

When Mom's a Psychic A Review of *Medium*

A woman is driving down a dark highway and passes a bar with a pink neon beer mug in the window. The radio plays a country-western tune about riding the rails. The car suddenly skids and slides over a cliff. The woman is now hanging upside down in her car, as the radio plays Vince Gill singing, "Nobody knew how she made it come true/ Jenny dreamed of trains." As the blood drips down her face, she looks in her rearview mirror, and sees...Allison Dubois, who wakes up with a gasp. Cue intro music to the TV show *Medium*. {link here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcC40Ex0ytU>}

While the above scene doesn't actually come from the show, it does follow the formula for a typical episode. Allison Dubois is the medium of the show's title, a middle-aged mom who just happens to serve as the link between the living and the dead. Most shows start with one of Allison's mysterious dreams, and the rest of each episode is devoted to figuring out what she is supposed to do with the confusing, ambiguous information the dead are sending. Apparently, dying steals the ability to speak in straightforward sentences. This leaves weird word association, odd coincidences, and ghostly mirror images as the primary communication methods. If *Verizon* figures out how to get reception on the other side, the episodes will be much, much shorter.

If a medium is someone who "channels" the spirits of the dead, the show itself channels the spirit of an anxious age. There is, first, the anxiety of the modern mom. Allison's three blonde daughters figure heavily in the plots of the show. The two older daughters have inherited Allison's psychic gift, and she cannot protect them from the horrors they are shown and the burdens the gift imposes. Her role as wife is also fraught with uncertainty. As you can imagine, sleeping with someone who regularly wakes up gasping in terror is not that much fun, and most episodes have at least one fight scene between Allison and her long-suffering husband Joe. And the family is not free from economic anxiety either; this season, both the adults are unemployed, and Allison is facing the pressure of trying to turn her spiritual talents into cold hard cash. In the sense that it is really just another show about the nuclear family, *Medium* is like a more twisted *Bewitched*, with kidnappers, rapists, and serial killers taking the place of Samantha Stephens's wacky Uncle Arthur and wild cousin Serena.

The show also channels our anxiety about crime, since most episodes showcase Allison's work with the Phoenix police and district attorney as they attempt to catch a criminal, usually someone who has attacked a helpless female. The crimes are shown in graphic, blood-soaked style, so if you are the queasy type, *Medium* may give you a taste of Allison's creepy dream life. Though I'm not wild about the worn-out damsel in distress and serial killer motifs, I do like the ambiguity of Allison's psychic abilities. Her access to knowledge about the future is messy and unpredictable, and in that way I prefer the show's depiction of spiritual ways of knowing to the feel-good "reality" of someone like John Edward. On his show, *Crossing Over*, the dead are always well, they always have something nice to say to the living, and psychic powers make everybody, especially the host, wealthy and wise.

Which is not to say that *Medium* is especially deep or critical. There usually is a "right" answer in the end, and the Dubois family is always blonde and loving. If you want smart, critical

and truly creepy, see the best movie ever made about psychic powers—and maybe the most fundamentally terrifying film in history—*Don't Look Now*. {link here to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpOL_tLvi7w}

But if you are looking for entertainment and not enlightenment, *Medium* is not a bad way to spend an hour on Monday nights. The show is fun, cheesy TV-- just formulaic enough to serve as a satisfying weekly ritual, and just smart enough that you don't lose points on the SAT by watching.