



Lara Zarum—*television*

Rough bitches: Jenji Kohan's world of women

Jenji Kohan, the creator of the new Netflix original series *Orange Is the New Black*, has finally figured out a way to get a bunch of batshit-crazy bitches on a TV show: Send them to prison. The show, based on a 2011 memoir by Piper Kerman about her 13-month stint at a minimum-security prison for carrying drug money, brings to the forefront characters—low-income minorities, transgendered women, and a whole lotta lesbians—who are usually sidelined on mainstream TV, or else seen only in brash reality shows that magnify one trait and ignore everything else.

Kohan, who also created the Showtime program *Weeds*, about a suburban California mom-turned-drug dealer, has long shown an interest in female characters whose behavior veers sharply away from what's traditionally accepted from women on TV. Kohan's pre-*Weeds* body of work makes it clear that the writer/producer was trying to break female television characters out of their "nice girl" mould at a time when many of the shows that bothered to feature women in lead roles at all made it clear that their primary concern should be finding a man and settling down.

For "bad girls" on TV, unlike the male anti-heroes we alternately valorize and fear (but rarely pity), the typical endpoint is punishment. And for a female character, being "bad" is often as benign as enjoying sex and maybe going a little too heavy on the booze. In one episode of *Sex and the City*'s sixth season, Lexi, an aging party girl who makes a drunken fool of herself at a Manhattan soirée, opens the window in a high-rise apartment building to have a smoke and falls to her death. Carrie is so troubled that she abandons her long-term career and tragic single life in New York to move to Paris with her artist boyfriend. *Sex and the City* may have been predicated on a pro-single ladies premise, but the show operated on the assumption that you can have all the fun you want as long as you eventually (preferably by your mid-30s) settle down with a man who can take care of you. Otherwise, to quote that episode's title, *splat*.

The recent publication of *Difficult Men*, Brett Martin's exploration of the male anti-hero character that has dominated airwaves for the past decade or so, has left many critics questioning whether a TV show built around a bad boy has any new ground left to cover. The solution to this glut of misbehaving dudes doesn't seem to be as simple as replacing the anti-hero with an anti-heroine. ABC's *Red Widow*, which premiered in March, tried to market itself that way—the show, which starred Radha Mitchell as a suburban mom who has to finish her husband's dirty work after he's assassinated by the mob, was cancelled after one season.

Kohan has described *Orange*'s lead character as a "gateway drug"—she wouldn't have been able to sell a series about a group of largely non-white (and non-heterosexual) women at a correctional facility without having the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Piper (Taylor Schilling) as its lead. But the show is really an ensemble piece. Each episode examines a different jailbird, including a transgendered woman who used to be a male firefighter, a lesbian junkie, and a curvy Latina whose abusive mother is in the same prison.

Typically, these women would be sidelined because of the assumption that they're a lost cause. But on this show, they're the meat and potatoes, not the side salad. *Orange* is in a unique position to dispense with the moralizing aspect of so many stories about women. The trope of punishing the mean girl—think of the many cruelties put upon Celia Hodes, the bitchy blonde housewife played by Elizabeth Perkins on *Weeds*—isn't very handy when every female character is behind bars.

Plus, the setting makes for some killer cat fights. Watching these women go at each other is highly entertaining. They threaten and yell, fashion crude weapons, crudely hit on each other, pee on each other's floors, stick used tampons in a sandwich and serve it up as punishment. Male characters have gotten away with such stunts for some time: *Oz*, the HBO drama set in a maximum-security men's prison, established a new precedent for violent, twisted behaviour on TV 16 years ago. But *Orange* affords its female characters dignity despite their messiness and their mistakes—their stories don't end when they fall out a window or get caught and locked away. By setting her show behind bars, Kohan has let that tired narrative out of its cage, following women to a place TV rarely dares to go. ■

ALSO
WRITTEN
BY JENJI
KOHAN:

Sex and the City S01E05
"The Power of Female Sex" 1998

Carrie sleeps with a wealthy architect who inexplicably leaves her an envelope stuffed with cash the next morning; meanwhile, Charlotte surprises herself when she agrees to sit for a painting in an artist's latest series: abstract portraits of vaginas.

LINER NOTES

Barts and craft

David Silverman has been a guiding light for *The Simpsons* since squigglier versions of Homer, Marge, and the kids first appeared in shorts that the animator helped make for *The Tracey Ullman Show* in the late '80s. To prep for his keynote address at the Toronto Animation Arts Festival International, we asked Silverman to talk about the evolution of one of our hardest comedy institutions through the lens of a suitably iconic image in a recent episode from the show's 24th (!) season. BY JASON ANDERSON



DAVID SAYS: "Some of the jokes in this episode ['A Tree Grows in Springfield,' which begins with Homer winning, then breaking his new 'Mapple' tablet] are as lazy as can be. We had 'Steve Bobs' instead of 'Steve Jobs' and 'MyPad' instead of 'iPad.' It's a colossal wink to the audience: 'We're making fun of Steve Jobs—geddit?' The joke is that we're doing the laziest kind of parody."

1. "The vividness of the colour palette is something you can trace back to the *Tracey Ullman* days. The colour stylist, Georgie Peluse, looked at the sketches and said, 'Bart and Lisa and Maggie don't have hairlines—what are we going to do? I'm not going to add a hairline, so I'll make the Simpsons yellow.' She didn't want to ruin the purity of the original design, and you can buy yellow as a hair color and a skin color. This was in the late '80s, when vibrant colors were in, and she was very big on that: purple tree trunks and Marge having blue hair and the walls being pink and the carpet being green. She didn't continue on the show after the first season, but she set the stage in a way."

2. "Wes Archer and I were the two guys directing [the shorts] on *The Tracey Ullman Show*, and we had very cinematic taste. We liked interesting angles and would try weird shots and transitions. There's flat space and deep space. Flat space is one-point perspective, with flat walls, a very proscenium-like stage, and no perspective. Deep space has a two- or three-point perspective, with a very

deep look, so we'd have a low-angle shot looking at Homer in the foreground, Bart deep in the distance, and a receding hallway."

3. "Other deaths on the show seem to be more Wile E. Coyote-ish, but Ned has been more affected. [He became a widower when wife Maude Flanders was killed in a season-11 accident involving Homer and a T-shirt cannon.] We felt, 'Oh, he's suffered long enough,' so now he's married to Ms. Krabappel. It's never a tough decision to kill off a character per se—it's more like, 'Let's try it and see what happens.' Sometimes we'll do crazy things, like with Skinner and Principal Tamzarian [i.e., the much-loathed season-nine twist when Principal Skinner was revealed to have gone missing in Vietnam and have been replaced by an imposter]. Most writers are mad about that episode so they mostly ignore it—it's like it never happened!"

4. "One point of departure for *The Simpsons* was '50s sitcoms like *Father Knows Best*. We were riffing on the era that people like Matt [Groening] and I grew up in. There are things in it that don't exist anywhere any more. For instance, Krusty the Clown is based on the idea of having local kids shows on TV—that's a '50s or '60s concept that started disappearing in the '70s. I knew a local guy in the Washington, D.C. area—he was this sea captain named Cap'n Tugg and he played *Popeye* cartoons. Matt was thinking about a clown in his area of Portland, Oregon named Rusty Nail, which is a hilarious name. Dan



Castellaneta based his voice on the Chicago version of Bozo the Clown. There are aspects of the show that are retro, and yet everybody buys it."

5. "The merchandising and press in the first season were about Bart, but if you really looked at the shows, at least half were about Homer. I think it's more people's perception that the show's emphasis shifted onto Homer. Remember, Homer is easier to write for. There are only so many times you can do stories about the kind of bad-boy, ain't-I-cute mean little kid that Bart really is. And Bart's universe is not as broad as Homer's universe because he's not an adult. So there's never really a conscious choice about what direction the show is taking [in terms of which Simpson to emphasize]. The other thing is that Dan Castellaneta is hilarious [as Homer]. Not to take away from Nancy Cartwright or anybody else, but Dan has so many tools in his toolbox. He makes mediocre lines great and great lines fantastic." ■

i David Silverman delivers the keynote address at the Toronto Animation Arts Festival International on July 26. Corus Quay, 25 Dockside Dr., 647-785-8740, info@taafi.com.