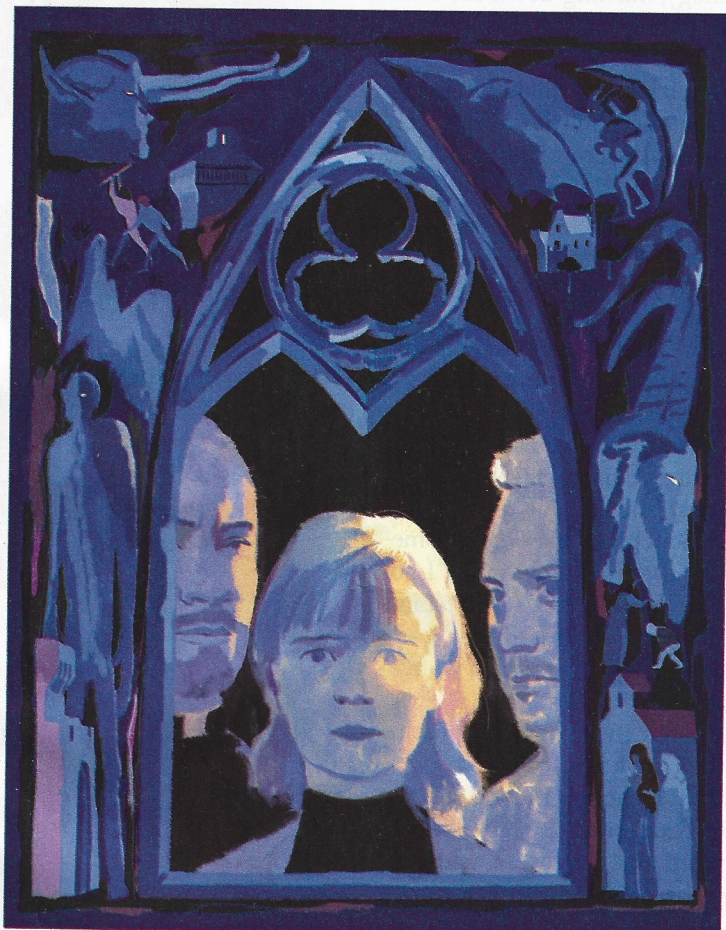


ON TELEVISION

DEVIL MAY CARE

"Evil," on Paramount+.

BY INKOO KANG



The version of Catholicism favored by David Acosta, one of the two protagonists of the delightfully unhinged religious procedural *"Evil,"* likely doesn't exist. David (Mike Colter), a Black man who starts the series as a priest-in-training, is often let down by the Church's ossified white leadership. But his more progressive faith is accompanied by rather medieval forms of devotion. He battles against demons, participates in exorcisms, and chases the high of a formative vision of God, even if he can now only achieve moments of transcendence with the assistance of psychedelics. The temporal dislocation of his calling creates a sense

of cognitive dissonance, but, in David's view, dedicating himself to the Church, for all its imperfections, may be his best chance at insuring that the world doesn't go to Hell in a handbasket.

Popular culture seldom explores spirituality with much depth. *"Evil,"* which wraps up its four-season run this month, on Paramount+, always stood out for its uncommonly open approach to faith. But the show feels just as distinctive for its particular tonal mixture—at once spooky, horny, satirical, larkish, and eschatological. The effect is that of a philosopher in an exorcist's trenchcoat. The series, which has recently found a larger audience on Netflix, follows

David and his two nonreligious partners—Kristen Bouchard (Katja Herbers), a criminal psychologist with experience evaluating the sanity of her interlocutors, and Ben Shakir (Aasif Mandvi), a self-taught generalist who moonlights as a debunker of the supernatural—as they look into potential cases of demonic possession around Queens, New York. It's a brainchild of Robert and Michelle King, the married couple behind *"The Good Wife"* and *"The Good Fight,"* and it shares those shows' gimlet-eyed tech pessimism and interest in lives lived online. *"Evil's"* primary villain, Leland Townsend (Michael Emerson), encourages a dweeb who's experienced romantic rejection to embrace incelism, and charges a subordinate with running a troll farm whose mission is to keep people doomscrolling. Implanting despair requires a deft touch, Leland explains. "Kill people, take their children—you run the risk of them turning to God," he says. Far better "to keep them nervous, unbound, focussing on all the bad things in the world."

It's to *"Evil's"* advantage that its plots veer between the serious and the seriously goofy. An episode about a nine-year-old boy whose parents suspect he's trying to kill his baby sister is an early triumph; a later installment about the urban legend of an elevator that sends teen-agers to Hell is just as satisfying. The series regularly interrogates how people are incentivized to sin, especially when it gets them attention. But it also considers how we might expand our notion of spiritual evil to include, say, a priest's earthly grief cutting him off from God, or the perpetuation of racism in its manifold forms. In one harrowing episode, David lands at a hospital and at the mercy of a nurse prone to drugging Black patients. During another case, when a white cop fatally shoots a Black woman, all three assessors scoff at the officer's suggestion that a demon made him see a gun in her hand.

The Kings are perhaps the only TV creators working today who are able to make their procedurals feel authorial, and fans of their previous series will recognize their thematic preoccupations and deep bench of character actors, many of whom are from the theatre world.

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(Christine Lahti, who plays Kristen's sexy, ethically flexible mother, Sheryl, can always be relied on to steal scenes.) But "Evil" is more than an intellectual exercise for its showrunners; its pursuit of questions of faith, in particular, seems decidedly personal. Ben, who grew up in a Muslim family but adheres to a strictly scientific world view, finds himself increasingly unmoored by the loss of tradition. An empiricist existence can't provide answers to life's greater mysteries—or closure with the deceased. Kristen, a lapsed Catholic, bristles at the ingrained bias against women within the Church and points out more than once that their caseload of persons acting unacceptably strange skews heavily female. She's baffled that someone like David's mentor, Sister Andrea (Andrea Martin), would spend her days cleaning up after priests—men who are her spiritual inferiors—or choose to serve an institution so hostile to the idea of gender equality.

Inevitably, the cases take a toll on each character's sense of self. Ben grows depressed as he encounters phenomena he can't explain away. David's patience with the Church frays as it becomes clear that its reluctance to combat evil on a larger scale is a matter of will rather than resources. And Kristen reacts as many of us likely would after being confronted with atrocities on a routine basis: she's consumed by righteous anger. A protective mother with four lively girls and a frequently absent husband (Patrick Brammall), she occasionally uses the language of female empowerment to justify her own acts of violence. It's not always necessary to sign a pact with the Devil, like Leland did, to discover how powerful you can become by indulging in your worst impulses.

The "Evil" universe gradually broadens to encompass shadowy figures from the Vatican and an end-times prophetess who becomes imprisoned in a Chinese work camp. But the show's complex mythology is most compelling when it's grafted onto the domestic realm, roping in Kristen's cacophonous daughters, whose shared bedroom is a frequent site of girlish chaos. In a larger arc, Kristen discovers that the I.V.F. clinic she used for one of her pregnancies may be a locus for demonic

spawning. It's a wacky, contemporary spin on "Rosemary's Baby"—why inseminate one woman with the Devil's seed when you could inseminate hundreds?—but it's also an implicit commentary on the ever-present threats to women's reproductive autonomy, from the satanists running the clinic to God Almighty himself.

For all its existential queries and dark truths about human nature, "Evil" is also *fun*. It revels in supernatural absurdism, cheerfully mashing up the occult and the mundane: at one point, a succubus visits Ben and has to remove her dental retainer before engaging in... succubus activities. (The sex scenes are in line with a series about moral abandon—Leland's bed literally catches fire when he seduces Sheryl—but the show gets a lot more emotional traction from the long-simmering, vow-threatening heat between David and Kristen.) There are clever reimaginings of archetypes and genre conventions, as well as a willingness to laugh at malefactors. During the investigation into the I.V.F. clinic, Kristen learns that one of her own eggs has been stolen and inseminated by Leland to create what he believes will be the Antichrist. It's a gross violation—but she simply envisions her nemesis rousing himself out of bed at four in the morning to change the Antichrist's diapers, then cracks up. "Good job," she tells him. "You just fucked yourself."

The new season wasn't intended to be the last, and admittedly feels rushed as a result; major characters undergo life-altering events with little breathing room for viewers to take it all in. But the larger reason to mourn the end of "Evil" is that it portends the demise of other small, quirky, introspective shows like it, as the TV industry contracts and executives become even more risk-averse. After producing some truly bonkers series, "Evil" and "The Good Fight" among them, the Kings have moved on to "Elsbeth," an appealing but comparatively generic "Good Wife" spinoff, on CBS. The duo seem to tip their hats to the tyranny of cost-saving in one of "Evil"'s final episodes, in which the archdiocese decides to sell off the church that David and Andrea have called home. Nothing's so holy that it can't be sacrificed at the altar of Mammon. ♦

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