In 1969, Jim Brooks and Allan Burns flew from Los Angeles to New York to pitch their sitcom, starring Mary Tyler Moore, to the programming executives for CBS TV.

When the producer wannabes indicated that Moore would be cast as a smart, 30-year-old divorcee from Roseburg, Minn., starting a new life as an assistant to a gossip columnist, a man from the CBS research department declared: "American audiences won't tolerate divorce in a lead of a series any more than they will tolerate Jews, people with mustaches, and people who live in New York."

Unable to formulate a persuasive response, Brooks and Burns regrouped; they refashioned Mary as single, recovering from a big breakup, and working for a local TV news program in Minneapolis.

The result, Jennifer Armstrong, a senior writer for Entertainment Weekly, reminds us, was "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

In "Mary and Lou and Rhoda and Ted," Armstrong - the author of "Why? Because We Like You," a history of the Mickey Mouse Club, and the co-founder of SexyFeminist.com (http://SexyFeminist.com) - provides an informative and charming account of the iconic program and the actors, writers, directors and producers who made it.

She is especially interested in the women associated with the show. Taken with the concept of a sitcom with a strong, independent, lead woman character, Armstrong reveals, director Edith Winant - the first female television executive in broadcasting history - enlisted Cloris Leachman to play Mary's neurotic neighbor, Phyllis Lindstrom, and, in essence, discovered Valerie Harper, as Mary's sarcastic sidekick, Rhoda Morgenstern.

Armstrong makes a persuasive case that "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" came along at just the right time.

A show "that demonstrated even a hint of women's liberation and creative artistry," she writes, "screamed, young, affluent and urban at a time when most sitcoms were still using feminism as nothing but a punch line."

Armstrong also indicates that Moore's character brought issues relevant to young, working women, including birth control pills and gender-based salary discrimination, to the small screen.

She acknowledges, however, that many of Mary's fans were "Life Stylers," "who needed fabulous clothes, beauty products and furniture to be the independent women they wanted to be."
Armstrong also points out that feminists believed that the show often pulled its punches.

Mary Richards (and, for that matter, Mary Tyler Moore) seemed to take seriously the argument that Lou Grant, her boss, deserved an extra 50 bucks a week because he had a family to support. Even TV Guide complained that the show did not demand "a new kind of sexual relationship or a new division of labor."

When she concludes that female comedians and producers cite Mary as the reason they believed that they could make it "after all" in show business - and that "working women everywhere" hummed the show's theme song whenever they felt overwhelmed by life's challenges - Armstrong shows her cards.

"If you think this is an overstatement," she writes, "you are not a woman who grew up in the '70s idolizing Mary Richards."

`MARY AND LOU AND RHODA AND TED: AND ALL THE BRILLIANT MINDS WHO MADE THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW A CLASSIC`
By Jennifer Keishin Armstrong
Simon & Schuster, $26 Original Print Headline: She made it, after all

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.
Mary Tyler Moore throws her hat in the air during the opening theme of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." The ground-breaking television show ran from 1970-1977. Associated Press file
'Mary Tyler Moore Show' examined in new book | Tulsa World

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