

## Articles

### "A Role Model We Can Live Without"

Kathleen J. Wu

Texas Lawyer

September 14, 1998

#### Why Young Women Lawyers Should Find Something Better Than "Ally McBeal" to Watch on Monday Nights

It's bound to happen someday soon: A waifish job applicant, in a micro-miniskirt, will come to me for a job, confessing how insecure she is and how convoluted her personal life is. Maybe she'll throw a tantrum or, better yet, fall down when an attractive man enters the room.

And I'll have "Ally McBeal" to thank for it.

I know I'm setting myself up for Dan Quayle-like criticism when I say this, but "Ally McBeal" - the highly rated Fox television show about a 20-something lawyer and her colleagues at a small Boston law firm - isn't the sort of program the world needs these days. And when I say "world," I mostly mean "women."

I'm all for well-written shows with interesting characters, which "McBeal" is. The plots are consistently interesting, the ensemble cast more than pulls its weight, and the dialogue, if not always believable, is quite clever.

But does the main character have to be such a rotten role model for women, women lawyers and the little girls who aspire to be them?

For those of you who have better ways to spend your Monday nights, "McBeal" is one of the Fox network's biggest hits. The lead character is a Harvard-educated lawyer whose personal travails almost always find their way into the office, usually in the form of a closing statement in a trial that conveniently mirrors her own problems.

I hadn't even watched the show until it became the water cooler buzz *du jour*. When I finally saw it, I couldn't help but be disturbed by the fact that so many young women lawyers saw themselves in it. It's disturbing on two levels: Is this ditzzy, fragile, mercurial lawyer, whose skirts have never been within shooting distance of her knees, the kind of professional they're aspiring to be? Or do they really see themselves this way?

I don't know which is more alarming.

Let's not even touch on the more unrealistic (though excusable under dramatic license) aspects of the show: the unisex bathroom (yeah, right), the nightly forays by the entire office staff to a bar where "everybody knows their name," the fact that Ally and her roommate, an assistant district attorney, have opposed each other in court on at least one occasion. We'll just leave those alone.

#### Bubble-Headed v. Stoned-Faced

Let's focus instead on the daftness of the lead character, who has inexplicably turned into an endearing symbol for all single professional women.

I realize when you start attacking a television show for not portraying people as we would like them to be that you're opening yourself up to criticism. It's *television*, for gosh sakes. Lighten up. Right? But let's not kid ourselves. Our children learn quite a bit from this ubiquitous medium. And if little girls, or even young women looking to find their professional "image" seek to emulate a woman who emanates anything but confidence, what are we teaching them?

We're teaching them that having neat outfits is really, really important; that whenever you find yourself flailing, run to a man, preferably your married ex-boyfriend who works with you and over whom you still pine; that it's OK to spend the vast majority of your workday obsessing over your personal life; that if you aren't married or otherwise romantically entangled, you're a failure; and that if you throw a tantrum, your nemesis will find you cute and "spunky," acquiesce to your client's

## Articles

demands and maybe even ask you out on a date.

That's not to say that women don't obsess over their personal lives, or, as McBeal does, have moments of self-doubt and anxiety. We sometimes do. So do men. But does her emotional and physical fragility have to be the hallmark of her character?

McBeal doesn't have to be a humorless automaton to be a decent role model for women. Just the opposite. Real people have flaws, even funny flaws that can drive an interesting plot. It's when they overcome those flaws that they turn into role models. Not when they wear them like sandwich boards into a courtroom.

McBeal represents the regrettable trend toward "Giggle TV," television's increasing tendency to write lead female characters who are unthreatening bubble-heads for whom career (even one in the legal profession) is an afterthought. Either that, or the women are written as stone-faced creatures whose characters exist solely for their jobs, as in "The X-Files" or "Law & Order."

Is it too much to ask that television give our daughters (and our future colleagues) at least one woman worth emulating?

Originally appeared in **TEXAS LAWYER**

*Kathleen J. Wu is a commercial real estate lawyer and managing partner of the Dallas office of Houston's Andrews & Kurth. Her e-mail address is [kathleenwu@akllp.com](mailto:kathleenwu@akllp.com). The views represented here are her own and do not represent those of the firm.*

**Copyright 1998, Texas Lawyer. All rights reserved.**