It is hard not to think that Wolf was belatedly rebutting certain women’s issues as real-life feminist groundbreakers.” Wolf labeled Carrie Bradshaw the “feminist icon” of the decade, stating that she “did as much to shift the culture around certain women’s issues as real-life feminist groundbreakers.” It is hard not to think that Wolf was belatedly rebutting Time magazine’s famous cover story in 1998 on the death of the feminist movement, which featured a photo of actress Calista Flockhart as the neurotic Ally McBeal to prove its point. Both citations seem, however, less momentous for what they actually say about the cause than for their evidencing of the fact that pundits and scholars alike look to popular culture and its female icons in order to discern feminism’s contemporary significance. In an era that saw few comparable productions, Ally McBeal and Sex and the City depicted single thirty- and fortieth women navigating life in a cosmopolitan milieu, and in so doing offered insight into the challenges of modern femininity with its attendant pressures of love, work, friendship, and sexuality. This formula has since then been widely copied in popular series like Desperate Housewives, Ugly Betty, and The Real Housewives franchise. But Deborah Jermyn’s Sex and the City and Greg Smith’s Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of “Ally McBeal” consider the gold-standard postfeminist shows.

Jermyn’s addition to Wayne State’s small-format TV Milestones series surveys the origins, textual history, and reception of Sex and the City. The book investigates and endorses the show’s popularity; as Jermyn contends, “for millions of female viewers SATC was (and remains) part of the cultural fabric of everyday life, an aspirational brand crystallizing a certain set of concerns and a kind of postfeminist identity they might engage with both through and beyond television” (6). The book has four chapters, which deal in turn with the show’s production history; its original approach to comedy and sex; the characters and setting; and finally the show’s legacy. Along the way, Jermyn acknowledges many of the questions that have lead to scholarly handwringing over the series. Is it fair to celebrate the lead characters as feminist exemplars when their search for male companionship looms so large? Is the show too resolutely heterosexual? Too white? And so on. Jermyn lacks the space, however, to respond in a comprehensive way to the contention that Sex and the City constitutes “feminism lite” or to thoroughly defend its focus on privileged representations of class, ethnicity, and sexual identity. As a result the book operates primarily as an introduction rather than a full analysis.

The first and most compelling chapter, “Making Sex and the City: Authorship and Ensemble Television Production,” usefully problematizes the concept of the televisual auteur, employing the show to test theoretical claims. The chapter notes the multiple origins and contributing styles of Sex and the City, particularly Candace Bushnell’s newspaper column, Darren Star’s status as a producer and protégé of Aaron Spelling, HBO’s self-conscious attempt to blur the lines between film and television, Sarah Jessica Parker’s star image, and the costume design of Patricia Field. Chapter 2 looks at how Sex and the City used comedy to celebrate women who are honest (sometimes crassly so) about their sexual desires. Here Jermyn also responds to the assertion that the show is too narrowly focused on heterosexual coupling. She counters that Sex and the City positioned heterosexual women as each other’s significant others, dramatizing how “homosocial life could coexist with the search for heterosexual sex and romance” (56). The third chapter has a strained, catch-all quality, grappling with such diverse topics as character archetypes, queer readings, ethnic diversity, and concluding with a discussion of the series’ urban milieu and the city’s notionally feminine identity.

It is understandable in the context of a book series concerned specifically with television that the decision was made not to delay publication to allow for discussion of the 2008 spin-off movie, which brings into renewed focus the conjunction of urban space, sexuality, and consumption (“Year after year,” as Carrie’s opening voiceover tells it, “two-twentysomething women come to New York City in search of the two Ls—labels and love”). But the decision does mean that Jermyn’s book seems already somewhat dated. Since publication, the 2010 sequel film, Sex and the City 2, has also been released, though the film was less popular than its predecessor. Now not merely a postfeminist text but a postfeminist franchise, Sex and the City clearly deserves more thorough treatment, whereas Jermyn’s brief study is necessarily constrained by the TV Milestones format. Her conclusion is thus sound but rather familiar: Sex and the City did “more than any other television text preceding it to push back the boundaries governing television’s representation of sex and its exploration of female sexuality, language, and the intricacies of female friendship” (91–92).
Greg Smith’s *Beautiful TV* rejects the premise that a television show needs to be “directly, socially relevant” (2) in order to be fit for academic analysis. In a refreshing, if brash, denunciation of Cultural Studies scholarship, Smith heralds *Ally McBeal* for having expanded the formal and narrative devices of the medium. Believing that television is, as his title indicates, a beautiful art rather than an inferior one, Smith analyzes *Ally McBeal* aesthetically, noting in particular how the show changed the way that music and special effects are used in mainstream television. The discussion is not exclusively formalist, however, and *Beautiful TV* also delves into how *Ally McBeal* focuses debates about the workplace that are still ongoing. It is nevertheless the aesthetic analysis that is most surprising about this book. Such commentary represents a significant departure from other academic writing, which has tended to focus on the show’s ambivalent presentation of feminism.

Smith is interested in the schematic way in which *Ally McBeal* differentiates between eccentric, imaginative characters and those who lack creative mindsets. The show valorizes introspection and individuality, a preference reflected, according to Smith, in its pop score (discussed in chapter 1), its special effects, voiceovers, and flashbacks (chapter 2), and its guest stars (chapter 4). As he writes in chapter 2 (“Practical Music, Personal Fantasy”), “In law, in love, in music, *Ally McBeal* argues that the dance is the way to be in the moment, to react, to bow to the power of discourse, but ultimately, to swing it to your own choices” (46).

Though it begins with strong insights and impeccable evidence, *Beautiful TV* falters when it turns to narration. The bloated narration chapter (which constitutes a whopping third of the book) painstakingly identifies each major character’s history and attributes, arguing that they all either offset or magnify some aspect of Ally; one character, for example, is called the Nelle the “anti-Ally: she is entirely grounded in reality, focused solely on a career, scornful of emotionality, always assertive in love and business” (105). The trouble is that Smith has already summarized the characters more succinctly in previous chapters—as, for example, when he discusses Ally’s boss, John Cage, whose channeling of Barry White affords him the sexual confidence he lacks. Their respective relationship to music identifies John as Ally’s closest alter ego, yet Smith belabor this same point in the characterization chapter, concluding that “John is the character closest to Ally’s idiosyncratic stance toward the world, but, like all the others, he falls short” (131).

Smith’s strongest argument is, despite the terms of his opening polemic, arguably not aesthetic but cultural, for he persuasively illustrates that the show’s representation of odd-ball behavior in the workplace encodes more politically sensitive questions of racial, ethnic, and sexual difference. As Smith points out, “in an era of touchy-feely narratives of acceptance, *Ally* reminds us that all acceptances are not equally easy” (160). Almost every case the show’s law firm handles involves the changing nature of modern work, and in particular how gender and sexuality relate to power in the workplace. Observing this pattern brings Smith to a kind of consistent argument in *Ally McBeal*: though it is tempting to rely on legal process to pass judgment on thorny scenarios, “attitudes such as tolerance and respect cannot be legislated” (191). Smith mentions but does not address the potential conservatism of a position that advocates personal rather than institutional solutions to conflicts at work, yet he convincingly demonstrates how important this recurring topic is to *Ally McBeal*.

As these two books show, *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* helped to define a postfeminist popular culture that is still pervasive today. The books usefully remind us of the daring and even groundbreaking aspects of these female-centered series—Jermyn emphasizes *Sex and the City’s* celebration of female friendship, while Smith highlights *Ally McBeal’s* willingness to valorize interiority and trouble conventional narratives of workplace gender dynamics. These once novel concepts have today, however, fueled a postfeminist culture industry of sorts (*Lipstick Jungle* anyone?), a monstrous reproduction perhaps masked by the optimism of these two studies. © 2010 Suzanne Leonard

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