

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Sex and the City*]

Age Before Beauty

By Steve Sailer

ON THE LAST DAY OF MAY, my younger son was flipping through the movie section of the newspaper when he looked up with sad eyes. "All month, we had good movies—'Iron Man,' 'Speed Racer,' 'Prince Caspian,' 'Indiana Jones'—but then ... this," he intoned, unable to bring himself to utter the words "Sex and the City." "What happened?"

Indeed, across America, countless guys felt that the manly month of May, when the biggest explosion-laden blockbusters are unveiled at the multiplex, was being tainted by the long lines of ladies attending the film version of the 1998-2004 HBO sitcom. "Sex and the City" updates us on the coven of skanky spinsters who long ago moved to Manhattan to find "labels and love" (there apparently being no stores or men in Minnesota, or wherever).

Inside the theater, the palpable affection toward the characters was reminiscent of a 1980s "Star Trek" movie, whose fans couldn't wait to hear Scotty exclaim one more time, "She cannae take any more!" Granted, the movie version of "Sex and the City" isn't as witty as "Star Trek IV." It's also grindingly long at 148 minutes—the DVD ought to include a "Couples' Cut" with an hour edited out and a few dozen more jokes

tossed in. Still, it's certainly no worse than the "Matrix" sequels and "Star Wars" prequels that males turned out to see by the tens of millions.

The stars aren't getting any younger, so sit in the back row. Hollywood has generations of experience lighting actresses of a certain age, though, and the three supporting women look passable, even Cynthia Nixon (who plays the prickly red-headed Miranda), whom I pointed out to my wife in 1998 was an obvious lesbian. (It took Nixon until 2003 to figure it out for herself.)

In contrast, "Sex and the City's" leading lady, purported fashion icon Sarah Jessica Parker, who portrays columnist Carrie Bradshaw, looks like a bulimic bodybuilder. Evidently fearing matronly upper arms, the 43-year-old with zero percent body fat appears to have spent the last four years bench pressing and not eating, giving her the grotesquely defined arm musculature of Rambo after the Bataan Death March. Her horse chin and witch nose have become even more prominent, making me wonder whether, like Sylvester Stallone, who was recently arrested smuggling Human Growth Hormone into Australia, she's on some muscle-building medicine with head-enlarging side effects.

In the climactic scene in which bow-legged Carrie reunites with her true love, the financier Mr. Big (played by an embalmed-looking Chris Noth from "Law & Order"), Parker's cheesy fur coat and stick insect legs jutting out of her tiny skirt make her resemble a streetwalking crack addict. The sequence is a masterpiece of the *memento mori* genre, a terrifying depiction of the skull beneath the skin. Unfortunately, it's supposed to be a romantic comedy.

As hideous as Parker looks, the "Sex and the City" movie is actually less repugnant than the TV series. Each of the four women is monogamous throughout the year covered in the film. That's typical for rom-com movies these days, which are about living happily ever after. In contrast, the TV show just went on and on for six years, with the bodycounts (and, presumably, STD's) piling up.

The 1998 TV series was to Helen Fielding's 1996 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* as Dick Wolf's 1990 TV show *Law & Order* was to Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Wolf made a fortune by taking Wolfe's sardonic story of New York cops and prosecutors hunting for "the Great White Defendant" and stripping out all the satire. Similarly, the gay male writers behind *Sex and the City* started with Fielding's spoof of "urban families" of stylish single women who undermine each other's chances of landing a husband by constantly gathering over drinks to nitpick their boyfriends, and turned these mutually destructive circles into a fantasy about friendship.

It was never actually about female solidarity but about female competition for alpha males like Mr. Big. Nevertheless, women hate to be seen as competitive, so "Sex and the City" displayed the nice side of cliquishness, minus the nasty side: these social X-rays wouldn't be seen dead in the company of 99 percent of their fans.

The trick was to make women viewers feel less awful about the big mistakes they've made in their lives by making their bad decisions feel fashionable. Misery loves company. ■

Rated R for strong sexual content, graphic nudity, and language.

BOOKS

[*What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception*, Scott McClellan, Public Affairs, 368 pages]

Present at the Destruction

By Leon Hadar

IN ROBERT PENN WARREN'S *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden, a young and idealistic political reporter who goes to work as a right-hand man to Gov. Willie Stark of Louisiana, discovers that the populist figure he at first romanticized is a corrupt politician surrounded by unscrupulous aides and shady operators. But Stark continues to serve the charismatic Southern governor. He applies a professional and somewhat detached approach to his work until Stark's behavior has tragic consequences on the young aide and his loved ones. Burden, the narrator, concludes, "the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden are, in one sense, one story" and he accepts responsibility for his association with "the Boss."

Burden describes his tale as "the story of a man who lived the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and a very different way." He "did not know when he had any responsibility... and when he did not." But finally he realizes that "he had seen too many people live and die" and that his preoccupation with the "Great Twitch"—a metaphor for the cynical political world—prevented him from searching for the truth.

There was a time when Scott McClellan, once a young and idealistic political communicator who went to work as a press secretary for George W. Bush, the popular governor of Texas who ended up occupying the White House, ideal-

ized his folksy boss. He saw him as a "man of personal charm, wit and enormous political skill," someone who "had a rare understanding of what everyday citizens across America were looking for in a leader, and was committed to giving it to them." McClellan certainly believed that Bush "possessed enough of those qualities to be a very good, if not great, president" and decided to move to Washington, D.C. to work for him at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

But McClellan discovered that his idol believed being president meant never having to say you're sorry. In addition to being insecure, President George W. Bush lacked curiosity and suffered from self-delusions. He was surrounded by a bunch of incompetent and nasty advisers like Dick Cheney (played a "sinister" role), Donald Rumsfeld ("controversial" and "disappointing"), Condoleezza Rice ("history will charge her harshly"), and Karl Rove (placed "political gain ahead of the national interest").

MCCLELLAN WRITES, THE "ONE REACTION BUSH WOULD NEVER ALLOW HIMSELF WAS SELF-DOUBT."

"The first grave mistake of Bush's presidency was rushing toward military confrontation with Iraq," McClellan writes. "It took his presidency off course and greatly damaged his standing with the public." Bush's second serious error was "his virtual blindness about his first mistake, and his own unwillingness to sustain a bipartisan spirit during a time of war and change course when events demanded it." Indeed, McClellan writes, the "one reaction Bush would never allow himself was self-doubt." He clung to the belief that the war upon which he had wagered his presidency would turn out right. As "the trickle of bad news turned into a torrent, the president could only double down."

Some of Bush's current and former aides who continue to share his bunker mentality have ridiculed McClellan's critique of the Iraq War. In particular, they resent his insistence that what drove

Bush toward military confrontation wasn't the threat of nonexistent weapons of mass destruction but "an ambitious and idealistic vision of transforming the Middle East through the spread of freedom." This dream was grounded in a "philosophy of coercive diplomacy, a belief that Iraq was ripe for conversion from a dictatorship into a beacon of liberty through the use of force, and a conviction that this could be achieved at nominal costs."

McClellan's critics contend that the former press aide is not a deep thinker (like, say, Douglas Feith) or a renowned Middle East expert (Paul Wolfowitz comes to mind). But in a way, it's McClellan's unique perspective that makes his memoir a fascinating read. For he comes across as a non-intellectual, unsophisticated, and unpretentious Texan who, like pre-9/11 Bush, favored a "humble" foreign policy and, like many Americans, was willing to give the White House the benefit of the doubt on Iraq.

Rove and Ari Fleischer, McClellan's predecessor as press secretary, suggest that the author of *What Happened* is not "the Scott that we knew." They express shock that a conservative Republican, a patriot, a man of faith, and a Bush loyalist—the kind of guy who should support the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the struggle against Islamofascism—should publish the sort of views about the Iraq War that one can read in, say, *The American Conservative*. McClellan's narrative makes it clear that from his very authentic, small-town American perspective, "waging an unnecessary war is a grave mistake." There is a clear compatibility between his own political-ideological roots, which were the reason he decided to work for Bush in the first place, and his devastating assessment that "the decision to invade Iraq was a serious strategic blunder"