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No Hugging, No Learning: The 'Seinfeld' Credo

The show was assigned to an NBC executive who had never overseen a sitcom. Left alone, Larry David sought inspiration from the only available source: memories of misbegotten moments in his own past.



PHOTO: NBC/GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner

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Everyone has a favorite episode or moment from the "Seinfeld" show—Jerry's puffy pirate shirt and his suede jacket or his encounters with the close-talker and the woman with man hands; the impermeable maitre d' at the Chinese restaurant; Elaine's spastic dancing or deciding whether a potential beau was worth the investment of a precious, discontinued birth-control sponge; Kramer's at-home talk-show set; George's mortifying "shrinkage" after a dip in a chilly pool or the time he quit his job with a tirade, then showed up for work the next day as if nothing had happened. Yada, yada, yada.

Not to forget the surly mailman Newman, J. Peterman or the Soup Nazi or Festivus and Del Boca Vista, Jerry's parents' Florida condo community, or Uncle Leo and his son, the star of the Parks Department. All were once fodder for Friday-morning water-cooler conversations and now generate internet chatter even though the last original episode appeared more than 18 years ago.

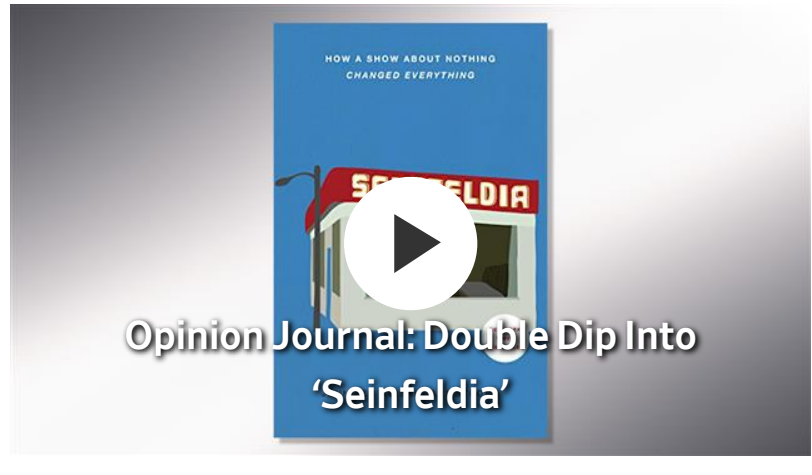
SEINFELDIA

By Jennifer Keishin Armstrong
Simon & Schuster, 307 pages, \$26

"Seinfeld" ran 172 episodes, most of them half-hours (actually 22 minutes), over nine seasons, after the pilot in July 1989. There was hardly a dud, except for the hourlong jailhouse finale watched by 76 million people and panned by nearly every one of them. The program is universally ranked among the best sitcoms in TV history, along with "I Love Lucy," "The Honeymooners," "M*A*S*H," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Cheers," "Friends" and "The Simpsons." TV Guide once rated it simply the best show ever, with "The Sopranos" a close second.

The series made Jerry Seinfeld and his collaborator, Larry David—one a successful stand-up comic, the other a legendary flop—unimaginably rich. The other stars—Jason Alexander as George, Michael Richards as Kramer and Julia Louis-Dreyfus as Elaine—made so much money that they would never have to work again, although all tried their own sitcoms, and Ms. Louis-Dreyfus has had two hits, reversing the supposed "curse of Seinfeld."

Opinion Journal Video



Associate Book Review Editor Bari Weiss on Jennifer Keishin Armstrong's new book on the legendary TV comedy.

Hardly "a show about nothing," despite the enduring cliché, "Seinfeld" offered obsessively close observation of the frustrations, annoyances and idiocies of the everyday life of 30-somethings in a narrow slice of Manhattan. Yet it was so smart and compulsively entertaining that its very provincialism entranced viewers around the country and, when reruns started, the world. Like most genuinely excellent achievements, it looked easy and inevitable.

It was just the opposite, as Jennifer Keishin Armstrong turns in her savvy and engaging "Seinfeldia"—a discerning account of what showed out to be the most successful and lucrative television program of all time and its impact on TV and the rest of pop culture.

"Seinfeld" was born in the late 1980s when Jerry, who had leveraged his act in comedy clubs around New York into guest spots on Johnny Carson's and David Letterman's late-night shows, got a feeler from NBC about doing a show of his own. He sought out Larry David, with whom he'd worked in the clubs, a famously irascible comic renowned for walking out on the stage, dismissing the audience with a "Nah, I don't think so" and stalking off. With his receding hairline and two clumps of wild gray hair, Mr. David looked, said pal Richard Lewis, like "a combination of Bozo and Einstein." He'd been a writer at "Saturday Night Live" for the 1984-85 season but had gotten only one sketch on the air—and that at 12:50 a.m., just before the show signed off.

The pilot was called "The Seinfeld Chronicles," and it had some resemblance to the later hit. Jerry played a version of himself. The Kramer character was based on one of Larry David's oddball neighbors whose real name was Kramer. Jason Alexander played the Larry David character, renamed George Costanza, because Mr. David didn't think he could write a show and act in it at the same time. Originally the only female character was the cashier at the diner where Jerry and George spent a lot of time trying to figure whether Jerry's houseguest really wanted to have sex with him. After the pilot was test-screened in 1989 to lukewarm reaction, Brandon Tartikoff, the head of NBC entertainment, asked his colleagues: "Who will want to see Jews wandering around New York acting neurotic?"

But, as Ms. Armstrong notes, "Seinfeld" had a charmed gestation. The network approved a mini-run of four original episodes for the following spring, mostly because it was a low-cost, low-risk bet on two offbeat talents. The show was assigned to an NBC executive who had never overseen a sitcom and offered no direction to the two creators, who had never done a show themselves. Left alone, Mr. David sought inspiration from the only available source—memories of misbegotten moments in his own (and to some extent Mr. Seinfeld's) past.

That turned out to be the secret of the show's success—plus maniacally intense work by the principals. With the show approved for a full 1991-92 season of 22 episodes, to be produced in Los Angeles, Mr. David imported a group of young New York writers and ordered them to scavenge their own lives for story lines, plot twists and gags. As it turned out, many of the show's most memorable riffs were spun from the writers' darkest or most inane experiences. When his "SNL" sketch ran in the last slot, Mr. David had stormed off the set in a rage only to turn up for work the next week—just as George does on the show. One writer had a girlfriend who hated her big hands. Another had once found a typo on a Trivial Pursuit card—"The Moops" for "The Moors"—that was alchemized into sitcom gold in the "Bubble Boy" episode about a sick child living in a plastic quarantine enclosure.

The network executives didn't always get "Seinfeld"—the author writes that they hated "The Chinese Restaurant," a defining episode—but they kept their notes to themselves, and Mr. David would have torn them up if any were sent to him. "No hugging. No learning," was his credo. One show about a masturbation-abstinence contest got past the censors by never mentioning the word—instead, Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine vied to "master" their "domain." Homosexuality? "Not that there's anything wrong with that" were the last words on that subject in another episode—another catchphrase that still resonates today.

"'Seinfeld' was a show written in the '90s about people remembering their New York lives in the '80s," one writer told Ms. Armstrong. After each season all but one or two of the writers, by now squeezed dry, were replaced by a fresh crew from New York. They would submit ideas or plotlines or scenes only to have Mr. David take their stuff back to the office he shared with Mr. Seinfeld and rewrite it. Constant tweaking was the norm. After Mr. David perfected the idea of a dovetailed ending for every episode—when all the elements of the story arc clicked together like a well-machined mechanism—endless hours were spent polishing these intricate payoffs.

The show became something of a cult hit. It was originally scheduled on Wednesday nights, where it got demolished in the ratings by Tim Allen's handyman comedy, "Home Improvement," on ABC. So for the 1992-93 season, NBC moved "Seinfeld" to a prime spot on Thursdays, right after "Cheers." The program leapt from 40th in the ratings to fifth, and by 1996 it was returning \$200 million a year in profits to the network. At that point, the ever-contrary Mr. David decided that he'd had enough. He quit the show after 134 episodes. For his finale, he killed off George's fiancée, Susan—by having her lick poisoned glue on the envelopes of her wedding invitations—because the other actors couldn't stand working with the actress who played the part. Mr. Seinfeld took over as both star and showrunner for the rest of the run.

During the ninth season, even Mr. Seinfeld wanted out, though he was being paid \$1 million an episode. When he broke the news to Jack Welch, the chief of GE, which owned NBC, Mr. Welch took him into a corner and showed him a slip of paper offering him \$5 million per show. No sale. The offer was emblematic of the astronomic wealth generated by "Seinfeld." Ms. Armstrong calculates that the show has earned \$3.1 billion in syndication fees since 1998. Just last year, the streaming service Hulu paid \$160 million to offer the entire "Seinfeld" oeuvre to its subscribers.

In fact, the best way to enjoy "Seinfeldia" is to read the book with TV remote in hand, calling up episodes on Hulu as Ms. Armstrong adroitly recounts the back story of these still-captivating shows that were never, ever about nothing.

—Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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