

CLOSE WATCH

25 Perfect TV Episodes From the Last 25 Years

The past quarter century's best TV episodes, from
Mad Men and *The Sopranos* to *Succession* and
beyond.

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JEFF GILES

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Earlier this year, *Vanity Fair* compiled a list of **eight perfect TV episodes** from the 2022–2023 season. It’s a killer collection, spanning comedy, drama, and whatever category *The Bear* belongs to. But after it was done, we couldn’t stop thinking about more of TV’s best episodes—the stand-alone chapters that push an ongoing narrative to new heights, the self-contained but sweeping stories that best exemplify what makes television so special.

So, which classics most deserve to be labeled perfect episodes? Let’s start with these 25 unforgettable titles, culled from the past quarter century of TV—including canonical series like *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *Lost*, *Friends*, and *Breaking Bad*, as well as instant standouts like *Atlanta*, *Reservation Dogs*, and *Insecure*—and presented in chronological order. These are the gems we’re still debating and swooning over and giddily rewatching, even years after they originally streamed or aired. (Remember those days, when you had to watch TV...on a television?)

“The One With the Embryos,” *Friends*



FROM WARNER BROS./COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION.

Airdate: January 15, 1998

Written by Jill Condon and Amy Toomin

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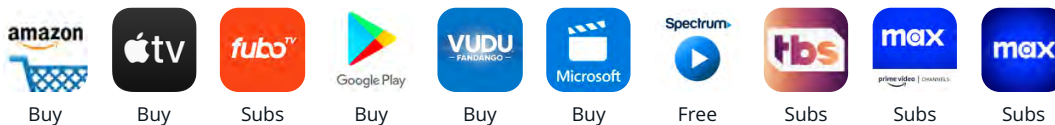
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“Why on earth did we call it ‘The One With the Embryos’ and not ‘The One With the Contest?’” cocreator **David Crane** asked in a **2018 oral history** of what’s now considered one of the sitcom’s best episodes. Despite the gravity of Phoebe’s (**Lisa Kudrow**) efforts to get impregnated with her brother’s baby (it’s not like that, **Giovanni Ribisi**’s Frank assures), it is an increasingly high-stakes personal trivia match amongst the other friends—Rachel (**Jennifer Aniston**), Monica (**Courtney Cox**), Joey (**Matt LeBlanc**), and Chandler (**Matthew Perry**) that makes the episode soar. After an argument about who knows who better, the quartet engage in a quiz that weds familiar character traits with fresh information, like Chandler’s job title, which even the most devoted *Friends* fan realizes mid-setup they do not know. Both of the episode’s storylines lurch toward consequential outcomes—Phoebe’s positive pregnancy test and the apartment shake-up that comes as a result of the game Ross (**David Schwimmer**) devises. Admits Crane decades later, “It should’ve been called ‘The One With the Two Tests.’” —*Savannah Walsh*



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“Pine Barrens,” *The Sopranos*



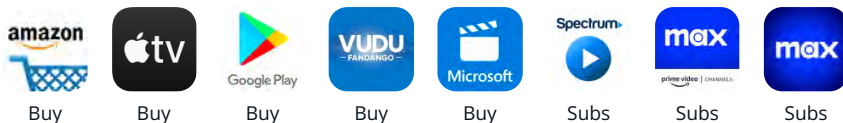
FROM MAXIMUM FILM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Airdate: May 6, 2001

**Story by Terence Winter and Timothy Van Patten;
written by Terence Winter**

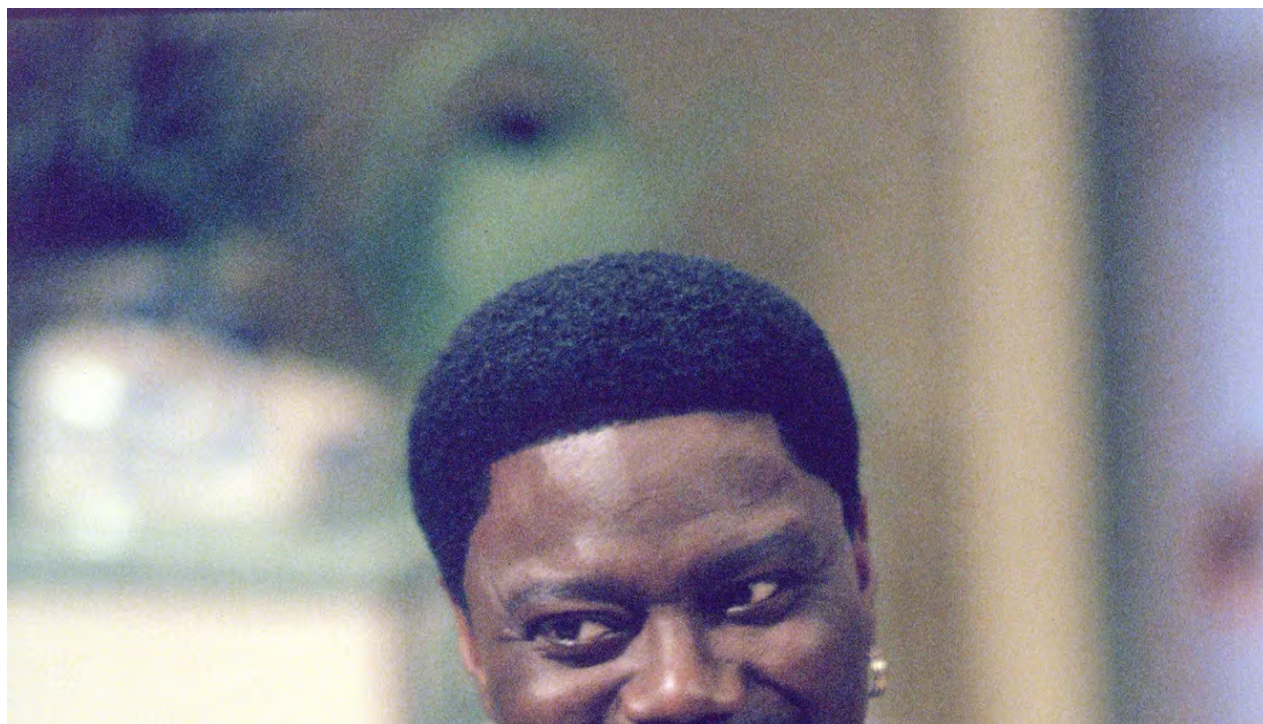
Consider this the mobster version of *Waiting for Godot*. **Michael Imperoli's** Christopher and Tony Sirico's white-winged Paulie were given one job: retrieve a few thousand dollars from a man in a Russian gang. It's a delicate situation because James Gandolfini's Tony Soprano is aligning with the Russkies to launder money. Things go wrong, badda bing, badda boom, the Russian ends up wrapped in his own carpet and stuffed into a car trunk, and the two hapless gangsters venture into the piney winter wilds of lower New Jersey to dispose of the remains. The only

problem: The Russian isn't dead. Paulie and Christopher battle their Rasputin-like rival in a shovel fight and shoot-out, but he vanishes into thin air and they end up lost in the freezing woods. They call Tony, who is straining to keep his own temper in check after fighting with an emotionally explosive new girlfriend (**Annabella Sciorra**) to come to their rescue. The episode, directed by **Steve Buscemi** and written by later *Boardwalk Empire* creator **Terence Winter**, is particularly memorable for its enduring mystery. Did the Russian survive? We never find out. All we know for sure is that Christopher and Paulie go through a long night of the soul, turning on each other and questioning every decision that led them to this lowly, merciless place. —*Anthony Breznican*



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“Pilot,” *The Bernie Mac Show*





FROM PICTURELUX / THE HOLLYWOOD ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

Airdate: November 14, 2001

Written by Larry Wilmore and Bernie Mac

Bernie Mac's first episode has cute kids, potty humor, a comedian playing a heightened version of himself—a good amount of material from the standard sitcom

playbook. The magic is in how Mac and series creator **Larry Wilmore** tweak those well-worn tropes, adding welcome edge and imagination. Rather than plopping Mac in front of a live studio audience, they opt for a more intimate single-camera format—something hardly any sitcom was doing in the early aughts, save for *Bernie Mac*'s network-mate *Malcolm in the Middle*—and turn the lens itself into a character. They punctuate jokes with cheeky supertitles, adding a meta twist that was years ahead of its time. And they let Mac transform what could've been another standard-issue exasperated patriarch into something darker—at one point, he threatens to bust his niece's head “til the white meat shows”—without ever taking the gag too far. “When I say I want to kill those kids, you know what I mean,” he tells us. “Bernie Mac just say what *you* want to say, but can't.” —*Hillary Busis*



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“Top Banana,” *Arrested Development*



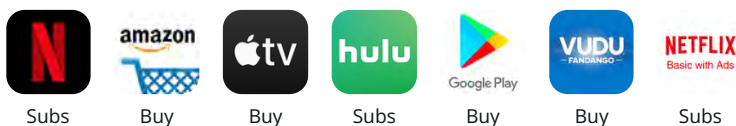
COURTESY OF EVERETT COLLECTION.

Airdate: November 9, 2003

Written by Mitchell Hurwitz and John Levenstein

In just its second episode, *Arrested Development* unveiled umpteen jokes that would recur throughout the series and live on as memes to this day. “There’s always money in the banana stand.” Tobias’s (**David Cross**) cutoffs. “Dead Dove Do Not Eat.” Gob (**Will Arnett**) trying and failing to throw a letter into the ocean. The relatively simple sitcom premise of two teenagers (**Michael Cera**’s George Michael and **Alia Shawkat**’s Maeby) working a summer job becomes an intricate nesting doll of plots, as Michael (**Jason Bateman**) tries to force his mother (Jessica Walter) to come clean about family finances even as patriarch George (**Jeffrey**

Tambor) is pulling strings from inside prison. In a payoff that will later become a standard of the series, the banana-stand fire teased at the beginning of the episode is revealed as a proud father-son bonding moment between Michael and George Michael—until, of course, they realize \$250,000 has gone up in flames. Characters who would define the series are absent—even Buster (**Tony Hale**) is left out—but the episode remains a pure distillation of *Arrested Development*'s perfectly calibrated chaos. —*Katey Rich*



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“Splat!,” *Sex and the City*



FROM MAXIMUM FILM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

Airdate: February 8, 2004

Written by Jenny Bicks and Cindy Chupack

As *Sex and the City* neared its end—“Splat!” is the last episode before the two-part series finale—it was perhaps only appropriate that it should consider the matter of death. And thus, the hideously comic demise of Lexi Featherston (**Kristen Johnston**), a single-episode character who, in all her garish, aging party-girl ways, represented a curdled old sense of self to which *SATC* was saying goodbye forever. The performance is funny and memorable and perfectly pitched by Johnston. But then there is an abrupt turn to genuine discord in a fight between Miranda and Carrie, in which their respective designs for living—and their ideas about who Carrie is and what she needs—badly clash. “Splat!” is a pleasingly dyspeptic counterbalance to the dreamy happy endings that were to come in *Sex and the City*’s final two episodes—and is perhaps the true resolution of the show’s seasons-long veneration of heedless Manhattan fabulosity. —*Richard Lawson*



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“Middle Ground,” *The Wire*



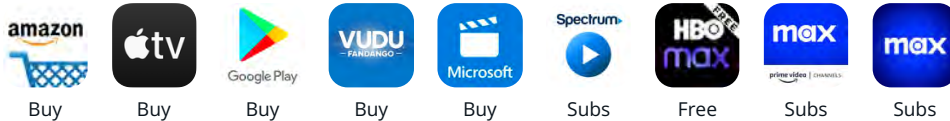
FROM CINEMATIC / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Airdate: December 12, 2004

Written by George Pelecanos

The Wire taught viewers very early that no characters were safe. But the death of **Idris Elba**'s Stringer Bell was a stunner, not only for its operatic framing—killed in the building he was restoring to try to build a legitimate fortune, betrayed by his brother in arms (**Wood Harris**'s Avon Barksdale)—but because of the three seasons of plotting, murder, conspiracy, and mayhem that led there. The glory of *The Wire* is in its broad sweep, how a season's worth of storytelling can make flawed heroes of every single character, and wrenching catharsis out of tiny gestures. This episode features many of those payoffs, from the opening scene that

unites the menacing, charismatic Brother Mouzone (**Michael Potts**) and Omar (Michael K. Williams) to the opportunistic Carcetti (**Aidan Gillen**, years before *Littlefinger*) getting a tour of the open drug market Hamsterdam from the optimistic cop Bunny Colvin (**Robert Wisdom**). Stringer's death made way for the birth of movie star Idris Elba, but also the ambitious, heart-wrenching storytelling that would define the next two decades of television. —*K.R.*



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“Everyone’s Waiting,” *Six Feet Under*

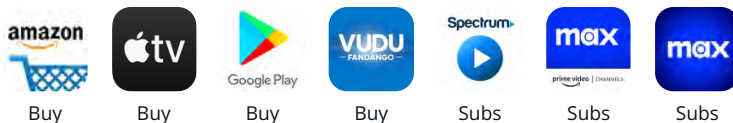


FROM PHOTO 12 / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

Airdate: August 21, 2005

Written by Alan Ball

There's closure, and then there's the closure of "Everyone's Waiting." Over its five seasons on HBO, *Six Feet Under* began each episode with a cold open of a death—glimpses that ran a few minutes long and ranged from morbidly funny to genuinely heartbreaking—before launching back into the saga of the Fishers, who operate a funeral home in Southern California. The epic family portrait meditated on matters of life and death as its characters fell in love and broke up, got married and had children, weathered tragedies and celebrated milestones while grief permeated their everyday existence. How perfect, then, that creator **Alan Ball** chose to end the drama with a grand montage of deaths, marking the exact moments that each principal character in the series would leave the world behind. It's the kind of full-circle achievement even the best TV finales struggle to deliver, and one that honored the series' humane, richly emotional core. Saying goodbye to each of the Fishers as **Sia**'s "Breathe Me" played in the background made for a tearjerker done wrenchingly right. —*David Canfield*



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“The Injury,” *The Office*



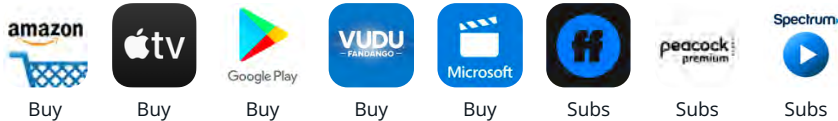
COURTESY OF EVERETT COLLECTION.

Airdate: January 12, 2006

Written by Mindy Kaling

The episode begins with **Steve Carell**'s blustery Michael Scott calling into the workplace he manages, pleading for help. He has been hurt! What happened? He doesn't want to say—then finally admits he accidentally stepped on a George Foreman grill while trying to cook bacon in bed. As wounds go, it's pretty light; much of the comedy derives from Michael's absurd overreaction to his mild pain. The real "injury" of the title happens when **Rainn Wilson**'s Dwight Schrute races to Michael's home and ends up crashing his car into the office park's gate. After that, something is off about him—and not in the way something's always been off

with Dwight. Post-crash, he seems normal, funny, even charming. But he's also dizzy and losing touch with reality. When his officemates finally take him to the hospital, receptionist Pam (**Jenna Fischer**) has a touching moment when she says a surprisingly tender goodbye to the concussed Dwight, a much more pleasant person to be around. When the doctors fix Dwight, the brusque old version of him will return. That's not only hilarious, but kind of heartbreaking too. —A.B.



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“It’s the End of the World,” *Grey’s Anatomy*



VIVIAN ZINK

Airdate: February 5, 2006

Written by Shonda Rhimes

So many terrible things happened to Meredith Grey (**Ellen Pompeo**) during her 19-season run on *Grey's Anatomy*. She survived plane crashes, sinking ferries, a musical episode, and even the death of her husband, Derek Shepherd, a.k.a. McDreamy (**Patrick Dempsey**). But there's one incident that takes the cake as the most intense and, frankly, absurd thing that ever happened to Meredith Grey: the bomb. The first part of a two-part episode, "It's the End of the World" finds Meredith holding a bazooka that has been lodged into a patient and, crucially, has yet to explode. Written by series creator **Shonda Rhimes**, "It's the End of the World" was *Grey's* at its highest stakes. It perfectly captured the show's irresistible melodrama, particularly when it initially aired right after the Super Bowl. It felt like the whole nation was watching as Meredith literally held a ticking time bomb in her hand. The episode also features emotionally wrenching turns from **Christina Ricci** as Hannah, the frightened paramedic who initially holds the bomb, and **Kyle Chandler** as the bomb squad captain, Dylan Young. "It's the End of the World" kicked off one of the most thrilling and devastating story arcs in network television, in a way that only Rhimes could pull off. —*Chris Murphy*



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“The Constant,” *Lost*



FROM ENTERTAINMENT PICTURES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Airdate: February 28, 2008

Written by Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse

Picture this: You’re puttering around your tony London townhouse when there’s a knock at the door. It’s your ex-boyfriend—the same guy who abruptly ended your two-year relationship, then up and joined the Scottish army—saying that he needs your new phone number so he can call you...eight years from now. What do you do? Well, if you’re Penelope Widmore (**Sonya Walger**), you rattle off the digits and send him packing. Then you wait. And wait. And because you happen to be a

character on *Lost*, the craziest part of this story is that your ex—Desmond Hume (**Henry Ian Cusick**)—was telling the truth. Penny, you see, is Desmond’s constant: the one familiar presence capable of saving him when mysterious island shenanigans cause his consciousness to get unstuck in time. Their tearful 2004 phone call, underscored by **Michael Giacchino**’s soaring strings, is *Lost*’s emotional high point, capping off an elegantly twisty hour that explains the show’s version of time travel without getting lost (ahem) in the weeds. Only a four-toed statue could watch it without welling up. —*H.B.*



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“The Suitcase,” *Mad Men*



FROM AMC/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION.

Airdate: September 5, 2010

Written by Matthew Weiner

Fittingly, the episode that best captures *Mad Men* came at the halfway point of its seven-season run. “The Suitcase,” in which Don (**Jon Hamm**) and Peggy (**Elisabeth Moss**) pull an all-nighter at the office to work on a Samsonite pitch, zooms in on the series’ central relationship to reveal new depths to its otherwise cryptic main characters. Hamm is pitch perfect as a slowly unraveling Don, who has split from Betty (**January Jones**), is drinking heavily, and avoiding confronting the news that Anna Draper (**Melinda Page Hamilton**), one of the only people who knew him as Dick Whitman, has died. His chemistry with Moss sparkles, particularly in the climatic scene when Peggy, missing her own birthday dinner and unhappy that Don won a prestigious Clio award for her idea, yells that he never thanks her for all her hard work. Don’s reply—“That’s what the money is for!”—might just be the most iconic line from the tour de force that is this show, even finding its way onto Hamm’s **picket sign** during the SAG-AFTRA strike. But more than its meme-ability, “The Suitcase” still resonates today because of its rather radical depiction—through a look, an “I’m sorry,” a touch of a hand—of the relationship between Don and Peggy. They’re not lovers. They’re not really even friends. They’re something deeper and richer—people who are bonded over their shared passion for their work and who, because of it, understand each other better than anyone else. —*Natalie Jarvey*



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“Double-Edged Sword,” *30 Rock*



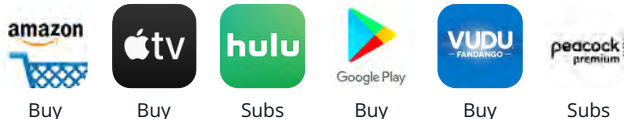
FROM NBCUNIVERSAL, INC./COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION.

Airdate: February 10, 2011

Written by Kay Cannon and Tom Ceraulo

Recaps of this episode back in the day were not especially effusive—evidence, as if

it's still needed, that art is not always recognized in its own time. “Double-Edged Sword” has three threads. Two of them are full-blown thrillers, in an absurdist *30 Rock* way: Liz (**Tina Fey**) leads an on-board revolution against her pilot boyfriend, Carol (**Matt Damon**), while Jack (**Alec Baldwin**) and Avery (**Elizabeth Banks**) race through a snowstorm to prevent their daughter from being born—picture Jack biting his hand at the hellishness of this possibility—Canadian. The third plot, in which Tracy (**Tracy Morgan**) discovers that respectability sucks and goes into hiding, is less propulsive, but still a feat considering that it was ginned up because the actor had had a **kidney transplant** and needed time off. The episode plays with so many action-movie tropes that the engine could have crapped out halfway over the shark it was jumping. Instead, it's hilarious, mixing some of *30 Rock*'s most sublime snideness with warmth and positivity. Damon's guest arc, along with his participation in **Sarah Silverman**'s song “I'm Fucking Matt Damon,” is arguably the height of his brilliant sub-career of silliness. And when Carol pulls a gun on Liz and threatens to shoot her in the middle of the cabin? And when Liz, in turn, wrenches a senior citizen out of his seat to use him as a human shield, and shouts back, “You'll have to go through *this* old bastard first”? *That* is a breakup. —*Jeff Giles*



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“Blackwater,” Game of Thrones

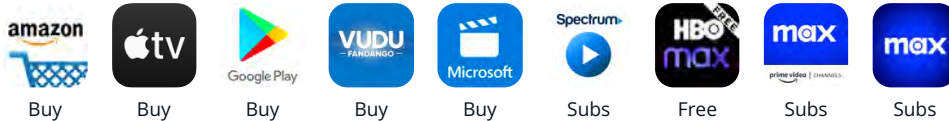


Airdate: May 27, 2012

Written by George R. R. Martin

The maximalism that propelled *Game of Thrones* into the pop-culture stratosphere is absent from its very best episode, an hour that's tightly focused on the hours before, during, and after the titular battle. There are no White Walkers here, or dragons, or voyages across the Narrow Sea. There aren't clear heroes or villains, either—a hallmark of Martin's universe that got unfortunately lost as the series progressed. (There is **sexposition**, but only a little bit.) As stern Stannis Baratheon (**Stephen Dillane**) launches his siege on King's Landing, Martin balances eye-popping action with finely observed, character-driven moments: Bronn (**Jerome Flynn**) and The Hound's (**Rory McCann**) brothel standoff; Sansa (**Sophie Turner**) saying she'll pray for the safe return of Tyrion (**Peter Dinklage**), "just as

I pray for the king’s”; Joffrey’s (**Jack Gleeson**) bluster fading into cowardice as the reality of war sets in; **Lena Headey**’s Cersei getting increasingly sloshed as she alternately needles Sansa and tries to teach her the ways of the world. All that, *plus* Tyrion chopping some guy’s leg off with an ax? It makes you yearn for an alternate universe where Martin had written every single *Game of Thrones* script. Of course, in that world, we’re still waiting to see how the story ends. —*H.B.*



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“Ozymandias,” *Breaking Bad*



Airdate: September 15, 2013

Written by Moira Walley-Beckett

The third-to-last episode of *Breaking Bad* is widely regarded as its finest, and perhaps its most tragic. Directed by *Knives Out* filmmaker **Rian Johnson**, then best known for *Brick* and *Looper*, this is ostensibly the end of Walter White's (**Bryan Cranston**) run as a drug kingpin. The two final episodes serve as a kind of epilogue, but "Ozymandias" is the one where it all falls apart. His crimes and disgrace are fully exposed to those he loves; he has lost his hidden fortune in the desert to a gang of white supremacists; and his partner, Jesse (**Aaron Paul**), has turned against him. The great genius is at his most powerless, failing even to plead for the life of his DEA agent brother-in-law, Hank (**Dean Norris**). With the supremacist gang holding Hank at gunpoint in the desert, Walt offers them his tens of millions of dollars to spare the man. Hank can only shake his head. They are going to take the money, yes, but they are going to kill him anyway. It's the perfect summation of the entire series: Walt forever deludes himself about the consequences of his actions. The title comes from the Percy Bysshe Shelley poem about the monuments to a once-great ruler, now collapsed into ruins. "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! Nothing beside remains..." —A.B.



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"Lens," *The Leftovers*



FROM COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

Airdate: November 8, 2015

Written by Damon Lindelof and Tom Perrotta

Perhaps the crown jewel of this beguilingly strange and affecting show's masterful second season is a tête-à-tête between Nora (**Carrie Coon**) and Erika (**Regina King**) as they needle at each other's wounds. They are, befitting of a big show with big ideas, essentially exploring what it is to grieve, to blame and self-flagellate and bitterly wonder about unknowable things. It's a formidable piece of acting, writing, and direction, all probing close-ups and tearful intensity. The rest of the episode is typically sharp too, but it's this penultimate scene that helped enshrine *The Leftovers* as one of the new century's great shows, a mysterious trip into existential

displacement that has only grown more resonant as we've tumbled further into the chaos and terrible majesty of our times. —*R.L.*



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“Fish Out of Water,” *BoJack Horseman*



COURTESY OF NETFLIX.

Airdate: July 22, 2016

Written by Elijah Aron and Jordan Young

It's kind of ironic that one of the best episodes of a show known for its tongue-twisting jokes is basically wordless. But that's the case with "Fish Out of Water," the fourth episode of *BoJack*'s third season. It follows jaded actor BoJack (Will Arnett) as he travels to Pacific Ocean City for the world's largest underwater film festival at the behest of his publicist, Ana Spanakopita (**Angela Bassett**). Being a horse, BoJack must wear a helmet filled with air the entire time he's underwater, rendering him unable to communicate with the denizens of the sea. Submerged and speechless, BoJack goes on a silent underwater odyssey that ends with him delivering a lost baby seahorse to his father. Like many *BoJack Horseman* episodes, "Fish Out of Water" is equal parts hilarious and filled with pathos. But what sets this episode apart is the bold choice to tell the story completely visually—a break in form for the series that plumbed the depths of what animation can do, rendering a vivid and specific underwater world. Over the course of its six seasons, *BoJack Horseman* became a standout series for its willingness to take risks with its form and storytelling. "Fish Out of Water" laid the groundwork for more daring moments to come, proving that a picture really is worth 1,000 words. —*C.M.*



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"Pilot," *This Is Us*



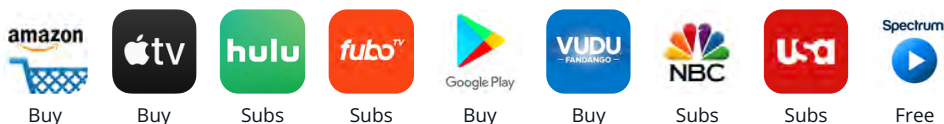
FROM NBC/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION.

Airdate: September 20, 2016

Written by Dan Fogelman

By devising a high-concept premise for *This Is Us*, creator **Dan Fogelman** ensured that the pilot's success would make or break the show. It needed to hop across multiple timelines to introduce the Pearson family, reaching for the audience's heart and prompting us to willingly suspend our disbelief about the convoluted beginnings of the Big Three—the characters played by **Sterling K. Brown**, **Chrissy Metz**, and **Justin Hartley**, whose connection won't be clear until the episode's final moments. Though the showrunner's love for twists painful enough to require an ankle wrap would elicit disdain upon the release of his 2018 film *Life*

Itself, the first episode of *This Is Us* somehow sticks the landing. It blends network drama’s requisite soft-folk soundtrack, gauzy cinematography, and pointed emotionality with a bit of slapstick—the scene where Kevin (Hartley) angrily walks off the set of his sitcom after some abuse from Alan Thicke is a particular standout—launching a vanishingly rare monoculture phenomenon. —*Erin Vanderhoof*



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“San Junipero,” *Black Mirror*



COURTESY OF NETFLIX.

Airdate: October 21, 2016

Written by Charlie Brooker

A rare uplifting chapter of *Black Mirror*, directed by **Owen Harris**, who also made the provocative *Striking Vipers* episode. What begins as an apparent period piece, with friends at a 1980s-era nightclub partying the night away, is actually revealed to be a futuristic virtual reality world populated mainly by elderly people who grew up in that time, logging in to relive their glory days. This fictional beachside retro-resort is also the home of actual ghosts—people who have died and uploaded digital copies of their consciousness to the realm of San Junipero. A love story unfolds between Yorkie (**Mackenzie Davis**) and Kelly (**Gugu Mbatha-Raw**), both still living in the real world. In reality, the aged Yorkie is paralyzed, and has been for most of her life. But in San Junipero she is young, vivacious and can run, dance, and play. As the love between them grows, Yorkie longs for the day she and Kelly can both live eternal lives online. But Kelly had a husband and daughter who both died before the technology to live forever existed, and she's not sure she wants to go on indefinitely without them. Can a life only have a happy ending if there is no ending at all? —*A.B.*



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“Teddy Perkins,” *Atlanta*



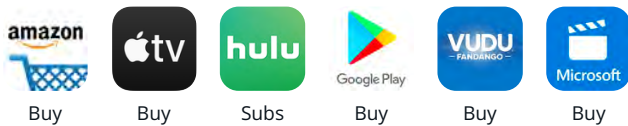
FROM FX NETWORKS.

Airdate: April 5, 2018

Written by Donald Glover, Jamal Olori, and Ibra Ake

His name is Theodore Perkins. Or maybe it's Benny Perkins. Either way, it's actually **Donald Glover**, buried beneath layers of prosthetics and pancake makeup to play perhaps the most unsettling character TV has dreamed up in recent memory. Teddy shuffles around a moldering mansion on the outskirts of Atlanta, gobbling up ostrich eggs as he muses about the sorry state of contemporary culture. ("Rap...I found it never quite grew out of its adolescence. Don't you find it insufficient as an art form?") With his Winnie-the-Pooh-esque rasp, affected

intonation, bleached skin, and surgery-altered features—he looks like the unholy union of **Jigsaw** and **Matt Damon in *Behind the Candelabra***—Teddy is bizarre enough to put off even **LaKeith Stanfield**'s unflappable Darius. But there's more to “Teddy Perkins” than Glover's transformation. It's an episode about stage parents, regret, the psychic dissonance of fame, the corrosive effects of internalized racism. It's ambitious and thinky and unflashily cinematic, thanks to the thoughtful direction of **Hiro Murai**. When it feels like telling jokes, it's also wildly funny. It's *Atlanta*, in short, boiled down to its purest form. —*H.B.*



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“START,” *The Americans*



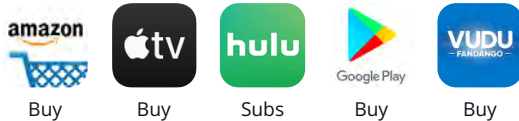
FROM FX NETWORKS.

Airdate: May 30, 2018

Written by Joel Fields and Joe Weisberg

After six seasons of hair-raising close calls, the walls have officially closed in on Philip and Elizabeth Jennings (**Matthew Rhys** and **Keri Russell**). These Russian spies posing as the American suburban dream made for compelling TV—thanks not just to their affinity for kooky disguises and steamy seductions, but also the ways their complex dynamic allowed executive producers **Joe Weisberg** and **Joel Fields** to explore the concept of marriage more broadly. Appropriately, the show's finale didn't rely on cheap plot twists or reveals as its antiheroes plotted their return home. It didn't need to, with character drama this explosive: The searing final

confrontation between Philip and his neighbor-slash-FBI agent Stan Beeman (**Noah Emmerich**); that shocking climactic shot of Paige (**Holly Taylor**) leaving her parents behind, so exactly cued by U2's "With or Without You"; those final moments spent alone with Philip and Elizabeth, back in their native land. It's all the promise and possibility of serialized television, perfectly realized in one very satisfying finale. —*D.C.*



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“Season 2, Episode 1,” *Fleabag*



COURTESY OF AMAZON PRIME VIDEO.

Airdate: May 17, 2019

Written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge

Three hundred seventy-one days, 19 hours, and 26 minutes after the events of the first season, the once-philandering Fleabag is labeling herself a new woman. Her café is thriving, she's engaging in self-care, and she's even sworn off casual sex. Nevermind that her transformation montage is sandwiched between shots of her dabbing blood from her nose and declaring that "this is a love story." Over the next 25 minutes, Fleabag attempts to prove her claim during a chaotic family dinner to celebrate the upcoming nuptials between her father and her godmother. Wearing a jumpsuit that may now be hanging in my closet, Fleabag confronts her estranged sister, Claire, and brother-in-law, Martin, while interrogating the attractive Catholic priest (**Andrew Scott**) who will marry her relatives. The resulting episode, which harkens back to *Fleabag's* theatrical roots, contains a juicy morsel in every beat of silence, each sideways glance toward the camera. The best part? This is just the season's beginning. Fleabag may be better, but she'll never be boring. —*Savannah Walsh*



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“Tern Haven,” *Succession*



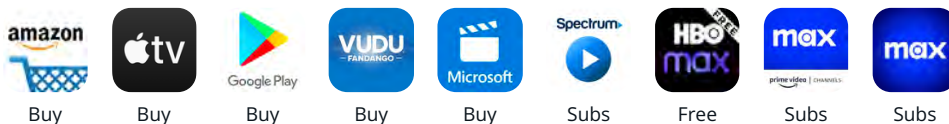
COURTESY OF HBO.

Airdate: September 8, 2019

Written by Will Tracy

The best *Succession* episodes force the entire Roy clan to spend time together in a remote location—and the best ever *Succession* episode is when that happens to *two* families. The Roys decamp to the Long Island estate of the liberal, blue-blooded Pierces in an effort to seem classy enough for Waystar to acquire the Pierce family business; because they are the Roys, they are not capable of maintaining the happy family ruse. Over the course of an excruciating, hilarious dinner, the Pierces turn

the screws on every fraught Roy family dynamic, leading to moments both absurd (**Matthew Macfadyen**'s Tom praising "the king of edible leaves, his majesty the spinach") and devastating (**Sarah Snook**'s Shiv tanking her prospects to become CEO by claiming, correctly, that Logan (**Brian Cox**) has chosen her). It's painful and funny, *and* has the Roman (**Kieran Culkin**) and Gerri (**J. Smith-Cameron**) scene that is gross and, in its own way, lovely. The Roys were never better or worse than when put under the lens of the Pierces. —*K.R.*



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“Lowkey Happy,” *Insecure*

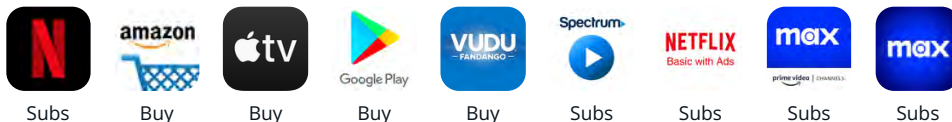


COURTESY OF HBO.

Airdate: May 31, 2020

Written by Natasha Rothwell, Issa Rae, and Larry Wilmore

The death of the romantic comedy has been greatly exaggerated, at least by those who somehow don't know that the genre is still thriving on television. You hardly need to be versed in the long, twisting saga of Issa (**Issa Rae**) and Lawrence (**Jay Ellis**) to be swept up in this exceedingly romantic two-hander, which finds the exes reuniting for a drink that turns into dinner that turns into a visit to an outdoor gallery that turns, finally, into a trip to Lawrence's swanky new apartment. If you *have* seen the rest of the show, though, you'll appreciate how "Lowkey Happy" has both closure and a tantalizing sense of possibility. Lawrence and Issa don't stumble back into intimacy; they find it gradually, after dissecting what went wrong during their (terrible, mutually devastating) first go-round and realizing how they've both changed since *Insecure* began. In a word, it's about growth. —*H.B.*



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I May Destroy You, “Ego Death”



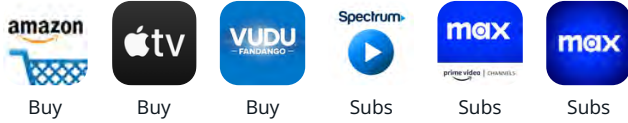
COURTESY OF HBO.

Airdate: August 24, 2020

Written by Michaela Coel

“You’ve got to love something to let it go,” series creator and star **Michaela Coel** told *Vanity Fair* about the impetus behind *I May Destroy You*’s propulsive finale. But how does one find acceptance after a trauma like the sexual assault Coel’s Arabella has endured? By finding “radical empathy,” as Coel **has put it**. In the episode, Arabella runs into her rapist, David (**Lewis Reeves**), at the bar where they first met, the aptly named Ego Death. Arabella then cycles through scenarios for how she’d confront her sexual assailant if she had the chance to revisit their encounter, honoring several of the what-ifs that linger in the body of a survivor.

Doing so distorts, disturbs, and dispenses Arabella’s beliefs about what closure looks like. But this event, she finds, will not define her. Yes, this episode has the power to destroy—but it also dares to imagine what comes next. —S.W.



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“This Is Where the Plot Thickens,” *Reservation Dogs*



COURTESY OF FX NETWORKS.

Airdate: September 14, 2022

Written by Sterlin Harjo and Blackhorse Lowe

FX seems to have cornered the market on a certain brand of auteur-driven, surrealist half hour comedies, from *Atlanta* to *Dave*. Here's the episode that places *Reservation Dogs* clearly in that class, while affirming it as a masterful series in its own right. "This Is Where the Plot Thickens" spotlights **Zahn McClarnon's** Lighthorseman Big, following the Oklahoma cop as he gets high on psychedelics and trips out through some unhinged scenarios—witnessing, among other things, a white supremacist sexual ritual that is much better seen than described. The veteran actor McClarnon, a **groundbreaking force** for Indigenous voices in Hollywood, pulls off a miraculously funny performance that feels decades in the making, while the visual storytelling (fashioned by the great Navajo director **Blackhorse Lowe**, who also cowrote the episode) manages to feel deeply political, strikingly inventive, and just plain beautiful all at once. This is what TV at its freest and most specific looks like. —D.C.



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