

Technically, Malcolm will no longer be the kid in the middle this season. His mom is having another baby.



Sneak Peeks

From '24' to 'Gilmore Girls,' our spies spill the beans on what's happening on your favorite shows this season.

WHY bother getting worked up over all the new fall series when in a few months almost all of them will be gone.

What TV viewers really care about is what's going to happen on their favorite shows.

How are they going to get rid of Rob Lowe on 'The West Wing'?

Will Malcolm still be in the middle?

Will the next season of '24' be the second worst day in Kiefer Sutherland's life?

You have questions. We have answers — well, some answers.

Here is everything we could find out about the shows you're really anticipating.

"BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER": Giles will be back for at least 10 episodes (he was sorely missed).

Willow's lover Tara will not be back, however, despite the show's propensity for revivifying the dead. (Creator Joss Whedon wants Willow's pain to be "real.")

He also insists Willow will continue to be portrayed as a lesbian and while a new lover is not ruled out, if one appears it won't be a man.

Sunnydale High gets rebuilt and that means the Hellmouth it sits on becomes an express ramp for the return of many of the show's top underworld villains: look for Glory, Faith, and Drusilla, among others.

The good news is that Sarah Michelle Gellar realizes it's time to holster that wooden stake after this season.

The bad news is that Whedon is deluding himself into thinking the show might go on: he seems to be positioning Buffy's whiny little sister Dawn as the next Slayer for seasons eight and beyond. **Tues., 8 p.m. on WWOR/Ch. 9, starting 9/24**

"MALCOLM IN THE MIDDLE": Jane Kaczmarek is pregnant and so is her character Lois — at least once November sweeps week rolls around.

Until then, look for her to be standing behind lots of potted plants clutching a throw pillow to her tummy.

Wayward newlywed Francis (the droll Christopher Masterson) ends up on a dude ranch, which

surely has to be an improvement over the slave-like conditions of the Alaskan logging camp he escaped from last season.

And Malcolm (no longer strictly in the middle once the baby is born) is a freshman at high school where he finds out he's a geek and depressingly unpopular. **Sun., 9 p.m. on WNYW/Ch. 5, starting 11/3**

"ER": As long as there are medical emergencies there will be an "ER," even if it means every character will have dated every other character at least twice by now.

Noah Wyle is the heart of the show, since Anthony Edwards and Eriq La Salle have checked out.

The late lamented sitcom "Popular" is the source for Leslie Bibb, who plays a new intern for Wyle's Dr. John Carter to mentor. Presumably that mentoring will be strictly professional since — when the season opens — he and Abby (the stand-out Maura Tierney) give each other full physicals in the friendliest manner possible.

Don Cheadle provides an adrenaline rush come November sweeps with a four episode arc as a surgical intern.

Best of all, the Machiavellian Dr. Romano reportedly gets part of one arm severed while on the hospital's rooftop helipad. The limb gets reattached but he may be unable to perform surgery again. **Thurs., 10 p.m. on WNBC/Ch. 4, starting 9/26**

"SMALLVILLE": Lana survives the tornadoes that tore through Smallville during the season finale, of course. That leaves her and Chloe to tussle over the heart-tuggingly handsome Clark Kent, who will remain chaste and true to the ideals of Superman.

Lex Luthor will get married, briefly, and Clark will serve as his best man.

Lex will get ever-so slightly nastier in season two, but most of his anger will still be directed at dear old dad's legacy instead of at Clark and the world at large.

Financial troubles arise on the Kent homestead (and it's about time, since no family farm of their modest size could survive easily in today's climate). **Tues., 9 p.m. on WPIX/Ch. 11, starting 9/24**

"GILMORE GIRLS": The folks behind the best show on television aren't making it easy for the lovelorn Gilmore girls.

Lorelai seems fated to be with grunting diner owner Luke and Rory seems goofy over less (they shared their first quick kiss — a peck, really — at the end of last season).

But Rory avoids Jess because she doesn't know what to say to him, and he responds by taking up with a tattooed chick of questionable morals who makes out with him at another one of Stars Hol-



The tornado that hit "Smallville" didn't kill Lana — despite how it looks.



You would think Sydney has enough to deal with already — now she has a mother.

low's endless community gatherings.

That pushes Rory to commit to Dean, the dimwitted but sweet fellow who everyone likes but is clearly not a good match for Rory.

Both Lorelai and Rory are refusing to speak to Rory's biological dad Christopher, who all but moved in until his almost ex-girlfriend announced she was pregnant and he felt obliged to take off and be with her.

Lorelai's mother Emily, a Wasp supreme, butts in by talking to Christopher and inviting him to the weekly family dinner.

Rory's dream of going to Harvard may actually be dashed (she's a senior now) by the obvious practicalities of going to her grandfather's alma mater Yale. **Tues., 8 p.m. on WPIX/Ch. 11, starting 9/24**

"ALIAS": We're still trying to figure out all the plot twists of last season.

But Sydney is done tangling with dad and will have a new mom (the sultry Lena Olin) to contend with this year.

Olin is the latest addition to the best-cast bit of fluff on television, thanks to returning regulars like Victor Garber and Ron Rifkin.

But best of all is Jennifer Garner as Sydney, who would be the funnest choice to win the Best Actress Emmy. If she doesn't, expect her to kick some butt (or at least look terrific while losing). **Sun., 9 p.m. on WABC/Ch. 7, starting 9/29**

"THE SIMPSONS": Fans who long for a feature film from Bart, Lisa, et. al. know they'll have to wait until the show calls it a day. And after 14 years on TV, that day still does not look to be soon.

Creator Matt Groening said they were probably closer to the end of the show than to the beginning. But that could be true even if it airs for another 12 years.

The roll call of guest stars continues, with Adam West and Burt Ward voicing Batman and Robin, musical cameos on the season premiere for Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, along with Tom Petty, Elvis Costello and others. **Sun., 8 p.m. on WNYW/Ch. 5, starting 11/3**

"7TH HEAVEN": The WB's top-rated show loses two key cast members. Jessica Biel — who practically begged to be fired by posing naughtily for a men's magazine — finally just quit.

And Teen Beat magazine mainstay Barry Watson was also pursuing a movie career until he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease. Now he'll appear in two or three episodes and work with the writing staff while undergoing chemotherapy. (A plot twist worthy of any soap.) **Mon., 8 p.m. on WB/Ch. 11, starting 9/16**

"24": The freshest, most addictive show of last season returns and you can expect CTU agent Jack Bauer's life to remain thoroughly miserable.

Taking it one day at a time is murder for this guy.

Bauer is definitely a widow (so goodbye to the fine Leslie Hope) and President Palmer (the terrific David Haysbert) is not, so you might see more of his duplicitous wife Sherry.

In any case, Palmer will call on Jack in some capacity, while newcomer Sarah Wynter plays a wealthy but attractive woman caught in the midst of one of Bauer's very complicated plots.

His daughter starts working as a nanny, so don't be surprised if the parents of those kids turn out to be triple agents or something. **Tues., 9 p.m. on WNYW/Ch. 5, starting 10/29**

"WILL & GRACE": The show's creators are planning to restore a semblance of reality to this over-the-top (and not in a good way) sitcom that was briefly the brightest show on TV.

Will might even get a regular boyfriend.

Kevin Bacon is reported to play one of Will's dates. And Gene Wilder pops in to play Will's boss at the law firm. (No word if he'll be clutching his personal hankie.)

Harry Connick Jr. — the man on a horse who mysteriously rescued Grace at the end of last season — returns for a few shows.

He's a doctor and he's single and he's straight, so obviously that bid for more reality won't last long. **Thurs., 9 p.m. on WNBC/Ch. 4, starting 9/26** —Michael Giltz