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Book Review


In her eye opening and innovative piece of non-fiction, Katherine J. Lehman describes the portrayal of single women in 1960s and 1970s popular culture. The author “takes a critical look at the “single girl in American media…. [and argues] that the single women was a pivotal figure in postwar popular culture who helped viewers negotiate sweeping changes in gender roles and sexual mores” (1). In this regard, Lehman makes the argument that women were able to navigate, and often challenge, changing gender norms through the “single girls” depiction on television.

The author defines “singleness” early on in the book stating: “I use the term ‘single’ to refer to women who were legally unmarried, even if they were actively dating” (12). This definition makes the use of the single girl clear, upfront and leaves the reader with no qualms about what is meant by this term. For example, Lehman describes how Mary on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* is divorced and yet still considered a “single girl” even though she had lived a life of non-singleness (133). However, Lehman never addresses why females fitting into this genre are called “girls” even they are all in their early twenties or older.

Lehman clearly delineates how single girls are portrayed, both historically and through gender studies, starting with *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962 and ending with *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* in 1977. The author craftily discusses how the representation of single girls changed in a linear and yet somewhat contradictory fashion. For example, as time moved on, it became more and more acceptable for the single girl to be independent. However, in the end, the traditional view that a single girl’s goal was to find a husband was still very much alive (238). This
contradiction is Lehman’s focus throughout the book and the author often switches back and forth between stating the rights that women gained through single girl television shows and the very apparent sexism that was simultaneously evident. In Charlie’s Angels for example, Lehman describes how the three “single girl” protagonists were tough, confident, and independent detectives. Yet, the Charlie’s Angels producers also decided to curb the violence and have the women rely on their male boss for fear that the female detectives would seem “too masculine” and not capable of showing their softer side (171). Thus, the influx of historical background and the discussion of gender dynamics makes Lehman’s book prime for an interdisciplinary focus.

Those Girls also uses strong interdisciplinary methodology in terms of the intersections of gender, race, and class. Lehman notes that the single girl was often depicted as: “…regionally and racially exclusive, usually portraying single women as white, middle class, and living in a large, coastal city…[because] producers and advertisers feared that minority characters would not be appealing to white consumers”(7). The absence of black and/or lower class “single girls” in television and movies is essential to the creation of this figure in popular culture. The mention of this absence certainly is congruent with the American Studies ideals of: “the study of society and culture in the United States” because the book highlights how culture changed on a racial, class, and gendered basis through the use of popular culture.

The absence of black (or other minority women for that matter) is relevant for American Studies 201, Introduction to American Studies. This book would be interesting to read after the class discusses Toni Morrison’s statement that all American literature is created “in the presence of the African.” It would be important to read an expert from this book to show that not only American literature, but also American media, was fashioned in the same vein. Lehman’s book would also be useful to read in History 270, The History of Sexuality. This class goes into great
detail about how the role of women has changed and this book would add to this powerful discussion. Furthermore, the mention of feminism coming to light through television and movies is prevalent theme of this work and also relates to topics discussed in this history class. Lastly, *Those Girls* would be a useful read for Sociology 210, or Gender in Media. The author’s ability to demonstrate the various ways gender changed and stayed static in the media would be a useful parallel to the material learned throughout the class.

Lehman closes her intriguing insight into the “single girl” in 1960s and 1970s popular culture by discussing the portrayal of single girls on the highly acclaimed television series *Mad Men*. The author claims: “*Mad Men* has been hailed by critics and scholars for being both feminist and historically accurate in its unflinching depiction of workplace sexism”(236). Lehman explains that the role of “single girls” on the show is aligned with the author’s examination of the “nuanced and accurate accounts of postwar women’s lives”(236). Lehman also discusses how shows that are relevant to today’s single girls such as *Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty* underscore the notion that viewers of modern media are still attempting to understand the single girl’s place in society(241). Thus, the author helps the reader recognize why studying the single girl is not obsolete. Furthermore, examining how the single girl is relevant in the 21st century accentuates the importance of viewing this topic from the gender, political, and sociological level and the significance of this work in the context of American Studies.

It is fascinating to read Lehman’s work in light of the new single girl television series *Girls*. The show, starring, directed, and written by Lena Dunham follows four post college “girls” who are striving to make it in the bustling New York City. The series has parallels to *Sex and the City* but was created for a younger audience. The main characters are all white, upper class, and have a certain innocence about them that makes watching this show particularly
intriguing. Lehman’s book would be a useful read before watching *Girls* because the evolution of single girls in American popular culture is evident. In some respects, the girls on *Girls* have much more power than the single girls in 60s and 70s popular culture. However, whiteness and class is just as apparent in this show as those in the earlier generations. For example, the only black character on the show thus far is a black homeless man that exclaims to one of the girls: “Oh girl, When I look at you, I just want to say ‘Hello New York!’ ” In other words, just as with the 1960s and 1970s shows Lehman’s addresses, black people are only used for entertainment value. Furthermore, watching *Girls* portrays New York City as a hub of single, rich, white, all-American girls who are trying to “make it” in the crazy world of “real life.” One has to adapt to fit into the mold if one does not fit within the paradigm of the aforementioned categories. Thus, reading and watching *Those Girls* and *Girls* in tandem are essential to understanding the single girl’s portrayal in popular culture and the evolution (or lack thereof) therein.