The ongoing debate about the female voice in popular culture seems to be answered by Carrie Bradshaw’s voice-over in *Sex and the City*—she is allegedly speaking as a woman, to other women, on a women’s show. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe’s compilation *Reading Sex and the City*, a series of critical essays addressing the show’s use of fashion, urban space and hyperbolic sexuality, is a comprehensive attempt to answer the question of whether Carrie and her three sexually adventurous girlfriends actually speak (for) the twenty-first century woman.

As the editors point out in the introduction, the show justifies critical inquiry almost solely on the basis of the extreme critical and popular reactions it elicits. Of course, this reception is fueled by *Sex and the City*’s frank presentation of female sexuality, its obsession with expensive commodities, its high production value, and its fetishization of New York City as a setting. This collection is the first to address *Sex and the City* from a critical standpoint, using the show as a site to explore the intersecting discourses of televisuality, the television industry, female representation, feminism, cultural studies, reception studies, and fandom.

Critical and popular debates have suggested that the show elides real issues of female identity with the constant quest for romance, and the first section of the book, “Sex, Sexuality and Relationships,” addresses the way men fit into the context of a “woman’s” show, particularly how male characters and heterosexual relationships affect and define the protagonists’ feminine identity. Joanna di Mattia’s essay, “What’s the harm in believing?: Mr. Big, Mr. Perfect, and the romantic quest for *Sex and the City*’s Mr. Right,” deconstructs ideas of classical heteronormative coupling in light of Carrie’s oscillation between two male archetypes, Big and Aidan, and uses this dilemma to reflect on the contemporary woman’s search for romance. Similarly, David Greven’s approach in “The museum of unnatural history: male freaks and *Sex and the City*” extends di Mattia’s argument into the criticism that the show constructs its female characters through the exoticization of men and the surface adoption of queer traits, which leads Greven to the conclusion that the show’s narrative tropes are both anti-feminist and homophobic. *Sex and the City*’s elision and derision of lesbianism is also explored by Mandy Merck in “Sexuality in the city,” where she traces the show’s queerness through a variety of episodes, uses it to explain the show’s popularity, and explains it in the context of female-dominated situation comedy.

From a critical perspective, opening the collection with a section about *Sex and the City*’s relationships seems to defy notions that the show is thematically concerned with the issues of single women. But the protagonists of *Sex and the City*, despite being imbricated in the search for significant others, are financially independent and continuously un-attached, and the second section, “Socio-Sexual Identities and the Single Girl,” engages with the program’s representations of the single woman and metropolitan space. Susan Zieger’s “Sex and the citizen in *Sex and the City*’s New York,” the last in the section, is a powerful delineation of how the show invests private acts with public resonance, looking closely at how the characters shape their metropolitan identities through acts of sexual and racial appropriation. Using both individual episodes and
feminist writings, Astrid Henry’s “Orgasms and empowerment: Sex and the City and the third wave feminism” explores, how the characters are typical third wave feminists because they emphasize choice in their lifestyles. Ashley Nelson’s article, “Sister Carrie meets Carrie Bradshaw: exploring progress, politics and the single woman in Sex and the City and beyond,” further contextualizes the show by analyzing it in terms of the history and representations of single women in urban space.

Consumerism is explored in depth in the next section, “Fashion and Cultural Identities,” which concentrates on the show’s fetishization of high-quality commodities and couture. In “‘Fashion is the fifth character’: fashion, costume and character in Sex and the City,” Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson highlight the creative intervention of costume director Patricia Field, who, through her use of spectacular ensembles in the show, adds performative dimensions to the show’s representations of femininity by creating tension between character-defining fashion and fashion as a completely separate entity. Anna König, in “Sex and the City: a fashion editor’s dream?”, continues Bruzzi and Gibson’s characterization of fashion as a fifth character with her discussion of the symbiotic relationship Sex and the City has with another feminine realm, fashion journalism. The section ends on a less critical note with Sarah Niblock’s “‘My Manolos, my self’: Manolo Blahnik, shoes and desire,” where the author suggests that Blahnik’s shoes, in the tradition of French feminism, speak to a particular yet diverse feminine essence.

The fourth section, “Narrative, Genre and Intertextuality,” broadens the scope of the collection beyond aspects of femininity and into a contextualization of the show in filmic and televisual landscapes. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe’s article, “Ms. Parker and the Vicious Circle: female narrative and humour in Sex and the City,” proves to be the most useful in this section for connecting the female voice to other “feminine” genres, for the authors (and editors of the collection) investigate how the show both empowers and deconstructs the traditional fairy tale through the use of humor. Their essay is complemented by Jonathan Bignell’s “Sex, confession and witness,” which explores the generic boundaries of the show through its connections to women’s magazines, confession and situation comedy. Bignell concludes that not only does the show exhibit the hallmark of generic mixing characteristic of contemporary television, but also that Sex and the City is a good example of the synergy of a multi-media empire. From a filmic perspective, in “Neurotic in New York: the Woody Allen touches in Sex and the City,” Tom Grochowski looks at the show’s use of location and unique rhetorical style in the tradition of Allen’s post-feminist romantic comedies, ultimately arguing that the show’s episodic format diminishes its thematic and stylistic possibilities.

The last section of the book, “Fandom, Flânerie and Desiring Identity,” is the most innovative of all the previous sections, for it combines an article about the show’s reception with short pieces from British scholars, mostly contributors to the compilation, thinking through the show while touring Manhattan. In “In love with Sarah Jessica Parker: celebrating female fandom and friendship in Sex and the City,” Deborah Jermyn works in the cultural studies tradition of feminist ethnography, analyzing the results she had with two different British focus groups of the show’s female fans, who expressed their engagement in the show’s friendships, romantic entanglements, and its reception among men. Her work and the short essays move the collection away from the text to investigate the claim of female empowerment from an audience perspective. While paying necessary attention
to the blurred line between fandom and critical analysis, the section also marks the focus of the compilation as the critical and popular British reception of the show.

Considering *Sex and the City*’s immense popularity among women, its frank discussions of female sexuality, and its four overdetermined female protagonists, *Reading Sex and the City* proves to be a necessary critical intervention in a post-*Sex and the City* television landscape. What will follow in the show’s markedly feminine footsteps remains to be seen, and Akass and McCabe’s compilation encourages both fans and critics to look at a landmark televisual showcase of the female voice from a variety of critical perspectives.

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