Counting Down the 40 Best TV Shows of 2024: #30-21

By Steve Sternberg

Twenty years ago, most TV critics lists of best series of the year tended to include largely the same shows. Viewer choices for original scripted series were, after all, limited to broadcast networks, and a few ad-supported cable and premium cable series (which made everyone's list since they were the only series on television that did not have the same content restrictions of ad-supported networks).

In 2004, most "best of" lists were populated by broadcast shows such shows as *Lost, House, NYPD Blue, Desperate Housewives, Boston Legal, The West Wing, 24,* and *Will & Grace,* ad-supported cable series The Shield, *Rescue Me,* and *Battlestar Galactica,* and premium cable shows *The Sopranos, The Wire, Deadwood,* and *Six Feet Under*.

Ten years ago, with few streaming options, and not today's level of social media, annual best series lists were still largely similar, although there began to be some divergence (simply because there were so many more series to choose from – it was the heyday or premium cable series). There was more-or-less a consensus of the highest quality cable shows, which pushed out many of the broadcast series that previously would have made the cut. Only a few streaming series were in the mix.

In 2014, series common to most "best of" lists included broadcast shows *Modern Family, Parks and Recreation, The Good Wife,* and *Jane the Virgin,* ad supported cable series *Fargo, Mad Men, The Americans, The Walking Dead,* and *Broad City,* premium cable shows *Veep, Boardwalk Empire, The Newsroom, Masters of Sex, True Detective, Game of Thrones, Homeland, The Missing,* and *The Affair,* and new streaming series *House of Cards, Orange is the New Black,* and *Transparent*.

Today's TV/video landscape is much more robust. There are so many good original scripted series, on multiple streaming platforms, that any 100 people you ask might have substantially different lists of their favorite shows of the year. And even the most diligent TV critics would have trouble watching every TV show out there.

And, of course, few if any critics lists will contain broadcast series these days – which is not to say that viewers' lists wouldn't. Several broadcast and ad-supported cable scripted series (such as some

CBS procedurals, NBC *Chicago* franchises, ABC *FBI* shows, *Yellowstone*, and the like) are more popular than most streaming series – but they're not sexy enough for most the press to include (and it would bely the narrative that linear TV is dying).

So my list is by definition subjective, and may vary significantly from yours (and mine does include some broadcast and ad-supported cableshows). If you haven't seen some of the series I discuss here, you wouldn't be wasting your time to check them out.

This is part 2 of my list of the 40 best TV series of 2024, which covers #30-21. Just as a reminder, #40-31 were, *Elsbeth* (CBS), *High Potential* (ABC), *Presumed Innocent* (Apple TV+), *Will Trent* (ABC), *Joan* (CW), *Cross* (Prime Video), *Hightown* (Starz), *The Brothers Sun* (Netflix), *Murder in a Small Town* (Fox), *NCIS: Origins* (CBS).

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The Sticky (Prime Video)
Dec. 2024

This dark comedy is loosely based on (or as they say, "inspired by") the real-life 2011-2012 crime that became known as *The Great Canadian Maple Syrup Heist* – even though it says on-screen at the start of each episode that "This is absolutely not the true story of The Great Canadian Maple Syrup Heist," which, of course, gives them leeway to use fictional characters and change details of the actual crime. Jaimie Lee Curtis is one of the executive producers, and also has a small but significant (and typically great) role.

Margo Martindale, who's good in virtually every role she tackles, is Ruth Landry, a tough, but well-liked and respected Canadian maple syrup farmer, who's going through tough times. Her husband is in a coma, and the corrupt head of the organization that manages maple syrup production (Guy

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Nadon), who has been swindling local farmers for years while building up massive maple syrup reserves, shuts down her farm and threatens to take over her property if she doesn't sell to him for pennies on the dollar. If he had a mustache, he'd be twirling it.

An associate of Ruth's husband, Mike Byrne (Chris Diamantopoulos), a low-level Boston mobster, comes up with the idea to steal millions of dollars' worth of maple syrup from the storage facility in Quebec. After initially balking, Ruth agrees and starts developing a plan. They recruit Remy Brouchard (Guillaume Cyr), an underappreciated and put upon guard in charge of security at the maple syrup storage warehouse.

Things don't go smoothly, as they seldom do in this type of show, as missteps cause their plans to constantly change, and they are continually on the verge of being discovered. Mike turns out to be a wild-card, leaving bodies in his wake and running afoul of his mob bosses, who send one of their associates, the volatile Bo Shea (Jamie Lee Curtis) to town. Once she finds out about the planned heist, things take a much more dangerous turn.

With its bumbling criminals, corrupt bureaucracy, and clueless (and not-so-clueless) cops, *The Sticky* is reminiscent of *Fargo*, but it's not quite up to that level. At just six episodes (each roughly 30 minutes), it's a breezy, fun, and an easy binge (my wife and I watched the entire season in one Friday night sitting). But it does seem cut short just so they could make it into two seasons (although at this writing it has not yet been renewed).

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Only Murders in the Building – season 4 (Hulu)
(Aug. 2021, June 2022, Aug. 2023, Aug. 2024)

An inspired bit of casting has Selena Gomez join comedy icons, Steve Martin and Martin Short , who reside on different floors in the Arconia, a fictional upscale Upper West Side co-op apartment building in New York City. Steve Martin is Charles-Haden Savage, a once popular TV star of a fictional 1990s detective series called, *Brazzos*. Martin Short is Oliver Putnam, a struggling Broadway director who hasn't had a success in many years. Selena Gomez is Mabel Mora, a young woman who lives in the building while renovating a unit for her aunt (apartments in the building are way too expensive for her to afford on her own).

Before discussing the fourth season, here's a brief recap of the first three.

As **season 1** begins, Charles, Oliver, and Mabel see each other every day in the elevator, but never converse. All three are obsessed with a true-crime podcast called *All is Not OK in Oklahoma* with Cinda Canning (a perfectly cast Tina Fey). One day, as they are all listening to the podcast, the building's fire alarm goes off and everyone evacuates. At a diner across the street, they realize they all listen to the same podcast. They find out the building was evacuated because their neighbor, who they had just seen in the elevator, was found dead in his apartment.

The police quickly label the death a suicide, but our true-crime super-fans suspect foul play and decide to conduct their own investigation and start their own podcast, which they call *Only Murders in the*

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Building. Both comedy and tragedy ensue as multiple suspects pile up and multiple secrets are revealed. The humor gets a bit darker toward the end of the season as the killer is revealed. Then there's a new murder in the building, which sets the stage for season 2.

Season 2 begins in the aftermath of the season one finale. Our three heroes are initially suspects in the crime, but are exonerated and, of course, start their own investigation, reviving their podcast. There are a number of side plots as well. Rival true-crime podcaster Cinda Canning (Tina Fey) starts a new podcast called, *Only Murderers in the Building*, and casts suspicion on Mabel. Charles (Martin) is asked to reprise his role in a reboot of his 1990s detective series. But this time, instead of playing the lead, he is the ailing uncle of the new detective Brazzos, a Black woman. Season 2 better fleshes out the characters, and is even better than the excellent first season.

Season two ends, as can be expected, with another suspicious death.

Season 3 finds Oliver (Short) finally getting the funding to produce a Broadway play – but on opening night, the star of the show, Ben Glenroy (Paul Rudd) is murdered. Meryl Streep joins the cast as Loretta Durkin, a struggling actress (and Oliver's new love interest), who gets cast in the show. This is the weakest of the four seasons – too many Broadway inside references, too much focus on Oliver and his budding relationship with Loretta and not enough of the three stars working together (which is always when the show is at its best). And, as can be expected, another murder (this one hits close to home) takes place at the end of the season finale.

Season 4 starts out with our heroes initially unaware of the murder in their building. Bev Melon (Molly Shannon), a Paramount Pictures producer proposes a film adaptation of their podcast. They fly to L.A. to attend a studio party and meet the acters who will portray them – Eugene Levy, Zach Galifianakis, and Eva Longoria – who play fictionalized versions of themselves. Charles and Oliver are enthusiastic, but Mabel is initially reluctant, until Eva advises her to use the money to build something on her own. The interactions between Molly Shannon, our three heroes and the actors are quite funny.

The stakes here are ramped up compared to previous seasons, as Charles (Martin) may have been the real target of the latest murderer. As the suspect list widens, we discover there is a separate section in the West Tower of the Arconia whose residents are less wealthy and even weirder than those in our trio's side of the building. I won't reveal how it all plays out, but the fourth season may be the best one yet.

The supporting, and large recurring, and guest star cast are all top notch and include:

Jane Lynch as Sazz Pataki, Charles' TV show stunt double, who dates everyone he dates after they break up with him, and whose popularity with their co-workers often exceeds his; Michael Cyril Creighton as Howard Morris, a cat-loving resident of the Arconia, who gets more involved in the goings on in the building and in our main trio's lives as the series progresses; Da'Vine Joy Randolph as Detective Donna Williams, who gets involved in investigating each of the murders; Jane Houdyshell as Bunny Folger, the iron-fisted Arconia board president; Cara Delevinge as Alice Banks, Mabel's season 2 love interest who works at an art gallery;

Nathan Lane as Teddy Dimas, an Arconia resident, wealthy deli chain owner, and old friend and patron of Oliver, who initially agrees to sponsor the podcast – he becomes a key suspect in the season 1 murder; Amy Ryan as Jan Bellows a professional bassoonist and Arconia resident who starts dating Charles – she's more than meets the eye and becomes a suspect in the one of the murders; Adina Version as Poppy White, Cinda Canning's determined but perpetually abused assistant; Andrea Martin as Charles' longtime makeup artist and love interest (seasons 2 and 3); Shirley MacLaine as Bunny Folger's mysterious mom (season 2); Linda Emond as Donna DeMeo, a Broadway producer who funds Oliver's new production in season 3; Wesley Taylor as Donna's insecure son Cliff, who produces Oliver's play; Richard Kind and Kumail Ali Nanjiani play two of the west tower neighbors; Griffin Dunne as professor Milton Dudenoff, who rents all the west apartments, but allows illegal residents live there for just $200 a month; Melissa McCarthy as Charles' sister Doreen, who lives on Long Island (season 4); Jason Kravitz as Doreen's husband, Big Mike (season 4); Sting and Amy Schumer have cameos as themselves and Arconia residents in season 1 and 2, respectively. Matthew Broderick plays himself, and is briefly cast in Oliver's play in season 3. Mel brooks plays himself in season 3. Scott Bakula, John McEnroe, and Ron Howard have brief cameos as themselves in season 4. Téa Leoni as the mysterious Sofia Caccimelio, who appears in the season 4 finale and sets the stage for season 5.

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Star Trek: Discovery – season 5 (Paramount+)
Sept. 2017, Jan. 2019, Oct. 2020, Nov. 2021, Apr. 2024

This was the series that helped launch CBS All Access in 2017 (which became Paramount+ in 2021). The first season opens a decade before Captain Kirk and crew's original five-year mission, and follows the exploits of the *USS Discovery* as it seeks out new worlds and new civilizations (battling various alien forces along the way). The third season elevates the series to new heights, propels it into uncharted territory and a completely new direction.

Sonequa Martin-Green is terrific as science officer Michael Burnham, a human who was raised on Vulcan by Spock's parents. She eventually rises to Captain. But unlike other *Trek* series, her path to command is fraught with peril and setbacks. Her actions during the first season lead to a war between the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire – she is court-martialed, stripped of her rank, and reassigned to the *USS Discovery*. Through multiple battles she manages to earn back the trust of the crew and the Federation.

Star Trek television series are not known for strong starts – the original series was continually on the verge of cancellation during its three-season run, while *Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager* didn't hit their strides until their third seasons. *Discovery's* first season was no exception – it showed potential but was uneven as it introduced many new characters and focused on the early Federation-Klingon war. Any series that centers around the early days of Starfleet is simply too limited by the existing mythos to seem truly innovative or exciting. It's also difficult to present something new and fresh, while still trying to appeal to hardcore fans of several previous hit series, the last of which ended 20 years ago – particularly when you're trying to launch a new streaming service.

Season 2, however, found its footing, revved up the action, and gave *Discovery* real potential to become a classic and revitalize the *Star Trek* franchise There are several nods to the original *Star Trek* series, as we meet a young Spock (Ethan Peck), who is significantly different from the stoic, heroic first officer we know from *The Original Series* and subsequent movies. We are also introduced to an in-his-prime Captain Christopher Pike (Anson Mount), James T. Kirk's predecessor on the *USS Enterprise*. Both actors expertly fit into these iconic roles.

The show includes artificial intelligence, time travel, the mirror universe, Section 31 (the latter two familiar to *Trek* fans), and a lot of action sequences. The season finale launches *Star Trek: Discovery* into new terrain, making season 3 a completely new entity with endless possibilities, enabling it to be unattached to existing *Star Trek* history. At the end of season 2, we also discover why Spock has never mentioned his "sister," Michael Burnham, in any previous series or feature film.

Season 3 manages to create a fresh and exciting take on a 50+ year-old franchise – not an easy task. It takes place after the newly promoted Captain Burnham and the crew of *Discovery* have traveled 900 years into the future, to a time when a cataclysmic event has decimated Starfleet and left the galaxy disconnected. Going to a future beyond any *Star Trek* continuity gives the franchise freedom to explore new stories and technology, unrestricted by existing canon. The third season also sets up the planned spin-off movie event starring Michelle Yeoh, which will air on Paramount+ this January.

In **season 4**, as they try to rebuild the United Federation of Planets, they encounter a space anomaly that destroys everything in its path, including entire planets. It will take all of Captain Burnham's political savvy and her crew's imagination to get competing interests and rival planets to work with the newly resurrected Federation to prevent galactic disaster.

Season 5 finds our heroes on a season-long story arc, a perilous journey searching for a mysterious power source that has been hidden for centuries – technology that the ancient race known as the Progenitors used to seed the Galaxy with life (their existence was first discovered in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). Other dangerous factions are searching for this technology as well, including the Breen (one of *Trek's* biggest baddie species). Captain Burnham and her crew's search leads to several adventures and ultimately to their prize. Now Burnham has to decide whether to claim the technology for the Federation or destroy it because of the nearly unlimited power it would give to anyone who possesses it. I won't spoil what happens, but it's a fitting end the story.

The *Discovery* crew includes: Doug Jones as first officer Saru, the first Kelpien to join Starfleet – he takes the role of outsider alien (or android) and captain's confidante that *Trek* is famous for (Spock, Data, Worf, Odo); Mary Wiseman as ensign Sylvia Tilly, one of the key members of the crew, who starts out having a lack of self-confidence, but grows into a fierce and insightful crew member. Aside from Sonequa Martin-Green's Michael Burnham, these two characters form the heart and soul of the series.

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Anthony Rapp is Chief Engineer Paul Stamets (the first openly gay character in a *Star Trek* series). **Wilson Cruz** is Hugh Culber, chief medical officer and Stamets' husband.

Blu del Barrio is Adira Tal, a human bonded with a Trill symbiont (Adira is the first non-binary character in a *Star Trek* series) – Adira's boyfriend Gray (**Ian Alexander**) is the first transgender character in *Star Trek*.

Comedian **Tig Notaro** is engineer Jett Reno, who brings much-needed humor to the proceedings. **David Ajala** is Cleveland Booker, a courier who works with and becomes Captain Burnham's love interest.

Callum Keith Rennie is Rayner (season 5), a Kellerun and war-time Starfleet captain struggling to adjust to peace time. He has a totally different leadership style from Captain Burnham, which causes problems when he has to take command when she's on a vital mission.

Michelle Yeoh in the dual role of Captain Philippa Georgiou and Emperor Georgiou, ruthless leader of the Terran Empire, from the mirror universe (seasons 1 and 2). She will reprise this role in the upcoming film, *Star Trek: Section 31*, which is scheduled for a January 24, 2025 debut on Paramount+.

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TWD: Daryl Dixon – the Book of Carol (AMC)
Sept. 2023, Sept. 2024

The first season was titled, *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon*, with Norman Reedus reprising his role from the original series. Melissa McBride was supposed to also reprise her role as Carol in season 1, but logistical problems prevented it from happening (she appears briefly in the season finale). Daryl and Carol, are finally reunited in season 2.

This is the second of three spin-offs taking place after the conclusion of *The Walking Dead*, each pairing two of its most popular surviving characters. The other two series feature Maggie and Negan in *The Walking Dead: Dead City* and Rick and Michonne in *The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live*. This is the first one to air a second season.

If you're a fan of *The Walking Dead* when it was great (basically seasons 1-8 out of 11), this is for you. After losing contact with Daryl, Carol has been searching for him in America. But as viewers of the first season know, he is now in France. Here's a brief recap of **season 1**.

As the series opens, Daryl finds himself washed ashore in southern France (which we learn is where the zombie apocalypse began), uncertain how he got there.

As Daryl tries to piece it all together and find a way back home, he meets and befriends members of a progressive religious group called the Union of Hope, and Isabelle (Clemence Poesy), a headstrong nun who helps lead the group. Daryl agrees to protect her and her young charge, a highly intelligent and insightful boy named Laurent (Louis Puech Scigliuzzi), who the nuns believe is a potential messiah destined to lead humanity's renewal. In exchange, she promises to help him find a ship to take him back home. They head north to an outpost called *the Nest*, where Laurent will supposedly be safe.

On their journey, they encounter a brutal paramilitary group of survivors, led by Marion Genet (Anne Charrier), an authoritarian woman, traumatized and hardened by seeing her husband killed during the beginning of the zombie apocalypse. She has heard rumors about Laurent and sees him as a potential threat to her power. She and her followers will do anything necessary to find him, regardless of how many innocent civilians they need to torture or kill to achieve their goals.

In **season 2**, Daryl and Carol don't reunite until episode 4, and their individual journeys are fraught with constant danger.

While searching for Daryl in Maine, Carol finds his motorcycle and captures its rider, who directs her to where he found it. She is led to an auto repair shop, where she recovers Daryl's crossbow and forces the men there to tell her where Daryl is. Searching for a way to cross the ocean, she meets and befriends Ash Patel (Manish Dayal), a pilot who has a small plane hidden

on his property. She lies and tells him she's searching for her daughter, and persuades him to fly her to France.

When Carol and Ash stop in Greenland to refuel, they meet two isolated female research scientists, who seem friendly and welcoming, but quickly turn on them – they want to kill Carol and force Ash to stay and be a sperm donor so they can start their own family. As can be expected, Carol and Ash quickly dispense with them and continue on to France.

At the same time, Daryl is in significantly more danger as he continues to protect Laurent from both Genet and Losang (Joel de la Fuente), the American leader of the Union of Hope, who is working against Genet. Losang has extreme and more violent views than the pacifist Union and Isabelle, and wants to prove Laurent is indeed a messiah and immune to the walking dead by exposing him to their bite. This causes Isabelle and Daryl to break away from the group in an effort to save Laurent.

Once Carol and Daryl find one another, the intensity escalates even more. Allies and enemies alike meet their demise as Daryl and Carol team up to battle Genet and her forces, as well as Lansing and his Union followers – both groups are relentlessly trying to track them down, killing anyone who gets in their way.

In the season finale, just as Carol, Daryl, Ash, and Laurent have escaped their pursuers, Ash informs them that the plane won't be able to get off the ground with four passengers – one of them will have to remain behind. As the plane is about to fly off with three passengers, both Genet's and Losang's soldiers catch up to them and a major battle ensues.

The series has been renewed for a third season, and is reportedly already shooting in Spain.

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Griselda (Netflix)
Jan. 2024

Sofia Vergara, unrecognizable from her role in the TV comedy *Modern Family*, gives a bravura performance in this heavily fictionalized miniseries about real-life drug lord Griselda Blanco, aka "Godmother," during what was known as the "cocaine cowboys" era of the late 1970s and '80s. This quote appears on the screen leading into the first episode and sets the stage for what is to come – *"The only man I was ever afraid of was a woman, Griselda Blanco."* – Pablo Escobar (drug kingpin).

The series (in Spanish with subtitles or dubbed in English) chronicles Griselda's stunning and violent rise from a former brothel worker married to a violent drug trafficker in Medellin Columbia, to one of the most feared members of the drug underworld, controlling the Miami cocaine trade.

As the drama gets underway, Griselda, having just killed her abusive husband, escapes to Miami with her three sons. She's taken in by her friend Carmen (Paulina Davila) who also fled from a husband

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in the drug trade, and now has a legitimate business as a travel agent. Carmen tries to get Griselda to leave the past behind and start a new life, but Griselda wants to start her own business selling cocaine in the U.S., and gain enough wealth and power so her family is never in danger again. She had stolen a kilo of cocaine from her husband, which she brought to Miami in one of her son's suitcases. She hopes to sell the drugs for enough money to get started.

She is assisted by a bevy of friends, all former sex workers from Columbia, who come to Miami by the planeload (tickets supplied by her travel agent friend Carmen), their bras stuffed with cocaine. But Griselda is initially unable to sell her product because neither the Columbian cartels nor the Miami drug dealers want to do business with a woman, much less let her control any territory.

But Griselda persists. She identifies a previously untapped market – wealthy white suburbanites, and tries to persuade the Medellin cartel to supply her, and Miami drug traffickers to help distribute her product. She manages to get one prominent drug dealer to partner with her, giving her the initial clout she needs to get started. But while she is determined to succeed, the most powerful Miami drug dealers are equally determined to stop her.

From there, it's a tumultuous decade, as she has to bargain with less competent men who don't take her seriously, drug dealers who try to rip her off, and a powerful Columbia drug cartel that poses a threat not only to her business, but to her and her family's lives. By sheer will and overpowering personality, Griselda knocks down every obstacle thrown her way, often with extreme violence.

Griselda recruits an army of "Marielitos" (refugees who fled communist Cuba during the Mariel Boatlift crisis). She promises them a better life and respect, seeming more as a crusading politician than a ruthless gangster. As she grows her own drug empire, and builds a reputation

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as a cunning and terrifying drug Queenpin, these Marielitos become her soldiers, guardians, and hitmen, helping her eliminate the drug lords who stand in her way (this period of the 1980s was known as the "Miami drug war").

At the same time, a parallel storyline is unfolding, where another woman, June Hawkins (Juliana Aiden Martinzez), a Latina police officer, is investigating the murder of several top drug dealers. She is the first to figure out that there is a new player in town, a woman who might be more than just a "girlfriend." A female witness who saw Griselda tells June, "she doesn't walk like a girlfriend…she walks like a boss."

Like Griselda, June has to put up with the misogyny and sexism of her colleagues, who don't take her seriously – expecting her to write analysis memos and make sure the coffee is hot, but leave the real investigating to men. She gets involved in Griselda's case basically because she's the only one in the police station who speaks Spanish. She soon becomes obsessed with bringing Griselda and her criminal empire to justice. June becomes part of the newly formed CENTAC (Central Tactical Unit), a joint operation between the Miami police department and the DEA, which eventually compiles enough evidence to arrest Griselda.

At only six episodes, *Griselda* does not have the same logical narrative of USA Network's superior female drug-lord crime drama, *Queen of the South* (also available on Netflix). The downside of so few episodes is that time jumps are necessary to effectively tell a story that spans decades. This makes Griselda's transition from a largely sympathetic anti-hero single mom, rescuing other women from life in a brothel, into a vicious, paranoid, crack-addicted, power-hungry murderer, too sudden and jarring. It could have benefited from a few additional episodes to better flesh out this

transformation and show more of the dichotomy between Griselda and June (on a broadcast TV procedural, this might have been June's story).

While the last couple of episodes don't live up to the promise of the first four that this would be something substantially different from the typical rise-and-fall crime dramas we've seen in the past, it is still enjoyable, fast-paced, gorgeously filmed, well-acted, and binge-worthy.

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3 Body Problem (Netflix)
Mar. 2024

What would we do if we knew a superior alien race was on their way to conquer Earth but it would take them 400 years to get here?   How could we prepare for the invasion if, even from that distance, the aliens can see and hear everything we do and say? What would this alien race do if they thought that the unpredictably rapid advance of human technology might result in humans actually being superior to them by the time they get here? These are the main (but not only) questions in this unique, eight-episode sci-fi thriller, based on Liu Cixin's, Hugo award-winning novel trilogy, *Remembrance of Earth's Past*.

In 1960s China, and astrophysicist prodigy, orphaned during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, is sent to a remote military base where she detects a message from the San-Ti, an alien civilization from a distant planet. Her response has repercussions that threaten humanity's very existence, as the San-Ti seem intent on invading Earth.   Nearly 60 years later, the global intelligence and scientific communities work to prevent the alien invasion, while a group of dangerous fanatics welcomes the San-Ti and wants to pave the way for their coming.

The series jumps back and for the from the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, to the present, when several events that defy scientific logic and the laws of physics, are taking place at the same time some notable physicists are suddenly committing suicide. A group of young scientists, recruited from around the world, who all trained at Oxford (and are dubbed "the Oxford Five"), partner with an MI6 agent and a global intelligence agency to try and figure out what's going on and what to do about it.

A secret organization comprised of human extremists, who believe the alien race is destined to save humanity from itself, will do anything to stop them. Working for a San-Ti, who they only know from a disembodied female voice, their mission is basically to prevent any scientific breakthroughs that might pose a threat to the alien invasion. If someone is offered a place in the group and they refuse, they soon die under mysterious circumstances. If anyone from the outside is perceived as a threat to them or their mission, someone from the group is sent to assassinate them.

After a plan to reach out to the San-Ti results in catastrophic failure, the global intelligence agency develops a strategy for devising a defense that is both bold and dangerous.

This is the type of sci-fi series where my ultimate determination of just how good it is will depend on how it all ends. I'm reminded of two other sci-fi series – *Dark* (also on Netflix), which ended on such a perfect note it solidified its greatness, and *Lost*, which was teetering on the edge of greatness, but whose ending was so disappointing it diminished the entire series. But until we see where *3 Body Problem* ultimately goes, it's a fascinating and worthwhile ride.

The excellent international cast includes: Rosalind Chao as present-day Dr. Ye Wenjie (Zine Tseng plays her younger self), an astrophysicist whose initial response to alien contact more than 60 years ago, threatens humanity's survival; Jovan Adepo, John Bradley, Eiza Gonzalez, Jess Hong, and Alex Sharp, as members of the "Oxford Five"; Liam Cunningham as Thomas Wade, chief of MI6 and head of the global Strategic Intelligence Agency; Benedict Wong as an MI6 officer assigned to protect the "Offord Five"; Jonathan Pryce as an old friend of Ye Wenjie, who shares her negative view of humanity, and is one of the leaders of the secret group of humans working for the San-Ti; Marlo Kelly as a fanatical member of the group, and CCH Pounder as Secretary General of the United Nations.

The series reportedly costs about $20 million per episode, making it Netflix's most expensive series ever. It has been renewed for a second and third season. The show's creators promise an epic conclusion "that will blow your mind."

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True Detective: Night Country (HBO, Max)
Jan. 2024

This is the fourth season of the crime anthology series, and the first to have a sub-title. The previous three aired in 2014, 2015, and 2019. The first one was excellent and the middle two were just O.K. This one, led by the always terrific Jodie Foster and exciting newcomer Kali Reis, is every bit as good as the first one, maybe better.

The theme song over the opening credits, Billie Eilish's *Bury a Friend*, is pitch perfect, and seems like it could have been written specifically for this show (it was actually on her 2019 debut album). Combined with the accompanying snowy landscape and cryptic, dream-like images, it sets an appropriately dark and eerie tone for this dark and eerie drama. The constant Alaskan December darkness lends additional eerie atmosphere to the proceedings.

The series opens on the last sunset before six months of night in the fictional town of Ennis, Alaska, where a brutal crime is about to take place. Eight men are working in an isolated arctic research station. One of them starts acting strangely, and you just know something bad is about to happen. Sometime later, a delivery person walks into the facility and finds it empty. All eight of the researchers have disappeared. Only a woman's severed tongue is left behind.

Police Chief Liz Danvers (Jodie Foster) is called in to investigate. She's joined by her former partner, state trooper Evangeline Navarro (Kali Reis), an Alaskan Inupiat (native). Reis's understated but intense demeanor is the perfect counterpoint to Foster's aggressive, scowling, and equally intense style. Both characters seem completely original and refreshingly devoid of any clichés common to the female cop archetype. Both are strong, fiercely independent women, and relentless investigators, unwilling to back off when ordered to by their less competent male superiors – particularly when they suspect a corruption and a coverup.

Chief Danvers deduces that the tongue belonged to an indigenous woman. Navarro believes it's the tongue of Annie Kowtok (Nivi Pedersen), an Inupiat woman who was stabbed to death six years earlier (with her tongue cut out), for protesting the policies of the Silver

Sky mine, which has been polluting the town's water supply for years. Since the mine employs roughly half the town's residents, many people hated Annie and there were numerous possible suspects. But the case was never solved. Navarro blames Danvers for not aggressively pursuing leads, which has caused a rift between them which is wider than ever as the series gets underway.

As the former friends and partners argue over the new case, they are notified that Rose Aguineau (Fiona Shaw), a local woman living on the edge of town, discovered the naked bodies of the researchers on a frozen lake. Their clothes have been neatly folded in the snow. The state of the bodies sends shock waves through the police force and the town. Adding to the mystery, is that one of the researchers is missing, and one of the frozen corpses is actually still alive.

There are also some supernatural elements involved, as some of the town's residents see and hear visions of the dead (are they hallucinations, or something real?). One such vision led Rose to discover the bodies of the missing men. As she later tells Navarro, "The thing about the dead, some come because they miss you, some come because they need to tell you something you need to hear, some of them just want to take you with them. You need to know the difference."

While Navarro is spiritual and has visions of her own, Danvers is just the opposite – she angrily shouts at Navarro, "The dead are dead. There's no heaven. There's no hell. There's no ghosts f**king beyond. There's nobody out there just waiting for us, watching us."

There are a number of sub-plots. Danvers has a strained relationship with her Inupiat stepdaughter, Leah (Isabella Star LeBlanc), who wants to explore her native heritage, and gets involved in protesting the mine. Navarro's sister Julia (Aka Niviana) is schizophrenic and has terrifying

visions that make her suicidal. Officer Peter Prior (Finn Bennett) is being mentored by Danvers, while his father, Captain Hank Prior (John Hawkes), is a corrupt cop involved in covering up the mine's involvement in polluting the town's water supply.

As Liz and Evangeline try to put the puzzle pieces together and figure out how it's all connected, more. secrets, coverups, and corruption are revealed. Annie's murder is ultimately solved, and we see in flashbacks who was responsible both for Annie's murder and the deaths of the research scientists, and how they are related.

The final scene is appropriately cryptic and open to interpretation – depending on whether you believe in the supernatural or spiritual aspects of the show or whether you think everything has a rational explanation.

True Detective has been renewed for a fifth installment, which will again feature a new cast and story.

23

Tulsa King – season 2 (Paramount+)
Nov. 2022, Sept. 2024

Taylor Sheridan (Yellowstone, *Mayor of Kingstown*, *1883, 1923, Lawmwn: Bass Reeves, Lioness*) creates another great character in Dwight "The General" Manfredi, played with relish by Sylvester Stallone. It's a role that fits him to perfection. Dwight Manfredi is a legendary mob capo, fresh out of prison, where he did a 25-year stretch to protect his bosses. Despite many opportunities to reduce his sentence by turning on them, he kept his mouth shut and did his time.

In **season 1**, expecting to receive praise and a high-level position upon his release from prison, Dwight is instead seen as a threat and exiled to Tulsa, Oklahoma. His bosses, particularly Don Charles "Chickie" Invernizzi (Domenick Lombardozzi), head of the Invernizzi crime family, want him as far away from them as possible. Despite not knowing anyone in the area, Dwight sets out to put together a new crew to help him build a criminal empire – which brings him into conflict with several local bad guys who don't want someone new impinging on their territory.

Dwight's crew includes: Tyson Mitchell (Jay Will), a former taxi driver who becomes Dwight's driver and the first member of the Manfredi "family"; Lawrence "Bodhi" Geigerman (Martin Starr), a marijuana dispensary owner who reluctantly joins the group and helps finance his new syndicate; Armand "Manny" Truisi (Max Casella), a former Invernizzi soldier who made a new life in Tulsa working at a local horse ranch after breaking a vow to the family; Mitch Keller (Garrett Hedlund), and ex-rodeo star, ex-convict, and bar owner; Dennis Carangi (Chris Caldovino), long-time capo of the Invernizzi family, who joins Dwight in Tulsa and becomes his underboss; Grace (McKenna Quigley Harrington), who works for Bodhi at his marijuana dispensary, and Michael "Bigfoot" (Ca$h Flo), who serves as Dwight's body guard and enforcer.

Additional cast members include Anabella Sciorra as Joanne Manfredi, Dwight's younger sister and Tatiana Zappardino as Tina Manfredi Grieger, Dwight's estranged daughter, who lives in Brooklyn.

What should be silly if not absurdly ridiculous, is somehow eminently watchable. Predictable but well-crafted, fun, and thoroughly entertaining, it doesn't take itself too seriously. Stallone is obviously enjoying himself as a 75-year-old mobster who can still knock out a bad guy (or obnoxious guy) with one punch and get the girl.

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In **season 1**, the girl, or rather woman, is Stacy Beale (Andrea Savage), who, after they sleep together, is horrified to learn how old he is – "I had you down as a hard 55" she tells him. She is later revealed to be a member of the local Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms unit (herself exiled to Tulsa), who finds out at her next morning briefing that Dwight is an ex-hitman come to town for unknown reasons. She is assigned to investigate him, and finds evidence that leads to his arrest. But she fails to get Dwight convicted (he defends himself at trial) and is eventually transferred to Alaska.

In **season 2**, Dana Delany is Dwight's love interest. She plays Margaret Devereaux, the wealthy and well-connected owner of a horse ranch in Tulsa, who is not at all put off by his criminal background.

Dwight is an old-school antihero, and has his own moral compass. He can go from charming to menacing in an instant, and often steps in when he sees some injustice or someone being bullied. This gives the viewer license to be on his side despite knowing that in the past he was a brutal killer.

In **season 1**, Dwight becomes enemies with a local outlaw biker gang, The Black Mcadams and their Irish leader (Ritchie Coster), who see Dwight as invading their turf. Violence ensues, with Dwight and crew eventually coming out on top.

Things get significantly more dangerous for Dwight and his crew in **season 2**. In addition to Chickie, who wants Dwight eliminated, there are a number of new threats, including, Cal Thresher (Neal McDonough), a corrupt businessman, oil tycoon, and large marijuana producer and distributor, who sees Dwight as a potential threat to his business, Bill Bevilaqua (Frank

Grillo), boss of the Bevilaqua crime family out of Kansas City – Tulsa is part of their territory, and they don't appreciate Dwight's presence, and Jackie Ming (Rich Ting), a violent Chinese triad gangster who partners with Cal Thresher, until he starts a war by trying to have Dwight killed.

Tulsa King was given a special Paramount Network preview following an episode of *Yellowstone*, and debuted as the highest rated new series of 2022. On Paramount+ it reportedly broke all records and led to its biggest new sign-up day to date. It's still going strong, and has been renewed for a third season.

22

The Agency (Showtime, Paramount+)
Nov. 2024

Produced by George Clooney and Grant Heslov, and based on the critically acclaimed French series, *Le Bureau des Legendes*, this spy thriller is centered around the department responsible for training and handling deep-cover CIA agents on long-term assignments, who live under false identities, often for years.

This is one of the rare series I'm including on my annual best list without having seen all the episodes. It debuted with two episodes on December 1st, and is subsequently releasing one per week. At this writing, I've seen the first four episodes (out of 10) – enough to persuade me to include it here. By the end of the series, I may either knock it up or down a notch or two, but this spot seems appropriate.

As the series opens, covert CIA agent, Brandon codename *Martian* (Michael Fassbender), who has been operating in Africa for the past six years, is abruptly called back to London Station and immediately

must abandon is undercover life. When the love he left behind, Dr. Sami Zahir (Jodie Turner-Smith), an anthropologist and political activist, who knew him as Paul Lewis, unexpectedly shows up in London, their romance reignites, and they are both thrust into a deadly game of international intrigue and espionage. Although he assures his skeptical bosses that she's not in the spy game, there might be more to her than meets the eye.

So far, unlike most spy dramas, which tend to focus on dangerous missions and the accompanying action they entail, *The Agency* is more concerned with the psychological impact and personal trauma involved in pretending to be a completely different person for years at a time, constantly at risk of being discovered, and then reintegrating back into "normal" society and your previous life – as we see when Martian tries to become reacquainted with his now teenage daughter, Poppy (India Fowler).

The excellent cast includes Jeffrey Wright as Henry Ogletree, CIA London Deputy Station Chief and Martian's immediate boss and mentor, Richard Gere as James Bradley, CIA London Station Chief, Katherine Waterston as Naomi, Martian's former CIA case officer, Harriet Sansom Harris as Dr. Rachel Blake, a CIA clinical psychiatrist assigned to evaluate Martian as he returns from his deep undercover mission (their sparring sessions provide some of the cleverest dialogue in the series), and Saura Lightfoot-Leon as Daniela "Danny" Ruiz Morata, a new CIA field officer being prepared by Martian and Naomi to go on her first undercover assignment in Iran.

The Agency was reportedly Showtime's most streamed series ever, and it's already been renewed for a second season.

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The Bear – season 3 (Hulu)
June 2022, June 2023, June 2024

Jeremy Allen White is fantastic as Carmen "Carmy" Berzatto a brilliant, young James Beard Award-winning chef. After being immersed for years in the world of fine dining, and working in some of the best restaurants in the world, he comes home to Chicago to run his family's struggling Italian beef sandwich shop. His brother Mikey (played in flashbacks by Jon Bernthal) committed suicide and leaves Carmy the restaurant in his will.

This is one of those rare shows that is universally loved by critics, awards-voters, and viewers alike (at least for its first two seasons). The writers, cast, and film crew do a remarkable job of making you feel the hectic pace of the back-of-house staff and the overwhelming stress of the kitchen's claustrophobic environment, helped along by a ticking clock and pulse-pounding soundtrack.

I struggled with how to position my review of season 3. I ultimately decided that while the show does not live up to the greatness of the previous two seasons (which were both among my top 5 series of the year – it was #1 in 2023), it is still better than most television shows on the air and the acting remains consistently great. Before getting to the latest season, here's a brief recap of the first two (which you need to watch before season 3).

In season 1, Carmy and his newly hired young sous chef, Sydney (Ayo Edebiri in a standout performance), who is brimming with innovative ideas, have to deal with a set-in-their-ways kitchen staff, who initially resist efforts to modernize the restaurant.

Before Carmy arrived, Mikey's stubborn, obnoxious best friend Richie (Ebon Moss-Bachrach) was temporarily running things. He and Sydney are as different as night and day, which leads to their bumping heads through much of the first season. Their conflict is one of the more interesting aspects of the show. Richie is loud, abrasive, used to settling disputes with his fists, and seemingly has no emotional depth (until we discover he actually does). Sydney is calm, restrained, efficient, and solves disputes through reason and compromise – but there's something bubbling under the surface, and you almost expect her to explode at any moment.

As the staff starts to see the results of their labors, and Carmy and Sydney's unrelenting confidence, staff members are gradually won over. They include: Lionel Boyce as Marcus, the restaurant's creative baker, who is constantly adding artistic flair to his scrumptious desserts; Liza Colon-Zayas as Tina, the wary prep cook, reluctant to make any changes, and resentful of having to take direction from a young upstart – she's gradually won over by Sydney's cooking skills and persistent efforts to make things run more smoothly, and Edwin Lee Gibson as Ebraheim, the sturdy, unflappable line cook, whom we discover survived the Somali civil war (so nothing that happens in the kitchen can rattle him).

Matty Matheson is Neil, the genial handyman, who doesn't officially work there, but finds his services constantly needed. Abby Elliott is Carmy's sister Natalie "Sugar" Berzatto, with whom he has a complicated relationship – they have completely different ways of dealing with their brother's death. She eventually comes on board to do the books and help straighten out their finances.

Season 2 is extraordinary, and may be even better than the first season. The tension ramps up higher than ever as Carmy and his staff close the sandwich shop and have to completely renovate the old space, get all the licenses and permits, design a menu, and open a new high-end restaurant – all in 18 months or they lose everything. Uncle Cicero (Oliver Platt) invests more than $500K in the project with the proviso that if they don't open in 18 months, he gets the entire property. This puts Carmy and Sydney under incredible stress. Everything seems at once on the verge of either triumphant success or catastrophic failure. Adding to the tension is the awareness that numerous Chicago restaurants have recently been driven out of business due to the pandemic.

A number of season 2 episodes are devoted to individual staff members, as Carmy sends them to learn from some of his former colleagues. They each gain a new perspective, which helps them work through their own issues. All are fascinating and extremely well done, and provide insights into each character's motivations, insecurities, and true talents. They all return with their passions renewed and determined to succeed.

Molly Gordon is excellent as Claire Dunlap, who Carmy starts dating. She was a childhood friend of the Berzattos, on whom Carmy had a crush as a teenager. Now, he sees her as distracting his attention from the restaurant, which requires his full-time focus.

There are some wonderful cameo performances, most notably the remarkable Jamie Lee Curtis (seen in a flashback episode) as Carmy, Mikey, and Natalie's loudly alcoholic mother. Bob Odenkirk as their mean "uncle" Lee, and Olivia Colman as Chef Terry (one of Carmy's mentors), have brief but great scenes as well.

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Everything comes to fruition in the season 2 finale, as everyone is put to the test preparing for the new restaurant's opening.

Season 3 seems like a step back (or sideways), and feels unfinished, like there should have been two or three more episodes. The focus on individual cast members' backstories provides some insights into events that shaped who they are today, but the overall narrative that propelled the previous seasons forward is missing. And much of the humorous interactions among the main players has been relegated to secondary characters. I guess my real problem with season 3 is that it's simply not as enjoyable as the first two.

We flash back to Carmy's training as a premier chef, when he is mercilessly abused and traumatized by executive chef David Fields (Joel McHale). In present day, when Carmy finally confronts him, there is no real emotional payoff. Now Carmy becomes borderline abusive of his own staff, in his fruitless pursuit of perfection, which includes changing the menu every day. This only adds to the stress everyone is already feeling as the new restaurant opens and they await what could be a make-or-break review from a well-known food critic.

Perhaps this encapsulates the mixed reactions this season seems to have generated among fans of the show. Whereas in each of the first two seasons my wife and I liked the same things, this season the episodes we liked and disliked were markedly different (and the first time there were any episodes either of us disliked).

There's an episode devoted entirely to Carmy's sister Natalie going into labor and having her baby – with her troubled and grating mom by her side (again, brilliantly played by Jamie Lee Curtis). I found this episode to be one of the least appealing of the season, but my wife thought it was one of the best and most insightful.

The Bear that can be intensely stressful, but also funny, dramatic, thought-provoking, exhilarating, and addicting – and unlike anything else on television. It's been renewed for a fourth season, which I hope returns to what made the series so great during its first two seasons.