TV Reviews: the Good, the Too Bad, and the Ugly
By Steve Sternberg

This continues *The Sternberg Report's* monthly series, where I review TV shows labeled *the Good*, *the Too Bad*, and *the Ugly*. Every issue will not necessarily contain a show in each category, and some will have multiple shows in a single category. This month's report focuses exclusively on "the good."

By way of definition, *the Good* is a show you should enjoy if you like that particular genre. *The Too Bad* is a show that could have (or should have) been better – but doesn't necessarily mean it's bad. *The Ugly* is a show that completely misses the mark or is just an ill-conceived mess.

There are some spoilers ahead…

The Good

All the Light We Cannot See (Netflix)

This four-part limited series based on Anthony Doerr's 2014 novel of the same name is a shining achievement. It tells the story of a blind French teenage girl, Marie-Laure LeBlanc, who has a radio broadcast in the Nazi-occupied French coastal town of St. Malo in 1944. Working for the Resistance, She reads stories over the air containing secret codes that provide bombing targets for the Americans and British.

Newcomer Aria Mia Lonberti, who is herself blind, gives an extraordinary performance as Marie-Laure, and more than holds her own with the superb supporting cast, which includes Mark Ruffalo and Hugh Laurie.

As the Americans get ever closer to liberating France, the town is under siege by an Allied bombing campaign. The Germans are vowing to fight to the last man, while not allowing the trapped French citizens to leave. In the midst of this destructive barrage, Marie-Laure is determined to continue her broadcasts, the Nazis are determined to find her, and most of the townspeople are determined to keep her location secret (at the risk of their own lives).

Marie-Laure is also using her broadcast to communicate with and locate her missing father Daniel (Mark Rufalo), seen mostly in flashbacks, and her great uncle Etienne (Hugh Laurie), a World War I veteran with PTSD who is now a member of the French Resistance. As the Nazis were invading France, Marie-Laure's father smuggled many items out of The Museum of Natural History (where he worked), including an extremely valuable diamond known as the Sea of

Flames. This diamond is rumored to have supernatural properties, enabling its owners to live forever, but cursing their loved ones. SS officer Reinhold Von Rumpel (Lars Eidinger), who is dying from some unspecified disease, will stop at nothing to find Marie, who he thinks was given the diamond by her father before he fled Paris. (This "MacGuffin" is one of the few weak points of the series, but it does drive the plot forward.)

In a parallel storyline, a brilliant young German orphan, Werner Pfennig (Louis Hofmann), is separated from his sister (Luna Wedler) by a Nazi officer, and forced to join the Hitler youth because of his skills with radio technology. He eventually becoming a soldier who specializes in detecting and tracking radio frequencies (so the SS can find and kill the broadcasters).

The two storylines converge, as Reinhold Von Rumpel is now Werner's commanding officer. Werner and Marie-Laure grew up listening to the same radio frequency on which she is now broadcasting, where a calm-voiced host, known as the Professor, spoke to children about reason, science, philosophy, and light and darkness – with lines such as, "…the light lasts forever, but the darkness lasts not one second when you turn on the light." In a world filled with chaos and confusion, the Professor was a calming and hopeful voice for a generation of children throughout Europe. Werner now secretly listens to Marie-Laure's broadcast (listening to foreign broadcasts in Nazi Germany was punishable by death).

Rumpel orders Werner to track down Marie-Laure, so he can kill her, and retrieve the Sea of Flames. Werner tries to avoid revealing Marie-Laure's location, until that becomes impossible. He eventually risks his life in an attempt to save her. She, in turn, tries to protect Werner when her Resistance group members want to put him on trial for war crimes and kill him.

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I've read a number of inexplicably negative reviews by critics who have read the book and find the TV series wanting. If like me, you haven't read the book, ignore them. The series is powerful, cinematic, thrilling, poignant, brilliantly written and acted, and simply riveting from start to finish (even though you may well guess how it ends). Like the Sea of Flames at its core, *All the Light We Cannot See* is a rare gem.

Lessons in Chemistry (Apple TV+)

Based on the popular Bonnie Garmus novel of the same name, Brie Larson gives a captivating performance as Elizabeth Zott, who takes America by storm with her 1960s feminist (and chemistry-based) TV cooking show, *Supper at Six*, which inspires women across the country to challenge the prevalent notion of the time that a woman's place in society was in the home.

This brilliantly written and acted series somehow manages to combine science, romance, tragedy, feminism, single-parenthood, the civil rights movement, and workplace comedy (and drama) into a cohesive and compelling story (in just eight episodes). It's also beautifully shot, with the 1950s and '60s costumes and sets transporting the viewer to a different, if not simpler, time.

In the 1950s, Elizabeth Zott's dream of becoming a scientist is held back by her gender and lack of a PhD – the only woman in the program, she had to drop out when she was sexually assaulted by her thesis advisor during her doctoral candidate exams (shown in flashbacks).

Now a lab technician at the Hastings Research Institute, she is not allowed by her superiors to develop her own projects because she's a woman (despite her being better than virtually any of the male chemists), and she can't put her name as the lead chemist on her work because she doesn't have a PhD. She becomes friendly with the institute's eccentric star researcher, Dr. Calvin Evans (Lewis Pullman), who recognizes her immense talent and supports her – but seems oblivious to the fact that her gender has held her back, as this conversation illustrates:

Elizabeth: "Of course, I would be much further along in my research if I wasn't making excellent coffee for mediocre scientists."

Calvin: You're on the verge of a major scientific breakthrough. You need to talk to Donatti (the head of the Institute)."

Elizabeth: I did, he said no."

Calvin: "That doesn't make any sense. Why?"

Elizabeth: "Sex discrimination."

Calvin: "What?"

Elizabeth: "Well, also politics, favoritism, and general unfairness, but yes, mostly sex discrimination."

Calvin: "I don't understand. Why would anyone discriminate based on something as intellectually non-determinative as gender?"

As they start working closely together on independent projects, a romantic relationship develops, and she eventually moves in with him. Calvin lives in Sugar Hill, a Black middle-class neighborhood, where they are now the only white couple (he seems not only oblivious to sexism, but racial inequality as well). A side plot has the racist city council approving the Santa Monica Freeway plans to be built through Sugar Hill, which

would demolish the neighborhood. Elizabeth joins her neighbor, Harriet (Aja Naomi King), in fighting the losing battle. One result is that Elizabeth becomes aware of systemic racism for the first time.

When tragedy strikes, Elizabeth no longer has Calvin's reputation to protect her. When she returns to the lab, she finds all their research has been removed – the higher-ups at Hastings are trying to recreate Elizabeth and Calvin's research and claim it as their own. Realizing she is pregnant (which leads to her being fired), but intent on continuing her research, Elizabeth impersonates Hastings' administrator and orders the equipment she needs, to build a chemistry lab in her kitchen.

Elizabeth gives birth to a daughter, whom she names Madeline ("Mad" for short). She earns money by secretly consulting for male chemists, none of whom are at her level of brilliance. A time jump shows her meeting Walter (Kevin Sussman), the father of one of Mad's classmates. He's a television producer, who, after sampling one of her scrumptious dishes (as Elizabeth says, "it's just chemistry'), offers her a job hosting a cooking show. She initially turns him down, but when Mad's teacher suggests Elizabeth enroll her in an advanced private school, the high cost leads her to accept Walter's offer.

As Elizabeth tries to develop her own show, designed to empower and inspire women, she and Walter meet resistance from the misogynist station owner (Rainn Wilson). The station and the show's sponsors do not like the feminist aspects of her show, and are adamantly opposed to her taking a public pro-civil rights stance (she encourages her viewers to attend a protest organized by her friend, Harriet). At one point he says to her, "Politics doesn't belong in the kitchen. A man wants his wife to make him a drink after a long day at work." Elizabeth replies, "What makes you think his day was longer than hers? Why don't you make the drink?"

She becomes such a hit with her female audience, that her newfound celebrity status gives her the power to do things her way (to a point). Here's how she opens her first show – "In my experience, people do not appreciate the work and sacrifice that goes into being a mother, a wife, a woman. Well, I am not one of those people. At the end of our time here together, we will have done something worth doing. We will have made supper, and it will matter." Each episode of *Supper at Six* has her demonstrating how the use of chemistry and science helps prepare her wonderful meals. And she always adds, "Children, set the table. Your mother needs a moment to herself."

There are a number of side plots and sub stories – flashbacks show Elizabeth's gay brother committing suicide, largely due to the homophobia and abuse of their preacher father; Mad (Alice Halsey), with the help of a local Reverend (Patrick Walker), tries to find information about Calvin; Elizabeth gets involved in the growing civil rights movement, much to the chagrin of her show's major sponsor – she gets Tampax as her new sponsor and talks about menstruation on air (not something that was done in the 1960s or '70s). There's also an episode narrated almost entirely by her dog, which is not nearly as cheesy as it could have been.

The ending, which includes another short time jump, is satisfying and hopeful. And as is often the case with great characters, I'm left wanting to see what happens next. I would love to see how Elizabeth and her daughter move through 1980s, '90s, and beyond.

The Good (broadcast)

Say what you will about the decline of broadcast and linear TV, many of the most popular shows on television start out there. And **CBS** knows its audience, which tends to check out virtually any new

series it airs. The network often manages to put a new spin on the procedural drama, providing its long-time loyal (and older) viewers with easy-to-digest, low-risk comfort food.

Originally scheduled for the fall, the writers' and actors' strikes caused these two new scripted dramas to debut in mid-season.

Elsbeth (CBS)

The character of quirky (but brilliant) attorney Elsbeth Tascioni (Carrie Preston) originated with recurring roles in CBS's *The Good Wife* and later in the Paramount+ spin-off, *The Good Fight*. Now headlining her own show, Elsbeth moves from Chicago to start over in New York City, where she becomes a civilian and consultant to the NYPD – after the police department is sued for making unlawful arrests in a major case, Elsbeth is assigned as an outside observer by the Justice Department to monitor the NYPD for a year to make sure they do things by the book (but she also has a secret agenda revealed at the end of the first episode).

Elsbeth's unique investigative skills and unconventional style are instrumental in helping the NYPD solve crimes, much to the chagrin of police Captain Wagner (the always good Wendell Pierce), who is forced to work with her, and detective Smullen (Danny Mastrogiorgio), who is initially dismissive of Elsbeth, and finds her to be nothing more than a nuisance – until he starts to realize how adept she is at spotting clues that even he has missed. Carra Paterson is officer Kanya Blanke, who is assigned by Captain Wagner to keep an eye on Elsbeth, but quickly sees how insightful she is, and becomes sort of a Watson to Elsbeth's Sherlock.

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Somewhat reminiscent of *Columbo* (and Peacock's wonderful *Poker Face*), Elsbeth manages to win the day often because both the police and the criminals constantly underestimate her.

I've always enjoyed Elsbeth in small doses as a secondary character, but whether she can carry an hour-long series remains to be seen. Much will depend on how the character is developed beneath the surface of her eccentricities – which was not required in her role as comic relief in the other shows. But from what I've seen so far, *Elsbeth* is witty and well-written, and most importantly, fun. There's no reason to expect this not to continue.

As is often the case with crime-of-the-week comedy-dramas (see *Poker Face*), the series has an excellent cast of guest stars, including Stephen Moyer, Jane Krakowski, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Blair Underwood, and Linda Lavin.

Tracker (CBS)

Based on Jeffery Deaver's best-selling book, *The Never Game*, CBS manages yet another spin on the procedural drama. Justin Hartley (*This is Us*) is Colter Shaw, a lone-wolf survivalist who travels across the country in his truck(with an Airstream trailer attached). He refers to himself as a "rewardist," which enables him to explain what he does in every episode when someone invariably asks "what's that?" If someone posts a reward for finding a missing person or object, or solving some mystery, he uses his extensive tracking skills to get the job done – as long as there's a reward attached. As he says in every episode, he only gets paid upon success.

Now, I'm certainly not saying this rises to the level of many other series I label as "good," but if you're a fan of CBS procedurals, and enjoy shows such as *The Equalizer*, you should find *Tracker* to be in the same mold. It's not designed to stay with you, and you may well forget what happens soon after

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you watch it, but that doesn't mean you won't like it – and it will probably enjoy significant repeat viewing if it's on the schedule long enough for it to eventually be picked up by ION.

Colter had a traumatic childhood (seen through flashbacks) due to his paranoid and abusive survivalist father, who died under mysterious circumstances – Colter believes his brother, who he hasn't spoken to since his father's death, was responsible.

Each week finds Colter in a new locale, with a new mystery to solve, and facing a new batch of bad guys who don't know who they're messing with.

While Colter works alone in the field, he has a small team to assist him remotely. Teddi and Velma (Robin Weigert and Abby McEnany), a wife-and-wife couple, provide him with potential clients and do basic research on cases he is working on. Bobby (Erc Graise) is an expert hacker, who gets key information to help him each week.

While some critics have compared *Tracker* to Prime Video's *Jack Reacher*, there is no similarity at all between the two shows or the characters (other than they're both loners who travel around the country). Bo award-worthy performances or brilliant writing here, just an entertaining distraction.

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