seinfeld, master of its domain

REVISITING TELEVISION'S GREATEST SITCOM

Edited by David Lavery, with Sara Lewis Dunne

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Contents

Preface

"Part of Popular Culture" The Legacy of *Seinfeld*

David Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne

> The idea that you have two guys who have never written a show, being run by a network executive that had never had a show, leading to a show that has a unique and unusual feel—this is a model that all the networks subsequently ignored and never did again—except for HBO. I think HBO—I don't know if they really knew that that's how our show evolved, but that's a network that hires people that they like and says that's the end of their job. We like you; do what you think you should do, and it leads to much more distinctive programming.
>
> —Jerry Seinfeld, "How It Began"

I

In "The Van Buren Boys" (8014), a Season Eight episode of *Seinfeld,* J. Peterman assigns Elaine the task of writing his autobiography. When it becomes apparent while sitting in his prosaic apartment, watching the world-famous globe-trotter watch television and search for a coupon for plant food, that his real life is actually very boring, she tells him a Kramer story about his escape from an unlikely gang, street toughs devoted to the eighth president of the United States. Peterman suggests they buy Kramer's stories and use them in *his* life writing. Although they eventually give Kramer his stories back—he quickly discovers that he can't really be Kramer without them—in "The Muffin Tops" (8021) Peterman's book *is* published, and Elaine has a confession to make to Kramer:

> Elaine: Kramer, ahem, remember that whole deal with you selling Peterman your stories for his book and then he gave them back to you?

Kramer: Vaguely.
Elaine: Well, I was kind of, he he he, short on material and I, um, I put them in the book anyway.
Kramer: You put my life's stories in his autobiography?
Elaine: Kramer, listen, it is such a stupid book. It doesn't matter.
Kramer: Oh no. Sure. It matters. Wow. I've broken through, huh. *I'm part of popular culture now.* Listen, I've got to thank Mr. Peterman. [my italics]

Inspired, Kramer starts showing up at Peterman's book signings and launches yet another scheme: Peterman reality tours, with Cosmo himself as tour guide.

After a slow beginning, *Seinfeld* broke through, too, developing into master of its domain, one of the most commercially successful sitcoms in the history of television,[1] being named by *TV Guide* as "The Greatest Show of All Time," and becoming itself "part of popular culture," its language, jokes, characters, situations now part of the water cooler vocabulary of two, even three, generations. With *Seinfeld* likely to run in syndication for several more decades, it may well remain common currency for a half century.

II

Seinfeld was, however, not without its detractors. Much talked about in the popular press during its original run (1989–1998), especially in the run-up to its final episode,[2] it was frequently both blamed and praised.[3]

Blame. Writing in the decidedly-left periodical *The Progressive,* Elayne Rapping examines *Seinfeld* and co-conspirators like *Friends* (1994–2004) and *Mad About You* (1992–1999) and finds them all to be alarming signs of the times in the dawning Information Age: "Call me a hopeless Puritan," Rapping writes, "[b]ut I see, in this airwave invasion of sitcoms about young Manhattanites with no real family or work responsibilities and nothing to do but hang out and talk about it, an insidious message about the future of Western civilization" (37). Ron Rosenbaum, writing in *Harper's Bazaar,* laments the "*Seinfeld* mania . . . that has swept through the media like a warm and fuzzy hurricane." In *Glued to the Set: The 60 Television Shows and Events That Made Us What We Are Today,* Steven D. Stark compared *Seinfeld* to *Home Improvement* (1991–1999) and found it wanting, the television equivalent of "sophomoric talk radio" (285). Roseanne Arnold (Roseanne Barr), whose series *Roseanne* (1988–1997) ran contemporaneously with *Seinfeld* on ABC, found her rival pretentious: "They think they're doing Samuel Beckett instead of a sitcom" (quoted in Wild 1).

Praise. Novelist Jay McInerney (in *TV Guide*) answers his own titular question "Is *Seinfeld* the Best Comedy Ever?" with a definite yes. Salon.com's Joyce Millman, while admitting an early distaste for the show, describes it as "Faster, smarter, darker and more unpredictable than any other network sitcom around, . . . a gasp-for-breath funny portrayal of bad behavior." Even some conservatives loved it: Rob Long, offering his tribute in the right-wing organ *National Review,* found *Seinfeld,* a series that inspired laughs at the expense of the handicapped, the homeless, the elderly, the retarded, suicides, abortion, and a variety of minorities, the near-perfect culture wars antidote to obsessive PCness. And Bill Wyman, also writing in Salon,[4] dismisses the carpers' complaints as a complete misunderstanding of *Seinfeld*'s intent and profound significance:

> *Seinfeld* was not really about how evil humanity is, though it's about that to some extent. The show is really about the joy of charting, in exquisite, unrelenting, almost celebratory detail, the infinitely variegated human interactions that, closely watched, will ultimately tell the story of the disintegration of our species.

III

Despite all the critical give and take, surprisingly, *Seinfeld* has to date inspired only one book-length study, *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book About Everything and Nothing.*[5] In David Wild's *Seinfeld: The Totally Unauthorized Tribute,* we do read, however, of several other volumes in the works:

Seinfeld *Friendship: Bond or Bondage*
Soup Nazis, Big Salads, and Other Food Issues: Seinfeld's *Hearty Appetitive for Disaster*
Jerry: Stand-Up Guy or Peter Pan with a Punch Line?
The Cosmetology of Kramer: Men Are from Mars, Cosmo Is from . . . ?
Elaine Benes: Tomboy or Time Bomb Waiting to Go Off?
George Costanza: Angst in His Sweatpants
Wash & Weary: The Dirty, Messy Truth about Jerry's Cleanliness
Newman's Own: Big Man, Bigger Problems
Crazy Joe Davola and the Insanity Defense
The Seinfelds and the Costanzas: Two Approaches to Parenthood from Potty Training On
"The Panties Your Mother Laid Out for You": Sexual Perversities in Manhattan
Seinfeld *of Dreams*
Elaine's Dancing: Movement or Madness?
Zen and the Art of Seinfeld

Elaine's "Get Out" Gesture as a Reflection of Postfeminist Rage
Frank and Estelle Costanza: Can This Marriage Be Saved?
Homoeroticism on the West Side: Jerry and George—A Love Story for Our Times?

To the best of our knowledge, none of these tomes has seen print, and since the series was to have been a project of Pendant Publishing (the New York house, former employer of Elaine Benes and George Costanza, publisher of Cosmo Kramer's coffee-table book on coffee tables, which went out of business when Mr. Lippman forgot his handkerchief and, his hand covered with snot, was unable to shake hands and seal the deal for the Matsushimi takeover ["The Opposite," 5022]), most likely they never will.

Though these must-read-TV books will now never appear in our universe, as fans of imaginary books of television criticism,[6] we like to think they do occupy a shelf in some library (zealously guarded by Mr. Bookman) or in a Brentano's (where Uncle Leo might shoplift them or George might make them forever-flagged bathroom reading material), not in our reality, of course, but in *Seinfeld*'s "sitcosmos" (the term is David Marc's, from *Comic Visions*). After all, the Seinverse has its own alternate reality movies, such flicks as *Prognosis Negative* ("The Dog," 3004), *Checkmate* ("The Movie," 4013), *Rochelle, Rochelle: The Movie* ("The Smelly Car," 4020), *Death Blow, Cry, Cry Again* ("The Little Kicks," 8004), *The Other Side of Darkness, The Pain and the Yearning* ("The Comeback," 8013), and *Sack Lunch*[7] ("The English Patient," 8017). Why not books as well?

IV

As this, hopefully real, book was in its final stages of development, the long-awaited *Seinfeld* DVDs came out. To date, rich-in-extras boxed sets of Seasons One through Four have been issued. Film scholar Thomas Doherty was thinking of movie DVDs when he wrote of how the "tantalizing wraparound extras—outtakes, 'making of' docu-shills, theatrical trailers, concealed 'Easter-egg' treasures, rock videos, and other tasty ancillary material" possible on DVDs have completely changed "the relation of the motion-picture spectator to the object of attraction." Thanks to the DVD, Doherty observes, a new relationship with the medium, "both homespun and starstruck," becomes possible: "you and the auteur, shoulder to shoulder, planted on your living-room couch, munching popcorn and hoisting a brewski, sharing a private tutorial in film studies laced with E! Entertainment gossip" (178). Television DVDs, multiplying by the day, including collections of some of the medium's worst shows, offer similar pleasures, even if the small screen is supposed to be auteurless.

Neither the authors or editors of this volume have begun to assimilate the *Seinfeld*iana to be found on the series DVDs. The insights come in various forms: "Yada, Yada, Yada" (episode commentaries by the cast, Larry David, and writers like Larry Charles and Peter Mehlman); "Inside Looks" (interviews with actors, writers, directors, and studio execs concerning selected episodes); "Notes About Nothing" (MTV "Pop-up Video"–influenced on-screen background information on each episode); "Not That There's Anything Wrong with That" (outtakes and bloopers); "In the Vault" (deleted scenes); and "How It Began" (an hour-long documentary on the making of *Seinfeld*).

Allow us, however, to at least offer our own notes on what is to be gleaned from a quick tour of the DVDs, remembering, of course, that the oral history of the series offered there is not necessarily an objective record and hardly the last word to be said about *Seinfeld*'s creation and development.

The original plan was for a special—ninety minutes about a standup comic. That it evolved into "ninety hours" still astounds Seinfeld ("How It Began").

Seinfeld declares the "gaps in society where there were no rules" to be the series' specialty ("Inside Look" for "The Seinfeld Chronicles," 1001).

In real life, it was actually Jerry who was relying on David to be the writer—the opposite of the situation on the show, where George, the David-inspired character, doesn't have a clue how to write for TV ("How It Began"). (In real life, David had written for *Fridays* and *Saturday Night Live*.)

David comments several times on how individual episodes—"The Contest" (4010), for example—came out of his notebook ("Inside Look" for the episode). Others comment on David's notebook as well. (On David's HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the notebook makes several appearances.)

That *Seinfeld* was filmed on the same stage as *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–1966) gave both Seinfeld and David a sense of their own show's place in TV history ("Inside Look" for "The Seinfeld Chronicles," 1001).

Julia-Louis Dreyfus has never seen the *Seinfeld* pilot, in which she did not appear ("Inside Look" for "The Seinfeld Chronicles," 1001).

David still hates the pilot because of network interference in its creation ("How It Began").

Richards admits not knowing how to play Kramer at first and being envious of the comfort Alexander and Seinfeld felt in their characters ("Inside Look" for "The Seinfeld Chronicles," 1001).

Jerry initially thought the wacky neighbor was a cliché ("How It Began").

The form of episode titles ("The Chinese Restaurant," 2011, "The Little Kicks," 8004) was the result of Seinfeld not wanting writers spending time and

creative energy on them ("Inside Look" for "Male Unbonding," 1004). Only "Male Unbonding" lacks a "the."

David was quite aware of the untypical-for-television continuity *Seinfeld* was developing but saw no "downside" in it ("Inside Look" for "The Stakeout," 1002).

NBC was extremely unhappy with the eventless "The Chinese Restaurant" and held it back until late in the season, but Alexander and others felt that it was the first episode that truly defined the show ("Inside Look" for the episode).

Richards was hurt by being left out of "The Chinese Restaurant"; later, Alexander would be similarly upset about not appearing in "The Pen" (3003) ("Inside Look" for both episodes).

Richards observes that Kramer first became Kramer in "The Statue" (2006)—in the scene in which he pretends to be a detective ("Inside Look" for the episode).

Beginning with "The Busboy" (2012), Seinfeld began to selflessly write himself out of episodes and give the big laughs and scenes to the supporting cast ("Inside Look" for the episode).

David recalls his terror at the television reality of having to turn out first thirteen (Season Two) and then twenty-two (Season Three) episodes ("How It Began").

Larry Charles recalls that writers thrived on the challenge of weaving together different story ideas that were brought to the writers' table into single episodes ("Inside Look" for "The Baby Shower," 2010).

Elaine's father ("The Jacket," 2003) was based on David's real-life encounter with the intimidating writer Richard Yates, author of *Revolutionary Road* ("Inside Look" for the episode).

With "The Revenge" (2007), Richards began to realize his hope "to *do* funny, not just talk funny" ("Inside Look" for the episode).

NBC executive Warren Littlefield pushed getting Elaine and Jerry back together, and the "this, that" arrangement of "The Deal" (2009) was the result. When Jerry went on tour immediately after the season, he received resounding "No's!" to his question to audiences about whether they should continue to be lovers, and by Season Three they were again "just friends" ("Inside Look" for the episode).

David claims that they worked the censors the way a coach manipulates a referee, complaining about small, insignificant "calls" so that they could get away with more important envelope-pushing matters—like the use of "it" to refer to the penis ("It moved") in "The Note" (3001) ("Inside Look" for the episode).

The ending of "The Parking Garage" (3006), in which Kramer's long-misplaced car fails to start, was a nonscripted perfect moment ("Inside Look" for the episode).

Again and again we learn that the events of episodes like "The Pen" (3003) or "The Café" (3007) had their origins in the actual experiences of the writers ("Inside Look" for those episodes).

Jerry explains that by Season Three the governing principle of the series on a daily basis had become "Let's not do anything you might do on another show" ("Inside Look" for "The Café," 3007).

The famous line uttered in "The Boyfriend" (3017) by Jerry over a prostrate, de-pantsed George—"And you want to be my latex salesman"—was improvised ("Inside Look" for the episode).

When David and Seinfeld visited the set of *Murphy Brown* (1988–1998) so Kramer could make a cameo appearance ("The Keys," 3022), they were both struck that it seemed like a real sitcom, while they always thought of their own show as "an amateurish version of a real sitcom" ("Inside Look" for the episode).

Writer Peter Mehlman cites his brother's observation that it was not the show's edgy material that distinguished it but that it did it "in mixed company" ("Inside Look" for "The Contest," 4010).

The addition of the oft-repeated, now famous "not that there's anything wrong with that" in "The Outing" (4016)—Larry Charles came up with the line—saved an episode they considered abandoning by transforming its possibly offensive tone into satire ("Inside Look" for the episode).

The "rhymes with a female body part" name "Delores" was actually contributed by an audience member ("How It Began").

"We'll go watch them slice this fat bastard up": this line from "The Junior Mint" (4019), a violation of every network rule about likability and identifiability, was, according to Seinfeld, a watershed for the series: "We were really out of the barn and running wild" ("Inside Look" for the episode).

If future *Seinfeld* DVDs are comparable to those so far released, by the time all are available—all nine seasons, all 180 episodes—we should have at our disposable a superb resource for examining not only the much neglected sitcom genre but television creativity itself.

V

The present volume about the Seinfeldian universe cannot hope to map that sitcosmos as fully as the several thousand imaginary pages of *Seinfeld* criticism David Wild envisioned, but it does explore some of the same territory. Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer are all examined at length, friendship is considered,

Jerry and George's masculinity is called into question, taboo and awkward subjects are brought into the open, food is simmered, parents are discussed. These and more subjects—*Seinfeld* in syndication, intertextuality, nothingness, Jane Austen, ethnicity, J. Peterman, *Seinfeld* in the Netherlands—are all given their due in a book intended to be not only an intellectual exploration of all things *Seinfeld* but a guide to the *Seinfeld* sitcosmos as well. Its editors hope that both "scholar-fans" and "fan-scholars" (to borrow Matt Hills's important distinction in *Fan Cultures*) will find it both illuminating and useful.

The book's first part, "'Giddy-up!': Introductions," provides three essay overviews of the series, by Albert Auster, noted television scholar David Marc, and Bill Wyman, as well as a miscellany of "Reflections on *Seinfeld*" by a variety of critics.

In Part II, "'Maybe the dingoes ate your baby': Genre, Humor, Intertextuality," Michael Dunne on *Seinfeld*'s intertextuality, Barbara Ching on the existential dimensions of the sitcom, Dennis Hall on the contemporaneous cultural phenomena of Jane Austen and *Seinfeld,* and Amy McWilliams on the series' revisioning of expected genre formulae all look at *Seinfeld* as a text among texts.

"'If I like their race, how can that be racist?': Gender, Generations, and Ethnicity," Part III, offers Joanna L. Di Mattia on the show's "homosociality," Matthew Bond on "Parents and Children on *Seinfeld,*" and Jon Stratton on *Seinfeld*'s Jewishness.

Part IV, "'It is so sad, all your knowledge of high culture comes from Bugs Bunny cartoons': Cultural, Pop Cultural Matters, and Media Matters," endeavors to situate the *Seinfeld* sitcosmos in a variety of contexts. Geoffrey O'Brien considers it as a 1990s phenomenon; Sara Lewis Dunne cracks its food codes; Eleanor Hersey offers a cultural studies critique of the character of J. Peterman on the show; Elke van Cassel analyzes why *Seinfeld* never quite made it in the Netherlands; and Michael M. Epstein, Mark C. Rogers, and Jimmie L. Reeves scrutinize *Seinfeld* as a highly successful syndicated program.

In an afterword, David Lavery and Marc Leverette reflect upon the nature of rereading *Seinfeld* as a syndicated text and in light of Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm.*

"'Get out!'," *Master of Its Domain*'s back pages, offers several appendixes, including Betty Lee's systematic "*Seinfeld* Glossary," a comprehensive episode and situation guide that identifies directors and writers and catalogs each main character's situation in each show, and a brief log of intertexts and allusions in *Seinfeld.* A composite bibliography and an index complete the volume.

Notes

1. First season episodes of *Seinfeld* drew audiences in the 15 million range. By Season Seven, the typical audience for the series had increased to over 30 million per episode. See the essay by Epstein, Rogers, and Reeves in this volume for more on *Seinfeld* economics.

2. For an excellent discussion of *Seinfeld*'s finale, see Joanne Morreale's "Sitcoms Say Goodbye: The Cultural Spectacle of *Seinfeld*'s Last Episode."

3. "Reflections on *Seinfeld*," included in Part One below, collects a variety of observations from a variety of sources on *Seinfeld*.

4. Wyman's essay is included in this volume.

5. Edited by William Irwin, *Seinfeld and Philosophy* was the founding volume in a hugely successful Open Court Press series in which academic philosophers cogitate on popular culture. *Seinfeld*, we should note, did motivate several other fannish books: Fretts's *The Entertainment Weekly* Seinfeld *Companion* (1993), Golub's *The Seinfeld Aptitude Test* (1994), Gattuso's *The Seinfeld Universe: An Unauthorized Fan's Eye View of the Entire Domain* (1996), Wild's *Seinfeld: The Totally Unauthorized Tribute* (1998), in addition to comprehensive special-issue episode guides from both *TV Guide* and *Entertainment Weekly*.

6. See Angela Hague and David Lavery, eds., *Teleparody: Predicting/Preventing the TV Discourse of Tomorrow*.

7. Thanks to the following exchange between Elaine and her current boyfriend, Blaine, we do learn a bit about this particular imaginary film:

> Elaine: Oh, c'mon, Blaine. I mean, look at the poster for *Sack Lunch*.
> Blaine: It's a family in a brown paper bag.
> Elaine: *(laughing)* Don't you wanna know how they got in there?
> Blaine: No.

Acknowledgments

This book's gestation was almost a decade, and, needless to say, it is a delight to finally see it in print.

My thanks to Sara Dunne for all her help along the way and for her fine essay.

My gratitude to Jon Stratton and to the Curtin University of Technology for making it possible to reprint Jon's excellent essay.

My thanks to all the book's other authors—Michael Dunne, Albert Auster, Bill Wyman, David Marc, Dennis Hall, Amy McWilliams, Joanna Di Mattia, Barbara Ching, Geoffrey O'Brien, Matthew Bond, Eleanor Hersey, Michael Epstein, Jimmie Reeves, Mark Rogers, Marc Leverette, and Betty Lee—for their contributions and especially for their patience.

I especially want to thank David Barker at Continuum for being receptive to our proposal and making it possible for the book to find a home. Thanks, too, for Gabriella Page-Fort for her hard work on the manuscript.

My family, all *Seinfeld* fans, have been, as usual, more supportive than I deserve. Thank you Joyce and Rachel.

Most of all, I want to acknowledge my daughter Sarah Caitlin Lavery. Only a little older than *Seinfeld*, she knows the series as well as I do and, an aspiring writer herself, toyed with writing an essay for the book to be called "Growing Up *Seinfeld*." This book is dedicated to her. (I hope, one day, she writes that essay.)

—David Lavery

I want to thank David Lavery, a gentleman, a scholar, and a helluva fellow, for inviting me to be part of this project. I also want to acknowledge the encouragement and support of my husband, Michael Dunne, and my friend, Dennis Hall, who first urged me to publish the original version of my essay about the food in *Seinfeld*.

—Sara Lewis Dunne

I

"Giddy-up!" Introductions

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ALBERT AUSTER (Fordham University)

Much Ado About Nothing

Some Final Thoughts on *Seinfeld*

This essay originally appeared in *Television Quarterly,* no. 29 (1998): 24–33.

Back when *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* went off the air in 1977 there were quite a few voices raised in protest and even more in sorrow. Feminists, especially, were practically grief-stricken. As one woman wrote years later, "Mary Richards made it OK—OK to be a single woman. OK to be over 30, OK to be independent. She made it acceptable to stay home alone and watch her if you had a mind to."

Only a few years later the end of a series became a national event. When *M*A*S*H* aired its final episode, "Goodbye, Farewell and Amen," in 1983, it was not only cause for despair, it was also the basis for the largest audiences ever gathered to watch a single television episode. Ten years later, *Cheers'* demise aroused similar feelings and a large audience, but not as large as the one for *M*A*S*H*'s finale. Although failing to eclipse *M*A*S*H*'s final episode's rating. *Cheers* fans certainly matched it in the hyperbole with which they lamented its departure. For example, novelist Kurt Vonnegut said that, "I would say that television has produced one comic masterpiece, which is *Cheers.* I wish I'd written that instead of everything I had written."

Barely five years later, we had the finale of another highly rated, critically acclaimed series, *Seinfeld.* This time, when the announcement was made of the series ending, it caused not only sorrow in some quarters but consternation: a sense that a national calamity was upon us. Indeed, *People* magazine headlined the news with the words "A Stunned Nation Prepares for Life Without *Seinfeld.*"

Behind all this hype, however, one sensed a note of hysteria, especially from the TV networks. Ever since the late '80s the networks have anxiously watched their audiences decline. In 1998 that hysteria took on megabuck dimensions when NBC, faced by the loss of *Seinfeld* and with no immediate successor in sight, agreed to pay $13 million per episode for its hit doctor series *ER.*

Similarly, faced by the possible loss of its perennial and only certain top ten prime-time hit, *Monday Night Football,* ABC agreed to pay practically double what it had previously paid for the rights to broadcast the games. These events, coupled with the end of *Seinfeld,* lead one to believe that behind some of the hoopla surrounding the end was increasing the need to deliver large audiences and thus convince advertisers of the continued relevance of the networks.

Another dimension that seemed to be overlooked in the "Festivus" of grief (to those uninitiated into the *Seinfeld*ian universe this was the yuletide holiday created by George Costanza's father) surrounding *Seinfeld*'s demise was the fact that despite its huge audiences many people just didn't get it.

For example, a literate and sophisticated couple (she is a published poet with a Ph.D. in English and has written a book on Faulkner, and he is a retired successful businessman), friends of my wife and me, would often ask us (knowing we both taught media studies and I was a TV critic) what was good on television. And we would inevitably reply: *Seinfeld.*

Invariably, they would dutifully go and watch the series and then, when we met again, would ask us what we saw in it. This happened a number of times with other highly intelligent people of our acquaintance, with generally the same results. When questioned a bit further as to why they disliked the series, the consensus was that they couldn't see spending time with such unlikable people.

Nor were our friends alone. Maureen Dowd in her Op-Ed page column in *The New York Times* once denounced the show for being the last vestige of '80s Yuppie self-indulgence. And *New York Magazine* television critic John Leonard in his brief epitaph on the series demise hardly bothered to hide his disdain. He commented, "The passing of *Seinfeld,* that Cheez Doodle of urban fecklessness into cryogenic syndication, inspires no tear in this cave. Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine never spoke for my New York. . . . in *Seinfeld* I always miss the snarl and the edge, not to mention real politics and real work . . . I know we're all so postmodern hip that we can be ironic about our own nostalgia—but nostalgic about our own irony?" Of course, Leonard and Dowd might certainly be accused of just a bit of over-the-top peevishness in their reactions to the sitcom which in other places had been referred to as "the defining sitcom of our age."

On the surface, it certainly doesn't seem to reflect well on our culture and society that its so-called defining contemporary comedy was one that dealt in such excruciating minutiae as getting a table in a Chinese restaurant, finding a parking space, or locating the perfect piece of fruit. As a matter of fact, if your heart was set on watching a show that really dealt with life's quotidian, then arguably there's no better place to start than reruns of *Ozzie and Harriet.* However, it

was *Seinfeld*'s special genius to reveal the fact that God (or more precisely in *Seinfeld*'s case, the Devil) really did reside in the details.

This is especially true in times such as these when, whether or not Saddam really permits U.N. arms inspectors to get inside his palaces, and sex and subpoenas are topic number one on the Washington, D.C., agenda. They also seem beyond the power of the average citizen to exert much influence over. As a result, daily experience looms larger and larger in our minds because it is something over which we do presumably have at least some semblance of control. In addition, it is undoubtedly in small letter rather than capital letter experiences that we often gain some of life's more piquant pleasures as well as its equally bittersweet frustrations and disappointments.

Indeed, nothing can cast a pall over a day faster than finding out the milk you counted on for your morning coffee has turned sour overnight; or brighten it more quickly than discovering that the check you've been expecting came in the mail. As a result, when Jerry Seinfeld and his co-producer Larry David proposed their show about nothing to NBC executives back in 1989, little did they know that they had latched onto the veritable cultural tiger's tail.

Beside seizing on its little portion of a cultural phenomenon, the success of the show was also in no small measure due to its writing and its actors. The writing of each episode was compared by one critic to "the twisted strands of DNA." Thus, one of the particular hallmarks of *Seinfeld* was to make four often disparate story lines, each seemingly headed off toward its own individual left field, end in one place without violating *Seinfeld*'s cardinal rule of "no hugging, no learning."

For example, the *Seinfeld* episode titled "The Boyfriend" (3017), ranked fourth in *TV Guide*'s list of all-time best series episodes, in which both Elaine and Jerry vie for the attentions of former New York Mets baseball star Keith Hernandez, and George tries to get his unemployment benefits extended by fabricating a bogus job, ends in a scene where Kramer and the recently seen-for-the-first-time Newman (did we ever really learn his first name?) do a takeoff on the Kennedy assassination's Zapruder film.

Certainly other sitcoms have used the backstory–front story approach to great advantage, perhaps none better than *Seinfeld*'s predecessor in NBC's crown jewel Thursday night 9:00 p.m. time slot, *Cheers*. However, what set *Seinfeld* apart from these other series was its ability to have the final scene turn into a socko punch line ending that summed up the previous action and left you scratching your head in wonder at the brilliance of the program's inventiveness.

For that matter, not very many sitcoms equaled *Seinfeld* for the consistency and quality of its surreal situations. Sitcoms would have to go a long way to best Kramer and George's father's invention of the male bra (or, as Kramer called it,

"the bro" ["The Doorman," 6016]); the churlish bubble boy who asks Susan to take off her top ("The Bubble Boy," 4006); and perhaps most over-the-top of all, the death of George's fiancée from licking toxic glue on the cheap wedding invitation envelopes he forced her to buy ("The Invitations," 7022). This episode has been the most frequently criticized of all *Seinfeld* shows for going a bit too far.

None of those story lines and fantastic moments would have meant anything without the gifted ensemble that emerged over the years to play them. Lost now in all the hosannas over the passing of the program was the fact that when it debuted back in July of 1989 as *The Seinfeld Chronicles,* it was a show without Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), and Kramer (Michael Richards), rather than being the mooch and the constant intruder into Jerry's apartment that he would later become, was a recluse who hadn't been out of his apartment for ten years. Also forgotten in all the *post hoc* praise was the fact that the show, which one early critic termed "mildly amusing," was clobbered when it was opposite *Home Improvement.*

Clearly, in its first years, and not until after it was salvaged by placing it in the surefire time slot after *Cheers,* the program was a cult favorite and an acquired taste. Much of that early popularity was in no small part due to such things as the misadventures of George Costanza (Jason Alexander), whose whining and self-destructiveness would made Dostoyevsky's underground man seem like the paragon of narcissism.

George's style included such kamikaze antics as getting fired from one job because he had sex with the cleaning lady ("The Red Dot," 3012); and trying to get a date with actress Marissa Tomei practically moments after the death of Susan. Indeed, by comparison no one but a lord of losers like George could make you believe that his boss at the New York Yankees, the famously autocratic George Steinbrenner, was a cuddly version of Mr. Magoo.

Equaling George's outrageous behavior, and undoubtedly surpassing him as the source of the show's original claim on the public's affections, was the hyperkinetic Kramer. Nothing, except perhaps Ed Norton's (Art Carney) balletic arrivals at Ralph and Alice Kramden's apartment in *The Honeymooners,* compared to the whirling dervish entrances of Kramer into Jerry's apartment to serve himself a bowl of cereal, or inform Jerry of his latest scheme for rickshaws to be pulled by the homeless ("The Bookstore," 9017).

Perhaps most unforgettable of all were Kramer's brief but always doomed attempts at normalcy. For example, in the unjustly overlooked story line in the much praised episode "Bizarro Jerry" (8003), Kramer starts working at the firm of Brandt-Leland (despite not being hired and not getting paid), which starts his

and Jerry's relationship deteriorating into a parody of the classic pattern of the nagging housewife and the workaholic husband. Ultimately, it was Kramer's aptitude for physical comedy (joyfully reminiscent of such silent clowns as Keaton and Chaplin), coupled with his zany schemes and eccentric friends, that provided each episode with its unique bit of Dadaist counterpoint.

In the very same "Bizarro Jerry" episode in which Kramer starts his job, Elaine discovers a group of friends who are the mirror opposites of Jerry and his friends, and despite the show's no hugging, no learning *obiter dicta*, we do gain just a bit of insight into the real Elaine. Originally added to the cast to provide the show with a bit of "estrogen," and given a history as Jerry's ex-girlfriend, the smart, diminutive, feisty Elaine has more than her fair share of zany adventures and weird jobs. Indeed she is the "best man" at a lesbian wedding ("The Subway," 3013), finds her nipple exposed in the picture she includes in her personal Christmas card ("The Pick," 4012), and works as the personal assistant to the eccentric millionaire Mr. Pitt, who is so aristocratic he eats his Snickers bars with a knife and fork ("The Pledge Drive," 6003).

Nonetheless, despite these comic misadventures, Elaine is the only character on the show who seems to know or care that there is a world beyond the hermetically sealed universe of Monk's coffee shop and Jerry's apartment, so beloved of Jerry, George, and Kramer. However, despite yearning for the "Bizarro Jerry" world of her friend Kevin and his pals Gene and Feldman, where in contrast to Jerry's world everyone is nice to one another, goes to the ballet, and reads books together, she's been so shaped and tainted by her association with Jerry, George, and Kramer, she's become a total misfit in polite society.

It's this struggle with conventional society that was also the hallmark of Jerry Seinfeld's character on *Seinfeld*. In interview after interview, Jerry cited the movie *Lenny* (1971) as one of his major comic inspirations. Now, nothing could be more different than the blessed life of this child of middle-class Long Island parents, who graduated from Queens College and practiced and polished his stand-up routines in Yuppie comedy clubs, and the tortured existence of the so-called "sick" comic who grew up and learned his craft in a world of strippers and burlesque comics, and whose brief but legendary career ended in the drugged-out vortex of criminal prosecutions and paranoia.

It was the now legendary NBC programming chief Brandon Tartikoff who originally dismissed the *Seinfeld* show's chances of success with the comment that it was too Jewish and too New York. Nevertheless, besides their both being young, Jewish, and urban, Bruce and Jerry also shared, in varying degrees, a kind of alienation from the middle-class world. It is the virtual condition of every

comedian's life that he works while most of the rest of the world sleeps and that the seeds of his/her art are bred in a kind of ironic detachment from everyday life. Therefore, in a term borrowed from the gay ("not that there's anything wrong with that") world, the comedian is continually at odds with straight society.

The fictional Jerry's long string of dates and relationships that never seem to work out, his moderate success as a stand-up comic, his generally good "buffer zone" relationship with his parents in Florida, and his spotlessly neat and clean Upper West Side bachelor pad testify to both his middle-class background and his aspirations. But the fictional Jerry's conventional tendencies are constantly at war with, and undermined by, his ultra-fastidiousness (Jerry breaks up with women for such petty reasons as eating peas one at a time ["The Engagement," 7001], liking Dockers pants commercials ["The Phone Message," 2004], and using a toothbrush that accidentally fell into the toilet bowl ["The Pothole," 8016]), fear of commitment, and self-absorption.

These latter traits reached epic proportions in the very same episode in which George's fiancée dies. Jerry, facing a life alone with Kramer, thinks he's in love with Jeannie Steinman (Janeane Garofalo), who has his initials, loves cereal, and riffs on brunches and shirt collars just like him ("The Invitations," 7022). In a rare moment of self-awarness, he concludes that "Now I know what I've been waiting for all these years—myself," only to break up with her when he also realizes that he hates himself.

Added to this was Jerry's often reluctant, petty outlaw behavior. Jerry thinks nothing of mugging an old lady for a marble rye bread ("The Rye," 7011); he makes out with a date during a screening of *Schindler's List* ("The Raincoats," 5019); he's hunted by the public library for a twenty-year overdue copy of *Tropic of Cancer* ("The Library," 3005); and when advising someone about breaking up a relationship, he suggests the brutal approach of doing it like removing a Band-Aid, "one motion, right off" ("The Ex-Girlfriend," 2001). As a result, despite Jerry's best efforts, he seems to be in a kind of perpetual unconscious guerrilla struggle with respectability.

This latter battle was one of the guilty pleasures of *Seinfeld.* In recent years, television drama and comedy emphasized either the dastardly conduct of the rich, such as in *Dallas* and *Dynasty,* or the dysfunctional behavior of the working class found in *Roseanne* and *Married . . . with Children. Seinfeld* was unique in that it examined the not-so-discreet churlish charm of the bourgeoisie. In contrast to the generations of family- and friends-style sitcoms, whose characters, despite frequent misunderstandings, were ultimately generous and mutually supportive

of one another, Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine never missed an opportunity to compete with, lie to, and backstab one another.

Not only did the fearsome foursome wreak havoc on each other, it usually extended to anyone in their wake. Heading the long list of *Seinfeld*'s victims—which included the likes of Jerry's friend Babu, who was deported back to Pakistan because Jerry forgot to file his visa application ("The Visa," 4014)—was George's Job-like fiancée, Susan Ross (Heidi Swedeborg). Even before their fatal engagement, she had to endure Kramer's misplaced Cuban cigar burning down her parents' cabin ("The Bubble Boy," 4006), as well as the later embarrassment of the discovery of love letters from novelist John Cheever to her father found in the cabin's ashes ("The Cheever Letters," 4007); losing her job at NBC; and the breakup of a lesbian relationship—all because of George.

This cycle of devastation even extended to their own families. For example, when Jerry's parents heard that the dreaded Costanzas are about to move to their condominium in Florida, they move in with Jerry, thus putting an end to his precious "buffer zone" ("The Showerhead," 7015). Similarly, when Jerry buys his father a new Cadillac, it results in the condo's board, of which he is president, voting to impeach him à la Watergate—they think he must be embezzling funds, because they don't believe a mere comedian could afford to buy his father such an expensive car ("The Cadillac," 7014). Indeed, though Jerry Seinfeld himself claimed *Abbott and Costello* as another of his comic muses (and the series' use of dialogue and language confirms this), the main characters'-stick-in-the-eye approach to one another, and everyone else, seemed more akin to the *Three Stooges*.

Nothing, however, rivaled *Seinfeld* for its version of postmodern etiquette. There was, for instance, the *Seinfeld* guide to dating that includes how many dates you have to have before it is still proper to break up a relationship over the phone rather than in person (only two); how long after sleeping with a woman you have to keep dating her (three weeks); and for those needing guidance on the subject, the information that the longer you know someone, the shorter you have to wait for them in the street; that you only have to keep a thank-you card for two days (unless you have a mantle); and you should never "degift" (take back something you give) or "regift" (give away something you receive).

Less frequently acknowledged, but nonetheless an essential ingredient of quite a few *Seinfeld* episodes, were mild satiric jabs at political correctness (especially ironic in a show supposedly about nothing). For example, Kramer is beaten up at an AIDS walkathon for refusing to wear a red ribbon ("The Sponge," 7009); George's father's car is vandalized when George parks in a disabled parking spot ("The Parking Space," 3021); and in an episode that prompted a network apology,

Kramer is attacked when he stomps on a burning Puerto Rican flag during the Puerto Rican Day Parade ("The Puerto Rican Day," 9020). The inspiration for these incidents is neither conservative nor liberal politically; instead, they seemed inspired by the series' radical individualism, or, put in a showbiz idiom, "Screw 'em, if they can't take a joke!"

Unfortunately, this indifference to politics and society did have its downside. For example, black characters in their infrequent appearances on the series rarely rose above the level of caricature. Thus, lawyer Jackie Chiles, the series' parody of Johnnie Cochran, seems an *Amos 'n Andy* lineal descendant of George "Kingfish" Stevens and Algonquin J. Calhoun.

If the series did have one strong point in its dealings with race, it was with the embarrassment and uneasiness that middle-class whites often feel about the issue. As a result, in one episode Elaine, because she's afraid of being considered a bigot, goes through all sorts of contortions in order to discover the race of the somewhat-swarthy man she's been dating (Jerry thinks he's black ["The Wizard," 9015].

Of course, Elaine's racial guessing game is mild in comparison to the larger question that often plagued the series—the extent to which the series went to hide not only its cultural Jewishness but any sort of religiosity. Though the series, apropos of Tartikoff's caveat, is replete with Jewish body language and syntax (George's head slappings and comments like "Again with the keys"); references (Bar Mitzvahs, the Holocaust, Florida condos, and Elaine being referred to as having *shiksappeal*), nevertheless, *Seinfeld* was always the artful dodger in explicitly acknowledging its Judaism. As a result, we have a funeral of a relative from Krakow without a yarmulke in sight ("The Pony Remark," 2002). When George wants to convert to "Latvian Orthodox" in order to impress a woman ("The Conversion," 5011), it's never really made clear what religion he wants to convert from.

All of these elements, both positive and negative, came together in the series' intellectually consistent, but generally less than hilarious, final episode. It was a conclusion that some finale mavens rated as inferior to *Mary Tyler Moore*'s sign-off, but better than *M*A*S*H*'s, and undoubtedly the equal of *Cheers'* curtain call. Nevertheless, the hoopla that surrounded the show paid off in Superbowl-type ratings that almost equaled *Cheers'* final episode (which, to be fair, is quite good, given the fact that the champion *M*A*S*H*'s and *The Fugitive*'s finales never had to contend with the inroads of cable).

There was, in addition, one other record set by the passing of *Seinfeld.* Some sort of Guinness mark must have been achieved for shortest post-TV-finale attention span by the modern media hype machine. In less time than it took to say "get out," that colossus had made a 180-degree turn, and was in overdrive

about another story—the death of Frank Sinatra on May 14, 1998. In the heat of the coverage of the death of the man whose voice had become the soundtrack for millions of lives worldwide, the ballyhoo over *Seinfeld* faded like a snowstorm in July.

As a matter of fact, in what seemed like less than a nanosecond, the Upper West Side had been exorcised by images of Hoboken on the television landscape—memories of the antics of Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine were replaced by nostalgia about the hijinks of Rat Packers Frank, Dino, Sammy, Peter, Joey, and Shirley, and "ring-a-ding-ding" substituted for "yada, yada, yada."

The hype meltdown aside, *Seinfeld*'s finale's most solid achievement was to manage to conclude without violating the consistency of the series' major characters or its major themes. This was perhaps a bit more difficult for *Seinfeld* than either for *M*A*S*H, Mary Tyler Moore,* or *Cheers.* In those earlier finales, there was the end of the Korean War, the purchase of the TV station by a media conglomerate, and the closing of the bar to serve as justifications for these programs' bittersweet conclusions. For *Seinfeld,* there was no such easy rationale.

Also in comparison to *MTM, M*A*S*H,* and *Cheers,* where fans and critics cited certain episodes such as "Chuckles the Clown Bites the Dust," "Abbysinia, Henry," etc., as highlights of the series, but left it for later generations to decide which of them were "classics"—*Seinfeld*'s fans, along with a number of entertainment periodicals and critics, had already constructed an elaborate pantheon of the series' most inspired episodes and anointed them as the *Seinfeld* canon. As a result, there was hardly any room for additions, which made the task of any final episode much more difficult.

The final episode, however, if not fall-on-the-floor funny, was still amusing and, in this most self-referential of all series, must have set a record for self-references. Concocted under a cloak of secrecy that the media claimed rivaled the Manhattan Project, former co-executive producer and head writer Larry David created a virtual concordance of some of the series' major moments, characters, and themes. Receiving curtain calls were story lines such as *The Jerry Show,* George and Jerry's self-reflexive show about nothing, which they had tried unsuccessfully to peddle to the network in the series' fourth season. Characters included lawyer Jackie Chiles, the Bubble Boy, Susan Ross's parents, and others, all of whose appearances, as character witnesses, were occasioned by the trial of the foursome for violating the Latham, Massachusetts, "Good Samaritan" Law.

In addition, David, in a bow to the show's most ardent fans, even included moments that alluded to their dreams of how the series should end. Thus, to those who believed that the show's rightful consummation should have been Jerry

and Elaine's wedding, there was a moment when the corporate jet on which they are flying seemed about to crash and Elaine appeared about to confess her abiding love for Jerry, only to squelch it moments later when they were saved.

Finally, in an homage to the only love affair the show really ever had—its passion for symmetry—the finale's concluding moments made a bow to the series' origins with Jerry in a jailhouse jumpsuit (George and Kramer in attendance, but Elaine nowhere in sight) doing his stand-up routine for the cons, spouting trademark insouciant lines such as "So, what's the deal about the 'yard'?"

This final allusion to the fictional and the real Jerry's beginnings in stand-up may be to some extent a suggestion about his immediate future. However, one might not go wrong in predicting another sitcom in the not-too-distant *Seinfeld* future. As a matter of fact, after the show's finale a very sober, almost solemn Jerry (in contrast to the *Cheers* cast, which was boisterously and blissfully drunk in its curtain call on the *Tonight Show* after its finale) appeared with Jay Leno to talk about his future. Upon his entrance, the studio audience's standing ovation was so intense and so prolonged that it prompted him to wave and seem to head offstage teasingly shouting, "OK, come on, let's do another season."

Whether Jerry Seinfeld can resist the future siren call of the sitcom better than the likes of equally talented stand-ups who starred in hit sitcoms (Bill Cosby, Bob Newhart) remains to be seen. What is not moot is that in a sitcom world where there is so much unrelieved similarity, *Seinfeld* stood out because of its originality and steadfast insistence on being true to itself. This makes it especially noteworthy in a medium where we've become so inured to the sameness of sitcoms that some teenagers can even shout story lines back to the screen à la *The Rocky Horror Picture Show.*

Seinfeld was also special because it continued and kept alive a tradition inherent in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, M*A*S*H,* and *Cheers:* that at its very best the sitcom has the potential to become an authentic American comedy of manners. In this, *Seinfeld* succeeded by becoming the television comedy that pointed out the imprecision of our contemporary relationships and gave a name to the sources of our modem urban anxiety.

As a result of these efforts, *Seinfeld* achieved something that not even *Mary Tyler Moore, M*A*S*H,* and *Cheers* ever accomplished, which was to create adjectives akin to the literary-inspired Dickensian and Kafkaesque. Hereafter, something is *Seinfeld*ian—or in its more common usage, an event or character is "just like a *Seinfeld* episode"—when it breaks the fourth wall of conventional expectations to reveal the potential of the everyday as a source of both art and philosophy. So, despite its best efforts at adhering (even on to the very last) to its rule of "no hugging, no learning," *Seinfeld* left us with a very rich legacy after all.