

what girls will put up with for friendship—pursuing it with a passion usually ascribed only to romantic relationships—can lead to a greater understanding of the crucial role that female friendships play in girls' lives, important as any romance. And tween/teen media featuring nonmean does thrive: The protagonists of popular TV shows like *Lizzie McGuire* and *So Raven* value close female friends, and then there's that thriving-aught-to-video empire created by Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. A sold last summer at the tween chain Rave Girl made an even bolder ent: Emblazoned with "Hilary's Best Friend" (referring to Hilary it's a powerful counterpoint to those "Mrs. Kutcher" and "Mrs. T" that also made the rounds last year. Sure, there must be a lot of titillation to be Hilary's best friend, but it would be a joy comparable (or superior) to wedding a pop idol.

ti-mean-girls rhetoric sounds feminist because it's nominally about saving girls; but, once filtered through popular media, it doesn't ask to explore their anger or aggression, nor does it address why they're said to be "nice"—and, more important, how being nice doesn't allow room for being smart, strong, capable, independent, or adventurous. What could've been a teen feminist movement, touching on some great unrecognized truths about life as a girl, ultimately became a more than a tired recapitulation of the good girl/bad girl game, and its attendant moralism. The mean-girls debates could have helped affirm the way teenage girls are encouraged to think and act toward her. But in the end, all we got was another catfight.

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Ladies and Gentlemen FEMININITY, MASCULINITY, AND IDENTITY

IT'S NOT MUCH OF A STRETCH TO MAKE THE CASE THAT MOST of the pop culture landscape, no matter what the ostensible plot or supposed topic at hand, is actually devoted to limning our expectations of men and women, girls and boys, and exploring the tensions therein. Magazines like *Glamour*, *Redbook*, *Men's Health*, and *Maxim* are nothing if not instruction manuals for gender-appropriate behavior. Both *Survivor* and *The Apprentice* saw fit to structure entire seasons around a "battle of the sexes" gimmick. The *Chicago Sun-Times* headlined a July 2005 story "Guy roles for women" on CBS this fall." (Just what would those "guy roles" be? Why, doctors and lawyers, and, you know, "leaders in charge of large responsibilities and their own complex lives," according to the paper.) Makeover shows from the mild *What Not to Wear* to the surgitastic likes of *Extreme Makeover* often focus on "correcting" gendered traits: On the former, women are forced to trade their baggy shirts and ratty sneakers for, as hostess Stacy put it on at least one occasion, "some clothes that are actually made for women"; on the latter, men with "weak" chins get implants and women with flat chests or, God forbid, facial hair get properly ladyfied. (Putting butch women in prom dresses is also a favorite of daytime talk shows.)

When gender expectations are being reversed, the reversal itself becomes the focus, again demonstrating loud and clear how central gender is to our understanding of the world around us: The pivotal scene of *G.I. Jane*

came when Demi Moore kicked her drill instructor in the nuts and said, "Suck my dick." *Commander in Chief* is built around the novelty of a person with tits occupying the Oval Office. Even nature films get in on the act—wasn't *March of the Penguins* as much about the supposed novelty of dad warming the egg for months while mom is off eating as it was about the resourcefulness of adorable flightless birds in the brutal Antarctic winter?

✓ A reliable category of punch lines has always been the transgression and/or maintenance of gender and sexuality's boundaries: Think Ross and Joey's naptime snuggling habit on *Friends*, the 2004 Chevy commercial in which a truck passenger sows discomfort among his friends by singing along to Shania Twain's "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!," *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*'s title characters catching each other singing along to Wilson Phillips's "Hold On," 2005 Emmy presenter Conan O'Brien's quip that every young girl dreams of winning an Emmy—and I am no exception."

There's a lot going on in this little cultural obsession with gender. There's the superficial stuff like the division of multiplex fare into chick icks and, well, everything else; at the bookstore, it's chick lit versus regular ol' fiction. This is just one of the many cultural hangovers of the age-old otion that the concerns of mankind are universal but stories about women e just, you know, about *women*; the result is a persistent belief among culture makers and marketers that women (and girls) will happily consume ories about men (and boys), but the guys won't do the reverse. Its corollary is the assumption that lack of a Y chromosome means an automatic ection for sappy sisterhoods (think Ya-Ya or Traveling Pants, not *Is Pw-*ful). Then there's slightly deeper stuff like the whims of advertisers and e circular arguments of their commercial imperatives. They like our tes—both in media and in products—divided into pink and blue camps, cause it's so much easier to figure out what to advertise where.

But that's far from the end of the story. Gendered identities are more than uly male or female, masculine or feminine. The tomboy and the sensitive r have been with us as long as the delicate flower and the manly man, and feminist and queer movements have made room for many more. Title IX ight women onto the playing fields in droves, carving out a female athletic nity far more nuanced and enduring than the tomboy. Organizations as rse as the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, whose mission is "to end rimination and violence caused by gender stereotypes by changing pub-

lic attitudes, educating elected officials and expanding human rights"; the Hetrick-Martin Institute, which provides services to queer youth; and Camp Trans, the protest-cum-alternative festival that developed in response to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's womyn-born-womyn-only policy are loosening the gender binary's stranglehold on our popular imagination. A decade ago, drag queens and high femmes started making it onto the mainstream radar: *Bound*; *Friends* Carol and Susan; *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; RuPaul. These days, a memoir of male-to-female transition can become a modest bestseller, and its author can be treated with respect on *Oprah*. Butch dykes, tranny bois, intersex folks, and the wide range of genderqueers who refuse to check either the M or the F box are moving in—however slowly—from the subcultural fringe: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Transamerica*, and Jeffrey Eugenides's Pulitzer prize-winning *Middlesex* are only the most mainstream manifestations of a new awareness of gender's infinite complications.

But most of us looking to celluloid for a reflection of ourselves will be sorely disappointed, no matter what our gender (even if we see ourselves as pretty standard males or females—Hollywood archetypes are limited about plenty more than the strict boy/girl thang). When nontraditional identities do make it onscreen, they tend to become confining and one-dimensional. Think *Will & Grace*'s Jack, who was prime time's first out-and-proud flaming fag, or *Sex and the City*'s unabashedly slutty (and always satisfied) Samantha: Both started off as interesting departures for TV but became insufferable caricatures when writers neglected character development in favor of recycled punch lines.

But there's meaning beyond the obvious in our quest to use our pop-culture screens as mirrors. We can't ignore the fact that lack of cultural visibility often translates into political erasure; more important, this gender obsession clues us in to how our culture has dealt with the complex changes and pressure brought by the aforementioned feminist and queer agitation. And it's mostly by playing up clear-cut versions of masculinity and femininity whose boundaries blur only for comic effect, or struggling against change with more and more lad mags, dating rulebooks, and other attempts at keeping us all in our "proper" place.

Bitch has always been concerned with this struggle, arguing loudly for critical examination of how pop culture seeks to define us and for whose purposes—and how we in turn push back to define ourselves. —L.J.