



Star, Darren (b. 1961)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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The openly gay writer-director-producer Darren Star has had a prolific career in television, responsible for such pop culture touchstones as *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *Melrose Place*, and *Sex and the City*.

He has also incorporated glbtq characters and issues into many of his primetime network and cable television shows.

Born Darren Bennett Star on July 25, 1961 in Potomac, Maryland, he is the eldest of three children born to Debra, a freelance journalist, and Norman Star, an orthodontist.

He attended Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Maryland and later studied at the University of Southern California before transferring to the University of California, Los Angeles, where he graduated in 1984 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

Even from an early age, Star showed a keen interest in the entertainment industry. In fact, as his mother recalled in an interview, Star used his own bar mitzvah money to purchase a subscription to the entertainment industry trade publication *Variety* when he was 13 years old.

Therefore, perhaps not surprisingly, his goal, after graduating from college, was to land a writing job in either television or film. "I was desperate to be a writer--of anything," he later revealed. "I just wanted to be a writer and get paid."

Star's writing career was slow to take off. He first worked as a waiter and then as an assistant in a public relations firm, while spending his off-hours writing a series of television scripts and screenplays. He eventually sold a pilot script for an animated television series based on the 1989 movie *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*; unfortunately, the show remained unproduced.

He also wrote the screenplays for the comedy feature film *Doin' Time on Planet Earth* (1988), about a teenager who believes he is a prince from an alien planet, and the teenage-spy spoof *If Looks Could Kill* (1991). Neither film was commercially or critically successful.

His career abruptly changed, however, when Star was approached by the Fox Broadcasting Company to help develop a television show that became *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000).

As Star explained in a 1994 interview for *The Hollywood Reporter*, given his reputation as a teen-oriented writer, executives at the fledgling Fox Network asked him if he was "interested in doing a show about high school." Star admitted that he had no experience in developing a show, but was intrigued by the concept. As he observed, "I realized that no one had done a show for high school that took kids at their own terms, that looked at lives from their perspective rather than through adult eyes."

Created by Star and executive produced by Aaron Spelling, the television mogul responsible for such

successes as *Dynasty*, *The Love Boat*, and *Charlie's Angels*, the show premiered in October 1990. Although it struggled at first to find a sizable audience, *Beverly Hills, 90210* eventually became a hit for Fox and made celebrities (and tabloid fodder) of its young cast.

The show chronicled the friendships, rivalries, and romances among a group of students at the (fictitious) West Beverly High School in the wealthy neighborhood of Beverly Hills, California. As it progressed, the show also followed its characters into college and the workplace.

Besides tackling such social issues as alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual assault, and teenage pregnancy, several episodes also addressed issues of special importance to the glbtq community, such as HIV/AIDS, homophobia, and gaybashing, and featured several, albeit peripheral, gay and lesbian characters throughout its ten-year run.

In addition to creating and producing the show, Star also wrote nine episodes and directed two.

The show was revised in 2008 by the CW Television Network, as *90210*, with a new cast in a similar setting. Several actors from the original series made guest appearances reprising their roles. The new show was a moderate success and ran for five seasons, concluding in 2013.

Star had limited involvement in the updated show. "It's not something that I would choose to do," he explained in an interview shortly before the new show premiered. "I'd like to think about what's next [rather] than go back."

Star's next television series, *Melrose Place* (1992-1999), began as a spin-off from *Beverly Hills, 90210* and built on the success of that show. Instead of teenagers, however, the new show focused on a group of young professionals in their twenties living in an apartment complex in the Melrose neighborhood of Los Angeles.

The show and its setting was reputedly inspired by Star's own experiences living in a motel-style West Hollywood apartment building after graduating from college.

In addition to creating and co-executive producing the series, Star also wrote twelve episodes.

While *Melrose Place* primarily concentrated on the amorous adventures of a group of straight characters, the cast also featured a recurring gay male character, Matt Fielding, portrayed by the heterosexual actor Doug Savant.

However, once the character of Matt was introduced, his (homo)sexuality was deliberately downplayed. As the television critic Matt Roush noted in *USA Today*, "Matt [Fielding] has been the invisible man of *Melrose Place*, a monk among men, denied a sex life while everyone else is frolicking naked in the pool."

Moreover, Fox executives demanded that *Melrose Place* producers cut a scene in which Matt is seen kissing another man in the show's season two finale. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), a watchdog group dedicated to promoting accurate media representations of the glbtq community, criticized the decision and announced, "What are the censors afraid of in a simple kiss? Why can't Matt be a full human being like the rest of his heterosexual counterparts?"

In December 1994, during the show's third season, *The Advocate* magazine put actor Doug Savant (as Matt Fielding) on its cover and asked, "Why can't this man get laid?"

In the cover story, Star defended his show and explained that "The nature of television and television advertising is such that we cannot permit Matt to have real physical relationships on-screen like the other characters. We walk on eggshells in terms of telling stories about his character."

While he was mainly deployed as a confidant, providing emotional support to his straight friends and neighbors, early episodes of the series explored Matt's relationship with his homophobic parents, and featured storylines involving HIV antibody testing, job discrimination, and gaybashing.

The character also became involved with a female friend from the Soviet Union, later marrying her so she could obtain U.S. citizenship for herself and her young daughter; the woman returned to the Soviet Union with her daughter, nonetheless, shortly after the wedding.

By the fourth season, the writers and producers of *Melrose Place* carefully began to give Matt a more active romantic life. In keeping with the soap-opera melodramatics of the show, Matt became involved with a closeted, HIV-positive lieutenant in the United States Navy, a gay police detective who becomes obsessive and holds him hostage, a married plastic surgeon who frames him for murder, a closeted movie star, and a director of a rehabilitation facility who becomes physically abusive.

The character of Matt Fielding was written out of the show in season six, after he receives an offer to work in an AIDS clinic in San Francisco. Early in the show's seventh and final season, the residents of *Melrose Place* learn that Matt has been killed in an auto accident.

An updated version of the series, also called *Melrose Place*, premiered in 2009, on the CW Television Network. It failed to gain an audience, however, and was canceled after only one season. Similar to *90210*, Star had only limited involvement in the new show.

Following the success of his first two television shows, Star was next approached by CBS to develop a primetime drama designed to attract a younger viewership for the network. He created *Central Park West* (1995-1996), set within New York's publishing industry.

Among others, the show featured out-actor John Barrowman.

However, *Central Park West* failed with critics and viewers alike and was pulled from the CBS schedule mid-season. It returned several months later, with a number of cast changes and retitled *CPW*. The retooled show also proved unsuccessful and the show was canceled in June 1996.

While living in New York and working on the show, Star became fascinated by a series of wry columns for the weekly publication *New York Observer* by Candace Bushnell titled "Sex and the City." Based on Bushnell's own dating experiences and those of her friends as single young women living in Manhattan, the columns were later collected in a book also called *Sex and the City* (1996).

Star thought the columns would make an interesting premise for a television show. What intrigued him, Star later recalled, "was the idea of a single woman in her thirties writing about relationships and using that column as a tool of self-discovery about her own life, sometimes even unbeknownst to herself."

Similar to Bushnell's book, the television show, also called *Sex and the City*, focused on Carrie (played by Sarah Jessica Parker), a lifestyle columnist, and her three friends: Samantha, a publicist (Kim Cattrall), Miranda, a corporate lawyer (Cynthia Nixon), and Charlotte, an art gallery manager (Kristin Davis). The show, according to Star, "was meant to look at relationships and sexuality from the point of view of urban women in their thirties."

It premiered in June 1998 on HBO and quickly became a hit for the network, running for six seasons before its end in 2004. In addition to creating and executive producing the show, Star also wrote six episodes and directed two.

HBO, a premium cable network, offered Star and his creative team much more liberty to explore his characters' sexuality than he was allowed with his previous, more mainstream shows on broadcast

television. Consequently, *Sex and the City* garnered considerable attention for the libertine attitudes of its female characters and their frank and casual discussions about sex.

Star, however, countered that as the show evolved it became more about the friendships between his female characters and less about their sex lives. "Instead of showing women who thought about men all the time," he argued, "it showed women who weren't dependent on men for fulfillment, who felt instead that their friendship was the most important relationship in their lives."

Star also consciously thought of the show as a reversal of television stereotypes. "Women have always been objectified by men," he explained, "and in this [show] the women [are] objectifying the men."

As a show co-produced and written by Michael Patrick King, another openly gay writer and producer, critics also suggested that *Sex and the City* was actually about four gay men, disguised by the show's creators for the sake of convention, as four heterosexual women.

Executive producer Michael Patrick King stated that he had never intentionally inserted a gay voice into the show. "I really don't feel that I'm a gay man who's channeling a gay voice into women," he stated.

Star found such allegations "demeaning." He was especially annoyed when critics observed that a highly sexualized character such as Samantha must be a gay man in disguise. "I think that people project what they want on her, but to say that Samantha isn't a woman is demeaning to her. I mean why can't a woman be like that; a woman that has that sort of libido exists, women who are alpha women."

Sex and the City featured two recurring gay characters, talent agent Stanford Blatch (Willie Garson), who makes an appearance in the very first episode of the show, and Anthony Marantino (Mario Cantone), an event planner, who was introduced in the third season. Similar to the Matt Fielding character on *Melrose Place*, however, both men had limited emotional lives on the show and instead typically served as confidant and sounding board to the straight female characters.

There were no recurring lesbian characters on *Sex and the City*; nevertheless, in season two, Charlotte was befriended by a group of "power lesbians" and explained that "while sexually, I feel that I am straight, there's a very powerful part of me that connects to the female spirit," and for three episodes in season four, Samantha became involved in a lesbian relationship with a Brazilian painter (played by Sonia Braga).

Over the course of its six seasons, *Sex and the City* was nominated for more than fifty Emmy Awards, and won seven, including Outstanding Comedy Series in 2001, and Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series for Sarah Jessica Parker and Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series for Cynthia Nixon, both in 2004. It was also nominated for twenty-four Golden Globe Awards and won seven.

The popularity of the show prompted two feature-length film sequels, in 2008 and 2010, both written and directed by Michael Patrick King. Star himself was not involved in the making of either movie.

Star has been less successful on the succeeding shows he has created and produced, which include *The \$treet* (2000), set in the world of corporate stock trading; *Grosse Pointe* (2000-2001), a satire on the off-screen lives of a group of young actors appearing on a show similar to *Beverly Hills, 90210*; *Miss Match* (2003), about a high-powered attorney and part-time matchmaker; *Kitchen Confidential* (2005-2006), based on the non-fiction book by Anthony Bourdain; *Cashmere Mafia* (2008), another show about the lives of four affluent women; and *GCB* (2012), based on the Kim Gatlin novel *Good Christian Bitches* (2009).

"Every time you make a show," Star once noted, "you hope that it will be a hit, but the odds are that it won't be. It's not always whether the show is good or not; it's whether they can find an audience."

He has also been developing a feature-length film for HBO on the life of Anita Bryant, the former beauty

queen and singer who gained notoriety in the 1970s as an outspoken antigay activist by campaigning to repeal laws that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Star serves on the board of directors of Project Angel Food, a Los Angeles-based organization founded by Marianne Williamson dedicated to providing nutritious meals to people with HIV/AIDS and other serious illnesses.

Star currently divides his time between residences in New York and the Bel Air neighborhood of Los Angeles, California with his partner since 1996, television director Dennis Erdman, with whom he frequently collaborates.

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Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.