

Sexing the
Single Girl



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“I’ve been down this road before.”

-Vonda Shepherd, singing the *Ally McBeal* theme song

An alien traveler visiting our planet need only browse the local bookstore, pick up the paper, or channel surf before coming to the conclusion that earthlings are all sassy, solo vixens whose primary activities consist of dating, mating, and relating. There’s Ally McBeal, Bridget Jones, and Carrie Bradshaw on the big and little screen, but there’s also a torrent of new magazines, handbooks, and self-help guides from *Don’t Bet on the Prince* to *If Men Are Like Buses Then How Do I Catch One*. Popular novels by and for this growing demographic compete for attention, with Melissa Bank’s *Girl’s Guide to Hunting and Fishing* sinking a line next to Harlequin Romance’s latest series, Red Dress Ink. The frenetic fixation on the sexcapades of the citified single gal often blurs the line between fiction and reality. *The New York Times* has itself become a major chronicler of modern single women’s innermost desires: “Solo in the Big City: Women’s Tales From the Front” reads a headline from March 1999. “Castle First, Prince Later: Marketing to Ms.” reads another from October that same year. *Everyone*—media pundits, television producers, advertisers, and a broad array of “experts” from Mom to grrlfriend—seems to have a vested interest in how we, as a generation of women marrying later, if at all, are wont to behave. The Single Girl, once again, has become headline news.

In today’s “postfeminist” era, the life and times of the post-liberated, 30-something Single Girl (or, rather, the life the media projects) may indeed define the

zeitgeist. For those concerned with women's status in the larger cultural landscape, this is potentially good news. At first blush, the iconic status of today's new "Single Girl" seems a testament to the qualified success of the women's movement. Our foremothers fought hard for changes in sexual double standards in a range of sociopolitical arenas, enabling a fair number of their progeny to cultivate the financial independence, professional mobility, and chutzpah needed to make it on our own. Writes Tamala Edwards in an August 2000 cover story for *Time* magazine, "single women, once treated as virtual outcasts, have moved to the center of our social and cultural life." And, so the argument goes, it's precisely *because* we've come so far that we now see our faces mirrored in the movies, novels, and newspapers that define the times. Popular culture is reflecting—indeed celebrating—our rise to sociocultural prominence.

But lest we get carried away.

The story of this Single Girl's alleged triumph—the story behind the headlines—is one far more complex and a great deal less sanguine than a cursory glance suggests. That the faces reflected reflect those of a very narrow segment of the population—white, upper- and middle-class, straight women between the ages of 25 and 35—goes without saying. That the alleged triumph of this particular Single Girl remains laden with a deep cultural anxiety merits explanation.

In what follows, I'll offer a cursory look at two texts in particular that have crystallized Single Girl representations in the media over the past four decades, highlighting a number of interesting parallels in the way both creators and consumers of these texts reveal their underlying unease with the icon. The first is Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*, a best-selling, "how-to" page-turner published at the

beginning of the second sexual revolution in 1962. The second, HBO's hit series *Sex and the City*, is a show poised at the cutting edge of sexual revolution today. Looking briefly at these texts and some of the media buzz around them, I'll suggest how yesterday's anxieties pervade popular representations of single women today.

Sex and the Single Girl

Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* took the nation by storm two years after the birth control pill revolutionized the way many Americans thought about premarital sex. The book spoke directly to unmarried working women at a time when sexual revolution remained primarily the prerogative of men and student counterculture types. As an April 2001 article in *USA Today* maintained, *Sex and the Single Girl* "was to unattached women what *Playboy* was to swinging bachelors." Described by its author as "a study not on how to get married but how to stay single—in superlative style," the book sold more than two million copies in the first three weeks following publication. Brown had clearly tapped a nerve.

At the heart of Brown's message was the suggestion that ordinary women could lead fully sexual lives outside marriage. Her argument appealed to hundreds of thousands who, as historian Laurie Ouellette notes, "were living out a growing gap between 'girlhood and marriage' made possible by shifting urban migration patterns and the expanding pink-collar labor force." The book offered step-by-step advice on everything from personal appearance and budget apartment dwelling to working and, of course, flirting. As Ouellette accurately explains, Brown expertly "guided women

through encounters with men who were not their husbands, instructing them how to attract the best ones, date them, cajole dinners and presents out of them, have affairs and eventually marry the most eligible man available.” In showing others the way, Brown drew on her years of experience as a woman who had held 18 secretarial jobs before she was promoted to advertising copywriter and then married at the age of 37.

A champion of the Single Girl’s right to choose, Brown ostensibly presented marriage as just one of many options. In the first chapter of *Sex and the Single Girl* she wrote,

You may marry, or you may not. In today’s world that is no longer the big question for women. Those who glom on to men so that they can collapse with relief, spend the rest of their days shining up their status symbol and figure they never have to reach, stretch, learn, grow, face dragons or make a living are the ones to be pitied. They, in my opinion, are the unfulfilled ones.

While this early passage strikes a rather casual attitude toward matrimony, a closer look reveals that the book was by no means anti-marriage. In fact, as we’ll see in a moment, Brown took great refuge in the fact that she herself was now married. By following her example, she hoped, readers could learn to enjoy their single status while on their way to becoming someone’s wife.

Answering some of the “big questions” for single women of her day, *Sex and the Single Girl* was far more than how-to; it was a massive cultural phenomenon.

Interviewed extensively in the press and appearing frequently on radio and television talk shows, Brown wrote a series of follow-up books, as well as a syndicated newspaper

column called “Woman Alone,” and sold the motion-picture rights to *Single Girl* to Hollywood. Then, in 1965, she took over as editor-in-chief of the languishing *Cosmopolitan* magazine. In *Cosmo*, Brown found an ongoing forum for her message. Reinvented by the five-foot, 90 pound dynamo, *Cosmo* became the first consumer magazine to target single “girls with jobs.” With Brown at its helm, the magazine’s circulation rose by more than 100,000 in the first year alone, and advertising sales grew by 43%. The Cosmo Girl quickly became front-page news.

As feminist media historians Susan Douglas and Barbara Ehrenreich have noted, like *Sex and the Single Girl*, what was potentially transforming about the new *Cosmo* was the explicit emphasis it placed on female sexuality. The magazine not only invited ordinary women into the sexual revolution, it offered them instructions on the new sexual protocol. So what had feminism’s famous Single Girl to say about Brown and her popular oeuvre? “She deserves credit for having introduced sexuality into women’s magazines,” noted Gloria Steinem in the *Times* in 1992, the year Brown stepped down from her post. “*Cosmo* was the first,” quipped Steinem. “But then it became the unliberated woman’s survival kit, with advice on how to please a man, lover or boss under any circumstances and also—in a metaphysical sense—how to smile all the time.” Revolutionary and “unliberated” all at once, *Cosmo* was not without its own internal contradictions.

Nor, of course, was *Sex and the Single Girl*. One of the richest, and perhaps most telling, of these contradictions is the fact that the author felt compelled to separate herself from the Single Girl who was both subject and intended reader of her book. Though on the dust jacket Brown flaunted the fact that she had stayed single for the first 37 years of

her life, on the very first page of the book she eagerly gushed that she is now safely married to David, “a motion picture producer, forty-four, brainy, charming and sexy. . . . We have two Mercedes-Benzes, one hundred acres of virgin forest near San Francisco, a Mediterranean house overlooking the Pacific, a full-time maid and a good life.” Brown’s unspoken discomfort about her own previously single status—here and elsewhere in the book—is hard to miss. An astute reviewer for *The New York Herald Tribune* in 1962 called attention to this double standard: “[O]ur society still has not moved to the point where this book could comfortably be written by a single women. . . . For all her gallantry, humor and courage, even Mrs. Brown somehow feels a woman without a husband lacks dignity and identity. Ironic.” Indeed.

It was thus not without some rather fundamental contradictions that Brown launched her career as the Single Girl’s most public spokeswoman. Oddly, the disavowal between “author” and icon is replicated to a certain degree in the more recent example of *Sex and the City*. Though we may wish to condemn such sexual double standards as stuff of the past, a brief look at *Sex and the City* and the “talk” around it suggests that Single Girl representations remain plagued with conflict and controversy today.

Sex and the City

In many respects, *Sex and the City* is an updated version of *Sex and the Single Girl*—a narrative about women in the city looking for love and having sex, not necessarily in that order. In other ways, HBO’s depiction of single life for women is a far cry from Brown’s 40 years ago. Yet, as I will suggest, popular talk around these two texts shares some rather disturbing themes.

Sex and the City, known simply as *Sex* or SATC to fans and industry insiders, is now in its fifth season. The popular series is based on the book of the same name penned by real-life sex columnist Candace Bushnell. The show's audience is vast and continues to grow. (A January 2002 airing brought in 7.3 million viewers.) The press has gone ga-ga trying to account for the show's success. "In its first two seasons," writes a journalist for *Time*, "*Sex* became a pop-culture icon for its astute bedroom politics, for the saucy *Seinfeld* banter . . . of its glam foursome, but above all for recognizing that a woman can live well without being at either end of a man's leash." Indeed, unlike Helen Gurley Brown and her *Cosmo* empire, *Sex and the City* holds out the possibility of saying "no" to changing your life for a man. Narrated by the witty Carrie Bradshaw (played by actress Sarah Jessica Parker, who won an Emmy for the role), the show's main character is a self-styled sexual anthropologist who writes a weekly sex column for *The New York Observer*. Carrie is joined by her three friends—well-educated, single women professionals in their mid to late 30's—as they date their way through the untamed wilds of Manhattan.

A potentially troublesome divide exists between the show itself and the public discourse surrounding it. In interviews with the press, the actresses who play the lead roles on *Sex and the City* publicly disassociate themselves from their characters. "Loose Ladies? Not on Your Life" declares a recent headline in *People* magazine, explaining that Cynthia Nixon (Miranda) lives with her lover Danny Moses and dotes on their child, placing maternity above career; "motherhood is the role she takes most seriously." In a June 2001 interview in the *Times*, Nixon adds, "I'm not much of a flitter, not much of a flirter. . . The chase doesn't interest me much." Likewise, Sarah Jessica Parker, a co-

executive producer as well as the show's central consciousness, repeatedly emphasizes in interviews how little she and her character have in common. The October 2000 issue of *People* describes Parker as "squeaky clean, happily married, and ready for kids," shows her nestled in the arms of her husband, and informs readers that Parker, who is "nothing like Carrie," gave up the F-word as a New Year's resolution. In a June 2000 interview for *The Los Angeles Times*, Parker admits, "I don't think I could live the way she lives. But I am very admiring of her in a lot of ways. I have grown to care for her." "I am not Samantha," declares actress Kim Cattrall in a January 2002 issue of *USA Today*. Cattrall's new ultra-explicit sex book, coauthored with husband Mark Levinson—at first glance a merger between the actress and her character—turns out not to be that at all. In the book and in media interviews, Cattrall emphasizes her distance from Samantha by talking about her lousy sexual past. (That lousy past, and not her sexually voracious SATC character, is what inspired her to write the book, she says.)

What are we to make of this modern-day disavowal, "I am not a Single Girl, but I play one on TV"? Is this collective distancing on the part of SATC actresses a repetition of Brown's own troubling double standard four decades ago? Could it be, as that reviewer in 1962 claimed, that "a woman without a husband lacks dignity and identity" *still*? Perhaps, on the other hand, the actresses' disavowals are not laden with meaning and simply reflect their professional need to distinguish themselves from the roles they play. Regardless of how one interprets this repetition of themes, the disassociation between creator (Parker is a producer) and text ultimately reinforces the idea that the SATC characters are images—fantasies, ideals, icons—for other women to consume.

Today, as in Brown's day, the liberated Single Girl remains larger than, and somehow outside of, life as we know it.

“It's Gotten Totally Scary Out There”

Even though the actresses anxiously disavow their SATC characters, many viewers increasingly voice anxieties about the show's effect on real women. A number of recent articles in the mainstream press describe *Sex and the City* as not a reflection of but rather an influence over real life, and a negative influence at that. If *Sex and the Single Girl* and *Cosmo* helped catalyze sexual revolution for an earlier generation of women, then *Sex and the City*, according to a number of mainstream journalists, has been the catalyst for a “dangerous” outbreak of sexual aggressivity among women today.

According to said journalists, the show has resulted in the creation of “SATC types.” Suggests an article appearing in the *Times* in August 2001, the show “has empowered urban women to embrace their sexuality with the predatory bravado of their male counterparts.” Observes Brooklyn bar owner Todd Ashley, who is quoted in the piece as the voice of the modern male, “It's gotten totally scary out there. . . . *Sex and the City* has turned women that you meet at bars into aggressive frat boys.” In an article appearing in the July 2001 issue of *Mademoiselle* ominously titled “Is SATC Ruining Your Life?” Lynn Snowden Picket surveys her male friends and her husband, concluding that the show is to be blamed for influencing a new sexual aggressivity among single, urban women (encouraging women to release their “inner Samantha”), and for subsequently making men feel cheap. According to the men Picket surveyed, “Samantha

doesn't only exist on TV." What's more, "SATC glorifies women behaving in ways once reserved for men," and this is bad. Says the author's husband, and he should know, "It's a control issue. Guys don't like to be used. We're the ones who are supposed to do the using! Women have enough control as it is; they decide if and when sex happens. Now they're taking away that one last thing—the how!" And finally, in an April 2000 *Time* cover story boldly titled "Who Needs a Husband," Tamala Edwards asks, "Does the rejection of marriage by more women reflect a widening gender gap—as daughters of the women's movement discover that men, all too often, have a far less liberated view of the wife's role in marriage? Do the burgeoning ranks of single women mean an outbreak of SATC promiscuity?" In other words, as the title of the *Mademoiselle* article implies, could SATC be ruining real-life relationships?

Talk about the show clearly betrays an anxiety about the show's potential to cause some kind of troubling, real-world epidemic. Anxiety of a different order seeps in between the lines of the show itself. With each season, the characters get older, and increasingly concerned about their seemingly terminal single status. By the fourth season, they're sadder, lonelier, and more desperate as they confront a range of unhappy circumstances, including unwanted pregnancy, cancer, and a litany of unfulfilling relationships. What started as a supposed celebration of single life has turned into a display of not-so-quiet desperation on the part of four heroines whose central plight is finding Mr. Right. For all the laughs, underneath is a fierce ache—honest and raw, full of the rich contradictions specific to a generation who have, as journalists Yahlin Chang and Veronica Chambers note, "embraced the modern fantasy of independence but still find [themselves] craving the old-fashioned fantasy of marriage." And this, I think, is a

contradiction that has only intensified since the days of Helen Gurley Brown, as a generation of feminism's daughters seeks to redefine romance—and independence—for ourselves.

Conclusion

Images and ideas about the Single Girl icon have changed dramatically over time, but a critical look reveals striking continuities. With each successive wave of sexual revolution—in the 1920s, in the 1960s, and, one might argue, today—we find the Single Girl icon elevated to the status of national obsession. With each moment of increased visibility comes a calculable intensification of cultural anxiety about women who are “unattached.” That anxiety—a mask for much deeper cultural fears about changing gender roles and the outer limits of female independence—lives on. Indeed, after multiple waves of feminism, and just as many sexual revolutions, “talk” about the Single Girl icon remains stuck in a cultural eddy, swirling around the same few contradictory themes. When and how that conversation may change remains to be seen.

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