

shameless

Despite *Shameless*'s critical acclaim, William H. Macy's brand-new Screen Actors' Guild Award for his portrayal of despicable family patriarch Frank Gallagher was the Showtime series' first major award win since it debuted in 2010. Chronicling the fleeting highs and ever-deepening lows of the self-destructive and dysfunctional Gallagher family, *Shameless* is one of the most underrated shows on TV. It's not polished, it doesn't have any costumed crusaders; it's just a show about flawed people trying to escape less-than-ideal circumstances.

Now in its fifth season and recently renewed for a sixth,

Shameless doesn't seem to inspire much online discussion outside of Tumblr and Twitter. When the end of the year rolls around, lots of critics will rave about star Emmy Rossum's performance as eldest Gallagher sibling Fiona, a young woman who's struggling to care for her five younger siblings while also trying to get a grip on her own life—but beyond that, it's almost as if the show doesn't exist. And that's a shame, because it's telling some of the most interesting stories on TV right now. For example, in a recent episode, 14-year-old Debbie (Emma Kenney)—who was once a symbol of innocence for the series—took advantage of her unconscious, older ex-boyfriend, not even realizing

that what she was doing qualified as rape. It was a big moment for the character; she'd finally lost her much-loathed virginity in an arc that's been uncomfortable to watch since the moment it began last season. But Debbie doesn't fully understand sex, and considering her young age and the circumstances in which she was raised, that's not surprising. Now, *Shameless*'s writers may have fumbled the story a bit—when Lip (Jeremy Allen White) found out, he didn't exactly try to help his younger sister understand the ramifications of her behavior, which I certainly wasn't expecting. But a later scene that featured Fiona and Debbie sitting together in silence is a perfect example of how the show can take the raw and unfortunate and turn it into something beautiful. In fact, it was poignant and heart-

breaking to the point that I wondered why no one appeared to be talking about it online. It was the sort of storyline that would normally inspire several think pieces about the portrayal of sexuality and rape on television—especially given Debbie's young age—and yet very few people wrote about it, save for the few sites who recap or review the show weekly. And even then, those reviews couldn't agree on whether or not *Shameless* was A.) trying to make a joke but failed horribly, or B.) trying to make a statement about Debbie's difficulties in comprehending the world she lives in. I didn't find anything funny about it, and I don't believe the series, which spends a lot of time mining uncomfortable situations for dark comedy, was going for laughs. (For what it's worth, Kenney took to Twitter after the episode aired to confirm that it wasn't an attempt at humor).

But I have to ask again, why isn't anyone talking about it? Is it because Debbie wasn't the victim of rape, but the rapist? If something like this had happened on a show like *How to Get Away With Murder* or on one of cable's more buzzed-about dramas, the internet would've had a field day. So why are people ignoring Debbie's story? And furthermore, why aren't more people talking about the show's depiction of sexuality in general?

As fans of *Shameless* are well aware, the series has never shied away from sex, or from using it as an entrypoint to tell larger stories. The relationship between Ian (Cameron Monaghan) and Mickey (Noel Fisher) began as a purely physical one in Season 1, but has since evolved into one of TV's most well-written and nuanced gay partnerships. And

in Season 4, when Mickey finally accepted his sexuality and came out to his violent, disapproving father and a bar full of people, it was a monumental moment, not to mention the product of four seasons' worth of character development. But just like Debbie's recent arc, it didn't make much of a splash with regard to critical chatter. *Shameless* just doesn't seem to get any credit for tackling the complex issues that earn other shows heaps of praise.

Perhaps the show is at a weird disadvantage because it's difficult to review and discuss on a weekly basis. (We've covered it here on TV.com in the past, but even though we know many of our readers are fans, the stories never generated as much interest or performed as well as expected.) Perhaps its greatness is easy to overlook because the Gallaghers and the people they associate with aren't always likable people, or because they're constantly making bad decisions. Perhaps people don't like to talk about how the Gallaghers are poor because they don't like being reminded that there are plenty of poor people out there, dealing with some of the very same issues and problems. Or perhaps the ever-present debate over whether the show should be



comedy or a drama turns away folks who are looking for something a little more clear-cut. I suppose the show should be thankful for.



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