

Before Blair Waldorf, Regina George or the Heathers, there was the original mean girl: Nellie Oleson. Armed only with a gingham dress and pigtails, actress Alison Arngrim managed to terrify an entire generation of young viewers on "Little House on the Prairie," the schmaltzy pioneer-life TV drama based on the writings of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Arngrim looks back on playing the pint-sized sociopath in her memoir, "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch" (It Books), in which she merrily recalls show creator and star Michael Landon ("like a male version of a Farrah Fawcett poster"), that infamous blond wig ("there was no point at which it felt comfortable") and how Nellie inspired her lifelong obsession with villainy: "Any idiot can be liked. It takes talent to scare the crap out of people."

I hate to say it, but you actually come off as a pretty nice person in this book.

Most of the time I think I am pretty nice! My husband says in the morning, before the first cup of coffee, that's when Nellie walks the earth.

You write that all your meanest episodes were filmed when you were PMS-ing, and speculate that Michael Landon planned it that way. I mean - really?

It would have been like him. Michael was very clever. They all knew when I got it the first time. The lack of privacy on that set - I remember before I started menstruating, I got sick a couple times, and they all got together and discussed whether I'd gotten it. So yeah, it's definitely possible.

You reveal two slightly startling things about Landon: that he was very short, and that he never wore underwear under his Pa costume.

That drove some people batty. He was a sexy dude! He was a good-looking man. But you go back and watch the show, he's always standing on those church stairs.

Do you think Nellie's responsible for spawning other unapologetic bitches?

Well, Melissa Gilbert and I had the mud-wrestling scene two years before Linda Evans and Joan Collins fell in the pool in "Dynasty." And I mean, look at "Desperate Housewives." "Little House" got popular again in the late '90s - that's when bitchy characters as the heroine started to come to the forefront. Being a bitch is even applauded in politics now. People say evil things about each other on the news - Ann Coulter, Sarah Palin. Twenty years ago you couldn't have done that. It's a good time to be a bitch in America.

Speaking of. What was Melissa Sue Anderson's (Mary Ingalls) problem?

We have all asked that. I don't know! I mean, I'm 48 and she's 47 and Melissa Gilbert (Laura Ingalls Wilder) just turned 46. Even if we didn't get along as teenagers, who cares? Now, surely, we could all go out for cocktails. I did buy her book. I went to the signing. She didn't jump up and down, but she didn't throw the book at me. I remember her saying, some time ago, "I don't really want to share personal information." Well, if you don't, then . . . don't write a book. But I went to her signing, and then we friended each other on Facebook. Perhaps this is the beginning. We're Facebook friends.

Does being recognized as Nellie ever work to your advantage, or do people just get weird?

It's really hard to get good service in restaurants. What happens is they recognize me and they kind of flip out and then they never bring the food. But sometimes I can work the Nellie angle without doing much, because the threat seems to be enough. I was in line for some concert and my friend went up front and said, "You know, we're in line with the girl who played Nellie Oleson and she looks like she's starting to get a little upset." They produced the tickets on the spot.

You talk about the "bonnetheads," your nickname for the real "Little House" fanatics - the show seems to cut across a lot of demographic lines.

I call it the red state-blue state show, because it's equally loved with mad passion by the most extreme religious conservatives to the most left-wing crazed wingnuts. The only people who do not know "Little House on the Prairie" are white heterosexual men over the age of 50. And in France - I was stunned at the attachment to Nellie over there. They don't think I'm mean, they think I'm French.

Copyright, 2010, New York Post