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WEEKLY COLUMN

My So-Called Single Life . . . on TV

Ways in Which TV Gets Love for Single Women Right—and Wrong

By Josie Brown, updated 5/23/2008 at 9:26:08 PM



Meredith and McDreamy. Pam and Jim. Marin and Jack. This year's TV twosomes say a lot about us as women.

At least, how we women are portrayed on TV.

I'll admit it: I'm a tube boobette. In my bedroom, television is a welcomed companion. Granted, it's not the same as curling up into bed with a good book (or a great lover), but as *petite amusement*, it can provide an hour or two (minus the endless commercials) of escape—ideally into the lives of people we'd like to hang out with.

For the most part, television shows are episodic. In the course of thirteen half-hour or hour-long segments, we are supposed to fall in love with these characters, empathize with them—or at least relate to them enough that we are willing to tune in week after week, endless commercials and network schedule shuffling be damned.

But would we want to *be* them?

Back in that not-so-long-ago day when *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw and her posse ruled the airwaves, that might have elicited a resounding "Hell, YEAH" from many of us. I mean, what woman wouldn't want to have a very cute, very large, rent-controlled one-bedroom brownstone apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and get paid well enough chronicling her very active love life in a weekly newspaper column that she could afford a closet full of Manolos and couture?



Yep, *there's* a wet dream for you.

Now that Carrie has moved into syndication and onto the big screen, a whole slew of single female characters are vying for her crown as TV's newest It Girl. But are they truly representative of single women in the 2008?

Here's a look at four shows that get it right, to the most part:

Marin, in *Men in Trees*

**The Plot:** When a female relationship guru gets dumped by her fiancé, she takes up residence in Alaska, where the ratio of men to women is 10-to-1: better odds, she hopes, for learning something about men.



**Where it's right:** Anne Heche's strength as an actress has always been her ability to portray women who are vulnerable without being pathetic, and funny without being silly. And with a great, quirky cast of lovelorn characters—both men and women—the show's writers are having a lot of fun with love in the wild. Think *Northern Exposure* meets *Ally McBeal*.

**Where it's wrong:** The men in Marin's life look as if they walked off the cover of a romance novel. Seriously, is Alaska truly populated by brawny beefcake types, all of whom are sensitive souls? It looks an awful lot like Southern California, minus the sunshine. Of course, one could argue there are other ways to keep warm.

**Couple Rating for Marin and Jack: 7.2** He's just too good to be true. Otherwise, he's a perfect ten.

Samantha, in *Samantha Who?*

**The Plot:** The perfect Hollywood high concept. A single woman wakes up from a coma to discover that she was once an unabashed bitch. She now has a chance to undo all her past cruelties and transgressions. Sort of 13



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*Going on 30* meets *My Name is Earl*. Thank goodness Christina Applegate looks more like Jennifer Garner than Jason Lee . . .

*Where it's right:* Samantha isn't the only dysfunctional in the cast. Her best friend Andrea (Jennifer Esposito) can be both catty and cruel. Her mom (played by the fabulous Jean Smart) is a consummate liar and opportunist, proof that the nut did not fall far from the tree; Her dad (the wryly deadpan Kevin Dunn) would prefer to hide his feelings and stay in denial. Samantha also has a boyfriend, Todd (Barry Watson), but it turns out she cheated on him . . .

Episode by episode, she redeems herself. And because her make-goods include everyone who enabled her bad girl 'tude, friends and family alike, this high concept floats back down to earth on a happy cloud.

*Where it's wrong:* Because the premise is sitcom-thin, the characters will have to find some way to become deep enough for viewers to keep caring about them.

*Couple Rating for Samantha and Todd: 6.1.* Todd was way too good for the old Samantha. And since she came out of the coma, he's got a new girlfriend. Until the writers ramp up the heat between them, he's just a friend without the bennies.

#### **Mia and Caitlin, in *Cashmere Mafia***

Ballyhooed as the successor to *Sex and the City*, *Cashmere Mafia's* four heroines—single Mia (the versatile Lucy Lui) and Caitlin (Bonnie Somerville), married Zoe (Frances O'Connor) and Juliet (Miranda Otto)—are B-School high-achievers with the kind of high profile, big buck Manhattan careers we've all claimed we wanted at one time or another (you remember, before we came to our senses). The major facing the married ladies in this quartet of thirty-somethings is what you'd expect: infidelity, and mommy track flack. As for their single gal pals, Mia has already chosen her career over her fiancé (both compete for the position of publisher for the magazine conglomerate they work for), whereas Caitlin—the self-proclaimed resident slut—must decide if her attraction to a new inability to commit to any guy, coupled with her attraction to a female co-worker, means she's playing for the other team.

*Where it's right:* As with *SATC*, the key relationships in this show are among the four women. Through thick and thin they are there for each other—to the point where they drop everything else: kids, biz meetings, even the not-so-occasional afternoon delight. Now, THAT's friendship.

*Where it's wrong:* Wouldn't it be great if, for once, Hollywood showed four working women with REAL LIVES? Even in New York (*especially* in New York), not all gigs are glamorous, everyone does not live in a penthouse apartment, loft, or adorable brownstone, cabs don't just show up when you need them, stockings do rip, daycare is more affordable (and more accessible) than au pairs, and most working girls wear off-the-rack size 10s as opposed to designer 0s. As for the show's men: none are bald, and all are brainy and well-paid. Two words: *AS IF*.

*Couple Ratings: Thus far, both singles, Mai and Caitlin, are batting 0.* Caitlin is supposed to be a savvy, sexy woman of the world. Wouldn't she have figured out her sexual preferences by now? And seriously, TV writers: Do we *really* need another show with a lipstick lesbian storyline?

As for Mia, of course she beat out her beau for the top spot. And so of course his ego was bruised, and he dumped her. I'm not inferring in the least that she should have let him win. Oh no, to the contrary! I'm just saying that she should have seen it coming. She's too smart to have fallen for someone so shallow. Her Perfect Guy would have given her two thumbs up and reminded her that the winner has to pick up their celebratory drinks at Tenjune later that evening, before golden-parachuting outta there. Oh sure, I get that this story line was a faux trauma cooked up by the show's writers to demonstrate that this posh foursome will *always* choose their careers over their relationships. And since few of us have perfectly balanced lives, *Cashmere Mafia* is betting that the bitchy biz babe is the new black, whereas that *other* so-called TV lifestyle, the desperate housewife, is SO last season.

#### **Pam, in *The Office***



*The Plot:* As Dunder-Mifflin's sweet, shy receptionist, Pam works her dreary desk job for the paycheck as opposed to the challenge, or for that matter the camaraderie. I mean, who would want to hang with needy boss Michael, judgmental Angela, space cadet Kelly, uber-nerd Dwight, bombastic bootlicker Andy, or any of the rest of the losers in this office?

Except of course Jim, the cute salesman who's got a crush on Pam.

*Where it's right:* In the first season, we waited with baited breath to see

if Pam would ever figure out that Jim was her soul mate, as opposed to Roy, her selfish fiancé who worked in Dunder-Mifflin's warehouse. By the time she did, Jim, heartbroken, had transferred out. When he came back, it was with a girlfriend in tow. By the beginning of this season, things had sorted themselves out: Pam and Jim (or "Jam," as they are known to their multitude of adoring fans, many of whom have created websites in their honor) are officially a couple.

And that's the beauty of the writing on this show. Pam is the ideal EverySingleWoman: she's smart, creative, and she has a great sense of humor—but she's far from perfect. We want to strangle her because she does not speak up for herself more often, but that's what makes the plot go 'round.

*Where It's wrong:* Keeping Pam and Jim's coupledness a secret took up the first couple of episodes of the season. Now that everyone knows, we have to wait for the Writers Guild strike to be over to see what twists and turns this relationship will take in the future.

Which, in honesty, is not so much wrong as it is cruel to millions of viewers who anxiously await the return of this hit sitcom.

*Couple Rating for Pam and Jim: 10.0+* The friendship between them is sweet. The sexual tension between the two is palpable. The crossed signals are agonizing. Their shared bliss is sublime. Yeah, now *this* is the real thing.

*Bonus Couple Rating for Angela and Dwight: 9.5* She is Lady MacBeth to his cockeyed Machiavelli. Will she ever forgive him for mercy-killing her cat—or is she better matched with the preppy Andy?

#### Here are a few shows that don't make the grade, and why:

*Grey's Anatomy:* Like everyone else, I used to be a fan. But in order for me to love a character, I expect her to grow, emotionally, with each new season. In this show, former interns Meredith, Cristina and Izzy seemed to have digressed as individuals, despite their promotions to full-fledged doctors. Considering they passed their state boards with flying colors, you'd think they could recognize when a guy is serious about them, wouldn't you? Look ladies, I get that you're tortured souls. But you are on the frontline of humanity: the operating room. It's time to grow a pair. (By that, I mean breasts.)

*Private Practice:* This spin-off, starring *Grey's Anatomy's* implacable but oh so vulnerable Dr. Addison Montgomery (Kate Walsh), has all the silliness and none of the charm or pathos of the original—despite a well-seasoned cast which includes Tim Daly, Audra McDonald, Taye Diggs, and Amy Brenneman. Once again we have doctors of both genders who act sillier than middle-schoolers about relationships, never mind sex—which is supposedly their specialties. Get real, people!

I've written it off as a case of the shows' writer-producer, Shonda Rhimes, being stretched too thin. So, now she's lost this former fan of *Grey's*. Recent audience ratings show I'm not the only one.

*Nip/Tuck:* Bad boy plastic surgeons, surrounded by shallow women? Why are you surprised? A smart, complex woman, or two, might make the plot less cartoonish. We might actually care about the naughty boys, too . . .

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