

## **THIS BOOK IS A TIME MACHINE.**

It goes backwards and forwards through all seven seasons. It takes longtime fans to a place where they ache to go again. It guides new viewers on their first trip to 1960s Madison Avenue. It's called *Mad Men Carousel*. It lets us think about the show the way a TV critic does. Around and around and back home again, to a place where we know why it's loved.

AVAILABLE WHERE FINE BOOKS ARE SOLD



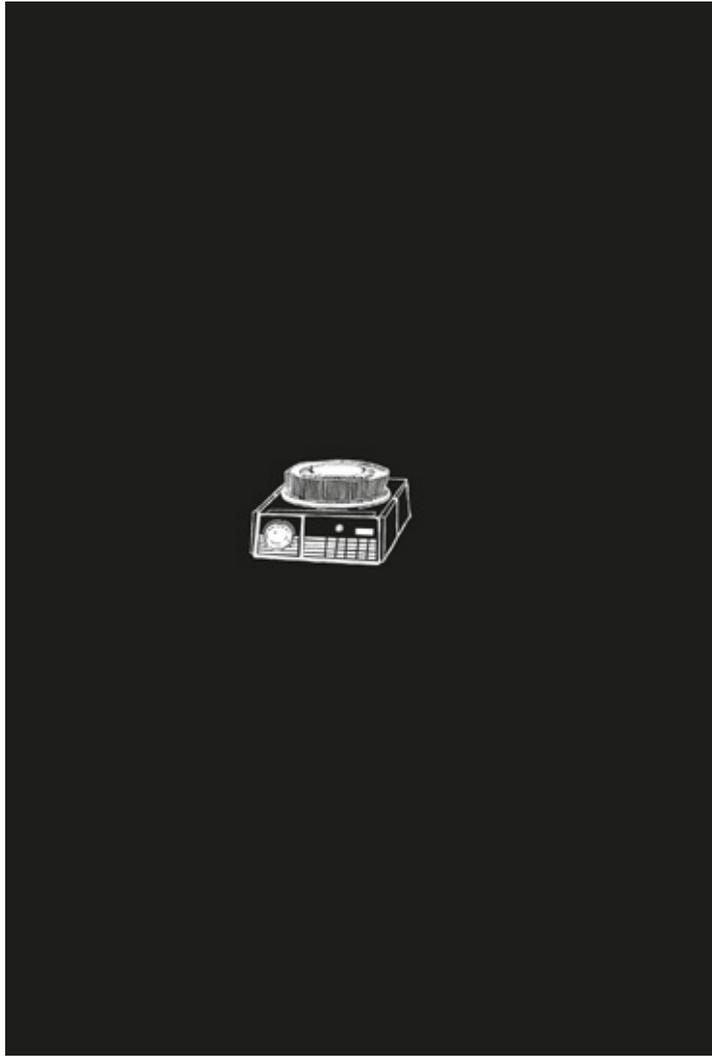
# MAD MEN

*Carousel*

The Complete Critical Companion

MATT ZOLLER SEITZ

Foreword by Megan Abbott



# Mad Men Carousel

The Complete Critical Companion

---

**Matt Zoller Seitz**

Foreword by Megan Abbott

Illustrations by Max Dalton

Poems by Martha Orton

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Deborah Lipp and Roberta Lipp,  
publishers of *Basket of Kisses*

Abrams

New York

**Dedicated to Amy**



# Contents

---

**Foreword**

**Preface**

**About Recaps**

## **SEASON 1**

---

**It's Toasted**

S1 / E1

“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”

**Nannies and Eggs**

S1 / E2

“Ladies Room”

**Old Dick Whitman**

S1 / E3

“Marriage of Figaro”

**Investments**

S1 / E4

“New Amsterdam”

**Executive Accounts**

S1 / E5

“5G”

**What Do Women Want?**

S1 / E6

“Babylon”

**Kid Stuff**

S1 / E7

“Red in the Face”

### **Total Ownership**

S1 / E8

“The Hobo Code”

### **Special Angel**

S1 / E9

“Shoot”

### **They See What They Are**

S1 / E10

“Long Weekend”

### **Business as Usual**

S1 / E11

“Indian Summer”

### **Slide Show**

S1 / E12

“Nixon vs. Kennedy”

S1 / E13

“The Wheel”

## **SEASON 2**

---

### **The Needle in the Haystack**

S2 / E1

“For Those Who Think Young”

### **Life and Work**

S2 / E2

“Flight 1”

### **All the Same Face**

S2 / E3

“The Benefactor”

### **For the Little One**

S2 / E4

“Three Sundays”

### **The Patron Saint of Amnesia**

S2 / E5

“The New Girl”

### **Mirror, Mirror**

S2 / E6

“Maidenform”

### **That New Car Smell**

S2 / E7

“The Gold Violin”

### **Housewives Love Green!**

S2 / E8

“A Night to Remember”

S2 / E9

“Six Month Leave”

### **Orphans**

S2 / E10

“The Inheritance”

### **Suitcase Dreams**

S2 / E11

“The Jet Set”

S2 / E12

“The Mountain King”

S2 / E13

“Meditations in an Emergency”

## **SEASON 3**

---

### **Limit Your Exposure**

S3 / E1

“Out of Town”

### **Change the Conversation**

S3 / E2

“Love Among the Ruins”

### **The Dying Empire**

S3 / E3

“My Old Kentucky Home”

### **Ant Farm**

S3 / E4

“The Arrangements”

### **Kitchen Dreams**

S3 / E5

“The Fog”

### **Hey, Hey, Woody Guthrie**

S3 / E6

“Guy Walks into an Advertising Agency”

### **His Master’s Voice**

S3 / E7

“Seven Twenty Three”

### **Expect the Moon**

S3 / E8

“Souvenir”

S3 / E9

“Wee Small Hours”

### **A Label on a Can**

S3 / E10

“The Color Blue”

S3 / E11

“The Gypsy and the Hobo”

### **Special Bulletin**

S3 / E12

“The Grown Ups”

### **Draper’s 11**

S3 / E13

“Shut the Door. Have a Seat”

## **SEASON 4**

---

### **Blow It Up**

S4 / E1

“Public Relations”

### **Serve Somebody**

S4 / E2

“Christmas Comes But Once a Year”

### **Return to the Wild**

S4 / E3

“The Good News”

### **Effortless**

S4 / E4

“The Rejected”

### **Hill of Beans**

S4 / E5

“The Chrysanthemum and the Sword”

### **Cure for the Common Blank**

S4 / E6

“Waldorf Stories”

### **Hands**

S4 / E7

“The Suitcase”

### **Satisfaction**

S4 / E8

“The Summer Man”

### **Dr. Babysitter**

S4 / E9

“The Beautiful Girls”

### **In Between**

S4 / E10

“Hands and Knees”

### **“What’s Going On?”**

S4 / E11

“Chinese Wall”

### **Afterimage**

S4 / E12

“Blowing Smoke”

### **I Got You, Babe**

S4 / E13

“Tomorrowland”

## **SEASON 5**

---

### **The Art of Supper**

S5 / E1&2

“A Little Kiss”

### **The Trailblazers**

S5 / E3

“Tea Leaves”

### **American Dream**

S5 / E4

“Mystery Date”

### **England in Pieces**

S5 / E5

“Signal 30”

### **Hall of Mirrors**

S5 / E6

“Far Away Places”

### **She Is a Camera**

S5 / E7

“At the Codfish Ball”

### **The Void**

S5 / E8

“Lady Lazarus”

### **Sippin’ Ice**

S5 / E9

“Dark Shadows”

### **Smiles and Innuendo**

S5 / E10

“Christmas Waltz”

### **Little Murders**

S5 / E11

“The Other Woman”

### **Short-term Loan**

S5 / E12

“Commissions and Fees”

### **You Only Live Twice**

S5 / E13

“The Phantom”

## **SEASON 6**

---

### **Nocturnes**

S6 / E1&2

“The Doorway”

### **Munich**

S6 / E3

“Collaborators”

### **Bad Pennies**

S6 / E4

“To Have and to Hold”

### **Shameful Day**

S6 / E5  
“The Flood”

**All That for Nothing**

S6 / E6  
“For Immediate Release”

**First Day of School**

S6 / E7  
“Man with a Plan”

**A Little Dream**

S6 / E8  
“The Crash”

**The Butter Half**

S6 / E9  
“The Better Half”

**Back to Disneyland**

S6 / E10  
“A Tale of Two Cities”

**Pip-squeak God**

S6 / E11  
“Favors”

**Written in Steam**

S6 / E12  
“The Quality of Mercy”

**Jesus Had a Bad Year**

S6 / E13  
“In Care Of”

**SEASON 7.1**

---

**Accutron Time**

S7 / E1  
“Time Zones”

### **Stop Talking**

S7 / E2

“A Day’s Work”

### **Prodigal Son**

S7 / E3

“Field Trip”

### **A Cosmic Disturbance**

S7 / E4

“The Monolith”

### **Tarzan in New York**

S7 / E5

“The Runaways”

### **Shangri-La with Fries**

S7 / E6

“The Strategy”

### **The Astronauts**

S7 / E7

“Waterloo”

## **SEASON 7.2**

---

### **You Like What You See**

S7 / E8

“Severance”

### **Stains**

S7 / E9

“New Business”

### **Whistling Through the Graveyard**

S7 / E10

“The Forecast”

### **The King Ordered It!**

S7 / E11

“Time & Life”

**Don’t Make Plans for Me**

S7 / E12

“Lost Horizon”

**The Final Note**

S7 / E13

“The Milk and Honey Route”

**The Real Thing**

S7 / E14

“Person to Person”

**Afterword**

**Timeline**

**Endnotes**

**Contributor Bios**

# Foreword

**The world of men is dreaming, it has gone mad in its sleep, and a snake is strangling it, but it can't wake up.**

**—D. H. LAWRENCE**

**I**t has become commonplace to draw parallels between today's more ambitious television shows and the novel, or even to claim that the most artful of these shows—rich with social commentary, complicated story arcs, and dense character psychology—have supplanted the novel. Overused, the comparison has been drained of meaning, sealing over both the visual pleasures and sensory urgency that TV shows can offer and the intimacy and immersiveness of our favorite novels. When one considers *Mad Men*, however, the comparison feels closer. And the show itself, thick with literary allusions, certainly encourages it—from Dante and Freud to Susann and Puzo, has a show ever shown so many characters reading? Creator Matthew Weiner himself has noted that when he first read John Cheever, he thought, *This man sounds like I want to sound: beautiful and sad.*

The most compelling evidence of *Mad Men*'s "literariness," however, is found not in the show itself, but in the way it has been "read"—dissected, deconstructed, laid upon the operating table week after week by an ever-expanding army of recappers, live tweeters, conspiracy theorists, and web sleuths. While many shows inspire online frenzies of speculation and theorizing, the *Mad Men* canon is remarkable both in its arcane depths and its intellectual rigor. But the voice striking clear as a bell above all that glorious noise has always been the analysis offered by Matt Zoller Seitz. Like the strongest and most incisive of literary criticism, his *Mad Men* pieces expand our view of the show and the issues it raises. So, if a recap oeuvre can read like lit crit—can make us see depths and meaning far beyond our own viewing experience—then it seems *Mad Men* does in fact work, and sing, and drown us like the most captivating of novels. The ones that feel like fever dreams.

Unlike most recaps, which are transitory productions, Seitz's *Mad Men* pieces are telescopic, enabling us to see not just the small details we might miss but how these moments fit in—or complicate—the show's larger contexts. Seitz is constantly "racking focus" between the episode itself and the show's recurring "big" themes: the nature of identity, self-knowledge, the burden of the past, identity and reinvention, character stasis and evolution. At the same time, he can narrow our gaze to a moment so subtle we may have missed it and that may make us rethink the episode, a character, even the series in total. Witness Seitz on Betty Draper in season seven's "Field Trip," lighting her cigarette and putting on her sunglasses after a particularly tense encounter with her son Bobby. It's a moment that, Seitz notes, serves as a crushing dismissal of her son. But rather than using it simply as evidence of Betty's cruelty, Seitz reminds us that what Betty is doing most of all in that episode is punishing herself (by not eating, by shutting herself off from her son, by retreating from an experience she was enjoying and then judging herself for it later)—an observation that is surprising and immediately feels deeply true.

For Seitz, the show can not only sustain such analysis, it demands it, bidding us not just to watch the show but to "scrutinize" it. Such a role suits the show's larger fixation with the slipperiness of identity, the self behind the self, and as engaged viewers we are complicit in that fixation. We must be "on the lookout for deceptions and self-deceptions," Seitz writes, and "the gap between how characters see themselves . . . and

who they likely are.” If we do not participate critically, we are missing at least half of what matters. Our interpretation is part of the show, enlarges it, completes it. It’s a dance, a shell game, a pitch, fictions traded for fictions. And we’d better have our back up and our stories straight.

Which brings us back to literary criticism. In *Aspects of the Novel*, his classic study of the form, E. M. Forster asserts that mystery is essential to plot, but to experience its full effect one must go beyond a what-will-happen-next mode of reading. “To appreciate a mystery,” he writes, “part of the mind must be left behind, brooding, while the other part goes marching on.” This observation calls to mind both *Mad Men* itself (part melodrama, part metaphysical puzzle) and Seitz’s critical process. Standard recaps focus on story developments, possibly also providing fresh blood for the rabid prognostication society that surrounds a show, generating theory after elaborate theory. By contrast, Seitz broods. Not a Don Draper mode of brooding, staring out a window into some distant abyss, but a Peggy Olson brooder, overflowing with ideas and fire and energy and demanding that we participate, too. It’s not enough to parse the episode or even the episode-in-light-of-the-recent-episode, we must also plunge further. *Sit down on the couch, put your feet up, and associate for me.*

And, in such a manner, Seitz gets at *Mad Men*’s deeper truths—truths that may in fact seem counterintuitive. It has become a hoary cliché, for instance, to sum up the show in neat phrases like “It’s about how people never change.” Or to talk about Matthew Weiner’s meticulous attention to detail, the show’s almost-Kubrickian coolness and formalism (you need only dip into season six to see Weiner’s appreciation for Kubrick in full flower). Over and over, Seitz complicates such easy notions, even upturns them. Bringing us into an ongoing conversation with his fellow critics, with his own past recaps, with his own prior presumptions, Seitz helps us parse the show’s more subterranean truths and mysteries. And what we find is a series not beholden to a strict and forbidding architecture at all but something far messier, far more beautiful, and far more real.

In his recap of season four’s “Hands and Knees,” an episode focused on secrets and exposure (including Don’s nail-biting government background check), Seitz discusses a distinction made by fellow critic Myles McNutt between “theme episodes”—in which the majority of scenes and dialogue all serve to highlight one larger concern—and “episodes with themes.” For Seitz, “theme episodes” are static, forced, stripped of all the randomness and chaos of life. In its place, we are left with “a sort of clever algebraic bloodlessness.” In contrast, “episodes with themes,” which Seitz argues constitute the majority of *Mad Men*’s run, have ideas but leave room for life, energy, thrall. And for the viewer:

The distinction is a fine one, but worth making, because it defines the difference between right-brain and left-brain storytelling, between drama as poetry versus drama as architecture. “Hands and Knees” offered more of the second category than the first, but it never succumbed to the tendency to flatten out human idiosyncrasy and replace it with a gigantic cause-and-effect flowchart. (Seitz)

Instead, Seitz argues, the episode turns on multiple variations of secrets—some large, some small—without ever landing on one tidy conclusion. In doing so, it reaches out to us, the viewers, reminding us, on a lower frequency, that we all have

secrets. “Every day we present the world with an official narrative about who we are and where we came from,” Seitz writes, “but huge portions of it are redacted.” This willingness to needle, prod, unsettle both its characters and, more quietly, the viewer, to mine self-hidden impulses, to reveal their manifold contradictions (consider caddish Pete Campbell’s surprising progressivism), to lay bare the chaos of the human heart—this is what pulses so unashamedly through the series, what shakes it loose from any Kubrickian rigidity. And it flies in the face of any notions of *Mad Men* as a show about “how people never change”—and exposes how limited that view is.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster writes in praise of what he terms “rhythm,” which he defines as “repetition plus variation.” Using Proust as his example, he points to the snatch of music, a “little phrase” that recurs, years apart, in *In Search of Lost Time*. “There are times when the little phrase means everything to the reader,” he writes:

There are times when it means nothing and is forgotten, and this seems to me the function of rhythm in fiction; not to be there all the time, like a pattern, but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with freshness and surprise and hope. (Forster)

This “rhythm” feels precisely like the bit of magic that Seitz pinpoints in *Mad Men*. Tight patterns, like Seitz’s dreaded theme episodes, “shut the doors on life, and leave the novelist doing exercises, generally in the drawing room.” By contrast, rhythm never feels imposed on us; it engages us. It’s *delicate, but potent* (see Don’s famous Kodak Carousel/nostalgia pitch from season one). Indeed, Seitz teases out dozens of half-hidden “little phrases” in this volume, perhaps foremost the recurring but infrequent appearance of a wheel that summons that Carousel. Once cued, however, we find so many more smaller notes: recurring suitcases, lonely children, closing doors, fur coats, a beauty mark, a carpet stain, cigarette lighters, a woman’s ring.

We might say, then, that what elevates so many *Mad Men* episodes is not an adherence to pattern, a rigidity of symbol and structure that leaves little room for the viewer, but instead a profound understanding of rhythm. Of how the emotional wallop is far greater when we don’t see it coming. It’s been so long since we first saw the object, heard the song, we’ve forgotten, or thought we had, until it hits us. Unlike a “theme episode,” we’re not primed to do any easy connect-the-dots. Instead, we’re taken by an awful surprise. Because the target was something we thought we’d forgotten, layered so deep it feels nearly unconscious.

Seitz points out that Weiner rarely bothers to “parse the show’s metaphors and symbols in relation to history: personal or national.” The literal, the manifest level isn’t his interest, or his inclination. The show satisfies fundamentally on a basic story level—a conscious level—but that’s only its gleaming surface. It is in its depths that the show reveals itself:

... because it’s in the depths that *Mad Men* comes close to dream logic. Often a situation or a character’s choice will mean exactly what you think it means, but at the same time there’ll be something else to it, something that connects to another character or situation in a glancing or uncanny way. (Seitz)

Once more, this observation defies everything most of us think we know about *Mad*

*Men* and Weiner and his rigid clockwork precision, characters both spinning in circles and also tugged toward inexorable fates. But it also seems deeply true.

After all, *Mad Men* is a show thick with dreams, the uncanny, the unconscious, and Freud himself. Consider the fever dreams, illnesses, drunken blackouts, drug-induced (LSD, pot, amphetamines) states, heatstrokes, Betty's natal twilight sleep, Don's persistent naps and stupors, even the way the show treats daytime movie-watching as a dreamlike experience. But Seitz's observation extends well past the level of plot and character. As this volume illuminates, the show regularly abandons traditional narrative form for a kind of dream logic, moving forward suddenly in time, flipping backward, seemingly digressing, ordered not by chronology but by emotional associations. It's an expressionistic structure, which, when its characters are as conflicted as these, can often look structureless—at least until you see what Seitz terms (writing about the woolly season six) its “drunk's logic,” the show “flailing and lurching and stopping and starting like Don groping toward his epiphany.” Or, as Don's voice-over intones as he reads Dante in season six's premiere, “Midway through our life's journey I went astray from the straight road and awoke to find myself alone in a dark wood.”

Viewers frequently grumbled over *Mad Men*'s seeming misdirections, false starts, detours (indeed, right up to the final episodes, when Don's road trip became a source of frustration for many). But they serve a larger function. They engage us, make us work, they frustrate us and ensnare us. They lead us to a deeper place. And that is a place of raw feeling, sensation, pain unmediated, unstrangled by story demands or viewer expectations. In his ardent defense of Bert Cooper's posthumous musical number in season seven, Seitz writes, “What a good many old-fashioned musical numbers have in common is that they occur in a sort of twilight dream space that's emotionally true but not ‘realistic’ in any meaningful sense, and they're expressing what the characters are feeling, not merely advancing the plot.” Scenes like this refuse our attempt to watch the show as simple drama. We must go deeper. Into that dark wood.

To achieve these effects, Seitz speculates that a big part of the show's writing must be “intuitive, with Weiner and his staff working as close to their unconscious as they can while still worrying about continuity and motivation.” Whether true or not, once you view the show through this lens, much is illuminated. All the viewer speculation about the series ending with Don falling out a window or into an elevator shaft, with Megan dying at the Manson family's hands, they all neglect the central ontology of the show—a show that dismisses the literal for the figurative (as advertising does)—or, more precisely, rejects the obvious or universal for the personal, the unconscious. Which is perhaps why the show inspires such fanaticism and such outrage. It hits nerves, taps hidden currents, speaks on lower registers, and therein lies its most subversive power.

In this way, we may come to understand our less explicable, more emotional connection to the show, the part we can't intellectualize away through our dissections, our grand theories. Those of us (very possibly you) who have become so ensconced in the gray-flannel embrace of *Mad Men* may find ourselves wondering, now that it is over, why it mattered so much, why we cared so fervently, why we spent so many