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# Culture Vulture: Gaylias

**W**hy is it that everyone who rents *Alias* is gay?" my friend Dave asked me the other day as yet another queer couple left the video store where I work holding their next fix of the addictive show.

I'd been watching *Alias* for a while, and had turned my roommates and friends on to it as well, but hadn't considered the possibility of any queer following, only thinking that most of my friends loved it — not because they were queer, but because of the intensity of its cliffhanger structure and the undeniable beauty of its heroine, Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner). But Dave was right; at least among the clientele of (the now "Off the") Waterfront Video, the *Alias* devotees were a decidedly queer bunch. Even if I take into consideration my decided tendency to turn a sample of three people I know into a "trend," a brief Internet search confirmed my suspicion — there was a brief article on the queer following of *Alias* in *gay.com* as early as the first season.

Perhaps part of the reason for my delay in noticing this pattern is that there's surprisingly little overt queer content in *Alias*. Unlike other perennial queer favorites like *Buffy*, *The L Word* or *Queer as Folk*, there are no explicitly queer characters on *Alias*, or even overtly queer themes. Why, then, does the show resonate so deeply with queer viewers?

I think this is for a series of reasons, not the least of which is the way the show foregrounds identity as performance, combined with its focus on familial trauma and the tension between the heroine's connections to her family of origin and her family of choice. I think it's safe to say that the fear (or reality) of familial rejection is a source of the central trauma of many queer people's lives. As a result, queer people often build up a family of choice, made up of people with whom it's easier to envision an alternate value system. The appeal of *Alias* lies in the combination of this familial instability with an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of identity, experienced by queer viewers not only in the experience of drag, but in the act of closeting oneself, undergone by almost all queer people at some point.

Okay but before I even start with any of that, here's a brief synopsis of the convoluted plot. Sorry if it sounds over-the-top, but



**anne moore**

that's part of the show's appeal. Sydney begins the show working for SD-6, which she thinks is a black-ops branch of the CIA. After her fiancé is murdered by SD-6, she discovers that they are in fact a terrorist organization and begins working as a double agent for the real CIA. She finds out that her father, from whom she has been estranged for most of her life, is a double agent as well. Then (still with me?) she discovers that her mother, whom she long believed was dead, is in fact alive and working with a rival terrorist fac-

**The power of *Alias* lies in the way it shows the connection between the family of origin and the destructive system of heterosexuality.**

tion. It goes on and on like this — every twist is more extreme than the last.

As part of this convoluted, few of the relationships in the series remain steady, especially those between Sydney and her family. In the first two seasons, Sydney's family of origin is represented by SD-6: her father works there, her boss, Arvin Sloane, is clearly the patriarch of that space, and there's even some confusion about whether or not he might in fact be her biological father. Sydney discovers halfway through the first season that she was part of a CIA operation that trained children to be agents from childhood. Without her knowledge or consent, Sydney was trained from childhood toward a specific way of being in the world — to participate in a specific system. When we consider this in comparison to the way kids are trained from child-

hood, without their knowledge or consent, to participate in heterosexuality, the parallels between Sydney's relationship with SD-6 and that of a queer kid with her family of origin become striking.

Perhaps because of this instability in her family of origin, and her inability to rely on her parents for unconditional support, Sydney's family of choice is clearly the source of her emotional sustenance. This is why it's so heart-breaking when her connections with her family of choice are constantly jeopardized by the machinations of her family of origin. Her fiancé is murdered under Sloane's direction, with the approval of her father, after she tells him she's a spy, and her best friend is murdered by an agent from a rival faction (possibly connected with her mother) and replaced by a double.

Not to say that I think that the straight families of queer kids are necessarily destructive forces — but I think the power of *Alias* lies in the way it shows the connection between the family of

origin and the destructive system of heterosexuality. Sydney's connection with her parents is deep and lends the show much of its emotional power, and I don't think that connection is wholly negative. The problem — and thus the thematic connection to the problem of so many queer people — lies in the way that this family compels Sydney to participate in a system that is ultimately destructive to her. It wouldn't seem explicitly queer in that — after all, unwanted parental pressure is the subject of loads of literature that doesn't have a queer subtext. It's Sydney's weekly drag act as she negotiates the minefield of familial relationships that resonates most deeply with this queer viewer, at least. Hopefully that's indicative of some kind of trend. ▼

*Anne Moore lives in Winooski and her favorite secret identity is a New York stockbroker named Mike.*