

The Opinion Pages | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Breaking Up With ‘The Bachelor’

Jennifer Weiner MARCH 10, 2017

I’ve spent a lot of time since Nov. 8 wondering how Donald J. Trump happened, and whether any part of his vindictive, chaotic and xenophobic presidency might, in some small way, be my fault.

I didn’t vote for him. I didn’t contribute to his campaign. I didn’t attend his rallies or secretly wear a “Make America Great Again” hat.

However, I did do one thing, consistently, even obsessively, for the past decade and a half that I think might have played a part in where we find ourselves today.

I watched — and live-tweeted — “The Bachelor.”

For those who don’t know the show, which will end its 21st season on Monday, the premise is simple: A single man is presented with a smorgasbord of women to date for the following several weeks. Each weekend ends with a “rose ceremony,” in which the women who get to continue on the show are handed flowers, and those left roseless are sent packing. By the season finale, two women remain. One gets an engagement ring; the other goes home, ugly-crying in the back seat of a limousine, knowing that maybe she won’t be alone forever — the network could tap her to star in the spinoff, “The Bachelorette.”

I know what you’re thinking: “The Bachelor” wasn’t even the reality show that our president was on!

But I submit that “The Bachelor” did the Republicans’ work for them, helping to prime America for its current leader.

It showed us how men treat, and talk about, women, and one another. It demonstrated that you don’t have to be the best, the kindest, the smartest or the most virtuous to stay in the competition. You just have to be the most interesting, and the producers will keep you around. It helped lull us into a false sense of security, that we could treat an election like a show; that everything on TV is entertainment and everyone on my screen is there to amuse.

And oh, was “The Bachelor” amusing, while being flagrantly problematic. Everyone was young and attractive. Almost everyone was white. There were bad boys and mean girls; studs and sluts. Insults were flung. Grammar was shredded (I still cringe at the memory of every “hers and my’s relationship” I heard over the years). I live-tweeted the whole thing, along with a gleeful community of other hate-watchers who’d call out the show’s icky sexual politics and double standards, then hold our breath at the proposal point, and weep along with the winners.

Each season’s conclusion would leave me bereft. Where are my villains? Where are my heroes? Where’s the story to engross me? Where’s the grammatically challenged, preening macho dope for me to make fun of now?

The summer of 2015 gave viewers a new answer, something much more appealing than the low-budget and notably un-air-conditioned spinoff “Bachelor in Paradise.” There was a hot new show in town, an all-you-can-eat buffet full of conflict and controversy, insults and eliminations. A program that felt as familiar — and as fun — as watching a bunch of bachelorettes in bikinis sitting in a hot tub and fighting over a man.

As on “The Bachelor,” women were objectified and mocked.

Sure, we were all shocked to learn that Mr. Trump taunted his female executives and beauty queens about their weight. We were appalled when he took to Twitter to continue to bash the one-time Miss Universe Alicia Machado. We clutched our pearls at Billy Bush and Mr. Trump chortling over the soap opera actress Arianne

Zucker's body as if it were a box lunch the producers had provided. Except how shocked could we really have been?

Old-school gender roles, constant objectification, the notion that men are superior to women are all baked deep into reality TV DNA. Shows have cast men accused of domestic violence as romantic leads (see Rick Rockwell, of "Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?") and played violence against women for laughs (how about that "Jersey Shore" promo that teased Snooki getting punched in the face during a bar fight?). Mr. Trump's bombshells might have landed harder without reality TV inuring us to all that lady-hate.

While "The Bachelor" made trash-talking part of the game, even the jerkiest bachelor had nothing on Mr. Trump, who assigned his fellow candidates demeaning and somehow perfect nicknames, tweeted unflattering memes about a competitor's wife, said unflattering things about another's looks and mocked a third by flailing around onstage with a water bottle.

Those antics paid off, to the tune of an estimated \$5 billion worth of free media. The chief executive of CBS, Les Moonves, said that Mr. Trump's candidacy "may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."

It helped that Mr. Trump himself was a creature of the reality TV world.

When he switched his focus from NBC's "The Apprentice" to the United States' election, Mr. Trump knew that he was essentially moving from one show to another. He also understood that social media had flattened the once crucial distinctions between "politician" and "entertainer," and turned viewing into a participatory sport, where it almost didn't matter what viewers were snarking about, whether it was a politician or a pop star, a political convention or an episode of "After the Final Rose."

For months, my fellow reality TV fans and I watched and tweeted, appalled and enthralled, as Mr. Trump went after Mexicans and Muslims, war heroes and Gold Star families; bashing beauty queens and retweeting anti-Semitic memes while still staying in the hunt.

I wasn't worried. It still felt like a program, and on my programs, justice always prevails. The jerk or the mean girl sometimes overstays his or her welcome, kept on by producers who know that drama means ratings, but they'd always be gone by the week of hometown dates. Mr. Trump, similarly, would never win. I'd watched enough reality TV to be sure of it.

On Election Day, I stood in the voting booth with my daughters. I had no doubt about which lever I'd pull, and no doubt about who'd emerge as the victor. Most of me was happy. A tiny part was regretful. A Hillary Clinton presidency would be historic, but, Lord, a Trump presidency would be insanely fun to watch.

Be careful what you wish for. "Are you not entertained?" Alec Baldwin, in character as the president, growled at the camera on "Saturday Night Live." While I'd use a different word — one like "terrified" — the Trump presidency is, indeed, must-see TV, with one crazy plot twist after the next.

Maybe President Trump will implode. Maybe he'll be impeached. What's certain is that we, the viewers and the voters, need to redraw the line between entertainment and politics, between producer-crafted reality-TV narratives and actual reality.

Candidate Trump was — let's all just admit it — riveting. President Trump is a disaster; a Frankenstein monster animated in some subterranean alt-right lab. Even those of us who didn't support him might have played a part in his victory by watching the shows that normalized his behavior and helping to make the social-media lightning that brought him to life.

I'm doing my part to make amends. This year, I've broken up with "The Bachelor." I miss it, but in a post-Trump world, it doesn't feel entertaining. Or maybe it's that I don't think I can allow myself the luxury of escape, not after six weeks of seeing what happens when a made-for-TV candidate stops being polite and starts being real.

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