BROADCHURCH
on Netflix and Amazon
∙ From BBC America and ITV ∙
Chris Chibnall:
Creator/Executive Producer/Showrunner

Before transitioning into writing for television, Chris Chibnall established himself as a distinguished playwright. Two of his early plays, written while he was in college (he earned his MA in Theatre and Film from the University of Sheffield) were performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. In 1998, he became Writer in Residence with GRiP Theatre Company. He later participated in the Royal National Theatre Studio, and his play Kiss Me Like You Mean It, developed and produced at Soho Theatre, was shortlisted for the Meyer-Whitworth Award.

In 2001, Chibnall developed (with writer Nigel McCrery) the drama series Born and Bred—which ran on BBC 1 from 2002-2005, with Chibnall serving as Head Writer, Consulting Producer, and subsequently as Executive Producer. Chibnall later worked with the series creators of the International Emmy-award-winning BBC 1 time traveling police drama Life on Mars (2006–2007), which also won the 2007 BAFTA Audience Award. In 2005, Chibnall served as Head Writer/Co-Producer of the science-fiction drama series Torchwood—a spin-off from the cult series Doctor Who. Torchwood was nominated for Saturn and Hugo Awards, and was the recipient of the Best Drama Series award in 2007 at the BAFTA Cymru Awards. Chibnall returned to Doctor Who for the 2010 season, after a 1-year stint as the showrunner/developer for Law & Order: UK (co-produced by Dick Wolf Productions).

Chibnall was also the showrunner/adapter of Camelot for Starz, before segueing to his luminous masterwork, the 1-hour drama series, Broadchurch, which premiered to unanimous critical acclaim in March 2013. The show, produced by Kudos Film and Television, has been nominated for numerous awards and won multiple BAFTA Awards, including for Best Drama Series (2014), as well as the Peabody Award (2014), UK Broadcast Award for Best Drama Series (2015) and more.

Broadchurch centers on the murder investigation of an 11-year-old local boy, Danny Latimer (Oskar McNamara), and its aftershocks on this once-idyllic (fictional) coastal town in Dorset, England. The media frenzy and pervasive suspicions threaten to destroy not only the Latimer family, but also this close-knit community. Dark secrets and lies come to light, and the bonds

¹ BAFTA Cymru is the Welsh branch of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts.
of family and friendship are severely tested. Despite its unflinching exploration of grief and tragedy, *Broadchurch* is, ultimately, a show about justice, faith and hope. The lead investigators on the case are detectives Alec Hardy (David Tennant) and Ellie Miller (Olivia Coleman), who clash at every turn (Ellie is a local; Alec is an outsider); both actors are brilliant, and have been honored with many illustrious awards as well.

*Broadchurch* is distributed by BBC America in the US and Canada, and is also available via Amazon, iTunes and Netflix. Immensely popular with audiences, Season 2 was immediately green-lit following the Season 1 finale. Season 3 is in the works, and will premiere in 2016.

**MAJOR SPOILERS** to follow...

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**Neil Landau:** Thank you for both delighting me and exhausting me because I just finished binge-viewing Season 2 last night; it's so addictive that I happily stayed up until dawn.

**Chris Chibnall:** [Laughs] Oh, that's good to hear, because that's how I've been receiving a lot of American box sets for a long time, so it's good to avenge on the culture.

**NL:** How do you design such intricate murder-mysteries? Do you reverse engineer the whodunit?

**CC:** You sort of work from both ends, actually. With Season 1, I created the world, and story-lined the first episode, had a sense of the season as a whole, and the story as a whole, and wrote the first script on spec, for myself. And then after I'd written that first draft, probably a week or two later, I literally woke up one morning with the identity of the killer in my head, going, “Oh, what if it was Joe [Miller, played by Matthew Gravelle], what if it was him?” That would sort of make sense of everything I’m sort of scrambling around, starting to look at. And then I tested it on Sam Hoyle, our script executive, and Jane Featherstone who’s the Executive Producer on the show. And they sort of both went, “Ah, interesting...” and so from then, I rewrote the first episode, and story-lined the whole series with that in mind. So, I think it’s always that you want to have that one, definitive answer with writing and process, and there’s no such thing, in a funny way. It’s like you plan as much as you can, and then you change if a better idea comes along. And I think, in making something intricate, you’ve got to be open to a better idea. Good ideas are killed by better ideas, and so a lot of planning, and then a lot of improvisation at the same time. [Laughs] So that’s no kind of answer really, is it?

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2 In the UK, “series” is synonymous to the US usage of the word “season.”
**NL: No, it’s a great answer because it shows that you’re open to making discoveries as you go forward. It’s enhances the suspense for the viewer — that almost anybody could have done it at a certain point. You throw suspicion on various characters, and make a case.**

**CC: Absolutely.**

**NL: When you were working on Season 1, did you have any awareness that there was going to be a Season 2? Because when I watched Season 2, there are so many seeds planted in Season 1, that you’re able to harvest, for example when Ellie beats on her husband when he’s in custody, and then Sharon Bishop [Marianne Jean-Baptiste] uses that against her in the courtroom. Did you have that plan in mind? Were you already making a roadmap for Season 2? Or did you go back and have to pore over the evidence, and say, “What can we use?”**

**CC: It was a little bit of both. I had an idea for a second season, I always thought, if by any chance we were successful, or we got a green light for a second season, I always knew I wanted to do the trial storyline. And I’d mentioned that to the network, very early on. But it’s no use if people don’t watch or like it. So there was a plan at the back of my mind. But something like Ellie beating up Joe, it’s really as much about the emotional psychology. The impetus behind that scene is, simply, there’s no other response that Ellie is going to have, other than that.**

**NL: That’s true.**

**CC: So, the emotions come first. But then I think the show is constructed around the idea of aftermath and consequences. And so what I tried to do with the show is be quite relentless and ruthless in exploring that idea, that these people have made a decision; what is the fallout from that decision? And what is the continuing fallout from the fallout? So that sort of single impetus defines a lot of the decisions that we make in story-lining, and that I make in the writing.**

**NL: I’m wondering if also, for example the bald man carrying the child’s body, in early episodes, it looks like it could be Joe, but from the way that the light is, it could also be Nige Carter [Joe Sims]. Was it kept cryptic intentionally so that you could still make a different choice? Or did you know at that point, it’s definitely Joe, but we’re going to make people think that maybe it could be Nige, or somebody else?**

**CC: I think we had discussed around the casting, that actually if they looked similar, that would be helpful, and actually I think that when one of them came in to read, I think again, Sam our (script executive) said, “Well, look, he’s a really good actor and he looks a bit like Matthew Gravelle, who plays Joe, so we could always use that as a red herring.” My memory is that’s how it was sort of seeded, so you’re constantly looking—it’s the great thing about a murder
mystery, you’re always looking for those little tricks and fun and those cheeky bits of mischief—that you can play with the audience.

**NL:** About theme, Season 1 seems very much about loss, and Season 2 is very much about the fight; in fact there are some very specific lines about how a trial is like “street fighting in wigs.” And there’s a boxing metaphor.

**CC:** There is, yes.

**NL:** I’m just wondering how intentional you’re thinking thematically, for example: this season is going to be more an exploration of this and maybe the next season will explore something different, or maybe from episode to episode? Is that in your mind?

**CC:** Yes, it has been in both seasons so far, in slightly different ways. I would say with Season 1, it was the notion of community, the notion of secrets, the notion of emotional loss is absolutely embedded in there, and always was, right from the start. It’s funny, but I think maybe themes come out of the ideas. So, in a sense, you have an idea of the story you want to tell, and then automatically you think it plays into the theme of loss and grief; that’s powering a lot of the characters in the show. And then the resolution to season 1 is still about loss and grief, in a different way. The decision to make Joe the killer—it didn’t end that theme, it just expanded it and deepened it—and made it worse! And I think with Season 2, what we talked about a lot was—funnily enough, fight wasn’t one, but as soon as you say that, I think you’re right, it’s all there in the boxing imagery, and each character’s telling another character to fight. I think for me, it was about the difference between truth and justice, which was: you’ve got the truth, but how do you now get justice? And what’s the difference between the two? And locked into that, one of the big themes in Season 2 is, I think, loneliness. And the difference between being alone and loneliness.

There’s a lot of deliberate duality in season 2, both visual, verbal, narrative; it’s a season of couples and duos and the splits between them. But also, there’s 2 stories going on. I think the theme is even more embedded in Season 2 and probably more front and center, because it needed to unify those 2 stories, of the trial and then the Sandbrook case. But what’s interesting, and I don’t know how successful it is, because you need to see the whole season to understand how thematically unified it is, and I don’t know for an audience watching Episode 4 that that’s particularly useful, because they’re just going, “Well, there’s 2 stories here, and how are they connecting?” So, I hope it’s satisfying at the end, but you have to place that trust in your audience, that they’re going to stick to the end and understand that at the end, both stories are about people trying to disguise the truth, people trying to escape justice. And then with Hardy and Ellie, across both stories, are trying to find the truth and deliver justice. I think the danger with theme is it becomes esoteric, or abstract, or you have to dig too deep.
NL: I agree.

CC: So, I think that it’s a constant experiment, and what I’ve done deliberately in both seasons is maybe verbalize the theme, and sum it up a little between Hardy and Ellie, in a scene in Episode 8. I don’t know whether that’s cheating, or useful! [Laughter]

NL: I know you worked on Law & Order in the UK, where it’s procedural and you’re just doing one, closed-ended case per episode. Was Broadchurch your creative reaction to those limitations?

CC: Yes! Absolutely! You know, you go, “I’m not done with these people; I want to know where they’re going. You know, those people in the morgue? I want to see where they go when they walk out!”

NL: I actually think that the procedural—the formulaic procedural with the murder, or the illness, or the case that gets resolved in 47 minutes—is actually going to become like an anachronism relatively soon, despite its durability and current popularity. I just can’t see that continuing, given that the audience is getting used to a much deeper dive, and more nuanced, gradually unfolding mystery.

CC: I’d be surprised to see them disappear entirely. But I think the audience appears to be responding to greater serialization. And also, I guess, technology is just our friend in that sense because they can catch up in a way they couldn’t. Whereas now, if you want to just pull up an episode straight away to remind you, to catch up, or to watch four at a time, you can do that. So, it’s very interesting how it’s the technology that’s informing the narrative, and it’s informing the commissioning and green lighting process as well. People are less afraid of [commissioning] those serialized narratives because they know they can put 10 episodes up, or 13 episodes up immediately, all at once. It’s really exciting as a writer and as a showrunner.

NL: Serialized shows used to be considered a liability. Now they’re being embraced. And the overnight ratings have become irrelevant.

CC: Yes, it’s going that way here [in the UK], too. And actually even here now there are conversations about not even the 7 or the 10-day window, but the 30-day window, and measuring that, because actually things sit on your box for ages, you don’t necessarily watch them in a week. So, even the measurements that feel up to date still aren’t an accurate description. And it’s not just great for the people writing stories, but it’s great for actors as well. You know they get the characters to play out across a much longer space, you can write richer parts; you can attract different levels of talent. It’s revolutionary, all of it, really, it’s had such an impact.
NL: Many top creatives are more willing to commit to a 10-episode order than 22. I’m planning to include Broadchurch in the section I’m calling Existential Detectives.

CC: [Laughter] Brilliant!

NL: And so it’s going to be The Fall, Broadchurch, Happy Valley and a show called Bosch, which is on Amazon here now. The idea about “existential detectives” is that, it isn’t just detectives who are solving cases about people who are very complicated, and have deep wounds from the past, and a whole pathology, but that the detectives themselves have these very complex backstories; they’re haunted by dark secrets, and things that are tugging them down. And in the case of Broadchurch, Alec Hardy has both emotional, psychological, and physical secrets (his heart arrhythmia is not a wound, but it’s another way he’s broken).

CC: Yes, he’s a completely broken man as he comes into Season 1, and absolutely, he hates the world in general; he hates the specific world he’s in at the moment; he hates himself for his failing and yes, he’s a man at war with the universe.

NL: He hates the press and the media for what they did to him and his reputation. He was ostracized.

CC: He has good reason to hate everyone, so that’s the thing I love, and the way David picked up on his characterization of it is, you feel that he’s not unjustified in his despair at everything around him.

NL: Like you said, more than anybody, he seems to hate himself. And the Sandbrook case, it destroyed his marriage; he’s estranged from his ex-wife, but especially his daughter, and then you were able to tie that in to why he wants to solve the Sandbrook case so much, because Pippa was the same age as his daughter, right?

CC: Yes, Pippa’s the same age as Daisy, yes, absolutely. That felt very important. And I knew that I wanted to bring his daughter in late in Season 2, just so you could have that glimpse and understand the rage. In a sense the first 16 episodes of Broadchurch are all about peeling the layers back on Alec Hardy so that you understand and go on that journey with him, and see what’s at his center, which is a good man who has, as he would see it, failed at what he’s intending to do. He’s failed as a husband and a father and a detective. Broadchurch is a show that asks: How does life go on when life hasn’t gone on? And in a sense it applies to Hardy as well: how can he pick himself up and carry on, given everything he’s turned his hand to has not worked the way he would wish as he comes in.

NL: Hardy truly can’t solve this case on his own; Ellie is a native, a local of Broadchurch, so she’s much more dialed in. At the same time, Hardy has his physical limitations and ailments,
so he needs her. And she’s so strong, and serves as his guide amid unfathomable grief: the death of a child.

**CC:** Yes, it’s unanswerable, really; the literal death of hope.

**NL:** So he literally has a broken heart, and then he figuratively has a broken heart, then you have Jocelyn [Charlotte Rampling], who is seeking justice, who is losing her eyesight. And Sharon Bishop has her son, who’s in prison, and she ultimately, she needs her rival (Jocelyn) to help... Jocelyn helps her with her son later, but even with a character as strong as Sharon, who seems to be impervious and just keeps charging ahead, she’s like a boxer, keeps punching, punching...

**CC:** Yes. Yes, yes!

**NL:** You gave each person a weakness, a soft spot. I’m not trying to get you to reveal all the magician’s secrets, but when conceiving a character, do you seek to know each one’s Achilles’ heel?

**CC:** Absolutely, it’s one of the first questions, really. And I think what you try to do is build an incredibly strong character, and go, well, “What is their Achilles heel?” and “Who are they when they’re alone?” and “What are they running from? What are they angry about?” You know, even when they’re heroic — especially when they’re heroic — because, in a sense, the heroes can often be the dullest characters on screen, and what you want to do is load them up with real life, to be honest, and emotional contradictions. I want the story to be difficult for them, and as well as people like the Latimer family who are obviously in the midst of a huge grief. But, and I think it’s interesting what you were just saying about ‘Achilles’ heel’, because I think also their vulnerabilities and their Achilles’ heel are also their fuel to move forward. But actually their desire to resolve that thing, or address that thing, is what propels them. And actually in Season 2, it’s Sharon’s rage against the system that is going to just get Joe shown innocent, just because she can, and because she has to prove that. And you know, with all of them, you want to build in the vulnerability, and exploit that vulnerability, as a cruel god.

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**Ellie’s vulnerability, particularly in Season 1, is that she’s trusting, and Hardy picks up on that very soon. It’s a clash of worldviews and values, but both are right and both are wrong. In the conversation they have, I think in Episode 2 of Season 1, she says, “People have a moral compass,” and he says, “Moral compasses break.” And that’s kind of the whole show. And he’s slightly talking about himself being broken there as well.**
So yes, always in the construction, we spend a lot of time before story-lining, just making sure that the world, and the characters in the world, are very complete, and what could be their issues, what are their strengths, what are their weaknesses, that’s the fun. I think it’s what actors look for as well; I think you need to be going to them with rounded characters, and big journeys, public and private as well; that’s very important in Broadchurch. The public face these people put out, and then the private moments.

NL: The church is so prominent in the town—I’m wondering about your personal worldview. As you’re writing it, are you...

CC: Yes!

NL: Would you consider yourself faithful, a cynic, a secular humanist? Where do you fit in all of this?

CC: Ah, I’m writing the show to try and figure that out, Neil! [Laughs] I don’t know, I guess I’d put myself probably on the humanist scale. I don’t belong to any organized religion. But equally, it was very important to me that the character of Paul be in there, and that the church be a part of the show, and also, that it wouldn’t be a caricature of the church either. So we’d researched a lot about it, and about young, English vicars. There’s a whole generation coming in, now. So it was something very important to me, in terms of investigating morality within a community. The church was very important to be at the heart of the drama here.

As for me, I think the show is me arguing with myself about my different worldviews! Some days I’m Alec, and some days I’m Ellie. In a sense, scenes between the two of them are me having my bipolar argument with myself about whether the world is a good or bad place, you know? I think there’s a conversation between them near the end of Season 2, where he says, “Ultimately, we’re all alone,” and she pulls him up on that outside and says, “No, I think you’re wrong!” And the show agrees with them both! The show is saying, “We are all alone, except there’s also community.” So, yes, I think the great thing about a show of this scale is, it allows you to work out your arguments. I’m not writing to offer up conclusions, or solutions, because I don’t have them. So it’s me going, “Here’s the problem, and here are the issues, and I don’t have the answers, sorry!” Because I don’t think people do. I think we’re all trying to figure it out, on a daily basis.

NL: Historically, television has been about creating shows that are reassuring for the audience.

CC: Yes.

NL: You come home after a long day, and you’re tired, and you want to be reassured. So, you want to get the verdict at the end. You want resolution. American audiences tends to like
more upbeat, happy endings, or antiheroes who succeed. But there’s always this idea of winning and getting answers. And what I love about Broadchurch is that you don’t flinch or pull away from the pain, you lean into it. You put it in close-up. And yet despite all of that, in every scene, even the excruciating ones, there’s this undercurrent of love and hope running through it. Otherwise it would be unbearable.

**CC:** I think you’ve identified exactly what we’re doing; I think love and hope are absolutely the cornerstones of the show. It’s love and hope in the face of terrible and unbearable events. It’s what happens to these ordinary people when the most terrible, extraordinary event hits them. And the only thing that can get them through is love and hope. But I think there are a number of ways we express that in the show and not just in the writing. But, also in the way we shoot and light the show, and the way we... Olafur Arnalds composes the music for the show; those are big watchwords for us; it’s very deliberately warm visually; there’s a lot of color in it; there’s a lot of light. One of our actors said to me when we were starting season 1, after about three weeks, “Oh, this isn’t how I imagined it!” He said, “I imagined it was raining, and it was gray, and it was dark” — and I was like, “No no, we always talked about a terrible thing in a beautiful place.” It was always... the phrase I’ve repeated now for 3 years to everyone, which is: the dissonance between those 2 ideas feels like a good expression of life to me. That life is not one thing, it’s not mono. So, yes, the show is essentially about keeping hope alive—and how the Latimers do that, and how Ellie and Hardy do that—how everyone does it.

**NL:** To me, the strength of the community and how people pull together is reassuring. It’s just that you don’t get it in the small bites of reassurance by the end of the first episode; you get it by sticking around — just like you would with a friend who goes through a tragedy; you see them through it and come out the other side. That is the brilliance of the show, and I think that’s why it’s so popular.

**CC:** I’m really pleased you say that, because that’s sort of very, very carefully designed that way. You always hope that you’re judging the balance correctly, that at the end, hopefully you’re moved at the end of both seasons, but at the end that there’s the sense of hope and there’s the sense of tomorrow, really, that actually it’s not over and actually these characters are still going to be moving forward and keep going, and pulling together as best they can. Broadchurch was such an unexpected hit for us; I think the general way is to keep a balance through everything, you know? If we knew that Broadchurch was a hit, we’d be making 20 shows over the next year doing exactly the same thing! So there is an alchemy, and there is a chemistry, that occurs on shows, and the audience tells you whether you’ve got it right or wrong, if they come to it. And we didn’t know that Broadchurch was going to be a big hit, and I don’t think they did.

**NL:** Tell us a little about Gracepoint [the US remake for Fox, subsequently canceled].
CC: I thought the team that made Gracepoint did a really good job on it, and they did a great job within the parameters that they had. The thing with all television and all writing is, as you know, it’s like the only way to stay sane is to keep balanced on any victories or disasters. And go, “Oh, well, on to the next one.” I think the team did a great job. It’s always a creative experiment. I wrote Broadchurch on spec, and it’s gone around the world; it’s being remade in France now, as we speak. I’m working away on Season 3 for the BBC.

This show has become this huge adventure. And you can’t predict which bits of the adventure are exciting and which bits are upsetting. And you just sort of surrender to it and go... You do your best. But I think, yes, I think just looking at yourself in the mirror and going, “You’re not a genius and you’re possibly not an idiot,” is about the best you can do.