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## Heroine And/Or Caricature?

### The Older Woman in *Desperate Housewives*

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ROS JENNINGS AND MARICEL ORÓ-PIQUERAS

*Desperate Housewives* (ABC 2004-2012) is a successful US-produced television text that focuses on the lives, concerns, and struggles of a group of American women living in the fictitious suburban enclave of Wisteria Lane. Generically hybrid, the series encompasses elements of drama, comedy, soap opera and even gothic (Lancioni; Hill) and together with *Ally McBeal* (Fox 1997-2000) and *Sex in the City* (HBO 1998-2004), *Desperate Housewives* forms part of a trio of key television texts that have received close attention with regard to issues of postfeminism, femininity and female identities (Chicharro Merayo; Kaufer Busch; McCabe and Akass 2006; Akass and McCabe 2006a). The narrative struggles of the four central female characters in *Desperate Housewives* – Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman), Susan Mayer/Delfino (Teri Hatcher), Bree Van der Kamp/Hodge (Marcia Cross) and Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria) – represent, as Elizabeth Kaufer Busch argues “[t]he unfeasibility of the twenty-first century happy housewife heroine” (95). Aged between their late thirties to early fifties, the four main female protagonists encapsulate Rosalind Gill’s definition of “postfeminist sensibility.” Within the overall narrative of *Desperate Housewives*, their individual stories interweave and combine with each other to demonstrate that for the four pre- and peri-menopausal heterosexual women at the heart of the text “notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the 'wrong' 'choices' (e.g. become too fat, too thin, or have the audacity or bad judgment to grow older)” (163).

The overwhelming preoccupation of existing research on *Desperate Housewives*<sup>1</sup> to engage only with characters who are involved in a 'desperate' battle to conform to the postfeminist ideals as delineated by Gill has worked to exclude and devalue the importance of characters who are not similarly portrayed. Female characters who have made the 'wrong choices' by not just growing older but more specifically by not trying to defy and disguise their age through the representational and cosmetic processes of youthification have so far attracted little academic attention. Because post-menopausal women fall outside the scope of postfeminist concerns the role of the older women within *Desperate Housewives* has largely gone unnoticed. This paper attempts to reverse this omission by offering an analysis of one of *Desperate Housewives*' older female characters, Karen McCluskey (Kathryn Joosten). The following analysis explores the role of Mrs McCluskey both as an older woman within the series and as an example of how older women are perceived, represented and understood within American and Western society more generally.

Although there are other older women characters around the same age range as Mrs McCluskey in the series, such as Ida Greenberg, Karen's best friend during the first seasons of the series, McCluskey is the only older woman character who is present throughout the whole eight seasons of the series and whose character is developed in any depth. Running over eight seasons, which amounts to a fictional time span of thirteen years, with a five year gap inserted into the series continuity between season 4 and 5, *Desperate Housewives*' serial format facilitates the viewers' ability to observe both the process of character ageing and also the cultural attitudes at play in relation to it; diegetically within the text and intertextually in their own viewing responses. During the span of the series, Mrs McCluskey ages from her mid-sixties to her late-seventies and, because her character also moves to a more central role within the community life of Wisteria Lane and the TV series overall, her representation becomes an important focal point for an analysis of the representation of the older woman within the series.

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1 For instance Karen McCluskey is only mentioned very briefly in a few sentences on two pages throughout the whole of McCabe and Akass *Reading Desperate Housewives*.

### Old Age, Television Genre And *Desperate Housewives*

The “generic fusion” of *Desperate Housewives* creates a complex textual space where “incongruity, idiosyncrasy, exaggeration and absurdity are used to foreground the polysemy of a particular scene, situation or character” (Lancioni 133). The suburban location of *Desperate Housewives* underpins the overall ambivalence of the text. On a geographical level, the suburbs can be understood also as a marginal space positioned, as they are, between the city and the countryside. On the surface, the retro inflected white picket fence mise en scene of Wisteria Lane conforms to the ideal of the American dream but below the surface, within the confines of the pristine domestic spaces, things are less benign (Hill). Wisteria Lane is a liminal space where realities are multiple and often contradictory (Lancioni) and characterisation is always in productive tension rather than homogeneous or unified. When conceptualised within a notion of productive tension, an analysis of Wisteria Lane’s oldest female residents, Karen McCluskey provides an important instance of an older woman presented as more than just a one-dimensional stereotype.

Serial complexity (Creeber) also plays its part and, over the span of *Desperate Housewives*, characters are able to be developed rather than remaining static. Ultimately, what shapes Karen McCluskey’s textual depiction is a process of mutual dynamics which link televisual representations to “the broader currents of practical consciousness of thinking and feeling, active within culture” (Corner 126). In *Desperate Housewives*, the complexity and uniqueness of its serial narration is made evident from the very first episode when it becomes clear that the narrator of the series is actually dead. The voice-over narration is from Mary Ann Young, a friend of the four main desperate housewives, Lynette, Bree, Susan and Gabrielle, who had just committed suicide. The hybrid and multi-storyline construction of *Desperate Housewives* work to transgress and challenge discrete boundaries from the outset by combining elements from different television genres; by bridging the separation of life and death and by calling into question limited and fixed understandings of identities. The following sections will discuss how the complex textual strategies of the series construct Karen McCluskey and more especially the ways that this is done in relation to some of the key cultural tropes that shape understandings of older women in Western society.

## Negotiating Binary Approaches to Ageing

During the course of the eight seasons of *Desperate Housewives*, Karen McCluskey moves from being credited as a “guest star” to being credited as “also starring”<sup>2</sup>. Her role is transformed from marginal figure to that of a central supporting character as she becomes more and more entwined in the storylines involving the four main protagonists. In the process of this transition her life story, emotions and motivations become more known to the audience and other characters. At the same time, the representation of her character becomes more nuanced and moves beyond her initial depiction which conforms to what Margaret Cruickshank suggests is the “characteristic mark” of the older woman: “an alien creature, costly and crabby” (5).

When Karen McCluskey is first introduced in season 1, she is presented in stark contrast to the text’s four central protagonists. The first episodes in which Mrs McCluskey appears seem to reinforce many of the limiting stereotypical conceptions of the older woman in Western culture. She is portrayed as a lonely and irritable old woman who lives alone with her beloved cat (Lancioni). She is presented as being outside or ‘other’ to the hegemony of the youthful postfeminist heterosexual ideal. In many ways she corresponds to deep-seated myths and conventions of the post-menopausal crone<sup>3</sup> (Ronn and Dausgard). A widow in her late sixties, her concerns and circumstances seem at the outset to be quite different from those of her younger neighbours.

As Featherstone and Hepworth indicate, a negative cultural lens dominates the representation of older age. In their view, “images of youth become positively charged with connotations of beauty, energy, grace, moral fortitude and optimism, whereas images of old age become negatively charged with ugliness, idleness, degeneration and moral failure” (252). Mrs McCluskey is introduced as a difficult and disruptive character. In season 1, episode 14, entitled “Love is in the Air,” she accuses Lynette Scavo’s children of having stolen her clock. Audience sympathy is directed towards the more established central character, the overworked and overtired mother of

2 In Series 7 she is credited as “starring” in the episodes that she appeared in.

3 In season 3, when news of her husband’s body being found in the freezer becomes public, the neighborhood children paint “Witch” on her door.

four. Lynette's desperation as a housewife is rooted in her inability to control her children despite previously managing a high-level business portfolio. With no responsibilities except to her cat, Lynette treats Mrs McCluskey as a crazy old woman with no demands on her time. As Markson puts it "older women are at particular risk of madness, decrepitude, death or murder: visual reminders of the loss of mobility, loss of mind, loss of functional capacity, and possibility of lingering or sudden death is associated with aging" (93):

McCluskey: Your little criminals snuck into my house and stole my wall clock.

Lynette: What?

McCluskey: It was a hand-painted, purple and white wall clock. My son made it.

Lynette: Are you sure you didn't displace it. No offence, but you probably forget where you put things.

McCluskey: No offense, but you should be sterilized.

Lynette: Look, my boys do not break into people's houses. Sure they may have stolen your flowerpot.

[*Later in the episode.*]

McCluskey: Maybe it's my dementia but I still haven't found my white wall clock.

Lynette: Nobody in my family knows or cares where your stupid clock is. ("Love is in the Air", 1.14 )

As Eva Krainitzki argues, "[a]geist stereotypes express predominant ideas about the ageing process, constructing ageing as a process of decline and reifying ageism as acceptable" (35) and it is these ageist assumptions that underpin Lynette and her children's initial attitudes and responses. Lynette's default response is steeped in a predominant cultural stereotype of old age that automatically equates it with mental decline even though their exchange presents Mrs McCluskey as quick-witted and also clearly aware of the cultural tropes that Lynette is employing against her.

By the end of the episode, the audience is invited to shed its initial perceptions of Mrs McCluskey as a selfish old woman unable to sympathise with Lynette's difficult situation. Not only does she turn out to be correct, Lynette's children had actually stolen her precious clock<sup>4</sup>, but when

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4 We learn that the clock was given to her by her son who died when he was 12 years old.

Lynette's children go round to apologise she invites them in for tea and biscuits. The audience is given a glimpse of a more humane and less irascible side to her character. However, when the Scavo boys come to apologise, as the following exchange between them and Mrs McCluskey demonstrates, the underlying interplay of chronological, social and individual understandings of age in operation between the boys and the older woman illustrates just how much perceptions of age are culturally inscribed and highly subjective:

Boys: We're sorry.

McCluskey: That's it uh? Didn't you know that stealing is wrong? How old are you anyway?

Boys: We're six.

McCluskey: And how old are you?

Parker: Five. [...]

Porter: And how old are you?

McCluskey: How old do you think?

Porter: 150. ("Love is in the Air", 1.14)

### **Roles And Representation: The Older Female Body**

Cruikshank suggests that, culturally, "old women are seen as old bodies, physical appearance encompasses their whole being" (4). For women, menopause is considered to be 'the change of life' which transitions them into old age (Sontag; Greer; de Beauvoir). According to critics such as Kaplan (1999) and Woodward (1999), the negative stereotypes associated with old age and the older body serve to make the loss of youth especially traumatic for women.

In *Desperate Housewives*, the dominance of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill) reinforces negative associations with becoming an old woman. For the series' main protagonists, Bree, Lynette, Susan and Gabrielle, every day is a perpetual battle to maintain the "sleek toned controlled figure [which] is normatively essential for portraying success" (Gill 150). The less than perfectly groomed Karen McCluskey provides a constant reminder to her four neighbours of the work involved in maintaining appropriate youthful femininity. The ongoing project of 'successful ageing' that Bree, Lynette, Susan and Gabrielle are engaged in, requires both the disavowal of old age



and the physical abilities and material circumstances to do so. As John Bell's analysis of the television series *Murder, She Wrote* and *The Golden Girls* concludes, despite the fact that both programmes have older women as their main protagonists, they are imbued with specific characteristics which make them difficult models to achieve by the rest of the population. In the same way as the central protagonists of *Wisteria Lane*, the protagonists of *Murder, She Wrote* and *Golden Girls* are powerful members of their communities, they live in an affluent environment and are affluent themselves. In addition, they are generally healthy, socially active and quick-witted. An important contrast between the desperate housewives and the postmenopausal protagonists in Bell's study is that "they may be sexy but not sexual" (308-309). Bell argues that although the representation of successful ageing in television drama "may satisfy fantasies of many older or younger viewers, it hardly presents an accurate picture of American life" (310). As Cruickshank argues, successful ageing is a limiting concept despite the apparent positive overtones of the term as it is embedded in the neoliberal capitalist context where profit defines success. As such, "the often substantial differences in aging created by ethnicity, class and gender are covered up by the falsely universalizing phrase 'successful aging'" (3).

Mrs McCluskey's circumstances exclude her from pursuing the goal of successful ageing. From season 1, we learn that she has had quite a difficult life; she had endured the loss of a son, a failed marriage and her last husband had died. She was living on a fixed income which did not allow her many luxuries and, above all, she was suffering from arthritis which she had to keep under control in order to keep mobile and maintain her independence. The realities of Karen McCluskey's precarious financial situation is explored in true *Desperate Housewives* serio-comic style in season 3, when it is discovered that she kept the body of her dead husband, Gilbert, in her freezer so she could cash his pension cheques, as he had signed his pension over to his first wife. By means of this plot device, Karen McCluskey's own 'desperation' to keep her independence is made clear.

It is significant that once women have gone beyond their fertile years and have raised a family, their fictional roles have been traditionally limited to those of the mother or motherly figure (Markson; Coupland). Throughout the series, Mrs McCluskey is not portrayed as the mother or grandmother, the stereotypical positive image of the older women as pointed out by Markson. Despite the fact that she occasionally babysits for her neigh-

bours, she never actually takes that role. In fact, any time she takes care of Lynette Scavo's children, she asks the Scavo's for some kind of economic compensation. In the beginning, Tom and Lynette Scavo are sceptical that an older woman will be able to keep their children under control, especially when Lynette struggles to do so herself:

Lynette: A million teenagers in this street and you hire McCluskey?

Tom: What's the big deal?

Lynette: Well, for starters, she's ancient.

[*Later in the episode, McCluskey and Lynette:*]

McCluskey: What exactly is it you look for in a baby-sitter? I may be ancient, like you said, but I've never gotten drunk and lost track of three kids.

Lynette: What?

McCluskey: I smelled wine on Bree Van de Kamp when she was looking for your boys. ("Thank You So Much", 2.15)

In this episode, Mrs McCluskey confronts Lynette's limiting conceptions of old age and makes clear that being old does not make her incapable but rather gives her certain experiential advantages. One of the advantages of *Desperate Housewives*'s serial format is that, by virtue of a narrative and generic complexity that is developing over time, it constructs a televisual space where the four main younger women protagonists gain greater understandings of themselves as well as others. In this sense, as the series advances, the four desperate housewives understand that Mrs McCluskey's blunt and bold character is the result of having to survive in an environment in which entering old age and being female are no longer valuable categories. In the particular episode between Lynette and Mrs McCluskey mentioned above, as well as in other small fights between these two characters, Lynette is ultimately the one who has to confront her own fears about the fact that she herself is ageing in a society in which being old equates to decline, loss and disempowerment. As Cruickshank, explains "aging in North America is shaped more by culture than biology, more by beliefs, customs, and traditions than by bodily changes." (ix). Lynette's interactions with Karen McCluskey therefore provide important counterpoints for self-reflection.

Karen McCluskey's age, her lack of conformity to postfeminist notions of appearance and neo-liberal constructions of successful ageing result in

her abilities being consistently underestimated by the residents of Wisteria Lane. The often-discussed concept of the invisibility of older women in society (Lövgren) frequently works to Karen McCluskey's advantage within the plot lines of *Desperate Housewives*. On some occasions, she is portrayed as an amateur sleuth in the tradition of other fictional older women such as Jessica Fletcher (*Murder, She Wrote*) and Agatha Christie's Jane Marple. For instance in season 5, enlisting the help of her sister Roberta (Lily Tomlin), Karen McCluskey solves the mystery of Edie Britt's (Nicollette Sheridan) new husband, Dave Williams (Neil McDonough) and his unstable behaviour, discovering that Dave's ex-wife and daughter were killed in the accident that involved Mike and Susan Delfino.

As she moves from peripheral character to a central supporting character through the course of the eight seasons, it becomes clear that although she eschews the role of a nurturing motherly type, she is loyal and protective of her neighbours. She is a source of bold and wise advice to the younger women protagonists and does not sugar-coat the realities of life in her advice. Above all she is proactive on their behalf, utilising, as discussed earlier, her older woman's 'cloak of invisibility' to go unnoticed and garner important information whilst also drawing on culturally denigrated attributes of the older woman busy body, such as gossip to alert them to dangers that might befall them.

Ironical and sarcastic on the outside but generous and understanding on the inside, Karen McCluskey is a complex character rather than a one-dimensional stereotype. She encompasses Karin Lövgren's conceptualisation of the 'tant,' who is a contradictory older woman figure in Swedish culture. Like Karen McCluskey, the 'tant' is at one and the same time an admirable figure and a frumpish gossip.

### **Postmenopausal Sexuality**

As Julia Twigg contends, the aging body is "not natural, is not prediscursive, but fashioned within and by culture" (60). Consequently, despite the increasing visibility in recent decades of older characters in films, their portrayals have generally strengthened, rather than lessened, the cultural associations that connect older characters with notions of unattractiveness, decline and abjection (Krainitzki; Chivers). To a great extent this results from the cultural celebration of the physiological exception. The exception-

al ageing body has taken a certain hold in the public imagination through the celebration of glamorous older women stars who look ‘good for their age’<sup>5</sup>; their presence acting as a fetish against the “toxicity” of decay and decline (Twigg 61). At the same time, actresses who go under, or are suspected of going under, the plastic surgeon’s knife are vilified in the press and on social media for taking their own more concrete steps to avert the perceived bodily ravages of age.

In terms of the physical signs of ageing and her ageing body, Mrs McCluskey does not try to make her body look younger or fitter than it is. She does not police herself about her appearance in the same way as the four main protagonists. Referring to Bree, Susan, Lynette and Gabrielle, Janet McCabe suggests that: “Of course, none of the ladies violate our contemporary obsession with bodies obedient to the social norm, the toned, waxed, slender youthful-looking female body” (76). In season 5, Karen McCluskey celebrates her seventieth birthday. This inscribes her age as being different to that of the central female protagonists and marks her chronologically as older. It also confirms that she crosses, if only just, into the broad age spectrum that would place her in the parental generation in relation to the others. The concept of age and generation also corresponds to common debates in relation to feminism and postfeminism and as Christine Holmlund explains, “postfeminists are generally young; a few are middle-aged; none seem old (Botox helps)” (116). In terms of chronological age, at seventy, Karen McCluskey corresponds to the age profile of women who might have been directly involved in second wave feminism’s battles for women’s liberation. Her fierce independence and the fact that she does not subject herself to the appropriate level of appearance anxiety dictated by postfeminism would also connect her to the legacy of second wave feminism. Her humour and desire, however, contradict postfeminist assumptions about sex-hating humourless second wave feminists and this also positions her within the dominant framework of ambivalence that *Desperate Housewives* manipulates as its core approach.

Although the situation is gradually changing, feminism has said little so far about old age (Woodward 1999) and the older female body (Twigg). Preoccupied with issues of reproduction, objectification and desire, feminism has concentrated on the premenopausal body – a younger, sexy, de-

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5 For instance British actress Dame Helen Mirren.

sired and desiring body. Arber, Davidson and Ginn argue that “although sex has assumed a greater importance within society than perhaps ever before, old age remains outside this sexualized world, with the stereotype of an asexual old age pervading not only popular culture, but also policy, practice and research” (64). When forced to confront the actuality of sexual activity in older age, Bouman et al. suggest that three of the most common cultural responses are silence, distaste and tunnel vision (i.e. limited and narrow definitions of heterosexual intercourse). Karen McCluskey’s role in *Desperate Housewives* serves to challenge the negativity of these discourses on several levels. In contrast to her younger conventionally heterosexually attractive neighbours, Mrs McCluskey frequently jokes about her lack of sex appeal and the fact that she is no longer attractive in the way that she was when she was younger. She is still, however, a sexual and desiring body. She is not coy about the fact that she misses sex. In season 6, she starts dating Roy Bender (Orson Bean) and they embark on a relationship where sex is an important component. In the following conversation with Gabrielle it becomes apparent that not only is sex in older age almost culturally inconceivable but there is additionally a high level of cultural squeamishness involved when younger people are forced to consider the older sexually intimate body:

Gabrielle: I think it’s sweet that you’ve found a companion at this stage of your life.

McCluskey: Roy’s no companion. The man has seen Paris. That’s right. I’m back in the saddle. See, it started one night when Roy asked if my bathtub was big enough for two.

Gabrielle: Hey, hey, hey! You want me to crash the car? Cause I will. (“Nice is Different than Good”, 6.1)

Within *Desperate Housewives* much of the humour generated in relation to Roy and Karen’s relationship stems from dominant cultural attitudes coming face to face with the realities of postmenopausal sex and desire which, as people live longer, will need to be reconsidered. Qualitative studies of later life sexuality and sexual practices (Arber, Davidson and Ginn; Gott and Hinchliff) suggest that sexuality remains an important aspect of identity and well-being. Increasingly, however, the neo-liberal project of ‘successful ageing’ extends to notions of successful or active later life sex (Katz and Marshall) which suggests that the four postfeminist protagonists will need

to be as obedient and disciplined in their pursuit of postmenopausal sexual 'fitness' (Marshall) as they have been in the pursuit of appropriate feminine grooming and style.

The humour displayed when Karen McCluskey shares that she has a fulfilling sex life with her younger female neighbours is in sharp contrast to the pathos present in the scenes in which Roy and Karen express their feelings for each other. When later life sexuality is analysed in academic research, there is a tendency to discuss it merely in terms of the 'performance' of a narrowly defined act of heterosexual sexual activity (Bouman et al.; Katz and Marshall). As Bouman et al. indicate, this overconcentration on sexual intercourse obscures more holistic understandings of sexuality, namely that: "Sexuality, in the old as well as the young, encompasses far more than this. It includes all the physical intimacies" (151).

### **Ageing, Illness And Death**

In Eva Krainitzki's study of older lesbians in cinema, she identifies that one of the main narrative cinematic devices to disavow older same-sex desire is to desexualise these relationships through notions of illness and the reduction of physical intimacies to those of nursing and caring tasks. Research (Bouman et al.; Gott and Hinchliff) suggests that, although illness and infirmity is likely to have discernible impact on both sexual desire and expressions of sexual desire, it does not necessarily end them. When Karen McCluskey's lung cancer returns in season 8, and is found to be terminal, the negotiation of everyday sexuality that encompass expressions of "loyalty, passion, affection, esteem and affirmation of one's body and its functioning" (Bouman et al. 151) can be identified in her relationship with Roy. To achieve this, the narrative requires the characters and also the audience to navigate their way through the implications and assumptions that underlie both the wider cultural constructions and also the internalized cultural conceptions of age and narratives of dependency and decline (Cruikshank). As indicated earlier, the complex generic style adopted in *Desperate Housewives* dictates that the exploration of Karen McCluskey's cancer is addressed along a spectrum of approaches and emotions that range from black humour to exquisite tenderness.

In American culture, self-reliance is a key element of personal and national identity and moving to a stage where help is needed "often brings

anguish and humiliation” (Cruickshank 10). Over the course of the series, Karen McCluskey has been as constructed as valuing her independence and as she faces this final stage of her life she wants to remain autonomous. She decides initially not to tell Roy because he has already endured the death of his first wife and does not want to put him through a similar situation. She decides to commit suicide so that she can take control of what will happen to her. This results in a range of darkly comic and farcical scenes<sup>6</sup> all of which are ultimately foiled and end in failure. By considering suicide, Mrs McCluskey is resisting what Cruickshank, among others, have defined as the overmedicalisation and institutionalisation of old age. In the last episode of the final season of *Desperate Housewives* Karen McCluskey is fully embraced into a community of women at the heart of the Wisteria Lane. This comes about once Roy assures her he is strong enough to be with her to the end and Bree, Lynette, Susan and Gabrielle insist on taking care of her so that she can die at home with minimal medical intervention. As the voice over articulates: “she was pleased to discover, after all those years, that they thought of her as a friend” (“Give me the Blame”, 8.22).

Admittedly the affluent context of Wisteria Lane provides her carers with time and resources to support her and also a comfortable environment in which to do it, but the material circumstances do not lessen the overall psychological and cultural impact of the act itself. This engagement with an impending death dismantles some of the fears and cultural barriers related to disease and death in Western society (Twigg). As highlighted earlier, the audience is able to see that Karen and Roy’s relationship is one that continues to find new forms of sensual and emotional expression; particularly in her deathbed scene when Roy tenderly kisses to the strains of Johnny Mathis’s *Wonderful, Wonderful* playing on the record player. This diegetic use of music rather than using the underscore of a non-diegetic musical soundtrack emphasises the choice, consideration, pleasure and love that they are able to share even at this final stage. The intergenerational friendship that is forged between Karen and her neighbours is also significant and counters what Norbert Elias denounces as the fact that, in an increasingly individualised society defined by economic and social ‘success’, the old are

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6 Her various methods, from asking Bree to help her commit suicide while Bree makes up silly excuses to avoid the situation to finally lying down behind Lynette’s car and waiting for her to leave the house and run her over.

now generally left in institutions rather than spending their last years amongst families and friends.

The fact that as an older woman character, Karen McCluskey is the only person in the series who dies due to disease rather than murder, accident or suicide is not a signifier of the usual stereotypical construction of older age and decline so common in film and television dramas. The final narrative trajectory is primarily driven by the intertextual circumstances of the actress who plays Karen McCluskey, Kathryn Joosten, who at the time was herself suffering from terminal cancer herself. Joosten died only 20 days after the screening of the final episode, at the age of 72<sup>7</sup>. In terms of the portrayal of illness and older age in *Desperate Housewives*, until the terminal cancer storyline, Karen McCluskey is shown as a stoic character who needs to manage her chronic arthritis but who was determined to live as full a life as possible. The diagnosis of Lynette's Hodgkin's lymphoma in season 4 also suggested that cancer, and indeed illness in general, can strike at any stage of the lifecourse rather than being the preserve of older people.

### Heroine And/Or Caricature?

The final episode of *Desperate Housewives* would seem to direct the audience towards viewing Karen McCluskey as a heroine. Shortly before her death, and knowing that she has nothing further to lose, Mrs McCluskey decides to accuse herself of having killed and disposed of the body of Gabrielle's abusive father, Alejandro, and thus, save Gabrielle's husband and the younger woman protagonist from being charged with the crime. The overall fictional space of *Desperate Housewives*, however hinges on ambivalence. The space and openness afforded by the series' hybrid synthesis of different generic conventions produces complex and contradictory characterisations that are open to a high degree of interpretation. None of the female characters are purely positive or purely negative and Karen McCluskey is no different. By means of her sharp tongue and her complaints, she conforms to the stereotype of the grumpy old woman but simultaneously her quick wit and keen observations force both her neighbours and the audience to question their gut ageist beliefs and assumptions. Mrs

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7 See *Guardian* obituary, 4 June 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2012/jun/04/kathryn-joosten>.



McCluskey's role in *Desperate Housewives* is in some ways the token older woman who bears the burden of representing understandings and misunderstandings of older age in Western culture. She does not conform to the docile restrictions of the selfless nurturing mother or granny figure or to the postfeminist ideal of disciplined and glamorous body. In addition, despite not conforming to the standards of the sexy older woman she is shown as a sexual woman and thereby confronts dominant notions of older women being asexual and beyond sex.

The dominant mode of ambivalence that operates throughout *Desperate Housewives* constructs Mrs McCluskey as both caricature and heroine, and does so by letting the contradictions of the two positions play out at multiple levels and in multiple interactions with the other characters. Rather than investing Karen McCluskey with the status of a heroine of older age, her character and role aligns closely with Sandberg's notion of affirmative old age, where she "does not aspire to agelessness or attempt to reject and fight old age, but instead seeks a conceptualisation and acceptance of old age in all its diversity, from active to sedentary, from sexually vibrant to sexually indifferent" (35).

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## TELEVISION

*Ally McBeal*. Creator E. Kelley, Fox (1997-2000).

*Desperate Housewives*. Creator Marc Cherry, ABC (2004-2012).

*The Golden Girls*. Creator Susan Harris, NBC (1985-1992).

*Murder, She Wrote*. Creators Peter S. Fischer, Richard Levinson, and William Link, CBS (1984-1996).

*Sex in the City*. Creator Darren Star, HBO (1998-2004).