By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Tulsa World | Posted: Sunday, August 21, 2016 12:00 am

During its nine-year run on NBC, “Seinfeld” became a sitcom sensation. In 2002, TV Guide named it the best show of all time, better than “I Love Lucy,” “The Honeymooners,” “All in the Family” and “The Sopranos.”

In “Seinfeldia,” journalist Jennifer Armstrong, the author of a book about “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” provides an engaging account of the improbable origins of the sitcom; its actors, writers and directors; the real-life inspirations of its plots and characters; and its afterlife.

The book is filled with facts likely to delight — and surprise — Seinfeld fans. The original “Soup Nazi,” Armstrong reveals, is Al Yeganah, who abused customers at the Soup Kitchen International on West Fifty-Fifth Street. Armstrong identifies the real Kramer and Monica Yates Shapiro, co-creator Larry David’s girlfriend, on whom the character of Elaine Benes was based.

And Armstrong indicates the real J. Peterman, whose catalog company was known for its delightful descriptions of chambray shirts and moleskin trousers, filed for bankruptcy, attributing the failure to excessive expansion undertaken in the wake of his “Seinfeld” exposure.

“Seinfeldia” doesn’t really explain why NBC picked up the pilot in the first place, or why the network gave Seinfeld and David so much latitude. Armstrong does, however, make some effort to explain the show’s popularity and its cultural significance. By using real names and real stories, she indicates, “Seinfeld” created a postmodern third dimension.

She reminds us that “Seinfeld” added words and phrases (“yada yada”) to America’s lexicon. Most important, she emphasizes that the “show about nothing” was often about something — something important.

Witness, for example, the “not that there’s anything wrong with that” episode on homosexuality, homophobia, and the desire of some men to make it known that they were straight and politically progressive; the show about masturbation (for which nine advertisers pulled their spots); and the broadcast in which George, Elaine and Kramer decide to park in a handicap spot adjacent to a mall.

Inevitably, Armstrong suggests, “Seinfeld” became fodder for cultural critics. Some scholars thought the show reflected male anxiety, the assimilation of Jews, irony and intertextuality. Other commentators expressed concern about the show’s cynical, self-centered, “no hugging, no learning” characters.

Elayne Rapping blasted the depiction of young Manhattanites with no family or work responsibilities, nothing to do but hang out and talk, and nothing good to say about anybody or anything, as an “insidious
message about the future of Western civilization.” In the New Republic, Leon Wieseltier deemed the show “the last gasp of Reaganite, grasping, materialistic, narcissistic, banal self-absorption.”

“Seinfeld” lives on, of course, in endless syndication. Fans binge watch episodes, poring over every detail, document anti-Seinfeld comments, track the careers of Seinfeld, Jason Alexander, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Michael Richards, and other actors with recurring roles on the show. “Seinfeldia” has its own art, music and an online business called “Seinfood.”

Americans love Seinfeld, it’s clear, but you get the feeling, don’t you, that no one is more surprised than Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, the misanthropic cult celebrity.

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