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How "Sex and the City" lost its good name.

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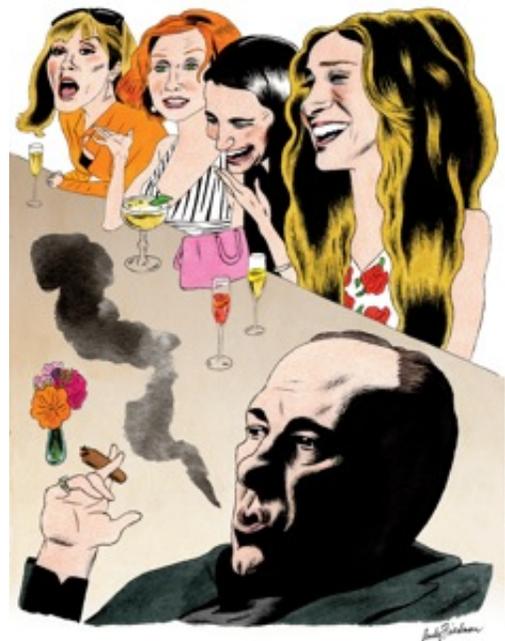
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When people talk about the rise of great TV, they inevitably credit one show, "The Sopranos." Even before James Gandolfini's death, the HBO drama's mystique was secure: novelistic and cinematic, David Chase's auteurist masterpiece cracked open the gangster genre like a rib cage, releasing the latent ambition of television, and launching us all into a golden age.

"The Sopranos" deserves the hype. Yet there's something screwy about the way that the show and its cable-drama blood brothers have come to dominate the conversation, elbowing other forms of greatness out of the frame. It's a bias that bubbles up early in Brett Martin's otherwise excellent new book, "Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From 'The Sopranos' and 'The Wire' to 'Mad Men' and 'Breaking Bad,'" a deeply reported and dishy account of just how your



Though "The Sopranos" may have sparked the bad-boy revolution of cable TV, Carrie Bradshaw was the first female anti-hero. Illustration by Andy Friedman.

prestige-cable sausage is made. I tore through the book, yet when I reached Martin's chronicle of the rise of HBO I felt a jolt. "It might as well have been a tourism campaign for a post-Rudolph Giuliani, de-ethnicized Gotham awash in money," Martin writes of one of my favorite shows. "Its characters were types as familiar as those in 'The Golden Girls': the Slut, the Prude, the Career Woman, the Heroine. But they talked more explicitly, certainly about their bodies, but also about their desires and discontents outside the bedroom, than women on TV ever had before."

Martin gives "Sex and the City" credit for jump-starting HBO, but the condescension is palpable, and the grudging praise is reserved for only one aspect of the series—the rawness of its subject matter. Martin hardly invented this attitude: he is simply reiterating what has become the reflexive consensus on the show, right down to the hackneyed "Golden Girls" gag. Even as "The Sopranos" has ascended to TV's Mt. Olympus, the reputation of "Sex and the City" has shrunk and faded, like some tragic dry-clean-only dress tossed into a decade-long hot cycle. By the show's fifteen-year anniversary, this year, we fans had trained ourselves to downgrade the show to a "guilty pleasure," to mock its puns, to get into self-flagellating conversations about those blinkered and blinged-out movies. Whenever a new chick-centric series débuts, there are invidious comparisons: don't worry, it's no "Sex and the City," they say. As if that were a good thing.

But "Sex and the City," too, was once one of HBO's flagship shows. It was the peer of "The Sopranos," albeit in a different tone and in a different milieu, deconstructing a different genre. Mob shows, cop shows, cowboy shows—those are formulas with gravitas. "Sex and the City," in contrast, was pigeonholed as a sitcom. In fact, it was a bold riff on the romantic comedy: the show wrestled with the limits of that pink-tinted genre for almost its entire run. In the end, it gave in. Yet until that last-minute stumble it was sharp, iconoclastic television. High-feminine instead of fetishistically masculine, glittery rather than gritty, and daring in its conception of character, "Sex and the City" was a brilliant and, in certain ways, radical show. It also originated the unacknowledged first female anti-hero on television: ladies and gentlemen, Carrie Bradshaw.

Please, people, I can hear your objections from here. But first think back. Before "Sex and the City," the vast majority of iconic "single girl" characters on television, from That Girl to Mary Tyler Moore and Molly Dodd, had been you-go-girl types—which is to say, actual role models. (Ally McBeal was a notable and problematic exception.) They were pioneers who offered many single women the representation they craved, and they were also, crucially, adorable to men: vulnerable and plucky and warm. However varied the layers they displayed over time, they flattered a specific pathology: the cultural requirement that women greet other women with the refrain "Oh, me, too! Me,

too!”

In contrast, Carrie and her friends—Miranda, Samantha, and Charlotte—were odder birds by far, jagged, aggressive, and sometimes frightening figures, like a makeup mirror lit up in neon. They were simultaneously real and abstract, emotionally complex and philosophically stylized. Women identified with them—“I’m a Carrie!”—but then became furious when they showed flaws. And, with the exception of Charlotte (Kristin Davis), men didn’t find them likable: there were endless cruel jokes about Samantha (Kim Cattrall), Miranda (Cynthia Nixon), and Carrie as sluts, man-haters, or gold-diggers. To me, as a single woman, it felt like a definite sign of progress: since the elemental representation of single life at the time was the comic strip “Cathy” (*ack! chocolate!*), better that one’s life should be viewed as glamorously threatening than as sad and lonely.

Carrie Bradshaw herself began as a mirror for another woman: she was the avatar of the New York *Observer* columnist Candace Bushnell, a steely “sexual anthropologist” on the prowl for blind items. When the initial showrunner, Darren Star, and his mostly female writing staff adapted Bushnell’s columns, they transformed that icy Carrie, pouring her into the warm body of Sarah Jessica Parker. Out popped a chatterbox with a schnoz, whose advanced fashion sense was not intended to lure men into matrimony. For a half dozen episodes, Carrie was a happy, curious explorer, out companionably smoking with modellizers. If she’d stayed that way, the show might have been another “Mary Tyler Moore”: a playful, empowering comedy about one woman’s adventures in the big city.

Instead, Carrie fell under the thrall of Mr. Big, the sexy, emotionally withholding forty-three-year-old financier played by Chris Noth. From then on, pleasurable as “Sex and the City” remained, it also felt designed to push back at its audience’s wish for identification, triggering as much anxiety as relief. It switched the romantic comedy’s primal scene, from “Me, too!” to “Am I like *her*?” A man practically woven out of red flags, Big wasn’t there to rescue Carrie; instead, his “great love” was a slow poisoning. She spun out, becoming anxious, obsessive, and, despite her charm, wildly self-centered—in her own words, “the frightening woman whose fear ate her sanity.” Their relationship was viewed with concern by her friends, who were not, as Martin suggests, mere “types” but portrayals of a narrow slice of wealthy white thirty-something Manhattanites: the Waspy gallerina, the liberal-feminist lawyer, the decadent power publicist.

Although the show’s first season is its slightest, it swiftly establishes a bold mixture of moods—fizzy and sour, blunt and arch—and shifts between satirical and sincere modes of storytelling. (It’s not even especially dated: though the show has gained a reputation for over-the-top absurdity, I can tell you that these night clubs and fashion shows do exist—maybe even more so now that Manhattan has become a gated island for the wealthy.) There is already a melancholic undertow, full of foreshadowing. “What if he never calls and three weeks from now I pick up the New York *Times* and I

read that he's married some perfect little woman who never passes gas under his five-hundred-dollar sheets?" Carrie frets in Episode 11. In a moment of clarity, she tells Miranda that, when she's around Big, "I'm not like me. I'm, like, Together Carrie. I wear little outfits: Sexy Carrie and Casual Carrie. Sometimes I catch myself actually *posing*. It's just—it's exhausting."

That was the conundrum Carrie faced for the entire series: true love turned her into a fake. The Season 1 neurotic Carrie didn't stick, though. She and Big fixed things, then they broke up again, harder. He moved to Paris. She met Aidan (John Corbett), the marrying type. In Season 3, the writers upped the ante, having Carrie do something overtly anti-heroic: she cheated on a decent man with a bad one (Big, of course), now married to that "perfect little woman," Natasha. They didn't paper over the repercussions: Natasha's humiliation, and the way Carrie's betrayal hardened Aidan, even once he took her back. During six seasons, Carrie changed, as anyone might from thirty-two to thirty-eight, and not always in positive ways. She got more honest and more responsible; she became a saner girlfriend. But she also became scarred, prissier, strikingly gun-shy—and, finally, she panicked at the question of what it would mean to be an older single woman.

Her friends went through changes, too, often upon being confronted with their worst flaws—Charlotte's superficiality, Miranda's caustic tongue, Samantha's refusal to be vulnerable. In a departure from nearly all earlier half-hour comedies, the writers fully embraced the richness of serial storytelling. In a movie we go from glare to kiss in two hours. "Sex and the City" was liberated from closure, turning "once upon a time" into a wry mantra, treating its characters' struggles with a rare mixture of bluntness and compassion. It was one of the first television comedies to let its characters change in serious ways, several years before other half-hour comedies, like "The Office," went and stole all the credit.

So why is the show so often portrayed as a set of empty, static cartoons, an embarrassment to womankind? It's a classic misunderstanding, I think, stemming from an unexamined hierarchy: the assumption that anything stylized (or formulaic, or pleasurable, or funny, or feminine, or explicit about sex rather than about violence, or made collaboratively) must be inferior. Certainly, the show's formula was strict: usually four plots—two deep, two shallow—linked by Carrie's voice-over. The B plots generally involved one of the non-Carrie women getting laid; these slapstick sequences were crucial to the show's rude rhythms, interjecting energy and rupturing anything sentimental. (It's one reason those bowdlerized reruns on E! are such a crime: with the literal and figurative fucks edited out, the show *is* a rom-com.)

Most unusually, the characters themselves were symbolic. As I've written elsewhere—and argued, often drunkenly, at cocktail parties—the four friends operated as near-allegorical figures, pegged to

contemporary debates about women's lives, mapped along three overlapping continuums. The first was emotional: Carrie and Charlotte were romantics; Miranda and Samantha were cynics. The second was ideological: Miranda and Carrie were second-wave feminists, who believed in egalitarianism; Charlotte and Samantha were third-wave feminists, focussed on exploiting the power of femininity, from opposing angles. The third concerned sex itself. At first, Miranda and Charlotte were prudes, while Samantha and Carrie were libertines. Unsettlingly, as the show progressed, Carrie began to glide toward caution, away from freedom, out of fear.

Every conversation the friends had, at brunch or out shopping, amounted to a "Crossfire"-like debate. When Carrie sleeps with a dreamy French architect and he leaves a thousand dollars by her bed, she consults her friends. "Money is power. Sex is power," Samantha argues. "Therefore, getting money for sex is simply an exchange of power." "Don't listen to the dime-store Camille Paglia," Miranda shoots back. The most famous such conversation took place four episodes in, after Charlotte's boyfriend asked her to have anal sex. The friends pile into a cab for a raucous debate about whether her choice is about power-exchange (Miranda) or about finding a fun new hole (Samantha). "I'm not a hole!" Charlotte protests, and they hit a pothole. "What was that?" Charlotte asks. "A preview," Miranda and Samantha say in unison, and burst out laughing.

The show's basic value system aligns with Carrie: romantic, second-wave, libertine. But "Sex and the City" 's real strength was its willingness not to stack the deck: it let every side make a case, so that complexity carried the day. When Carrie and Aidan break up, they are both right. When Miranda and Carrie argue about her move to Paris, they are both right. The show's style could be brittle, but its substance was flexible, in a way that made the series feel peculiarly broad-ranging, covering so much ground, so fleetly, that it became easy to take it for granted.

Endings count in television, maybe too much. "The Sopranos" concluded with a black screen: it rejected easy satisfaction and pissed off its most devoted fans. (David Chase fled to the South of France.)

Three years earlier, in 2004, "Sex and the City" had other pressures to contend with: while a mob film ends in murder, we all know where a romantic comedy ends. I'll defend until my dying day the sixth-season plot in which Carrie seeks respite with a celebrity like her, the Russian artist Aleksandr (Mikhail Baryshnikov), a chilly genius she doesn't love but who offers her a dreamlike fairy tale, the one she has always longed for: Paris, safety, money, pleasure. It felt ugly, and sad, in a realistic way. In one of the season's, and the show's, best episodes, she saw other older women settling (Candice Bergen) or falling out of windows (the hilarious Kristen Johnston, who delivered one of "Sex and the City" 's best monologues: "When did everybody stop smoking? When did everybody pair off? . . . I'm

so bored I could die"). The show always had a realpolitik directness about such social pressures; as another HBO series put it recently, winter was coming.

And then, in the final round, "Sex and the City" pulled its punches, and let Big rescue Carrie. It honored the wishes of its heroine, and at least half of the audience, and it gave us a very memorable dress, too. But it also showed a failure of nerve, an inability of the writers to imagine, or to trust themselves to portray, any other kind of ending—happy or not. And I can't help but wonder: What would the show look like without that finale? What if it were the story of a woman who lost herself in her thirties, who was changed by a poisonous, powerful love affair, and who emerged, finally, surrounded by her friends? Who would Carrie be then? It's an interesting question, one that shouldn't erase the show's powerful legacy. We'll just have to wait for another show to answer it. ♦

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Difficult women are the ones who make the history books, who have the stories written about them. In the immortal words variously attributed to Marilyn Monroe, Anne Boleyn, and Eleanor Roosevelt (all fabulous examples of the type): "Well-behaved women rarely make history." Advertisement. There is a certain, peculiar pressure on a writer to create characters that are "likeable" and this is a charge particularly levied at female characters: "I just couldn't like her" or "She made things so hard for herself."