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The Tube: Parenthood and Friendship

November 15, 2012 Melissa Zimdars Arts & Entertainment, The Tube No comments

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After seven years of watching "Gilmore Girls," the series finale was bittersweet. I went through high school and college during the same time as the main character, Rory. I identified with her nerdy awkwardness and feeling like she didn't quite fit in. It was like not seeing those characters anymore was akin to losing some long-time friends. Never knowing if Rory would become the next Christiane Amanpour or whether Luke and Lorelai would ever be together was painful. It may sound weird, or childish even, but it's honest. And "Gilmore Girls" isn't the only finished show that translated into feelings of loss for me, many have, including "Friday Night Lights," "Sex and the City," and "The Wire."

In an article, titled "TV Binge" (found at FlowTV.org), media scholar [Michael Z. Newman](#) writes that we come to know the characters on the screen with such intimacy that they become like friends. He argues, "Sometimes we know them better than our real-life friends, because we get so much insight into their psychology, their secrets, their hopes and fears and dreams. Spending years with characters, they become regular visitors to our living rooms." The ongoing, serialized nature of television is precisely what builds these TV friendships and strong emotional investments. I've never felt like I was losing a friend, or that there was a void in my life, after finishing a film or playing a video game. Probably because I've never spent seven-plus years of my life learning about the characters depicted in them.

While it's sad to see TV friends go, there is always the possibility that new TV friends can be made, or that old ones will come back into our lives in interesting ways. Such is the case with "Parenthood" (2010-present), which is now in its fourth season on NBC. "Parenthood" is a drama that depicts multiple levels of the Braverman family tree by exploring the dynamic between parents and their adult children, and their children's children. This ensemble cast of "Parenthood" includes such recognizable TV friends as Lauren Graham from "Gilmore Girls," Peter Krause from "Six Feet Under," Michael B. Jordan and Matt Lauria (among others) from "Friday Night Lights," and John Corbett from "Sex and the City." Not to mention the patriarch of the Braverman clan, Craig T. Nelson, who will never not be Coach after nine seasons on "Coach," and the recent addition of Ray Romano from "Everybody Loves Raymond." While none of these characters have memories from their past diegetic worlds, just seeing their faces again, especially in interaction with one another, is comforting.

Reconnecting with TV friends is what initially drew me to "Parenthood," and ultimately what kept me around despite a somewhat mediocre first season. "Parenthood" is like an adult "7th Heaven." "7th Heaven" was a family-centered drama that lasted eleven years on the WB (and then CW). Each episode explored a different topic, from cheating at school to peer pressure, and ended with a moral lesson and strengthening of the familial bond.

While "Parenthood" isn't nearly as preachy, it is just as optimistic. There really are no villains or "bad" characters, only good people who sometimes make bad decisions or who find themselves in troublesome situations regardless of their actions. Any antagonists that do emerge come from outside of the family itself. Because of this, the show borders on being sickeningly sweet at times, and

I find myself craving a little more provocation or rebelliousness from the program. Yet, oddly, I'd rather that than see anything irreparably bad happen to these TV friends I've grown to care about.

The show has mastered the creation of non-controversial controversy by planing most of the contentious edges from its narratives. However, no topic is off limits, and it seems like all the characters of "Parenthood," at some point or another, will deal with every major personal and social issue fathomable. The son of Adam and Kristina, Max, has Asperger's syndrome. Sarah deals with single-parenthood and an ex-husband who suffers from alcohol and drug problems.

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gender roles (Julia works as a lawyer and Joel is a stay-at-home dad), and also depict the emotional rollercoaster that characterizes the adoption process. The heads of the family, Zeek and Camille, work through infidelity, aging and, more recently, issues concerning returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

“Parenthood” navigates these issues in a decidedly progressive way, but does so without alienating audiences who may not agree with its politics by otherwise showcasing the centrality of the traditional, American family. Of course, the Bravermans are a far cry from the Cleavers, the Nelsons, the Andersons, or the Stones because their lives are much messier than their late 50s/early 60s TV counterparts (and we unfortunately never got to see Ward Cleaver smoke a joint). At the same time, and despite the fact that this modern family looks quite different, “Parenthood” maintains that the family is still the heart of American society. The Braverman family motto seems to be that family is the only thing you can ever truly depend on, and the first line of defense against the ills of the world.

While the show sometimes privileges family solidarity at the expense of potentially more compelling or realistic narratives (would you ever tear up a \$2 million dollar check to prove that you care about your sibling?), their bonds with each other are enviable. And watching as those bonds are tested and reaffirmed can be emotional. In fact, my episode to cry ratio is nearing one to one.

Some say that friends often become our families of choice. In the case of “Parenthood,” our television friends of past morphed into a television family that we, as viewers, choose to be part of. The result is perhaps not the highest quality program currently on television, but I look forward to reconnecting with these friends each week.

Melissa Zimdars is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at The University of Iowa, specializing in media and critical cultural studies.

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About Melissa Zimdars

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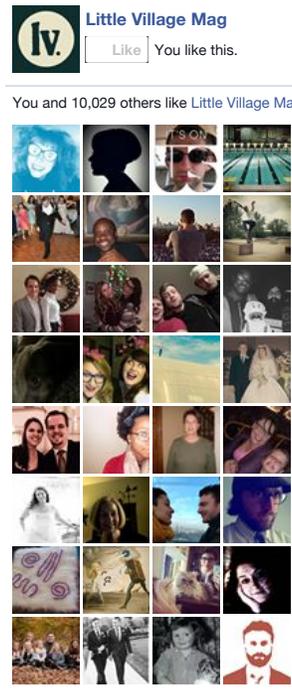
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