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Readers familiar with academic "cultural studies" aren't likely to tingle with anticipation when our eyes fall on a scholarly article from the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University in Melbourne. And the title of Joanna L. Di Mattia's essay, "Male Anxiety and the Buddy System in Seinfeld," does nothing to lighten our mood. We expect to be rewarded, at best, with the warm feeling of virtue that follows the performance of a duty requiring heavy lifting.

But it turns out that Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer, whose program ceased production in 1998 but still circles the planet in endless reruns, provide as much fun for academics as for the rest of us. With their lives and their world now sealed off in a 20th-century time capsule, they have become appropriate subjects for cheeky theorizing in the universities.

Di Mattia's essay, for instance, explores a fascinating question with persuasive force. While not for a moment suggesting that Jerry and George be compared to cowboys on Brokeback Mountain, she nevertheless deftly makes the point that as TV characters they are the perfect married couple.

Her essay appears in *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain: Revisiting Television's Greatest Sitcom (Continuum)*, edited by David Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne of Middle Tennessee State University. This isn't the first attempt to provide fodder for Seinfeld studies -- earlier works include William Irwin's 1999 collection, *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book about Everything and Nothing*, and *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld*, written by Thomas S. Hibbs in 2000.

But this latest book notably differs in tone from standard university products. Appreciation and enjoyment, combined with wonder at the cleverness of the program's writers, set the tone. The platoon of scholars writing the essays understand *Seinfeld* as brilliant popular art, not merely a specimen demanding intellectual dissection. This means we can admire their insights without giving up our love for the best television farce we'll ever see.

Di Mattia quickens to the human comedy presented on *Seinfeld* while insisting that its superb jokes mask subject matter of great emotional consequence. She doesn't tolerate for a second the widely accepted (even by the writers) notion that *Seinfeld* is about Nothing. As I've always thought, that idea collapses under even the most cursory scrutiny.

For Di Mattia the program's subject is a very big Something, sex, and in particular a major component of that Something, manhood. In making her case she cites my favourite line in the history of the program, one that occurs when Elaine, in conversation with George, describes another man as handsome. Called upon to share that description, George nervously demurs. For reasons of his own sexual security, he's reluctant to recognize male beauty. Elaine considers his trepidation ridiculous. "Just admitting that another man is handsome doesn't necessarily make you a homosexual," she says. George memorably replies, "It doesn't help."

But if a man is not homosexual then he's probably attracted to, and often allied with, a woman. George may be anxious to prove his manhood, but not that anxious. He avoids getting close to women, and so does Jerry. In fact, as Di Mattia says, much of the program focuses on the fear and anxiety involved in men's encounters with women. In different ways, George and Jerry prove childish and ineffectual as romantic partners.

They have a reason. The companionship they give each other matters, to them, more than anything women could possibly provide. Di Mattia uses the term "homosociality" to describe their relationship: "When it comes down to it, they find the most fulfilment with each

other." George gets engaged at one point but soon discovers that he can never have with Susan what he has with Jerry. Rather than calming his masculine anxiety, Susan heightens it by requiring that he alter his way of life. With Jerry, on the other hand, no unsettling change is necessary; everything is already as it should be. In fact, at no point in the 179 Seinfeld episodes do either George or Jerry behave as unselfconsciously with a woman as they do with each other.

Elsewhere in the book, we can't escape the word "nothing." Fortunately for these thinkers, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote *Being and Nothingness*, making him a handy high-culture reference. Barbara Ching of the University of Memphis writes about "Sartre, the philosopher of nothingness, and Seinfeld, the comedian of nothingness" while David Marc of Syracuse University manages to get both Sartre and Samuel Beckett into his first paragraph. But "nothing" eventually gets buried under the long list of subjects Seinfeld deals with. Race, for instance, was chased by Seinfeld writers into every hidden corner of the sophisticated personality. Probably no one has ever handled with such rich understanding the hideous embarrassment of middle-class liberal whites when dealing with any sensitive racial issue.

While academics analyze Seinfeld on issues of race, Sartrean philosophy or sexual terror, they almost entirely avoid discussing one crucial underlying subject: Seinfeld and religion. That element has always interested me. I've often wondered whether Jerry and his friends live in heaven or hell.

Certainly their milieu often resembles heaven. World crises never intrude, politics is barely mentioned, no one worries about food or lodging, sex is available (if sometimes complicated), and money seldom arises as a serious problem. We never learn, for instance, how Kramer earns a living or if he does, yet he shows no signs of starvation. No significant character gets ill. And in the middle of New York, Jerry doesn't bother to lock the door of his apartment.

For self-esteem and identity, the men depend on their delicate sense of which actions will win the approval of normal, regular guys -- just as they did before they were old enough to vote. Romance, too, has an adolescent quality. When it fails, as it often does, the former lovers are far from heartsick; they just position themselves as the dumper rather than the dumpee. The characters worry about form and appearance, about saying and doing what the gang considers appropriate; they are governed by what used to be called "peer pressure." In the Seinfeldian world a great deal happens but almost none of it much matters. In all these ways it closely resembles high school. That answers the theological question. They're living in hell.

Yadda, Yadda, Yadda

Selected entries from the table of contents of *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain: Revisiting Television's Greatest Sitcom*, edited by David Lavery, with Sara Lewis Dunne, Middle Tennessee State University

I. "GIDDY-UP!": INTRODUCTORY

- Much Ado About Nothing: Some Final Thoughts on Seinfeld, Albert Auster, Fordham University
- Seinfeld: A Show (Almost) About Nothing, David Marc, Syracuse University.

II. "MAYBE THE DINGOES ATE YOUR BABY": GENRE, HUMOR, INTERTEXTUALITY

- Seinfeld as Intertextual Comedy, Michael Dunne, Middle Tennessee State University.
- They Laughed Unhappily Ever After: Seinfeld, Situation Comedy, and the Encounter with Nothingness, Barbara Ching, University of Memphis.
- Jane Austen, Meet Jerry Seinfeld, Dennis Hall, University of Louisville.
- Genre Expectation and Narrative Innovation in Seinfeld, Amy McWilliams, Texas A&M.

III. "IF I LIKE THEIR RACE, HOW CAN THAT BE RACIST?": GENDER, GENERATIONS AND ETHNICITY

- Male Anxiety and the Buddy System in Seinfeld, Joanna L. Di Mattia, Monash University.
- "Are they having babies just so people will visit them?": Parents and Children on Seinfeld, Matthew Bond.
- Seinfeld is a Jewish Sitcom, Isn't It: Ethnicity and Assimilation on 1990s American Television, Jon Stratton, Curtin University of Technology.

IV. "IT IS SO SAD, ALL YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF HIGH CULTURE COMES FROM BUGS BUNNY CARTOONS": CULTURAL, POP CULTURAL, AND MEDIA MATTERS

- Seinfeld: Purity, Danger, and Food Codes on Seinfeld, Sara Lewis Dunne, Middle Tennessee State University.
- "It'll Always Be Burma to Me": J. Peterman on Seinfeld, Eleanor Hersey, Fresno Pacific University.
- Getting the Joke: Seinfeld from a European Perspective, Elke van Cassel, Radboud University Nijmegen.
- From Must-See TV to Counter Programming: Seinfeld and Syndication, Michael Epstein, Southwestern University College of Law, Mark C. Rogers, Walsh University, and Jimmie L. Reeves, Texas Tech University.

V. AFTERWORD

- Re-Reading Seinfeld after *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David Lavery, Middle Tennessee State University, and Marc Leverette, Colorado State University.

VI. "GET OUT!": BACK PAGES

- Betty Lee: Seinfeld Lexicon
- Seinfeld Episode (and Situation) Guide (by David Lavery).

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