

**Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci**  
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# **Genre Analysis of TV Show Reviews**

**Bachelor Thesis**

Appendix

**2022**

**Filip Večeřa**

## Analyzed texts in their full form

### Explanatory notes

Placeholders:

[picture] – picture not copied

[photo] – photo of author not copied

[trailer] – trailer not copied

[stars] – stars not copied

Moves annotation (according to colors):

Move
Title
Post-title
Introduction
Characters/actors
Plot
Setting
Comparison
Format
Background information
Evaluation
Case in point
Final evaluation
Practical information

Relevant passages in **bold**

Texts are uniformly formatted, pictures are downscaled

Allen, Nick. 2020. "Netflix's The Letter for the King Written with Medieval Cliches." *RogerEbert.com*. March 23, 2020. Accessed February 9, 2022.  
<https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/netflixs-the-letter-for-the-king-written-with-medieval-cliches>.

## Netflix's The Letter for the King Written with Medieval Cliches

**Nick Allen** March 23, 2020



The most unique feature of Netflix's teen knight series "The Letter for the King" might be its proper nouns: Tiuri; Dagonaut; Ardanwen; Unauwen; Lavinia; Evellian, etc. These are the names and places from a world originally created by author Tonke Dragt, and they're like window dressing for a series that otherwise feels like it's been built up from medieval cliches. "The Letter for the King" will certainly have a more forgiving audience with younger viewers, especially if they don't recognize pivotal dramatic beats, character details, or general plot directions. But as quests go, "The Letter for the King" tests the limits of when distracting entertainment is too familiar to be fun.

Amir Wilson plays our underdog hero Tiuri, a young man raised by his powerful stepfather Sir Tiuri the Valiant (David Wenham) to become a knight, even though Tiuri is smaller than others, and not very good with a sword. Sir Tiuri is so focused on getting his adopted son to knighthood that he even rigs a competition, ultimately causing him to be looked down upon by his peers. When Tiuri participates in sacred knight training with his fellow wannabe knights one evening, Tiuri goes rogue from the group to assist an old man pleading for help, one of the story's first examples of a decent theme about the courage it takes to do the right thing. But Tiuri finds himself responsible for an important letter, handed to him by a **soon-to-be-dead** man called The Black Knight (Ben Chaplin). We don't know exactly what the letter says until later (and it becomes one of the less exciting Maguffins in recent storytelling history), but **we** know that it came from the menacing Prince Viridian of Unauwen (Gijs Blom), who just won a major victory. Every now and then, the show cuts back and forth to show that he is up to no good (like when he murders a shaman and breathes in their powers, for starters), and it becomes one of the series' many flat portrayals of villainy.

The drama of “The Letter for the King” concerns three kingdoms—Evellian (where Tiuri is originally from), Dagonaut (where Tiuri was raised by his mother and stepfather), and Unauwen (where the letter must go). Even for just three kingdoms, the series can be a little exhausting when keeping track of who is from where (a “Game of Thrones”-like recap might have benefited this series in particular, something Netflix seems largely defiant of). But once you get the gist, “The Letter for the King” can be pretty straightforward—a wide-screen quest through some inspired locations (like a monastery at the top of a mountain), with Tiuri soon receiving help from a princess of Dagonaut named Lavinia (Ruby Ashbourne Serkis), who was originally intended to be married off by her father (Andy Serkis, in a fleeting appearance). They’re the main duo (along with tenacious steed Ardanwen) that travels with the letter to get it to said king, while being chased by Viridian’s Red Riders through the snowy mountains, onto a boat, and toward the kingdom of Unauwen.



Tiuri's peers are also on his tail, like the lute-playing goofball Jussipo (Jonah Lees), and the lionhearted Iona (Thaddea Graham). They've been ordered by their superiors to find Tiuri and the letter, and though they are not particularly villainous, they go along with it. Their own quest provides some padding to the adventure, and some weak (however welcome) attempts at light-hearted humor. Despite formidable ensemble casting work, they always seem just like kids, instead of young people who want to be killer adults. A gap in the story develops—knighthood never registers as a fun concept, instead it's an obligation by parents. For all the power that comes with being a knight, it equates knightthood with getting through a standardized test.

“The Letter for the King” is clearly aiming for the TV-PG audience who want their own “Game of Thrones” or even “Lord of the Rings,” and it's hobbled by that rating more than it should be. Any time there’s a threat of large danger, the outcome is predictable because of knowing who can’t be harmed in such a family friendly story, or that a beat of someone sneaking up slowly for a kill just isn’t going to turn out as the would-be murderer planned. (And when there is a brief killing, the series lets an abrupt cut to someone's shocked reaction do the work.) Given the care that clearly went into the choreography and

the cinematography, the show's sword duels fare better, even if a particular action scene's tension struggles to raise the show's overall pulse.

Almost as if it must continue the trend of Netflix series about people who learn they have super powers (from “Wu Assassins” to “I Am Not Okay with This” and beyond), an element of magic is thrown into “The Letter for the King.” Like a lot of the stuff raised here, including an eye-popping climactic battle that looks like it was inspired by a “Final Fantasy” game, it's a bright element whose promise is snuffed out by dominating **mediocrity**. First it's in how Tiuri initially hears voices, making his hero saga seem **obvious**; then it's a big reveal about destiny that while **surprising**, doesn't have the jaw-dropping impact that prophecies in fantasy stories once had. It's the kind of detail that might have stood out if this weren't the thousandth tale to wield it, but it is telling about the whole show—even magic makes “The Letter for the King” seem ordinary.

*All of season one screened for review.*

[trailer]

Baldwin, Kristen. 2020. "At long last, *Locke & Key* is here — and it's delightful: Review." *Entertainment Weekly*. February 1, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2022.  
<https://ew.com/tv-reviews/2020/02/01/locke-key-netflix-review/>.

## At long last, *Locke & Key* is here — and it's delightful: Review

By [Kristen Baldwin](#)

February 01, 2020 at 03:01 AM EST



CREDIT: CHRISTOS KALOHORIDIS/NETFLIX

Fans of *Locke & Key* — the horror-fantasy comic series by [Joe Hill](#) and Gabriel Rodriguez — spent the entirety of the 2010s waiting for an on-screen adaptation that never materialized. Fox tried first, back in 2011, but [ultimately passed on the pilot](#). Universal's proposed film trilogy, announced in 2014, didn't happen, and last year Hulu **pulled the plug** on *their* version of the series, even though the writers had reportedly already [banged out seven scripts](#).

It's all the more impressive, then, that the *Locke & Key* hitting Netflix on February 7 bears not even a **whiff of "development hell" stink**. The 10-episode supernatural drama — developed by Carlton Cuse (*Lost*), Aron Eli Coleite (*Heroes*), and Meredith Averill (*Star-Crossed*) — is an entertaining and heartfelt family adventure about growing up, coping with loss, and finding a demon at the bottom of a well on your haunted estate.

Imagine *Goosebumps* for grown-ups, or *Stranger Things* on antidepressants.

After her husband Rendell (Bill Heck) is murdered, Nina Locke (*Scandal*'s [Darby Stanchfield](#)) relocates her three children to her late spouse's "ancestral home" in Massachusetts — a creepy Victorian monstrosity known as Key House. While teenagers Tyler ([Connor Jessup](#)) and Kinsey (Emilia Jones) are standard-issue sullen about the move, 10-year-old Bode ([It's Jackson Robert Scott](#)) is content to ramble unsupervised around the Locke family's sprawling new property. **It's almost comical how often Bode is left alone to wander into potentially dangerous situations — all in the service of story, of course.** In the gloomy and sinister looking "wellhouse," the boy meets Dodge (Laysla De Oliveira), a comely spirit who urges Bode to bring her the magical keys hidden throughout his new home.

Of course Dodge is actually an evil demon, and soon Bode, Tyler, and Kinsey find themselves engaged in a battle for possession of the enchanted keys. While *Locke & Key* openly embraces many familiar elements of its genre — beginning with a haunted house straight out of central casting — it supplements the more formulaic elements with **genuinely imaginative** storytelling. Many of the keys Bode discovers will be recognizable to fans of the comics — from the Anywhere Key that enables users to travel, well, anywhere, to the Head Key, that lets you enter and explore your mind (or someone else's). Cuse and company have a tremendous amount of fun with the latter key in episode 3, as the Locke kids get inside their own heads (Bode's is a kinetic and colorful arcade, while Kinsey's is a hyper-organized shopping mall).

The keys can have sinister uses, too — this is a horror story, after all. But much like his father, [Stephen King](#), Hill **has a knack for** crafting scary tales with heart. *Locke & Key* uses the genre to explore temporal issues ranging from addiction and abuse to peer pressure and high-school love triangles. In the world of this show, most adults are unable to experience magic (“**This is how stuff always works,**” notes Bode), so much of *Locke & Key*'s success rides on the appeal of the young cast. Jessup and Jones deftly tread the line between teenage bravado and vulnerability, while 11-year-old Scott blends the cherubic sheen of a child actor with the nuanced comic timing and natural charisma of an actor who happens to be a child. Coby Bird, a 17-year-old performer with autism, is a charming stand-out as Rufus, the autistic groundskeeper at Key House and Bode's ally in the war against Dodge.

It can be intimidating to delve into a show based on beloved intellectual property if you're not familiar with the source material, but *Locke & Key* presented no barriers to entry for this newcomer. In the interest of due diligence, **I grilled** longtime *Locke & Key* comics fan [Christian Holub](#) (who watched all 10 episodes as well); he characterizes the series as a faithful adaptation with a few notable updates. (The “Gender Key” and “Skin Key” that allowed characters to change their sex or race in the comics, for example, have been combined into the “Identity Key,” which lets the user shape-shift into any person her or she likes.)

None of the episodes suffer from Netflix bloat; the writers deliver a steady supply of answers (about the keys, Rendell's troubled past, Dodge's ultimate goal) while making effective use of binge-friendly cliffhangers. **Sure**, some of the twists and misdirects along the way tilt toward **predictable** (even if you haven't read the comics), **but** the finale offers a **satisfying** action-climax while setting the table for a season two. For a show that deals so

**intently** with loss — of loved ones, of innocence — *Locke & Key* is a surprisingly  
**rewarding** endeavor. **Grade: B+**

*Locke & Key* premieres February 7 on Netflix.



Balial, Nandini. 2022. "Apple TV+ Thriller Suspicion Raises Too Many Doubts." *RogerEbert.com*. February 4, 2022. Accessed February 10, 2022. <https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/suspicion-uma-thurman-apple-tv-review-2022>.

## Apple TV+ Thriller Suspicion Raises Too Many Doubts

Nandini Balial February 04, 2022



Almost exactly a month ago, Apple became the first corporation in history to reach a market cap of \$3 trillion. While I'm sure this was a reason for the 45-year-old company to celebrate, it doesn't seem like any of this money went into hiring quality writers for their new Apple TV+ thriller series, "Suspicion." Unless you're bored out of your skull, you should save your curiosity for a better show.

Uma Thurman plays Katherine Newman, a communications strategist who works exclusively with villains. Cooper Newman Public Relations specializes in constructing "a version of reality that is usually at odds with someone else's." Her son Leo (Gerran Howell) is kidnapped at New York City's Park Madison Hotel by five assailants, disguised in flabby rubber masks of the Royal family. The kidnappers post the video of the abduction on the internet; it promptly goes viral and becomes a meme.

The cast of "Suspicion" is the Benetton of suspects, which is to say its diversity is performative and lacks depth. Kunal Nayyar makes the best of a bad job as hacker Aadesh Chopra, who is arrested at his family home, where he lives with his wife, adult brothers, and their carpet cleaning business owner parents. Georgina Campbell, saddled with a plot nowhere near the terrific "Hang the DJ" episode of "Black Mirror," plays financial adviser Natalie Thompson, arrested during her wedding. Tara McAllister (Elizabeth Henstridge, doing her best Keira Knightley impression), a lecturer at Oxford University, is escorted out during a class. Tom Rhys Harries' performance as Eddie Walker, a failson who doesn't appear to be anything more than a loafing college student partying in New York, provides some of the only **decent** acting on the show. (There's one other **good** performance: Nancy Crane plays Nancy Harper, a no-nonsense version of Diane Walters, who subjects Katherine to a withering live interview.) Sean Tilson (Elyes Gabel, whose accent work

tends to wander from Wales to Scotland to Ireland and back) is never actually arrested, and though I watched the entire show, I still can't tell who he worked for. All five, however, were at the Park Madison Hotel for reasons about as flimsy as my dog's weakest chew toy.



I would liken the show's approach to suspect interrogation to "Rashomon," but that would convey a level of generosity "Suspicion" does not deserve. Every aspect of the production—wardrobe, dialogue, score, direction, cinematography—frequently comes off as the efforts of an AI program that has been fed the Jason Bourne and "Mission: Impossible" franchises. Both those series of films offer brisk writing, **terrific** direction, and, most importantly, **charismatic** performances. The creators of "Suspicion" are using conspiracy thriller tropes so dated I began to wonder whether the show is actually meant to be set in the early aughts. A dull synth and bass-heavy background score—provided by Gilad Benamram, who previously worked on "Fauda"—cannot serve as a substitute for a quality plot.

Perhaps the most hackneyed character dynamic is the post-9/11 tug of war between the practices of British and American authorities. Noah Emmerich must be as bored here as Thurman; "The Americans" alum plays Scott Anderson, an FBI officer who flies to England to assist the investigation. His brash, guns-blazing methods contrast oh-so-unoriginally with Vanessa Okoye (Angel Coulby), a by-the-book officer and chief interrogator from the UK's National Crime Agency.

"Suspicion" is a remake of the Israeli drama "False Flag"—*that* name, **if you ask me**, gives away a tad too much—but instead of Israelis who happened to be in Moscow during an assassination, our motley crew are accused of kidnapping the only child of a crime boss-style PR sorcerer. The kidnappers don't want money. They instead plaster social media and hack, seemingly, the entire internet, with three T's: tell the truth. The slogan, aimed at Katherine, turns into a popular hashtag, international protests, even cable news analysis fodder. **It's** fairly late in the game when the audience finds out what "the truth" refers to, and it casts unwelcome light on the show's ideological underpinning. "Suspicion" seems to

suggest that those challenging the status quo are just as morally bankrupt as those who manufacture fake news.

Everything about the show is **baffling**, including its pedigree. Jennifer Ehle pops up for a two-minute scene with her sister Katherine. Chris Long, celebrated and award-winning director and executive producer of “The Americans,” directed the pilot. Even the costume and hair departments take the path of least resistance: Aadesh’s entire family is almost always dressed in red, orange, and yellow. They’re Indian, **how original!** Katherine’s long straight hair is slightly curled at the ends, reading as a long blond tree at her back, and her clothes scream insurance company middle manager.

Sometimes good ingredients result in a **great** final product, but in this case, almost none of the ingredients were of **good** quality to begin with. “Suspicion” raises too many doubts, and **fails** to resolve any of them.

*All eight episodes screened for review. The first two episodes of "Suspicion" premiere today, February 4th on Apple TV+, followed by one new weekly episode every Friday.*

[trailer]

Cumming, Ed. 2020. "Warrior Nun review: Netflix series is just about eccentric enough to work." *Independent*. July 5, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2022.  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/warrior-nun-review-netflix-episodes-cast-alba-baptista-a9596591.html>.

### Warrior Nun review: Netflix series is just about eccentric enough to work

[stars]

The Catholic material lends even its silliest sequences a certain gravitas, which paradoxically frees the programme from having to take itself too seriously

[Ed Cumming@EdCumming](#)

Sunday 05 July 2020 12:56

[trailer]

There's a time and a place for subtlety in television, and it is not a comic book **adaptation** called *Warrior Nun*.

Netflix's latest play for the kids-but-actually-all-of-us *Stranger Things* demographic is a kind of updated *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* set in contemporary Spain, complete with spooky crypts, angels, hell monsters, avuncular priests and even a swarthy hunk called "JC" (Emilio Sakraya), not to mention the warrior nuns of the title, that's just about eccentric enough to work.

At the outset, a platoon of young women in black ninja outfits is fighting a losing battle against a force of mysterious goons. The sisters, among them Sister Lilith (Lorena Andrea) and Sister Beatrice (Kristina Tonteri-Young) have retreated to a morgue-crypt with a dying comrade with a glowing metal halo in her back. **Think of *Iron Man***, with the nonsensical tech-bro exposition replaced by nonsensical religious exposition.

In a last-ditch attempt to stop this artefact falling into enemy hands, a nurse plunges it into the back of another corpse, Ava (Alba Baptista), a 19-year-old orphan who recently died in unexplained circumstances. With the golden ring lodged between her shoulder blades, Ava comes roaring back to life. In case the viewer was confused about what to expect, a Billie Eilish tune plays as Ava starts to work out what's happened.

She adjusts quickly to her new superhuman strength and regenerative abilities. **"The Catholics are a little twitchy about who gets to be resurrected,"** she says, agreeing with an old friend in the orphanage about the need for secrecy. **"Unless they get to control the narrative."**

Ava does what any self-healing young person would do and sets out in search of a good time. She runs down the beach, dances alone in a bar and jumps into a stranger's pool,

forgetting she can't swim. Luckily, she is rescued by the aforementioned JC, who introduces Ava to his friends, a band of beautiful Euro-misfits who style themselves as rebels against bankers, oligarchs and other faces of The Man. **Sadly, even in modern Spain you can't go around** with a magical halo in your back for long before you draw unwelcome attention. Who is this young woman, and why was she dead in that mysterious crypt in the first place? Soon it will be time for her to join the ninjas and fulfil her destiny. Like *Buffy*, *Warrior Nun* **does not wear its parallels lightly**: the demons of young adulthood versus literal demons, the solace of like-minded souls, the power of institutions to protect and oppress. A lot hangs on Baptista, who must find enough naivety that we can believe in her transition to warrior hero, but not so much that we can't believe in her as a hedonistic 19-year-old keen to do pills and get laid. **On the evidence of the first episode, she strikes a reasonable balance, and despite some flat dialogue and a predictable plot there is an agreeable energy to *Warrior Nun*. The Catholic material lends even its silliest sequences a certain gravitas, which paradoxically frees the programme from having to take itself too seriously. Nuns on the run have always known how to party.**

Cumming, Ed. 2021a. "Mare of Easttown review: Kate Winslet is undimmable despite the encompassing gloom." *Independent*. April 19, 2021. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/mare-easttown-review-kate-winslet-b1833726.html>.

## Mare of Easttown review: Kate Winslet is undimmable despite the encompassing gloom

[stars]

Ed Cumming @EdCumming

Monday 19 April 2021 22:08



**Winslet seems to relish the challenge of the accent and the depressing setting**

(© 2021 Home Box Office, Inc. AI)

What's the collective noun for **Kate Winslet** performances? A raft? Actually, she has a bad record with those. **Anyway**, after her windswept turn as a Victorian fossil hunter in *Ammonite* last month, she's back, in drastically different circumstances. In *Mare of Easttown* (Sky Atlantic), HBO's dark new seven-part miniseries, she plays Mare Sheehan, a detective in the Pennsylvania town of – **wait for it** – Easttown, who is sucked into a murder inquiry while her personal life falls apart.

The stately first episode establishes it as a place of two halves. Most of Mare's work takes place in a sad, rusting town, blighted by unemployment and drug abuse. At home, she's closer to the affluent, suburban side of things. She lives with her mum Helen (Jean Smart), teenage daughter Siobhan (Angourie Rice) and grandson Drew (Izzy King), the son of Kevin, her son who died.

Her ex-husband Frank (David Denman) has moved into a big house backing onto hers with his new partner, where Siobhan can hang out in comfort. Siobhan is academic and **obviously** more middle-class than the other kids around her, enough so she might be able to go to a good college and get out. Victuals reinforce the class divides. While Frank borrows oregano for his rib roast, Mare drinks to live up to her Irish name and eats like a teenage boy, stuffing down pizzas and cheesesteaks and, at one point, squeezing cheese out of a can.

These details, elegantly picked up by the director Craig Zobel, help to build a convincing world. Its star will get most of the attention, but it is well acted throughout. The other standout in this opening episode is Cailee Spaeny (from Alex Garland's *Devs*) as Erin, a teenage mum caught between an angry father and a useless ex-boyfriend. Winslet seems to relish the challenge of the accent and the depressing setting. Beneath the accumulated layers of rage and disappointment, there are flickers of a brave and big-hearted spirit. She starts small, building the character through little details: a flash of annoyance or a wince of pain. When a visiting novelist and creative writing professor, Richard (Guy Pearce), tries to pick her up in a bar, she is initially resistant before she succumbs to the exoticism of this out-of-towner. Men in Easttown usually aren't up to much, so it takes a while for her to thaw.

At times, *Mare of Easttown* feels self-consciously novelistic, and not only thanks to the presence of a novelist. Like Updike's Rabbit Angstrom and Franzen's Patty Berglund, Mare was a high-school basketball star, still remembered by the town for a game-winning shot years ago. Series writer Brad Ingelsby is himself the son of a professional basketball player. As with Mare's literary forebears, adolescent glory weighs heavily on the ordinary life that follows.

Pennsylvania was a Trump swing state, and in the two sides of Easttown we are clearly meant to see two visions of America. Plenty of other series have taken on the gloomy small-town Gothic challenge, but if *True Detective*'s influence is obvious, there are sprinklings of *Broadchurch*, *Fargo* and *Happy Valley*, too. *Mare of Easttown* is much easier to watch than *I Know This Much Is True*, Mark Ruffalo's joyless HBO miniseries from last year, and much of that is down to its star. Mare's undimmed despite the encompassing gloom. Thanks to her, Easttown feels surprisingly warm for a town full of dead teenagers.

Cumming, Ed. 2021b. "The Nevers review: This supernatural period drama is an overstuffed junk shop of ideas." *Independent*. May 17, 2021. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/the-nevers-review-sky-hbo-b1848725.html>.

## The Nevers review: This supernatural period drama is an overstuffed junk shop of ideas

[stars]

At its best, 'The Nevers' offers flashes of the lively dialogue that elevated Whedon's best work. **But** the enthusiasm comes at the expense of developing any of the characters beyond their immediate impact

[Ed Cumming@EdCumming](#)

Monday 17 May 2021 23:20

[trailer]

If **you** ever wondered what it would look like if Derren Brown was put in charge of *X Men*, *The Nevers* (Sky Atlantic) will put **your** mind at ease. Written by the *Buffy* creator **Joss Whedon**, this new six-part **HBO** drama takes the misfit-superhero dynamic and sets it in **a lavishly realised** Victorian London. **Themes** of alienation and acceptance unfold amid horse-drawn chases, expensive special effects, high-society orgies, corset brawls, and wainscoting aplenty. If it sounds like too much of a good thing, **you're** not altogether wrong.

In the last years of the 19th century, a mysterious supernatural event, revealed at the end of this first episode, has bestowed special gifts on a small number of the population. They call themselves "**touched**" but less sympathetic voices call them "**afflicted**". In a 19th-century London dominated by severe old white men, those endowed with these powers are more representative of the **world TV producers want to see in 2021**: a diverse bunch, and mostly women. Instead of Professor Xavier's mutant academy, there's an orphanage for the touched run by Amalia True (Laura Donnelly), with help from her pal Penance Adair (Ann Skelly). True's power is being able to see snatches of the future, which makes her confident in conversation as well as in a scrap. Penance can harness electrical energy, a power she uses to create all kinds of outlandish inventions: a prototype car, a self-driving carriage, and various ornate grenades.

It is not always immediately apparent how useful some of the other gifts, known as "turns", are. Several seem inconvenient. In the opening moments, Amalia and Penance rescue Myrtle (Viola Pettejohn), who's able to speak in a mix of Russian and Chinese.



Primrose (Anna Devlin) is just tall. We hear of another woman who is able to float, but only an inch or so off the ground. Horatio Cousens (Zackary Momoh), who has healing powers, is a more helpful member of the team.

**There is no** shortage of people who want to harness the new powers for their own means, **nefarious** or otherwise. **There's** the government, represented by the flinty minister Lord Massen (Pip Torrens); the wealthy Bidlow family, ruled by Lavinia (Olivia Williams); not forgetting a gang leader, The Beggar King (Nick Frost); a Wildean priapic dandy called Hugo Swann (James Norton), who has a fondness for extortion; and a touched serial killer called Maladie (Amy Manson).

There is **plenty** to look at, and at its best, *The Nevers* offers flashes of the **lively** dialogue that elevated Whedon's best work, on *Buffy* or *Firefly*, by giving its supernatural **shenanigans** a droll lightness of spirit. With such an enormous toy box to play around with, however, this first episode ends up being an **overstuffed junk** shop of ideas, characters, plots, special effects and action sequences. The enthusiasm comes at the expense of developing any of the characters beyond their immediate impact. The dynamic between the two leads is promising. **Despite** their advantages, they must still put up with being young women in a male-dominated world. **But** the relationship is hardly given space to breathe amid all the plotting and exposition.

The series' release has been overshadowed by real-life revelations about [Whedon's historic behaviour](#) towards cast and crew. HBO replaced him as showrunner as fast as they could, but the damage was done. **It's especially unfortunate given *The Nevers*' feminist overtones, but if it puts people off, the programme itself doesn't help itself by failing to provide much in the way of discernible story. The controversy speaks to another of *The Nevers*' themes, and a recurring fixation of Whedon's scripts: the relationship between power and responsibility. It's relevant to showrunners, as well as the plucky young women they depict who take on the forces of darkness.**

Dyer, James. 2020. "Raised By Wolves: Season 1 Review." *Empire*. December 2, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://www.empireonline.com/tv/reviews/raised-by-wolves-season-1/>.

## Raised By Wolves: Season 1 Review



A pair of androids named Mother (Amanda Collin) and Father (Abubakar Salim) flee a dying Earth to raise a litter of human embryos on a distant planet. The environment proves harsh and unwelcoming, however, and the situation complicates further with the arrival of another group of Earth-born refugees: the fanatical, sun-worshipping Mithraic.

[stars]

By [James Dyer](#)

Posted On 02 12 2020

Giving [Ridley Scott](#) a sack of cash and allowing him to noodle the philosophy of the human condition via the medium of science-fiction is surely among the safest bets a studio can make. However, while *Raised By Wolves*' **android-centric** story might evoke notions of *Blade Runner*, its *Prometheus*' presence that is most keenly felt as we explore the barren, hostile landscape of Kepler 22b. As executive producer and director of the series' opening episodes (son Luke Scott directs two more), Scott leans into the hard sci-fi he dabbled with in his divisive *Alien* prequels, **putting his stamp** on a story by Aaron Guzikowski (*Prisoners*, *The Red Road*) that's equal parts castaway yarn and unorthodox parenting drama.



A far cry from either the neon-drenched streets of Deckard's LA or the sulphurous pools of LV-223, Kepler is a desaturated, almost monochrome wasteland. The androids arrive in a no-frills, pill-shaped vessel, wearing grey rubber onesies and phallic caps that do little

justice to the show's not insignificant budget. Scott sets an aesthetic that remains deliberately bare-bones and austere throughout, capturing the planet's harsh environment (shot on location in Cape Town) as the androids attempt **to eke out** an existence while nurturing their clutch of infants. The limited palette expands only slightly with the arrival of the Mithraic ark, and then primarily via arterial red.

When **our** Silicon Family Robinson (programmed by Earth's atheist faction and raising their children accordingly) encounter the zealous believers, the show's mythology begins to properly unspool, and **we're** taken on a journey that explores what it means to be a caregiver, the role of belief and the finer points of human nature. None of these ideas feel particularly **fresh**, nor ground Scott hasn't covered in more depth elsewhere. The story also moves at such a **ponderous** pace that it at times feels more like guided meditation than actual entertainment. It doesn't help that, bar Father (Abubakar Salim) being programmed with a penchant for **terrible** dad jokes, the show is entirely **humourless**, plodding along with a dour nihilism that often makes the atmosphere as spartan and unwelcoming as the environment.



The saving grace, however, is Mother. Amanda Collin is **completely captivating** as the cold yet nurturing android matriarch, who switches from loving to absolutely terrifying in the blink of her weaponised eyes. The true nature of Mother (a retrofitted 'necromancer' android designed as a weapon of war) swiftly becomes the story's most compelling element, with all else (**including** Niamh Algar and [Travis Fimmel](#)'s B plot as atheists posing as believers) rattling along some distance behind.

Collin alone is enough to keep most viewers coming back for more, **but** anyone hoping the pilot's deliberate pacing will eventually pick up is in for a disappointment. What the show **lacks** in velocity, **however**, it does make up for in **demented** plot turns. As the story progresses, we're exposed to a space rapist in an iron mask, stolen eyeballs, flying statues, screams that liquify people and radioactive cucumbers. All building to an Episode 10 finale that is so **mind-bendingly batshit**, it almost ensures viewers will return for Season 2 just to find out what the hell is going on.

Appealing to the head over the heart, this is a somewhat detached existential musing on parenthood, the nature of consciousness and the role of theism. Otherwise known as what might have happened if Prometheus had been ten hours long.

Framke, Caroline. 2021a. “‘Call Me Kat,’ Starring Mayim Bialik, Leans Too Hard on an Ill-Fitting Format: TV Review.” *Variety*. January 5, 2021. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://variety.com/2021/tv/reviews/call-me-kat-review-mayim-bialik-1234878836/>.

## ‘Call Me Kat,’ Starring Mayim Bialik, Leans Too Hard on an Ill-Fitting Format: TV Review

By Caroline Framke

[date]



Fox

There are enough moments in “[Call Me Kat](#)” that veer close to working that they become even more **frustrating** when they **don’t**. Enough **good ingredients** to make a broadcast hit are right there, most notably [Mayim Bialik](#) starring as Kat, her first regular TV role since “The Big Bang Theory” made her a network TV mainstay. A solid supporting cast — including Swoosie Kurtz, Kyla Pratt and Leslie Jordan — accompanies her as she vamps for the camera, which becomes another character all its own as Kat constantly talks straight at it. And in one of the show’s best creative decisions, Darlene Hunt’s “Call Me Kat” doesn’t let Kat, a single 39 year-old Louisville woman who ditched academia to open her own cat café, become the total spinster cliché she could have.

When her fretful mother (Kurtz) asks her if she’s not afraid of becoming “a sad cat lady,” for instance, Kat just smiles, picks up one of her many cats, and insists that she’ll be “a **rad cat lady**.” It’s not a line that deserves the burst of audience laughter it immediately gets, but it’s at least one that makes it clear that Kat **isn’t a completely depressing mess** just because she’s a single 39 year-old who ditched academic to open her own cat café. She genuinely, mostly, likes her life.

This, **unfortunately**, is about the most interesting the show gets in its first four episodes. “Call Me Kat” is ostensibly based on “Miranda,” a screwball comedy from British comedian Miranda Hart. For its own iteration of the show, “Call Me Kat” takes the (very) basic “Miranda” premise of “**a woman in her late thirties runs a shop and doesn’t have a boyfriend**” and Hart’s signature fourth wall breaks in which she talked to her audience, pulled funny faces and shared some of the thoughts she didn’t dare speak aloud to the characters right in front of her. (**For those unfamiliar with “Miranda,” think “Fleabag”**)

with the punctuation of an enthusiastic studio audience.) Kat's mother, like Miranda's, is an eccentric **worrywart** who just want her to get married, already. And like Miranda, Kat pines for her handsome friend, played this time by Cheyenne Jackson. Their dynamic is another point that **suffers** when directly compared to the one that inspired it on "Miranda," where Hart and Tom Ellis had an immediately recognizable romantic chemistry despite the **wacky hijinks** surrounding them at all times. On "Call Me Kat," Bialik and Jackson can barely keep their **friendly banter afloat**, let alone hint at the possibility of anything else beyond it.

Bialik is an **enthusiastic** lead who throws herself headfirst into the challenge of playing Kat as a more fulfilled person than her logline would suggest. But **she doesn't have as firm a grip** on the tone and format as Hart did, and very often feels like she's doing an American impression of Hart's very specifically British character and tone. Turning and grinning at the camera might be a time-honored cheesy sitcom tradition, but it's also deceptively hard to pull off without seeming **distractingly unnatural**, as is the case with "Call Me Kat." Without a sharper central performance to ground it, nor cohesive enough directing and editing to stitch it all together, the show struggles to maintain its own pace and becomes **more jarring than charming**.

*"Call Me Kat" airs Thursdays at 9 pm on Fox.*

Framke, Caroline. 2021b. "Netflix's 'Shadow and Bone' Creates a Smart, Immersive World Distinct From the Novels: TV Review." *Variety*. April 21, 2021. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/shadow-and-bone-review-netflix-1234956287/>.

## Netflix's 'Shadow and Bone' Creates a Smart, Immersive World Distinct From the Novels: TV Review

By Caroline Framke

[date]



COURTESY OF NETFLIX

Adapting a beloved book is one of the trickiest **high wire acts** there is in television. Change too much and risk the wrath of a passionate fanbase; change too little and risk losing the magic in replicated story beats that make more sense on the page than the screen. Despite their constant overlap, television and narrative fiction are two entirely different mediums that usually require entirely different approaches. Embodying what makes a book sing for its readers isn't as easy as casting a bunch of telegenic actors for the parts. It doesn't just require skill, but flexibility to well and truly adapt the material beyond a basic transposal.

Netflix's sharp "[Shadow and Bone](#)" adaptation, from "Arrival" writer Eric Heisserer, tackles [Leigh Bardugo](#)'s popular fantasy series. Comprised of a central trilogy and various spinoffs in its "**Grishaverse**," this is the kind of series with so many of its own terms, languages and traditions that turning on the subtitles might be advisable; otherwise, the constant allusions in invented languages might blend together into one indecipherable syllable soup. Yet it didn't take long for me to become fully enveloped in it, lured in by clever choices, engrossing acting and costuming and production design that **dances on the knife's edge of lush and camp**. And even if it never gets quite as explicitly gory as the book's events might suggest, this "Shadow and Bone" still has its genuinely startling moments, especially when bracing for what lurks inside the seemingly endless darkness of the Fold.

Bardugo's heroine will feel familiar for anyone who's dipped a toe into the genres of YA, fantasy or both. Alina Starkov is a scrappy orphan **who** discovers at the most traumatic

moment of her life that she has special abilities that could save her world from the oppressive “Fold” — a vast expanse of shadows separating warring nations — once and for all. While many others (the “Grisha”) have powers, Alina’s are unique unto herself, making her a classic Chosen One figure whose very existence threatens the old world order while promising a shinier new one.

The Netflix version, however, takes Alina’s unique place a step further by making her biracial. Played by [Jessie Mei Li](#), Alina has long felt out of place in Ravka, the Soviet-esque nation in which she grew up. (Her mother, lost years ago to the Fold, was “Shu,” the series’ stand-in for East Asian.) With only her best friend Mal (Archie Renaux) to rely on, Alina has spent her entire life being told she’s not enough, and therefore all the more determined to prove her worth. Her character **doesn’t** change between the book and screen so much as become a more concentrated version with more room to set herself apart from the source material. (**And yes:** the fact that Alina ends up being the key to save both worlds from themselves after being stuck between them for years makes for a fitting twist on the book’s central conceit.)

Over the course of this first season, “Shadow and Bone” continues to adhere to the book’s original plan, deviate sharply from it and borrow elements of Bardugo’s extended Grishaverse to create a thorny, **immersive** world all its own. It’s an **ambitious** approach, not least because the show only has eight episodes in which to tell the story, making for some **whiplash** transitions as it hurries to get to the next big plot point. For the most part, though, “Shadow and Bone” doesn’t **bite off more than it can chew**, focusing its energy on fleshing out its characters and universe in a way that could sustain it beyond any single book.

Alina’s story unfolds largely as it does throughout Bardugo’s first volume, but the season’s subplots borrow from other books entirely. A trio of “Crow” rogues — acrobatic spy Inej (Amita Suman), sharpshooter Jesper (Kit Young) and ringleader Kaz (Freddy Carter) — aren’t in the “Shadow and Bone” book proper, but nevertheless are an integral part of the series with a mission all their own. The same goes for defiant Grisha Nina (Danielle Galligan) and her wary captor Matthias (Calahan Skogman), though they’re mostly stranded off at the fringes of the show in its least urgent storyline. By expanding “Shadow and Bone” beyond the parameter’s of Alina’s experience, the show makes her world feel that much bigger, denser and complicated. This works especially well for the Crows, with Suman’s Inej and Young’s Jesper provide welcome depth and humor, respectively.



Still, the **driving engine of the show** is Alina, a challenge Li embraces. Whether portraying Alina struggling with her sudden new powers, longing for Mal, or finding herself drawn to the mysterious General Kirigan (an entirely committed [Ben Barnes](#)), Li makes for a **compelling center of gravity**. Her Alina is smart and loyal, annoyed and rash, heartbroken and headstrong. The show's most obvious climaxes tend to involve Grisha throwing the elements at each other, but its most effective unfold entirely on Alina's face, lined with pain, joy and worry.

Often times, the Chosen One character is a story's least interesting, beholden as they are to being the Sun everyone else has to revolve around. That's not the case with Li's Alina, a heroine as believably **vulnerable** as she is bold. Should Netflix give its "Shadow and Bone" enough time beyond this installment to unravel its many tangled threads, there's little doubt that this version of Alina can sustain it.

*"Shadow and Bone" premieres Friday, April 23 on Netflix.*

Franich, Darren. 2020. “*Ratched* ratchets up the crazy and goes off the deep end: Review.” *Entertainment Weekly*. September 14, 2020. Accessed February 9, 2022. <https://ew.com/tv/tv-reviews/ratched-review-netflix/>.

### ***Ratched* ratchets up the crazy and goes off the deep end: Review**

Netflix's prequel to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is nice to look at until the too-ludicrous plot spoils the fun.



By [Darren Franich](#) September 14, 2020 at 10:00 AM EDT



CREDIT: SAEED ADYANI/NETFLIX

*Ratched* tells the same origin story three times. When Mildred Ratched ([Sarah Paulson](#)) arrives at Lucia State Hospital seeking employment, she's a mysterious woman with a complicated mission. The new Netflix drama's eight-episode first season (streaming Sept. 18) doesn't just reveal her past. It reveals, and re-reveals, and then reveals the same thing all over again.

There are actual flashbacks to Mildred's childhood horror, filmed with all the abrasive sensitivity of an Investigation Discovery re-enactment. Dreamlike marionettes also re-enact that same tragic past, trauma tilted hysterical via puppetry: This is a Ryan Murphy show. And then Mildred just tells someone what happened to her, a two-minute soliloquy filmed with an almost unbroken take on Paulson's face. It's a good speech, yet by then it serves no real purpose, like a bonus acoustic track on an overstuffed concept album. That's *Ratched* in a nutshell. Repetitive cycles of mawkish drama and lavish camp undercut whatever the actors are trying to do.

The series knows how to wave its price tag in your face. Mildred drives into postwar Lucia, Calif., and finds a town full of coastal color and Crayola fashion. In the premiere, she crosses Bixby Bridge and finds a cheap cliffside motel with a view right over the ocean. The location shooting is fun, and the sets are big for horizons. Lucia State Hospital is some kind of converted old-money mansion with floral wallpaper, picture windows, and more breakable vases than you expect from an asylum. The nurses wear bright turquoise.

The most dangerous inmate gets stashed in a converted wine cellar. **Bad writing murders great** production design, though. The first time someone walks into the office of Dr.

Hanover (Jon Jon Briones), the facility's chief administrator, you gaze longingly at his boulevard-length curtains. The sixth or seventh time something ridiculous, ultraviolent, and unbelievable happens in that office, **even the curtains look bored.**

Nurse Ratched didn't even have a first name when Ken Kesey created her in 1962's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Louise Fletcher's steely glare in the 1975 film **didn't** need a backstory. The show fills in all the blanks and takes place in a polychromatic 1948 that suggests the Technicolor melodramas of Douglas Sirk. Meanwhile, certain high-tension musical cues nudge Hitchcockian. It's a cheeky conceit for a prequel. Nurse Ratched was the villain of *Cuckoo's Nest*, a hallmark New Hollywood anti-establishment fable with gender lines drawn sharp between a brash male rebel and a deadpan lady boss. Could she be the tragic hero of an earlier Hollywood era? Worth pointing out that, in the show's diverse ensemble of characters, the main white guys are a serial killer, a corrupt politician, and a scarred veteran. That's a sins-of-masculine-privilege hat trick: violent monstrosity, horny disinterest, noble impotence.

Dr. Hanover is an ex-pat Filipino researching the fatal forefront of the psycho-sciences. He experiments with lobotomies and hydrotherapy while getting high on his own supply, and Briones brings the petty tyrant a note of imperial desperation. He's fun, though immediate **plot absurdity** forces you to wonder why Hanover is simultaneously living in hiding *and* seeking mass media coverage. Head Nurse Betsy Bucket (Judy Davis) is Hanover's no-nonsense lieutenant, who cheerfully boils patients' skin off for **the greater good of mental health**. Any story about an asylum is, eventually, about how those in charge are crazier than the patients. So we also meet a nurse named Dolly (Alice Englert), a textbook nymphomaniac attracted to ludicrous danger.

And **we haven't** even gotten to the madman named Edmund Tolleson (Finn Wittrock), who kills a gaggle of Catholic priests in the show's first scene. From there, the premiere follows Mildred's first day at the hospital *and* establishes that everyone is some kind of nutcase, *and* there's a visit from the governor of California ([Vincent D'Onofrio](#)) because his entire re-election campaign somehow rests on an underfunded mental hospital. Don't forget about the mystery man at Mildred's motel, played by a bemused [Corey Stoll](#).

The gubernatorial thread and the Tolleson subplot are already **too much** for a series that's supposed to be about a strange nurse in a curious hospital. Still, the first couple episodes sizzle with romance and danger. The governor's press secretary, Gwendolyn Briggs

(Cynthia Nixon), takes a special interest in the asylum — and in Mildred. The two women go to a restaurant full of windows overlooking the foggy coast. They seem to be communicating messages without quite using words — and that, more than anything, was Sirk's great gift to Hollywood cinema, the sense that all the beautiful people were talking around something too mature for the censors. The scene lasts long enough for meaningful glances to become long stares. And they eat oysters.

It's an **outlandish yet restrained** moment, **electric** with the sense that everyone understands the big thing that nobody's saying. *Ratched* never finds that energy again. The series marks the first major credit for creator Evan Romansky, but Murphy and fellow executive producer Ian Brennan are up to some familiar tricks. [Sharon Stone](#) shows up as a vengefully rich matriarch whose main character trait is asking people to decapitate someone. Sophie Okonedo checks in, playing a multiple personality case who yells, "**Beethoven would f--- you in the face!**" when she's not cursing an invisible Hitler. The first episode ends with a showbreaking revelation that deflects Mildred's whole arc into a top-secret plan that never makes sense. By midseason, everyone either loves a murderer or is a murderer.

**I know, I know, I know:** This is supposed to be what's fun about Ryan Murphy shows! **Wonderful** performers, **kooky** twists, a monkey on Sharon Stone's shoulder, a Spring Fling at the mental hospital, sex through prison bars! *Ratched* is a shirttail [American Horror Story](#) spinoff that owes a clear debt to that anthology's transcendent *Asylum* entry. This is the third series Murphy has launched on Netflix, and it reflects his transgressive instincts better than the dire *Politician* or the preachy *Hollywood*. Something has happened to Murphy and his collaborators in their Netflix victory lap, though. The old luridness keeps edging into feverish moralizing, as if everyone is worried about being *too* offensive. Enemies become allies and vice versa so constantly that the plot momentum becomes its own **weird** stasis. *Ratched* wants **you** to cackle at the characters while also sincerely appreciating their striving souls. There has to be a difference between campy hyperbole and grasping pretension. You want Countess Luann to sing, not explain what her songs mean.

Everything is just **so terribly obvious**, and too many creative decisions are outright **embarrassing**. Consider what happens every time Okonedo's character shifts between her many personalities. The performer's face alters ever-so-subtly because that's what great actors can do. For some reason, a dunce in the editing room added an explanatory whirring noise on the soundtrack. A *personality changing* sound effect? **Come on!** And we surely

can accept a lot of ludicrous story points from our luscious trash. But really: Why would someone record themselves conducting an illegal lobotomy? Why would they *keep* that recording?

Paulson's a problem, unfortunately. Mildred is supposed to be, like, a sympathetic murdering traitorous dedicated dismissive repressed libertine grieving clever villain hero. She lies about everything and is also great at everything, as if Tom Ripley was also Harry Potter. Paulson traps herself in a kind of respectful monotone, playing every corner of Mildred's puzzle-piece psyche with bland cool. You sense what's missing whenever she's in a scene with Davis, who turns Nurse Bucket into a delirious portrait of cruel authority masking lonely insecurity. Davis lets you see the contrast between Bucket's public and private face. That separation may look extinct in our days of social media screaming, but if you can't honor that mood in a period piece, you might as well film some **TikToks with old-timey clothing.**

Worth pointing out that one key point of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is that Nurse Ratched *isn't* an obvious horrorshow. In Kesey's telling, and Fletcher's playing, she represents the **banality** of bureaucratic evil, more monstrous in her everything-just-so normality than any of the crazies she's patrolling. The whole tone of *Ratched* feels like a point extremely missed, and it can't even generate its own upside-down gravity. At times, its rudeness is just crude. One character has a habit of stabbing the various non-white domestic workers in his mansion. None of those victims ever get a scene, or even a real line of dialogue, whereas the attractive young white maniac gets all the laugh lines: **Hmm.** The lone Black employee at the asylum barely appears until his big plot point, and then the characters forget about him in the worst way: **Hmm.**

*Ratched* also features an outrageously **bad** LSD scene, all woo-woo camera angles and "drugs made me do it!" bad behavior, which is a special blight given Kesey's extracurricular activities. I was all set to credit *Ratched* as a glossy misstep, another **nice-to-look-at mediocrity** from a creative coalition that needs some new ideas. And then I got to the finale, which is one of the **worst** hours of television I've ever seen, successfully stitching lame soap opera cliches and lame horror cliches into a veritable Frankenstein of dramatic **lameness**. The clothes are **nice**, but they're dressing a corpse. **C-**

Franich, Darren. 2021a. “*Mare of Easttown* scrambles intriguing family drama with a drab mystery: Review.” *Entertainment Weekly*. April 15, 2021. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://ew.com/tv/tv-reviews/mare-of-easttown-review/>.

## ***Mare of Easttown* scrambles intriguing family drama with a drab mystery: Review**

Kate Winslet plays a troubled cop in HBO's miniseries.

By [Darren Franich](#)

April 15, 2021 at 09:00 AM EDT

**Never judge a book by its cover. But, like, really: *Mare of Easttown*?** That's a confidently terrible title. A network only lets something like that slide by when they believe in the material — or if the only name that matters is the star. [Kate Winslet](#) leads the HBO limited series (debuting Sunday) as Mare Sheehan, a difficult detective in a distressed Pennsylvania township. She's tormented by a missing-teen cold case, which might be the tip of a serial-killer iceberg. She's also tormented by, **well**, everything: broken dreams, divorce, old friends who look at her funny, multiple Rolling Rocks consumed daily, the possibility that suicide is her family's pastime. Can she solve the mystery? Can she solve her emotional issues? Both questions have the same exasperating answer: Probably, eventually.

Winslet helped launch the **movie-stars-on-television** trend with 2011's *Mildred Pierce*. That HBO series came out not long after her Best Actress Oscar, and set the stage for Matthew McConaughey's *True Detective* renaissance. Now *Mare* creator Brad Ingelsby sets this seven-part saga in a very *True Detective*-ish landscape of emotional ruin, where the details of the case matter less than a bleak general mood. Addiction, teen pregnancy, mental disorders, and poverty run rampant. It takes one whole episode for a dead body to show up. By episode 2, everyone seems like they could be the killer, but only because no reveal is too ridiculous to be possible.



**Kate Winslet in HBO's 'Mare of Easttown'**

| CREDIT: MICHELE K. SHORT/HBO

*Mare* begins one year after the disappearance of a local teenager. The victim's mom, Dawn (Enid Graham), keeps going on TV to insult Mare's detective work. **Awkwardly**, Dawn

and Mare are old basketball teammates, reuniting in the first episode at a 25th anniversary celebration for their squad. Mare is a local hero, haunted by the legend of her game-winning basket. **That's a lot to live up to.** And, almost 25 years after *Titanic*, Winslet has great fun living down any notion of aristocratic glamour. Her default expression is an exhausted frown. She sucks on a perpetual e-cigarette, which will never look cool on anyone. The Brit also throws herself into the regional accent — "water" as *wood-er*, "on" with two syllables — and lets her flannel do the talking. When Mare busts her ankle chasing a junkie, Winslet adopts **a magnificent limp** that maps a whole psychology. Every step seems to say: *Christ, another thing to deal with.*

Then another teen girl turns up, not missing but murdered, her corpse missing one finger and most clothes. She has a connection to deadbeat Kenny (Patrick Murney), **whose** cousin is the husband of Mare's best friend Lori (Julianne Nicholson). And Mare's daughter Siobhan ([Angourie Rice](#)) was one of the last people to see the victim alive. And Mare's ex-husband Mark (David Denman) was the victim's teacher. **"There anybody you're *not* related to?"** hotshot county detective Colin Zabel ([Evan Peters](#)) asks Mare, when their case circles once again into her social circle.

Pairing Peters' bright-eyed outsider with Winslet's dour local suggests a spiky procedural. But the miniseries is more interested in exploring its protagonist's home life. Mare is, in fact, a grandmother, raising 4-year-old Drew (Izzy King) while suffering from visions of her dead son Kevin (Cody Kastro). Mare gets a little help and a lot of grief from her own mother, Helen, played by the ever-splendid [Jean Smart](#). Winslet plus Smart equals a **megazord of intimidating** acting talent. But Rice (Betty Brant in the recent *Spider-Man*s) holds her own as a high school senior juggling personal discord with her own dreamy ambitions.



CREDIT: MICHELE K. SHORT/HBO

Siobhan has a band, Androgynous, whose career **I** have become very invested in. We see them play a college radio set at Haverford, hosted by a way-cool DJ named Anne (Kiah McKirnan). Anne flirtatiously offers Siobhan a ticket to see Boygenius at the Met, even though Siobhan's in a relationship with her bandmate. **Drama!** Meanwhile, great-grandma

Helen sips Manhattans with her priest nephew (Neal Huff) and merrily swipe-slashes her iPad games. Then Drew's addict mother (Sosie Bacon) arrives, freshly-rehabbed, to demand sole custody of her child. **Did I mention** that Mark lives with his fiancé in the house right behind Mare's? Romantic intrigue swirls around the Sheehan women. Mare escapes her family on dates with Richard ([Guy Pearce](#)), a briefly famous and very handsome novelist who just moved to town for a teaching gig. Pearce was in *Mildred Pierce*, too, and his onscreen reunion with Winslet sizzles; you believe that these two very different people would hook up immediately. "Did I f--- like a grandma?" Mare asks Richard in the premiere — a line that's either super badass or super campy, **I'll watch 50 more times to decide.**

**Oh, and right, yes: The murder.** *Mare's* investigation unfolds with dull familiarity. Something happens at the end of part 2 that shocked **me**, but then part 3 walks back that shock immediately. There is an episode-ending cliffhanger that so completely points a finger at one suspect you are forced to conclude they're innocent. In the five episodes I've seen, two characters with major plot prominence have nothing to do with the missing-girls story. I don't know whether to credit the series for ambient atmosphere, or criticize it for so obviously hiding final twists in plain sight.

**I'm** talking around some plot developments, and I am invested in finding out Who Did It. Just know that the mystery moves at a glacial pace. The material strains for twisted Opioid Gothic social resonance. Although director [Craig Zobel](#) finds light humor in the family dynamics, he mostly films with a bland strain of mopey premium-cop tastefulness. You feel the lineage of *The Outsider*, *True Detective*, *Broadchurch*, and *The Killing* — a whole genre style that is way past self-serious parody.

Zobel made last year's blow-em-up satire *The Hunt*. I could've used more of that **kitchen-sink verve**. Four generations living under one roof while the ex lives next door: That matriarchal set-up suggests a **quirky-detective** TNT drama. But when Mare's boss sends her to multiple episodes of therapy, the series turns "personal" in the worst way, rendering crimesolving into an act of self-realization for our **troubled-yet-wonderful** hero cop. "This isn't about you, Mare," Siobhan tells her mother. "Not everything is." Someone tell the show. **B-**



Franich, Darren. 2021b. "WandaVision is a boldly surreal new direction for the MCU. Or is it?: Review." *Entertainment Weekly*. [Date missing]. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://ew.com/tv/tv-reviews/wandavision-review/>.

## ***WandaVision* is a boldly surreal new direction for the MCU. Or is it?: Review**

On Marvel's first Disney+ miniseries, Elizabeth Olsen and Paul Bettany look liberated in their sitcom prison.

By [Darren Franich](#)

[date]



CREDIT: MARVEL STUDIOS

[WandaVision](#)

WATCH IT NOW ON [Disney+](#)

If you asked **me** to rank every single character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe from very favorite all the way down to Doctor Strange, Wanda Maximoff ([Elizabeth Olsen](#)) and Vision ([Paul Bettany](#)) would land right in the middle. The benchwarming Avengers were crucial plot points for three of the biggest films ever made. Their powers are eccentric: She's sort of telekinetic (plus also red energy beams), he's an android with radical density. A shared comics history offers weird-as-hell adaptation possibilities, and Bettany and Olsen are appealing performers. **But** the movies squashed them between cosmic twists and global ensembles, leaving their romance **as vague as** Wanda's disappearing Sokovian accent.

All of which makes the miraculous season premiere of [WandaVision](#) a real **feat of chaos** magic. The first two episodes of the nine-part miniseries launch Friday on Disney+. At the beginning, the familiar Marvel Studios logo fades to black and white. An opening title sequence introduces Wanda and Vision as a "regular husband and wife" newly arrived in suburban Westview. The town's a '50s retroscape lousy with nosy neighbors and gruff bosses. Vision worries the fellas at the office will find out he's not quite human. "I'm a regular carbon-based employee!" he sputters, while the studio audience cackles. Wanda

can move objects with her mind and bewitch-ify a chicken into an egg — but that doesn't help her cook a last-minute lobster thermidor.

Any resemblance to the *Donna Reed* or *Dick Van Dyke* shows is very much intentional. And something is obviously wrong. Today's date is marked on the kitchen calendar, and neither Wanda nor Vision can't remember why. There's a lot they don't remember. In the three episodes I've seen, nobody mentions that time Vision died in [Infinity War](#). Strange sounds rumble outside. Curious color intrudes on the monochrome world: a beeping red light, a drop of blood.

*WandaVision* casts a spell with its rigid dedication to the throwback conceit. The first episode focuses on an old-fashioned misunderstanding: Guess who's coming to dinner! As **chatterbox-next-door** Agnes, [Kathryn Hahn](#) keeps pouring herself into the house. Agnes has a habit of mentioning her unseen husband, and Hahn somehow turns the name "Ralph" into a hilarious catchphrase *and* an eerie threat. **You feel you're** watching an actual legendary sitcom character — and then [Debra Jo Rupp](#), an actual sitcom legend, shows up as the tetchy wife of Vision's boss (Fred Melamed).

Director Matt Shakman honors the rigidity of '50s multicam, only breaking from that format for an unsettling scene near the end of the premiere. Somehow, the artifice sets the lead actors free. **Shorn of whatever emo thing** she wasn't nailing in the movies, Olsen pinpoints a particular strain of daffy exasperation. There are wheels turning within wheels behind Wanda's domestic pirouetting. Her internal struggle is sort of a plot thing, but it's also a sincere homage to how Laura Petrie always looked streets ahead of Rob. Meanwhile, Bettany dials up his English as a desperate-to-please goofball husband.

And *WandaVision* cleverly keeps shifting the landscape under their feet. Clothes, furniture, and even camerawork evolve forward a decade per episode. Part 2 is suddenly the '60s: Wanda in pants, scenes shot outside, the historical invention of sex. By episode 3, the opening title sequence advertises "*WandaVision in Color!*" and Vision's got sideburns. Along the way, Wanda befriends another Westview newcomer supposedly named Geraldine, played by [Teyonah Parris](#). [\(Her actual identity is a matter of record.\)](#) Great to see Parris, who's no stranger to vintage between *Mad Men* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* — and she has a monologue that **left me in stitches**. Still, a prominent Black character arriving in a meticulous midcentury caucasiaverse opens up questions I'm not sure *WandaVision* can answer. There are more urgent concerns, maybe. How did the superheroes get here? Where *is* here? The neighbors start whispering. A voice calls out in the darkness. Is this cheerful suburban domesticity some sort of prison?

Yes, duh: That's the point of every novel ever written about American suburbia. And getting trapped on a TV sitcom is nothing new. It happened twice last year, on [an absurdly entertaining \*DuckTales\*](#) and a *Legends of Tomorrow* episode literally titled "[The One Where We're Trapped on TV](#)." *WandaVision* adds opulent visual gloss and the patience of a megafranchise on a victory lap. Creator Jac Schaeffer has a ball building her pleasantville into a netherworld of familiar clichés: poolside planning committee meetings, the way '70s television kept discovering new colors to paint on walls, *uh oh the Vision swallowed some gum!*

The assumption is that viewers coming off an 18-month MCU drought will groove onto a serialized enigma buried beneath layers of meta-parody. A good assumption, and *WandaVision* is already the best original series on Disney+. I should point out that I have many dear friends who get such joy from [The Mandalorian](#), whereas I watched that show's second season premiere and **had the sudden urge to crush every screen in my house with a hammer** and take with my family to a faraway land untouched by the lobotomizing scourge of blockbuster television, like maybe we could move San Luis Obispo. The streaming brand for Disney's *other* cosmic saga is nostalgia overload, whereas Marvel Studios is cheekily unafraid of tossing out its own history. (A good example: Wanda's accent, which really did have to go.)

That instinct explains *WandaVision*'s in-your-face strangeness, which pulls freely from the characters' previous screen appearances and comics canon while sending its own story line in some unexpected directions. Free of any obvious plot requirements, Bettany and Olsen get to **fire up** some real chemistry. Their beautiful light twisted fantasy wavers between sweetness and sorrow. You start to worry what secrets their laugh track is hiding. "Is this really happening?" Wanda asks her husband. "**Yes, my love,**" he promises, "**It's really happening.**"

**Is it, though?** There's a small problem in these opening episodes. I can't decide if it's a problem future episodes will fix — or if the problem is, like, the entire purpose of the miniseries. *WandaVision* keeps pulling back to suggest the underlying *wrongness* of their domestic reality, clockwork nudges that grow a bit dull from repetition. Whenever you catch a glimpse of the "real" world, it looks notably **lamer** than the lusciously imagined blandness of sitcom land. Episode 3 has a sequence where something scary is supposed to be happening, and the whole mood turns generic: spooky choirs on the soundtrack, lights from the sky, one expressive actor's face suddenly sternly *mysterious* like they're setting up a cliffhanger that won't pay off for weeks.

There's a lot of stuff to enjoy in *WandaVision*, and I haven't even mentioned the period-appropriate theme songs by *Frozoneers* Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez. **But if** you pop the hood of this overlit comedy twilight zone, I worry that the central mystery is a bit standard. Success will depend on whether the eventual answers are satisfying — and whether all those fancy sitcom adornments are just a long wind-up to an overly familiar superhero smash-up. Consider *WandaVision* an unusual first step for this new Marvel phase. The best parts lovingly conjure the mood of very old television shows. The worst parts feel like just another movie. **B+**

Watch *WandaVision* on [Disney+](#)

Hadadi, Roxana. 2020. "Bridgerton is a Scintillating, But Somewhat Shallow, Regency Fantasy." *RogerEbert.com*. December 24, 2020. Accessed February 7, 2022. <https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/bridgerton-is-a-scintillating-but-somewhat-shallow-regency-fantasy>.

## **Bridgerton is a Scintillating, But Somewhat Shallow, Regency Fantasy**

**Roxana Hadadi** December 24, 2020



As a genre, romance is frequently described with the kind of dismissive words that suggest a certain inherent, and often sexist, bias. “Bodice-ripper” isn’t so bad, but “trashy” is, and the latter comes up quite often in critical analysis of projects that dare to imagine their protagonists happy, in love, and having a lot of sex. This point isn’t to suggest that all romance films are actually good—rest assured that the “Fifty Shades of Grey” trilogy will not be defended here—but to note that, like the romantic comedy, the romance genre tends to be targeted toward female fans, and also tends to be broadly derided. Is there some kind of connection there? **Absolutely**. And that’s what makes assessing a project like Netflix’s “Bridgerton,” with its varying pleasures and failures, so tricky.



On the one hand, the show’s **juicier** elements—the acrobatic sex, the whispered gossip, the fights and backstabbing—populate some of the series’ most **exciting** scenes. The ensemble cast tears into the witty one-liners and cutting insults of creator Chris Van Dusen’s adaptation of Julia Quinn’s *Bridgerton* novels. The production and costume designers amp up the world of privilege these characters occupy with sprawling estates and opulent gardens, extravagant outfits of satin, tulle, and velvet, and elaborate ball after elaborate ball, during which anachronistic choices like Ariana Grande’s “Thank U, Next” and Billie Eilish’s “Bad Guy” are performed by the Vitamin String Quartet. From both an aesthetic

and erotic perspective, "Bridgerton" delivers. But where the show falters is in carving paths forward for its characters that feel in any way unique or singular. Instead, some of the storylines stretch out far longer than their natural evolution, while others are hastily introduced and resolved in a fraction of the time. The result is an **inconsistently** paced effort that ultimately reveals itself as an **entirely predictable** "Pride and Prejudice" retread. "Bridgerton" is amusing enough and will scratch a certain thirsty itch, but its themes about love, marriage, and class aren't quite as progressive as it would like to think. Van Dusen's series transports us to a version of Regency-era England in 1813 that is far more ethnically diverse than history actually allowed. In "Bridgerton," the Queen Charlotte (Golda Rosheuvel) with whom the king fell in love is a Black woman, and his adoration of her paved the way for the inclusion of other races other than only white people in proper British society. But few families of any ethnic background can rival the powerful, prestigious Bridgertons, whose eldest daughter Daphne (Phoebe Dynevor) is set to make her society debut. She is everything a desirable young woman should be—**delicate, pretty, and slim**; clever in conversation and demure otherwise; kind to household staff, commoners, and other elites alike; determined to be a good wife and mother—and the Bridgertons have high hopes that she'll do well during the upcoming season of balls, parties, dinners, teas, and other events that allow for young men and women to catch each other's eyes, and their parents to work out the details of their engagements. Although the Queen describing Daphne as "flawless" in her debut is a triumphant moment, younger Bridgerton sister Eloise (Claudia Jessie) correctly observes that the other 200 or so young women who also came out to society that year now have a **"collective adversary."** What men will be left for them if they're all off courting Daphne?



But things don't go quite according to plan. The first issue is the arrival of the beautiful and mysterious Marina Thompson (Ruby Barker), a distant cousin of the "tasteless, tactless" Featherington family, who are frenemies of the Bridgertons. At the first ball of the season, Marina charms and enchants, while Daphne stumbles—literally. Her bumping into the eligible bachelor Simon, Duke of Hastings (Regé-Jean Page), and their terse

conversation afterward, causes a stir. Mothers eager to get a member of the landed gentry interested in their daughters are constantly watching, and any misstep of Daphne's could damage her marriage prospects. When Daphne realizes that her overprotective older brother Anthony (Jonathan Bailey), now the viscount of the house after her father's death, is going to scare away any suitors whom he doesn't consider promising, and when she learns that Simon is utterly disinterested in marriage and wants to get everyone off his back, the two of them hatch a plan. If Simon and Daphne pretend to be courting, Daphne's unavailability will renew male interest in her, while Simon's suggested affection for Daphne will dissuade female interest in him. They can't stand each other (she calls him a "rake"; he calls her "desperate"), but each of them gets what they want—as long as the secretive Lady Whistledown, who serves as the series' narrator (voiced by Julie Andrews), doesn't find out about the scheme and spill the dirt in her rabidly consumed scandal sheet. Of course, if you've read any Jane Austen novel, or seen any romantic comedy from the last 30 or so years (from "Pretty Woman" through "Easy A"), you can guess where this is going. **Frustratingly**, however, "Bridgerton" takes its sweet time getting there. About half the season is devoted to characters dancing around each other rather than proclaiming what they want, and after relationships are finally established, major obstacles are then inserted into the lovers' paths, only to be hastily resolved. The inconsistent pacing makes for early episodes that drag and latter installments that seem too rushed, in particular a subplot about whether the purpose of marriage is love for its own sake, or children and familial legacy. Those are major questions that "Bridgerton" tidily wraps up in about one episode's time, sometimes with characters' decision making taking place entirely off-screen, and the result is that certain arcs end up shortchanged. What causes a young woman to break up with one of the Bridgerton brothers after their prolonged, passionate affair? What inspires the individual who is eventually revealed as Lady Whistledown? What effect does the death of a patriarch have on a certain family? "Bridgerton" wants a little morsel of story for nearly everyone (except for the household staff members, maids, housekeepers, cooks, and servants, who are universally devoted, loyal, and perfectly happy serving all these rich people), which is admirable. But some characters get such scraps that it almost seems like a disservice to have made the attempt at all. And some of the series' **greatest shortcomings** are how **inconsistently** it addresses the "model minority" pressure placed upon the characters who were elevated upward as a result of Charlotte marrying into the royal family, and how little attention it pays to Charlotte herself as a Black woman attempting to rule a country alone, rather than just serving as the ailing king's wife.



Still, the cast is game for pretty much anything, and their willingness to throw themselves into numerous outsized declarations of love and a staggering array of energetic sex scenes (which last longer than you would expect, and are appreciably egalitarian in their focus on both male and female pleasure) sells a lot of this. Dynevor and Page have solid chemistry, and they convey the transforming feelings of the central couple. Their pivot into increasingly sexual flirtation, including a conversation about masturbation, is abrupt, but pays off with a callback later on. Also wonderful are Nicola Coughlan as the brainy Featherington daughter Penelope, whose close friendship with Eloise has been forged over years of rolling their eyes at their families' antics, and Adjoa Andoh as Lady Danbury, a mother figure for Simon who can pull strings with the best of them. The flashbacks focusing on her tutelage of a young Simon allow the actress to display both steeliness and tenderness; Andoh's performance is the most multifaceted performance of the whole show. Austenites will rejoice at scenes where one character gently pulls off another's gloves or undoes the many tiny buttons of her undergarments, and when a declaration of love is given during a thunderstorm. And some of the series' funniest moments arise from a self-aware cheekiness at the absurdity of this world: Anthony's steward diverting his horse's gaze from Anthony having sex with a woman up against a tree; one of the Featherington daughters fainting before Queen Charlotte because of a too-tight corset; Portia Featherington (Polly Walker) snapping at her daughter Penelope to put down a book lest it "confuse your thoughts." More of that irreverence would have served "Bridgerton" well, instead of three separate episodes during which Daphne and Eloise struggle to understand what sex is and how women become pregnant. That thematic bludgeoning isn't the show's strong suit.

The primary issue, though, is that "Bridgerton" is most interested in maintaining a specific heterosexual woman's fantasy, and will shuffle past legitimate concerns raised by its very narrative to maintain that dream. There is a formula for joy in "Bridgerton," and the show never really strays from those beats: buck tradition and find a "love match" instead of an arranged marriage; be relieved to find that the man in question is fabulously wealthy; have



immediately perfect and flawlessly exceptional sex; step up as a protective matriarch while maintaining your attractiveness and sexual desirability; live happily ever after. That soothing familiarity makes for pleasant viewing, but **boring viewing**, too. **"I am going to be a princess!"** Daphne exclaims at one point, her pouty proclamation complete with a foot stomp. **"Bridgerton" is best when** it services the scintillating elements of this story rather than the self-satisfied part.

*Entire eight-episode first season screened for review. "Bridgerton" drops on Netflix on December 25.*

[trailer]

Hadadi, Roxana. 2021. "Joss Whedon Practically Plagiarizes Himself in the Uneven The Nevers." *RogerEbert.com*. April 7, 2021. Accessed February 7, 2022.  
<https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/joss-whedon-practically-plagiarizes-himself-in-the-uneven-the-nevers>.

## Joss Whedon Practically Plagiarizes Himself in the Uneven The Nevers

**Roxana Hadadi** April 07, 2021



Joss Whedon doesn't *totally* plagiarize himself with the new HBO series "The Nevers," but he comes pretty close. Whedon, who stepped down as writer, director, executive producer, and showrunner in November 2020, is no longer affiliated with "The Nevers," but the first part of this first season unmistakably bears all his fingerprints. (Six episodes will begin airing on April 11, while the second four, delayed to COVID, will be available at a later date.) Women (mostly young, pretty) alternately tortured and empowered by supernatural abilities (given mysteriously, resented by men) come together to save the world (even though it's a patriarchal cesspool). "The Nevers" is steampunk "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," with the Turned here as the Slayers and the Scooby Gang, and you don't get closer to late-seasons Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy, with her self-hating sexual choices and desire to abandon all responsibility, than the brawl-happy, pint-chugging Mrs. Amalia True (Laura Donnelly). None of this is to discredit the sprawling cast of "The Nevers," who—particularly Donnelly—attempt to grasp mysterious, disparate, silly plot threads and bring them together into something sensible through the sheer charisma of their performances. **It feels like Whedon's fault that it rarely works.**

The fact that "The Nevers" immediately introduces so many players and so many subplots is what makes it practically **impossible to have a clear sense** of where the series is going from its first four episodes (the pilot, "Exposure," "Ignition," and "Undertaking"). The cast **is too sprawling**; there are too many overlapping interests between the Turned, the humans who fear and fetishize them, and the various arms of the British government that want to control them; and there are too many villains. **At one point Mrs. True complains, "Cops, the Church, the Purists, and our masked freaks. There's no shortage of people who hate us,"** which made me do a double take. There are anti-Turned religious people in the mix, too? That's **too many** baddies to overwhelm viewers with at once! **It's too many**

faces and motivations to keep track of when the character themselves are barely introduced past being various “Buffy” types, and when so many details about the Turned themselves feel overly **malleable**.



Are the women basically like the X-Men? Sort of. Some of their powers are more straightforward, like 10-foot-tall teenager Primrose ([Anna Devlin](#)); remember when Buffy’s sister Dawn became a giant in the comic book series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Eight*? Others are more confusing, like Mrs. True, who seems to have super-strength and super-speed (ahem, *BUFFY*) and can definitely glimpse into the future, but she has ambiguities, too; villain Maladie ([Amy Manson](#)) accuses Mrs. True of being able to shed her skin. Still others are purely useful, like Mrs. True’s primary companion, genius inventor Penance Adair ([Ann Skelly](#)), who can see the currents of electricity (and serves as the Willow Rosenberg stand-in, down to her red hair), and prostitute Désirée ([Ella Smith](#)), who can make people tell the truth. **There’s a nebulousness** to all this that serves the story, but that also means these women, based on our brief interactions with them, aren’t developed as more than their abilities. Need a woman who can throw fire? **We got that!** Need a woman who can sing entrancingly? **We got that!** Need a guy who can fire a machine gun arm? **We got that too!** But their likes, dislikes, passions, interests? **Couldn’t tell you.**



Yes, men have powers in “The Nevers” too. That feels a bit like narrative surrender, like Whedon **tip-toed** toward misandry and then realized he didn’t have the gumption to go all the way. His non-commitment is an unfortunate acquiescence. “The Nevers” would be a more interesting show if it purely followed a **“women have powers, men don’t, now go!”** storytelling outline. What could *really* change in our world if the power imbalance was shifted so fully? Without that kind of curiosity, “The Nevers” **fails** to clarify what exactly

it's trying to say about the experience of being a woman, or being a Black or brown immigrant to the UK, or being differently abled, past a generic "Everyone deserves a family" message. That's a **valid** idea, but was an alien fish ship sparkling magic dust on people really necessary to make this point?

"The Nevers" begins in London in 1896, when a strange event (**ahem**, the aforementioned *alien fish ship sparkling magic dust on people*) transforms people all around the country. (**Question: Did this event also occur outside of London? How did that affect the world at large?**) People—mostly women—who absorbed that strange substance have begun to develop inexplicable powers, and three years later, society is divided on what to do about the Turned. Government agents, like former soldier turned union-busting and equality-hating Lord Gilbert Massen (Pip Torrens), are obsessed with stamping them out, and see their existence as an act of war upon the monarchy. Police detectives, like Inspector Frank Mundi (Ben Chaplin), are intent on bringing law and order back to the streets; he's been chasing serial killer Maladie, whose Turn is deriving power from pain, over five murders. Spoiled rich guys, like Hugo Swann (James Norton), want to use the Turned **to line their own pockets**; his dream is to expand his sex club in which these women and men work, drawing in clients aroused by their powers. And countless other people are anti-Turned, too: parents who believe their changed daughters have been possessed the Devil; working men who think the Turned will steal their jobs; and storeowners who think the Turned will infect their other employees.

Trying to navigate all the haters are Mrs. True and Penance, who together run the St. Romaulda's Orphanage with the help of benefactor Lavinia Bidlow (Olivia Williams). Their orphanage is a bustling place that accepts the Turned of all ages, and the pair of women pay for protection and information from local gangster the Beggar King (Nick Frost), who every so often passes along details of another Turned child or adult he hears about. The pilot episode follows Mrs. True and Penance as they foil a kidnapping attempt on young Matilda (Viola Pettejohn), who is able to speak in every language but English, by cloaked, gun-carrying villains whose faces look like they're encased in wax. Over the next three episodes, the motivations of this crew, what they're trying to discover about the Turned, and what they're trying to unearth in London are very sparingly revealed. **But** "The Nevers" struggles to build a rhythm when it overloads each episode with so many other details and churns through story so quick.

In the first four episodes alone, **we** get: a forbidden romance for Mrs. True, a connection between her and Maladie, a disagreement between her and Penance about how the Turned

should treat humans (**clearly** another “X-Men”-like story point that will come up throughout the season), and a strange communication intended only for Mrs. True that is transmitted through an unaware Turned woman who comes to Mrs. True for protection. There’s shadiness around Mundi and blackmail attempts; the seemingly insane Maladie spilling details of her plan that don’t make any sense, but that somehow result in numerous deaths; and Maladie’s associates turning on her and on each other. There are operas and parties and secret meetings, chess matches and orgies and duels, bar brawls and experimental procedures and double crosses. “The Nevers” doesn’t want for narrative, but it feels like Whedon throwing all the “Buffy”-lite ideas he had together—women mistaking pain for pleasure, female friendships built on quippy asides and oppositional personalities, condescending men looking down on women in every way they can—and hoping some of it would gel. **“If you can look a man in the eye, you can stab him in it,”** one of Mrs. True’s comrades says. **“The Nevers” should have devoted itself to that misandrist idea rather than this hybrid of “X-Men,” “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” and “The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,”** which four hours in feels like a copy of a copy of a copy. *Four episodes screened for review.*

[trailer]

Helm, Jake. 2021. "WandaVision review: This Disney+ superhero sitcom shouldn't work - but it does." *Evening Standard*. January 14, 2021. Accessed February 7, 2022. <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/tvfilm/wandavision-disney-plus-review-b898385.html>.

## WandaVision review: This Disney+ superhero sitcom shouldn't work - but it does

The Marvel Cinematic Universe meets The Dick Van Dyke Show in this risk-tasking success

[trailer]

By

Jake Helm

14 January 2021

Review at a glance

[stars]

Two years ago, Martin Scorsese likened Marvel films to a formulaic fairground ride – all spectacle with little risk. It was a low blow for a franchise that took pride in imagining every possible crossover in its cinematic universe.

WandaVision is the perfect response. Brimming with assurance, the television series is a concoction of risk that pays off. Combining the eccentricity of retro American sitcoms with the ambiguity of film noir, it shifts the superhero action from the skies of New York City and distant galaxies to the eerily friendly neighbourhoods of suburban America. The result is a cross-pollination that undercuts sitcom warmth with a deep feeling of unease.

Directed by Matt Shakman (Succession, The Great) and written by Jac Schaeffer (Captain Marvel, Black Widow), the first episode finds reality-altering witch Wanda (Elizabeth Olsen) and burgundy-faced android Vision (Paul Bettany) residing in 1950s suburban bliss. He's the fedora-wearing husband, she's the apron-clad housewife. He's a super-intelligent, density-changing robot, she's telepathic and can manipulate energy. And they're both living in a black-and-white homage to The Dick Van Dyke Show, with a studio audience laughing at every joke, whether funny or not, and a 4:3 screen ratio. It's a cocktail that shouldn't work.

But it does. Every 30-minute episode resembles a vintage American sitcom, from campy classics to wacky family shows of the Nineties, Bewitched to Modern Family. It's a genius concept that never fatigues. But this is still a Marvel product and as the trailers drum home,

everything is not as it seems. Whether it's a neighbourhood watch gathering or a doctor's inspection, every moment is on a knife-edge with constant potential to spiral into doom. Schaeffer's script is **astute and witty**, guaranteeing there's as much pleasure in the humour as there is in the supernatural. After all, WandaVision is a sitcom – the first of its kind for the MCU – splattered with classic sitcom tropes: from slapstick mishaps when Vision's boss comes to dinner to Vision's intoxicated response to chewing gum. Most of the humour stems from Wanda and Vision disguising their extraordinary powers from their intrusive neighbours. Having a child is five minutes rather than nine months, and a magic act proves challenging for a pair of superheroes. It's a repeated technique that provokes laughs every time. The corny adverts for coffee machines and bath powder are also nice touches that elevate the series and complement the various WandaVision chimes penned by Frozen songwriting duo Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez. While the sitcom format is **strong**, the sense of impending doom can become a little **threadbare**. The camera spins and zooms into tense moments as if we hadn't noticed. They become a nagging reminder WandaVision is a superhero series – an annoying alarm clock you can't figure out how to turn off. Olsen is Marvel's new **golden girl** and rightly so. Coming out from Iron Man and Captain America's shadows, she offers a self-assured performance that escalates from dainty housewife to overbearing control freak at the click of her magical fingers. She manages the nuances of the different decades expertly, mimicking Elizabeth Montgomery's role in Bewitched to perfection. Her slapstick cooking with a lobster while Vision distracts his boss is pure delight.



**Just your friendly neighbourhood superheroes** / Marvel Studios

Bettany's performance is **less successful**. He nails the sincere moments **but struggles** with the comedy. He drunk walks, shrieks "**what the dickens**" and spends much of the series with either a puzzled face or Cheshire cat grin that wears thin after the first episode. In fairness, he's a robot masked behind a human body in a sitcom made by Marvel, but in the end, it all becomes too much and yet not quite enough.

Mercifully, Olsen's Wanda wears the pants in the relationship and the supporting cast is strong. Kathryn Hahn draws **brilliantly** on her extensive comedic experience (Bad Moms, Step Brothers) for her role as the nosy neighbour, and Teyonah Parris as Monica Rambeau brings vigour to the series.

WandaVision is the studio's first attempt to bring the franchise to an original Disney+ series and based on this, the remainder promise so much. In the first episode, Wanda tells Vision that she's doing her best to "blend in". WandaVision does anything but. It screams: "**Look at me, I'm the future of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.**" The nine-part series is **a risk that pays off** and demands Scorsese's response. After all, fortune favours the bold.



Horton, Adrian. 2020. "Sweet Magnolias review – low-stakes Netflix drama is a syrupy watch." *The Guardian*. May 19, 2020. Accessed February 10, 2022.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/may/19/sweet-magnolias-review-netflix>.

### Sweet Magnolias review – low-stakes Netflix drama is a syrupy watch

[stars]

A breezy show about three women navigating divorce, friendship, and work in South Carolina abounds in margaritas and its role as comfort food TV



A still from *Sweet Magnolias* Photograph: Eliza Morse/Netflix

**Adrian Horton**

**@adrian\_horton**

Tue 19 May 2020 10.04 BST

Sweet Magnolias, a breezy Netflix series about three best friends somewhere outside of Charleston, South Carolina, is a show that knows the potential – and limits – of its ingredients. Created by Sheryl J Anderson and based on the series of novels by Sherryl Woods, it stars three steadily working but not well-known actors, whose episodic orbit is not the local coffee shop or bar but the couch, weekly margarita in hand. There, they extoll the messes of their lives (balance, jobs, motherhood) which, in real life, can be overwhelming; here, it's mixed with light tea-spilling, perfectly coiffed hair and expertly mixed drinks.

It is, in other words, incredibly **low-stakes** television, a streamlined version of Lifetime or CW (think *Hart of Dixie*) content, the enjoyment of which depends, like their staple margaritas, on one's personal pressure release valve and tolerance. Kicking back with it feels indulgent and **mindless**, an easy slide into a binge, **syrupy** with enough tart to keep it moving. It can range from pre-bottled to slightly distinct but is still what it is: unpretentious, with all the requisite parts, a balm for some and too "rosé all day" for others.

Sweet Magnolias takes place in a self-contained town where everyone knows each other, all hardships are personal, and all flaws are ultimately redeemed. Naturally, it's called

Serenity, and its focal point is a charming but taste-signifying restaurant owned and operated by chef Dana Sue (Brooke Elliott), who grew up in the town with best friends Helen (Heather Headley) and Maddie (Joanna Garcia Swisher). In keeping with the town name, Sweet Magnolias eschews melodrama for more down-to-earth, mundane struggles; the most explosive scandal – Maddie’s doctor husband, Bill (Chris Klein, **literally straining** through a southern accent), having an affair and impregnating a nurse, Noreen (Jamie-Lynn Spears, **also straining**, though **that’s beside the point**), and breaking up the family – takes place before the first episode, which opens with their divorce proceedings. [trailer]

Instead, the series ambles from Maddie’s indignation to recovery in the arms of her friends, who endeavor to somehow renovate a beloved old home into a women-only “spa” (wellness center) in a month or so. The project allows each woman to demonstrate satisfying competency – Helen as a no-holds-barred lawyer, Dana Sue as a perfectionist chef, Maddie as an event planner balancing caring for her of two teenage sons and a young daughter – with small, absorbing complications.

Their tribulations over the course of the 10-episode season, eight of which were available to critics, are momentous in real life but, in TV terms, tame – there are no tragic accidents or explosive love triangles, but stage-of-life quandaries that will likely feel relatable to many in the target audience. Maddie wades into life beyond divorce with an attraction to her son’s baseball coach, Cal (Justin Bruening); Helen is a successful careerist coming to terms with her desire to have a family, man or no; Dana Sue channels the trust issues scorched by her ex-husband into work, and struggles to ask for help.

Their kids, meanwhile, also wade through what feel surprisingly like grounded high school drama, **not the trauma of Euphoria** or craziness of Outer Banks but more mundane mortifications: getting too drunk once at a party, the **post-life** of a too-vulnerable text, dealing with parents upset with your grades. The Magnolia’s children – Maddie’s sons Tyler (Carson Rowland) and Kyle (Logan Allen) and Dana Sue’s Annie (Anneliese Judge) – also, refreshingly, look like they’re actually 15.



A still from Sweet Magnolias Photograph: Eliza Morse/Netflix

The view of the south in the series is similarly benign, with only a palatable kick of anything awry – it's mentioned once that, in the past, Helen's high school love was complicated by his parents' disapproval of him dating a black girl. Otherwise, Serenity is unremarkably diverse and harmonious – or, at least, the gossipy small town-ness is evenly spread among the town's black and white inhabitants, who talk a lot about each other but not about race. Which is **fine** – for some shows, especially those whose budgets and marketing invite scrutiny for its overwhelming *meaning*, such omissions would be notable flaws. But Sweet Magnolias is not trying to be that show; it is consciously aiming for pleasant. If you're watching, **you're** knowingly submitting to a world where the conditions of modern life (social media, texting) are arbitrarily applied and the horror of America's racial contract is out of sight.

Watching Sweet Magnolias, particularly its women kicking back and ribbing each other to keep it (amiably) real, I could easily imagine its label as a **"guilty pleasure"** – a dubious term, since what's the point in saddling one's enjoyment these days with guilt. **I cannot in good faith describe this show as "good"** (please see Klein's accent or most of the acting) but I also can't deny that it knows exactly what it's trying to be. There's nothing deceitful about that, which, in today's glut of depressing reality, counts for something.

Sweet Magnolias is now available on Netflix

Lopez, Kristen. 2022. “‘The Cleaning Lady’ Review: Cliché Dirties Up Elodie Yung’s Confident Portrayal.” *IndieWire*. January 4, 2022. Accessed February 9, 2022. <https://www.indiewire.com/2022/01/the-cleaning-lady-review-fox-series-1234686482/>.

## ‘The Cleaning Lady’ Review: Cliché Dirties Up Elodie Yung’s Confident Portrayal

Yung and Martha Millan are stars, but they're smothered by the soapy (pun intended) issues of a criminal underworld that feels like Mafia 101.



**Kristen Lopez**

**Jan 4, 2022 2:00 pm**



### “The Cleaning Lady”

Michael Desmond

“The Cleaning Lady” feels like disparate parts of other series. It certainly feels **like a FOX series, with its flashy editing, gritty storyline**, and adoration of clubs and opulence. It also feels like numerous other “woeful immigrant” stories about the undocumented having to get into crime in order to find freedom. It’s an overused cliché, so much so that in 2018 a study by the CATO Institute and the Marshall Project showed that **over one-third of TV shows situated undocumented people in the criminal lifestyle**. It’s a shame because Elodie Yung, making her debut as a TV series lead, is way too good for it. Yung plays Thony De La Rosa, an undocumented Cambodian immigrant to the U.S. trying to raise her young son. When she witnesses a crime, the only means of looking indispensable is by offering to clean up the corpse and its aftermath. The man doing the murdering, Arman Morales (Adan Canto), finds Thony fascinating and decides to give her a job as the criminal underworld’s cleaning woman.

Within the first five episodes of “The Cleaning Lady,” **it’s hard not to wonder when things will take a turn**. I mean, this can’t just be about a woman cleaning up after people, can it? **Yes and no**. Creator Michelle Kwak comes from the world of action, initially starting her career as an actress and stuntperson before becoming a writer and producer.

“The Cleaning Lady” plays a lot like something you’d find scrolling Netflix, probably starring Zoe Bell. That’s not a mark against it, but it means you have to give the plot a wide berth.

Thony De La Rosa may say she’s “**just a cleaning lady**,” but the series positions her as a modern-day Superwoman who, in the pilot, performs a tracheotomy on a man with little more than a straw. As her coworkers stare at her in awe, the obvious question — “**Um, how does she know how to do that?**” — pops up. Her best friend and sister, Fiona (Martha Millan) responds in awe that Thony “**is a doctor.**” Yep, this is another series where a person is obviously highly intelligent and successful in another country only to start at the bottom in America. **The problem is** that within five episodes there’s not really any significant critique there. Thony’s husband is still a doctor in their native country, and while Thony talks about bringing their sweet, sickly son Luca (Sebastien and Valentino LaSalle) to this country for a better life, there’s no real discussion about the bait-and-switch that this notion of the American Dream continues to inspire.



### “The Cleaning Lady”

Michael Desmond

The stakes of typical immigrant storylines are here, particularly that of deportation, which is where “The Cleaning Lady” is **actually engaging**. Thony and Fiona question every element of their lives around whether ICE or someone similar will spot them. As if that’s not a **compelling** reason enough, we’re brought back to Luca, who is a precocious small child with a deadly illness that forces him to live like the boy in the plastic bubble. **Much** of the early episodes focus on Thony’s need to get Luca into a research program to treat his illness. Nearly every episode is akin to having Luca tied to the railroad tracks, needing some type of new illness or he’ll die... **before the next commercial break.**

The series stacks so many BIG moments in its runtime that it’s almost hard to remember this is about a woman sucked into the criminal underworld. Had it eschewed that latter element entirely it would have been better. Yung and Millan are a compelling pair. You see the history in their relationship and how everything is motivated by their desire to

protect each other and the lives they've created. Really, the fear shouldn't be gangsters and murderers, but the American government. It doesn't help that the government, like an all-pervasive boogeyman, pops up frequently, whether that's an actual ICE raid or Oliver Hudson's agent Garrett Miller reminding Thony what a nice guy he is, but he'll also deport her without a moment's hesitation.

That brings us to where the series thinks **you'll** be most interested: Thony's life in the criminal underworld and her double role as a spy for Miller. You want to watch Yung because she's smart, charismatic, and an intriguing presence. The same can't be said for the men in power who Thony is stuck orbiting around. Hudson's smarmy Garrett Miller is the apotheosis of dude who thinks he's the best, but isn't. Apparently he's landed in hot water with his bosses for sleeping with an informant, and it's difficult not to see where his relationship could develop with Thony. The power dynamics between the two are **cringe-inducing**, as Miller enjoys smiling and reminding Thony he has no issue with sending her back to Cambodia.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Canto's Arman Morales. You might recall Canto as the tatted New York-accented boyfriend **of Halle Berry's character in "Bruised"** and while he's not playing the same character here, it still feels like Canto is mired in cliché. **He's** a dark-suited murderer with a heart of something a little dingier than gold. He feels like the Christian Gray of this series: a man who has no compunction with shooting someone or dunking their face in boiling water, but also can't resist helping Thony's sick son. His plotline involves a series of power struggles with the men above him that feel like something ripped out of "Goodfellas" or any of the numerous "underworld" series you've watched in the last decade.

"The Cleaning Lady" has good intentions, but is far too derivative to form a compelling series. Yung is a star, as is Millan, but the two women are **smothered by the soapy (pun intended) issues** of a criminal underworld that feels like Mafia 101.

**Grade: D+**

*"The Cleaning Lady" premiered Monday, January 3 at 9 p.m. ET on Fox. New episodes air weekly.*

Mangan, Lucy. 2020a. "Love Life review – light romcom glides by on Anna Kendrick's charms." *The Guardian*. October 6, 2020. Accessed February 7, 2022.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/oct/06/love-life-review-romcom-anna-kendrick>.

### Love Life review – light romcom glides by on Anna Kendrick's charms

[stars]

There is nothing **very deep** or challenging to find in this tale of a 20-something's romantic New York endeavours. But the comic writing **is effortlessly good**



Moving on ... Anna Kendrick and Jin Ha in Love Life. Photograph: Lions Gate Television Inc/BBC

### Lucy Mangan



@LucyMangan

Tue 6 Oct 2020 21.30 BST

Ever since her fierce, funny and, well, pitch perfect turn in Pitch Perfect, I have known that I would trust Anna Kendrick with my life. And by life, I mean entertainment. Two things that are rapidly becoming synonymous. And now, just when I need her most, up she pops in her first major television outing obviating even the need to rent a movie (or, of course, go to the cinema – on which glorious endeavour, as with all golden memories of **the Before Times**, the less we dwell the better).

In the 10 half-hour episodes of Love Life – created and written by Sam Boyd – Kendrick (who also executive produced) stars as Darby Carter, whose millennial misadventures in both the love and the life we follow at the rate of roughly one per instalment, moves through New York and her post-grad 20s and on into her 30s. So the opening episode has her in 2012 hoping for the kind of relationship in which, as narrator Lesley Manville – **yes, our Lesley Manville!** – explains in voiceover, you don't have to change into a new outfit to meet up. **"You just wear what you're wearing because you are who you are."**

She meets Augie Jeong (Jin Ha from Devs) at a party and after the obligatory (in art as in life) torturous wait for him to text, they start to date and spend an idyllic few months falling and being in love. Then he gets a huge job opportunity and leaves for Washington DC, leaving the lightly posed Question of the Week – is it better to have loved and lost to professional ambition than never to have loved at all? (**The answer**, at Darby's 25, by the way, is yes. That's me telling you that, not the show.) The next episode has her going out with her divorced older boss ("**I'm not a creeper. I didn't have you picked out or anything**") and coming a cropper at his father's wake, the next a one-night stand with a man more vulnerable than he appears to be, and so on through all the basic dilemmas and intrigues one encounters while **you're** trying on different personalities, deciding which one you are and who else's best compliments your psychical wardrobe.

As **you** can probably tell from the above summary, there **is nothing very deep** or challenging in Love Life. It is a light, slight thing – **charmingly held together** by the chemistry between Kendrick and the actors playing her roommates and best friends, particularly Zoe Chao, whose long-term relationship with her boyfriend provides a secondary storyline as the series progresses. It has the kind of comic writing so good it makes even the hardest dialogue **to pull off** – fleet, authentic-sounding, genuinely funny banter between friends and lovers – seem effortless.

It is perhaps for those very reasons, however, that it seems an odd choice as the inaugural offering from its originating host, the new streaming service HBO Max. HBO is the home of "prestige TV", whose most famous slogan is "It's not TV. It's HBO". So **you** would expect a Max'd version of the network that gave us Curb Your Enthusiasm, Westworld, Sex and the City, Oz, Six Feet Under, The Wire and The Sopranos to want to come out of the starting gate with something a little more **overtly impressive** and complex than this brilliantly **skilful** but insubstantial offering.

**Fortunately**, that's not something we have to worry about too much **on this side of the pond**. The BBC picked it up, plonked the whole thing on iPlayer, and is airing the episodes week by week on Wednesdays on BBC One, where we can enjoy it purely on its own terms. Which are not perfect, for sure. Even if you allow for the fact that a romcom – whether constituted as a 90-minute film or as a 10-part series – is never going to pass the Bechdel test, you could still legitimately ask for a little more development of its lead character and certainly of its supporting, recurring ones.

The format, the writing and acting talent on display **could all bear more weight** without crushing its romantic, retro – or retro-romantic – spirit. It is designed and planned as an



anthology series with a new love-seeking protagonist each time and it will be interesting to see, if it goes to a second series, if all that potential for nuance and additional perspective and stories remains unexplored. It's perhaps worth remembering that Sex and the City, which Love Life undoubtedly counts as one of its ancient ancestors, became markedly more of an ensemble piece and markedly more complex and rewarding after its initial outing.

I could happily **binge** the entirety of **this baby** SATC exactly as is. It is the perfect balm for troubled times. But I equally happily look forward to what could come next.

Mangan, Lucy. 2020b. "Raised By Wolves review – staid, stale sci-fi from Ridley Scott." *The Guardian*. December 5, 2020. Accessed February 7, 2022.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/dec/05/raised-by-wolves-review-staid-stale-sci-fi-from-ridley-scott>.

### **Raised By Wolves review – staid, stale sci-fi from Ridley Scott**

[stars]

This 10-part series could have been the triumphant return of the *Alien* creator, but inconsistent world-building and a basic plot leave it unable to compete with the likes of *Westworld*



**Paranoid androids ... Mother and Father with five of their brood in Raised By Wolves.** Photograph: Coco Van Oppens Photography



**Lucy Mangan**

**@LucyMangan**

**Sat 5 Dec 2020 22.10 GMT**

When Ridley Scott calls, you answer, **right?** Or at least sit yourself down with alacrity – and a “Do not disturb” sign on the door – before his latest offering, the 10-part series *Raised By Wolves* (Sky Atlantic). While Scott directed only the first two, as executive producer his imprimatur is stamped throughout the tale of two androids (Mother, played by Amanda Collin, and Father, Abubakar Salim).

They escape a warring, brutalised Earth for the **desolate-but-just-about-habitable** planet Kepler-22b with 12 embryos, a dozen jars of nutrients in which to raise them to maturity and all the programming they need to keep them firmly set on the mission to save humanity. Six make it to jar-term, but they are gradually picked off over the next decade or so by accidents and sickness on the increasingly inhospitable planet until only **Campion** is left.

The war on Earth was between atheists and zealots – the Mithraic people who worship a deity called Sol. Mother and Father raise **Campion** as an atheist and discourage his

growing urge to pray (“**Peaceful. Technocratic. It is the only path to progress. Belief in the unreal can comfort human life, but also weaken it**” – alas, none of the dinosaurs whose bones litter Kepler-22b died reading a copy of Syd Field’s Screenplay **that could have been preserved for later generations**).

The relationship between Mother and Father begins to fracture. When an arkful of Mithraic survivors approaches the planet, Father wants to signal their settlement’s location so that Campion will have them for support once his “parents” wear out. Mother is having none of it; as Mithraic scouting parties land over the opening episodes, she becomes increasingly violent, in an attempt to protect what they have created together.

It looks like a Scott creation – blue-grey palette, beautifully unforgiving landscapes filling the frame – and sets up his favourite themes: the clashes and connections between artificial intelligence and humans, the strengths and limitations of each, the religious impulse and the fact these rarely combine to produce a sunny vision of a future utopia. Plus, it is not long before some skittery, long-limbed monsters emerge from the darkness to wreak havoc.

**Unfortunately**, what seems a set up for a triumphant return by the master **falls apart** fairly quickly. The world-building becomes riddled with **inconsistencies**. The androids are meant to be purely rational beings, yet they bury their children’s bodies and seem to mourn the losses, keep mementoes and cry. Mother keeps discovering abilities more akin to superhero than AI powers, which seem to be either forged by or the expression of maternal instinct made monstrous by frustration.

It quickly comes to seem **hysterical** rather than noble or operatic, and forms part of the programme’s **strangely reductive attitude** to the female body and its workings (especially from within the ambit of the man who gave us Ripley). The pregnant teenage rape survivor of a church elder, Tempest, is given little to do beyond being an emblem of religious hypocrisy, feeling conflicted about her foetus and being assured by Mother that “**the child is innocent**”.

Not that any other characters fare **much better**. Children and adults alike are mere ciphers; there is no one to root for or invest in. The potential for commentary on and insight into the parallels and divergences between AI and human intelligence – raw computing power versus the higher brain functions that breed art and culture – or between religion and science goes unrealised (**at least in the early episodes** available for review).

Father’s **effortful** dad jokes aside, the tone is unrelentingly **bleak**. Much of the time is taken up with the survivors finding ways to avoid Mother’s wrath and subsist on Kepler-

22b – presumably until they are old enough to start shagging (this ultimate point of the child cohort that Mother adds to the settlement adding an extra layer of disquieting ickiness to proceedings). These longueurs are occasionally relieved by **well-done** action sequences (especially during the flashbacks to the war on Earth), but these do little to deepen the story.

It is not the fact that there is nothing new on show. Delivered with enough panache, there will always be an appetite for traditional sci-fi tropes reassembled to bang home the usual messages. **But** Raised By Wolves does not have panache – and the **thin, unsophisticated** story it comprises stands naked, particularly cruelly so in a post-Westworld landscape. Humanity is not up to much, for sure, but **we were ready for more than this.**

Mangan, Lucy. 2021. "Them review – racist horrors lurk behind white picket fences." *The Guardian*. April 9, 2021. Accessed February 9, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/apr/09/them-review-amazon-prime-video>.

## **Them review – racist horrors lurk behind white picket fences**

[stars]

Amazon's **supernaturally-tinged** tale of a black family in 50s LA who are loathed by their neighbours perfectly captures the menacing side of American suburbia



**Wave of terror ... Alison Pill leads the welcome.** Photograph: Courtesy of Amazon Prime Video



**Lucy Mangan**

**@LucyMangan**

**Fri 9 Apr 2021 13.00 BST**

Amazon Prime's new horror anthology series *Them* opens with a gloriously nightmarish, sepia-toned prologue. A woman and her baby are alone in an isolated house when an apparently innocuous old woman walks down the road towards them. She mentions that "we" saw the woman's husband leave and begins singing about "Old Black Joe". When she hears the baby, she brightens and asks **"Can I have him? Your boy? I'd like him very, very much."** It would be chilling enough, but the fact that the woman whose baby she is demanding is black adds a historical dimension of horrors to the encounter. Shadows of slavery, babies taken from mothers, and the inescapable vulnerability – even to malevolent supernatural forces – caused by having a certain skin colour in a certain country at a certain time instantly come to mind. The opening scene demonstrates the series' greatest strength in microcosm.

The Emorys are one of the 6 million African-American families taking part in what would become known as the "great migration", relocating from the rural south to northern states promising industrial employment and a better life than the land of Jim Crow was offering. Prompted, it seems, by both a personal tragedy and the offer of a job as an aircraft

engineer) Henry (Ashley Thomas, also known as musician Bashy) and his wife Livia (Deborah Ayorinde) have bought a house in Compton, Los Angeles, for themselves and their two daughters, Ruby (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Gracie Lee (Melody Hurd, both proving again that America has the highest rate of brilliant child actors in the world). The covenant in the house deeds forbidding sale to anyone “of negro blood” is, the realtor assures them, no longer binding.



**All smiles ...** Deborah Ayorinde and Ashley Thomas. Photograph: Amazon Prime

It rapidly becomes clear that the neighbours disagree. Beneath the pastel twinsets, hearts fill with fear and loathing. And behind closed doors facing out on to immaculate front lawns, awful plans are laid.

The flesh-and-blood racists who the Emorys face are enough to terrify. The women gather silently, smiling, to set up chairs and tea tables outside the new family’s house, each playing different stations on their radios to surround the newcomers with a constant, hellish cacophony. The men prefer action, under cover of darkness. While Livia is trapped in the house, Henry must confront the sea of white professional faces at work (on his first day, the receptionist insists he must be bound for the kitchens), and the children endure their own sufferings at school.

What marks out this portrayal of 50s prejudice (not unworked ground) is that, thanks to **magnificent performances** from Thomas and Ayorinde, you get a great sense of the cost to victims: the sheer amount of mental energy it takes to navigate a relentlessly hostile world, the consequent exhaustion, the constant abrading of the soul.

If the series has a weakness as a horror story, it’s that the supernatural stuff is really a **bagatelle**. Each family member is haunted by a different ghost – Gracie Lee’s is a

Victorian governess figure from her favourite book, Henry’s is a phantom in blackface – all of which are manifestations of the house’s displeasure and of course a metaphor for everything outside. They provide some effective jump-scares but still can’t compete with the affectless smile on the face of queen bee Betty (Alison Pill) as she channels her plentiful energy into making the Emorys’ lives a waking nightmare.

It should be remembered that Them was conceived and commissioned during the presidency of a man who came to power on the backs of those yearning for a return to the

50s and the American Dream. One can only imagine the horror of watching this if he had won again. Waking nightmares indeed.

O'Hara, Helen. 2020. "Ratched Review." *Empire*. September 14, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://www.empireonline.com/tv/reviews/ratched/>.

## Ratched Review



### People:

**Sarah Paulson**

**Cynthia Nixon**

**Sharon Stone**

**Vincent D'Onofrio**

**Corey Stoll**

**Ryan Murphy**

It's 1947, and former army nurse Mildred Ratched (Sarah Paulson) arrives at Lucia State Psychiatric Hospital looking for a job. Hospital boss Dr Hanover (Jon Jon Briones) reluctantly takes her on, just before the arrival of convicted multiple-murderer Edward Tolleson (Finn Wittrock). But everyone is hiding secrets that will turn the hospital upside down.

[stars]

**By Helen O'Hara |**

**Posted On 14 09 2020**

Ryan Murphy's latest show has been billed as the untold history of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest's* Nurse Ratched, unforgettably brought to life by Louise Fletcher in Milos Forman's 1975 **multiple-Oscar-winning** film. Fletcher's power lay in chilling restraint, a smiling passivity that hid a lust for absolute control. But restraint and passivity are not the words that come to mind here; the series starts off bloody and only gets more violent.





*Ratched*'s backstory of hard times and abuse for Sarah Paulson's Mildred Ratched means that all five of the American Film Institute's top villains of the 20th century have now been given a **sympathetic prequel**. But this has so little connective tissue to its inspiration that it's best viewed as an entirely separate entity. Instead of Haskell Wexler's bleak cinematography, this looks more like Russell Metty's work for Douglas Sirk, teal and blood-red with **a little mustard on top**; instead of that dreary institutional grey, **we're** in a spa-turned-luxury-asylum, sparkling and shiny. It's undeniably gorgeous, and of course this is a different era, but it's a visually jarring difference that never helps sell this as the same Nurse Ratched.

*Ratched* can't help but be watchable with a cast this overqualified and design this sumptuous.

Thematically there's no overlap either. If Murphy laudably addresses the appalling treatment of LGBTQ+ people by mid-century society, he also uses offensive stereotypes of mental illness for shock value, most notably as regards Sophie Okonedo's Charlotte Wells.

Then again, this show betrays no genuine interest in mental illness, just in the power struggles between Ratched and Judy Greer's Nurse Bucket, or between hospital head Dr Hanover (Jon Jon Briones) and California Governor George Wilburn (Vincent d'Onofrio) and his right-hand woman, Gwendolyn Briggs (Cynthia Nixon).

Psychiatric patients are rarely glamorous, so Murphy and team focus instead on millionaire Leonore Osgood (Sharon Stone) and shady PI Charles Wainwright (Corey Stoll).

Surrounded by all these huge personalities screaming for attention, **Ratched is not a big fish in a small pond**, but someone all too aware of her own vulnerabilities, and capable of empathy, which makes her feel not so much like a forerunner of Fletcher than the antithesis of her. Paulson's performance is as **reliable** as always, sometimes even approaching the infuriating composure that Fletcher showed, but she's pulled in ten different directions by the script.

[trailer]

Ratched can't help but be **watchable** with a cast this overqualified and design this sumptuous. But it feels like the same old Murphy soap opera we've seen before, all blood and thunder and sex and **undercooked** love affairs, and with almost none of the introspection that might explain where a Ratched comes from. There are more gory deaths than episodes, and that feels wrong. The real Ratched barely needed physical violence. Her presence was her weapon.

It shares precious little DNA with the original Nurse Ratched, but is crammed with fabulous people in gorgeous clothes doing dastardly things to one another, so it's weird but rarely less than watchable.

Pitt, Leslie Byron. 2021. "Them Review." *Empire*. April 2, 2021. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://www.empireonline.com/tv/reviews/them/>.

## Them Review



People:

[Ryan Murphy](#)

[Ashley Thomas](#)

[Pat Healy](#)

[Alison Pill](#)

[Ti West](#)

The 1950s. African-American family the Emorys move from North Carolina to California looking to improve their prospects after a traumatic event. Little do they know their new neighbourhood harbours a corrosive malevolence, which manifests itself both in the everyday and the supernatural.

[stars]

By Leslie Byron Pitt |

Posted On 02 04 2021

How much pain is too much? In *Them*, the tolerance bar is high. Created by Little Marvin and co-executive produced by Lena Waithe, this horror anthology series, set within a ten-day timeline, hurtles viewers headfirst into thick molasses of Black pain and generational bigotry, only intensified by capitalism and otherworldly afflictions. *Them*'s approach — [Suburbicon](#) by way of [The Shining](#) — provides an intriguing premise, albeit a harrowing one.

Owing more than a little to [Ryan Murphy](#)'s *American Horror Story*, *Them* delivers an unapologetically Black family who stick out against the pastel décor of their despicable neighbours. Henry ([Ashley Thomas](#)) is hounded at his workplace. Wife Lucky (Deborah Ayorinde) is persecuted by the Stepford-adjacent housewives of the community. Their kids Gracie (Melody Hurd) and Ruby (Shahadi Wright Joseph) face the torment of being the only Black kids in their schools. *Them* fast-tracks through a whirlwind of themes including

redlining (discriminatory raising of property prices), harassment, war trauma and loss. The hatred is unsubtly strong, and Herculean efforts are required to quell the anger and pain the family undoubtedly harbour.



It is bad for them and **exhausting** for an audience. *Them* pummels viewers with Black trauma in nearly every scene with little respite, resulting in a discomforting horror that is almost **off-putting**. The show's biggest strengths lie in its aesthetics, chiefly with the show's delectable look. From Saul Bass-inflected main titles to the corridors and basements hiding all manner of nastiness in the shadows, *Them* does not skimp on design. Also, the formidable cast infuse their roles with energy. Both Thomas and Ayorinde give forceful turns as the parents, [Pat Healy](#) (*Cheap Thrills*) comes into his own as an embittered, selfish bigot in later episodes, while elsewhere it is certainly destabilising to see the drummer of Sex-Bob-omb ([Alison Pill](#)) play a hideous racist so **effectively**.

[trailer]

The Emorys are battered from all sides —guilt-ridden over their past, berated in their present and haunted by phantasms within the distinctly short timeline of events. An eclectic group of directors (including [Ti West](#), Nelson Cragg and Craig William Macneill) are adept at building tension, generating startling moments, and utilising the lenient luxury of elastic timekeeping that streaming services can provide, the shorter episodes being the most beguiling. However, *Them* delivers no moments of levity, while the narrative is disjointed. Individual scenes hop back through the 1940s and the 1800s, highlighting a racial hatred embedded into the spiritual fabric of America. The reluctance to show any lightness evokes the claustrophobic atmosphere of shows like *The Handmaid's Tale*. *Them* is a series of beautifully visualised ugliness, which is engaging to watch but only in small doses — not ideal in the era of binge-watching. But even *The Handmaid's Tale* **allows its audience up for air**.

**Them spins an engaging concept, powerful performances and visuals to die for. But its obsession with Black trauma leaves everything off-kilter.**

Rosseinsky, Katie. 2020. "Bridgerton review: Netflix and Shonda Rhimes' period drama is the glossy Downton Abbey replacement we deserve." *Evening Standard*. December 22, 2020. Accessed February 7, 2022.  
<https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/tvfilm/bridgerton-netflix-review-b357506.html>.

## **Bridgerton review: Netflix and Shonda Rhimes' period drama is the glossy Downton Abbey replacement we deserve**

With its **diverse** cast and **enlightened** heroines, Bridgerton is a very modern spin on Regency romance

[trailer]

By

Katie Rosseinsky

@katierosseinsky

22 December 2020

[stars]

**It is a truth universally acknowledged** that period dramas are a tonic in uncertain times, serving up a dose of comfort viewing for our frazzled modern nerves. So after the year we've had, **god knows we deserve** Bridgerton, the lavishly appointed period piece from Netflix and legendary producer Shonda Rhimes.

Based on a best-selling series of romance novels by Julia Quinn, the swoon-worthy eight-part series is set in the gilded upper echelons of Regency high society, where salacious gossip has the power to make or break a reputation. **No one knows this better than the acid-quilled Lady Whistledown, the pseudonymous author of London's most talked about scandal sheet, who is not afraid to **wreak havoc** by naming and shaming aristocrats for their outrageous behaviour, like an early prototype for Gossip Girl.**

**Much like her fellow anonymous blogger, she is the narrator of the piece, voiced - in a stroke of casting genius - by none other than Dame Julie Andrews, who sounds like she's having a grand old time turning her mellifluous tones to Whistledown's bitchiest, most barbed comments. Will her true identity ever be revealed? Only time will tell.**

**As the London social season kicks off, there's no shortage of scandalous material to fill her pages - especially when two of the most eligible new players on the marriage market, fresh-faced debutante Daphne Bridgerton (Phoebe Dynevor) and brooding Simon Basset, the newly minted Duke of Hastings (Regé-Jean Page). Daphne hopes that being seen on**

the arm of a handsome Duke will prompt proposals from other, less rakish suitors; Simon wants to dodge the attention of mothers seeking an aristocratic match for their marriageable daughters. There is, however, a huge flaw in the plan: from the moment they start engaging in verbal sparring à la Elizabeth and Darcy, it's abundantly clear that they fancy each other. Oops.



**Will Simon and Daphne's showmance bloom into a romance?**

/ LIAM DANIEL/NETFLIX

Thanks to British TV **bosses' collective mania** for adapting the collected works of Jane Austen down to the last fragment and scribble, Bridgerton's early nineteenth century milieu is a familiar one, but **you've** never seen Regency romance like this - and not just because the production values, from the **dazzling** costumes to the **elaborate** party scenes, are sky high. Rhimes' Shondaland production outfit has **blazed a trail for representation** on screen; the company's commitment to colour conscious casting means that Bridgerton's sprawling ensemble cast is much more diverse than your average British costume drama. It won't please the all lives matter brigade, but frankly, **who cares**. Star turns from Adjoa Andoh as Simon's formidable, cigarette-wielding godmother Lady Danbury and Golda Rosheuvel as Queen Charlotte (thought by some historians to be Britain's first black queen), who reigns over her court with a fleet of fluffy Pomeranians and a heavy dose of side-eye, are proof that diverse casting is a win for the viewer, too. Pretending that only white people existed in the past and failing to cast from the entire pool of British acting talent, as many productions continue to do, feels a bit like cutting off your nose to spite your face. Here's hoping that this series, along with other recent releases like Armando Iannucci's David Copperfield adaptation, will soon become the rule, rather than the exception.



**Golda Rosheuvel, centre, reigns supreme as Queen Charlotte**

/ LIAM DANIEL/NETFLIX

You can also trace Rhimes' influence in the show's enlightened heroines. Daphne is keen to wear beautiful ballgowns and find herself a match, but she is also frank about the fact that husband-hunting is "all [she has] been raised for," and that her freedoms are very different to those afforded to her dissolute older sibling (Jonathan Bailey), who spends all his spare time shagging opera singers and being a terrible example to his fleet of identikit younger brothers.

Her younger sister Eloise (Claudia Jessie) and neighbour Penelope Featherington (Nicola Coughlan, wearing a fancy ginger wig but retaining the malleable facial expressions we know and love from Derry Girls) are more interested in furthering their educations than looking ornamental. Their attitudes may be anachronistic, but Bridgerton isn't trying to offer us documentary realism - and why should we have to put up with drippy heroines in pursuit of perfect historical accuracy? The female gaze prevails in the show's many, many sex scenes, too (yes, it's a period drama premiering over the Christmas holidays; **no, you probably don't want to watch it with your parents...**)



**Eloise (Claudia Jessie) and Penelope (Nicola Coughlan) aren't fussed about making their society debut**

/ LIAM DANIEL/NETFLIX

Naysayers will doubtless dismiss the pacy dialogue, dramatic plot reveals and **end-of-episode cliffhangers** as soapy and silly, but what was Downton Abbey if not a soap dressed up in period attire? **With seven more books in Quinn's series ripe for adaptation, there's**

certainly scope for Bridgerton to rival Julian Fellowes' long-running hit. A **pleasingly** OTT exercise in glossy, glorious escapism, Bridgerton is a jolt of **joy** and romance at the end of a year that, **for most of us**, has been sorely lacking in both.

*Bridgerton is on Netflix from December 25*



Rosseinsky, Katie. 2022. "This Is Going To Hurt review: Superlative adaptation of Adam Kay's memoir is funny, chaotic and heartbreaking." *Evening Standard*. February 8, 2022. Accessed February 9, 2022. <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/tvfilm/this-is-going-to-hurt-review-bbc-one-iplayer-ben-whishaw-adam-kay-b981133.html>.

## **This Is Going To Hurt review: Superlative adaptation of Adam Kay's memoir is funny, chaotic and heartbreaking**

This TV adaptation starring Ben Whishaw deserves to be just as big a hit as Kay's best-selling book



### **Ben Whishaw as Adam in This Is Going To Hurt**

/ BBC/Sister/AMC/Ludovic Robert

By

**Katie Rosseinsky**

**@katierosseinsky**

[stars]

"Welcome to the NHS!" Ben Whishaw's permanently exhausted junior doctor Adam trills to the camera while being pushed through the hospital corridors on a gurney, squatting over a woman who is mid-labour and experiencing an umbilical cord prolapse. He is, as his unflappable colleague Tracy puts it, "holding the cord inside", or, in Adam's more graphic turn of phrase, "wearing her like Kermit the Frog."

Only a few minutes earlier, he'd woken up in his car, too tired to drive home from his last shift and now late for the next. He delivers the baby by caesarean section wearing yesterday's jumper, or as his stony-faced consultant Mr Lockhart (Alex Jennings) puts it, making the phrase sound like some particularly heinous swear word, "in casual wear."

This opening sequence - **chaotic, funny, deeply, deeply stressful, and littered with deadpan fourth wall-breaking** from Whishaw's character - immediately sets the tone of *This Is Going To Hurt*. BBC One's **superlative** adaptation of Adam Kay's wildly successful medical memoir. Everyone working on the obs and gynae ward (nicknamed "brats and t\*\*ts") of this London hospital is completely knackered, over-stretched and under-resourced; no one is deified because of their job - they are just fallible people

flailing around, trying to do the right thing in unenviable, frustrating circumstances. Births are not miraculous but mundane - “same s\*\*t, different vagina.”

[trailer]

The pace is necessarily relentless, each episode cramming in a steady stream of medical incidents ranging from the ridiculous (a Kinder egg being retrieved from... I'll leave you to fill in the blanks) to the tragic. One catastrophic mistake leaves Adam reeling, replaying the event in his mind over and over until the images constantly intrude on the most banal of everyday actions. These tonal shifts might have ended up a bit “Alton Towers” - to borrow a phrase from Adam, criticising medical student Shruti (Ambika Mod) for crashing the aforementioned gurney into the walls like a dodgem - in less assured hands, but Whishaw is such an **engaging** performer that the whole thing feels effortlessly authentic. He's our anchor in the whirlwind of the ward, but the ensemble cast is similarly **impressive**. There is a camaraderie of sorts between Adam and his colleagues, expressed either in secret codes (mostly used to disguise the fact they're asking for someone to do the coffee run rather than a medical procedure) or a sort of performative sniping. Just as Mr Lockhart puts Adam in his place with a string of withering one-liners (“**You can't have cared for her that well or she wouldn't have died,**” is his matter-of-fact retort when Adam asks whether he can break protocol and attend the funeral of one elderly patient he'd “really cared” for), he in turn takes out his frustrations on Shruti, though their relationship eventually thaws. “Friends?” Adam asks after one particularly gruelling shift. “Colleagues,” she answers emphatically.



**Ambika Mod as Shruti and Ben Whishaw as Adam**

/ Sister

Mod, a **standout** in her first major TV role, plays Shruti with a nervous energy and a keenness to please that we can see turning to disillusionment and pragmatism in real time, while Kadiff Kirwan is **enjoyably superior** as Adam's peer Julian, who never wastes an opportunity to remind our protagonist that he is just an “acting” registrar, and not doing a particular convincing job at it.

Set in 2006, when the real Kay was working as a junior doctor, there are enjoyable flashes of nostalgia in the show's mid-Noughties backdrop, from the chunky Nokia phones and

their glitchy ringtones to the soundtrack (yes, that *is* a Libertines album track you hear) and clips of Preston and Chantelle falling in love on Celebrity Big Brother.

Yet Kay certainly doesn't romanticise the near past. Adam lives with his partner Harry (Rory Fleck Byrne), but doesn't correct his colleagues when they ask about his girlfriend; he is also yet to properly talk about his sexuality with his mum, played glacially by Harriet Walter (her character is not quite as pathologically chilly as Succession's Caroline Collingwood, but she's not far off).



**Alex Jennings as consultant Mr Lockhart**

/ BBC/Sister/AMC/Anika Molnar

Kay has described the show as “a love letter to the NHS”. Thankfully it's not a soppy Valentine's card but a deeply nuanced tribute that's by turns horribly funny, heartbreakingly sad and righteously angry. This series, delivered by another institution we often take for granted, deserves to be just as big a hit as his book.

*This Is Going To Hurt begins on BBC One and BBC iPlayer on February 8 at 9pm*

Shoemaker, Allison. 2020. "Kaley Cuoco Stars in the Highly Entertaining The Flight Attendant on HBO Max." *RogerEbert.com*. November 27, 2020. Accessed February 7, 2022. <https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/the-flight-attendant-tv-review>.

## Kaley Cuoco Stars in the Highly Entertaining The Flight Attendant on HBO Max

Allison Shoemaker November 27, 2020



The ingredients that make up "The Flight Attendant," HBO Max's highly entertaining, stealthily thoughtful new thriller, should all feel familiar to anyone who loves television, movies, and/or a good page-turner. It's Hitchcock and hijinks, or "New Girl" by way of "The Lost Weekend"; imagine a single, alcoholic Lucy Ricardo trying to flee Thailand after waking in a fancy hotel room next to the bloody, murdered corpse of her most recent hook-up and you're in the right neighborhood. But like the best of all such genre-melding stories, it's a lot more complicated than that, thanks in no small part to a **career-best** performance from Kaley Cuoco. When an actor walks that sort of tightrope—trauma, but make it **funny**; it's a thriller, but you're bad at being in **a thriller**; et cetera—the results can be either underwhelming or dazzling, and it's rarely anywhere in between. In the case of "The Flight Attendant," it's definitely the latter.

Adapted from Chris Bohjalian's 2018 novel of the same name, Steve Yockey's series centers on the titular high-flier, Cassie (Cuoco), a hard-partying "good time girl" whose job, in addition to paying her rent, allows her to drink, dance, and bed-hop across the globe. It's clear, though perhaps not to our heroine, that her life choices have begun to wear on her friends and loved ones, primarily: her brother Davey (T.R. Knight, excellent), his husband, and their daughters; her fellow flight attendants, including Marie (Rosie Perez), who has her own drama playing out after work hours; and her best friend Annie (Zosia Mamet), an aggressively competent criminal attorney. (Handy friend to have.) While on a flight to Bangkok, she meets charming cypher Alex (Michael Huisman, eminently watchable and expertly opaque), a rich guy who soon becomes a rich dead body. Confronted with that gruesome scene and her own hangover simultaneously, Cassie makes

just about the worst decisions imaginable, then keeps on making them. And that would be a problem, even if she could remember the night before, which she can't, or if a mysterious woman (the great Michelle Gomez) wasn't hot on her trail, which she is.



The cleverest trick “The Flight Attendant” pulls is this: the plot, while enjoyably twisty, isn't the main attraction. It's Cassie herself. Whether Cuoco, an executive producer on the series alongside Greg Berlanti and others, decided to deliberately play off her sitcom-star image, **this writer cannot say**, but the tension between Cassie's daffy, messy-ol'-me persona, which would be perfectly at home in a sitcom, and the reality of her life and impact her choices makes for a fascinating starting point for a character study. Cuoco doesn't waste the opportunity. It's as though Cassie herself is playing a role, but in the wrong genre, and she knows it's not working but can't bring herself to throw in the towel. The result is a performance equal parts frenetic and deliberate, a character it's easy to love but who will also have audiences fairly shouting at the screen in frustration, and a level of staggering vulnerability that Cuoco somehow manages to make obvious to everyone but Cassie herself. It's been a strange year, but one rich with great star turns on television, and Cuoco's is **among the best**.



As the title and the above paragraph both suggest, “The Flight Attendant” is all about the flight attendant, and no other character comes close to her level of dynamic shading. That's not the fault of the actors, who are uniformly strong—it's a hell of a flex to cast Bebe Neuwirth and give her a single scene, at least in the four episodes provided for review—and it's not really to the detriment of the series, either. While critics only screened the first half of this miniseries, the performances are potent enough that no one feels underdeveloped, simply **less significant**. The exceptions are Knight, a terrific actor whose

scenes with Cuoco are among the show's **strongest**, and Perez, whose character benefits both from a cloud of mysterious plot questions and from being played by Rosie Perez. Were this series more of an ensemble drama, it's likely their turns would be nearly as noteworthy, but "The Flight Attendant" owes both a debt; without their specificity and skill, it's likely that the whole affair would go **lopsided**.

**Mercifully**, that's not the case, and rather than watching Cassie wander amidst a crowd of cardboard cutouts, we simply follow her down a nightmare rabbit hole. Here's where "The Flight Attendant" proves particularly **surprising**: Not content to merely anchor a popcorn-friendly plot to a remarkable central performance, Yockey and company also anchor it to Cassie's papier-mâché mental state. To say too much about the show's visual language or its most interesting narrative swings is to diminish some of the appeal, but suffice it to say that neither the trippy Hitchcock-inspired opening titles nor the irresistible, anxiety-including score (from frequent Berlanti collaborator Blake Neely) is the least bit out of place. Cassie is an unreliable narrator, but not because she's out to deceive the audience. We're in her mind, and it's her own mind that she's most intent on deceiving. It's also a real mess in there.

While the TV-lover in **me** would love to gobble this series down whole—HBO Max will release the series in small batches over the next several weeks—it's likely that "The Flight Attendant" will only benefit from a more drawn-out schedule. In the days between installments, viewers will have time to wrestle with the chaos of Cassie's story before zooming in on the chaos of her everyday life, and the thriller that's secretly a character drama about addiction and its destructive aura deserve that extra time to marinate. But a thriller also often lives and dies by its finale. If "The Flight Attendant" doesn't come in for a **smooth landing (no apologies for that pun)** it's possible that this writer's delight in the early episodes will diminish, but the potency of its interior drama and Cuoco's work make that outcome unlikely. What matters isn't if or how Lucy and Ethel manage to solve their chocolate conveyor belt problem, it's how they react when all **hell breaks loose**. It's a privilege to watch Cuoco stand alone as the bon-boss come flying down the track, and it might even be funny if it weren't so **damn** tragic.

*Four episodes screened for review.*

[trailer]

Tallerico, Brian. 2022. "FOX's The Cleaning Lady is a Melodramatic Mess." *RogerEbert.com*. January 3, 2022. Accessed February 9, 2022. <https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/foxs-the-cleaning-lady-is-a-melodramatic-mess>.

## FOX's The Cleaning Lady is a Melodramatic Mess

Brian Tallerico January 03, 2022



The first new drama of the year drops on FOX tonight and it's a cautionary tale for other TV creators as to how not to deploy manipulative tropes and thinly drawn characters through a potentially **engaging thriller**. The concept here **isn't** bad but the execution is another story as the writers pull out all the stops to manipulate the emotions of their viewers in ways that alternate between annoying and exploitative. I always find it a little cheap when TV writers put kids in jeopardy—it's an easy way to pull at the heartstrings—and "The Cleaning Lady" doubles down in its first few episodes, presenting us with one who needs a life-saving medical procedure and another who might be deported. Even worse, issues like immigration and social imbalance are treated like window dressing here instead of anything that the writers want to genuinely explore. Only the central performance holds it together at all, but even her notable screen presence can't **clean up the mess** that the writers keep throwing at her.

Adapted from an Argentinean drama of the same name, "The Cleaning Lady" stars Elodie Yung as Thony, a single mother living and working in Las Vegas. A doctor in Cambodia, where she was born, Thony struggles to make ends meet in the United States, only here because she needs a breakthrough medical treatment for her son Luca (Valentino and Sebastien LaSalle) while her husband Marco (Ivan Shaw) struggles with getting a visa to join them. She lives with her sister-in-law Fiona (Martha Millan), who has her own issues with being an undocumented worker (and what that might mean for her son's future).



In the premiere, Thony ends up witnessing a crime and gets entangled with a crime syndicate through one of its power players, Arman (Adan Canto). He basically saves her life by turning her into the cleaning lady for their operation, tending to crime scenes when they get a little messy. Movies and TV shows have a habit of ignoring the practical truth of violence, and so there's something admittedly clever about centering the kind of functional character that these narratives typically ignore, but the first few episodes of "The Cleaning Lady" fail to define what it is that Arman and his colleagues really even do. The writing here needed a character like Gus Fring from "Breaking Bad," and that show's clear definition of its power structure and rules. The writing on "The Cleaning Lady" just isn't sharp enough to do that.

One of the reasons is that the writing hits one talking point after another with all the subtlety of a hammer. Expect a melodramatic exchange about the health of her child, her former life in Cambodia, and the legal status of the characters every other scene. Nothing here is allowed to breathe in a way that makes it feel genuine, especially not the subplot about an FBI agent named Garrett Miller (Oliver Hudson) who ends up turning Thony way too early. The decision to basically pull Thony in two directions with Garrett and Arman early in the show's existence takes too much agency away from her, defining her by the men who manipulate her more than any sort of actual character development.

It's a shame because Yung is an engaging actress who deserves a better show. She's constantly pushing against the overwritten dialogue here and trying to sell the immediacy of Thony's predicament, and she acts circles around everyone else. Sadly, that ends up being another one of the program's issues because one realizes that performers like Canto and Hudson aren't delivering on the same level. This show needed a rich, complex ensemble. As is, it's more the tale of an actress who I hope can quickly escape this messy drama and move on to something cleaner.

*Three episodes screened for review. Premieres on FOX on January 3<sup>rd</sup>.*

[trailer]



Travers, Ben. 2020a. “‘Love Life’ Review: Anna Kendrick’s HBO Max Anthology Romance Is Gratingly Superficial.” *IndieWire*. May 18, 2020. Accessed February 9, 2022. <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/05/love-life-review-anna-kendrick-hbo-max-tv-series-bad-1202231809/>.

### **‘Love Life’ Review: Anna Kendrick’s HBO Max Anthology Romance Is Gratingly Superficial**

The first HBO Max original series is about a 20-something New Yorker whose struggle to love herself is far too easy to understand.



**Ben Travers**

**May 18, 2020 9:00 am**

@BenTTravers



**Jin Ha and Anna Kendrick in “Love Life”**

Sarah Shatz / WarnerMedia / HBO Max

Anyone worried HBO Max wouldn’t be easy to distinguish from HBO should have their fears settled on launch day. Not only is the WarnerMedia streaming service premiering with plenty of original series far-removed from violent dramas and foul-mouthed comedies — like “The Not-Too-Late Show with Elmo” and a crafting series hosted by YouTube star LaurDIY — but its first scripted, **live-action, Emmy-contending**, HBO Max *original*, “Love Life,” would never pass muster on premium cable.

Starring and executive-produced by Anna Kendrick, the 10-episode, half-hour anthology series from creator and co-showrunner Sam Boyd tells the full story of one woman’s quest to find a happy relationship — **but that’s it**. Unlike, say, HBO’s landmark comedy “Sex and the City,” “Love Life” really only cares about one story, not bothering to flesh out compelling supporting characters or even define its lead beyond her relationships, which restricts **its time-hopping structure** and ambitious premise to one-note drack.

As a seasonal anthology, “Love Life” aims to track a different protagonist each season, which is a fine idea for tackling long-form romance, but issues quickly arise in how this first story is told. Meet Darby (Kendrick). Fresh out of college and working as a museum tour guide, Darby lives in the kind of spacious New York City apartment that only appears on television: bright, cute, and impeccably clean, and the only problems exist offscreen, like an in-building laundry unit (the horror!) another tenant randomly pees in (**OK, that’s bad**). Her two roommates, Sara (Zoë Chao) and Mallory (Sasha Compere), exist in a similar fashion: Though conversations imply Darby sees them often, neither are given half as much attention as the men Darby meets, even though Sara and Mallory make fleeting appearances throughout the series while each man gets one or two episodes, tops.

“Love Life” covers one relationship per episode but, **unlike that other half-hour, NYC-set, adults-only, HBO-related series**, it often runs through a year of its protagonist’s life in that same short timespan. First, Darby meets Augie (“Devs” star Jin Ha), and the two enter into the all-too-typical post-teen dilemmas of **“did we hook up too soon?”** and **“why isn’t he texting me?”** After pushing past those early hurdles, the story fast-forwards through their first few months of bliss, when his interests (the Knicks!) become her interests, sleepovers become routine, and silly nicknames would be assigned if only there was time for scenes to generate said nicknames! Alas, there’s not, and the premiere skips to the inevitable break-up, which is caused **by spoiler-y reasons** that have to do with him having a life and her lacking one.



**Anna Kendrick and Gus Halper in “Love Life”**

Zach Dilgard / WarnerMedia / HBO Max

Subsequent episodes follow a similar roadmap: Introduce a guy, love blossoms, things fall apart. Darby slowly develops along the way, but the first five-ish episodes mainly focus on her romantic mistakes — mistakes that are far too obvious for anyone who’s not 22. First-love heartbreak leads to over-commitment; then there’s a series of flings, the obviously-wrong-guy-for-you phase, and the flashback to her first relationship so she can figure out *when it all went wrong*. (Perspective: **She’s 25. Relax.**) Each episode tries to cover a lot of ground in 30 minutes, and when the ground has been this well-covered by plenty of other romantic comedies, glossing over details to get to Darby’s main lesson only makes

her whole experience feel more hollow. (Do a shot every time she calls her partner “baby” — it’s the only way to suppress the gagging induced by that word.)

Expanding episodes to an hour isn’t exactly a welcome solution for future seasons, unless it forces Boyd to focus on his lead’s friends, work, and other ambitions. “Love Life” makes it look like the only thing that matters to Darby is finding a husband; though there are fleeting scenes that highlight her other interests (and later episodes dig into Sara with decent results), they all feel **extraneous**, forced, and **underdeveloped** compared to her romantic pursuits, which feel obsessive given how much they dominate her life.



### Jin Ha and Anna Kendrick in “Love Life”

Sarah Shatz / WarnerMedia / HBO Max

As a star vehicle for Kendrick, who’s only previous “TV” roles were in other quickly forgotten start-ups for Facebook and Quibi, “Love Life” is an odd choice. Kendrick’s talents as a **fierce, often biting, performer** — who can channel powerful emotions into specific gestures and phrases — are wasted on Darby, who’s painted purely in broad strokes. She’s described as a “people-pleaser,” which is a) the biggest (minor) obstacle she has to overcome, and b) a phrase sharing far too much in common with “lacking a personality.” It’s hard to invest in a character who’s so **busy** pleasing others that the audience can’t tell who she really is. Plus, Kendrick has no room to build, fitting in random vulgarities and quick zingers as the only way to distinguish this character from all the lovelorn leads in past PG-13 rom-coms.

And yet, Darby is the only character “Love Life” makes time for. One could certainly argue the first HBO Max original series aimed to be “Sex and the City” for 21st-century TV, but it’s, at best, a cheap Fendi knockoff. Instead of a serialized ensemble comedy, it’s a **star-driven anthology** series; instead of focusing on many nuanced relationships through a variety of perspectives, it’s one person’s homogenized journey. Even in an area where “SATC” seriously struggled — diversity — “Love Life” can’t gain much ground. (Aside from ignoring everyone other than Darby, Mallory is so rarely seen or heard that her inclusion borders on tokenism.) These likely **aren’t** the differences anyone was hoping

to see in a romantic series for the streaming era, but hey, at least there's no mistaking it for an HBO show.

Grade: D+

*"Love Life" premieres Wednesday, May 27, with three episodes on HBO Max. New episodes will be released every Thursday.*

Travers, Ben. 2020b. “‘The Flight Attendant’ Review: Kaley Cuoco Soars in Kooky Thriller from HBO Max.” *IndieWire*. November 26, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/11/flight-attendant-review-hbo-max-kaley-cuoco-1234600715/>.

## ‘The Flight Attendant’ Review: Kaley Cuoco Soars in Kooky Thriller from HBO Max

Whether or not it can stick **the landing**, "The Flight Attendant" offers plenty of style, rapid fun, and first-class service from its ebullient star.

**Ben Travers**

[photo]

Nov 26, 2020 11:00 am

@BenTTravers



### Kaley Cuoco in “The Flight Attendant”

Phil Caruso / HBO Max

TV mysteries are a lot like **bumpy flights**: So long as they end well, earlier quibbles can be forgiven. “The Flight Attendant,” one of HBO Max’s first marquee originals, didn’t offer its finale to critics in advance, and the first four episodes have plenty of bumps if you want to look for them. But the sleek ride Susanna Fogel, Steve Yockey, and especially star/producer Kaley Cuoco have cobbled together makes it hard to push the call button, let alone start looking for a parachute. Meshing together a handful of genres — part mystery-thriller, part dark comedy, part surreal romantic-fantasy — the hourlong series careens forward with a propulsive pace, curious side stories, and an enticing cast of characters. Suspension of disbelief is a requisite and nagging questions need to be held until the end, but all signs point to net positive trip, even if a safe **landing is still up in the air**.

In the first of many montages, “The Flight Attendant” opens with Cassie Bowden (Cuoco) jet-setting around the globe, mixing business with pleasure by working each flight and going out each night. The blunt opening, set to Sofi Tukker’s “The Good Time Girl,” plays into our collective presumptions about what flight crews do when they’re not enforcing sky law: hitting the hottest bars, sleeping in glamorous hotel rooms, and even inviting the most attractive passengers to sign up for a mile-high membership. But the lack of masks and fear

over job security aren't the only reasons not to take Cassie's life as a literal interpretation of what it's like to be a flight attendant: The series quickly undercuts any representational reality when the good times suddenly end.

After an excellent first date with Alex (Michiel Huisman of "Game of Thrones" and "Haunting of Hill House" fame), Cassie wakes up to a fate much worse than her hangover: Her new beau's perfectly trimmed throat has been slit. In a panic, she runs back to her job, flies out of Bangkok, and tries to act like she never even went out with "3C," as her fellow flight attendants have been calling Alex. But when the body is found, Cassie has to search her foggy memory of the worst one-night-stand ever for clues that just might save her life. Things only get weirder from there. For one, Cassie's subconscious takes the form of Alex: Whether she's mid-flight or being interrogated by the FBI, Cassie keeps flashing back to Alex's hotel room, where he'll sit up in bed — neck still sliced, body still covered in blood — and start talking to her. Their conversations go further than Cassie using Alex as a stand-in for her own memories, and, in **one of the series' biggest reaches**, their time together is real enough that she starts falling in love with not just a dead guy, but her active hallucination of a dead guy.



### Kaley Cuoco and Michiel Huisman in "The Flight Attendant"

Phil Caruso / HBO Max

Like I said: weird. But that kind of bizarre choice helps make other unnatural decisions look sensible. For reasons necessary to the plot more than the character, Cassie starts investigating the murder on her own. She argues it's to help clear her name, but she's got a lawyer best friend (played by Zosia Mamet) working for free, and there's very little evidence that makes her a prime suspect; it's her own investigation that gets the FBI's attention, meaning it's Cassie's bad decisions that keep the story going.

**OK, enough nitpicking.** This is a mystery-thriller, Cassie is **your** every-woman protagonist, and entertainment is the priority. In addition to stylish modern costumes (courtesy of Emmy nominee Catherine Marie Thomas) and more frames within the frame than any comic book movie since "Hulk," "The Flight Attendant" has a great main character. Writer/producer Yockey (adapting Chris Bohjalian's 2018 book) gives Cassie

enough history to make her feel real, even when she's living through **goofy**, surreal circumstances. Plus, Cuoco nails every beat of the genre-shifting script.

The "Big Bang Theory" star **brings her comedic chops** to the table yet again, but she also enlivens the many frenzied close-ups of Cassie's bewildered, worried, or excited expressions. It's a detailed performance, requiring Cuoco to handle every disparate scene as they come, while also tying them together to form a through-line only she can — one minute Cassie is having a heart-to-heart with her brother (a well-cast T.R. Knight), then she's stuck inside her own mind talking to a dead guy, and then she's knocking over a tray of drinks. Personal drama, existential romance, physical comedy: Cuoco plays them all in the span of a few minutes, and she also wraps one into the other as she goes.

Not knowing where all this is going makes it hard to say whether "The Flight Attendant" is worth an eight-hour investment — let alone its \$15/month subscription fee. The HBO Max original is moving so fast, **it could come crashing** down at any second. But as a light and loose limited series with an **arresting** turn from Cuoco, there's enough sheer entertainment for fans of the star (or anyone already subscribed to WarnerMedia's burgeoning service) to hop on board. Unlike those long flights, if this mystery gets too bumpy, you can **deplane at any time**.

**Grade: B**

*"The Flight Attendant" premieres its first three episodes Thursday, November 26 on HBO Max. Two new episodes will be released each following week, with the finale debuting December 17. The first episode is available to stream without a subscription.*

Travers, Ben. 2022. “‘The Gilded Age’ Review: Carrie Coon and Christine Baranski Add Pizzazz to HBO’s Blissful Period Drama.” *IndieWire*. January 20, 2022. Accessed February 10, 2022. <https://www.indiewire.com/2022/01/the-gilded-age-review-hbo-julian-fellowes-1234691464/>.

## ‘The Gilded Age’ Review: Carrie Coon and Christine Baranski Add Pizzazz to HBO’s Blissful Period Drama

Julian Fellowes blends PBS vibes with HBO grandeur in a drama series as opulent as it is chaste.



**Ben Travers**

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### Carrie Coon in “The Gilded Age”

Alison Cohen Rosa / HBO

Since the beginning (also known as the late '90s), HBO dramas have come with a certain expectation. Quality? Well, the odds are better here than elsewhere. Originality? Usually, yes, at least until the sequels and reboots start. But really, the one thing that has long tied together the awards magnet's hourlong programs is, well, depravity. There's a proclivity for violence, or coarse language, or sex and nudity — sometimes one of each, all of which are banned from broadcast. Give or take an idealist crowdpleaser here and an adventure series there, HBO dramas have always had a mature edge to them.

Now, maybe it wasn't an edge as routinely gutting as Showtime or Cinemax, but for its first few decades of original programming, HBO needed that edge to stand out. Network TV was still pulling massive audiences. Subscription services were a niche market. Satellite and cable package add-ons had to offer something the other channels couldn't. But what was once a quality rare enough to set them apart from the competition has now been replicated across the small screen.



I say all this not to lament “*The Gilded Age*’s” lack of “*Knick*”-esque needlepoint or “Perry Mason’s” corpse complex, but to prepare you, **dear readers**, for an altogether different kind of HBO costume drama. (OK, “*The Knick*” was on Cinemax, but Steven Soderbergh is an HBO man, through and through.) Julian Fellowes’ latest period story — originally intended for ITV overseas and ordered to series at NBC before moving to its final network home — is **gentle, blissful** entertainment. Watching the first five episodes elicited a reaction not unlike enjoying a warm fireplace with witty friends. The **tasteful** tale of class conflict at the start of America’s Gilded Age relishes its expansive production, stunning wardrobes, and talented ensemble as thoroughly as it preserves its respectful atmosphere. After all, Fellowes’ characters’ common goal is to be society’s *most* dignified member. Appearing gentlemanly instead of *being a gentleman* is social suicide, and where one stands on the public ladder of success is everything, whether they need to maintain appearances in order to access long-denied opportunities or for the simple satisfaction of knowing you’re a rung up on the guy down the block.



### Louisa Jacobson and Denée Benton in “*The Gilded Age*”

Alison Cohen Rosa / HBO

Our gateway into late-19th century New York’s aristocracy is Marian Brook (played by Louisa Jacobson, daughter to Meryl Streep), a young woman from Pennsylvania who’s left with nothing after the death of her father. Forced to move out of the rented home she thought her family owned, Marian’s only practical option is to join her two wealthy aunts in New York. Along the way, she meets an aspiring writer named Peggy Scott (Denée Benton), and the two form a fast friendship soon complicated by the consistent obstacle of the time: class.

Upon arriving in Manhattan, circumstance brings them both to the refined foray of Marian’s aunts, Agnes van Rhijn (Christine Baranski) and Ada Brook (Cynthia Nixon). Despite her initial resistance to housing her wayward niece and instinctual distrust of her new friend — “**An unknown colored woman lent you money to travel to New York? I find that very unlikely.**” — Agnes relents to both, arranging for Marian to meet her upper-upper class acquaintances and hiring Peggy as a personal secretary. Soon enough,

the house is filled with passive aggressive differences of opinion, built from generational divides and cultural blind spots alike, but they're all smoothed over well enough. After all, the Brooks are family, and while Ada and Marian genuinely like Peggy, even Agnes shows the respect earned by a skillful employee.

Where Agnes draws the line — repeatedly, and with enough droll quips perfectly elevated by Baranski's impeccable execution — is with her new neighbors. The Russells are what the elder Brooks refer to as New Money. George (Morgan Spector) made his massive fortune as a railroad tycoon, and his wife, Bertha (Carrie Coon), spent a chunk of it on their palatial mansion just across the street from Agnes and Ada's prying eyes. Despite their curiosity, neither aunt will dare venture the dozen paces required to look inside the magnificent estate; they simply will not lower themselves to these up-and-comers, nor grant a **leg up to the Brooks'** lofty status.



### Christine Baranski in "The Gilded Age"

Alison Cohen Rosa / HBO

Yet access is all Bertha wants and the only thing George still needs. She understands how fleeting a fortune can be, compared to joining the elite social club that protects its own for generations. (Her fixation on finding a "suitable" husband for her aging daughter, played by Taissa Farmiga, shows just how savvy she is at playing the long game.) He knows he's conquered the business world, and the only way to keep growing is by befriending (or besting) the politicians and policy-makers who shape cities, states, and countries. Coon is tasked with setting the series' stakes via a fiery moment to close the premiere, shouting to her husband that not only will she never stop fighting to elevate the family's stature, but she'll also seek vengeance on those that block their climb. It's the kind of moment that in other hands would be an unforgettable pivot to villainy. Here, it's just an unfiltered human reaction in a series where everyone always has their guard up.

Asking a talented acting troupe to embody people whose deepest desires are only shared through a coy smile or pointed scowl is like tossing catnip to a group of feral felines, but the cast of "The Gilded Age" still **provides** an embarrassment of riches. Coon, as

remarkable as she is **versatile**, remains a far cry from her plainspoken sheriff in “*Fargo*.” Elegant and ferocious in equal measure, she builds Bertha quickly as a **brilliant** strategist whose singular focus doesn’t distract from seeing others clearly. (She also has *the* most breathtaking gowns, courtesy of costume designer Kasia Walicka Maimone, befitting Bertha’s need to prove her worth.) Jacobson and Benton embody youthful naïveté without sacrificing smarts and empathy; they’re both ideal audience proxies, steering “*The Gilded Age*” forward as the next generation pushing for change through positivity. Nixon is strongest when she’s serving as the supportive aunt (her more frenzied moments skew too close to the manic version of Miranda, who’s still haunting “*And Just Like That...*”), but it’s Baranski who steals the show. There’s a 20-minute run in the second episode where the only notes I took were quotes from Agnes. Despite her clout, the character is hardly an overpowering presence in the series. It’s Baranski who makes her so bold.

The combination of rather serene storytelling centered on extremely wealthy individuals may prove trying for audiences fed up with rich people’s problems. (A handful of the house staffers are given their own arcs, but none so far compare to the folks upstairs.) Similarly, “*Downton Abbey*” detractors may see too many similarities to invest in the next chapter of Julian Fellowes’ “*Gosford Park*” successors. But if you’re normally enamored with period dramas, *Masterpiece* on PBS, or well-orchestrated ensemble pieces, “*The Gilded Age*” should provide plenty of entertainment in the weeks to come. Just try to remember it’s on HBO.

**Grade: B**

*“The Gilded Age” premieres Monday, January 24 at 9 p.m. ET on HBO.*

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## Suspicion review: Apple thriller proves we need to rescue Uma Thurman from bad TV shows

[stars]

Conspiracy drama doesn't so much have episodes as reams of questions, exposition and occasional answers dispensed weekly

Adam White

6 days ago

[trailer]

A lot of television doesn't act like television anymore. Case in point: Apple TV's *Suspicion*, purportedly a conspiracy thriller series starring Uma Thurman, but in actual fact, an almost impressively tedious film chopped into 45-minute chunks. And not really starring Uma Thurman. In execution, *Suspicion* doesn't so much have episodes as reams of questions, exposition and occasional answers dispensed weekly. Few will make it past its first two instalments.

Based on an Israeli series, *Suspicion* opens with the abduction of a rich teenager from a New York hotel. His kidnappers wear latex masks of the royal family and the resulting CCTV footage of the incident goes viral. Meanwhile, we're introduced to three seemingly random Brits who've just flown back to the UK from New York: cybersecurity boffin Aadesh (*The Big Bang Theory*'s Kunal Nayyar), academic Tara (Elizabeth Henstridge) and financial adviser Natalie (Georgina Campbell), who's a few hours away from getting married. Arrests are soon made, along with pleas of innocence and hints at a global network of crime and corruption.

*Suspicion*'s first few episodes are **cold and confusing**. We can assume the show's disparate cast – which also includes a wanted man (Elyes Gabel) and, later, a floppy-haired student (Tom Rhys Harries) – will eventually come together and/or show their cards, but the demands of an eight-hour season means it won't happen for a while. It results in a series that endlessly evades the viewer, with characters who do little but act bewildered. Who's lying? Who's pulling the strings? Why should we care?

Then there's Thurman, a bona fide movie star whose recent adventures in TV – from the musical flop *Smash* to the Netflix organ donation thriller *Chambers* – have proven

consistently depressing. Cast as the mysterious mother of the kidnapped boy, she's plastered all over *Suspicion*'s posters but seems to have filmed her few scenes in a day. Noah Emmerich, one of America's most **unsung** character actors, looks set to do more as an FBI agent transferred to London to investigate our suspects, but then spends much of the action staring at computer screens. The biggest mystery in *Suspicion* is why it's asked two brilliant US actors to perform back-up to a cluster of **not-very-good** Brits.

In fairness, few could salvage a script this **silly**. Despite straining for real-world relevance, writer Rob Williams misunderstands not only internet culture – violent kidnap footage is memed into oblivion and giggled over by seemingly everyone the main cast encounters – but any kind of normal human behaviour. Perplexingly still, Apple has decided to drop *Suspicion* weekly, despite a format – **namely endless delaying** tactics with only the hint of future answers – built for binging. It brings to mind an important lesson: television works when it uses the storytelling tools at its disposal, rather than just hacking a story into pieces and expecting viewers to follow it.

*'Suspicion' begins on 4 February on Apple TV+*