

## IN THEIR PRIME

*Women in Nighttime Drama*

◆ Karen Lindsey

I love television. I don't like going to the movies. They give me headaches, and they make a demand of me that I resent: their largeness, and the darkness that surrounds the screen—a quality many film fans love—annoys me. Why should I be forced to be wholly engaged with the screen?

TV, on the other hand, has to earn my wholehearted attention. If I want—if the show gives me the motivation—I can shut everything else out of my mind, just as I could at a movie theater. If I don't want that much focus, I can give it most of my attention, or half of my attention, or a fraction of my attention. I can turn it off if I'm bored, and not lose a penny. If I'm watching with other people, I don't have to put up with a dull film or be the spoilsport who ruins everyone's fun—I can just go into another room and read a book. If I want to watch a movie, I watch it on TV.

But mostly, I don't want to watch movies. I love the forms of television, as well as its convenience. Series television is satisfying in a way no one-shot story can be. I don't get attached to these people, only to be deserted when the show is done, or at best hope I'll meet them again in a few years in a sequel. I know I'm leaving them only for a week and that I'll have them in my life for at least a year, and often several years. It's cozy, curling up on my couch and inviting these friends to join me on a regular

basis, to watch them evolve over time, to meet their new friends and say goodbye to the characters that are leaving—sad, perhaps, at the individual loss, but secure in the knowledge that I still have the rest of my fictional community.

At the same time, I'm a leftist, an antiracist, and above all a feminist. Which means that there aren't all that many fictional communities I can feel at home with. For someone with my values, the "vast wasteland" that Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chair Newton Minow complained of half a century ago remains a disturbing reality.

Oh, things have gotten better over the years. There are more African-American, Asian American, and Hispanic American characters than there used to be. Once in a while, there's even an intelligent Native American character. And there are more female characters with careers and families, with sex lives, with at least the trappings of feminist lives. Most of the ensemble shows—*Law & Order*, *The Practice*, *ER*, etc.—have black characters and female professionals, even if the real authority, like that of the real world, is uncritically in the hands of men. And there are some terrific female characters in these shows: Ellenor, played by the comfortably chunky Camryn Mannheim in the law firm of *The Practice*, S. Epatha Merkerson's no-nonsense police captain in *Law & Order*. (Captain Van Buren is also African American, in a predominantly white cast.)

But since the 1980s gave us the gritty, compassionate, role-challenging police-women of *Cagney and Lacey*, I had been longing in vain for a drama series that combined strong women, antiracism, class awareness, good writing, and good acting. And the gods answered my prayers at the turn of the century, with five shows that are almost all I could want.

Two of these shows are on the broadcast network CBS, and the three others are on the Lifetime ("television for women") cable channel.

## Judging Amy ♦

*Judging Amy* premiered on CBS in the 1999 fall season. Its heroine is a lawyer in her 30s, recently appointed judge, who has left a promising career in New York and moved back with her daughter to the family home in Hartford, Connecticut. She is trying to pull her life together in the wake of a shattering divorce, and now lives with her widowed mother, Maxine. Amy is an excellent character, but Maxine is a splendid one. When women over 50 appear on television, rarely enough, they tend to be loveable granny types, or, worse, loveably feisty. Maxine is neither. Played by one of America's best actors, Tyne Daly, Maxine is an unpretentiously vital woman in her 60s who is a full-time and passionate social worker. She has already raised her kids, and, although willing to help her daughter with a bit of baby-sitting when it's needed, has no time to be a loveable old granny. Like her daughter, she's busy with a job whose limits she struggles with, and unlike her daughter, she is ready to bend rules to help a desperate client, creating occasional illuminating conflict between the women.

As a newly appointed judge, Amy is assigned to the juvenile court, the lowest rung of the ladder. She accepts this grudgingly, till she can get her promotion to the more prestigious criminal law court. But as she does this work, she sees how important these cases are to ordinary people who are dealing with issues of child custody, abuse, and other life-wrenching situations. When, midway through the first season, she is offered the prize of criminal law, she turns it down to remain where she is.

Her work often parallels, and sometimes clashes with, Maxine's. Maxine is dedicated to caring for her clients, despite an overload of work. She struggles when her concern for protecting women and children clashes with her determination not to impose American values on third-world people (as in an episode in which an

Arab teenager has been clearly stabbed by someone in her family, and denies it. Maxine refuses to simply take the girl from her family, and instead painstakingly investigates to learn what has happened and why.). Maxine meets an attractive man and has an affair with him—a real affair, in bed, not chaste hand-holding between two cute codgers, which is what we usually get on those rare occasions when nighttime TV allows older characters any romance at all.

Both women's jobs expose them—and thus us—to poverty, racism, drug addiction, and profound family suffering. We see racism in every stratum of society. Amy's legal assistant, Bruce, is a handsome black man who in the beginning strenuously avoids anything like a friendship with her because he knows, and she discovers, that a friendship will be perceived as sexual and that the perception can destroy both their careers. They have grown into a friendship during the show's three seasons, and it too is one of the glories of this program. In one second-season series of episodes, their very camaraderie has the effect Bruce feared, and they are, quite falsely, accused and penalized for improper conduct in the courthouse. In the process, Amy has to deal with her own unexplored racism, as she earnestly and disastrously makes unilateral decisions for herself and Bruce about fighting the injustice of it. In the 2000-2001 season, we saw much more of Bruce's own life, including his struggles as a single father, his complicated relationship with his family, and his strong religious faith.

Interestingly, the star, Amy Brenneman, is also one of its executive producers, and the show is based on Brenneman's own mother, a superior court judge in juvenile matters.<sup>1</sup> Since Brenneman is also one of the show's executive producers, this may account for some of its believability.

Over its two seasons, the show has taken on many important social and political issues, giving them the complexity they deserve. When Maxine takes on the case of a 5-year-old rape victim, the obvious culprit is her new stepfather. But the girl (using

dolls provided by psychologists since she's too traumatized to speak) indicates instead that it's her older brother. Realizing that the adolescent boy himself has been sexually abused, Maxine again suspects the stepfather—then realizes, to her horror, that it's the children's mother.

In another episode, Amy is able to find a legal way to allow lesbian parents to keep their daughter, in spite of the lack of same-sex partnership laws in Connecticut. She is committed to the law, more than some of us (and her mother) might like, but the glow on her face when she realizes that she can honor both the law and her sympathies is superb. (The women had both wanted biological involvement with their child, and so one conceived the child and the embryo was implanted in the other. Amy rules that this then is not a case of same-sex partnerships, but of two biological parents.)

A later episode takes on a more controversial and daring gender issue. Inspired, perhaps, by the 1997 French film *Ma Vie en Rose*, the plot focuses on the expulsion from school of an 8-year-old boy who dresses as a girl. The mockery and hostility of the children, says the principal, constantly disrupts the school. The father testifies, awkwardly and painfully. The boy has wanted to be a girl since he was 3; they've been to therapists and counselors, they've harassed him themselves, and finally, seeing his misery, have let him have his way. They don't like it; they don't understand it, but, as the father says, tearfully and defiantly, "he's smiling again." Amy questions the child himself; very lucidly, he explains that he doesn't like being a boy and never has, but now "I'm a girl!" And so he is—pretty, sweet, classically feminine. Amy goes, as his parents have, from disbelief (can a child know from the age of 3 that he doesn't like his gender?) to acceptance. For the sake of the school and "Sasha's" education, she makes a deal with him. He will "pretend" to be a boy in school, and be what he really is at home. In one astounding sentence, she turns the traditional concepts on their heads. Whatever Sasha's genitals or

chromosomes may say, she's a girl—a girl who must pretend, for part of the day, to be something else because of society's narrow restrictions. This is important stuff—the sort of thing we expect to see on an occasional PBS documentary, perhaps, but not on a prime-time network drama.

Equally important in *Judging Amy* are the portrayals of domestic life. Too often dramas about “strong women” confine their plots to the workplace, and occasionally the romantic arena. Domesticity becomes relegated to sitcoms: like traditional women, domesticity is implicitly seen as necessary but uninteresting. But life plays out in several arenas, and the lives of women, and men, at home are as important and dramatic as they are at work. *Judging Amy* honors that reality.

Amy and Maxine support each other, and they clash—both personally and professionally. Both struggle with the boundaries of their relationship: how much should a mother interfere with an adult child's life, especially when they're living under the same roof? There is a wonderful, complex texture in the relationship of these two women and, to a lesser degree, in both their relationships to Amy's two brothers. Even Amy's motherhood is placed firmly in context. When her daughter, Lauren, complains in one episode that Amy's job keeps them from having as much time together as one of her friend's has with her stay-at-home mom, Amy starts to recite a clearly familiar litany of reasons why it's best for Lauren that Amy works. Then she stops, and adds that it's also better for Amy herself—she loves her work, she helps people and helps herself, and that this too is important.

And yes, Amy longs for romance. She has a few bad near relationships, and finds herself attracted her daughter's much younger karate teacher. Amy likes this guy, and loves sex with him, but she's not in love and knows it. She knows that that gap between them is more than just age: he's intelligent and thoughtful, but Amy confesses to her brother, “he has an empty bookcase in his apartment. How can anyone be an adult and

have an empty bookcase?” And Amy allows this relationship to be what it is—honest, tender, sexy, and temporary.

## ♦ Family Law

A similar, and even more realistic show is CBS's *Family Law*. Its heroine, Lynn, is a suddenly abandoned lawyer whose philandering husband has also been her law-firm partner. When he leaves the marriage, he takes the firm and all its clients with him. She starts over again, building a new firm with a team of partners and associates with widely disparate lifestyles and values. Danny, a friend who worked with her old firm, is a younger woman—cynical, emotional, tough, and sometimes confused. Randi is an elegant, middle-aged lawyer of conservative politics and a dramatic background: she got her law degree in prison while serving several years for the murder of her abusive husband. Though these three want to specialize in cases they believe in, Lynn realizes that such cases won't pay the bills, and she hires Rex, a womanizing, sleazy, corrupt lawyer who will bring in rich clients. In the second season, the show brought on sitcom star Tony Danza as the newest partner, and at first glance, I wondered if this was meant to dilute the show's feminist, progressive bent with a heftier dose of testosterone. But Danza's character soon reassured me. Joe may be macho, but he's also a Communist, and his only concern is fighting against the establishment (including any law firm he works with) and for the rights of his working-class and poor constituents. Throughout many episodes, he stubbornly insists on taking too many pro bono cases, alarming the rest of the firm and infuriating Rex. His clashes with judges come close to losing him clients, and he respects the law only to the extent that he can use it to thwart the system he abhors.

Equally challenging a character is Randi, the ex-convict (played by Dixie Carter).

She's in her 50s, and a fascinating contrast to Tyne Daly's Maxine in *Judging Amy*: slim, stylish, elegant, and ladylike. But like Maxine, she's tough—with the “steel magnolia” touch that Carter does so well.

There are moments of dark comedy, and more of the painful realism of no-win cases, compromises that are sometimes more painful for the partners than defeat. Here again, issues of age, class, race, are addressed, and rarely simplistically. In a first-season episode, parents of a mentally retarded child sue the doctor who performed amniocentesis and told them, knowing otherwise, that the child would be fine, because he opposed abortion. Against their wishes, Lynn does the only thing that will win her case: she puts the child on the stand. They win, but the mother confronts Lynn, accusing her of doing what the doctor had done, of taking away her right to make her own decisions. We're not left with an easy answer, or indeed any answer, but only with a hard, excruciating question.

One second-season episode was so disturbing the network held back on rerunning it during its scheduled airing in mid-summer because Procter & Gamble threatened to withdraw its sponsorship. (It ran in early September with other sponsors.) The issue was gun control—controversial, indeed, but it's been dealt with before on network television, without sponsorship withdrawal. But then, TV tends to want good guys and bad guys, and this show refused to deliver. A child has been shot, and his 8-year-old brother admits to the killing. Lynn is able to save the boy from criminal conviction. Then the children's father, recently divorced from his wife, sues for custody. Lynn's client, the children's mother, has turned her gun over to the police, but bought another one.

Lynn is horrified, even after her friend explains. She bought the gun soon after the divorce, when a man broke into the house and raped her, vowing to kill the children if she made any effort to stop him. Even with one child dead, she fears her other son's safety if she doesn't have a gun.

Assuming that everyone in the office shares her position on gun control, Lynn brings it to a staff meeting, only to have Rex go to his office and return defiantly with the gun he keeps in his desk. The staff's emotional debate about the case reinforces the complexity of the issue. Lynn's argument for her client, passionately delivered and against all her deepest beliefs, is electrifying. She wins her case.

In the episode's last scene we see Lynn lock up her house, nervously looking for prowlers as she does so. The camera switches to Rex, turning in his gun to the police and walking away with an agonized face. There's no right or wrong offered us, only pain and hard decisions in a hard world. While this might be less satisfying than a pro-gun-control conclusion, it demands of us that we think through the difficulties of the issue rather than handing us an emotionally easy answer.

My major complaint about *Family Law* had been the fact that all its women were beautiful in a standard American way, in spite of their age range. The 2001 season has brought a startling and significant exception to that. To replace the character of Danni in the wake of actor Julie Warner's departure, two new female lawyers were introduced in the season's first episode. One is a thirtyish, pretty Irish woman. The other is a pretty, thirtyish dwarf. As Lynn and Rex stare in surprise, and Rex only barely smothers a smirk, Emily pushes past the stammering secretary, sits down, shoots out her impressive qualifications, and calmly threatens to sue them for discrimination if they don't hire her. I had a moment of nervousness watching the episode: was this going to be a one-shot display of liberalism? But as the firm discusses Emily's application, Randi points out that Emily has them all running scared. The rest of the season to date has seen her as a strong, very active member of the law firm.

On November 12, 2001, *Family Law* aired what is probably its most important episode ever. Unusually, the show confined

itself to one storyline—a very controversial one, in which the firm takes on the case of an Arab American held by the federal government on suspicion of passing classified information to terrorists. There is enough evidence to make it possible, but nowhere near enough to make him certain. Yet he is held without bail, without visitors, forbidden to receive drawings from his young son, for fear they are really messages from terrorists. He is not allowed to see his court-appointed lawyer, who seems willing to accept this.

Lynn, contacted by the suspect's wife, is not willing to accept it, and she and Joe take on the case. Their decision causes a furor at the firm, and the meeting of the partners, in spite of Lynn's effort to keep the discussion focused on the case itself, becomes an outpouring of emotions. Those who want to take the case have slightly different reasons. Lynn is concerned with the violation a prisoner's of civil rights. Emily identifies with anyone discriminated against for the way they look. Joe agrees with both, but also has a larger political concern. He blames the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in part on U.S. policy over the years. Of course Arab countries are angry, he yells. The sanctions on Iraq alone, he says, have left thousands of people starving and dying. This latter is particularly impressive, because it's a point of the view the network news rarely if ever mentions. Ironically, CBS's fiction here offers more fact than its newscasts do.

But others are opposed, just as vehemently. A refrain throughout the program—as indeed throughout America—is echoed: “Things are different since September 11.” Brandi's granddaughter had to leave her kindergarten early because someone found a box with something strange in it. She and the others want Americans at peace again, even if it means risking the imprisonment of innocent people. The people in the hijacked planes and the attacked buildings, she says, were also innocent.

As the case moves on, we see the prosecuting attorney, government representatives, and others justify the draconian measures taken against the suspect. We also see the ugly attacks on Arab Americans and even those who support them: as one of the lawyers comes out of the suspect's home, a man beats her up for supporting “turban heads.” But as always, we are left with no firm conclusion—only one of TV's better explorations of the complexity September 11th has thrown at us.

### *The Lifetime* ◆ *Cable Channel*

Like CBS, at least one cable channel seems committed to depicting strong women and progressive political concerns. *Family Law* and *Judging Amy* bear a strong resemblance to the recent lineup of Lifetime's original prime-time dramas, run on Sunday nights from 8 through 11 p.m. Lifetime has had an interesting evolution from its beginnings in 1984, when it tried to attract a female viewership with a “thematically confused lineup” of cooking shows, medical-information shows, exercise workout programs, and reruns of old network programs.<sup>2</sup> Originally the targeted audience was less feminist than traditional—“upscale, female homemakers.”<sup>3</sup> Evening programming focused on reruns of shows women would watch with their husbands, such as *Spenser: For Hire*, *L.A. Law*, and, significantly, the controversially 1980s feminist hit *Cagney and Lacey*. There were a few original series, but they faded out in a few years.

In 1998, Lifetime once again ventured into an original series with *Any Day Now*, the story of two women, one black and one white, in Alabama. Best friends as children, then separated, they come across each other as adults and become again best friends. As the adults deal with issues of the turn of this century, we get flashbacks to their

childhood days in the late 1960s, fighting a racism far more overt than the subtle forms they face in the present. The show has been very successful, partly because of the wonderful acting of stars Lorraine Toussaint and Annie Potts. Toussaint's Rene is a lawyer, following in the footsteps of her adored father, a civil rights judge. Her focus, like that of the women in *Family Law*, is on fighting discrimination, and, like those lawyers, she sometimes has to deal with wealthier clients to keep the firm going. Potts's character, Mary Elizabeth, is a housewife and aspiring writer, whose commitment to fighting racism has remained staunch, and over several moving episodes, has threatened her marriage. The flashbacks to the past are as much a part of the show as the present, and do a fairly good job of showing both the progress and the failures of four decades in which white America has largely refused to deal with its continuing racism. The friendship of the women remains central, and crucial.

In 2000, Lifetime added another Sunday night series, *Strong Medicine*, a harder-hitting and wider-ranging show that, like *Family Law*, adds class to its list of concerns. Its executive producer is Whoopi Goldberg, who got the idea for the show during the birth of her grandchild.<sup>4</sup> Goldberg has proven as fine a producer as she is an actor and comedian. In the first episode, white, upscale, Harvard educated Dr. Dana Stowe is working to keep her new women's health center at the prestigious Rittenhouse Hospital. Dr. Luisa Delgado runs an inner-city clinic for women, with a tiny staff and even tinier budget—and the clinic is about to be closed down because they can't pay their bills. The women clash on first meeting, mirroring some of the real-life clashes between career-oriented feminists and social-justice-oriented feminists. But they are forced to work together when the funding both need will be supplied only if the clinic merges into the hospital. No one is happy with the compromise: Lu fears her poor clients won't be able to get to

Rittenhouse, which is in an upper-middle-class neighborhood far away from the old clinic. Dana and the hospital's (male, of course) chief of staff are dismayed at the visible presence of drug addicts, homeless people, and the badly dressed poor—as well as Lu's receptionist, a tough black ex-stripper, and her New Age-y male nurse-midwife.

The hostility between Lu and Dana, once established, recedes, emerging only when they clash professionally. They have a sometimes affectionate, though grudging, respect for each other that verges on friendship. But the clashes are frequent, since class struggle is always an underpinning of the show. In fact, I've never seen television deal with class so well, and so consistently. *Family Law* has Joe, the Communist, who fights for the poor. But Lu, a Latina who grew up in the neighborhood where she built her clinic, is much more intimately connected to poverty. Every episode begins with a meeting in her "chat room," in which low-income women have an hour's discussion of health issues with Lu or one of the staff. The contrast between rich and poor, working class and professional class is always visible, in the very setting of the program. Often, the episodes deal directly with the effects of class—as when Lu discovers that one of her patients, a 17-year-old, has been persuaded by Dana to become an egg donor for Dana's childless, well-to-do patients. For Dana, it's a win-win situation: the girl will get money for college and the couple will get their child. For Lu, it's a rip-off of a poor girl's future fertility in the service of the wealthy. "What does Our Lady of the High Heels want with one of my patients?" she mumbles when she sees the girl going into Dana's office. In another episode, a patient of Lu's dies of breast cancer, having been previously misdiagnosed by doctors uninterested in the symptoms of poor black patients.

The relationship between Lu and Dana remains intriguing: they like each other, finally, and support each other, since both are concerned with women. But the barrier of class is always present, and in each

episode we are, at the very least, presented with one story that reflects Lu's world and one that reflects Dana's. And when their worlds come together—as in the episode in which Terri Garr plays a middle-class woman in a wheelchair who is dying of cervical cancer because doctors have refused to give her pap smears, assuming that a disabled woman isn't sexually active and not wanting to take the extra time to get her on an examining table—it's especially powerful.

The most recent of the Lifetime drama series, debuting in 2000, is *The Division*. This is also the closest to a contemporary *Cagney and Lacey*—a standard cop drama with a major twist. Here the captain of the San Francisco Police Department's Central Station is a woman. Captain McCafferty, played by Bonnie Bedelia, is a "seasoned, politically savvy career officer who survived the early days when women on the police force were few and unwanted."<sup>5</sup> She is tough and laconic and tries to promote the solidarity among her female officers that she had no access to in her own early days.

These women are diverse in class and ethnicity. Jinni comes from a tough, white working-class family, all of whom, including herself, have alcohol problems. Angela is the black daughter of a general in the army, highly ambitious. Magdalena comes from a poor Latina family and is a single mother, struggling to raise her son and worried that her job will deprive him of his mother. Her toughness matches Jinni's, and they are close personal friends as well as, eventually, partners. C. D. is white and, like Angela, middle class; they have been partners and have grown into friendship. It's a good, suspenseful cop show, and the evolving relationships among the women doing work that forces them to see the most brutal aspects of human behavior are compelling.

How stable these shows are remains to be seen. The 2001 season saw three woman-centered new programs that might threaten them. The quality of the shows might be gauged by the cover of *TV Guide's* fall-preview issue: each is about one woman, not a community of women,

and each woman is young and sexy. On the cover, they're dressed alike, in clingy tank tops and low-hanging jeans, staring provocatively at the camera: the caption reads: "Tough Women Rule, As If You Wanted It Any Other Way." *Crossing Jordan* is a crime show about a State Coroner's medical examiner who tries to solve the murders of the cadavers she dissects. NBC has shrewdly placed it opposite *Family Law*. The first episode was good enough—Quincy as a sexy young woman—but certainly showed no hint of the social conscience that drives its rival. ABC's *Philly* is clearly meant to draw viewers away from *Judging Amy*—it's on at the same time and is about a tough (and sexy and young) DA. Finally, Lifetime's *The Division* faces competition from *Alias*, in which a gorgeous grad student is also a CIA agent. It's another sexy show—a mildly entertaining cross between *Ally McBeal* and *Mission Impossible*.

I like TV fluff, in its place. But I also like series dramas that bring, along with the comforting continuity that is one of the form's joys, reminders of the less entertaining realities that are part of our culture and indeed of human life. We get enough fluff on TV, and certainly enough evasion, even in the news. These five series prove that the medium can provide both entertainment and social responsibility.

## ◆ Notes

1. From CBS's press packet for *Judging Amy*.
2. Byars, J., and E. R. Meehan, "Once in a Lifetime: Constructing 'The Working Woman' Through Cable Narrowcasting," *Camera Obscura*, Vols. 33-34, Nos. 1-2, 1994-1995.
3. Ibid.
4. From Lifetime's press packet for *Strong Medicine*.
5. From Lifetime's press packet for *The Division*.