

Queer Eye on Springfield

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"We're here, we're queer, get used to it." emphatically chant the participants in Springfield's annual Pride Parade.

"We are used to it," responds young Lisa Simpson as they pass by 742 Evergreen Terrace. "You do this every year."

Although everyone's favorite 8-year-old progressive is used to it, there has never been an openly gay character -- as a series regular -- on The Simpsons in its 16-year run. That all ends on Feb. 20, however, when someone comes out of the proverbial closet.

Yep, someone in Springfield is gay.

The plot: Gay marriage is legalized in Springfield to raise money for the town, Homer becomes a minister and a series regular participates in a same-sex hitching.

To me it seems strange for a show that has been on the cutting edge of making snarky cultural observations for more than a decade and a half -- a show that thrives on irreverence and diversity -- to not already have a regular "out" character.

Though to be fair there has been the occasional queer guest star -- something we should recognize and applaud.

Cast member Hank Azaria did a redux of his lovable Agador Spartacus character from The Birdcage. And auteur Jon Waters appeared as the owner of a kitschy vintage store who befriends Homer (when Homer wants to set Jon up with some local ladies Marge gently explains Jon's orientation to her husband. "He pre-

fers the company of men," she says. "Who doesn't?" responds lunkhead Homer).

I also find it strange that coming out of the closet is still a big deal -- such a big deal that since the announcement about the episode was made by series creator Matt Groening last August, people have been placing bets online about who the outed character will be. I'm more interested in the social implications of the writers' choice rather than who's sleeping with whom.

Let's consider the more obvious candidates.

On BetUS.com the recipient of most wagers is Marge's sister, Patty, who we've seen in previous expose shots coming out of Springfield's local brothel, La Maison Derriere. Then again, that doesn't mean anything. It only presumes that a straight woman can't appreciate the female form -- whatever. These favorable bets are more likely a result of a rumor circulating that in the upcoming episode, "There's Something About Marrying," Patty falls in love with and subsequently marries a local female golf pro.

The relationship between Lenny and Carl has also been speculated about and bet upon. Although it would be exciting to see an interracial, queer relationship on a network television series, I fear it would reinforce the juvenile notion that men can't be close friends without also being gay -- an assumption that does a disservice to men regardless of orientation.

Finally, surprise, surprise -- there are a significant number of bets being placed on Smithers, devoted assistant to Mr. Burns.

While it's easy to assume that Smithers is gay, it's only because of clues that reinforce stereotypes about queer identity. He collects Malibu Stacy dolls and wrote a musical about them. He resides in the Castro-like district of Springfield where he can be seen roller-skating. He owns one of Judy Garland's old velvet suits. He listens to ABBA. He has a notorious obsession with Mr. Burns -- though we may be thinking of Smithers' orientation too narrow mindedly.

Executive producer Al Jean asserted in a recent syndicated article by Stephen Kiehl of the Baltimore Sun, that he has "always thought of Smithers as a Burns-osexual."

Because the episode promises a gay marriage it is unlikely that 1) Burnsie will switch teams and proclaim his love for Smithers or that 2) Smithers would devote himself to anyone else.

Regardless, Smithers coming out would be a disappointment. Obvious. Redundant. Unimaginative. With him, the stereotypes and ambiguity are the joke and I can't imagine the writers giving up on such fertile comedic material, no matter how old the jokes are getting.

The Simpsons could instead do something really thought provoking by choosing someone unexpected -- say conservative Christian and single father of two Ned Flanders. What could be more interesting, subversive, complicated and, therefore, real?

As someone interested in gender issues and popular culture, I have been struggling with several things in regards to this upcoming episode.

Is betting on sexuality a liberating embrace of queer identity? Or does it continue to debase and belittle very real lives? Why is there more emphasis on who's gay than on Springfield's decision to legalize gay marriage -- a much more interesting and timely topic?

As a progressive series that has taken shots at every aspect of American culture, The Simpsons has the power (and the audience) to illustrate or explore something indicative of real life -- to go beyond the stereotype. Will they be so bold?

I expect they will. And I expect "There's Something About Marrying" to be intelligent, thought provoking and hilariously offensive to everyone.

Come Feb. 20, I'll have my eye on Springfield.