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Commentary: Little Ally McBeal's All Grown Up

by KATHLEEN J. WU

"Is it too much to ask that television give our daughters (and our future colleagues) at least one woman worth emulating?"

Those were the closing words of a column I wrote in 1998 — in another era — titled "A Role Model We Can Live Without," about Fox's "Ally McBeal." For you youngsters who don't remember it, "Ally McBeal" featured Calista Flockhart as a ditzy, waiflike, inappropriately dressed young lawyer who cried, tripped and tantrumed her way through her career.

ONTHELEVEL

For a time, "Ally McBeal" set the bar for the public's perception of women lawyers, at least in popular culture. And an unrealistic, silly bar it was. What I wanted more than anything was a TV female lawyer who didn't make me cringe. I think I've finally found one in CBS' "The Good Wife."

Now, I can't claim that I'm well-versed in every TV show with a woman lawyer in a lead role, and I'm sure there are other decent female lawyers on the small screen. But I've been impressed at how well "The Good Wife" portrays the life of a working mother-lawyer, with all the demands and conflicts that happen even without a writer's help.

In "The Good Wife," Julianna Margulies plays Alicia Frollick, a lawyer who spent much of her adult life as a stay-at-home mom until her husband, a prominent politician played by Chris Noth, is jailed after a corruption and sex scandal. Like so many of her real-world counterparts, Margulies' Alicia Frollick is "the good wife" who stands by her husband during his mea culpas.

Yes, it's good storytelling and it's a great way to spend an hour. But I'm more heartened about what the show says about the evolution of the legal profession and women's role in it over the past couple of decades. The 1990s may seem like just yesterday (at least it does to those of us over 40), but it truly was a different world.

In the late 1990s, when Ally McBeal and her co-workers were boozing it up to Barry White and Vonda Shepard, the world still saw Hillary Clinton as Bill's wife — and a good portion of the population hated her for wanting to step outside that role and make her own way. Contrast that with the seeming inevitability of Sen. Clinton winning the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008 and Gov. Sarah Palin hitting the campaign trail with a newborn, and you have a good idea of how much more accustomed the public now is to seeing women in positions of genuine power and authority.

Frollick definitely fits that mold. Despite coming back to the law as a first-year lawyer, she has become quite a heavy-hitter and is frequently requested to work on matters by the firm's clients. She summons the guts to kick her husband out of the house for cheating on her with her best friend (the original criminal case against him had been thrown out, he was released from prison and he went on to wage a successful campaign to be state's attorney) and stands her ground against her formidable mother-in-law.

I'm not advocating that anybody use Alicia Frollick as a mentor — fictional characters typically give terrible advice — but there have been far worse role models on TV for young women lawyers.

Frollick takes herself and her work seriously, she doesn't dress like a stripper, she keeps her personal life out of the office (OK, there was that one brief affair, but she's only human) and she does all this while remaining a dedicated mom to her two teen-age children.

And she's not the only strong female lawyer on the show. Christine Baranski plays the firm's managing partner, and Martha Plimpton has done a couple of scene-stealing guest spots as a lawyer at a rival firm. They're both well-crafted, noncaricatures who would fit in well at most major firms.

It should be no surprise that the show's co-creator is a woman, Michelle King, who has said she wanted to tell the story of accomplished women who historically have taken a back seat to their higher-profile husbands but who suddenly are pushed to the forefront by scandal and forced to make a name for themselves outside their marriage. I'm grateful to King for creating a character who doesn't make me wish that the show was censored on law school campuses.

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