TV WRITING ON DEMAND

"TV Writing On Demand: Creating Great Content in the Digital Era" takes a deep-dive into writing for today's audiences, against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving TV ecosystem. Amazon, Hulu and Netflix were just the beginning. The proliferation of everything digital has led to an ever-expanding array of the most authentic and engaging programming that we've ever seen. No longer is there a distinction between broadcast, cable and streaming. It's all content. Regardless of what new platforms and channels will emerge in the coming years, for creators and writers, the future of entertainment has never looked brighter.

This book goes beyond an analysis of what makes great programming work. It is a master course in the creation of entertainment that does more than meet the standards of modern audiences—it challenges their expectations. Among other essentials, readers will discover how to:

- **Satisfy the binge viewer**: Analysis of the new genres, trends and how to make smart initial decisions for strong, sustainable story. Plus, learn from the rebel who reinvented an entire format.
- **Develop iconic characters**: How to foster audience alignment and allegiance, from empathy and dialogue to throwing characters off their game, all through the lens of authenticity and relatability.
- **Create a lasting, meaningful career in the evolving TV marketplace**: How to overcome trips, traps and tropes; the pros and cons of I.P.; how to use the Show Bible as a sales tool and make the most of the plethora of new opportunities out there.

Neil Landau is a bestselling author, producer and award-winning screenwriter who runs the Writing for Television program in the UCLA Department of Film, Television and Digital Media (his alma mater). Credits include *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead, Melrose Place, The Magnificent Seven, Doogie Howser, M.D., The Secret World of Alex Mack, Twice in a Lifetime, MTV's Undressed* and one-hour drama pilots for CBS, ABC, Freeform, Warner Bros., Disney, Lifetime and Fremantle. Neil has served as Executive Script Consultant for Sony Pictures Television and Columbia Pictures. Among his animated films are *Tad: The Lost Explorer*, which earned him a Spanish Academy "Goya" Award for Best Adapted Screenplay, *Tad Jones and the Secret of King Midas* (he is working on the sequel, *Tad 3*), *Capture the Flag* for Paramount and *Sheep & Wolves* for Wizart Animation. Neil penned the bestselling *101 Things I Learned in Film School, The Screenwriter's Roadmap, The TV Showrunner's Roadmap* and *TV Outside the Box: Trailblazing in the Digital Television Revolution*, which was the first book sponsored by the National Association of Television Program Executives (NATPE).
“This is like a masterclass in the art of creating television—both now and for whatever ‘television’ may become. Visionary, insightful and timely.”

—Issa Rae, Golden Globe-nominated Writer/Producer/Actress: Insecure, The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl

“I’m a longtime fan of Landau! His decades of experience and genuine love of the form shine in TV Writing On Demand. The definitive guide to writing for modern audiences.”

—Damon Lindelof, Emmy Award-winning Writer/Producer: Lost, The Leftovers

“With close to 500 scripted series, the current television landscape takes some navigating. Fortunately, Landau does that with precision, passion and purpose. This book is invaluable.”

—Frank Spotnitz, Emmy-nominated Writer/Executive Producer: The Man in the High Castle, Medici: Masters of Florence

“The television business has changed radically over the last few years and Landau has written an absolutely essential guide to understanding it. Whether you’re trying to get a foot in the door, or you have a foot in and are trying to keep it there, this book is a must read.”

—Sarah Watson, Creator: The Bold Type; Writer/Executive Producer: Parenthood

“Landau’s previous book introduced us to the revolutionaries of the new age of creativity. TV Writing On Demand holds the secrets to becoming one. For writers, students and fans of story-driven entertainment, this book is indispensable.”

—Dr. Nathaniel Kohn, Director, Roger Ebert’s Film Festival; Associate Director, George Foster Peabody Awards

“Neil truly understands how television is changing and what today’s creators need in order to transition to tomorrow’s landscape. You’re in good hands with this book!”

—Amy Aniobi, Co-Executive Producer, Insecure; Host of “Smart Manners” on Amy Poehler’s Smart Girls’ Network
For my mother, Evelyn
CONTENTS

Introduction xiii
Peak TV vs. Pique TV: The Streaming Smorgasbord xiv
How to Navigate TV Writing On Demand xvii

PART I SATISFYING THE BINGE VIEWER:
NEW GENRES, FORMATS AND TRENDS 1

1 Blurring the Lines: Redefining Genre and Tone in the Dramedy 3

How Did We Get Here? 4
Dramedies and Life on the Cringe 7
Female-Driven Dramedies 8
You’re the Worst: The Anti-Romantic Dramedy 10
Baskets and Lives in Disarray 13
Satire as the Weapon of Reason in Dear White People 16
I Love Dick: Exploring the “Female Gaze” 19
Master of the Observational: Master of None 21
Better Things: Philosophical Vignettes 25
Love and Death in Atlanta 25

**Bonus Content:** Further analysis on dramedies, including the rise of the genre, Catastrophe and Casual 28

2 The Slow-Burn, Season-Long Procedural: From Murder One and Twin Peaks to The Night Of, Fargo, Search Party and More 33

The Season-Long Mystery 36
The Mystery Underlying the Crime: The Night Of 40
The Good Fight: The Procedural Within a Procedural 44
Search Party: Something From Nothing 46
Fargo Is a State of Mind 47
Truth and Consequences 50

**Bonus Content:** American Crime, True Detective Season 1, Riverdale, Medici: Masters of Florence, Happy Valley, The Fall, Bloodline, The Expanse 51
3 Trust Me: The Long Con On-Demand—From *The Riches* to *Sneaky Pete, Patriot, The Americans* and More 55

The Masquerade: *Sneaky Pete* 60
The Period Political Masquerade: *The Americans* 61
Entrapment and Reversals: *The Night Manager* 62
All Is Not What It Seems: *The Good Place* 63
The Farce Thriller: *Patriot* 64
*Ozark*: Who Can a Con Artist Trust? 67

**Bonus Content:** *The Path, Younger, Mr. Robot* 69

4 Dystopias, Multiverses and Magic Realism 71

The Constructive/Destructive Power of Ideas: *The Handmaid’s Tale* 74
Our World with a Cautionary Twist 77
Crafting the Supernatural/Dystopian Pilot 79
Microcosmic Dystopias and the Monster Mash: *American Gods* 80
Portals and Multiverses: Childlike Wonder in *Stranger Things* 82
Surprise and Shifting POV: *The OA* 84
Adjoining Realms in *The Man in the High Castle* 86

**Bonus Content:** *Atlanta, Man Seeking Woman, The Good Place, Game of Thrones, The Young Pope,* plus “The Neurotic Superhero” 88

5 Story Tentacles: Making Surprising Choices That Yield More Story 91

Inevitable Yet Unpredictable 91
Keep Your Frenemies Close: *Orange Is the New Black* 93
You Can’t Always Get What You Want . . . *Mozart in the Jungle* 94
A Window Onto a New World: *Switched at Birth* 96
Taboo Relationships in Comedies 99
Points of View: *The Affair* 100
Ensembles and Backstories 100
When a Flaw Becomes an Asset: *Girls* 101
The Macro/Micro Approach: *The Young Pope* 103
*Game of Thrones*: The Ultimate Story Tentacle Show? 104
The Unreliable Narrator 106

**Bonus Content:** *Breaking Bad, Scandal, Mad Men, Taxi,* plus the *Switched at Birth* pilot teaser 108
6 Spotlight on a Rebel: Ryan Murphy Reinvents the Mini-Series by Embracing His Inner Outsider 111

Why Can’t I Be Audrey Hepburn? 111
Tone is everything in television 112
Reinvigorating a Genre 113
The More Specific You Make Something, The More Universal It Becomes 114
"No" = A Rest Stop on the Road to “Yes” 115
Limitation as an Opportunity and Differentiator 117
The Pop Culture Junkie 118
The Limited Anthology Series 118
Impossible = Possible 120
Marcia, Marcia, Marcia 121

PART II DEVELOPING ICONIC CHARACTERS: RELATABILITY AND AUTHENTICITY 125

7 Character Empathy vs. Sympathy: How and Why We Align With Characters’ Wants and Needs 127

Touching the Void 128
Nobody’s Perfect 129
The Dance 132
Reverting to Type 132
Judgment, Morality and Perception 133
The Insatiable Appetite of the Ego 134
Insecure: Authentic as F**k 135
Big Little Lies, Guilt and Shame 139
Sympathy for the Robot: Westworld 141
Hannah, Clay and the Razor’s Edge: 13 Reasons Why 144
Alignment and Allegiance 147

Bonus Content: Mr. Robot, Getting On, Breaking Bad, Better Call Saul, The Young Pope, Better Things, Animal Kingdom, plus “Empathy and the Female Gaze” 148

8 Choosing Between Two Wrongs: Characters Trapped by Limitation 151

Creating the Dilemma 152
Homeland: The Lasting Effects of Devastating Decisions 153
A “What If?” Exercise 158
Dilemma and Perspectives 158

Politics, Power and Internal Logic: Legion, The Handmaid’s Tale 160

Jessica Jones: How Late is Too Late? 163

Guilt, Maturity and Aspirations: This Is Us 166

The Cleanse and Crossing the Line 168

**Bonus Content:** Bates Motel, Breaking Bad, Queen Sugar, Orange Is the New Black 169

9 The Wild Card Character: Power Dynamics and Motivations 173

The Wild Card With a Twist: Mr. Robot 173

The Wild Card’s Wild Card: Mozart in the Jungle 179

The Roommate Soulmate: Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt 185

The Pushy Roommate/Friend/Business Partner/Mentor: Silicon Valley 186

Disrupting an Institution: The Young Pope 189

The Role of Destabilizing Characters: Better Call Saul, The Crown and Goliath 191

**Bonus Content:** Luther, Big Little Lies, Stranger Things, Bloodline, plus script excerpts from Mr. Robot, The Crown, Goliath 198

10 Writing Smart Dialogue in the Digital Era 201

The Oblique 201

**Bonus Content:** The Profound Power of Silence plus Better Call Saul excerpt 202

Idiosyncratic Voices: Empire, Silicon Valley 202

Get in Late, Get Out Early 205

Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication 206

Point of View and Subtext: The Last Man on Earth, Crazy Ex-Girlfriend 208

Shop Talk: Brooklyn Nine-Nine 211

Naturalistic Dialogue: Profanity in The Wire 213

Backstory: What They Don’t Say 216

Actions—And Triangulation 217

Overlapping Dialogue: Stranger Things 219

Economy With Words 222

E-Communication 222

Listening to Our Characters 223

**Bonus Content:** Bones, Orphan Black, The Americans, Scandal 223
PART III CAREER STRATEGIES IN THE EVOLVING TV MARKETPLACE 225

11 To I.P. or Not to I.P.? That Is the Question: The Value of Intellectual Property in the Scripted TV Ecosystem 227

- Intellectual Property Glossary 229
- Breaking (Through the Noise) and Entering (the Zeitgeist) 237
- The Literary Approach 239
- Adapting Autobiographical Material 239

**Bonus Content:** A deeper dive into putting a new spin on forms of I.P., from comics to musicals 241

12 The Show Bible as an Essential Sales Tool 243

- That Was Then. This Is Now. 244
- The Need for Reassurance: From Closed-Ended, Stand-Alone Procedurals to Open-Ended, Slower-Burn Serials 246
- If There’s a Central Mystery, There Needs to Be a Series Bible 247
- Networks That Circumvent the Pilot Process (Tend to) Commission Series Bibles 249
- The Following Networks Still Make Pilots, But Do They Require Series Bibles? 254
- Half-Hour Sitcoms Rarely, If Ever, Require a Series Bible . . . 259
- Drafting the Series Mini-Bible 261

**Bonus Content:** Examples/templates of one-hour drama and half-hour dramedy series mini-bibles, plus how to create a story area document 262

13 Trips, Traps, Tropes: Avoiding Rookie Mistakes 265

- Become Experts in the Genre 265
  - “Great Pilot, But What’s the Series?” 266
  - “It’s Too Wrapped Up” 267
  - “What’s the Franchise?” 268
  - “Who Are We Rooting For?” 268
  - “There’s No Sense of Place or Time” 269
  - “It’s Confusing” 270
  - “The Premise Is Weak” 270
  - “It Doesn’t Feel Authentic” 271
“The Dialogue/Style/Tone Are Uninspired” 272
“It’s Too Long” 274
“The Plotting is Tepid” 275
“The Stakes Are Not High Enough” 276
“It’s Just Talking Heads” 277
“It’s Too Superficial” 278
“There Are Too Many Characters” 278
“The Good Stuff Appears Too Late” 279

Know the Industry—Yet Be Innovative 279
The Temptation to Rush 281

Bonus Content: “The War Against the Kitchen Sink Pilot,” a/k/a “The Premise Pilot Blues” 282

14 The Creative Entrepreneur: From Kickstarting a Web Series to Hitting the Big Time 285

“Call My Agent” 285
Getting an Agent 286
Agents vs. Managers 287
Advice From the (Staff Writer) Trenches 287

Bonus Content: List of the Top Contests and Fellowships 291
More Opportunities Than Ever—Yet It’s Never Been More Competitive 292
Show Them Your Proof of Concept 293
Think Locally, Act Globally 293
What I Really Want To Do Is Direct (a Web Series) 293

Bonus Content: Advice from Kit Williamson 298
Work Begets Work 298

Acknowledgments 300
About the Author 301
About the Editors 303
Index 305
INTRODUCTION

Since I began researching for this book, two things happened that I couldn’t predict: the rise of Trumpism and the toppling of the Hollywood patriarchy of predators. The ripple effects continue to have statewide and global implications. From Silicon Valley to anti-sexism movements in France, the fallout is impacting all strata of culture. This revolution is being televised, streamed and shared; it’s cultural Black Mirror with real life causes and consequences that range from disturbing and tragic to felonious and monstrous. I’m still struggling to comprehend their gravity.

There is no, as 19th century historian Martin Jay put it, “aesthetic alibi” for bad behavior. The art made by those accused has turned radioactive. As much as we want to separate the man from the art, we cannot. Celebrating their work is what gives these power abusers more power. Formal investigations are being conducted and in most cases, career achievements and lifelong bodies of work are justifiably being erased and irreparably damaged. In other cases, time will tell. While assault is a clear issue of right and wrong, for others the alleged transgressions land in a morally gray area. I’m not going to mention the names involved, as giving them space here prolongs their power. I, and my editors, have made every effort to be sensitive but if there are any names included that post-publication woefully turn out to be transgressors, I ask for your understanding.

The ground is unstable beneath us. Nothing, nowhere and no one are safe. It’s incredible that it’s taken until 2017 for such issues to come to light. Now everything we watch will be viewed through a different prism. Hopefully, the long range implications will lead to improved conditions both in front of and behind the camera. As Ben Travers, TV critic at IndieWire said, “A lot of people are hoping this is more of a turning point, that the work that’s being lost won’t be missed because the work that’s being gained will be better . . . The people who were silenced and thrown out and kept from working by these predators will be able to go forward and thrive.”
Great storytelling on television hasn’t changed all that much in 50+ years. We still need someone to root for and invest in. But the radical shift in the TV ecosystem—from traditional broadcast and cable network brands to digital streaming giants (Netflix, Amazon, Hulu)—has led to an ever-expanding array of the most authentic TV shows we’ve ever seen. The legacy networks have skin in the game, too, with all-access, on-demand options. Those willing to pay the monthly subscription fees can get everything—450+ shows—commercial-free. It’s game on, with fierce competition between all players to produce the boldest and freshest content and win subscribers. What’s more, there’s no longer a distinction between broadcast, cable and streaming. Now it’s all just called content.

As a society, our relationship to time—arguably the most valuable commodity—has changed, significantly impacting viewership. We manage and attempt to maximize our time by adopting more and more efficient technologies, which have enabled us to multitask and squeeze more than 24 hours of work/consumption/play into each day. How? Our gadgets deliver what we want and when we need it: email, texts, calendars and our favorite TV series, available to us 24/7, at our fingertips. We’re shaving off commercials, skipping intros, earning from web ad bucks instead of commuting, all meaning we cram more than a day of 20th-century living into each 21st-century day. As TV continues to evolve, there is no going back, only forward faster. With TV content so accessible, it’s easy to get addicted and hard to pull ourselves away from what’s up next. You don’t even need to move a muscle for the next episode to play automatically; we’re now in a culture where we consume more by doing less. Netflix’s breakout hit, Stranger Things, offered up the best thrill ride in town—and we didn’t even have to leave the house.

Are we in a bloated content bubble that’s inevitably going to burst? I can foresee some attrition, but more choices are always preferable to today’s channel and app surfers—that’s you and me. What is happening is that the TV ecosystem is continuing to, just like the real-world ecosystem, evolve. Disney is to end its theatrical distribution deal with Netflix in 2019, with
Bob Iger announcing that Disney- and ESPN-branded streaming services are to launch that same year, with access to Pixar, Marvel and Star Wars content. More studios may follow suit, retaining exclusive rights for their own, new streaming services. The streaming giants will begin relying more on original content. But of course, they’d already foreseen that. Showrunner/writer/creator Shonda Rhimes and her producing partner Betsy Beers signed a multi-year deal at Netflix, ending their long relationship with ABC (which is owned by Disney). These are the echoes of the HBO story in the 1980s, when studios pushed back against its rapid growth and success. HBO made new deals and flourished. In fact, in 2017, Netflix made the first acquisition of its 20-year history, of comic book publisher Millarworld (which created Kingsman and Kick-Ass). Again, it’s reminiscent of Disney’s 2009 acquisition of Marvel. In 2017, Disney bought longtime rival 20th Century Fox’s TV and movie studios, and gained majority control of Hulu. “Content is the weapon of choice in this over-the-top game,” says Peter Csathy, chairman of CREATV Media. Others are rethinking their strategy internally, such as CBS’ Les Moonves, who surprised many with his announcement that The Twilight Zone reboot will stream exclusively on the digital CBS All Access platform. This follows All Access’ streaming of NFL games and Star Trek: Discovery—whose premiere and second episode resulted in the biggest ever increase in platform subscribers. Streaming “is a more profitable business model,” Moonves declares.

What may be truly game changing—as FX Networks chief and industry savant John Landgraf puts it—is the “titanic struggle” on the cards between Netflix, Amazon, Facebook and Apple. The latter Silicon Valley giants are moving into the scripted TV space, with Facebook’s launch of its “Watch” premium video platform; Apple’s high-profile hires of Sony TV, Channel 4 and Amazon execs to oversee its scripted content; even Snapchat has partnered with NBCUniversal to produce programming. The joint venture signed its first deal with Mark and Jay Duplass, whose first series for the app is set to debut in 2018. In contrast, “Watch” will be a platform for anyone who adheres to Facebook’s community guidelines to upload their shows. Facebook is also developing a drama with Kerry Washington plus an English language version of the Scandinavian hit teen show Scam. Then there’s YouTube TV, which is entering the living room via its new app that integrates with smart TVs and connected devices, including Apple TV, Roku and Xbox. YouTube Red Originals, encompassing web series to feature-length movies, are already growing in scope and reach.
Landgraf compares the sheer financial weight of the digital behemoths to a tsunami or a water cannon, “like being shot in the face with money every day,” he says. “Wait for the epic titanic fight for talent . . . Beyond television we’re all watching an epic battle unfold for who will control human attention. For who controls attention, controls its monetizing.” We may see new business models emerge, even before the end of the decade. Certainly there will be winners and losers.

On-demand viewership provides us with the illusion that we’re in control, if not of the existential Big Picture then of the little ones via our flat screens, laptops, tablets, smart phones. Indeed we, and our devices, are locked in a symbiotic, co-dependent relationship, especially when we get hooked on a great new series. Jill Soloway summed it up best at the Variety TV Summit in June 2017, when she mused that when we stay up all night watching a show, it’s like meeting someone special and wanting to stay up all night talking. It’s like falling in love.

It all comes back to story. Given the political landscape, the need for niche representation on TV is ever more urgent. “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme,” goes the saying. It’s the stories we tell that can transform a generation. In my last book, TV Outside the Box, I posited that “Niche Is the New Mainstream,” which positively reflects how diverse we truly are and which arose from our need—a demand—for inclusivity. Politically, the idea of going back and reconnecting to “the good old days” appeals to some, while it excludes and outrages others. These are divisive, incendiary times, and the huge volume of content today simultaneously enthralls and pacifies us. For many, Stranger Things was the right show at the right time. We needed a dose of innocence and nostalgia to combat all the cynicism and “fake news.” We continue to need pure escapism. We need those heroes. “I want to thank the great algorithm that put us all here,” Donald Glover declared in his Emmy acceptance speech in 2017, as he made history. He was joking, but it’s true: Despite digital’s threats to the more traditional TV industry, it can bring us closer together. His show Atlanta is on FX—Landgraf’s network. Their game is far from over, and so is our political struggle. Today more than ever, we need to tell the stories that connect us and bring us closer together. This book presents how. And after all, as Charlie Brooker said as he accepted his second Emmy for the technological thriller Black Mirror, “Love will win.”
INTRODUCTION xvii

HOW TO NAVIGATE
TV WRITING ON DEMAND

This book is structured like an on-demand app: It’s part overview of the changes in the TV business that are affecting writers and creative entrepreneurs in the digital age, part layered, nuanced, deep-dive into the tools we need to help create the strongest possible scripts. It’s a “how to” guide with a new perspective for today’s leading-edge innovators. Pick and choose what interests you most. You can read each chapter in any order, whenever and however you choose. I’ve intended to cover several strata of the new and evolving TV landscape in which the walls between film and TV have crumbled, and genres and tones have mercifully blurred. We are rapidly approaching 500 scripted series across multiple platforms; it’s Digital Darwinism out there. TV Writing On Demand highlights the best of the best—and why—on demand. With serialized content all the rage, we tune in to stay connected and to avoid FOMO (the Fear Of Missing Out). The tide has turned away from the formulaic. These are uncertain times, which also form the backdrop for what I believe are the five most exciting words in digital storytelling: Anything can happen any time.

Spoiler Alerts—and Learning from the Masters

Rather than interrupting the flow of your reading experience with a peppering of spoiler alerts throughout this text, please heed this global caveat: If I mention a series that you haven’t seen yet, do presume that my discussion will likely contain spoilers, some whodunits, how and why, and proceed with caution. In a few chapters, I’ve withheld spoiling the solution to the central mystery. On occasion, I’ve included spoilers to illustrate specific analytical points, to help with learning from the masters who write these shows.

Notes


2 Ibid.


PART I
SATISFYING THE BINGE VIEWER
New Genres, Formats and Trends
“Nothing’s straight comedy, nothing’s straight drama. In drama there are always elements of comedy. In black culture, you are always trying to laugh through the sadness, and it’s a testament to the experiences that we go through.”

—Issa Rae

writer/co-creator/executive producer/actress

Insecure
CHAPTER 1
BLURRING THE LINES

Redefining Genre and Tone in the Dramedy

Is it a comedy or a drama? Or is it a genre-bending *dramedy*? I say, as long as it’s good, does it matter?

It depends on whom we ask. For the broadcast and basic cable networks that are still scheduled in rigid timeslots and beholden to advertisers and commercial breaks, categorization still matters a lot.

At NBC, where everything old is new again, scheduling sitcoms in comedy blocks on the same night continues to be a viable programming strategy. Tune in Thursdays and we’ll have a night of laughter, anchored by their reboot of *Will & Grace*. ABC, CBS and Fox all program their sitcoms in compatible pairs, presuming that if we’ve tuned in to *Modern Family* or *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, we’re probably going to stick around for the complementary shows that follow.

Broadcast networks still need to fill their primetime schedules with series that work in particular timeslots, and they’ll often utilize a proven ratings hit as a launching pad for a new show. Traditionally, the 8:00 to 9:00 p.m. timeslot has been called the “family hour” and offers softer-edged shows that appeal to the whole family, followed by more sophisticated sitcoms and reality TV at 9:00 p.m. and darker, harder-edged crime, legal and/or medical procedurals in the 10:00 p.m. timeslot. But besides sports and live events, who even bothers to watch TV in timeslots anymore? The answer is twofold:

1. Generally, viewers over the age of 40.
2. Viewers who can’t afford a subscription to a streaming, on-demand service and/or those who simply prefer free TV.
Will & Grace isn’t the only classic sitcom getting a revival, bolstered by the tug of nostalgia; ABC has plans to reboot Roseanne as well. The multi-camera hit series The Big Bang Theory (from the fertile imagination of TV’s successful funnyman, Chuck Lorre) still garners large ratings for CBS (its 2017 season finale scored more than 12.5 million viewers). Nevertheless, its prequel/spinoff, entitled Young Sheldon, is shot single-camera style—without a live studio audience. This delightful dramedy has more in common with nostalgic series The Wonder Years than with its mothership laugh riot sitcom The Big Bang Theory.

Is this a sign of the times that the multi-camera sitcom is on the wane? It’s alive but leaning in that direction, as TV shows have become more cinematic and less static/contained. The big ratings numbers of Big Bang Theory certainly attest to audiences’ enjoyment of three-jokes-per-page traditional sitcoms—especially if the jokes are funny. But having the freedom to follow characters outside of large apartments, office spaces and coffeehouses tends to feel more liberating and surprising. If the characters can go anywhere and not be limited to two “permanent” sets and a “swing” set (an interchangeable set depending on that week’s episode), the episode can feel more organic and authentic—like life.

Like the dramedy that’s between genres, viewers today fall somewhere between traditional and online platforms. NBCUniversal’s niche digital comedy network Seeso announced its closure at barely 19 months old, having struggled to win subscribers. Some Seeso Originals moved to streaming service VRV, while comedies on NBC’s traditional broadcast network continue to flourish. Perhaps Seeso was ahead of its time.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

James L. Brooks is best known for his Emmy Award-winning MTM Enterprises\textsuperscript{2} sitcoms; the equally lauded sitcom Taxi; and Oscar-bait movies (Terms of Endearment, Broadcast News, As Good As It Gets). He’s also an executive producer of TV’s longest-running primetime comedy series, The Simpsons, but his roots in half-hour dramedy actually go way back to his groundbreaking series Room 222, which aired on ABC from 1969–1974. This single-camera dramedy was time-slotted among traditional sitcoms but features a diverse cast and centers on Pete Dixon (Lloyd Haynes), an African-American social studies teacher at the fictional Los Angeles school Walt Whitman High, and his core group of inquisitive students in Room 222. A far cry from the broad, zany antics of high school “sweat hogs” on Welcome Back Kotter (1975–1979), Room 222 explores contemporary themes with light comedy, nuance and the trials and tribulations of coming-of-age, during the
tumult of the late 1960s and early to mid-‘70s (including the Vietnam War, feminism, racism, homophobia and even Watergate). Room 222 is my earliest memory of a sitcom that straddles the line between comedy and drama, with an emphasis on authenticity and subtlety, obliquely addressing issues of our times without ever feeling preachy/pedantic.

The half-hour dramedy also has its roots in the TV version of the 1970 Robert Altman film *M*A*S*H*[^3], adapted by Larry Gelbart (*Tootsie*). The much celebrated, Emmy and Peabody Award-winning TV series aired from 1970 through 1983. Scheduled and packaged by CBS as a sitcom, the series is set in the 4077th mobile army surgical hospital during the Korean War. The early seasons are bloodier and grittier, with laughter interrupted by artillery shells and bombings; the latter seasons feel somewhat slicker, with less gore and more quips. It is inherently a political series that avoids glamorizing war but often makes it look like a whole lot of fun (just add sex, booze and an unfortunate laugh track). And then Gelbart and his team floor us with a shocking, tragic turn, including the deaths of beloved characters, to remind us of reality (these outlier episodes were sans laugh track). Always a delicate balancing act between comedy and tragedy, the show finds its greatest success by reminding us that despite the worst situations imaginable, laughter truly is the best medicine.

If *M*A*S*H* and Room 222 are half-hour dramedies masquerading as sitcoms, *The Wonder Years* (on ABC from 1988–1993) is pure dramedy from the get-go and an anomalous period piece to boot. Like Room 222, *The Wonder Years* retrospectively explores the tumult of the 1960s/early 1970s through the lens of innocence: the coming-of-age story and, in this case, puppy love. The main focus is the Arnold family’s youngest child, Kevin (Fred Savage), and delves into his school life, home life and blossoming love life. The critically acclaimed hit series’ signature style is in employing voice-over (Daniel Stern, as off-screen narrator/adult Kevin, providing us with insight into young Kevin’s state of mind). Although at ABC’s insistence the show was set in Anytown, USA, the show’s suburban setting and authenticity gave series creator/showrunners Carol Black and Neal Marlens the opportunity to explore controversial political themes—the draft, Vietnam, women’s liberation, race relations—but as background and counterpoint. *The Wonder Years* is consistently funny but never just goes for the laugh and is devoid of contrived jokes. Instead, it is a character-driven slice of nostalgia and idealism that reminds us of the possibility and wonder that baby-boomers all once felt.

There were other precursors to today’s dramedies: *United States* (Gelbart’s follow up to *M*A*S*H*); *Hooperman* (created by Steven Bochco and Terry Louise Fisher); *Doogie Howser, M.D.* (from Bochco and David E. Kelley); *The Days and Nights of
Molly Dodd (created by Jay Tarses)—most of which would be considered successful in today’s TV ecosystem. Alas, back in their time (and timeslots), they were relatively short-lived but are all definitely worth a second look.

What differentiates a dramedy from a comedy?

Norman Lear pushed the envelope on his classic multi-camera sitcoms in the 1970s (All in the Family, The Jeffersons, Maude, Good Times, One Day at a Time) by balancing laugh-out-loud jokes and funny situations in front of a live studio audience, while also dealing with the controversial issues of race, religion, gender and politics. But Lear went even further with more personal dramatic storylines that encompass divorce, infidelity, cancer, abortion and even rape. These more serious episodes were the exception, not the rule. The broadcast networks have always been more comfortable with funny comedies (with heart) and emotionally resonant dramas with (easily solvable) moral dilemmas.

Most dramedies are not giant ratings champs, but they do have a fiercely loyal, niche fan base. If authenticity is the most desired commodity in the digital TV era, then the dramedy hits that sweet spot by getting real, and rarely sacrificing a raw, emotionally impactful moment for an easy laugh.

Multi-camera sitcoms are, by design, formulaic, familiar and reassuring and must be funny. If the table read in front of the network and studio executives doesn’t generate consistent laughs, the writers will need to stay up all night rewriting the script. A multi-camera sitcom with flat jokes is deadly.

Single-camera sitcoms also need to generate laughs, but through funny, ironic situations and character quirks, more than punch lines. Of course, single-cam sitcoms are also required to be funny.

A sitcom with fewer jokes is . . . what? That depends. It could be a bad sitcom, or it could be a version of the seminal, genre-bending, tone-blurring dramedy series—either half-hour or one-hour.

**Good rules of thumb . . .**

**MULTI-CAMERA SITCOM:** Half-hour. Funny is money. Mainly interiors, 2–3 main sets; lots of entrances and exits from rooms. Minimum of 3 jokes per page (setups and
punch lines); escalate chaos to solve a small problem writ large (a/k/a “tremendous trifles”); restore stasis and love by the end of the episode. A/B/C stories usually have a unifying theme. Little to zero character development. Examples: The Big Bang Theory, Two and a Half Men, Fuller House, One Day at a Time.

SINGLE-CAMERA SITCOM: Half-hour. Mixture of jokes and funny situations. Approximately 60/40 split between interiors and exteriors; humiliate the protagonist(s) and challenge their comfort zones; restore stasis and love by the end of the episode; flashbacks and flash cuts to past moments of embarrassment are employed for comedic effect. Mockumentary and confessionals (a/k/a breaking the fourth wall) are sometimes employed. Usually have a unifying theme. Little, no or slow character development. Modern Family, Silicon Valley, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, The Good Place, The Last Man on Earth, Black-ish, Veep, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Grace & Frankie, Ballers and Fresh Off the Boat as well as Ricky Gervais’ groundbreaking comedy/dramedy series including The Office, Extras and Derek.4

DRAMEDY: Half-hour or one-hour. Honest, raw, uncomfortable relationship issues are explored with nuance and subtext. Generic and familiar plotlines are eschewed entirely. The tone can be funny or tragic but is intentionally off-putting, especially when offering an inconvenient truth. Characters have hyper-specific personality quirks and are more psychologically and emotionally complex. Characters tend to make irrational decisions and are less likable. Avoid formula, with each episode individually crafted to feel distinctive and one-of-a-kind. Can be expansive and cinematic, often featuring multiple locations and fragmented plotlines; usually have an indie movie sensibility and avoid mainstream, obvious/manipulative music choices; the visuals tell the story more than expositional dialogue; usually tell the story in the cut5 to create a tapestry of interwoven storylines; particular music, montages, flashbacks, voice-over, fantasies and magic realism might be utilized. Thematic through-lines may unify each episode, but more likely there’s a season-long theme. Most dramedies are heavily serialized and utilize DPUs6 from episode to episode.

DRAMEDIES AND LIFE ON THE CRINGE

The pure dramedy may serve up a wholly serious episode, followed by a more broadly comedic one. There’s less of a consistent comedic or dramatic tone, and more of the creator’s sensibility. Authenticity trumps easy laughs. Subtext and nuance are mined for maximum cringe and relatability. If traditional sitcoms are about likably flawed characters getting into and out of trouble, then dramedies are
more about coping with the ongoing hardships and moral complexities of relationships.

Sitcoms generally offer well-intentioned characters caught up in their own self-generated chaos; they offer up a problem and a solution—or moral—by the end of the episode.

Dramedies are generally much more ambiguous, and their characters tend to be self-involved, self-destructive, and while forgiveness and love are still the currency required to solve a dilemma, dramedies don’t offer up easy answers.

---

**FEMALE-DRIVEN DRAMEDIES**

HBO’s *Sex and the City* indeed blazed the trail for women-focused dramedies such as *Girls* (also HBO) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW). While *SATC* is about the search for love, *Girls* is about self-actualization (or the lack of it), and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* centers around self-delusion. The protagonists are smart, funny women—as well as being relatable, lovable and sexy, they make us laugh. It almost seems unfair to demand so much from female protagonists in dramedies, but it’s a standard we’ve come to expect. Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham) and Rebecca Bunch (Rachel Bloom) have deep-rooted vulnerabilities, grow through transformational arcs and always with a good dose of humor, all of which puts them squarely in the hybrid dramedy category.

What also connects these female-driven dramedies, not only to each other but to their audiences, is their authenticity, with their writers drawing on personal experience to create endearing characters who feel real. *Sex and the City* was originally based on Candace Bushnell’s book about her own 30-something experiences of dating in New York in the ‘90s; *Girls* creator/writer/director/actress Dunham freely admits the show is essentially about herself and her friends; *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is partly based on co-creator/writer/actress Rachel Bloom’s personal struggle with mental well-being. Authenticity is also the female-driven dramedy’s common ground with quality female-driven, half-hour comedies. Creator/writer/actress Issa Rae’s *Insecure* (HBO) is partly based on her past awkward experiences; the same is true of Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, who created, write and act in *Broad City* (Comedy Central). And co-creator/writer Whitney Cummings’ multi-cam sitcom *2 Broke Girls* (CBS) was informed by the time she spent penniless in her 20s. All six female-driven shows ring
true to their time and place; in *Insecure/Girls/Broad City/Crazy-Ex/SATC*, there is authenticity to the point of rawness: Issa writes from her own experience of being accused of “not being black enough.” In *Girls*, Lena Dunham confronts stereotypes as a young woman who is highly sexual. Such dramedies and comedies continue to push the kinds of jokes and subject matter that women are broaching on television. Both the female-driven dramedy and comedy recognize the importance of being able to laugh at ourselves even when things go wrong.

Funnily enough, location is also a character in all these shows, which exist in heightened realities: turn-of-the-century Manhattan, the satirical take on hipster Brooklyn/Queens in *Girls* and *Broad City*, the fetishized suburbia of West Covina, urban LA and View Park, a/k/a “The Black Beverly Hills” and more. Even the set of the multi-cam *2 Broke Girls* is memorable for its brightly colored diner and the girls’ work uniforms. The highs and lows of female friendship are also featured throughout these female-driven shows—from Issa’s bust-up with Molly (Yvonne Orji), to Rebecca’s realizing she’s found a much-needed true friend for life (and maternal figure) in co-worker Paula (Donna Lynne Champlin).

The female-driven dramedy traffics in real human emotions; the characters evolve and reevaluate throughout the series. Although *SATC* owes some of its DNA to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the major difference is the dramedy’s willingness to challenge and push female characters to grow. When Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore) breaks up with a man she is largely unscathed, appearing in the next episode as if nothing happened. Carrie, on the other hand, wears the scars of every heartache, embarrassment and post-it note inflicted on her during her search for love, as do *SATC*’s viewers. The emotions that Carrie et al. experience feel genuine, and we recognize them, recalling our past relationships and choices too. The female protagonist’s mistakes and how she learns from them define her and bring us closer together with some laughs to bond us, for good measure.

**Express the truth—while finding humor throughout.**

Streaming has ushered in a new crop of half-hour dramedies, available on-demand, across multiple platforms. The half-hour dramedy is polarizing, with some veteran sitcom writers lamenting and deriding them as unfunny, plot-less comedies. It’s a
matter of opinion. They’re among my favorite shows on television: fresh, authentic and always surprising. If the high-end cable drama series’ sweet spot is exploring taboos, then the half-hour dramedy is all about the cringe.

Here are some of the best recent dramedies (and their creators):

- **Atlanta** (Donald Glover)
- **Baskets** (Zach Galifianakis, Jonathan Krisel and Louis C.K.)
- **Better Things** (Pamela Adlon and Louis C.K.)
- **Casual** (Zander Lehmann)
- **Catastrophe** (Sharon Horgan and Rob Delaney)
- **Chewing Gum** (Michaela Coel)
- **Crazy Ex-Girlfriend** (Aline Brosh McKenna and Rachel Bloom)
- **Dear White People** (Justin Simien)
- **Fleabag** (Phoebe Waller-Bridge)
- **Girls** (Lena Dunham)
- **GLOW** (Liz Flahive and Carly Mensch)
- **I Love Dick** (Jill Soloway and Sarah Gubbins)
- **Insecure** (Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore)
- **Love** (Judd Apatow, Lesley Arfin and Paul Rust)
- **Master of None** (Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang)
- **Mozart in the Jungle** (Roman Coppola, Jason Schwartzman, Alex Timbers and Paul Weitz)
- **Transparent** (Jill Soloway)
- **You’re the Worst** (Stephen Falk)

Following is an analysis of a selection of these shows, while *Insecure* is featured in Chapter 7.

**YOU’RE THE WORST: THE ANTI-ROMANTIC DRAMEDY**

There’s a misconception that “dramedy” means “a show with unlikable characters.” Look at early iterations of modern dramedy such as *Weeds, Nurse Jackie, Californication, Rescue Me, Girls, Orange Is the New Black* or *Transparent*: Constant references were made to the “unlikable” characters at the core of these series (it would be naïve not to note that this comes up more often with female characters, whose sole purpose for many years was to be likable). But
audiences are realizing that this signifier has a broader definition, welcoming dramedies about flawed nice people (Master of None, Better Things, Insecure) and comedies featuring morally challenged characters who rant, criticize, judge and lash out: Atlanta, Baskets, Fleabag, Casual. I suppose Seinfeld, which featured lovably selfish neurotics, was an outlier sitcom, and It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia featured (funny) horrible jerks. And neither was ever considered a dramedy.

The “likability” factor takes an interesting turn in FXX’s You’re the Worst. Just from the title, viewers know they’re in for a show about characters they might like to watch, but wouldn’t want at their house for dinner. What makes You’re the Worst different, however, is how the show takes the trope about horrible people and turns it into a sweet, empathetic and heart-wrenching story about two people desperately trying to learn how to love one another. Unlike its dramedy soulmate Catastrophe, whose leads often make bad and selfish choices but are generally trying their best, You’re the Worst follows three truly terrible characters who constantly hurt those around them. (I’m not including ensemble cast member Edgar, played by Desmin Borges, because he is objectively a delight.) But at the end of the day, Jimmy (Chris Geere), Gretchen (Aya Cash) and Lindsay (Kether Donohue) always harm themselves most of all. You’re the Worst does a masterful job of showing the pain behind the characters’ selfish actions. We get an especially good look at this pain in the Season 2 arc, where Gretchen sinks into a deep depression. It’s a touching portrayal not only of what it’s like to constantly live with a mental illness, but also the reality of loving someone with a mental illness. Creator Stephen Falk gives Jimmy, Gretchen and Lindsay rich backstories and internal lives that make their actions understandable but not redeemable.

By the end of the pilot, Jimmy has behaved terribly after his one-night stand with Gretchen. Actually they both have, but he was worse. He calls while she happens to be in the bathroom of the LA mansion belonging to douchey director Ty (Stephen Schneider). They’ve just had sex but Gretchen isn’t feeling it tonight. Perhaps because Ty was appalled when Gretchen revealed she burned down her high school to get out of a math test. Clothed in the bathtub, after stashing some of his coke in a take-home baggie, she can’t resist snorting some straight away, using tweezers she’s found. Ty remains in the bedroom, oblivious.

Her phone rings. She looks at the display and reacts in this order: surprised, pleased, then apprehensive. She answers, speaking quietly.

GRETCHEN

Hello?  

CUT TO:
INT. JIMMY’S BEDROOM - SAME TIME
Jimmy is sitting on his bed.

JIMMY
What are you doing?  

CUT TO:

INT. TY’S BATHROOM - SAME TIME

Gretchen is frozen. Lying in the bathtub. Clutching the bag of coke. The tweezers. The phone.

GRETCHEN
Nothing. Just... reading?

INTERCUT AS NEEDED:

JIMMY
Hey you won’t believe this. Someone stole my car.

GRETCHEN
Oh? God, that’s awful.

JIMMY
Yeah. I have to file a police report in the morning.

GRETCHEN
(shutting her eyes)
I may have borrowed it.

JIMMY
I know.

GRETCHEN
Oh. Well, sorry. I told you I’m the worst.

JIMMY
Actually no, you said that I was the worst and that I was lucky to “get” you.

She cringes lower in the tub.

GRETCHEN
Yeah. About that...

JIMMY
No. Don’t apologize. It was a great speech. It was funny and true and mean. My favorite kind.
GRETCHEN
(pleased)
I set my school on fire to get out of a math test.

JIMMY
(laughs)
That’s genius.

Gretchen smiles. A comfortable silence.

JIMMY (CONT’D)
Oh and... I lied to you before. I do have a foot thing.

GRETCHEN
Seriously?

JIMMY
Yeah. In fact I was just trying to find the right clip online to, you know... so that I could fall asleep. But nothing’s quite right.

GRETCHEN
Oh.

(beat)
Do you want me to try?

---

BASKETS AND LIVES IN DISARRAY

FX's quiet, dark dramedy Baskets has its main characters constantly begging the question: “What the hell am I doing with my life?” In the beginning of the series, we meet our protagonist, Chip Baskets (Zach Galifianakis) at a crossroads. He’s flunked out of a fancy French clown school in Paris, only to return home to Bakersfield, California, and work as a lowly rodeo clown. In their hometown, twin brother Dale Baskets (also played by Galifianakis) literally sells the possibility of success at the cut-rate Baskets Career College. But it’s Chip and Dale’s mother, Christine Baskets (Louie Anderson), whose journey steals the show. And not by playing a transgendered mom—the series never comments on the fact that a man is playing mom. Baskets just is.

Christine is the epitome of a mother trying to do her best. Left alone by her husband after he jumped from a bridge when the twins were young, Christine has
tried to support her sons in all of their endeavors. (This includes Christine’s adopted set of African-American twins, the rarely seen but often bragged about Logan and Cody, played by Jason and Garry Clemmons.) Although the show finds numerous ways for Chip to pursue his true purpose, mess it up and start all over again, it’s often Christine’s hopes and dreams that go unrealized—even though one of her trademarks is her effusiveness for particular, sometimes trivial things: “I LOVE carpeting!” “I LOVE smart animals!” “I LOVE Denver!”

As we see in Season 1, Episode 4, entitled “Easter in Bakersfield,” all Christine wants is a nice Easter brunch with her mother (Ivy Jones), Chip and friend Martha’s (Martha Kelly) family. But when Chip’s selfish obsession with his life gone awry takes over the meal and Grandma criticizes Christine’s weight and begins to tell the whole table about her daughter’s reliance on food as an emotional crutch, Christine’s simple request for a nice Easter meal becomes heartbreaking. Just as Christine’s character is used to inform the audience more about Chip, Christine’s mother is used to show us another, sadder side of Christine. Much of this is brought home thanks to Louie Anderson’s Emmy-winning performance as Christine (which he has described as heavily influenced by his own mother). The performance is unlike anything else on TV, perfectly landing every joke while still playing scenes such as the Easter brunch with the type of vulnerability and shame that comes from being 60 years old and still having to hear that your mother is disappointed in you.

GRANDMA
It started when she was a teenager, I would find these candy wrappers and what have you in her backpack.

CHRISTINE
Mother.

GRANDMA
And when she was a freshman, she was poised to be the head of her cheerleading squad--that just went out the window.

CHRISTINE
I sprained my ankle.

GRANDMA
Why do you think you sprained your ankle?
  (to the others at the table)
It was all that new excess fat she had on her. I did everything I could. I made her write down everything she ate. We had weigh-in Wednesday, but somehow she was always able to get it. So that’s why after a while I just gave up. I mean, she was so sensitive about it, and it was really, really sad because cheerleading meant everything to her. It’s so sad. Well, eventually, she had to settle for that husband of hers. He was a piece of work. Then she just funneled all of her energy into motherhood, and you see how well that turned out. So the sugar just kept coming.

[Christine leaves the table having not touched her dessert plate.]

GRANDMA
Christine, sit down, honey. Eat your desserts.

[LATER]

[After Christine has been so embarrassed by her mother, she wanders the floor of the hotel casino where she comes upon Chip at a slot machine. The two have a heart to heart.]

CHRISTINE
You okay?

CHIP
Yeah. You?

CHRISTINE
I’ve been better. Not my favorite Easter brunch. My mother shamed me out of a dessert.

[Chip looks understandingly at Christine, two disappointments. He fishes around his pocket and pulls out an Easter egg filled with little candies. Christine smiles and begins to eat the treats.]

CHIP
I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about getting married.
SATIRE AS THE WEAPON OF REASON IN DEAR WHITE PEOPLE

Dear White People is based on the 2014 indie film and breakout hit of the same title, which was written and directed by showrunner Justin Simien. As Ann Hornaday writes: “[The movie is] relevant, but, in the right hands, entertaining, too: Simien maintains a scrupulously light tone and deft touch throughout Dear White People.” Both the show and movie are set at Winchester, a fictional, supposedly liberal Ivy League university. “There, African American students—representatives of the ‘talented 10’ percent—grapple with identity, expectations and ambition.” The Dear White People series examines polemics by leaning in to the gray areas, layering in sexual chemistry and relationship dynamics. The arc of Season 1 demonstrates that our beliefs—which we can control—may incite change and affirm righteous indignation but can also be overwhelmed by inconvenient emotions, which we can’t.

The half-hour dramedy features a diverse ensemble cast and our protagonist is biracial Samantha White (Logan Browning). On the surface, Sam is a radically politicized activist who hosts the controversial campus radio show, “Dear White People,” in which she holds up a mirror to white culture from a black perspective; in most cases, it’s a funhouse mirror, as Sam admonishes white people to stop dancing or to stop asking people of color the question, “What are you?” as if they’re space aliens. Sam’s demeanor ranges from incredulous to outrage, as she rails at the system—particularly at white male privilege. What keeps the show on track is its smart tone that doesn’t take itself too seriously. This isn’t a preachy series; it’s a referendum on ignorance versus respect. In one of Sam’s many radio rants, she expresses the show’s main theme: Satire is the weapon of reason.
As in the movie, the show makes use of a detached male narrator who observes everything from a humorous, hyper-PC perspective. Simien knows that if we’re going to tackle race issues, first we need to be invited to laugh at our cultural and racial sensitivities. He’s not preaching to the choir here. The POV is fairly balanced, an equal opportunity offender, and the blame and hypocrisy are somewhat colorblind. Today’s politically charged climate is especially intense on university campuses, which can be PC minefields of “micro-aggressions” and “triggers.” When it’s intimated that Sam might be undermining herself by being “a slave to the cause,” it’s simultaneously offensive, provocative and probably true. The series also addresses the Black Lives Matter movement via Winchester’s voluntarily segregated Armstrong Parker (“AP”) House—a haven for the college’s (more or less) marginalized African-American students, the place on campus where Sam feels most at home . . . or does she?

Sam had intended to teach Winchester’s magazine Pastiche, run by white male students, an embarrassing lesson by capturing on video its “Dear Black People” party, with white students in blackface and masks. But when a caucus of black students learns about the event, they storm the place and pandemonium ensues. Sam escapes the melee, satisfied . . . until her neglected, secret white boyfriend, Gabe (John Patrick Amedori), reveals on Instagram that he and Sam are a couple. In both the movie and the TV series’ stroke of genius, Sam’s relationship with Gabe effectively leaves her torn between her ideology on race inequality and her passion for Gabe, as she hates what he represents in her worldview, even though she loves him.

It’s one of the many forms of triangulation Simien employs, not only between Sam’s/Gabe’s/her own belief systems, but also between Sam and Reggie Green (Marque Richardson), who is black; Reggie truly likes Sam, and Sam tries to return his affection, but her feelings for Gabe throw her off her game. Sam wishes love could be (color)blind, but it’s complicated. This is but one example of the show’s currency of love/hate relationships that generates significant conflict, drama, pain and humor.

Then there is the overachieving beauty, a black student Colandra “Coco” Conners (Antoinette Robertson), who’s infatuated with Troy Fairbanks (Brandon P. Bell), the president of the Black Student Union who also happens to be the dean’s son. Coco believes she’s in love with Troy, but her judgment is clouded, not by emotion, but by her social-climbing ambition. Troy is wildly attracted to Coco, but he also starts to see the cracks in her persona/façade—which creates another triangle: Coco/
Troy/Ambition. Add to that the additional layer of Troy's black roommate, Lionel (DeRon Horton), who's a closeted gay man with a secret crush on Troy.

*Dear White People* plays the race card as satire, but like the best satire, the target is truth—or its various versions that may not be politically correct, or too much so. The show's tone is funny, ironic, bold and unflinching. Barry Jenkins, who won an Academy Award for *Moonlight*, directed Episode 5 (written by Chuck Howard and Jack Moore), which explores the use of the N-word and builds to a white cop pulling a gun on a black college kid.

This groundbreaking series coincides with the mainstream use of the word “woke”—a word intended to challenge white people to wake up to the systemic racism and inequality that still permeates and festers in the US and around the world. We need to be mindful of platitudes. Our words matter. I reached out to two trusted friends for their perspectives: Steven, who's Afro-Latino, Puerto Rican, a writer and identifies as queer, and Tiffany, an African-American female screenwriter (and recovering CNN journalist).

Steven finds the term “woke” problematic. He describes how “woke” was originally a social justice term in the 1960s, resurrected after Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. Steven objects to “woke” being appropriated as a catch-all word “that doesn’t take into account socioeconomics or the politics of skin color”; he feels that darker-skinned black people suffer greater discrimination than lighter-skinned blacks. He also believes that institutional racism doesn’t account for the inequality of other marginalized groups, i.e., the LGBTQ community. To Steven, one can claim to be “woke” but still be prejudiced against other marginalized groups. “We parcel out identity, but we don’t acknowledge the intersection,” he explains.

In the show, Sam’s frenemy Coco is darker-skinned and portrayed as uppity—at the expense of her black identity—but flashbacks show just how much Coco has struggled because of her skin tone. In fact, the night after that party, Coco calls Sam out on how she has it easier because of her fairer complexion: “Imagine the reaction if your divisive revolutionary drivel were coming from the mouth of a real sister. You get away with murder because you look more like them than I do.” Meanwhile, Troy is portrayed as athletically gifted, excels academically, is privileged and for a while he appears to transcend race; Lionel is a geek hiding behind the façade of his glasses and Afro, writing about other people to take the focus off himself.
Tiffany is a fan of *Dear White People*, which she describes as “nuanced in a way that TV—especially dealing with racial issues—rarely is.” To both Steven and Tiffany, the bottom line is that getting “woke” is not a monolith. The show succeeds by shining a light on the intersections between racism, sexism and homophobia, as well as socioeconomic and academic status. It’s an important story about the relationship between identity, respect, resistance and solidarity, all delivered with sharp satire.

*I LOVE DICK: EXPLORING THE “FEMALE GAZE”*

If *American Gods* and *Twin Peaks* are the most bizarre series on TV today, then *I Love Dick* (co-created by showrunner Jill Soloway and Sarah Gubbins) takes the prize for the most emotionally raw and daring. Whether its characters are fully clothed or naked, they bare their souls to us and expose their shame in unexpected and provocative new ways. Based on the book by American artist, author and provocateur Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* is a hybrid of fiction and memoir and explores the writer’s psycho-sexual obsession with a media theorist and sociologist whose name is Dick (played with laconic, low-key, humorous cowboy swagger by Kevin Bacon).

This is extreme cringe dramedy, and a more apt title might be *Diary of a Mad Stalker*. Soloway has said in interviews that her series explores “the female gaze.” While movies and TV have explored the male gaze (objectifying women) for generations—from Marilyn Monroe’s legs exposed under her billowing white skirt in *The Seven Year Itch*, to every James Bond and action movie ever made—examples of the female gaze in film and television are historically rarer. There are of course notable exceptions: Written by Oscar-winner Callie Khouri, *Thelma and Louise* immediately comes to mind. Movies such as *Magic Mike* and its sequel, touted for featuring male strippers, are essentially designed as bromances, and the men are never exploited. To safeguard your pilot against inadvertent stereotyping and gender inequality, I suggest you put it to the Bechdel test. In an industry where women are drastically underrepresented in all roles and objectification is rife, such awareness is more important than ever.

*I Love Dick* explores the female gaze in a microcosm, in the small, dusty, hipster town of Marfa, Texas. Our protagonist, Chris (the brilliant, courageous Kathryn Hahn), has just moved here with her professor/author husband Sylvere (Griffin Dunne) for his residency at the local artist colony/institute, helmed by Dick. When Chris sets eyes on Dick, it’s lust at first sight. If her gaze isn’t telling enough, we
hear her innermost thoughts via voice-over in the form of highly inappropriate, intimate letters to Dick. Her letters are the central narrative device of the series, and lines from these letters appear in large font on the screen, in bright red. The camera also stalks Dick, and lingers, crotch-level, whenever he’s near.

Chris is falling hopelessly in love with Dick, even though he barely knows she exists, and she’s married. Sylvère knows about the letters, and Chris’ sharing her unbridled lust for Dick at first serves to turn up the heat on their sex life—from nonexistent/tepid to passionate. But the truth is, even in the midst of mind-blowing orgiastic sex with her husband, Chris is thinking only of Dick. In one of several touches of magic realism in the series, Dick is present in the room while Chris and Sylvère are making love; Chris’ eyes remain locked with Dick as he looks on. It’s just a delusion in Chris’ mind—which she seems to be losing. By Episode 5, Chris is completely out of control, a slave to her desires. And when Sylvère cries foul and demands that she stay away from Dick and stop writing these letters, Chris’ painful reply to her husband is: “I don’t think I can.” Yes, Chris is ready, willing and able to destroy her whole ordered existence in order to be liberated from rules, limitation, sexism and shame. When it comes to Dick, she’s all in.

Consider some excerpts from her poetic, wildly provocative letters:

CHRIS (V.O.)
Dear Dick: I was born into a world that presumes there’s something grotesque, unspeakable about female desire. And now all I want to be is undignified, to trash myself. I want to be a female monster. I want to have the kind of sex that makes breathing feel like fucking.

And this:

CHRIS (V.O.)
Dear Dick: I’m on a mission to obliterate the walls of my desire.

When her feelings appear to be unrequited by Dick, Chris ramps up her obsession and disregards his pleas to leave him alone. She even prints out her letters and tapes them up all around town for everyone to see. It’s partially to get Dick’s attention (she succeeds and he’s angry and humiliated), but also part of exposing herself. She can’t be discreet and hide any longer. She’s coming out and to hell with what anybody else thinks about it. This is her truth.
The cast is rounded out with an ensemble of other women and men dealing with similar issues of gender identity, shame and marginalization. The character of Dolores/Devon (Roberta Colindrez) is trans with a less-than-supportive mother; Toby (India Menuez) is a young artist obsessed with porn; Lila (Gabrielle Maiden), one of the few African-American women in Marfa, is the curator of Dick’s gallery and yearns to have her taste and vision validated by her white, patriarchal boss. Each woman negotiates identity and liberation on her own terms, with Episode 5 (“A Short History of Weird Girls”), written by Annie Baker and Heidi Schreck and directed by Soloway, the standout of the season; in this anomalous episode, Chris, Devon, Toby and Lily break the fourth wall and directly address the viewer about her/his backstory and first experiences with sexual insecurity and shame.

Once Chris has her sexual awakening, her true self emerges, and there is no going back to her former life of quiet desperation. She’s ready to live out loud, and her lustful letters to Dick evolve into a manifesto and, ultimately, into letters to love itself. I won’t spoil the sensational Season 1 finale, except to say that it involves an inevitable, sexually charged confrontation between Chris and Dick. Now she has his full attention; he’s alert and erect, and the male and female gaze converge in the most shocking and explosive climax I’ve ever seen on a dramedy—bar none. The series is definitely not for the easily offended. It did not get picked up for a second season, although this may be part of Amazon’s bigger shift toward event series (more on this in Chapter 12).

MASTER OF THE OBSERVATIONAL: MASTER OF NONE

Aziz Ansari’s breakout role was that of Tom Haverford on Parks and Recreation. Since Tom the character mostly cares about swagger, networking and being a mogul, it came as a pleasant surprise when Ansari, the actor/writer/producer, and co-creator Alan Yang developed such a sensitive, grounded and unabashedly charming series. Ansari plays Dev Shah, a working actor who is navigating his life as a 30-something, second-generation Indian man in New York.
Now, that premise could lead us to believe *Master of None* is another in a long line of hang-out comedies about hot young people in an apartment who are somehow always just about to kiss. But instead, this personal auteur comedy treats Dev’s life and relationships with naturalism and fluidity. Friends show up in an episode, disappear and then reappear three episodes later at a brunch to discuss Dev’s texts with a girl, mirroring the real way friends come in and out of our lives. (Unlike many sitcoms, which lead the audience to believe our best friends will always be neighbors or that every night somehow everyone ends up in one apartment.)

Dev’s relationship with his parents adds another touch of authenticity to the show. Ansari bravely cast his own parents in the roles of Dev’s mom and dad Nisha (Fatima Ansari) and Ramesh (Shoukath Ansari). The understanding and empathetic portrait that Aziz and Yang paint of their parents in Season 1, Episode 2 (appropriately titled “Parents”) gives viewers a perspective not only on what it’s like to be the children of immigrants, but to be parents to those children. *Master of None*’s subtle interpretation of what it’s like to be a child of immigrants adds depth to the trope of a struggling actor trying to make it in New York City. The show consciously addresses the lack of minority representation in the media through Dev’s struggles (ditto for *GLOW* on Netflix and gender inequality). *Master of None* has also broken new ground: In 2017, actress/writer Lena Waithe (who plays Denise) became the first black woman to win an Emmy for comedy writing, which she shared with co-writer Ansari. The award was for Waithe’s incredibly personal episode “Thanksgiving,” where Denise comes out to her family. Hers was a profoundly moving acceptance speech:

> My LGBTQIA family, I see each and every one of you. The things that make us different, those are our superpowers. Every day you walk out the door and put on your imaginary cape and go out there and conquer the world, because the world would not be as beautiful as it is if we weren’t in it.\(^{11}\)

“Parents” digs into the privilege allowed the children of immigrants as a result of their parents’ sacrifice. The episode starts with Dev’s father Ramesh trying to get Dev to help him fix his iPad, but Dev never answers his phone. The scene concludes with Dev brushing off his father, saying he can’t mess with his iPad now; he’s going to see an *X-Men* movie and doesn’t want to miss the trailers. The exchange is relatable, especially for any child who’s had to help his or her parent set up some form of technology.
What gives the episode an introspective quality is the series of flashbacks that follows: We go back to India, 1958. A young Ramesh (Tarun Vaidhyanathan) plays enthusiastically with an abacus on the street, that is, until a bully comes up and crushes it under his feet. In another flashback, this time to 1980 New York City, we see Ramesh, straight from medical school, arrive in America to go to work as a doctor. When Ramesh inquires about the steak dinner for his family all new doctors are treated to, the racist doctor giving him a tour tells him there will be no dinner; Ramesh and his family can eat in the cafeteria. The last flashback is to Ramesh gifting a young Dev a desktop computer—a major leap from the abacus Ramesh cherished as a child. We see a similar scene play out between Dev’s Taiwanese-American friend—Brian Cheng (Kelvin Yu) and his father. We observe the struggle Brian’s father went through to provide a better life for his family and, again, Brian’s blindness to that struggle.

Here, creators Ansari and Yang (after whom Brian is modeled) evaluate their own relationship with their parents and acknowledge the struggles they have gone through for their children. Brian and Dev both seek verbal affirmations from their parents that they’re proud of them, but in the mind of Ramesh and other immigrant parents, they show their love for their children by creating a better life with better opportunities than they had.

Here, Dev and Brian discuss the difference between Asian parents and white parents as they walk down the street after a movie. Dev’s cell phone honks.

**DEV**

Text from my dad: “Please come and fix my iPad. Now it won’t stop dinging.” Does your dad always text you to fix stuff?

**BRIAN**

I don’t think my dad knows how to text. He also hates talking in person. He averages, like, three words a week.

**DEV**

Our dads are so weird. I told my dad I got a callback on The Sickening--

**BRIAN**

Oh, the black virus movie? That’s great.
DEV
Thank you. I told him. He’s like, “Uh, okay. Can you fix my iPad?” How about, “Hey, son, great work,” or, “Hey, son, I’m proud of you”?

BRIAN
I have never, ever heard my dad say the word “proud.” It’s always like, “That’s it? So that’s all you’ve done?” Like, if I went to the moon, he would honestly be like, “When are you going to Mars?”

DEV
Yeah. “Oh, Brian, you went to the moon? That’s like graduating from community college. When are you gonna graduate from Harvard, AKA, go to Pluto?”

BRIAN
I just feel like Asian parents, they don’t have the emotional reach to say they’re proud or whatever.

DEV
Have you ever hung out with a white person’s parents, though? They are crazy nice.

BRIAN
Yeah. I had dinner once with my last girlfriend’s mom, and by the end of that meal, she had hugged me more times than my family has hugged me in my entire life.

DEV
Yeah, dude, most white families, they’d be so psyched to adopt me.

In the first episodes of Season 2, Dev travels to Modena, Italy, to learn how to make pasta. Ansari has said that he learned not only how to cook, but also how to speak conversational Italian. We get the sense that making his show is part of his personal journey, and Ansari and his character Dev both come across as wandering, restless souls who second-guess and overthink everything. But Dev isn’t a complaining neurotic; he is much more optimistic. At his core, he is a hopeful, not hopeless, romantic. The show is called Master of None, but it might more accurately be called Lust for Life—even when life is crushing. No pain, no gain. It is, after all, a dramedy.
In Better Things, co-creator/showrunner/star Pamela Adlon draws our attention to the internal life of a divorced, single mother trying to raise three daughters by herself. The series is semi-autobiographical, which adds a layer of meta-authenticity: Is this art imitating life, or vice versa? What does it matter, when it’s so poignant, relatable, cringe-worthy, sometimes sad and usually very funny? The series has a bemused, sometimes acerbic, comedic sensibility. The opening theme song, “Mother” by John Lennon, perfectly sets the tone for this melancholic slice of life, as it plays over images of Sam and her girls.

What pulls Better Things into the dramedy category is that, throughout the episodes, we see Sam navigating her doubts and insecurities while juggling a freelance career as a middle-aged Hollywood actress, trying to find Mr. Right, or at least Mr. Right Now; her complicated teenaged/pre-teen daughters and their issues; and her own eccentric, boozy mother (who lives right next door). And don’t you dare call Sam or Adlon “brave” for being so plucky and vulnerable—or she might punch you in the face for being patronizing. Moreover, she’s tough. We root for Sam because she’s unapologetically genuine and suffers fools by confronting them—not to attack or shame them, but to understand them. To say her piece. Amidst all the noise in her life, Sam doesn’t demand validation or accept bullshit. She just needs to be acknowledged and heard. Yet, she’s hardly a control freak. All she ever really wants is to tame the chaos, not conquer it—she’s too exhausted for that. And so, for now, she copes and hopes for better things—which for her means happy kids, steady work—and getting laid. In Adlon’s show, we might finally have a true comedic portrayal of what it means to try and “have it all.”

The realism Pamela Adlon achieves by basing the series directly off of her life is crucial for the emotional beats to land. It makes the show approachable, relatable and equalizing in experience.

When it comes to authenticity, it’s tough to surpass the wry, ironic, gritty, satirical world that is Atlanta. Tonally, the show defies categorization but can be best described as an existential comedy, or more accurately a tragicomedy; it’s an example of how cognitive dissonance can be rewarding to
viewers. It’s not whiplash storytelling for the sake of being provocative; series creator/showrunner/director/star Donald Glover is just keeping it real. But the problem for his alter ego, protagonist Ernest “Earn” Marks, is that life is too real. He may have dropped out of Princeton for undisclosed reasons, but he’s now enrolled in the School of Hard Knocks. In 2017, Glover became the first black person to win an Emmy for directing for a comedy series, and the first black actor to win lead actor in a comedy series since 1985. “It’s pretty obvious people in dystopian societies don’t realize they’re in dystopian societies,” he said after the ceremony. “I just want people to be aware, I think people are aware.”

From the opening (teaser) of the funny pilot episode forward, Glover makes it clear to his audience that they’re in for a destabilizing ride—so don’t get too comfortable. Akin to today’s best dystopian and supernatural series, on Atlanta, anything can happen. Glover can write funny and score laughs at throwaway one-liners, but much of the show’s comic relief comes from Earn’s perpetually stoned, eccentric friend, Darius (Lakeith Stanfield)—a walking non sequitur. In the pilot, out of the blue, Darius asks Earn’s father if he can measure a tree in his front yard. Earn’s mom and dad have perfected the art of the deadpan and manage to steal every scene they’re in. There’s also a middle-aged woman at the airport shilling Delta Airlines credit cards (the rival of Earn and his friend) who taunts Earn by flirtatiously snagging a male customer and then gyrating doggie-style behind the oblivious customer’s back.

But these laugh-out-loud moments are juxtaposed against scenes of police brutality, of negotiating the use of the N-word and of cold-blooded murder. How can a dramedy be so gritty and tragic? In today’s television landscape, authenticity trumps laughs—even in a half-hour format. Donald Glover shows us the Atlanta he knows, loves and hates. (The city, in all its contradictions, is a character in the series, the way Baltimore is a character in The Wire.) One moment Earn and his buddies are laughing it up; the next moment they could be dodging bullets or accused of a crime—in a rush to judgment based on stereotyping—they may or may not have committed.

In the pilot episode, “The Big Bang,” an altercation with a pimp/thug leads to a gunshot and probable death. In Episode 2, “Streets on Lock,” Earn’s rapper cousin Alfred (known as Paper Boi and played by Brian Tyree Henry, Earn’s only client as a nascent music manager) and Alfred’s sidekick Darius are released on bail for the previous night’s melee, but Earn remains in custody. Stuck in jail and hoping that his ex-girlfriend (and mother of his child) Van (Zazie Beetz) will, once again, come to his rescue, Earn witnesses the cruelty of our flawed justice system, as a mentally ill man dances around the waiting area in a hospital gown, then drinks from a toilet and spits the water into the face of a police officer. Earn is horrified by the cop’s
immediate, violent beating of the homeless man. Clearly the man needed psychiatric treatment, not brutality.

To counterbalance this harsh moment, Glover layers in a macho guy who discovers that his pretty girlfriend is trans—and plays the guy’s cluelessness and trans/homophobia for laughs. Everyone in the jail laughs at him, too—except for Earn, who tries to help:

EARN
Sexuality is a spectrum, you can really do whatever you want.

The confused, outraged man responds with, “I know what you think she is, but I ain’t on that faggot shit.” One point for intolerance, zero for Earn. This disconnect is meant to break the tension with humor and, like Paper Boi’s earlier refrain of “I hate this place,” it’s clear that Earn hates this place even more; it represents how oppressed and subjugated Earn feels in his everyday life.

The show’s episodes seamlessly and organically swing from comedy to tragedy and back again, but the Season 1 finale, entitled “The Jacket,” is the most controversial and inevitable. The episode centers around Earn’s lost bomber jacket that he believes he left behind in an Uber after a wild night of partying. We know the jacket has great value to him, and he’s on a quest to get it back. But we don’t find out until near the end of the episode that it’s not the jacket he needs so badly, but actually a key to a storage locker (more on that in a moment).

Meanwhile, Earn tracks down the Uber driver, Fidel Arroyo (Tobias Jelinek) via phone and convinces Paper Boi to give him a ride out to the Atlanta suburbs (with Darius riding along as always). They arrive at Arroyo’s address and stake out the house. As they wait, Earn gets a call from popular rapper Senator K (Qaasim Middleton) who invites Paper Boi to go on tour with him. This is their big break! But Earn is skeptical and guarded from a life of disappointments, and Paper Boi is getting antsy: Three black men have been parked in the same spot for too long, and they look suspicious.

As Paper Boi starts to drive away, they’re cut off by police vehicles and surrounded by a dozen cops in SWAT gear brandishing assault rifles. It turns out that Fidel Arroyo is a suspected drug and weapons trafficker. As Earn, his cousin and Darius put their hands on the cop car in compliance, Fidel tries to make a hasty escape—and is gunned down by an overzealous white cop. Here we go again: the shooting of an unarmed Hispanic man in the back, the spurting of blood, and the dead body
lying on the ground. It’s a shocking moment in any context, but this is a *dramedy*. It’s beyond provocative. It’s horrifying. I counted ten shots.

Understandably, Earn, Paper Boi and Darius are rattled—and relieved at being spared. For the first time since the pilot in which Earn managed to get Paper Boi some airplay on a local radio station, Earn feels lucky to be alive. By now, Earn’s sometimes girlfriend and baby momma Van has newfound respect for Earn’s principles (bolstered by their bizarre experience in Episode 9, “Juneteenth”), and she invites him to spend the night at her place. But Earn declines. He knows he must stand on his own two feet. He could have easily been killed today, so now he’s more determined than ever to be independent and live on his own terms—even if home, for the time being, is a storage locker. Ironically, the key was not in Earn’s jacket pocket after all; he’d given it to Darius for safekeeping.

Without the bitter, there’s no context for the sweet. Without struggle, the reward feels empty or tinged with fear that it’s unsustainable. These shows demonstrate the interstices in our lives. The ellipsis between a dissatisfied “here” and some abstract or idealized notion of “there.” We tend to watch TV during our own interstices, and for varied reasons—to pass the time, for distraction, for inspiration—and yes, escape. Seeing fictional characters who are as uniquely flawed as we are also treading water is comforting. We identify with characters who are always yearning and waiting for the next big thing. But every moment matters, and even the insignificant ones are significant in a great half-hour dramedy. It’s the accumulation of the smallest details and the struggle between the repression and expression of emotions that pulls us in and keeps us invested in the outcome. In several respects, the dramedy has flourished because it’s like life.

**Bonus Content**

Further analysis on dramedies, including the rise of the genre and the shows *Catastrophe* and *Casual* is available at [www.routledge.com/cw/landau](http://www.routledge.com/cw/landau).

**See also:** *Chewing Gum* on Netflix and *Fleabag* on Amazon (a co-production with BBC Four). In *Fleabag*, a pitch-black dramedy, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and grief have never been funnier or more disturbing. *River* on Netflix is a one-hour, drama/crime-procedural that shares some of *Fleabag’s* touching irreverence. And *One Mississippi* is a dark dramedy starring one of the drollest comedians on
Earth, Tig Notaro. The Amazon show is co-created and executive produced by Oscar-winning screenwriter Diablo Cody (Juno).

Notes

1 As “Black” is a politicized term, in this book, I have opted for “black,” as per The Economist style guide on ethnic groups; however, I fully recognize that “Black” may be others’ preference. I deeply respect both viewpoints.

2 MTM Enterprises was the production company behind such classic sitcoms as The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Rhoda, Newhart, St. Elsewhere and Hill Street Blues.

3 The screenplay for the 1970 film M*A*S*H was written by Ring Lardner, Jr., based on the novel by Richard Hooker.

4 My interview with Gervais and full analysis of his show Derek can be found in my book TV Outside the Box.

5 Telling the story “in the cut” demonstrates the elliptical nature of cinematic storytelling in which cutting from one scene to another generates story momentum and irony via juxtaposition.

6 A direct pick-up, or DPU, is the technique of picking up directly where the previous episode left off. This is also known as a contiguous serialized structure.


8 Published by Semiotext(e) in 1997.

9 Named after the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, the Bechdel test asks whether a work of fiction features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man.

10 Influential filmmakers Ava DuVernay, Ryan Murphy and Melissa Rosenberg have all mandated that their writers’ rooms be integrated by race and gender and that at least half of their episodes be directed by women.


Episodes Cited

“Pilot,” You’re the Worst, written by Stephen Falk; Hooptie Entertainment/FX Networks/Bluebush Productions/FXX.
“Easter in Bakersfield,” Baskets, written by Samuel D. Hunter; Pig Newton/Slam Book/3 Arts Entertainment/FX.

“A Short History of Weird Girls,” I Love Dick, written by Annie Baker and Heidi Schreck; Amazon Studios/Topple Productions.

“Parents,” Master of None, written by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang; Universal Television/Netflix.

“Streets on Lock,” Atlanta, written by Stephen Glover; RBA/343 Incorporated/MGMT Entertainment/FXP.
Blurring the Lines

Pilot, You're the Worst, written by Stephen Falk; Hooptie Entertainment/FX Networks/Bluebush Productions/FXX.

Easter in Bakersfield, Baskets, written by Samuel D. Hunter; Pig Newton/Slam Book/3 Arts Entertainment/FX.

A Short History of Weird Girls, I Love Dick, written by Annie Baker and Heidi Schreck; Amazon Studios/Topple Productions.

Parents, Master of None, written by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang; Universal Television/Netflix.

Streets on Lock, Atlanta, written by Stephen Glover; RBA/343 Incorporated/MTM Entertainment/FXP.

The Slow-Burn, Season-Long Procedural

The Call of the Wild, The Night Of, written by Richard Price and Steven Zaillian; BBC Worldwide Productions/Bad Wolf/Film Rites/HBO.

Dystopias, Multiverses and Magic Realism

International Assassin, The Leftovers, written by Damon Lindelof and Nick Cuse; White Rabbit Productions/Film 44/Warner Bros; Television/HBO Entertainment.

Faithful, The Handmaid’s Tale, written by Dorothy Fortenberry; MGM Television/Hulu.

Birth Day, The Handmaid’s Tale, written by Bruce Miller; MGM Television/Hulu.

Character Empathy vs. Sympathy

Insecure as Fuck, Insecure, written by Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore; Issa Rae Productions/Penny for Your Thoughts Entertainment/3 Arts Entertainment/HBO.

Somebody’s Dead, Big Little Lies, written by David E. Kelley; Pacific Standard/Blossom Films/David E. Kelley Productions/Warner Bros/HBO.


Choosing Between Two Wrongs

Our Man in Damascus, Homeland, written by David Fury; Fox 21 Television Studios/Showtime.

AKA You're a Winner!, Jessica Jones, written by Edward Ricourt and Jenna Reback; ABC Studios/Marvel Studios/Tall Girls Productions/Netflix.
The Wild Card Character
□□□eps1.0_hellofriend.mov,□□□ Mr. Robot, written by Sam Esmail ; Universal Cable Productions/Anonymous Content/NBC Universal Television Distribution/USA Network.
□□□Pilot,□□□ Mozart in the Jungle, written by Alex Timbers , Roman Coppola and Jason Schwartzman ; Picrow/Amazon Studios.
□□□I□□□m with the Maestro,□□□ Mozart in the Jungle, written by Alex Timbers and Nikki Schiegelbein ; Picrow/Amazon Studios.
□□□Pimento,□□□ Better Call Saul, written by Thomas Schnauz ; Sony Pictures Television/AMC.
□□□Gloriana,□□□ The Crown, written by Peter Morgan ; Left Bank Pictures/Sony Pictures Television/Netlix.

Writing Smart Dialogue in the Digital Era
□□□Pilot,□□□ Empire, written by Lee Daniels & Danny Strong ; Imagine Television/20th Century Fox Television.
□□□West Covina,□□□ Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, written by Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh McKenna ; Lean Machine/Black Lamb/racheldoesstuff/The CW.
□□□The Bet,□□□ Brooklyn Nine-Nine , written by Laura McCreary ; Universal Television/NBC Studios/20th Century Fox Television.
□□□Jezebels,□□□ The Handmaid□□□s Tale, written by Kira Snyder ; Temple Street Productions/Hulu.
□□□The Law of Vacant Places,□□□ Fargo (Season 3), written by Noah Hawley ; MGM Television/FX Productions.
□□□Chapter 1: The Vanishing of Will Byers,□□□ Stranger Things, written by the Duffer Brothers ; 21 Laps Entertainment/Monkey Massacre/Netflix.