily at Wesleyan, he couldn't convince faculty members that his work was good enough to get into a class. Finally, he took his poems to Professor of Letters Franklin Reeve for an independent study. Their first meeting was rocky. Reeve found much to criticize, but he was also amused by Weiner's sense of irony.

"Matt never quite fit," Reeve said in a phone interview. "He had a spunky original streak that meant his writing wasn't successful the way others were. He was determined to reinvent the wheel in a wonderful way, which made him a stimulating and rewarding student to work with."

Reeve agreed to take Weiner on in the spring of his sophomore year. They continued working together throughout his junior year and then on his senior thesis for the College of Letters. For Weiner, Reeve was a larger-than-life figure, handsome and robust. He lived in Vermont and split logs. "He had been Robert Frost's translator in Russia, so I always suspected he was some sort of spy. He was a romantic in the best sense of the word and I loved him for that.

"He made me understand that my writing came from inside. It was embarrassing to expose myself but he was the first to tell me, 'That is good! When you embarrass yourself, you're engaging the audience; you're being honest.'" Like his teacher Suzy Moser, Reeve gave Weiner license to be himself as an artist. In fact, he demanded it.

Weiner never believed Reeve had a high opinion of him. "I always thought I disappointed him in some way," he says. When told what Reeve said, Weiner responds with a shocked, "Really?"

After graduation Weiner went to film school at USC, met and married Linda Brettler, and tried to write. Linda, an architect, supported him until he finally landed a job at A&E writing biographies and then became a writer on



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Matthew Weiner honed his writing skills in sitcoms and on *The Sopranos* before he was able to create the show he longed to do: *Mad Men*.

the sitcom *Party Girl*. He still considers himself to be a comedy writer.

He began to research the advertising industry from the era of Max's beautiful clothes. During the summer hiatus between seasons of working on comedy, he sat down and wrote the pilot of *Mad Men*.

At about that time, Linda pushed him to watch an episode of *The Sopranos*. He remembers it as a religious experience. "Tony strangles someone who has a kid. It showed that the writers were actually going to follow through on the dramatic premise of the character. Viewers were going to be compelled to live with this guy as he drove his own daughter to college after committing the murder." This was the kind of rule-breaking that Weiner had been looking for on TV.

After seeing *The Sopranos*, Weiner tried for months to get HBO to read his *Mad Men* pilot. Finally, he begged his agent to get Chase to read the pilot since they were both represented by United Talent Agency. The script sat at the agency for two years before they finally sent it to Chase. During a Halloween party for his children, a car pulled up to Weiner's house to take him to the Los Angeles airport for an interview in New York. "I had never been flown anywhere, never been put up in a hotel, never had a car waiting for me," Weiner says.

In November of 2002, Weiner began work on *The Sopranos*. His auditory memory and knack for dialogue set him apart from other writers. He also understood Chase's preference for subtext. Weiner writes obliquely, preferring to use dialogue to hint at underlying tension rather than address it directly. "I don't like people talking about the real subject because people never do."

He worked on *The Sopranos* for four and a half years, but he continued to think about *Mad Men*. "That was where I lived. I just wanted to make that show." As *The Sopranos* headed towards its conclusion and television history, Christina Wayne at AMC read the *Mad Men* script and fell in love with Weiner's highly stylized and edgy approach to a forgotten era. She was looking for a way to brand the channel with original content and believed *Mad Men* was the perfect vehicle.

ONE OF THE INSPIRATIONS for the 1960 Madison Avenue setting of *Mad Men* was a College of Letters class with Howard Needler on the cyclical patterns of history. Weiner was deeply influenced by the Marxist concept of

history predicated on the conflict between opposed material and social forces.

The election of John Kennedy in 1960 signified an inflection in the play of social forces. World War II had not yet faded into history, and Vietnam was just around the corner. A revolution in technology was accelerating. Unheard of prosperity mixed with vivid memories of the Great Depression. Jim Crow discrimination was giving way to civil rights. The same secretaries who were working for advertising executives would soon be marching for equal rights. The men who comfortably ruled over these secretaries, like men who rule in any period of upheaval, had reason to be anxious about change.

Don Draper, the lead ad exec on *Mad Men*, suffers from a deep, existential ache. Although the period-piece atmosphere of *Mad Men* fixes the show in time, Draper's alienation is timeless. "There are no primary causes, there are no rules, your morality is your own, no one is keeping score, and your behavior is to be judged on its own merits," says Weiner.

"I remember the first time I was a pallbearer," Don confesses to his mistress Rachel as he tries to seduce her. "I'd seen dead bodies before, must have been fifteen, my aunt. I remember thinking, They're letting me carry the box, they're letting me be this close to it. No one is hiding anything from me now. And then I looked over and I saw all the old people waiting together by the grave. And I remember thinking, 'I've just moved up a notch.'"

"I've never heard you talk that much before."

"Rachel."

"What do you want from me?"

"You know. I know you do; you know everything about me."

"I don't."

Don tries to kiss Rachel.

"You don't want to do this, you have a wife. You should go to her."

"Jesus, Rachel. This is it. This is all there is. I feel like it's slipping through my fingers like a handful of sand. This is it. This is all there is."

"That's just an excuse for bad behavior."

"You don't really believe that."

Don kisses Rachel passionately. She responds. He stops.

"No. Unless you tell me you want this."

"Yes, please," she says.

Weiner slowly reveals Don Draper as an imposter. Born to a prostitute who died in childbirth, he was handed over to his mean-spirited father and his wife. When his drunken father died, the wife took up with another man. "I was raised by those two sorry people," he admits to Rachel. He went into the army to escape his family. When enemy fire killed his lieutenant, he switched dog tags. He came home as Don Draper, the dead lieutenant.

Throughout the first season, flashbacks foreshadow the discovery of Don's past. But when Pete, Don's subordinate, finds out the truth and brings it to the head of the firm, he gets an indifferent reception. "This country was built and run by men with worse stories than whatever you've imagined here," the founder says.

The violence of Tony Soprano and swagger of Don Draper are a cover for the quiet desperation Weiner sees in all of us. They are liars who want to be what they are not. They represent the duplicitous side he believes lurks in each of us.

The crew of *Mad Men* reports that Weiner shows unbridled joy at having his dream on the screen. "Matt's passion ends up being a beautiful and generous thing," *Sopranos* and *Mad Men* director Taylor says. "Dealing with his own emotions and obsessions passionately, inspires everyone."

The effort also has taken its toll. During the first season, he was in a fog, a ghost in his house. His four sons had to accept that "daddy's on a different planet." But the payoff to him as an artist was huge. "When we finished filming the first season, I felt we had done something great. I'd never had that experience in my life."

In a television era dominated by *American Idol*, the storytelling and cinematic beauty of Weiner's work stand out for the quality of craftsmanship. The real power of his writing, however, emerges from his honest connection with the alienated person struggling for acceptance in a hostile world. Weiner, like his leading men, has strived mightily to fill the existential void. He has survived creative purgatory. But as the creator and show runner of a successful television drama, he has done something remarkable. He has fulfilled Franklin Reeve's call to write from the inside out.

Tom Matlack previously wrote for Wesleyan magazine about his experiences as an undergraduate on the crew team.