



DORDT COLLEGE

Digital Collections @ Dordt

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

1-23-2020

Shows that Shape Us: Saved by the Bell

Erin Olson

Dordt University, erin.olson@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Olson, E. (2020). Shows that Shape Us: Saved by the Bell. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1140

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Shows that Shape Us: Saved by the Bell

Abstract

"No one really watches sitcoms because they think they're truly representative of reality, but we also don't want them to reinforce common misperceptions."

Posting about the television program *Saved by the Bell* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/shows-that-shape-us-saved-by-the-bell/>

Keywords

In All Things, television programs, critical thinking, Saved by the Bell

Disciplines

American Popular Culture | Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

in things

January 23, 2020

Shows that Shape Us: Saved by the Bell

Erin Olson

If there's a TV theme song that immediately brings me back to being an adolescent in the early 90s, it has to be the theme song from *Saved by the Bell* (SBTB). Every week, if I could, I tuned in (no streaming or binge-watching back then) to see what Zack, Kelly, Slater, Screech, Jessie, and Lisa were doing. I considered these six people to be my TV friends. While SBTB was certainly mostly comedic escape, the sitcom did provide some level of complex adolescent thought as they highlighted social problems, relationship struggles, and the importance of friendships. The show provided a good dose of both humor and seriousness. SBTB certainly shaped me and my peers in both positive and negative ways. It shaped our expectations, but also allowed us to keep a certain amount of our naiveté and idealism than shows aimed at adolescents today.

My peers and I were positively influenced by SBTB. First, the show did a good job of *introducing me to feminism*. I can't remember as an adolescent if there was one key female character with whom I identified most closely—I think I probably felt torn between wanting to be an independent feminist like Jessie and wanting to be the stereotypical high school cheerleader like Kelly (I did become a cheerleader, by the way). Jessie Spano—the high-achieving, feminist academic—was, however, the teenage female I was most unfamiliar with. I saw plenty of Kelly Kapowskis amongst my 17-year-old teenage friends. Most of them seemed to be into dating jocks, cheerleading, and becoming homecoming queen. Lisa Turtle, another SBTB character, was the ditzy girl who cared most about fashion, makeup, and avoiding Screech's (the show's token nerd) love interest. These girls—including Jessie—clearly fit some high school stereotypes; yet, they each had a certain amount of complexity to keep them interesting. I'm confident that I first learned about feminism from Jessie and credit SBTB for helping me see that being a feminist didn't mean exactly what I'd been told or assumed.

This show also *demonstrated the complexity of working through problems in relationships*. Like other sitcoms, the problems that developed in the first half of each episode were usually resolved by the end. While unrealistically brief, SBTB and its characters highlighted the interpersonal skills and conversational habits which are often necessary to work through conflicts. Instead of avoiding hard conversations, the show demonstrated the value of talking things through. Our brains were created by God, hard-wired for relationships, and this is especially true for the developing adolescent brain. Seeing demonstrations of working through healthy conflict, even fictitious conflict, can help reinforce those connections which can support positive, healthy peer and family relationships.

SBTB also *provided a light-hearted (ish) perspective on teen angst*. Being a teenager has always been hard—we won't argue whether it was more difficult in the 90s or now. SBTB and other shows like it provided some comic relief from the normal stress of being a teenager. One could identify with many of the social and emotional experiences of the characters while still being able to, for a time, dissociate from their own social and emotional stressors. Again, the stressors and conflicts faced by the characters were often resolved by the end of the episode, providing the viewer hope (though likely unrealistic) that their problems too could come to a quick and decisive end.

SBTB did *expose the viewer to some social problems like poverty, homelessness, and drug abuse*. The show didn't always portray life through rose-colored glasses. The character's lives weren't always perfect and they often had struggles with which many adolescents and teens could identify. SBTB didn't take itself *too* seriously, but balanced the humor and lightheartedness with little snippets of wisdom and understanding that didn't come across as overly precocious. For me, a somewhat naïve adolescent watching SBTB, the expose of those living in poverty or seeing Jessie on the verge of a pill addiction helped me realize that even seemingly "good" kids had real problems. The most memorable episode, in my opinion, was the one when perfectionist Jessie starts taking caffeine pills to maintain an impossible workload between school and a new singing gig. For those of us who were faithful SBTB watchers, Jessie singing "I'm So Excited" while having an apparent breakdown is probably one of the first pictures that comes to mind when we think about the show.

Now, as an adult, I can see some of the ways my peers and I might have been less positively impacted by the show. First, SBTB *reiterated the belief that all teens need is their peers*. Unlike some other shows from that era like *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Full House*, SBTB's main focus was on life inside Bayside High and the peer relationships that both festered and flourished in the school. Mr. Belding, the high school principal, and some of the teachers sometimes played important roles in the weekly episodes, but you very rarely saw any family involvement. While any fan of SBTB could tell you quite a bit about

the relationship connections amongst the main characters, most would likely struggle to tell you if any of them had siblings or if their parents were married or divorced. I honestly can't remember one single thing about any of the characters family lives. Adolescents and teens value their peer relationships, but SBTB seemed to act as if family life was tangential rather than an essential part of this stage of development.

Second, the show reinforced gender role stereotypes and traditional expectations for relationships. The 90's was a time of mostly traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Kelly, Jessie, and Lisa never—to my recollection—did anything that might be considered the least bit masculine. When Slater showed interested in ballet, he was berated and laughed at by his friends and peers at Bayside High in a way that would be railed as heinously politically incorrect today. Relationship-obsessed adolescents might have gotten an introduction to feminist independence in Jessie Spano, but all of the other female characters fit a more traditional mold of female gender interests and roles.

SBTB also seemed to *display a lack of true ethnic, cultural, or class diversity.* Lisa Turtle, a main character, was African American, and there may have been a few other cameo appearances by people from diverse people groups, but it wasn't a common occurrence on SBTB. For me, a white girl growing up in a mostly (if not all) white community in rural Iowa, the show didn't provide me with any exposure to diverse groups or cultures. It basically reflected the social circles with which I was already familiar and reinforced the idea that white, upper middle-class culture was the norm. Just like the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity displayed in SBTB, most of the characters fell in the upper echelons of the class structure.

Things have certainly changed since SBTB was popular. In 2015, the *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* aired a skit with most of the actors from the original SBTB cast. It was like a flash forward to what the show might have looked like if it was aired today rather than 30 years ago. In an attempt to be more edgy than the 90's variety of SBTB, the skit made some changes within the brief and shallow plot. In the 2015 skit, Kelly Kapowski is pregnant with Zack's baby and while this is edgy it's mostly sociologically inaccurate. Teenage pregnancy rates were much higher in the 90s than they are today, so Kelly had a much higher chance of becoming a mom in the 90s than she would in 2015. Maybe a dose of reality like this in the 90s might have helped burst the bubble I lived in or maybe as a young adolescent female it was better that I remained in that bubble for a few more years. No one really watches sitcoms because they think they're truly representative of reality, but we also don't want them to reinforce common misperceptions.

I can think of plenty of other shows from the same time period that were off limits to both me and my friends for various reasons, but I don't remember any of my friends

being forbidden from watching SBTB. I grew up in a fairly conservative rural Christian community where TV was and still is viewed with a very skeptical eye. We tend to be quite particular and intentional about what shows we consume and why. Today we want to be sure that what we're watching on TV (or on Netflix) has some redeemable qualities. So how does SBTB measure up? While *Saved by the Bell* doesn't rise to the top of the TV pile as I consider my favorites from my childhood, I'd like to watch it now, in 2020, with my 14-year-old daughter. It's not likely to spur the most thought-provoking or faith-inspiring conversations, but I still think it would be fun—a walk down memory lane.

Also, my daughter might enjoy seeing how fashion from the 90s has come full circle today.