

Who's Your Spy Mama?

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No, her first name ain't "Baby" -- it's Sydney. Ms. Bristow if you're nasty.

This season of *Alias* brings us television's first spy mama; and as Ms. Bristow has said herself, she's not like other moms. Being from a family full of double agents, how could she be?

Jennifer Garner's current pregnancy has been written into the show so, thankfully, there'll be no heavy overcoats like Lucy Lawless wore on *Xena, Warrior Princess* or alien abductions a la Gillian Anderson on *The X-Files*. Nope, Syd's baby is the star of this season's story arc (and, for at least the first half of the season until the baby is born, her belly is the star -- but wasn't it always?).

Television has come a long way in regarding babies. Back when Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz wanted to write their pregnancy into *I Love Lucy*, CBS said they couldn't show a pregnant woman on TV (as if twin beds were enough to prevent a married couple from knocking boots, right?). When they managed to blend art and life, they did so under the condition that they would not say the word "pregnant" on air (I guess it must be a dirty word; one for people with king size beds). Instead, they used the word "expecting." That was 1951, but 40 years later, pop culture controversy struck again.

In 1991, Murphy Brown became pregnant, although the actress that played her, Candace Bergen, wasn't. Murphy's choice to be a single mother became political fodder for the then Vice President,

Dan Quayle, who went on to publicly criticize Brown for eschewing a more traditional lifestyle. Yes, he criticized Brown the character personally -- as if she were a real person -- rather than the series itself. But hey, that was Quayle for ya. The eponymous series brilliantly used Quayle's narrow-minded polemic against him by airing a show on the controversy that not only validated Murphy Brown as a series, but that validated alternative families as well.

Though I wholeheartedly champion representations of single mothers and pregnant women on TV, like many fans and critics, I had concerns about a pregnant Sydney being a jump-the-shark storyline. But *Alias* has jumped the shark, been eaten by it and come back to life -- as often as its multitude of characters. This season has actually been revived through Garner's pregnancy because now the show has an excuse to leave behind the chum of convoluted, ill-conceived storylines and focus on what it's always been about, which is Sydney's evolution as a woman, a daughter and an agent. Ironically, this season's tagline, "Expect more," channels Lucy, Desi and little Desi Jr. and reveals just how much American cultural ideas about women and morality have changed.

In a series where removing eyeballs via plastic sporks is the norm du jour, Sydney's pregnancy is being handled with the same amount of matter-of-factness and irony as every other plot line. It hasn't overwhelmed the show, but it hasn't been ignored either. I doubt we'll see Agent Bristow singing a rendition of Aretha Franklin's classic "You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman" to the child (like Murph did). She'll be too busy kicking ass and taking names.

Though we won't be seeing her do this in lingerie for a while (it's a tragedy, yes) Sydney's uber-hotness is compiled of more than her statuesque physique -- it also comes from seeing her in action. Throughout the series' run, her femininity has been embraced but it hasn't defined her -- and Sydney's pregnancy is no exception. Her swollen belly is just another of her many dis-

guises. It exaggerates her feminine exterior, which in turn conceals her actual strength.

What's been great about a character like Sydney is that while she may be flawlessly beautiful, that outer beauty has been continuously juxtaposed with intelligence, integrity and agency. Exploring her role as a mother will only continue to add to her complexity.

Don't you wish she were your spy mama?