

## "Do we need men to be happy .. ... or can we go it alone?"

Published: February 22, 2004

TONIGHT is the series finale of HBO's "Sex and the City." After six seasons of love, lust, loyalty and impassioned excursions through the luxury marketplace, America wonders: Will the relationship columnist Carrie Bradshaw surrender her heart to Mr. Big -- despite his prior romantic failings -- and leap into his Town Car for eternity now that he is back? Will she stay in Paris (trying to look like Leslie Caron) with the well-meaning but haughty artist Aleksandr Petrovsky? Or will she reject the burdened pleasures of coupledom altogether and elect a life unattached? (Or will we be left unsure until the movie?) Over lunch last week, Ginia Bellafante, a fashion reporter for The New York Times, and Rachel Cline, author of a new novel, "What to Keep" (Random House, \$23.95), about the problems of intimacy and solitude, hashed out the pros and cons of pairing off popular culture's most celebrated singleton.

G.B. -- So, Big seems believably contrite and certain, almost desperate in his desire to be with Carrie.

R.C. -- Just desperate. I don't think he has reformed at all. He's a drama queen. Now he's just proclaiming more and proclaiming it more emotionally. I think he's on the verge of a breakdown, frankly. He's going to leave and keep coming back at various points in her life in ever-increasing stages of disarray and dishabille. I could see him turning into a roaring drunk, miserably pontificating at dinner and driving everyone else out of the room.

G.B. -- I don't agree. I believe -- in the absence of hard evidence -- that he has reformed, that he truly has missed her. Maybe he realizes he's getting older. Maybe he's gone out with people who haven't measured up. The appeal of Carrie and Big is the notion of a mind meld. It's hard to know what Petrovsky really sees in Carrie given that she is not all that cultivated and he is pretty invested in his own cultural snobbery. Their whole setup doesn't ring true, and eventually one assumes he is going to tire of her when she puts down "Diary of a Madman" after Page 10. Beyond her high taste in clothes, Carrie is utterly average. Big seems to love Carrie for her charming ordinariness, for everything she isn't rather than what she might become. They delight in each other's company.

R.C. -- He may think he appreciates her for who she really is, but he still basically treats her like a bauble. I mean, have we ever heard the two of them have an interesting conversation? They've had flirty, cute chatter. At best, that relationship was hyperdating. They never just wake up, have breakfast, do the laundry. I don't think they've ever stumbled across real life together.

G.B. -- But that's been the problem. He has not been able to have that sort of stumbling around, make-pancakes-together life with her, or anyone, because he's been so elusive up to this point. What if he has come to some new self-understanding?

R.C. -- I see no reason to believe that is possible.

G.B. -- If the writers married her off to Petrovsky -- which, granted, seems unlikely at this point -- they'd simply be capitulating to the idea of marriage, and that wouldn't work.

R.C. -- The whole Petrovsky thing is ridiculous. His character is a complete satire of what an urbane single woman is supposed to want. The sight of her snoozing in that thunderstorm-colored gown in last week's episode gave new meaning to the phrase "all dressed up, no place to go." She gave up her job for this nudnik?

G.B. -- Let's tackle the question of whether or not Carrie would be better off married.

R.C. -- Here's my big objection to her getting married now: We'll never find out what happens when David Duchovny gets out of the nuthouse. I thought that relationship was really promising.

G.B. -- I did too. Back to tonight -- we believe that Carrie can be alone. She hasn't been dependent on men. But why would we want her to be alone?

R.C. -- Let's remember that unmarried is not necessarily alone. She has shown herself to be tremendously skillful at getting boyfriends. She's not going to waste away in a closet.

G.B. -- But would you want her to be hopping from one guy to the next?

R.C. -- No. I want her to make something of her own life. Basically, I want to see her get out of that shoe box of an apartment. The reality of being alone at 50 or 60 in New York City is not that you're lying in your apartment getting nibbled to death by wild dogs. The reality is that you have a rich life and lots of friends, and marriage stops looking so desirable. Most of the time your friends' husbands would rather talk to you than to their wives.

G.B. -- But Carrie's been part of this family -- the family of friends. Now Charlotte, Miranda, Samantha even are all making their own families. What is she going to do? Find a bunch of 28-year-olds to go out drinking with every night?

R.C. -- She has to start focusing on her work. For six years, she's been writing 350-word essays that end with a wisecrack. I'd like to see her become more creatively engaged.

G.B. -- Agreed. But if she weren't so focused on all the frustrations involved in finding a partner and simply took the opportunity to commit to someone -- and Big is the obvious candidate -- wouldn't the mere fact of resolution give her the psychic space to do more? This is not a show that has celebrated professional obligation. No one ever stays home at night because they have a deadline or an early morning meeting. Carrie's been driven by her search for someone to spend her life with. What if her energies were no longer consumed by that search? I think she would be professionally and creatively advantaged if she paired off.

R.C. -- But married to Big? Big is a "follow me" kind of guy. And let's not forget that she still refers to him as Big. What is his name? Does he even have one? He's not even a real person to her; she can't possibly marry him.

G.B. -- "Sex and the City" has famously celebrated single life, and in a sense there would be something oddly off message if Carrie sauntered down the aisle tonight in a big Oscar de la Renta dress. On the other hand, how can a show like this be narratively fulfilling without a marriage, or some notion of permanence, at the end?

R.C. -- It's true, marriage is the best convention we have for literally tying up everything with a bow. But that's the whole problem: it doesn't really do that except in stories. In reality, marriage is the end of the television episode and the beginning of the documentary.

G.B. -- Yes, and in reality, there is intense social pressure to get married. Can she withstand that?

R.C. -- Once you get over the social pressure to reproduce, which is fierce -- and I think we agree that Carrie is not a breeder -- the pressure to be part of a couple is much fainter. It's not as though one doesn't get invited to things if one is single, or that people look at you funny in the street. Parental pressure seems to be the real problem. Luckily, Carrie has no parents!

G.B. -- Right. The show never depicts mothers or fathers, brothers or sisters. We're not seeing the kind of pressure a family might apply.

R.C. -- Smart writers.

G.B. -- I'd like to level an old-fashioned argument here: She should marry Big because she loves him. Because in six years she hasn't been able to get him out of her system.

R.C. -- That's the only remotely persuasive argument. But I'm not convinced love is what is really going on here. She's obsessed with him and he with her. I don't think they'd have the foggiest notion of how to make compromises for each other, of how to spend a day together, of what to do if one person wanted to go on a golf vacation and the other didn't.

G.B. -- But I want her to get married in some sense so that she's forced into certain compromises of adulthood.

R.C. -- Oh, so you're punishing her!

G.B. -- No. I want her to mature. She's lived a fairly adolescent life in an apartment where she never seems to have used a coffeepot or turned on the stove. And from the perspective of closure and fantasy, this stage of her life needs to end. How many more blind dates can she go on? How many more times can anyone sit across a table from a stranger and ask them what it was like to grow up in Connecticut?

R.C. -- She could go on a hiatus from all that, of course.

G.B. -- If she doesn't marry Big, I want her to do something incredibly noble. It's just too upsetting to think about her with neither a career nor any kind of domestic ambition. I want her to work for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

R.C. -- In my own fantasy she'd write a novel and grappling with that -- taking her own ambition seriously -- would force her to grow up. And meanwhile, she'd be in a whole new social world where maybe she'd meet someone who makes more sense for her.

G.B. -- Emotionally available novelists -- they're everywhere!

R.C. -- She needs a divorcé -- no, what she really needs is a widower. Anyway, she should hold out for someone better than Big.

G.B. -- So you're the real romantic.

R.C. -- Look, she doesn't speak Napa any more than she speaks French. And as for Big, I just don't believe he can change his spots.

G.B. -- But he can be tired, very tired, of being alone.

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