

Counting Down the 40 Best TV Shows of 2023: #30-21

By Steve Sternberg



The first of my four-part countdown of the best 40 TV shows of 2023, which included #40-31, contained a wide variety of program genres. Part 2, which looks at #30-21 has an even greater diversity. This is a sign of a robust television landscape. There are now so many linear and streaming series on so many platforms, that there's something (actually many things) for everyone.

By its very nature, any "best of" list is subjective, and mine is no exception. There are so many excellent shows on today that I readily admit I may not have seen something that might make your top 10 – while I try to watch at least one episode of most shows (when the network or streamer makes screeners available), if I haven't watched at least four episodes I won't put it on my list. So I'm always open to suggestions about shows I may have missed.

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Here is part 2 of my best 40 TV shows of 2023, which covers #30 – 21. There are some minor spoilers ahead, but I tried not to reveal too much. For any show on for more than one season, I suggest watching the previous installments first. As a reminder, 40-31 on my list are, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *Special Ops: Lioness*, *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon*, *Gen V*, *Star Trek: Picard*, *Lawmen: Bass Reeves*, *Only Murders in the Building*, *The Night Agent*, *Rabbit Hole*, and *The Diplomat*.

30



Star Trek: Lower Decks

Paramount+ 2020 – present) **Four seasons**

There's an episode in the final season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* titled *Lower Decks*, which features junior officers, those not typically seen in *Star Trek* series. It takes a look at

the stress they encounter in their daily routines and when assigned to dangerous missions, as well as their gossiping about senior bridge officers, such as Captain Picard and Commander Riker. While that was a mostly serious episode, this animated version takes a decidedly comedic approach, with the entire series focusing on those who work under the command-level officers we are used to seeing – essential but often unseen members of the crew who perform largely menial tasks and keep the star ship running. The captain is still one of the central characters, but the other bridge officers are mostly shown in supporting roles.

Star Trek: Lower Decks follows the low-ranking support crew of the *USS Cerritos*, one of Starfleet's least important starships – for example, they specialize in second contact (mostly follow-up administrative tasks after crews from ships like the *Enterprise* have already established first contact with alien species).

Bordering on parody, but never quite crossing that line, *Lower Decks* manages to mock but still maintain its reverence for the *Star Trek* universe – not an easy thing to do. The show stays true to *Star Trek* continuity, and if you like *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, this series should resonate. It often takes well-known *Trek* tropes and icons, and shows them from a point of view we've never seen before (such as what it's like to have to clean up the holodeck). There are also numerous in jokes and references to well-known characters and events that happened in previous *Star Trek* series.



The lower deck crew members include: Beckett Mariner ([Tawny Newsome](#)), a human ensign and the Captain's daughter – she knows her stuff but is an irreverent rule-breaker, which has resulted in several demotions (she calls herself a “Kirk-style free spirit”); Brad Boimler ([Jack Quaid](#)), a human ensign on the command track, who is a stickler for the rules, but needs to learn how to improvise if he is ever to become a captain; D’Vana Tendi ([Noel Wells](#)), an Orion ensign in the medical bay, who is desperate to get people to like her – as the series begins, she is new to the *Cerritos* and thrilled to be there – she (and the viewer) get introduced to the ship and crew at the same time, and Sam Rutherford ([Eugene Cordero](#)), a human ensign and engineering whiz, still adjusting to his new Vulcan cyborg implant.

The senior officers include: [Dawnn Lewis](#) as human Captain Carol Freeman – she is constantly trying to prove her ship and crew deserve more respect from Starfleet Command; [Jerry O’Connell](#) as first officer Jack Ransom, described by the show’s creator as *Next Generation’s* Commander Riker if he was on speed and had less shame; [Fred Tatasciore](#) as Shaxs, a Bajoran tactical officer; [Gillian Vigman](#) as T’Ana, a Caitian (a species of cat people), a good but unpleasant doctor who is head of the medical department (including her is a nod to the 1970s *Star Trek: The Animated Series*, which featured a Caitian character).

Each of the four seasons is better than the previous one. A fifth season has been ordered.

29



Lucky Hank

(AMC, AMC+ 2023) **One season**

The great [Bob Odenkirk](#) is good in every role he tackles, and this comedy-drama is no exception. Based on the Richard Russo book *Straight Man*, He portrays Hank Devereaux Jr., chairman of the English department at the fictional Railton College, a severely underfunded liberal arts school in a small Pennsylvania blue-collar town. He's a struggling writer, who had a novel published several years ago, but hasn't been motivated to follow up on his brief success. He's seemingly confident, but condescending, and brutally honest in his assessment of his entitled students, the bickering and backstabbing professors in his department, and the college's sometimes corrupt, often inept administration.

The writing is sharp and biting, as are several of the characters. In the first episode Hank is teaching a creative writing peer-review class and listening to a poorly written short story by Bartow Williams-Stevens (great name), one of his students. The entitled Bartow obviously believes he is headed for writing fame. His fellow students seem afraid to criticize anyone else's writing. In an outburst of frustration, Hank rants that Railton College is "mediocrity's capital," and that the proof that none his students will succeed as writers is because "you are here." And the proof that Hank can't make them better writers is because "I am also here." "Even if there is some hidden talent lurking in the room, it will never surface because I'm not a good enough writer or writing teacher."

As anyone could have guessed, a student is recording all this, which sets the stage for pretty much everything that follows. As a tenured professor, he can't be fired, but his outburst does not sit well with anyone at the college – which leads to a number of quite funny confrontations, as Hank slowly starts to reassess his situation.

Responding to the constant bickering among the professors in his department, he asks, “Haven’t we all figured out what the advertising industry learned long ago? That after age 49, we aren’t changing our minds about anything.” This seems to sum up his philosophy on just about everything.



Hank’s personal life is not much better. Going through a mid-life crisis in a town and job he seems to hate, yet remains stubbornly bolted to, is bad enough, but his wife, Lily, a highly motivated but unappreciated vice principal of a local public high-school, played by the wonderfully pleasant [Mireille Enos](#) (*The Killing*, *Hanna*), is questioning her own path. She interviews for a much better job at a prestigious New York City charter school, which causes some consternation with Hank, who adamantly opposes moving. In addition, his daughter Julie’s ([Olivia Scott Welch](#)) marriage is on the verge of crumbling.

To top it all off, he reads in the local newspaper that his estranged father ([Tom Bower](#)), a famous author and critic, who abandoned his family long ago, is retiring “to spend more time with his family.” Hank’s mom ([Anne Gee Byrd](#)) has invited him to move in with her. When Hank asks her how she can forgive someone who abandoned them, she replies, “He didn’t abandon us, he abandoned you.” So it’s not hard to see some of the factors that contributed to his current state of mind.

The quirky cast of characters are all perfect foils for one another, and for Hank’s particular brand of condescension – and what we eventually discover is a surprising degree of loyalty. It’s a fascinating character study, as well as commentary on our education system, mid-life crises, and how one person can actually make a difference. If you like [Bob Odenkirk](#), you should like this.

Unfortunately, the season finale will have to serve as the series finale – AMC just announced the show will not be renewed for a second season.

28



Will Trent

(ABC, Hulu 2023 – present) **One season**

Every year I try to include at least one new broadcast series on my list. This year, it's *Will Trent*, which is based on Karin Slaughter's detective novels. It's unusual for a new procedural drama to be instantly filled with so many interesting characters, none of whom fit neatly into the clichéd variety that seem to populate so many new shows these days – particularly on the broadcast networks.

The first couple of episodes manage to entertainingly introduce us to most of the main players, without too much exposition, gradually revealing how several of them have inter-related histories and connections. It's also unusual (and refreshing) to see the mostly traumatic backstories of the main characters, and really get a feel for what drives them and how they became who they are today.

Ramon Rodriguez is perfectly cast as Will Trent, a damaged but brilliant special agent of the Georgia Bureau of Investigations (GBI). His observational skills are legendary, as is his quirkiness. His blunt dismissiveness of those who can't keep up with him and awkwardness in dealing with his colleagues, make him difficult to work with. Dapper and always dressed in a three-piece suit, he carries both physical and psychological scars that stem from his rough childhood in the Atlanta foster care system – which is one of his driving forces to help others, particularly those failed by the system.

Will is dyslexic, so instead of taking notes like other cops, he speaks into his recorder – which serves as a good device to explain to the viewer how he's thinking about solving the crime.



Scorned by most of Atlanta's police department (APD) for having previously launched an investigation that rooted out corrupt cops, they nonetheless have to acknowledge his unique gifts in solving crimes that stump everyone else. The APD is forced to work with Will and the GBI on major cases, which, of course, is every case on the show.

The series has a strong ensemble cast. [Sonja Sohn](#) is Will's no-nonsense boss and mentor, Amanda, who has problems with his style, but is constantly defending him to others. [Iantha Richardson](#) is Faith, an APD officer who has a personal grudge against Will (her mom was a decorated cop caught up in his corruption probe), but is forced to partner with him on the first case of the season. [Erika Christenson](#) is great as Angie Polaski, an undercover vice detective, a recovering addict who we eventually discover shares a past with Will. Their relationship is one of the more fascinating on television. Angie's new partner, Michael ([Jake McLaughlin](#)), comes across as an arrogant ass, but is also a top-notch detective. He had a one-night stand with Angie years before, and she is not particularly happy about having to team up with him now.

Through flashbacks we get a glimpse of Will and Angie's past, as well as a look at Faith's mom's time starting out on the force, when female cops were still novelties, and looked down upon by most of their male colleagues.

This is the type of intelligent, quirky show that is too often canceled too soon on broadcast television. Fortunately, it's been renewed for a second season, set for early 2024.

27



Lupin

(Netflix 2021 – present) **Three seasons**

French mystery thriller tells the story of Assane Diop ([Omar Sy](#)), the son of an immigrant from Senegal. In the first season, his father is framed for the theft of a valuable diamond necklace by his wealthy employer, Hubert Pellegrini ([Herve Pierre](#)) and his family. His father then supposedly hanged himself in prison, leaving the teenage Assane an orphan.

Twenty-five years later, inspired by the Maurice LeBlanc book about Arsene Lupin, nicknamed the “gentleman thief,” Assane sets out to get revenge and prove his father’s innocence – using his charm, charisma, expertise at disguises and thievery. The problem is his powerful and corrupt adversary has all the local politicians, the police commissioner, and even the news media in his pocket. The story is told partly through flashbacks – some to his childhood, others to right before a particular job to reveal how he plans his various heists and escapes.

The thrilling drama culminates with Assane finally getting his revenge in season two. The third season finds Assane being one of France’s most wanted (and most popular) fugitives. It’s a more straightforward heist and adventure yarn than the previous two seasons, until a new bad guy emerges to threaten an important person from Assane’s past. In the process, he manages to steal the famous and extremely valuable Black Pearl (after announcing the exact time of the crime), avoid the police, fake his own death, and stay one step ahead of the police – until he decides not to.

[Omar Sy](#) gives a magnetic performance, and the series is fast-paced, taut, thoroughly engrossing and entertaining, and perfect for bingeing (the three seasons contain just 17 total episodes). It might be more accurate to call them installments rather than seasons – five episodes dropped in January

2021 with another five in June 2021. The third seven-episode installment debuted in October 2023. No word yet on whether there will be a fourth.



The cast includes, [Ludivine Sagnier](#) as Assane's ex-wife Claire, [Clotilde Hesme](#) as the daughter of his foe and one-time lover, [Nicole Garcia](#) as Pellegrini's wife who inadvertently helped frame Assane's father, [Vincent Garanger](#) as a corrupt police commissioner on Pellegrini's payroll, and [Shirine Boutella](#), [Soufiane Guerrab](#), and [Antoine Gouy](#), as honest cops assigned to catch Assane after he executes a jewel heist. [Pierre Lotin](#) is Bruno, Assane's childhood friend who helps him plan heists and escape from the police in season three.

One ongoing theme (I would say joke, but it's not really played that way) is how a very distinctive looking and large Black man (who is taller than virtually everyone else he encounters) in a majority white country can maintain his anonymity and continually thwart efforts for anyone to identify him.

When [Lupin](#) debuted in 2021, it was Netflix's most watched non-English-language series (it has since been surpassed by [Squid Game](#)).

26



The Great

(Hulu 2020 – 2023) **Three seasons**

Satirical period dark comedy subtitled on-screen in season one as "An Occasionally True Story," and in season two as "An Almost Entirely Untrue Story" (and back to the original subtitle in season three). Described by Hulu as "anti-historical," it's loosely based on 18th century rise to power of Catherine the Great ([Elle](#)

Fanning), the longest female ruler of Russia, and her plot to overthrow her sadistic sociopath of a husband, Emperor Peter III (Nicholas Hoult), the son of Peter the Great, and take the crown for herself.

Elle Fanning gives a world-class performance, taking Catherine's journey from a naïve 20-year-old outsider, newly married to the depraved emperor, with a general notion that she can make Russia better, to a hardened revolutionary who actually accomplishes that. Nicholas Hoult is just as good as the childish, and casually monstrous emperor, who incompetently rules Russia and its increasingly unhappy people through fear.

Many of Catherine's potential subjects initially see her as little more than someone to deliver heirs for the emperor. Peter is oblivious to the damage he causes, or the impact on those around him. In one of the early episodes he tells Catherine, "You probably don't remember this, but a week ago I shot your bear and punched you."

The sex is frequent and not always consensual. In one scene, Catherine asks her handmaiden (Phoebe Fox) how her evening was, she responds, "Avoiding rape, you?" Catherine replies, "Same, if anyone invents something easier than buttons we are all in trouble." It's just another off-hand remark indicating how dangerous this world is for women, regardless of their station.



In season two, after Catherine wrests control of the empire from Peter, she tries to get her people to see things as she does, but it is not easy. When Peter kills someone because he called him a "dickhead," everyone else sees this as perfectly reasonable. Catherine proclaims "I am tired of arguing with people who think the earth is flat."

In season three, Catherine tries to bring nobles, merchants, and peasants together to get them to agree on her plans to dramatically improve life for average Russian citizens. Her first order of

business is to outlaw murder (which virtually no one agrees to). Threats to her fragile hold on power continue. The show manages to maintain the satirically violent and vulgar (yet still comedic) tone of the first two seasons, even as a tragic mid-season twist changes the dynamic of the series and several of its characters. The season finale seemed like it could serve as the end of the series, which, unfortunately it turned out to be – Hulu announced there won't be a fourth season.

25



Ted Lasso

(Apple TV+ 2020-2023) **Three seasons**

An American college football coach ([Jason Sudeikis](#)) from a second-tier league is hired to coach the AFC Richmond Greyhounds, a mediocre Premier League soccer team in England, despite the fact that he has no experience with the sport and doesn't even understand most of the rules or basic terminology. Three seasons of a charming, insightful, and fun series ensues. Debuting in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with so many people stuck at home, [Ted Lasso](#) became an instant “feel good” hit.

In season one, the team gets a new owner, Rebecca Welton (the wonderful [Hannah Waddingham](#)) as a result of her divorce from the former owner, the philandering, misogynist, billionaire, Rupert Mannion ([Anthony Head](#)). She has an ulterior motive for hiring Ted, as she initially wants to ruin the team (to get revenge on her ex, who still sees the team as his baby). But when she sees Ted's unusual ways start to work, and she starts to actually like him (he brings her fresh biscuits every morning), she has a change of heart and wants the team to succeed.

Surrounded by feuding players, a negative press corp., and fanatical fans (who scream “wanker” every time they see him in public), Ted Lasso’s determination to succeed, his confidence in his own ability and his team’s talents, and his unrelenting niceness and folksy charm, gradually win over even his harshest critics. Especially when the team starts to win some games.



Season two is remarkable in that when you think you know exactly where the series is going, it veers off in a completely different direction. While the comedy is still solid, the show gets significantly darker in tone. A new team sports psychologist ([Sarah Niles](#)) is brought in to counsel the team. After bumping heads with Ted, she develops a strong relationship with him. We start to discover some of the trauma and emotional baggage behind Ted’s constant smile and continuously pleasant demeanor. For the first time, we see cracks in his armor.

I’ve written before about some of the inherent problems with most “fish-out-of-water” comedies. Once the protagonist no longer feels out of place, the conflict that drove much of the comedy is gone. [Ted Lasso’s](#) writers seem aware of this potential flaw, and smartly chose to focus much of the second season delving into the stories of some of the key secondary characters. New conflicts comes from having Ted not be happy with the potential influence of the new psychologist on his team, and a surprising betrayal of a key team member toward the end of the season.

For some reason, which I still don’t get, a number of TV critics panned the third and final season. Perhaps because the writers keep taking it in different and unexpected directions. It is often as poignant as it is funny. I think it is just as good as the previous seasons, particularly the excellent series finale. It gives story resolutions and some new beginnings for many of the main characters, and left me wanting more. A great ending to a great series – although there have been persistent rumors that a new show, sans Ted Lasso, is under consideration.



In addition to [Jason Sudeikis](#) and [Hannah Waddington](#), there is a terrific supporting cast.

[Jeremy Swift](#) is Rebecca's sycophantic assistant, Leslie Higgins, who initially has nothing but disdain for Ted, but eventually grows to respect him and become a key ally.

[Brett Goldstein](#) is Roy Kent, an established, but aging champion, feuding with Jamie Tartt ([Phil Dunster](#)), who is an egotistical, young rising star on the team – Roy eventually retires and becomes one of the team's coaches and Jamie's mentor;

[Juno Temple](#) is a revelation as Keely Jones, a smart, ambitious model who dates both Jamie Tartt and Roy Kent, at different times – she develops a close friendship with Rebecca and eventually becomes the club's manager of marketing and public relations.

[Nick Mohammed](#) is Nathan Shelly, the teams kit manager whom Ted promotes to assistant coach – he lacks confidence, but is extremely knowledgeable about the sport and often develops winning strategies – in season two he does something that shocks Ted and stuns the rest of the team, setting up several season three storylines.

[Brendan Hunt](#) is a gem as Coach Beard, Ted's long-time assistant and best friend, who came with him from America.

[James Lance](#) is Trent Crimm, a cynical reporter who berates Ted in post-game press conferences – he is initially critical of Ted's coaching, but slowly starts to come around – he is imbedded with the team in season three so he can write a book about them.

[Ted Lasso](#) was the first Apple TV+ series to be rewarded with Emmys, receiving seven in 2021 and 11 in 2022, including Outstanding Comedy Series, Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy ([Jason](#)

[Sudeikis](#)), Outstanding Supporting Actor ([Brett Goldstein](#)), and Outstanding Supporting Actress ([Hannah Waddingham](#)). Multiple cast members were nominated for acting awards.

24



Loki

(Disney+ 2021 – present) **Two seasons**

In the 2019 blockbuster film [Avengers Endgame](#), the Avengers went back in time seven years to when Loki ([Tom Hiddleston](#)), God of Mischief and Thor's half-brother, was fighting them in the "Battle of New York" (from the first [Avengers](#) movie in 2012). They needed to get the Infinity Stones before Thanos acquires them and wipes out half the universe. In the chaos that ensued, Loki managed to get his hands on the powerful cosmic energy cube known as the Tesseract. Then he disappears. This did not happen in the events we saw in the original movie, thus creating a new timeline. This series follows what happens to that Loki, before we see him grow and redeem himself in [Thor: Ragnarok](#) and [Avengers: Infinity War](#) (when he is killed by Thanos).

This is the MCU's introduction to the multiverse (alternate timelines and realities) and alternate versions of well-known characters.

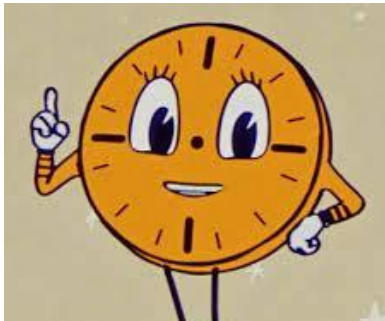


Loki's disappearance has caught the attention of the Time Variants Authority (TVA), a powerful bureaucratic organization that exists outside of normal time and space. The TVA is tasked by the mysterious Timekeepers to make sure people stay in their set timeline.

Any "variants" are put on trial and either reset into their expected timeline, or simply "pruned" (erased from existence). This Loki is now considered a variant.

Just as the TVA judge, Ravonna Renslayer ([Gugu Mbatha-Raw](#)), declares Loki guilty and is about to have him “pruned,” TVA chief detective Mobius ([Owen Wilson](#)) steps in. He wants to use Loki to help them capture a dangerous variant who has been traveling through time and killing TVA agents.

As Loki quickly discovers, magical powers don’t work in the TVA compound, so he is trapped. The equally talkative and charming Mobius tries to elicit information from Loki about why he does what he does, at the same time explaining what’s going on and how Loki varied from his “set path.” For a god-like being who thrives on chaos, the idea that his path is predetermined by all-knowing keepers of the sacred timeline does not sit well. Mobius shows Loki scenes from events that those who saw the [Thor](#) and [Avengers](#) movies remember. Events that haven’t yet happened to this Loki.



The situation is helped along by the animated clock mascot of the TVA, known as Miss Minutes (voiced by [Tara Strong](#)), who conveys dire information with a smile – a surreal device in a surreal situation. It does help the viewer understand what’s going on. But “she” also has orders and an agenda that Mobius and Loki are not yet privy to.

Loki has long been one of the most complex Marvel villains, and this take on his motivations, the impact of seeing how some of his former bad acts have impacted people he loves, and seeing his own death in what he is told is the future that is supposed to happen, is fascinating – and pulled off largely because of the chemistry between the immensely talented [Tom Hiddleston](#) and [Owen Wilson](#).



Mobius tells Loki the variant they are chasing is another version of Loki from another timeline. This Loki is in the form of a woman (smartly played by [Sophia Di Martino](#)). When he finds her, she tells him that she is no longer a Loki, and now goes by the name Sylvie (this character seems like a combination of Lady Loki and the Enchantress, both of whom appeared in

various Marvel comics, and is way too confusing to get into here). Her plan is to destroy the Timekeepers (who supposedly created the TVA) and blow up the sacred timeline.

As they question one another, she reveals details of her past that are substantially different from his. She also tells him that the TVA staff were not created by the Timekeepers, but are rather all human variants who were plucked from their own timelines and have no memory of their previous lives. Did Mobius lie to him, or is he unaware of his own previous life? Loki is known to be deceitful and manipulative, so the fact that these two versions of Loki start to trust one another can't end well (or can it?).

As they continue their banter, they both casually acknowledge that they often have meaningless sex with both women and men. While the comic books have occasionally referred to Loki's bisexuality, this is the first time a major character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe has been so designated – and is now officially part of the MCU canon. It should be noted that in Netflix's series, [Ragnarok](#), which provides another take on Norse mythology, Loki is clearly bisexual. In Norse mythology, Loki shifts between male and female presentations and pronouns.

Having escaped from the TVA, they eventually wind up in a void at the end of time, where they meet several other versions of Loki from different timelines and realities, who have apparently been trapped there for quite a while. They have to remain in hiding lest the cloud monster Alioth, a trans-temporal entity and guardian of the Void destroys them. When TVA victims are pruned, we discover, they are actually banished here to be devoured by Alioth.



In the end, they escape the Void to discover the man behind the curtain, or rather “He Who Remains” ([Jonathan Majors](#)). He gives Loki and Sylvie a choice – they can replace him as arbiters of the Sacred Timeline, or destroy him and face thousands of versions of himself in

thousands of multiverses, who are far “less benevolent.” While his real name is never mentioned, this is clearly the popular Marvel comics villain, Kang the Conqueror.

Loki and Sylvie have different ideas on how to proceed. Sylvie wins, causing ripples through time as the single TVA timeline seems to branch off on countless directions. This sets up a whole new Marvel Cinematic Universe (or Multiverse), and introduces a new major cross-movie villain (or is it villains?). It also paved the way for the theatrical films, [Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness](#) and [Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania](#). Although with Jonathan Majors on trial for allegedly assaulting his ex-girlfriend, his character, which is supposed to be the lynchpin of the next phase of the MCU, has been called into question. Given that Kang has already been established as having many alternate identities across the multiverse, and Marvel comics fans know of his other incarnations, it should be relatively easy to replace the actor who plays him.



Season two is more of a pure action thriller, as Loki teams up with Mobius, TVA agent Hunter B-15 ([Wunmi Mosaku](#)), and other agents “in a battle for the soul of the TVA,” as they race to prevent the multiverse timelines from being destroyed. In the end, Loki finds his “glorious purpose,” as his journey from villain, to anti-hero, to actual hero, to something beyond, is a satisfying culmination to Loki’s story, and creates a new multiverse – it remains to be seen how this impacts the Marvel Cinematic Universe going forward,

No word yet on a potential season three, but I don’t see the need. [Loki](#) season two is top of the line when it comes to Marvel TV shows (only rivaled by [WandaVision](#)).

23



The Gilded Age

(HBO 2022 – present) **Two seasons**

The wonderful [Christine Baransky](#), [Cynthia Nixon](#), and newcomer, [Louisa Jacobson](#) (Meryl Streep's daughter) lead a stellar cast in this period drama from Julian Fellowes ([Downton Abby](#)), set in the boom years of 1880s New York City – a time when fortunes were made and lost, and new-money entrepreneurs clashed with the old-money social establishment.

Everything about this series shines – from the brilliant casting, to the sharp writing, to the luscious costume designs, to the elaborate set pieces, to the terrific performances. The series is also notable for the way it shows the conflicts faced by the upper and upper-middle-class, the Black upper class (normally not referenced in period pieces of this nature), and the domestic workers who tend their every need and are privy to their secrets.

Much of the first season is seen through the eyes of Marian Brook ([Louisa Jacobson](#)), a naïve young woman who moves from rural Pennsylvania after the death of her father to stay with her aunts Agnes Van Rhijn ([Baransky](#)) and Ada Brook ([Nixon](#)), established old-money fixtures in the New York social scene. Agnes is particularly resistant to change, while Marian sees change as normal and necessary.



Marian is accompanied by Peggy Scott ([Denee Benton](#)), an aspiring Black writer and graduate of the Institute for Colored Youth. Peggy had lent Marian money when her purse was stolen at the train station, and Marian invited her to her aunt's home so she could be reimbursed. Peggy's smarts (and ability to take shorthand) leads to Agnes asking her stay on as her secretary. Eventually, Peggy gets hired as a writer for a Black-owned newspaper.

Across the street from the Van Rhijn home on West 61st Street is a newly built mansion, housing the ambitious and very rich railroad tycoon. George Russel ([Morgan Spector](#)), and his equally ambitious wife Bertha (the perfectly cast [Carrie Coon](#)). She is determined to break into the snobby New York social circle, which is equally determined to keep new-money newcomers out.



In season two, battle lines are declared and crossed – old-money opera goers, members of the elitist Academy of Music, face off with the new-money newcomers, who get behind plans to build the new Metropolitan Opera – having been excluded from joining the Academy, Bertha and some new allies are determined to open a place of their own. It's actually a lot more interesting than it sounds.

The latest season also features more romantic entanglements, and more focus on the lives of the domestic staffs. It also follows Peggy on a dangerous trip south to Tuskegee, Alabama for a story, where she interviews Booker T. Washington ([Michael Braugher](#)). While Peggy is aware of northern racism, she was born free and raised in New York. But as the newspaper's publisher Thomas ([Sullivan Jones](#)), who accompanies her on this trip (he was born into slavery but is now free), informs her (and she eventually sees for herself) there is a completely different level of dangerous and violent racism in the south than anything she has experienced in Brooklyn or Manhattan. This has significant impact on her role as a newspaper writer.



The rest of the regular cast is just as good as the main players. [Audra McDonald](#) and [John Douglas Thompson](#) play Peggy's upper middle-class parents, who live in Brooklyn, a place looked down upon by the white Manhattan elite. [Donna Murphy](#) is Mrs. Astor, the most prominent (and intimidating) American socialite of the time, whose approval is essential for any

newcomer to be accepted into New York society. [Jeanne Tripplehorn](#) is Sylvia Chamberlain, a wealthy socialite, excluded from polite society because of her past. [Nathan Lane](#) plays Ward McAllister, the arbiter of social rules and style in old New York, whom Bertha recruits as an ally.

No official word yet on a potential third season

22



Abbott Elementary

(ABC, Hulu 2021– present) **Two seasons**

Workplace comedy about teachers working in an underfunded predominantly Black public school in Philadelphia. [Quinta Brunson](#) created the series and stars as Janine Teagues, a relentlessly optimistic second-grade teacher at Abbott Elementary. The show takes an [Office](#)-style mockumentary tone, with the cast often talking to an unseen film crew recording a documentary about underfunded public schools.

When Janine is not teaching, she's trying to come up with new ways to raise funds for school supplies, fixing the many things that continually break down, or bringing in new educational methods or tools that might help the school's generally deprived students. At first, her colleagues seem bemused by her efforts until her persistent unwillingness to give up, combined with her unwavering niceness, gradually wins them over.

There are many laugh-out-loud moments along the way from the outstanding cast. The first season focuses on introducing us to the various teachers' idiosyncrasies how they react to Janine. The episode where they discuss whether they are real friends or just work friends is genuinely funny and touching. The second season expands the scope to give more time to the individual teacher's

personal lives, which adds a new, richer dynamic to the show. It also makes a strong pro public-school statement, as Abbott Elementary is in danger of being taken over by an elite charter school that would exclude many of its current students.



[Janelle James](#) is the school's hilariously inept and tone deaf principal, Ava Coleman. [Tyler James Williams](#) is Gregory Eddie, a substitute first-grade teacher who eventually gets hired full time, and who has a "will they or won't they" dynamic with Janine – he originally interviewed for the principal position, but Ava blackmailed the superintendent to give her the job. [Lisa Ann Walter](#) is Melissa Schemmenti, a hard-edged Italian-American second-grade teacher with questionable connections, who cares a lot more about her students than she lets on. [Chris Perfetti](#) is Jacob Hill, an awkward history teacher (who happens to be gay) who is supportive of Janine and struggles to get his young students to respect him. [Sheryl Lee Ralph](#) shines as Barbara Howard, a religious, proper old-school kindergarten teacher whom Janine looks up to. [William Stanford Davis](#) is Mr. Johnson, the school's eccentric custodian.

This is the best first-run situation comedy on television (on any platform). Due to the writers' and actors' strikes, the third season premiere (an hour-long episode) has been delayed until February.

21



Justified: City Primeval

(FX, Hulu 2023) **One Season**

The critically acclaimed [Justified](#) (based on Elmore Leonard's novels) aired for six seasons on FX from 2010-2015. At the time, FX was one of the leading cable networks for developing original scripted drama, significantly edgier than those on most other ad-supported networks. [Timothy](#)

[Olyphant's](#) anti-hero, Deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens, was a perfect fit for FX's typical combination of dark humor, violence, and sex. If you haven't seen it, it's worth bingeing (on Hulu) before watching this terrific revival.

Eight years after the original series ended, Raylan has to operate away from his familiar Kentucky environs. Now balancing life between being a U.S. Marshal and part-time father, he's in Detroit with his 15-year-old daughter, Willa (played by his real-life daughter, [Vivian Olyphant](#)), to testify against the perp who tried to carjack them. When the judge he appears before is murdered, he's put on the task force to find the killer. The appearance of his daughter is just a device to link this series to the original – she returns home and isn't in most of the show. But it does add some nuance to Raylan's motivations that were missing in the original series.



Raylan is grayer, but still tough as nails, as he plays a cat-and-mouse game pursuing the main suspect, dangerous sociopath Clemens Mansell (a deliciously evil and deadly [Boyd Holbrook](#)). He also has to deal with a compromised defense attorney ([Aunjanue Ellis](#)) and the Albanian mob (who is also after Mansell – which puts everyone associated with the case in danger).

My only complaint is that it's just eight episodes (the original series had 13 per season), but its surprise ending sets up potential second season – although nothing has yet been announced.

Next up will be part three of my list of the 40 best TV series of 2023, which will include #20-11.