

TV Pandemic Log II 2020-2022

by Clay Reynolds

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Introduction

★ = A must watch—multiple stars indicates level of recommendation

 = Skip it

 = Smart and worthwhile and requires the viewer to think and to know something

In all of the foreign made series, **avoid English dubbing**—always. Go for subtitles.

Notes: The following is necessarily heavy in crime dramas, police procedurals, detective mysteries, and so forth, particularly those of European and British origin, as these all seem to be the meat and potatoes of all streaming television platforms. Nothing, I think, is more appealing to people today, for some reason. It has been thus since Edgar Allen Poe invented the detective story, and Arthur Conan Doyle perfected it; Agatha Christi, Dorothy L. Sayers, and others brought it into the modern era, and now television seems to have pushed it into our own century.

Although there is a sameness about these that borders on redundancy, I find that most all of them, predictable though they sometimes are, offer puzzles to solve, and that may be the appeal. A variance in acting can have a very positive impact, but the opposite is also true. Often the actors seem to be phoning it in. There's a lot of variation in quality, but less variation in plot structures and all suffer from inconsistencies, loose ends left dangling, and improbable coincidences. They also basically ignore significant details such as how long certain pathology tests actually take and all the paperwork that the average cop has to do.

But I have to say that what I've mostly learned from them is the following:

--Avoid English coastal villages and most European coastal villages; they are rife with drug dealers, grisly murders, secreted and often long-buried corpses from cold case files that are exhumed to fit into more contemporary mysteries. Societies in these villages are close-knit and tight-lipped, with little regard for the local constabulary, armed or not, and protective of volatile secrets that hold the key to whatever mystery is afoot.

--Detectives of all sorts and ranks and nationalities who figure prominently in the investigation all share identical traits: They most all have perpetual three-day beards, although they never maintain these, and none ever becomes a full beard; they have perpetually clean clothes, sharp neckties (if they wear such), although they seldom or never bathe or launder garments; in Europe, particularly, they go about in jeans and well-worn tee-shirts, tails often out; although they are grossly underpaid, they all live in picturesque homes, well furnished, often beachfront properties, and far beyond the affordability of a typical police officer; they all have troubled backgrounds owing to widowhood, divorce, or unhappily maintained marriages, often producing children who are troubled and are either always on the cusp of victimhood themselves or are marginally criminal in the main; mothers and mothers-in-law, usually widowed or divorced, live with them or are handily nearby and interfering; fathers are unsupportive and usually irascible if they're not physically or mentally incapacitated; they invariably drive small SUVs and practical sedans of either Asian or European make; they have a love-hate relationship with cell phones and computers; they are outliers, mavericks, not team players, stretching the rules and varnishing the facts to suit their relentless pursuit of justice; their bosses are stern and sometimes troubled themselves with domestic problems they try to keep secret, and they are quick to come down on violations of procedure and policy, which occur with frequency and threaten to derail an investigation. Sometimes, they're involved in criminal mischief themselves. The killer is never who you think it is,

and red herrings and misleading plot lines are designed to set this up. Contrivance and coincidence occur without apology; so do plot gaps one could drive a truck through. and many end with more loose ends dangling than a hand-knitted Christmas sweater. Confusing arrays of side plots and multiple characters and suspects often arise to muddy otherwise murky waters.

Rural American sheriffs and police detectives invariably drive vintage full-sized Ford Broncos or Chevy Blazers, all of which are in mint condition in spite of rough treatment. Muscle cars of sixty-year vintage are commonly seen everywhere and just as commonly wrecked beyond repair in the course of things. European detectives prefer Volvos, Land Rovers, Mercedes, and occasionally Kias for some reason, it seems, although a few Porsches do appear here and there. They always seem to have ample clips of ammo for their weapons ready to hand, rubber gloves stowed away in a pocket for handling evidence, and, for some reason a flashlight somewhere on their person.

It's a cinch that when entering a dark building, room, apartment, warehouse, or other structure, no one thinks to turn on a light with a handy wall switch. Instead, they whip out a flashlight and prowl around in the dark, thereby making themselves a can't-miss target for any lurking thug with a firearm at the ready. It's also a lead-pipe cinch that when readying themselves for a confrontation by taking out a semi-automatic pistol or pump shotgun, they will ratchet back the slide or pump, which would have the insalubrious effect of reducing their firepower by one round. It's also noisy, which isn't always advisable.

It goes without saying that cell phones never need charging even when left by a bedside night after night, computers get instant WI-FI, even when operating in a racing vehicle down a rural road and are never bothered by viruses or annoying prompts that updates are required. Coffee is invariably bad. Meals are rarely eaten in their entirety or sometimes at all (Often, one wonders how some cops keep from starving to death.); sleep is put on hold for days at a time with no deleterious effects, and money is always tight.

They almost never do paperwork. Lab work, particularly DNA testing, is almost instantaneous. Pathologists can whip out a full autopsy in minutes, unless the plot calls for a long delay, photographs can be perfectly and instantly produced from any camera or device, including film, without benefit of dark room, and nobody ever secures an evidence room. Printers never jam, tape always sticks. No lock ever made is worth a damn; any cop or criminal can pick one with a nail file or paperclip or, for that matter, fingernail. Jail and prison cells are roomy and uncrowded; prison common areas are neat and clean; interview rooms are sparsely but efficiently equipped, and all prisons are pristine clean, and are staffed with polite but firm guards, unless they're part of a criminal organization, which they often are, or are on the take, which they usually are.

But on some level or other, almost all are entertaining, with some notable exceptions as noted. The appetite for these is insatiable, apparently, and some are considerably better than others.

A French Village ★★★★★

A multi-series drama set in a fictional town on the border between Occupied France and Vichy France during World War II, it offers a deep dramatic look at both personal relationships and the enormous complexities involved in a small town full of people who are trying to walk a narrow line between forced cooperation with the invading Nazis for survival and treason to their own country. The love affairs and personal betrayals are remarkable for their dramatic import, and the writing is stupendously good as is the acting and attention to period details. The French are divided among Vichy, Gaullists, Communists, and those who are merely bewildered and afraid, but all seem determined to resist as best they can; the Nazis are sinister; German soldiers marginally sympathetic to the locals as they are caught between extremes and are also protectively grateful not to be fighting the Red Army on the dreaded Eastern Front. The political and wartime background provide a stirring backdrop for this highly intricate drama that spans the period 1940-1945; it's a war movie without the war, in a way, a look into the ordinary lives of extraordinary people in almost intolerable times and situations. It veers away from the borderline of soap opera whenever it approaches it, and it offers a marvelous insight into the complexities of human nature. *I highly recommend it.* **Netflix Disk Rental, Amazon Prime**

A Promising Young Woman ★★★

The always pleasing Carrie Mulligan shines in this dark thriller about a young woman who uses uncommon good looks to lure men into seduction and then dispatches them with aplomb, a vengeance motive providing the background. She ultimately meets her match, though, and things get complicated. Worth watching. **Netflix**

A War ★★

Yet another Danish film, this quiet gem of a picture stars Pilou Asbæk and Søren Malling, familiar from the series *Borgen*, but this time in expanded roles. It concerns an accident of warfare in Afghanistan during which a commander in a desperate effort to save the life of one of his men calls in an air strike on what is apparently a civilian household. Although it's not clear, ever, even to him, whether the strike was warranted, the resulting casualties create a furor in this confusing and frustrating war, which had seemingly lost its purpose. As a kind of microcosmic metaphor of the tragic absurdity of the war itself, it is more provocative than resolved in its outcome. **Netflix**

Accusation ★

This series documentary recounts the true story involving an accusation of sexual assault brought against Dominique Khan-Strauss, the head of the World Trade Fund and presumptive nominee for the presidency of France by a maid in a luxury hotel in New York City. She claimed that she entered the Presidential Suite, where DKS was registered and from which he was presumably already checked out, to service the room, when he appeared from nowhere, naked, threw her down on the floor and assaulted her, forced her to commit specific sexual acts, then left her there and made his way to La Guardia Airport, from where he intended to depart for France. She reported the assault to hotel security, who alerted NYPD, who then arrested DKS at the airport and jailed him pending judicial process. The series consists of a series of interviews with various involved parties, including NYPD detectives, investigators from the Manhattan DA's office, private

investigators, journalists (of a sort), French government ministers and politicians, lawyers, prosecutors, and, of course, the victim herself, as well as other women who came forward to level similar past incidents involving DKS. Like many such documentaries, the ending is inconclusive, as the truth remains hidden behind a murky forest of assertions, claims, statements, suppositions, and assumptions, all of which have some degree of credibility behind them. Fast-moving to the point of confusion from time to time, statements and counterstatements fly fast and furious; in the end, it's impossible to know who's telling the truth and who's lying. As DKS remains mum, his role in the affair remains a mystery. It's either a miscarriage of justice or an elaborate con game gone awry. You decide, but be prepared to take six or seven episodes to do so. **Netflix**

American Made ★★★

An older film based on actual events and circumstances that offers Tom Cruise in what may be one of his best roles ever, this film makes a great supplement to *Narcos*, mentioned elsewhere. **Amazon Prime**

Another Life

This sci-fi melodrama was much touted by Netflix, but a more incredible and implausible treatment of space adventure and alien contact could not have been better achieved even by millennials who have the imagination of gnats when it comes to science fiction. In this case, the arrival of a mysterious but huge alien spacecraft that crashes to earth somewhere in the United States and sits there emitting mysterious signals occasions an implausible mission into deep space to try to go to the aliens' presumed planet of origin, which is billions of parsecs away at the far reaches of the galaxy. Okay. The mission absolutely must be led by the series' heroine, a mother of a young daughter and wife of a young man and no one else—she seems to be about a decade or more older than he, and too old to have such a young daughter—and absolutely *no one else*. So off they go, and we discover them in deep space. The crew of this dubious cast includes a mutinous pilot of the huge spaceship, a handsome youth with the customary tree-day beard, which he does nothing to maintain, and a crew of motley men and utterly gorgeous woman—mostly centerfold quality women with perfect coifs and teeth and botox-enhanced lips and salon manicures stuffed into tight skinny jeans and tops. The one woman who does not fit that profile is killed off early on. The other men are singularly ugly, excepting one, a “space diplomat,” who appears to be a college boy caught up in a fraternity prank. One narrow brush with death follows another, and the mission is full of martial arts demonstrations and utterly incredible happenstances, while they crew's banter is pockmarked with contemporary 2020ish slang and colloquialisms, although all of this is supposedly happening far into the future when most of the east coast of the US is under water. Meanwhile, back on Earth, where all is typical for our own time, the abandoned husband, who, by coincidence, is the chief scientist investigating the alien craft, tries to balance fathering duties with his professional work. This is a waste of time for anyone over the age of about ten, although there's a lot of sexual innuendo and foul language. Give it a pass. **Netflix**

Another Round ★★

This Danish film offers a delightfully understated performance by Mads Mikkelsen (*Hannibal*, *Arctic*, and much more). Here, though, the former professional modern dancer and singer who made the transition to film, where he nominally plays loners, sinister types, and villains, takes on a more sympathetic role. In this nearly too sweet tale of four high school teachers, though, he plays a vulnerable man going through a bout of

mid-life crisis. The four men all teach in the same school system. One is a psychologist, one a music teacher, and one coaches elementary school soccer (football, in Denmark). The music teacher, played by Lars Ranthe, will be familiar to fans of *Seaside Hotel*, in a principal role of Herr Madsen. The quartet of fortyish men, all facing the advancing ennui and boredom of middle age, elect to try an experiment suggested by a French psychologist. The idea is for them to try to function between eight in the morning and eight at night with a consistent level of alcohol in their system. The amount is under the legal limit for intoxication; but to maintain it, they violate school policy and drink constantly throughout the day. At eight pm they quit for the night. All have had previous trouble with their students, who are disengaged, unruly, bored. With the infusion of alcohol, though, each of the four teachers suddenly takes on an inspiring role, motivating students beyond any level of performance previously seen. They are suddenly transformed into effective and “fun” teachers. They also become better fathers and husbands, more loving and attentive, generally more animated, more alive. As the experiment continues, though, the obvious problems with such a venture begin to manifest and with somewhat predictable results. The movie is a bit slow, but there are some wonderful moments throughout, and Mikkelsen dominates the screen and the storyline. **Netflix**

Atlantic Crossing 🍷🍷🍷🍷

This PBS offering provides one of the most fanciful romances that Masterpiece has ever deigned to stoop to. A highly imaginative retelling of the plight of Norwegian Crown Princess Maartha as she and her children were spirited away from Norway in the advance of German invasion and aggression and her rise to prominence as a refugee in the United States and her supposed association and affair with Franklin Delano Roosevelt is “inspired by true events,” but is largely the product of addled and overactive imagination. Played deftly by Sofia Heflen (*The Bridge*, among other notable series), a Swedish actress of singular middle-age attractiveness, Maartha emerges from a shy and reluctant celebrity to activist, convincing FDR, overplayed ridiculously by Kyle MacLachlan, as a philandering and totally child-like and irresponsible and somewhat supercilious president, to support the Scandinavian countries. She is singularly credited with the push for Lend-Lease in 1940, among other ridiculous claims made by the film. The supporting cast is earnest but equally absurd in both casting and writing, and the script is marred by twenty-first century slang and colloquialisms as much as by the anachronistic introduction of commercial TV a full ten years before it was available. One ridiculous scene follows another in this improbably saga that has less substance than the average Hallmark Christmas movie. This one is a total turkey and squandering of talent. **PBS**

Away ★★

This space saga featuring Hillary Swank and almost no one else you ever heard of finds a comfortable soap-operaish pathway early on and continues it with astral trajectory. The plot involves the first manned trip to Mars, a three-year proposition, with a four-person crew of Astronauts representing China, Russia, Africa (and by extension England and Israel and the only black character, all rolled into one) and India, with Swank, the American commander, leading the way. The usual bout of technical issues and frictions among the crew create danger for the expedition in opening episodes, but things start turning sentimental as connections to family back on Earth fray and seek to reknot over the millions of miles of separation. Each episode offers a new crisis, handily resolved in forty-eight minutes of angst-dripping tension and syrupy family romance. Everyone in this is good and wonderful, in spite of some minor past indiscretions. The spacecraft special effects are pretty good, although far from perfect. Swank’s long hair never floats in zero gravity, for some reason, for example, and whenever they need gravity, they seem to be somewhere on board where it’s provided. Slow and overly sentimental throughout,

it's not without some entertainment value, but *Star Trek* it ain't; nor is it in a class with any of the more dramatic and better written sci-fi fare in this category. **Netflix**

Babylon Berlin ★★★★★

Not for everyone but hugely rewarding, this is a stunning and deeply complex series set in 1920-1930s, Germany and loosely based on the detective series by Volker Kuschner and involves a regular cast of characters focusing on Gereon Rath, a homicide detective, and Charlotte Ritter, a perky and ambitious young upstart who is determined to be the first female detective on the Prussian Police Force. (The actress, a newbie, has been called one of the most stunning finds in European TV in decades.) The economic and political background is every present, as the Nazi Party gains traction and the struggle between the Nazis and Communists provides a good deal of grist for the criminal mill. The actors are appealing, the characters all seriously flawed; many are nearly grotesque even in the decadent world of 1920s Berlin. But it's a dark and historically accurate portrait of post-WWI and pre-Nazi Berlin that is arresting. As the Nazis come more and more into the light, the corruption of the Weimar Republic starts to show, and the logic of what happened in Germany begins to develop. There is small resemblance between the books, which are excellent, and the TV series; in most ways, the books are as good as or better than the series, but the series is excellent. **Netflix**

Baptiste ★★★

This PBS offering from Masterpiece Mystery and is a spin-off of the popular series *Missing*. The first season harkens back about a half dozen years and follows the exploits of a French detective, Julien Baptiste, played by Tchéky Karyo, in a reprise of his former role, but now who has retired after a bout with cancer. Now removed to Amsterdam with his long-suffering wife in order to be close to their daughter and grandchild, Baptiste wastes no time before being drawn into an investigation being conducted by the local police, the chief of which is his former lover from years before. The caper involves a missing girl being sought after by her purported uncle. She has been working as a prostitute in Amsterdam's red-light district, which is displayed with all the sordidness one might expect. The next season removes from Amsterdam to Hungary, where Baptiste becomes involved in the murder and terrorist plots involving the British ambassador's family. It is more up-to-date as it deals with far-right neo-Nazis and Hungarian nationalism and hostility to immigrants from the Islamic Middle East. The plots of all three series are immensely complicated and are mostly held together with the soft-spoken Baptiste who has remarkable powers of reasoning and logic working for him. He is capable of diffusing most situations with calm, sweetly accented French, and a kind of self-effacing demeanor that somehow inspires trust, but he's also not without his own character flaws or adverse to physical altercation where its call for. These are both fairly slow in development, sometimes plodding, and there are some illogical sequences and improbable circumstances in play. It's still entertaining enough. **PBS**

Being the Ricardos ★★★

This small film about the astonishing phenomenon that was the *I Love Lucy* TV program of the 1950s and the two key people, Ricky Ricardo and Lucille Ball, who were at the creative and popular center of it, a

program that reached the unheard of number of 60,000,000 viewers each week, is fascinating to watch, in spite of a number of significant flaws. Lucy, played with the usual adroitness and chameleon-like abilities of Nichole Kidman, and Desi, played with somewhat less convincing and too much crude roughness by Javier Bardem, are found at the outset of a week in 1953, when the show was riding high, but when Lucy was “outed” as a member of the Community by the highly respected journalist, Walter Winchell. Lucy, of course, was about as apolitical as a person could be, and she had already been cleared by HUAC and the FBI, but the damage was potentially still there in the public’s eye. Anxiety over that, over Ricky’s continual philandering, and over the usual tensions between Lucy and her writers and directors over the episode being rehearsed, and over emerging friction between Lucy and Vivien Vance, played expertly by Nina Arianda, over Vance’s reluctance to gain weight and be comfortable in her match with William Frawley, played with equal care by J.K. Simmons (who seems to be in everything these days), all take a back seat to a more serious problem: Lucy’s pregnancy with their second child. At the time, pregnancy was a taboo topic on TV, which still didn’t show double beds or toilets in homes. All of this provides a series of disjointed and often illogically connected scenes where Lucy lays down the law, Desi runs the show, and the staff that creates the program blisters under the autocratic rule of both of them. Kidman is less convincing physically as Lucy than one might want; but who could ever play Lucy? Kidman often looks the part, but only at a glance, and her eyes are just not Lucy’s eyes. Bardem is far less convincing as Ricky, whose selling point was, in large part, a baby face and deceptively boyish charm. Bardem always looks like a gangster, no matter what. He’s also too big, too muscular for the part. There are significant slips in dialogue that is too 21st Century in its jargon and slang—“I literally just said that!” i.e.—and no one smokes enough, no one. Cigarettes were too much a part of the culture at the time and were, not incidentally, sponsors of the original show. There’s more sadness than triumph in this serious look at one of the funniest comedy teams ever on TV, although the point is made clearly that Lucy was always underrated, underappreciated, and undervalued not just for her personal comic abilities but for her theatrical and creative talents and instincts. It’s worth the time, but probably not as memorable as they’d hoped it would be. **Amazon Prime**

Bethlehem ★

A feature film available from Netflix, this account of the actions of an Israeli agent operating in Palestine and his relationship with an “asset,” who happens to be the younger brother of one of the most wanted terrorists in Palestine lacks much to recommend it. The acting is wooden, plot difficult to follow, situation almost impossible to discern, and plot is convoluted and just plain odd. It’s redemptive qualities come from the action scenes, and there aren’t that many of them. On the whole, it’s not a waster of time, but it lacks much to recommend it. **Netflix**

Better Call Saul ★★★★★

a prequel to *Breaking Bad* that may be as good as or better than the main series, it’s made by the same people and features many of the same actors, although in greater depth and development. It also has a lot of twists and turns and offers the same level of satisfying entertainment and suspense and off-the-wall humor. Actors from the original series include Bob Odenkirk, Jonathan Banks, and Giancarlo Esposito, all of whom were excellent in the primary series, and introduces Rhea Seehorn, who is captivating as a principal character. No knowledge of the original series is really required, although if you’ve seen it, it enriches this one beyond measure. **Netflix**

Billions ★★★

This Showtime series debuted its first season in 2016. It is smart and quick, and stars Paul Giamatti, Damian Lewis, Maggie Siff (coming off *Sons of Anarchy* with aplomb and sophistication) and David Constabile. Asia Cate Dillon makes a debut in a later season, as well, as do others who are talented and significant additions to a quality cast. The writing is quick and witty, although it stretches credibility that all these business and IT majors are so well-read and able to quote major philosophers and poets and make reference to obscure classical literature, mythology, historical events, as well as obscure pop culture notes and so forth with sophistication and a well-read erudition that would escape many top scholars in the fields. The initial conflict between a US Attorney and a billionaire CEO of a huge and prosperous investment company and hedge fund outfit, with the former trying to bring the latter to justice, while the lawyer's wife works as a corporate psychologist for the same company is intriguing and compelling. It's highly complex and requires some knowledge of economics, finance, law, and investments, as well as some technical knowledge of how digital trading works; any gaps in audience perceptions of these can be overcome. The acting is strong, and direction is solid. It all becomes less lavish, less slick as the series moves forward into subsequent seasons, though; it's observable that budget cuts cause a truncation in the elaborateness of the sets and settings, as well as extras to give the corporate setting a sense of business reality. There are fewer exteriors, fewer extras bustling about in the background, and more tightly focused interior scenes. The overarching plot also turns kind of on itself, and there's a sense of impetuosity in its seeking interest in its own creation in order to continue the storyline. Season Six was showing frayed seams, but Seasons Seven and Eight are more marked by an unraveling and a sense of trying too hard. The dialogue is so laden with allusions and scholarly references, one wonders if it's being written by Oxford dons. No business major even at the very best university could know that much history, literature, and philosophy. The plot is also showing severe shopwear, as it is no nearly so clever as it seems to be more a game of dodgeball than chess. Season Eight concludes the overwrought plot, but a new season featuring some of the same actors and a whole new caper will debut in early 2022. **Showtime**

Bitter Daisies

This two-season series is mainly remarkable because it is the first ever to be broadcast in the Gallegian language, which to the inexperienced ear sounds like a hybrid between Spanish and Portuguese, but is, it seems, technically closer to Latin. The wish is that it had been a better vehicle for such a launch. For the most part, this is a highly cliched police procedural, wherein, again, an outside detective arrives in a small town ostensibly to investigate the disappearance of a missing girl. As the girl is known to be a working prostitute, and as her best friend is the teenaged daughter of one of the high-ranking local policemen, the situation is complicated from the outset. There are loads of plot twists, most of which feel contrived and made up as they go along, with some surprise and highly improbable revelations coming later in the first season. Problems with writing are too numerous to list in total. Continuity is a significant problem. The main protagonist, the outside detective, seems to be a former supermodel attempting to make the transition to acting. Her super slender frame, though, is no impediment to her ability to physically handle burly bad guys, and her natural beauty is hard to mask, although not for want of trying. In the course of the week or so she's investigating, she never changes clothes, wearing the same jacket, tee-shirt, jeans, and boots, complemented with a light leather jacket which has two shallow pockets that are amazingly able to contain a tape recorder, cell phone, backup pistol, handcuffs, and a bottle of mysterious pills she takes all the time.

She wears a huge 9mm pistol, as well, and handles it with acting professionalism. There is a dog, a host of sinister suspects, some very mild semi-porn, numerous red-herrings, and more unresolved plot detours and holes than an old sweater left to the mercy of moths. It's also astonishingly slow and boring, unrealistic and hard to follow. A second season is slated for release in 2022. One can only wonder "Why?" **Netflix**

Black Spot ★

An Israeli crime drama, this police procedural is fairly cliched in many ways. The crime here is a school shooting—a massacre, really—that is being investigated by a fairly typical policeman (see headnotes above), who stands out principally because of a glass eye, the residual effect of a beating he suffered as a student at the same high school some years before. Married to an all-too-understanding wife and matched with an all-too-attractive partner, the cop, who is no physical prize, determines that the shooters are members of the student body, masked and disguised, and whose motives are not at all clear. Much of the focus is on the kids. Unless one speaks the language and is familiar with Israeli names, this is the source of some confusion, since many of the youngsters look remarkably alike—all handsome and rich and spoiled rotten. There's some mystery involved, but sloppiness and internal rivalries tend to disrupt the flow and complicate matters entirely. **Netflix**

Bloodlands ★★★

(Not to be confused with *Bloodline*)—At first blush this appears to be just another English coastal police procedural, but quickly coming into focus is the Northern Ireland setting, albeit along the coast, and the residual animosity that continues to excite friction between the Catholics and Protestants of this tragic part of the world. The DCI in this case is the (clean-shaven, for a change, and, as it's in Northern Ireland, well-armed) focus of the mystery at hand. His wife disappeared just before the peace accord put an official end to the "Troubles," as the period of violence, insurrection, and outright murder was called, in the late 1990s. Trying to be a father to his now grown daughter, he has never recovered from the ongoing mystery of his wife's taking off, although he suspects a mysterious killer, someone inside the constabulary itself, named "Goliath," was responsible. The abduction of a former Protestant activist and possible terrorist, though, reopens the wounds and the old cases of disappearance and murder, and "the game's afoot." There are numerous connections that seem to strain credibility, and not a little coincidence to detract, but these are easily overlooked with the intensity of the drama unfolding among the principals. In only four episodes, the mystery is more or less solved, but numerous twists and unexpected turns mark the journey. A second season is planned. **Amazon Prime**

Bloodline ★★★★

This outstanding series has been around on Netflix for a while. It boasts an all-star cast with Kyle Chandler playing the lead against Sissy Spacek and Sam Shepard. Set in the Florida Keys, it follows the story of a successful family with a black sheep brother, played by Ben Mendelsohn, who stars in *The Outsider*, the Stephen King vehicle that was more recently released on Amazon, who returns to create chaos and disruption in the wake of the death of their paternal scion. Dark and sinister events are cast against the ocean-fronted Florida island sky and weather, with convincing set and background and a large cast of

characters that continues to intrigue and complicate matters over the run of the series. Highly watchable and bingeable. **Netflix**

Bonfire of Destiny ★★

This soapy rendition of the great fire at the Charité Bazarre in Paris in 1897 that claimed nearly 130 lives, most of them aristocratic women, some of whom were tragically trampled by panicked men fleeing the flames follows the tangled lives of two particular families who were caught up in the tragedy. It's not without some suspense and steamy romance as well as a hefty amount of class-scandal and corruption as well as a socially conscious message about the place of women in society. The most interesting part of it is the period detail and the setting. The attempt to wring a compelling personal drama out of the horrific event is a bit strained, and coincidence and circumstance play heavy roles. There's a fine cast of buxom beauties and handsome lotharios, some sinister villains who offer a few twists here and there to keep things interesting. It's more than worth the time, but don't expect too much. **Netflix**

Bordertown ★★★

This is a very slow-moving, highly complex, but deeply engaging series set in a small, industrial town on the Finnish/Russian border. The focus is on a detective with extraordinary powers of memory and acute observation of details which give him abilities to deduce solutions to complex cases owing to a faculty for reasoning and recall that give him unique insights. The writing is uneven, and there are annoying gaps in plotline details, forcing the audience to deduce for themselves what must have happened here and there. The cast, though, is consistent, characters do come to well-rounded life (None is completely likeable.), and plot lines are extended from episode to episode, even season to season over the three-year run. The characters are unique and interesting to follow. **Netflix**

Borgen ★★★

Set in Denmark, this four-season series starts slow but unfolds better than it packages. The characters are well developed and sustaining of interest. The story concerns the first female prime minister of Denmark—the series first aired in 2010, and the first woman, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, served as the Danish PM in 2011-2015 but is not really a model for anything; oddly, the series' heroine Brigette Nyborg, played by Sidse Babett Knudsen (who also is featured in a small role in *Roadkill*), gives up the office and goes back into the complex political arena that is Danish politics about the time that Thorning-Schmidt got her legs under her in the office. The various political machinations are foiled by a companion plot line involving television reporters for Denmark's TV1, sort of the equivalent of CNN, as it battles in the ratings wars with TV2, sort of the equivalent of FOX News, with a kind of *National Enquirer* print paper mixing things up on the sidelines. The main reporter for all of that is Katrine Fonsmark, played by the almost terminally sexy and desirable Brigette Hjort Sorenson, who is best remembered from *Game of Thrones*. The bridge between them is her sometimes lover, sometimes father of her child, and sometimes press secretary Kaspar Lang. It's complex, what with Danish politics being a mishmash of multiple small parties making unholy alliances all the time, and what with family drama also going on in the background; it has great character development, and it comes to a satisfying conclusion after four seasons and is well worth the time. **Netflix**

Bosch ★★★

Based on the novels of Michael Connelly, this multi-seasoned series follows Bosch, a maverick homicide detective in Los Angeles. Shot with filters that do not mask the dirtiness and sordidness of LA, or the smog and dustiness, either, and written with a kind of folksy corniness in dialogue that is very naturalistic, it's very watchable and never slow. The storyline is continuing, involves Bosche's ex-wife, a professional gambler, and his all-too-skinny daughter, who is too good to believe and never quite as pretty as they want her to be, season to season, and there are high quality and naturalistic players in the supporting cast. Strong jazz undercurrents give it a slight noir flavor, but after a while Bosh gets just hard to take. **Amazon Prime**

Broadchurch ★★

Set in Dorset in 2013 this seems at the outset to be a typical BBC British crime series. A detective with a checkered past is sent to a small coastal village with loads of scenery to take over the head of CID, displacing an ambitious Detective Sergeant who believed she was up for the job. That friction operates in the background when a young boy's body is found on the beach; he has been brutally murdered. The village is typically very small, and the community typically close-knit, so as suspects pile up and the mystery deepens, there's no shortage of red herrings as individual secrets are slowly revealed, each seemingly incriminating, but none conclusively so. There is sufficient tension and intrigue, and regular fans of British television and film will enjoy seeing a half-dozen major actors in younger iterations strutting their stuff in this well-crafted three-series continuation of a centralized plot that has no end of twists and turns. There's a measure of contrivance to be ignored, but on the whole, it's fascinating to watch. **Netflix, PBS**

Capitani ★

Another police saga following the usual pattern. A handsome and rugged and slovenly dressed out-of-town cop finds himself sent against his will and in violation of his rightful vacation to a tiny town—this time in Luxemburg—where two girls have gone missing in the nearby woods. One turns up dead from mysterious causes; the other is missing. The cop, Capitani—great name—has a checkered past but is known for his sleuthing skills, and he immediately is paired with an extremely attractive novice officer, who, it turns out, is hooked up with a ne'er-do-well soldier in apparently the Luxembourgian military, such as it is, who has knocked her up and promises to marry her—but we know that isn't going to happen. Suspects abound in the small village where everyone knows everyone else and everyone also knows everyone's darkest secrets and most cloistered business, however nefarious it may be. One wants to say, "Nothing to see here." and move on. But there are some interesting dynamics among the characters that, if one can stay awake, keep things glued together. **Netflix**

Case ★★

Another police procedural, again from Iceland, this caper involves what is apparently a suicide, but a single detective with a tenacious hold on illogical details is convinced that it's a homicide. Matters are complicated by the fact that the victim, a young girl, is the foster child of a wealthy couple, and she was wrenched, possibly because of fake complaints and the compliance of a corrupt social worker, away from her natural parents, who are still bitter over the injustice. Further complications involve a kind of dark alcoholic minor

criminal whose girlfriend is a competent hacker; the pair of them for apparently humane reasons, undertake to expose the wealthy couple as corrupt and also as abusers of the dead girl. If that's not enough, there's a sexual predator at work, seducing underage girls who are unknowingly filmed during sexual acts, although to what purpose is not immediately clear. Finally, there's a slimy gangster type who may or may not be supplying drugs to other schoolgirls who may or may not be involved in the growing sex ring. If all of this sounds like too much, it probably is. Still, the writing and acting are well done, and although the complexities compete for time and give the whole a sense of plodding rather than progressing, it is not without strong interest. **Netflix**

Chestnut Man ★★★

Another Danish police procedural, this time set in Copenhagen rather than in some remote village, this crime drama follows the investigative efforts to track down a serial killer who is apparently targeting women against whom complaints of their neglect or abuse of their children have not produced results from the government entities that are supposed to police such things. The killer is intrepid and smart, always, it seems, a step or two ahead of the police, and his ruthlessness and bizarre methods of torture and death of his victims is sickening to contemplate. At the center of things is a mismatched pair of detectives, a woman, Naia Thulin, played by Danica Curcic, and Mark Hess, played by Mikkel Boe Følsgaard. Both are excellent in their roles. Thulin, whose innate beauty and sexuality is tamped way down by dowdiness and apparent exhaustion, is attempting to transfer out of homicide and into a job with more stable working hours for the benefit of her young daughter, who needs her attention; Hess, nerdy and overly quiet and accepting of his diminished status, is on assignment from what amounts to Europol, after some kind of breakdown he suffered when his wife and child were killed in a fire. They have an uneasy partnership, as Hess is still psychologically injured, and Thulin resents being given a part-timer and cast-off loser as a partner. Overseeing them is their supervisor, Nylander, played with characteristic bluster by Lars Ranthe, familiar to fans of *Seaside Hotel*, but with no hint of comedy in this serious role. The drama is enhanced by a subplot involving a cabinet minister's daughter, who disappeared a year before and was never found, but whose fingerprints somehow turn up at all the murder scenes. This is suspenseful and dark and grisly, but it is consistently unpredictable and entertaining, never slow or bogged down by personal life drama that is held on the margins. The first season comes to a last-minute conclusion, but a second season is set up by the conclusion. As these sorts of series go, it's very good. **Netflix**

Citizen Hearst ★★★★★

Another installment of PBS's *American Experience* series, this proves out to be an excellent and thorough examination of one of the most phenomenal individuals in American history, William Randolph Hearst. Heir of sorts to his father's mining fortune, young Willie Hearst drops out of Harvard where he had no intention of staying and capitalizes on his mother's affection and generosity to build a publishing empire out of nothing. Starting in San Francisco, he moves to New York, courts and marries a showgirl, and attacks the established press remaking form and face of newspapers for all time. Hearst's ruthlessness and careless expenditures of money are paralleled by an outrageous lifestyle and public image that would return him to California where he settled into the role as a notorious and highly admired and hated public figure. His relationship with his wife and mistress is at the front and center of this documentary, as is his lavish behavior and over-the-top personality. There are shadings of contemporary figures present in Hearst's role in shaping

both the news as well as the political landscape of the country. This is a very worthwhile four hours to spend for anyone. **PBS**

City on a Hill ★★★★★

Produced by Ben Affleck and Kevin Bacon, who stars in it, this series enters its second season with the same gritty and violent themes and plotlines that defined the first. It's a thoroughly Boston scene, set in the early 1990s, and involves tensions among the Boston Police Department (marked by racism and corruption in the main), the DA's Office (marked by political corruption and budgetary concerns), and the FBI (marked by racism and corruption). These three entities are involved heavily in the War on Drugs in Beantown, and as they jockey and bump elbows in their various bids for primacy, the few honest cops and prosecutors involved find themselves helplessly caught up in situations that force them to compromise their own integrity and honesty in order to achieve nobler goals. A thoroughly Boston-rich story, viewers are required to have a good knowledge of the various areas of the city, its ethnic divisions, and some knowledge of Boston's demographic history. Mostly, though, it's about Bacon's character, Jackie Rohr, a drug-addicted FBI agent who has crossed the line often, sometimes in the name of justice and sometimes in the name of personal gain or revenge. Everyone bristles with hostility. Loving couples yell profanity at each other at the top of their lungs, parents insult children and vice versa, brutal language vies with horrific physical violence that is never far from the surface. Drug-dealers, prostitutes, pimps, blemished priests, recent immigrants, IRA operatives, street gangs, rats and crooks run rife in the city, making one wonder what value there is in living there. Everything and everywhere seems seedy, dirty, old, and decrepit. At the same time, though, there is a haunting attraction to the series, like watching a disaster unfold one horrific layer at a time. By the final episodes of the continuing plot, it emerges as both surprising and riveting and thoroughly believable. It's worth the time, but not for everyone. **Showtime**

Collateral ★★

A 2018 limited series now available on Netflix, this is police procedural starring the consistently versatile and always pleasurable Carey Mulligan who is stunning as the matter-of-fact, highly confident DSI investigating the murder of a pizza delivery man in London. Complex and offering more than the usual number of twists and turns as well as convincing political friction, there are at least three subplots, most all of which are tied up at the end, although there is a sense that hopes for a continuation were in the works. That never happened, and Mulligan has moved on. But this is worth a look. **Netflix**

Coyotes 🐺🐺🐺

In spite of high production values and some imaginative acting here and there, this limited crime caper series from Belgium makes no earthly sense whatsoever. A group of scouts, all of whom seem way too old to be participating in a kind of ersatz boy or girl scout jamboree, find themselves camping in the Luxembourgian forest. They are doing the usual scouting things, pitching tents, chopping wood, boating, hiking, playing games, etc.; but one of their number inadvertently finds the body of another young man about his age and on him is a cache of diamonds worth millions. In the meantime, the same discoverer falls in love with the all-too-pretty daughter of the local estate owner, who is worried about money and hanging

onto her land. The daughter was in on the original diamond theft heist, but she has no idea her boyfriend has been killed and assumes that he's abandoned her. In the mean, meantime, the scouts somehow and quite improbably stumble upon the hidden diamonds, that the kid who found it has incongruously—and stupidly—stashed it in a hollow tree. If that's not enough to put viewers off, there's a philandering priest, an inept local cop, a gang of other young people held in thrall by the chief bad guy who killed the diamond thief in the first place, a brutalizing older brother, a priggish scout who is determined not to go along with the scout's mission to hock the rocks and make off with the dough. Not enough silliness, yet? There's an extraordinarily strong Seik hitman who doesn't speak French and relies on a telephone app to interpret his words into English, yet, so the Belgians can understand him, some corrupt and criminal but utterly inept diamond merchants in Antwerp, a clueless scout master who enjoys brutalizing his charges, and.... well, it goes on and on. Distances mean nothing; these people cover miles in minutes, are able to locate one another or a specific place in a forest too dense to see through, and the whole thing descends into a farcical bloodbath Monty Python would have been proud of, if it was funny, which it's not. **Netflix**

Crime ★★★

This is actually a multiple series, all with the same primary title, but each as a different subtitle—UK, France, Spain, Germany, etc. All use the same set, an interview room in a generic but very modern police station. The room features a one-way mirror, a table, camera and recorder, and four chairs. The subject of the moment—suspect, witness, sometimes both, is seated at a plain table, with or sometimes without a lawyer present; opposite will be one or two police detectives. There are microphones and a camera in plain view, and the session is recorded. On the other side of the glass is a fairly sophisticated computer and recording set-up, with at least one detective monitoring the proceedings, and another possibly doing various computer investigation chores such as verifying statements, facts, or checking background or other statements as they are made. The subject is aware this or something like it is going on, and sometimes mentions it. The premise is that the interviewing officers have a pretty good idea that the suspect is guilty of the crime in question, and their job is to extract a confession merely through conversation. Things are sometimes very intense, and sometimes a bit funny, but there are always unexpected twists and turns that can change the direction of things rapidly. Interplay among the officers is sometimes involved, as they all have ambitions and sometimes personal relationships that can be either fractious or romantic or merely a conflict growing out of the police hierarchy. This is highly entertaining for fifty minutes or so at a time; each episode deals with a different crime, different setup, and each segment is in a different country and in a different language. It's not for everyone. It's very cerebral and requires close attention. All of the first season is available, and the first sequence (*Crime UK*) of the second season is just now available. **Netflix**

Cry Macho

No matter whether one's position is that they hate or love Clint Eastwood's movies, the one thing that's sure is that none is boring, none uninteresting, none less than original. It's a shame, then, that at age 92, what is very likely his last movie should be such a dull, nonsensical, cliched and poorly produced film, one that is imminently forgettable. Typically, Eastwood stars in this self-directed virtual parody of his former roles. Once again, he's a loner, maverick tough guy who does the right thing simply because it's the right thing. In this case, he's been commissioned by a wealthy Texas rancher, a role virtually phoned in by Dwight

Yokum with lines delivered as if he's reading them off a cue card, to go to Mexico and retrieve the rancher's son from his extremely wealthy and well-connected ex-wife who is reportedly abusing the thirteen-year-old kid, played with excessive woodenness by Eduardo Minett. The youth, who supposedly grew up in Mexico City and lives on the street most of the time, speaks flawless English and can't pronounce many Spanish words properly. The dialogue is horrible, the situation totally implausible. Set in the late 1970s so as to avoid the inconvenience of the present situation in cartel-controlled Mexico, one surmises, Mike, the Eastwood character, can barely stand and walk upright, but he manages to break a small herd of mustangs en route home. He also has an innate knowledge of Mexican backroads, and he navigates his way to a border crossing in the middle of nowhere back into Texas, somewhere that lacks the inconvenience of having to cross the Rio Grande, and is always able to punch out a bad guy with a single blow. Spanish and English intermingle without consideration for understanding, unless it's convenient to fail to understand; there is no logic to the ultimate rendezvous at the border, everyone just magically shows up; illogical and improbable scenes, one including an "attacking rooster," mix with incorrect nomenclature—regular police are called "federales" throughout—and in spite of his evident frailty and declining health, Eastwood is, once more, irresistible to beautiful young women. Shot entirely in New Mexico, it doesn't look anything like the Mexican interior, cars are stolen willy-nilly and without consequence, and no matter how antique they are, they always start, always run. Nothing in the movie makes sense, but it's not even good escapist fantasy. It's just a pitiful attempt to reclaim former glory, and as such is a sad final act for a star who was once so much at the top of his game. **Amazon Prime**

Deadwater Fell 🍄

This is a slow Polish crime series, limited to one season, involving the search of a prosecutor for his sister, who went missing along with two other kids, from a summer camp thirty years in the past. When a fourth kid who was presumed to be dead turns up as an adult, apparently murdered, the prosecutor goes into action. Sort of. The whole thing bounces back and forth in time without warning and lacks tension. **Netflix**

Dirty John ★★★★★

Another true-crime docudrama, Season One moves nearer the quick of a painful ordeal wherein a professional con man insinuates himself into the life of a highly successful but somewhat naïve and vulnerable woman and proceeds to take over her world. Domination by charm, good lucks, and a patina of sincerity that is difficult to penetrate or find flaw in, the name character is indeed a ruthless cheat, liar, scoundrel, and poltroon of the first order. Conflicts between him and the woman, a four-time divorcee but somehow enormously wealthy and attractive woman played by Connie Britton, memorable from *Friday Night Lights* and *The White Lotus* (discussed below), her daughters, played by Julia Garner (*Ozark*) and Juno Temple with convincing Valley Girl characterization and their long-suffering grandmother, Jean Smart, more recently seen in a pivotal role on *Mare of Easttown*, match the villain, played with chilling and sinister tones by Eric Bana. The rest of the cast features a number of other familiar actors. Although it's been around for a while, this series is now launched into a second season with a whole new caper that works equally well but is completely different in tone and plot, as well as in villains. Christian Slater and Amanda Peet head another fine case. Both seasons are grabbers, though, full of suspense. Slickly written, brilliantly directed, and extremely well-acted, it's bingeable. **Netflix**

Dogs of Berlin ★★★

This is a somewhat older (2019) German crime series that requires viewers to bring some knowledge of both soccer (football) and the enthusiasm therefor in Germany, as well as current events in German racial politics. The bad guys are divided into factions, ranging from Neo-Nazis to Turkish motorcycle gangs to Lebanese mafia to general Arabic immigrants, all of whom hate each other with equal verve. Caught in the middle is an overworked police department, that itself divided because of diversity and multi-racial profiling, with Turks, Lebanese, black and white cops all trying to get along, and with the additional element of gender leveling and the need to include gay cops all clashing with the imbedded bigotries and prejudices of generations. All of this makes for a heady mixture, made more complex by the individual corruption of some of the most effective and outstanding officers. One of these is the focus of the series, a practicing bigamist with two families, a compulsive gambler deeply in debt to the very betting syndicates he's investigating. Add to this the near-criminal life of one of his two wives and the struggle for acceptability of the other, who also is prone to adultery, children involved in both marriages, plus his background in the new Nazi party, a mother who is out all-but-announced Nazi fascist, a brother who is a leader of the cult, and a homosexual-hating opportunist, it's a stretch to call him a "hero." But so he is. Saddled with a gay Turkish partner, who is more interested in bringing down a huge Lebanese crime syndicate than in solving the mysterious murder and mutilation of German's top footballer, himself a Turk, and the attempts of the self-same criminal syndicate to branch out into match-fixing, and things get even dicier. The series is sexy, violent, dark and dirty, with numerous side-plots and connections that aren't entirely apparent for a time, and it's sometimes hard to keep up. But in the end, it's worth the effort, although there are still some loose threads dangling, tantalizingly suggestive of a second season that never appeared, probably because of COVID. **Netflix**

Don't Look Up ★★★★★

This send-up of disaster films offers a surprise second blade in its double-edged satiric attack on the general stupidity of people in general and of the American public in particular. The premise is that a huge comet is hurtling toward the Earth on a collision course that is a scant six weeks away. The discovering scientists raise the alarm and are summoned to Washington, and the "fun begins," as the President of the US, played with brutal satiric efficiency by Meryl Streep, turns out to be kind of a female version of Donald Trump, surrounded as she is with clowns and buffoons, including her own son—Chief of Staff. The sarcastic hits just keep on coming as the scientists are treated as cranks and nutjobs by a comedic version of *The Today Show* combined with *Morning Joe* with some *Fox and Friends* blended in. Jennifer Lawrence, Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Blanchette, and a host of other major stars skip lightly through the whole film and acquit themselves well as the absurd reactions to the news of imminent planet destruction spreads, is massively denied in spite of scientific confirmation and then deliberately ignored—shades of COVID-vaccine deniers cast long shadows here—by hundreds of millions who see a political motive in the whole thing, adding an additional skewering of social media and billionaire entrepreneurs to the mix. The movie would have been better without some untoward and undermining sexual innuendo that undermines the protagonists' seriousness, but small roles by Ron Pearlman, Rob Morgan, Melanie Lynksey, and others buoy the whole thing and keep the laughs coming to the very end. **Netflix**

Dream Horse ★★★

This movie, which carried low expectations, truly delivers. In a sense, the actress, Toni Collette, puts Francis McDermott into the shade, and that's hard to do with the formidable McDermott. The plot isn't that unfamiliar. A down-trodden, rural housewife whose life has become nothing more than tedium and a cycle of boredom gets the idea to purchase a thoroughbred mare, then breed her to a former championship stud, and raise the colt up to be trained as a racer. She has to form a consortium of local folks to contribute the money, and she uses her government allotment as a place for the horse, which has little chance of becoming much more than, well, a horse. But she is cunning enough to have done her homework on the bloodline; as it happens, she's right. The usual dramatic trauma rocks the plot forward, but in the end, it's a genuinely smart and inspirational film about ordinary people doing something extraordinary and finding themselves newly defined by the experience. **Netflix**

Dreamland ★★

A low-budget vehicle with no major stars, this Depression-Era saga is supposedly set in Childress County, Texas, but looks too much like New Mexico, where it was actually shot, to pass muster. There simply are no mountains in that part of Texas, not even hills worth the name, and the aridity of the geography much farther to the southwest is out of place here. The plot involves a Bonnie Parker-style villainess who is shot during a hold-up in an apparently mythical town that also in no way resembles any Texas berg. In the get-away, her partner/lover is killed and she winds up hiding out on the farm owned by a local deputy sheriff, and his hapless wife, their daughter, and the deputy's step-son, a teenager who falls, of course, desperately in thrall with the gun moll. Her ruthlessness and ability to seduce and then sustain the support of this poor, ignorant country boy who dreams of his absconded father and Mexico, where he supposedly went when he ran off years before, occupy far too much of the movie's unfolding plot. In the background the devastation of the Dustbowl is on-going, only the results of that are conveniently out of sight in subsequent scenes. They also have a "swimming lake" still available in the middle of the worst drought in centuries in a part of the country where there are no natural ponds, let alone lakes worth the name; details are also confused, as characters manage to overlook stolen clothing and to ignore the obvious among other improbabilities. It could have been a good but imitative story, but it stumbles over its own feet far too much and ends in a predictable and telegraphed fashion. It has some good moments, but not enough and not often enough. **Netflix**

Endeavor ★★★

This is in seven seasons, I think, and it's one of the best of the period British crime dramas on TV. It follows a small group of small-town (Oxford) police detectives as they battle a criminal syndicate and investigate attendant crimes, many of which involve dons from the university. It's not trite, and it's very true to period, with a highly talented cast and good direction. **PBS, Netflix**

Fargo ★★★

The first three seasons evolved from the deliciously bingeable to the utterly acceptable. Season Four offers Chris Rock in the main role as a gangster heavy. He's amazingly convincing in the role, over the top in some ways, but that's the fault of the writing, not the acting. Although set in 1951 Kansas City and meticulous in period detail,

background, props, and cultural references, it's loaded with both verbal and attitudinal anachronisms. It's also pointlessly violent, and it wastes some fine acting talent. Improbabilities occur in every episode, and the plot, such as it is, is so convoluted and confused that I doubt anyone, including the writers, could make sense of it. Excessive and self-indulgent, with a lot of scenery-chewing, it was hard to watch at times, as it went so far off the rails. The first three seasons are studies in what's possible with TV drama; the fourth, though, is an utter waste of quality actors, overzealous special effects, and gallons of Hollywood gore, all in a pointless, self-indulgent romp that should be embarrassing for the Coen Brothers to put their names on. **FX**

Fatma 🍷🍷

A Turkish series set mostly in Istanbul, this has so little to recommend it that it's hard to know how the makers could stand to finish it. The acting is one-dimensional and never changing in characterization; the writing is bewilderingly dependent on circumstance, coincidence, and huge gaps in coherence or logic, and the overall story is merely one of mayhem that is pitifully justified by childhood trauma combined with repressed memory and denial of responsibility. Nothing much makes sense here. It's a wonder that Netflix bought it. **Netflix**

Fauda ★★

Another Israeli series that follows pretty much the same premise as outlined in *Bethlehem* above. Israeli undercover agents operate in Palestine, posing most often as Arab-speaking Palestinians, even mimicking all their religious trappings, including incessant evocations of Allah and prayer at mosques. A team of operatives has been assembled to ferret out and capture or kill a terrorist who is operating outside the perimeters of the Palestinian governing authority (mostly HAMAS) and is threatening to upset the tenuous ceasefires and peace that protects both sides. The agents dress casually as Palestinians—tee shirts and designer jeans, for the most part—and pose as different people from time to time. The Palestinian terrorist, though already to be dead but somewhat suddenly revived and reemerged has a gang of operatives working with him or for him, including an Oman, who tries to hold everything together. Meanwhile his long-suffering wife and family pretend that he is dead, although the pretense is fairly thin. Once exposed he goes on a mission to destroy as much as he can, employing suicide bombers and exploiting pretty much everyone. The first year of the series is a bit slow, almost plodding, and there are some significant gaps in credibility that strain the plot. It's brutal, violent, and there's a lot of death. The second season gets more interesting as love interests develop among the agents and various Palestinian women as well as among each other. The main character agent, Doron, is a rough-and-tough guy unafraid of violence or of going rogue, which he tends to do, disobeying orders and mostly getting away with it. As is the case with numerous similar series, the story reveals, intentionally or not, that these two peoples are more alike than they are different. They look alike, their languages are similar, they worship the same god in much the same way, they eat the same foods, dress the same slovenly way, but they are somehow eternally locked in a battle of hatred and recrimination that seems never-ending. **Netflix**

First Cow ★★

Set in the Oregon Territory in the 1820s, this disappointing attempt at a frontier drama that depicts an unlikely friendship between a hapless drifter and a Chinese immigrant is not without some interest, but it fails, ultimately, to fulfill its promise. The premise is that these two basic losers are thrown together by

circumstance, misfortune, and some hopelessness near a frontier outpost during this primitive time in the wilderness. The American, who has been taught how to cook, brings his talents to work with the entrepreneurial talents of the Chinese man, who is, himself, running from white men who want him for killing one of their parties—a justified case of self-defense, according to the Chinese man. When the cook, though, manages to use basic ingredients to concoct tasty pastries that sell like hotcakes among the trappers, traders, and pre-Gold Rush miners of the region, they seem to be well on their way of reversing their fortunes. The film fails, ultimately, to satisfy, though, as the fate of these two vagabonds winds up being pointless and unknown. Great performances elevate this thoughtful, well-acted, and beautifully photographed film above the mundane. But the plot was wanting. **Netflix**

Flesh and Blood ★★★

This seems to be another limited PBS Masterpiece series, following a now somewhat familiar formula. There is another of the apparently endless array of English coastal villages, a small town, with people living casually in gorgeous homes, this time overlooking the English Channel over the Dover Cliffs. A widow, played by Francesca Annis, who has been a staple bit player on Masterpiece series going back decades and was a regular on *Home Fires* a half-decade ago, has three adult children, all with significant problems of their own. She becomes involved with a retired physician played by Stephen Rea, best remembered for his Oscar Nomination for *The Crying Game*, who is full seductive mode and may well be courting her for her money. There's a strong soap-atmosphere about this melodrama, although it's not without some interest, as the crime, if there is one, is concealed through the first few episodes of a limited series. **PBS**

Forgotten Battle ★★★★

This internationally funded war saga is exceedingly well done for what it is. It is the combined effort of Dutch/Lithuanian/British filmmakers and producers, shot in Holland and Lithuania, and offers up some of the most realistic combat sequences I've seen in a long time. There's not a lot of personal drama in it, and what little there is fails fairly completely; but as a pure war movie it works. It's set in November 1944 and involves the battle of the Scheldt, which was, a near disaster for the Allies, as the Canadian army group sent to try to open up that river from German control and thereby make Antwerp available as the major port to the Allies, was nearly wiped out by a much smaller German army defending it. The whole operation was "forgotten," largely because it was incorporated into the larger operation, "Market Garden," which was an unmitigated disaster for the British, Canadian, and American armies supporting them. Great camera work, period detail, and realistic combat sequences provide gory, horrific, and chaotic scenes of combat; more extras (soldiers) would have helped sell it better, but for war movie fans, it's a fine romp. **Netflix**

Foundation ★★★

An Apple TV+ vehicle based on Isaac Asimov's award-winning novel, originally short stories (1943-1953) the hammered into a trilogy that was pronounced "Best All-Time Series" by the Hugo Awards in 1966. There were two or three following volumes written and published in the 1980s, all prequels, I think. I read the original three volumes when I was in 9th grade, long about 1961-62, and thought they were the best sci-fi I'd ever read, an opinion I have had no reason to amend, since. They were, in retrospect, highly prescient. Asimov's

personal genius, erudition, understanding of the cosmos, and sensitivity to the human condition, warts and all, is profound. That trilogy, which Asimov claimed was inspired by Gibbon, was the basis for Tolkien's "Ring Trilogy," for *Star Trek*, and, of course, for *Star Wars* and much else in the sci-fi literary and sub-literary pantheon. What's striking the TV series--which is nowhere as good as it should be--is how Asimov invented concepts and scientific technological development decades before such ideas were even in scientists' imaginations. Things like "warp drive," cyber sleep, hieroglyphic transportation and imaging, human cloning, AI and robotics, of course, are all present in his work, although they are called different things. I also find it fascinating that the basis for his futuristic predictions finds its impetus in history, and the wedding of history and mathematics, with metaphysics and literature being fundamental to their understanding. The technology actually takes a back seat here, it being so very commonplace that no one finds anything about it remarkable. The series gets a lot right, but it fails to get a lot right, as well. In a way, it's sort of like *Game of Thrones* meets *Star Wars*: or, "*Star Wars* for Adults" with a bit of *Lord of the Rings* thrown in. The romantic similarities are hard to ignore; but the vision Asimov imposed on the whole is also remarkable. I find the concepts in the series reminiscent of the books and haunting in a "liberation of the imagination" kind of way. I do wish the teleplay writers could avoid twenty-first century jargon a bit more. I also wish the racial subtext of the filming of it wasn't so heavy-handed (all good guys are played by blacks; almost all bad guys are played by whites; all of the acting is a bit wooden). It's still worthwhile, although far less than it could have been. **Apple TV+**

Fourteen Minutes ★★★

A great legal/cop thriller set in NYC, with some fine acting and very good writing. Not to be confused with three other series with similar names. It is compelling and addictive and more than a little suspenseful. **Netflix**

Frieda ★★

This biopic centers on Frieda Kahlo, the lover, then wife of famed painter and muralist and socialist revolutionary Diego Rivera. A gifted artist in her own right, Frieda meets and marries the much older and thoroughly reprobated Rivera when she is barely out of school, accepting him, flaws and all. He nourishes her talent to an extent, but she remains in his shadow, always seen as his charming and intelligent consort, not so much as his wife and companion and, to some extent, inspiration. As time passes, Rivera, now a committed communist, takes up with the exiled Leon Trotsky, exiled to Mexico and in fear of assassination by his former partner in revolution, Josef Stalin, provides the expatriate revolutionary housing, shelter, and friendship, for a time, until Frieda, pushed to the brink of endurance by Rivera's philandering and blind commitment to political imperative drives her away. A victim of a tragic trolley car accident in her youth, Frieda lives a life of physical pain and unfulfilled ambition, but her love for Rivera somehow buoys her and keeps her going in spite of horrific adversity. This version of events is somewhat idealized, romanticized, and being filmed in English lacks the authenticity of some other treatments. Selma Hayek is convincing enough as the flawed beauty Frieda was supposed to be and looks a bit like her, single eyebrow and all; Alfred Molina is also fine as the morally depraved artistic genius Rivera, but Geoffrey Rush is wasted as Trotsky, unconvincing and just plain wrong for the part. Everything in Depression-era Mexico is too bright, too colorful, too clean and well kept. The art is too much in the background. A cameo by Edward Norton as J.D. Rockefeller is interesting but all too brief. Not a terrible treatment and informative to those who know nothing about the history, but there are better treatments. **Netflix**

Goliath ★★★

A Billy Bob Thornton vehicle, this series offers two very good seasons, then a strange and confusing third, then a dynamite fourth and finale season, all focusing on a down-and-out attorney in Los Angeles who is not afraid to sober up and take on the silk-stocking law firms and their criminal clients. That sounds cliched, but it's more about the execution of the formula than the existence of it; the series is fresh and original in many ways, with clever dialogue and quality acting, particularly in the fourth season, a heavy seasoning of noir mood and devices to sustain the mood. The supporting cast is very, very good and frequently features major stars such as William Hurt and J. K. Simmons and Bruce Dern. Continuing cast, including Nina Arianda, who is splendid, and Tania Ramonde are also excellent. The writing is crisp, except in the third season, which tends to go off the rails, but it is jerked back to a more realistic plot line in the fourth. **Amazon Prime**

Good Morning, Veronica

This Portuguese crime caper starts off promisingly although tritely enough with an all-too-pretty, sexy, and petite junior police “clerk,” the daughter of a former police captain who apparently tried to kill himself after being exposed as corrupt, anxious to redeem her family’s reputation and rise in the ranks. Her ambition exceeds her abilities, but we are led to believe that her dedication and honesty will out. The principal target is a serial killer who uses his meek and browbeaten and abused wife as bait to lure young girls into his evil and deadly trip. The problem is that the suspect is also a cop, and a high-ranking one, as well as being an intimidatingly large man. Veronica, the protagonist, finds herself frustrated by her superiors and by the cunning brutality of the suspect, but she is committed to rescuing his victim/wife and exposing the truth. The series gains interest as it develops, but as the episodes progress, it becomes more and more incredible, more strained and complex. There is a sense that the writers lose control of it. Although it concludes on a singularly dissatisfying note, it also sets up a second season. I shall give it a miss. **Netflix**

Grace ★★★★★

Although all the cliches are in place for this mini-series—charming English coastal village rife with murder and high crime, troubled detective inspector with a flawed past and unorthodox methods, colorful secondary cast, each with problems galore, and a heady mixture of villains and people of questionable merit—it manages to side-step past these familiarities and offers a solidly plotted set of individual mysteries that unfold with complex storylines. Grace, the main character, a middle-aged detective does shave daily, at least, and works out a lot, although he’s getting up in years. He’s both charming and determined, doggedly so, and highly confident. This works more often than it doesn’t and provides worthwhile entertainment without more than a modicum of fuss. **Amazon Prime**

Grantchester ★★★

Now in six seasons, this British BBC crime series is one of the better offerings of its ilk currently available. Set in the 1950s Cambridge Village, it concerns the interaction between the town’s DCI and the local vicar. Unlike some other series of a similar nature, it does not involve the university on a regular basis. It’s more about the people, truly, than the sleuthing, the tensions between the past and present as the pain of memory of the war years recedes and adjustments to a rapidly modernizing world emerge. At issue from

the middle seasons on is the illegality of homosexuality, something for which imprisonment was still likely, and the difficulties of dealing with a church mired in the past that refuses to change. Robinson Greene plays the main detective in the series, a capable man who is haunted by his experiences as a POW in Burma; contrasting with him is the vicar, or really vicars, who are far more modern-looking and seem to leave him behind. The series starts to turn darker in the later seasons, more serious and more socially conscious. Nevertheless, it is entertaining and worth watching, although the credibility of the solutions—one murder per episode is the ration—sometimes is strained. **PBS**

Greyhound ★★★

This WWII-set film was released some time back but is only available on Apple TV+, which is one of the most awkward and difficult of the streaming platforms to use. None of the usual remote-control buttons do what they do on all other platforms, including the pause and replay commands. You can get these to work, but it takes some experimenting. Getting CC is a mystery difficult to solve, as well. Nevertheless, this is a crackerjack good war movie presented in the tradition of a host of similar films that were made in the late 1940s, early 1950s. It follows the exploits of the USNS *Greyhound*, a destroyer escort for a convey of supply and troop ships en route to England. Once beyond the range of air support from the mainland, the ships are totally vulnerable to attacks by German U-Boats that, by this time in the war (whenever, exactly this is) have learned to hunt in “packs.” Hanks basically reprises his role from *Saving Private Ryan* as a thoroughly good man doing his duty, although in many ways it contradicts his personal values. Nevertheless, he’s a by-the-book commander of the four-destroyer escort, and he proves to be an intrepid and creative strategist as he both out maneuvers and out-wits the ruthless German commanders who taunt him on the wireless. Front and center is naval protocol in period-accurate detail, with sharp commands and orders given and responded to in highly disciplined fashion, without panic and according to training; gut-wrenching decisions are made in a momentary fashion as emotions have to be forcibly tapped down in the face of extreme duress. There’s a lot of action, a lot of suspense, and the filming of the sea battles is both compelling and exciting to watch, and the computerized special effects are not noticeable. Touted without comment is the incredible versatility and effectiveness of the destroyer class of America warships, as well as the cramped space and remarkable maneuverability and speed of these relatively small, weapon-bristling vessels that were designed to do precisely what the film demonstrates, destroy enemy ships, particularly U-Boats. There’s little in the way of personal drama or romance in the film, mostly on the edges, as the focus is almost entirely on the combat sequences and the overall tragedy and waste of war. But it’s well worth watching, as Hanks is, as always, excellent, consistent, and convincing. **Apple TV+**

Guilt ★★★

This four-part BBC mystery is set in Scotland, Edinburgh specifically, and involves a pair of brothers who set about to cover up a hit-and-run accident in which they are involved. There’s a serio-comic tone to the whole that goes away in the final episode when matters turn serious, but even then there’s a sense of lightness about it that keeps it from slogging down into another crime drama formula. The characters are likeable, even in their villainy, and they are all corrupt in one way or another. It’s highly entertaining, but there are numerous loose ends at the conclusion that are distressing. **PBS**

Guilt ★★★

This re-release of a tension-packed drama starring Jake Gyllenhaal is captivating from the start. It involves a 911 operator who receives a call from a woman who apparently has been abducted. His skepticism about the call fades quickly, but she is unable to tell him much about her location or situation. He hears from her sporadically, and he tries desperately to get her the help she needs, but a lack of concrete information completes with a major fire disaster that's taking place at the same time and is jamming the phone lines. This feels more like a play, on which it's based, than a film or TV series, but it is nevertheless gripping, suspenseful, and compelling, as well as surprising. Fine performance by Gyllenhaal propels it to the top. **Netflix**

Happy Valley ★★★

A limited season British crime series set in the small villages of the Highlands. It's very well acted and gritty and highly entertaining. It features Sarah Lancashire in the lead role, this time playing an even more dowdy and harried mother and constable instead of the more sophisticated roles she usually takes. Another season was wanted, but it hasn't happened. **Netflix** and **PBS**

Heist ★★★

This three-part series follows the two-episode accounts of some of the most inept and incapable criminals in recent history as they pull off three incredibly lucrative grand-theft capers imaginable. An armored car hijacking, the theft of surplus cash in transit, and, most improbably, the appropriation of high-dollar Kentucky bourbon from a distillery in Louisville form the events. All are true stories in this documentary series, and they are made richer by entertaining accounts of the criminals themselves, all of whom were caught and convicted, but none of whom really seems bright enough or intrepid enough to have pulled off the capers. Some are, indeed, played by actors, but in most cases, they themselves appear in interviews, speaking in monologues in a highly entertaining fashion to demonstrate that one doesn't have to be a star student to be a criminal mastermind. **Netflix**

Hidden ★★★

A British crime/mystery drama with a familiar scenario, although set in Wales and rich with Welsh language inserts. The first season is a bit slow in places, largely owing to a legal requirement that the whole program be filmed in both Welsh and English, forcing scripters to cut a lot of dialog that would otherwise take place and often would be welcome and valuable—it's expensive to shoot every scene with dialogue twice, meaning lots of long, introspective silent shots—but it's still well done and intriguing enough to hold attention. The second season picks up the pace quite a lot and is somehow more intriguing. It also integrates a lot more Welsh into the regular dialogue, meaning that subtitles are a must. **Amazon Prime**

Hinterland ★★

Another British crime series set in rural England, with more darkness and depressing landscape behind it. It's a great deal like *Shetland*, mentioned above, but with a less remote setting, although it's still pretty remote. **Netflix**

Hit and Run ★

Another Israeli vehicle in Hebrew and English, this all-too-familiar limited series plot follows the exploits of a tough-guy with a heart of gold married to a beautiful woman about twenty years his junior who is somehow a perfect match for him, it seems, until she is killed by a hit-and-run driver who may or may not have done the deed on purpose. The protagonist husband, of course, has a mysterious past that give him what in another action fantasy are defined as “unique skills,” that equip him to take the international investigation into places the Israeli police cannot go. As things develop and he discovers his late wife’s somewhat sordid past, his need for personal revenge is balanced against the need to keep him in the role of positive hero. It’s not painful to watch, by any means, but it’s also not original in the slightest way. Thinking too hard about it will spoil it. **(Spoiler Alert The series suspended shooting for COVID; it is unfinished.) Netflix**

Hollywood 🍌🍌🍌🍌

Unless you are totally addicted to alternative histories and utterly ridiculous fantasy, give this one a miss. Details of the plot are widely available online, as are any number of scathing reviews, and from notoriously sympathetic sources. Even the most “woke” critics are offended by this turkey. It could have been so very good, but it turned out to be so very bad. The acting is good, and the cast is surprisingly stellar, but the writing—egad, the writing—it’s the worst combination of millennial claptrap and wish fulfillment anyone could imagine. If you must watch it, turn down the sound and admire the fashions, the cars, and the props—they’re all meticulously authentic—but ignore the action and certainly don’t listen to the dialogue. If HBO is offering boxing, tune it in, or any infomercial for cookware or timeshares in Honduras will do as a worthy alternative. **Netflix**

I Care a Lot ★

Given moderate hype when it was released on Netflix, this dramedy is worth watching mostly for the performance of Peter Dinklage (*Game of Thrones*), who brings his most sinister characterization to the role of a powerful and fabulously wealthy American drug dealer who operates his clandestine business from a high-rise office building. There is a lot of potential here for an outstanding drama, as the villainess, played steadily by the lovely and versatile Rosamund Pike, convincingly creates a sinister character whose mission in life and work is to exploit the helpless and enrich herself without apology. Her man-hating philosophy shared by her partner in crime and lover—Eliza González plays the role alluringly and sexily for the most part—is off-set by her ruthlessness and ability to convince naïve authorities of her sincerity and honesty. The plot, unfortunately, goes off the rails when it takes a hard turn about half-way through, and what could be a satisfying account of comeuppance in a battle of evils that would, twistingly, force the audience to root for a violent drug-dealing criminal against a conniving evil-minded and greedy woman via manipulation of the legal system and more complexity, takes the easy way out and proves less satisfying or worth caring about in the ending than it promised to be in the beginning. **Netflix**

I See You ★ 🍌

Helen Hunt is largely wasted and is the only name actor in this crime drama that has more holes than a swiss cheese. It involves a serial killer, a crooked cop, an unfaithful wife, and a couple of “Phroggers,” who

inadvertently trigger a series of killings that turns into a bloodbath at the end. Not a particularly rewarding 99 minutes, but Hunt is always fun to watch. The suspense is good, and the technique of telling the same story twice from a completely different point of view is not without interest. But there's too much contrivance, too much coincidence, too little logic, and too little credibility to fully sell it. **Amazon Prime**

Inhuman Resources ★★

A kind of thriller, also in French, it might be set anywhere there is high unemployment, ruthless corporate heads running ruthless defense contracting, and agism, one of the quiet discriminations that no one talks about much, in play. It involves a hapless former Human Affairs Department head who has been let go during "downsizing," but who was told quietly and unofficially, it was because he was approaching sixty. As he's officially "laid off," he's not eligible for retirement benefits, so to keep up the mortgage on his crumbling apartment, where he and his long-suffering but devoted wife lives, he is reduced to part time employment, handling menial jobs that provide too little for him to even feed his wife and himself. He has two grown daughters, one a flighty idiot married to a bigger idiot, a smarmy banker who recommends "vacation" as an alternative to financial despair, and one a bright lawyer who is exasperated with her father's tendency toward violent outbursts that continually land him in trouble. The plot seems to unfold too quickly, as the meat of the matter is reached in the third episode, but then it becomes apparent that deeper implications and actions will be revealed, and a more complex and dangerous game is afoot. In some ways, it feels like two separate plots stitched together. On the whole, it's entertaining and well-made with almost unending unexpected twists and turns. **Netflix**

Jerusalem ★★

A CNN special documentary in a half-dozen episodes, it purports to give an academic overview of this tumultuous city that is central to three of the major religions of the world and has, somehow, always been the catalyst for violence and controversy. The overview formula is a bit truncated and typically repetitive, although the reenactments (without dialogue) are convincing and often revealing. There is a sense of selective history about it, though, as huge swaths of time are skipped over without explanation or even summary, and the general history of the region surrounding this holiest of cities is somewhat awkwardly dissected from the history of Palestine generally. It offers no real news to the well-educated, and may be more confusing than enlightened to the uninformed. Still, it's not a bad review of the historical importance of this major center of controversy, and in spite of the clumsy insertion of ridiculous commercials, it pleases more than it doesn't. **CNN**

Just Mercy ★★★

Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx head this fairly cliched and somewhat clunky tale of racism in the judicial system of the Deep South. In this case, the period is fairly recent, and the focus is on unjustly accused, tried and convicted to death men, mostly African Americans, who are consistently victimized by systemic racism that is bred deep into southern politics and culture. This based-on-a-true story follows the career of a campaigning young Harvard Law School graduate from Delaware as he wades into the dangerous waters of southern racism to champion men who have been falsely accused and railroaded onto death row. It's a true

story, and it's compelling, for sure. It might have been more effective if *every* southern white person depicted wasn't ipso facto a fish-eyed racist and if *every* black individual hadn't been a paragon of virtue and sterling personality, to boot. The film is compelling enough, and appropriately disgusting with regard to the whole situation, with an uplifting ending and justice, at least in some cases, prevailing. I felt I'd seen it a few thousand times before, though. **Amazon and Netflix**

Kayla ★

This Icelandic saga can't make up its mind what it is. Part horror story, part science fiction, part Hallmark Romance, it also can't make up its mind what language these people speak. Some are speaking Icelandic, some Russian, some German, and the Swedes all speak English for some reason. It moves with glacial speed through a series of macabre events related to the impact of the eruption of a volcano named Kayla near some glacier and remote town that is separated from the mainland by a river. Additional confusion is caused by the question of whether it's warm or cold. People are wearing parkas and layers and talking about the cold, and snow is falling mixing with the ash that piles up on everything, but people run around on the beach and play in the surf. The plot is sticky and inconsistent, and the behavior of the characters is illogical and too internalized to sustain consistent interest. At the same time, there's a substantive intrigue and constant hope supported by a heavy score and suspenseful juxta positioning of scenes that is slightly compelling. There's a constant threat of violence, and an occasional eruption of it, but on the whole, it has a sweetness that seems overdone. **Netflix**

Keeping Faith ★★★

A British legal thriller that is absolutely bingeable. Great acting, particularly by Eve Miles, perhaps one of the most enigmatic and compelling actresses to emerge in a long time, and loads of twists and turns, and not too many flaws, really. It does tend to spend too much time on very close close-ups of Mills' face, and offers perhaps too many shots of her in deep thought and wrestling with her internal demons. These do punctuate the whole, though, and smooth out intensity. It grabs hard and won't let go. **Amazon Prime.**

Landscapers ★★

This limited series starring the now more or less ubiquitous Olivia Coleman and David Thewlis (familiar to *Harry Potter* fans, as well as to fans of other sensationalist popular fantasy and action films) traces as a docudrama the story of a middle-aged and very British suburban couple who are accused of having killed the wife's parents, an apparently brutal pair of abusive and obnoxious people, and burying them in the garden. The male half of the homicidal pair is an accountant, the female a librarian. They abscond to Paris, her dream city, where they eventually run out of money. The homicide is discovered by accident, and the case is turned over to a detective, ably played by Kate O'Flynn and her somewhat inept partner, played almost comically by Samuel Anderson. The problem is how to arrest and then prosecute the couple, who are in France, without creating an international incident. Nevertheless, following the thread of what actually happened, the couple returns voluntarily, as they are out of money, largely owing to the wife's extravagance in purchasing movie memorabilia and the husband's inability to speak French resulting in his failure to find employment. The series emphasizes their insistence that while they did, indeed, kill the older couple and

hide the bodies, they were justified in their actions. The police and prosecutors, though, are like dogs with a bone and cannot let go of this heinous crime, and they relentlessly pursue the case to its actual conclusion. The series lacks luster, but it's a fascinating study in character and policing in Britain. O'Flynn is particularly striking as the cold-hearted and determined detective constable, who finds that she must balance what is right against her deeper emotional responses to this couple who seem more devoted to one another than ought to be possible. **HBO**

Last Tango in Halifax ★★

A kind of serio-comic but highly entertaining soap opera with wonderful performances by some familiar actors, including Derek Jacobi, Anne Reid, Sarah Lancashire, and Nicola Walker, who appears in several other series on this list. It's got a lot of twists and turns and is lively and amusing, although sometimes too charming for its own good, with an all-star cast and fine performances. Apparent is a darker shading that is not intrusive but keeps things interesting. There are about five seasons of this, and it concludes neatly at the end of the last one, perhaps a bit too neatly. It's being reprised on **PBS**, but it's available in its entirety on **Netflix**.

Let Him Go ★

Kevin Kostner takes his role of patriarch on *Yellowstone*, and moves it from location in Utah (which is supposed to be Montana) to Canada (which is also supposed to be Montana, and then North Dakota), where he now plays a patriarch, who is not only a rancher but also a retired county sheriff. Owing to the accidental death of his and his tough-as-nails, master horsewoman wife's only son owing to a riding accident, their daughter-in-law marries a local boy who turns out to be part of a notorious North Dakota family. Genes prove out as the boy turns out to be a wife-beater and child abuser, so grandma enlists grandpa in a rescue mission to extract their toddler grandson from the clutches of this ne'er-do-well and his murderous family. Things go about as one might expect, only with some improbable twists and incredible turns that shift the whole thing toward a tawdry mayahem flick with shades of bad horror movies dancing in the firelight. Koster more or less phones it in, and none of it makes any particular sense. Unaccountably corrupt or totally intimidated local cops and a frightened Indian boy round out the unlikely cast. Not hardly worth the two hours. **Netflix, Amazon**

Life in Pieces ★★★★★

This situation comedy runs over four seasons, with the fifth slated for filming in 2020 but probably cancelled, because of COVID and features Diane Weist, James Brolin, Zoe Lister-Jones, Collin Hanks, and Thomas Sadoski and Dan Bakkedahl in starring roles. It pushes the edges of the normal sitcom and explores with candor and realistic effectiveness some of the more distressing reaches of family life ranging from aging and senility to emerging pubescent awareness and tongue-in-cheek humor that seldom misfires. Not every episode will please everyone, but each episode is different and sometimes squirmingly familiar to anyone who deals with family. Often hilarious and occasionally poignant, it presents a piquant view of life and the dilemmas that so often cause permanent family rifts but somehow manage to resolve themselves through understanding and the resignation of familiarity. Well worth the investment in time. **Amazon Prime**

Line of Duty ★★★★★

A fact-based London police procedural series that takes the unique perspective of Scotland Yard's equivalent to American police forces' Internal Affairs Division as seriously flawed heroes fall prey to their own personal excesses. This is *very good*, well-acted, well-written, and carefully and consistently directed series and continues characters and plot lines from season to season. It is unaccountably addictive, since it involves more procedure than mystery, more talk than action, more flashback than forward movement. None of that seems to diminish the suspense, though. There's a good deal of tension and highly believable situational plotting. This is compelling and bingeable. **Amazon Prime**

Longmeyer ★

Based on the series of novels by the same name, this involves a totally honest sheriff of a Wyoming small town who is in constant conflict with the Native Americans on the neighboring reservation and greedy ranchers who are either in conflict with them or in collusion with them. The tribe's construction of a casino and hotel threatens to spoil the natural wilderness of the area—which the sheriff owns a considerable chunk of, although he does not “work it” as a ranch; his deputies and he form a kind of phalanx against an inordinate amount of crime for this remote valley in the middle of nowhere. They seem to be subscribers to the “Murder a Week Club.” There are serious credibility issues throughout, but the drama is mostly plausible and the acting is compelling with memorable characters. **Netflix**

Lost Daughter ★★

Maggie Gyllenhaal writes and directs this adaptation of a novel for Netflix. Starring the absolutely astonishingly ever-present in almost everything Olivia Coleman, this story of a neurotic and troubled woman on holiday on the Greek coast offers as false tension and sense of foreboding that is, alas, never realized any more than the clear issue of what the problem is with the woman is never revealed or in any way resolved. The woman's macabre behavior and reaction to a group of obnoxious American tourists, who may or may not be gangsters of some kind, and her obsession with one of the young mothers and her daughter—and more significantly, the daughter's doll—is odd enough all by itself, but add in a somewhat shady set of resort employees—one played with understated menace by Ed Harris—and the formula seems complete enough. What makes the movie work and worth watching, though, is a stunning performance by the relatively newly discovered Jessie Buckley, who also appears in *The Courier*, mentioned above, and who in the two roles demonstrates a wider range and more attractive possibility than anyone else in this particular outing. She upstages Coleman entirely, dominating the film's story, although she only appears in extended flashbacks. More of her will soon be seen, doubtless. This outing, though, ends in ambiguous and unrealized conclusion. If one has read the novel, one might come away with more understanding; on the other hand, that could mean another investment of time in something that will reach no clear conclusion. **Netflix**

Lupin

This is a French crime “thriller,” which isn't very thrilling. It has plot holes you could drive a Citroen through; and in spite of being highly rated by Netflix, is weaker than most TV major network series. Unless one is into watching a handsome and exceedingly well-built guy do parlor tricks and accomplish incredible things

that would require years of professional training, which his backstory does not admit, interests you, it has little appeal. It's mostly a bore. Now in a second interminable season, it fails on too many levels to enumerate. **Netflix**

Ma Rainey's Blackbottom Blues ★★★★★  

This is another in the series of filmed plays by August Wilson that Denzel Washington has committed to producing. It may be one of the best so far, as it is not part of the “Pittsburgh Cycle” and is more directly upfront about black/white relations and the racism of Jim Crow Era discrimination. Viola Davis in the title and Oscar-nominated role is *nothing short of stunning*. Her performance is a *tour de force* that embraces the stereotypical “Safire” character and expands it and makes it her own. She is frightening, intimidating, powerful. The supporting cast is all excellent, the dialogue stagecraft crisp, and the tone and ambience very dramaturgic. **Netflix**

Madmen ★★★ 

This seven-season series captivated audiences during its run that terminated in 2015, but I didn't watch it then, cut up as it was by commercials. Watching it in toto, not as a binge but as a nightly dose, though, is a fascinating experience. The producers have gone to great pains to recreate the 1960s in a way that captures the crude stumble forward toward liberal thinking and social consciousness as well as the emergence of both African Americans and women into the elevated business world. There are some glaring mistakes— they introduce IBM ball-type Selectric Typewriters a decade early, birth control pills two years early, and occasionally a character says or does something no one in his/her position would have said or done in that era; however, about 90% of it satisfies a glimpse into the past that is both discomfiting and informative. It's well-acted and well-written and well-directed, at least in the first three seasons. **Amazon Prime and Netflix (disk rental only).**

Mank ★★ 

The is film bio and supposedly truth-based account of the creation of the Orson Welles' epic film from 1941, *Citizen Kane* has created a lot of stir among critics, both positive and negative. The title role played by Gary Oldham is brilliantly and entreatingly delivered, although the film's Herman Mankiewicz is too over-the-top to be entirely believable. No one is that witty all the time, or that smart. Mankiewicz himself was a member of the Algonquin Round Table and was exceedingly intelligent, as well as talented. He was also a hopeless alcoholic and addicted to gambling. But that quite literally is another story. The film centers on the period of time when Welles' commissioned Mank to write the script for a film Welles had *carte blanche* from RKO Pictures to make. Following roughly the format of the film's object, the movie *CK*, itself, it proceeds through a series of flashbacks reaching to 1931 and involving Mank's friendship and association with the biggest names in Hollywood, at least at MGM, and cameos by some of the most memorable writers in the business. There's less drama than scenery chewing here, for the most part, and there are some gross violations of historical facts with some anachronisms in dialogue thrown in for good measure, but overall for film buffs, film historians, devotees of Welles' most memorable movie, or for those who just love Hollywood nostalgia, it's right on the money. **Netflix**

Mare of Eastown ★★★★★

Kate Winslet offers a *tour de force* performance as the hard-bitten, Pennsylvania working class detective who finds herself working a murder case in their Philadelphia suburban community, one that is surrounded by the despair of urban blight, rusting industrial deterioration, and is surrounded by criminal elements and its results, ranging from drug dealing and addiction to prostitution to violent crime in neighborhoods lined with row houses stacked against one another and falling apart both outside and inside. Set in the late autumn, the ambiance is made even more bleak by wet, cold weather and a sense that everything is soiled, dirty; there's a strong sense that these people, mostly former factory and foundry workers, are trapped in this environment, unable and unwilling to leave it, sustained by the forlorn hope that somehow, someday, prosperity may be restored. That it won't be, ever, is a tragic subtext to the whole program. Most of the cast are minor players, but all do a commendable job, convincingly offering vulgar and profanity addicted working-class characters whose attitudes and approaches are often just hard to take. Infidelity is one of the few escapes from the rough-and-tumble marriages and the grim family settings where everyone seems to want to do the right thing but somehow cannot find the gumption to stay on the pathway toward it. One gets the idea that these people are the architects of their own misfortune, designers of their own traps into which they eagerly fall. It is a highly engaging, almost entrancing portrayal that pulls few punches and offers a somber portrait of working-class America as background for grisly murder and shameful denial. **Amazon Prime**

Marseilles ★

Slow-paced but offering a lot of twists and turns, this French political drama is a vehicle starring Gérard Depardieu, who is too old and far too fat to play the role, but which does have its moments. It leaves no loose ends, but there are some stretches of probability here and there that are distressing. French politics are confusing and characteristically disorganized, but they are also, typically, easy to ignore; shots of the city and harbor are gorgeous, in spite of an annoying camera lens filter that seems to make the natural lighting harsh and cold, the atmosphere hazy and diffused. There's ample violence and sex with some enticing nudity to keep attention focused, and some nice cliffhangers to entice viewers into the next episode. There are some problems with character consistency, as well, almost as if the writers changed their minds about a character's nature and decided to alter it about half-way through. There's also a sense that this might be Depardieu's swan song. Worth the time. **Netflix**

Midnight Sky ★★

A George Clooney production—starring himself—this works fairly well as a “soft sci-fi” film set in 2049. Clooney plays a genius astrophysicist who is dying, apparently, of kidney disease but who is stuck in the Arctic on a weather station that once seemed to accommodate dozens prior to their evacuation back to their homes and, apparently, certain death owing to “bad air.” It's never clear what causes the toxic atmosphere to develop but develop it has, and it's about to reach the Arctic. He is aware of an exploratory mission to one of the moons of Jupiter that is scheduled to return to Earth and, owing to a complete inability to raise anyone on the radio as they approach Earth, are going to ignorantly reenter Earth's atmosphere and, presumably, die. Tension is reasonably well maintained for the two-hour run, although one almost has to be asleep to miss the telegraphed ending. Clooney hits one note and stays pretty much with it throughout, but the astronauts on the returning craft are remarkably varied and fairly interesting to watch.

Although predictable and somewhat slow in places, with almost laughable special effects in the Arctic sequences, it's a noble effort to bring science fiction back into perspective. **Netflix**

Minari ★★

This study in immigration of Koreans to the American Midwest received a lot of attention in the motion picture world last year, but it honestly fails deliver much. The story is fairly hackneyed—people ignorant of the climate and terrain attempt to make a go of farming in a traditional way, only to find that weather and circumstance conspire against them. The marital difficulties of the couple, as recalled by the story's recollective teller, their son, are relieved by the presence of a wise and astonishingly good-humored grandmother, who proves to be an asset in both life and death to the family. Somewhat shockingly, the local rednecks accept them entirely, which, claims to the facts of the matter notwithstanding, is hard to believe. It's worth a look, but don't expect too much. **Netflix**

Money Heist ★★★★★

(*LaCasa Papel*)—A Spanish TV thriller/crime series, five segments in two volumes. Avoid the dubbing and go for the subtitles. The English dubbing is terrible, but the subtitles give it dimension and character. This is a stunning and highly entertaining fantasy caper, and it's on my "Do Not Miss" list. There are some plot gaps that occurred when it was adapted for Netflix from Spanish 3 TV, but you can think around these if you halfway try. As things develop, a suspension of disbelief is required, more so as the whole thing expands and takes on a huge presence in Madrid. This offers well-developed, endearing, and captivating characters, believable dialogue, great musical score (If you don't walk away humming "Bella Ciao" you're just not human.) It has elaborate and stunning production values, loads of suspense, tremendous action scenes and stupendous shoot-outs, multiple twists and turns, loads of surprises, and is absolutely addictive. It's just plain fun! **Netflix**

Mosul

A feature-length film based on articles published in a major American magazine, the movie is more action/adventure, combat flick than anything else; however, there is a sentimentality in it that works very, very well. It underscores the horror that we, the United States, unleashed on Iraq as it was made manifest with the rise and fall of ISIS in the aftermath, something that needn't have happened if we'd shown any sense. The tragedy of destruction and death that the Iraqi people deal with is very nearly a character in the film, as is the hopelessness. The film centers on the Nineveh SWAT squad, or its remnants, in the final days of the battle for Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq and one that was almost entirely destroyed. It lacks cohesiveness, though, and descends into an improbable shoot-'em-up fairly quickly. **Netflix**

Mystery Road

An Australian two-series offering made after a pair of movies directed by the same director, this plodding mystery is set in the Outback, or the northern reaches thereof, in a small, ranching town and is chiefly interesting for its take on Australian race relations. The main characters are all rough-and-tough, and the

surroundings are gritty and, for some reason, so dirty that one feels the need for a shower after each episode. Typical themes of other Aussie series—the rusticity of the Outback, the heat, the flies, the conflict with the metropolitan areas—are constant. The ambience will have you reaching for a fly swatter and sunscreen. The central theme focuses on the main character, Jay, is an aboriginal/white Aussie who has neither foot planted firmly in either world. He’s a stereotypical fish-out-of-water strong man, ruggedly handsome in his quasi-cowboy gear (a feature enhanced by a lot of third-level American country and western music), and a bevy of exceedingly attractive young mixed-race women flitting around the edges. It’s not without interest, but the focus isn’t so much on the mystery—which is really solved early on and about which it’s hard to care—and more on the relationships that develop. Season Two is deathly slow and the mystery at hand is so complex and interwoven that by the time it’s solved, it’s hard to remember what the fuss was all about in the first place. One more season is out there, but it has a different title, for some reason. Two films were made prior to this series’ release; neither is really worth the time. **Amazon Prime**

Narcos and Narcos: Mexico ★★★★★

(two separate series best if watched in that order) The first one of these is a multi-part series concerning the rise of the drug cartels in Columbia and emergence of Pablo Escobar. The second moves to Mexico and traces the formation of the Sinaloa Cartels as they expanded into the main cartel areas of Tijuana, Laredo, and the Gulf, and establishes, in the next season the rise of El Chapo and the dominance of the Sinaloa Cartel as the most powerful and deadly of the bunch. Although production values are wanting in places and in spite of ultra-violent shootouts and other bloody scenes of mayhem, torture, and death, it’s well-researched, highly detailed, well-acted and well-directed, highly compelling without descending to soap-opera; both series command attention. It’s all fact-based, so it’s not typically formulaic. Caveats are that it glosses over entirely the United States’ involvement in establishing the Central American connection through the Contras and Sandinistas, trading guns for drugs, but this can be filled in with Tom Cruse’s film, *American Air*, mentioned below. If watched in between these two separate series, it basically fills in a gap. In addition, a significant factor is the Tijuana newspaper, *La Vox*, another story that is very well handled in another series, *Tijuana*, also mentioned below, that is dedicated to it and is a touch disturbing in its realistic treatment of corruption and conflict with a free press. The Spanish is fast, colloquial, regionally accented, and slang-and-epithet-filled, so closed caption is highly recommended even for native speakers. This is a worthwhile, informative, and entertaining investment of time all the way through, particularly if supplemented. **Netflix and Amazon Prime**

News of the World ★★★

This much ballyhooed Tom Hanks vehicle dramatizes a best-selling novel by Paulette Jiles by the same name and offers a fairly staid quest plot as an itinerate Civil War veteran officer, Captain Kidd, who makes his way by reading newspapers aloud to an events-starved and entertainment-starved population on the Texas frontier “for anyone who has ten cents and the time to listen.” He accidentally stumbles across the corpse of a black man whose business is it to rescue white captives from Indian clutches. The man who originally rescued the girl, already dead and unnamed in the film but based on the historical character of Britt Johnson, an actual figure from the mid-nineteenth-century Texas frontier who actually did that as he pursued his wife and daughters from Comanche raiders who abducted both of them, does not figure into the movie’s plot. In the ruins of his wagon, though, is a young girl, Joanna, who has been abducted and reared up by Kiowa and who

speaks no English and is thoroughly Indian in her outlook and identity. Kidd finds papers in the dead man's possession that indicate that Joanna has surviving family in south central Texas near San Antonio, and he reluctantly accepts the task of returning her to them. The journey is arduous and full of peril, and one by one, every possible obstacle that can be predictably located on the post-war frontier is encountered and overcome. Although there are some glaring mistakes in period detail, and although the New Mexican terrain (where it was filmed entirely) in no way resembles any part of Central Texas from the Red River south to the Hill Country, Hanks' completely dominant acting ability carries the movie and keeps interest and suspense alive. It's worth a look and the price of rental, but not much more. **Amazon**

Nomadland ★★★★★

There is absolutely no reason why this Frances McDermott vehicle should succeed. Filled start to finish with long shots of McDermott either sitting alone and looking thoughtful, smoking and brooding, or of her doing a series of mundane tasks in association with pedestrian and temporary part-time work across the American West, it follows her from her abandonment of her lifetime home in a small Nevada town that has been totally shut down and deserted when a gypsum mine, the only reason for the town's existence, closes. Widowed and childless, she roams the West, making friendships with other people who are not, technically homeless, but who make their way around the country living in campers, motorhomes, and vans, comfortable in their rootlessness and wandering ways. Yet the film is quietly gripping, creating suspense out of character more than situation. It very neatly avoids cliché and side-steps expectations of Hollywood-style twists that one can almost forecast, but which just don't occur. Although it overlooks common problems that such a lifestyle might entail—medical care, for one thing, as well as hundreds of minor difficulties everyone faces every day—it presents a fascinating study in character and situation, cast in large part with real “nomads,” people who live that lifestyle in reality, it is marked by realistic dialogue and action and is just quietly a masterpiece. **Amazon Prime**

Nordic Murders ★★

This German cop thriller set, typically, in a small coastal village in extreme northern Germany along the Polish border pairs a mother/daughter team against the usual gang of international criminals. Each pair of episodes takes on a new crime, but there's a continuing story line. A inept public prosecutor adds a bit of “serious humor” to the situation. The mother, also, is different. A convicted murderer, she has served her time for killing her husband; her daughter, ostensibly happily married, is carrying on with a Polish policeman, and there are a few other oddball twists and turns that keep the whole thing moving rather than stumbling forward. It's still slow in places and requires some patience. **Amazon Prime**

Occupied ★★

Now in three seasons, this is a projected idea about a “soft takeover” of Norway by Russians. It's a bit entangled in soap-operaish, back-room relationships, but it has a lot of well-made quality about it and is mostly credible. The premise is that Norway has discovered a method of generating clean energy in the face of a growing climate change crisis, but big oil powers object to the cessation of Norwegian oil production, and they persuade the EU to condemn Norway's actions, thereby encouraging the Russians to act

unilaterally to take over the country and force them to continue fossil fuel production, so they are subjected to occupation. There's quite a bit of tension and some convincing political maneuvering, and the acting is very good, but plausibility suffers before it's all over. **Netflix**

Oktoberfest ★

a limited series that focuses on the Munich beer wars around the turn of the twentieth century. Politics and business rivalries and organized crime all clash in this city, fated to become the Nazi-party capital that would later have a darker association under the Hitler regime a half-century later. For now, though, its focus is on rolling good times that cover murder and chicanery and family squabbles and unwarranted romance while aristocrats clash with commoners over the making and marketing of beer in this center of the German brewing industry. Although sometimes hard to follow without a scorecard, it's not without interest and there are some fine performances, and period accuracy is spot on. **Netflix**

On Becoming a God in Central Florida ★★

This Showtime series stars Kristen Durst and a hodgepodge cast of zany but compelling comic actors playing outrageous roles and over-the-top characterizations that, somehow, work well and manage to be completely entertaining. Durst plays a low-income theme park employee whose husband is done in by a pyramid scheme that ruins their already distressed family finances. Determined to seek revenge, Durst sets out to undermine the promoter of the fraud and then gets more than she bargained for. There's some tragedy and violence mixed in with farcical and romantic comedy, but it manages to remain fresh and compelling on a low level and is well worth the time. **Showtime**

Only Murders in the Building ★★★

This self-indulgent but still entertaining comedy pairs Steve Martin and Martin Short with the youthful and lovely Selena Gomez in a ridiculous caper that involves the over-the-hill show biz guys and the young Hispanic girl from Long Island in a jewelry theft/murder caper that seems to make things up as they go along. The generic nature of the whole gives one the impression that they are improvising sometimes within scenes, and Short's scene-stealing habits show through. Martin is the straight man to the manic Short, in other words; Selena who has the totally non-Hispanic name of Mable is, of course, younger and prettier. At issue is a suicide that has been ruled a murder but is probably neither. There are cameos by a number of significant comedians all the way through, sometimes playing themselves, sometimes characters. Nathan Lane has a significant role as the wealthy producer—possibly jewel thief—who is bankrolling an absurd podcast that Short wants to produce with Martin, a former star of a TV detective series, starring. It's all great fun, but you don't want to think too hard about any of it, as there's a sense that they're making it up as they go along, which fits the plot admirably. **Hulu**

Ozark ★★★

Most everyone knows about this dark comedy set in the Missouri Ozarks. It's very well done, although it is turning less comic with each season. Nicely acted with stunning and memorable performances by Jason

Bateman and Laura Linney, among a talented ensemble and well written, highly suspenseful, often surprising, and occasionally dark and darkly comic, it's serious but at the same time naturalistically convincing. **Netflix**

Peaky Blinders ★★★★★  

Set in post-World War I Birmingham, England, this multi-season series focuses on the Irish immigrants who were brought over to the UK to work in the steel foundries during the Great War and who stayed on. All of this is based on an actual gang of organized criminals, kind of a British/Irish version of the American Mafia, who took the name “Peaky Blinders,” because of their habit of wearing razor blades in their work caps, which they would take off and use as kind of gloves when involved in a fight, frequently blinding their opponents. The series follows the exploits of a principal core family in the group. Sam Neill appears as a detective determined to shut them down; Cillian Murphy is his nemeses in the underworld. The accents and jargon are thick, and subtitles are recommended, but it's worth figuring out and is different and highly compelling, right down to the contemporary music soundtrack, and it is in many ways different from the usual crime series. A final season due out Fall 2021 has been delayed by the death of Helen McCrory until February 2022; she was a significant actress who played a key role as the sister to the main gangster and really the “brains of the outfit.” The seasons hopscotch through time, though, and feature the rise of American gangsters and British Nazis in time. **Netflix**

Phoenix ★

This woeful little romance involves a woman, a saloon-singer, who happens to be Jewish, maybe, having been rounded up and sent to a concentration camp, which she survived, barely, drawing strength from her desire to be reunited with her husband, who was also her piano-playing accompanist. She emerges from the camp, though, with horrific facial injuries, so much so that it requires sophisticated plastic surgery to restore her features. Fortunately, she is also an heiress to a fortune which has somehow been preserved, although her parents perished in the war, so she can afford the top plastic surgeon in Berlin—assuming, with the aid of disbelief suspension, that there is such. She is returned to Berlin for this unlikely operation, which, of course, turns out perfectly, by a sympathetic “agency” worker—what agency is vague—who nurses her through the process and advises her against trying to find her husband. She ignores this and sets out to find him and reunite with him. She discovers him working as a bus boy in the nightclub with the movie's name, but, of course, he doesn't recognize her although he sees the resemblance and enlists her in a plot to deceive the powers that be into giving her the family inheritance on the presumption that she is the heiress, which, of course, she is. The film unfolds around her conflicted love for the husband who was and her contempt for the man he's become. It's slow and a bit tedious and too incredible to really accept wholesale. **Netflix**

Pine Ridge ★★ 

An Australian production, this somewhat wooden spy thriller still offers sufficient mystery and suspense to sustain interest, although it exploits all of the same thematic modes of almost all other Aussie dramas—Black/white conflict, gorgeous mixed-race off-spring, rustic Outback, slick metro areas, etc. It's slow-

moving, though, and is also deeply involved in complex geopolitics of the Pacific Rim and future of dominance in Asia, a struggle that pits the United States against the Chinese, with Australia, as usual, caught in the middle. It's not a flattering profile of American diplomacy or militarism (another prevailing theme of much of Aussie TV here of late), and that's enhanced by a fictional President of the United States who too much resembles Donald Trump for any mistake to be made about it. It's a touch fanciful in places, and it's painfully slow to develop, as the relationships among the technical staff of a highly secret and utterly isolated joint Australian/American spy base in the heart of the Australian Outback provide the setting. It has its moments, although the acting is sometimes stiff and unconvincing and the dialogue not always believable, with a sense that the actors aren't sure what relationship one scene has to another. **Netflix**

Power of the Dog ★★★

This Montana-set western was filmed entirely in New Zealand, which resembles Montana in absolutely no particular way, and offers a talented cast to tell this mid-1920s tale of high tension and murder in the high Rockies. Period detail with only one or two glaring errors is meticulously laid out in what is, effectively, more of a mood piece than any sort of crime thriller. The setting is a cattle ranch; the situation is that there are two owner-brothers who have an uneasy relationship, one with pretensions of refinement and the other with pretensions of rough-handed masculinity, who are not in conflict so much as they are uneasy with each other. There is a love interest that further divides them. The entire plot turns on questionable sexuality in a period when being anything but straight was a matter of both outrage and illegality, and merely not being a "man's man," so to speak, was considered to be womanly. There are some significant obfuscations of plot development that will leave less attentive viewers scratching their heads. The overall tone is somber and serious, dark and foreboding, but the story itself, while intriguing if one can figure it out, is far less sober. **Netflix**

Quo Vadis, Aida ★★★★★

A Bosnian movie and nominated for Best International Film, this feature film is hard to watch. It involves the plight of an entire village of Muslims trapped by the Bosnian Serb Army and become refugees as those remaining behind to try to negotiate a peaceful surrender of the village are summarily executed. UN Forces, mostly Dutch, commissioned to protect the villagers attempt to save them, but a combination of bumbling indifference on the part of the western allies and UN officials and Serbian duplicity leads to one of the worst massacres of the war, as the Serbs summarily execute the entirety of the village and bury them in a mass grave. The plot of the film centers on Aida, a UN interpreter and therefore a protected official, as she attempts to save her husband and two sons from the villagers' fate. It's *not* a comedy. It is, however, still marginally dissatisfying as justice is neither served nor even acknowledged in any significant way, which is realistic, perhaps, but less dramaturgic than a film wants to be. **Amazon Prime**

Radio Flash ★★

With a bit of budget and maybe a couple of decent writers, this could have been a post-apocalyptic film of the first order, reminiscent of *The Road*; alas, it descends quickly into average and ends on a mediocre note. The premise is that an Electro Magnetic Pulse—a "Radio Flash," in old-time parlance—has disabled the

entire electric grid in half the US. The predictable panic ensues, but the heroes of the film, a father and daughter team, take off for the hills, quite literally the Yak Mountains in Wyoming, supposedly, to join dad's survivalist father-in-law who has been anxiously awaiting just such an emergency. Things progress with their usual pace, involving traffic jams and sinister travelers, all increasingly desperate to find fuel, food, and water, until the plot takes a predictable turn and the heroic duo find themselves afoot in the wilderness, helpless and desperate. An improbable hillbilly clan then enters the picture to create another level of suspense, one that was really not needed, and clichés abound as things wind more or less to a conclusion and tightly wrapped ending. On the whole, the acting was very good, and the scenery is immeasurably beautiful. But the situation stretches credibility and finally hits every lever on the cliché-a-tron. **Netflix**

Ratched 🍷🍷🍷

This series has nothing to do with Ken Kesey's iconic *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, either the novel or the film on which it purports to be based but seems to be an alternative reality drama/horror flick with improbable characters doing improbable things for improbable reasons. It's hard to tell who the heroes and villains are, as everyone is at the least sinister and certainly evil. The mad scientist, his crazier assistant, a homicidal maniac, viciously aggressive nurses, inept cops and corrupt politicians all flitter in and out of this remarkably colorful (loads of pastels) picture that is more sparkle than substance. I quit it after three episodes. **Netflix**

Reckoning 🍷

A crime drama involving a serial killer, in this case the "Russian River Killer," or "RRK," an anachronism the writers wear out before the end of the first episode, this is no "Whodunit," so much as it's an unpacking of a series of antique murders that are apparently being restarted by the same undiscovered killer. The principal characters—a high school counselor, a sheriff's detective, and a nutcase neighbor, all of whom suffer from extreme psychosis of one sort or another, are complemented by their families and the drama associated with home-bound troubles. The one character the audience can identify and sympathize with, a lesbian deputy detective partnered with the obsessive/compulsive other sheriff's detective, appears too infrequently to sustain interest and principally functions as a foil to the main character. Set in northern California but filmed, for some reason, in Australia, the art director and set decorators are to be complimented for their efforts to make an Australian coastal suburb look like the US, with loads of signs, street markings, and American vehicles employed (It must have required a huge cargo ship to transport all those left-side steering cars and trucks from CA to Down Under. They might have exported some native Californian trees and deer and so forth, though.) The dialogue coach also gets kudos for making all these Aussie actors talk like Americans. But the series lacks suspense, lacks logic (It's a Swiss Cheese of plot holes and leaps in logic.), and the writers would have done well to do some research as to how sheriffs operate in the US and what their limits of jurisdiction and oversight authority are. In ten episodes, it's boring, almost painfully so, with a wooden leading man and oversexed women surrounding all (There is not one average-looking woman in this, and *no* people of color appear, highly unusual for an Aussie vehicle.); and **Spoiler Alert**, it concludes (limited series, so no second season is forthcoming) without either solving the crime or bringing the RRK to justice. *Give it a miss.* **Netflix**

Retribution ★★

An unnecessarily complex and confusing but beautifully shot crime story about a family that becomes complicit in the murder of a murderer, a crime that unintentionally opens a treasure-trove of individual secrets and sins that were simmering under the surface for years, this Scottish series has more to recommend it than detract from it, in the long run. Keeping everyone and their relationships straight is a bit of a challenge at first, but once all that is “sorted,” as they say in the UK, the rest is more interesting than it isn’t. This is well-acted and not badly thought out, but there are some coincidences that seem too conveniently placed for comfort. **Netflix**

Riders of Justice ★★

A Danish film, this cannot make up its mind whether it’s a comedy or a drama, but it has elements of both working more or less against each other, with a patina of violence that is borderline disturbing. A Danish officer serving in Afghanistan is informed of the death of his wife, which he is led to believe was caused by a local motorcycle gang that is heavily into a variety of nefarious activities. His belief is stimulated by a couple of older geeks, one a statistician and the other an internet whiz, both of whom are so nerdy and innocuous that they couldn’t sell their theories of probability to the police, however credible they seemed. The distraught husband and father, though, buys into it totally, then launches a campaign of revenge that knows no bounds. Irony works throughout the story line, and there are echoes of such films as *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*, or *The Long Good Friday*, as bumbling outlaws meet bumbling good guys in deadly earnest struggles. In spite of itself, the film has a certain charm, but there are more questions than answers at the end. **Netflix**

Road to Berlin ★★

A Russian film produced somewhere between the fall of the Soviet Union and the height of the Putin era, this follows a familiar strain in post-Soviet popular cultural offerings, attempting to find a balance between celebrating the “Great Patriotic War,” as World War II is commonly known in Russia, and the cruelty and impersonal brutality of the Red Army under Stalinist control. Based on a novella and actual diaries kept by the soldier involved, the movie traces the plight of a communications officer, a lieutenant, who while en route to deliver an important communique to a front-line commander finds himself caught up in a German attack. Distracted and delayed, he is not an effective fighter, but he finally completes his mission, only to be accused of treason and cowardice for failing to do so in time for the communique to matter. Tried and condemned to be executed, stripped of his rank and status, he is saved, temporarily, by a female clerk who insists that his sentence must be “confirmed” by headquarters. Accordingly, he is put into the custody of an illiterate private who must escort him to HQ, some great distance across an area that is being strongly contested by German forces fighting the Red Army. Although his fate is seemingly sealed, the lieutenant accepts it gracefully and then acts with fatalistic directness in the face of what seems to be certain death. An interesting character study, the film is slow in unfolding. Battle scenes are elaborate but low-budget, and often make no clear sense. What does emerge is the unquestioned loyalty of every Russian soldier to the defense of the Motherland, and the deprivations and brutality of their treatment on the lines. By western standards, the movie seems a touch primitive, but as Russian movies go, it’s not bad. **Amazon Prime**

Roadkill 🍷

A four-parter on PBS, this features Hugh Laurie and a very good cast of BBC familiar faces in a political melodrama that has its moments but falls way short of being satisfying. It wanted to be twice as long or maybe three times, with more plot, more characterization, more depth. It's the most "just okay" program PBS has mounted in years. It's somewhat entertaining at times and sometimes even approaching intriguing, but it terminates rather than ends and leaves more loose ends dangling than a hand-crocheted Christmas sweater. **PBS**

Schitt's Creek ★★★★★

This is another fish-out-water farce that might be described as *Ozark* without the crime. It's obvious and absurd, but it is also very funny at times, with great comic performances by a Canadian troupe of comedians, playing wealthy Californians, now dispossessed, and forced to move and live in anonymous small-town America. It's complete in seven seasons, and it won a stunning number of awards when it was broadcast and gathered something of a cult following, particularly among the LGBTQ community. It's outrageous, over the top, but if binged, it's fascinating to watch the character development and growth. **Netflix and Amazon Prime**

Seaside Hotel ★★★★★ 🍷

This curious little Danish sit-com or possibly dramady is part French farce, part soap opera, and part mystery, part historical dramatization, an odd combination of parts, *but it is dangerously addictive*. The setting is a remote seaside hotel in Jutland, a kind of crude resort, to which the same cast of characters, with some additions and subtractions along the way, come each summer. Set in the late 1920s, at the outset of the first season, there are dark forecasts of what's to come, both in the NY Stock Exchange and in Germany; but on the surface, for most, all is fun and games, prosperity and jazz, fashion and romantic frolic. The characters run the gamut from the "Merchant," played adroitly and totally by Lars Ranthe, who appears in numerous other Danish series, his well-meaning wife, played wonderfully by Anne Louise Hassing, and two oddball daughters, one of whom, played by Amalie Dollerup, emerges to dominate the series, to a stage and silent film star, played with astonishing range and brilliant versatility by Jens Jacob Tychsen, and his third (and very pregnant) young bride, who develops a crush on the shy naturalist son of a wealthy widow, desperate to marry him off to some unsuspecting but socially prominent girl, while her actor husband actively pursues the gorgeous but sexually frustrated wife of a minor bureaucrat; meanwhile, a shady industrialist works to bankrupt the merchant, and all the while a secretly gay couple court each other, although one is married to one of the guests. The staff of this somewhat chaotic series of complications that unfold in a lackluster establishment, which offers first-class service and serves up some of the most elaborately prepared, mouth-watering cuisine anyone might desire and which in the course of things acquires electricity and telephone, not always with happy results, with pretensions of luxury. As the series goes on further complications and historical developments evolve. It's incredibly fresh. The cast includes a bevy of attractive young maids, who double as cooks and servers and bellhops and just about anything else (though nothing tawdry) that's needed, a long-suffering matron who runs the place for her drunken and morose husband, who is an unpleasant lecher, miser, and voyeur, at least for a time. This changes as things evolve. At the center of the storm is Fie, a newly arrived and innocent and very pretty maid who isn't as naïve as her rural background would suggest and whose

competence shines as she is wooed by a neighboring farm boy become bootlegger. And that's just the first season. As the series develops, the storylines continue and offer numerous twists and turns, most all of them very credible, introduces a few new characters here and there, and manages to sidestep cliché and obvious subplot conclusions with candor and wit. *It's all great fun*, with a remarkable patina of innocence and the gathering storm of experience and grim historical reality, and between confusion as to who's in what room and what will happen to confuse things more in the next scene is a mixture of light comedy and shadowy doings, with a touch of naughtiness thrown in with sometimes unpredictable but somehow always satisfying results. *It's just delightful, deceptively thoughtful, light and airy*, but at the same time tinged with satire and sadness and a bit of nostalgia for a distant and far more innocent past about to devolve in global tragedy. It just gets better and better with each episode. Solid through nine short (four to seven episode) seasons; season ten awaits US distribution. I cannot stand the wait! **PBS Masterpiece, Amazon Prime**

Secret City ★

This is a first-rate political/spy/police drama set in Australia involving an intrepid investigative reporter and more corrupt politicians and crooked cops than there are koala bears and kangaroos down under. It's very well acted, with a pull-no-punches series of gut-checking twists and turns, none of which can be foreseen. Beautifully photographed, it, like some of the others, offers a less than flattering picture of the US and its heavy-handed role in the world. This, actually, is a perennial theme of a lot of Aussie drama; other familiar themes is the tension between the metropolitan and cosmopolitan cities and the rustic and somewhat backward rural primitiveness of the Outback. The requisite number of interracial marriages and romances is included, with any children emerging from such unions always coming out gorgeous, athletic, smart, and talented. Additional familiar details may be noted in the omnipresent flies, overpowering drought and heat, massive "truck trains" and endless stretches of highway that characterize Australia's interior under a sky that is always filmed at night in time-lapse to show the wheeling beauty of the firmament. **Amazon Prime**

Shameless ★★★

This eleven-season *Showtime* offering was almost destined to fail from the outset. With William F. Macy as the only name with high recognition appearing as a regular, it follows the antics of possibly the most dysfunctional family in American history, at least since Erskine Caldwell's depictions in *Tobacco Road*. Macy is the drug-addicted, alcoholic and frequent street bum philosopher and professional mooch patriarch of a motherless, apparently, family of six children, none of whom resembles each other in looks, temperament, or personality. Held together by the eldest daughter, Fiona, adeptly played by Emmy Rossum, who ultimately rises to lead both the on-camera family and the cast as a whole, but who leaves at the end of Season Nine, the children grow up on camera, so to speak, developing from their childhoods and young teen years into adults who, ultimately, have no more responsibility than their worthless father. The comedy runs high and is derived mostly from outrage, although a developing side story involving neighbors played more than ably by Shanola Hampton and Steve Howie rises to steal much of the show and to keep things rolling. Their semi-comic banter and antics are highly believable and testimony to a mixed-racial relationship that works and works well. The plot continues from episode to episode and from season to season, although there are significant inconsistencies as time goes forward. This is not for everyone or for the squeamish or those adverse to sexual deviance, violence, and ongoing dissipation. There's a lot of nudity—which disappears after about Season Seven—and the language is as salty as the Great Salt Lake.

It's laugh-out-loud funny to any unoffended by over-the-top vulgarity and behavior, repulsive to any with sensitivity or demands for stronger dramaturgy, and habit-forming. It's not a show to "binge," though, at least not for more than two or three episodes at a time; it's too rich and there's too much of it. **Showtime**

Shetland ★★

A British crime series with a Scottish flavor set on the islands by that name. It's dark and bleak in places, sometimes a bit slow, but is not without strong interest and quality acting and convincing plot developments. It's a touch clichéd, offers all the usual traits of British crime procedurals, but the setting provides sufficient contrast to hold interest. **PBS, Netflix**

Signs 🌳🌳🌳🌳

This Netflix offering from Poland is about the most depressing, desultory, confusing and senseless crime procedural in recent years. No one—absolutely no one—is in the least happy, content, or even satisfied with life in modern Poland, it seems. Misery is the order of the day. There is a murder, of course, but it's hard to tell who is involved with whom, who's a good cop, who's a bad cop, and the criminals are indistinguishable from the local nutcases. Things happen without logic or explanation; everyone seems angry or on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The plot, if there is one, gets lost in the weeds of the second episode. There is something to do with a local-boy-made-good developer who is exploiting his chances of untold wealth by ignoring the accidental discovery of a burial ground—WWII corpses? No one really seems to care—people who sneakily discover one thing or another. The police station is literally falling apart, as are the domiciles of most everyone. A travelogue for Poland this is not. **Netflix**

Sleepers ★★

This is a Czech-set series filmed in Prague, at least mostly, with dialogue in Czech, Russian, German, and English, so subtitles are a must. It's dark and dismal, set on the eve of the fall of the Soviet Union and in the midst of the chaotic transfer of power from Moscow and the KGB to the Czech and Slovakian governments as they initiated the split between the countries in the aftermath. As a spy thriller in the vein of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, it is a dismal and dark look at "spy vs spy" shenanigans, sleeper agents, and disillusioned Communists who watch all they worked for crumble in a massive power struggle between East and West. Setting details and action all reflect the primitive nature of life in the old USSR and the base necessities of existence among unhappy people living in an unhappy time. It has its moments, with deep characterization, but it asks more questions than it answers and offers some distressing gaps in plot development. Some knowledge of Soviet politics, Czech politics, and history of the seventies and eighties helps. Not unentertaining, although it's often so slow and ponderous that it undermines its own suspense. **Amazon Prime**

Sophie ★★

A documentary about the murder of a French woman and artist who has for years retreated to a small coastal Irish village in West Cork is compelling enough, although it fails, ultimately, to satisfactorily pin the

deed on a killer. More than one person, including her husband, look good for it, although the police and local village, a tight-knit, small town group, look toward a journalist from the city, London and Dublin, instead. The only thing certain is that a beautiful woman was unaccountably murdered and more than one life was ruined as a result. It's worth the time, but not entirely satisfying. **Netflix**

Startup ★★★★★

Although this seems on the surface to be a fairly cliched series based on high tech genius and corporate shenanigans, it very quickly leaves that impression behind and launches off into a twisting and turning tale of high crime and low adventure in the underworld of Miami and the business of finance and high technology. The three unlikely heroes are bound together in an unlikely alliance based on their greed and ambition as well as their "unique skill sets." One is a Haitian gang lord with a sterling conscience as well as profound sense of morality, another a button-down financial executive lacking in scruples and, to be honest, any genuine talent other than being white and respectable-looking; and the third is a Cubana-American computer genius, Stanford grad from the Miami barrio, with ambitious plans for wealth and success; pitted against them are the Russian mob as well as a collection of American gangsters and a gazzilionaire-genius crime boss who may be more made than realized. Throw in a corrupt FBI agent, a corrupt CIA agent, and a handful of white supremists and high dollar financiers, and the mixture become heady and fast-paced. The story line neatly side-steps predictability and exploits stereotypes in a tweaking and sometimes disturbing way that refuses to give in to "woke" nonsense but is realistically hypersensitive to contemporary social values. Often shocking, it's highly entertaining and addictive through three seasons. **Netflix**

Succession ★★★

A continuing series, this is the saga of a highly dysfunctional and utterly spoiled family of corporate billions. Brian Cox heads the clan and sits atop a broadcasting company empire. Fashioned in part out of the model provided by Rupert Murdoch and his media empire, the family patriarch is struggling to pick which of his obnoxious and scheming and spoiled rotten children should succeed him as the head of the company when he either retires or dies. At the outset, he appears to be dying, but he quickly rebounds and then faces the reality that he needs to designate a corporate heir. None of the three children is worthy or really capable of holding things together, though, and their *King Lear*-style mutual hatred of each other and, truly, of the old man himself, results in intriguing scheming, plotting, and plans for revenge and knock-out blows that keep things moving. Their spouses and other connections also are drawn into this vortex of disgusting behavior and exhibitions of the kinds of excess that make the rest of us hate the very rich. The daughter, played with charm if perceptible weight gain by Sandra Snook, and the clan's youngest son, perhaps the most complex and appealing character, played by Kieran Culkin, dominate the camera, particularly as Culkin is one of the most vulgar and profane of the group. Snook's screen husband, played by Matthew McFayden is perhaps the most pitiful character, although his foil, played with obnoxious obsequiousness by Nicholas Braun, is a close second. Cox is very strong in the lead, and all of the supporting actors all deserve credit for keeping their characters fresh and interesting, although in the most recent season the seams are starting to strain, and the insults and vulgar invectives are rising to dominate the dialogue. Fascinating and exotic sets are offered, as are astonishing fashions and an unflattering depiction of what it's like to be filthy rich. It's more entertaining than *Billions*, which it resembles, but not nearly so addictive. Now offering a new season, it's slated for more. **HBO**

T-34 ★★

This short movie is chiefly fascinating because it is a sterling example of post-Soviet Russian propaganda that almost shouts cliché and banality. The premise is that a tank commander of the most formidable Russian T-34 tank takes on a platoon of German Panther *panzers* and fights them to a comparative draw, then is himself captured and imprisoned. In the POW camp, he is reacquainted with two of his captured crewmen from the original tank. He is also recruited by the same officer, an SS tank commander, he duelled with before, now for some reason in charge of the POW camp. The hare-brained scheme devised by the producers has the Germans using a T-34 tank they've captured intact, the dead crew still inside, as a means of training their own tank squadrons, somewhere in Weimar. The captured Russian and his crew are persuaded to command and maneuver the tank in practice exercises; unbeknownst to the Germans, though, is that there still six live rounds of cannon shell inside the T-34, hidden beneath the rotting corpses of the dead crew. This unlikelihood is passed off as acceptable. The rest unfolds about as one might expect. Characterized by video-game-style combat sequences and improbable dialogue and an equally incredible romance between the Russian commander and a captured Russian translator, which seems unnecessary, as they all seem to speak Russian, although the subtitles mask that. It has a comic book flair to it, but historical accuracy is out the window, as is any realistic portrayal of actual tank combat. This is worth watching only as a study in Russian fantasy. **Amazon Prime**

Ted Lasso ★★★★★

Jason Sudeikis stars in this off-beat fish-out-of-water comedy that takes a minor division college football coach out of Kansas and drops him into the middle of England, where he's been unaccountably hired to coach a professional football (soccer, to Americans) team. The reason for his hire, it's revealed, is that the team owner, the recent divorcee of a philandering rake who prized nothing higher than the football club except a bevy of bimbos he courted publicly, wants to ruin the team for all time as an act of revenge against her dead husband. The logic of this self-destructive action should not be an impediment, but it's clear from the outset that in spite of her apparent rapacious nature this won't work. Lasso, who knows less about English football than he does about Indian food, as it turns out, is unrelentingly optimistic and extraordinarily wise about human nature. Despite a grating phony southern accent that soon wears thin, his quick wit and refusal to be harmed by any comment, no matter how hurtful, always deflects hostility, somehow. It's highly entertaining, fresh, often funny and quite clever. **Apple TV+**

The Bay ★★★★★

With Season Three in the offing, the first two seasons of this continuing series offers a grittier and more realistic view of the typical English coastal village criminal situation. Morven Christi, a DCI in the local constabulary and a woman of considerable reputation and professional status, fouls up during a girl's night out and loses her control, something that compromises her investigation of a missing pair of teenaged twins, one of whom turns up dead and dumped into the ocean. Things get hinky at that point, as her continuing probe into what is apparently a stable family reveals darker secrets that extend outward. In the meantime, her own unwise decisions and inattention to her family puts everyone in peril. Her sleuthing skills are unimpaired, though. Remarkably, there's no preservation of key roles through contrived salvations, and people come off as very real as the plot thickens. The usual clichés are in place: coastal drug

dealing, troubled off-spring and stormy marital pasts, a fractious mother/grandmother figure, and all and all. But the Manchester setting is somewhat different, although used in a few others, and the accents and regional idioms are quaint. *Christi* is abandoning the series for the third go-round, which is disappointing, and presumably a new caper will be in the offing; but there's a strong secondary cast that should pick up the slack. **Amazon Prime**

The Break ★

An odd French psychological thriller that is a bit slow but compelling. There may be too much quiet reflection for most peoples' taste, and too much introspection. Credibility is sometimes challenged, as well. **Netflix**

The Bridge ★★★★★

(US edition)—This American series originally broadcast on FX and available on demand features mostly unknown actors in a crime thriller that is a derivative of a similar series made in Sweden and received in sensational fashion (see below). It begins with a discovery of a body on the international bridge between the US and Mexico at El Paso, Texas, and involves the local police department and their Mexican counterparts, as jurisdiction is muddled because of the positioning of the corpse exactly on the borderline. It is also unique because the main character, an El Paso detective, is autistic, on the Asperger's Spectrum. This is never specifically mentioned but is revealed in her behavior and interaction with others and also in the care taken by her mentor, an older detective, who values her acumen and high intelligence and aptitude for problem-solving. A very strong supporting cast of villains and others bolsters the plot and keeps things moving. Unlikely heroes are found, as well. Unfortunately, the series did not "find its audience" in the US and was cancelled after one season, but it's concluded in satisfactory fashion with regard to the main plot (mostly) and is well worth watching on demand. **FX on Demand, Hulu**

The Bridge ★★★★★

(Swedish Edition). More subdued and crudely photographed, it seems, through a hazy filter that makes everything dim and mutes all colors, this original version of the series follows the same character developments for the leading role, Saga, played adroitly by Diane Kruger—she's autistic and high on the spectrum, although it's much more humorously exploited here as her candor and directness and insistence on accuracy in expression and word use often embarrasses people and puts them into awkward positions, one that causes squirming in the viewer—but interestingly involved a cooperative effort between Swedish and Danish police, as the two nations are now directly linked by a causeway that provides a modern highway and rail connection between Malmo and Copenhagen. In the initial season, there's serial killer who's something of a maniac as well as the reemergence of past crimes and sins that come back to haunt the principals. The Danish detective is great, highly believable and deeply flawed, and supporting cast is also remarkable. Seasons Two and three involve more complex crimes, and it's often difficult to keep up with the suspects and victims, but that all takes a backseat to the character development of the main characters and Saga, the lead character, and her background and fate. There's a lot of suspense involved in all of them,

and they're not afraid of realistic depictions of process and outcome; there're also some gaps in police procedures and so forth, not enough to be distressing or really atypical for this formula. **Netflix, MzH**

The Chair ★★★

This quasi-comic take on a contemporary private Ivy League University is more than a little entertaining. There's a certain amount of slapstick and obvious humor in it, and much of it is fairly accurate as it skewers higher education, particularly in an English Department that is facing failing enrollments and can no longer rely on the traditional values that sustained the Liberal Arts for centuries. The cast is well assembled and the problems of a new Department Chair, an Asian-American woman, played exquisitely by Sandra Oh, who is eager to make good are sufficiently balanced against an ossified group of older faculty who cling uselessly to the traditions that have sustained them. The writers get most of it right, although they miss wide of the mark in several important ways. Certain things that happen never would; some things that should happen, don't. Get used to the idea that feet of snow apparent in the morning are totally gone by afternoon, sometimes sooner. Issues that provide the conflict are drawn with a broad stroke and seem overdone; issues that should be resolved easily become impenetrable and overly complex. In sum, the characters do many things they should and don't do many things they shouldn't. There's a kind of feel-good idealization about it by the end that's not entirely credible. But there's lots of good humor and some scenes will make anyone involved in the academy squirm with familiarity. **Netflix**

The Climb ★★

This is a "buddy film" with the twist that the two men involved have an unstable and uneasy relationship. Friends from childhood, one is a dominating personality, something of a scoundrel, and is singularly unaccomplished, although handsome and athletic. The other is a kind of pudgy guy, not a loser but hardly a go-getter; but he is smart and accomplished and achieves pretty much what he goes for. The problem is that he is so much under the influence of his nefarious friend that it almost entirely ruins his life. The relationship is strained but somehow sustained, as fraternal devotion overrides commonsense and forgives horrendous abuse. It's entertaining and worth watching, something of a bittersweet comedy. **Netflix**

The Code ★★★

Another Australian thriller with all the usual thematic lines playing out, this time the McGuffin is a corrupt bio-chemical company that is involved in the development of secret nuclear materials. Things kick off with an accident on a remote Outback highway in which a girl is killed, although her death is mysterious, as her boyfriend survives. This attracts the notice of an on-line tabloid reporter who is also at least marginally involved with the beautiful and extremely sexy press secretary to the top government foreign minister. Matters are made more complicated by the reporter's brother, played with remarkably convincing characterization by Ashley Zuckerman, a computer savant with an addiction, apparently, to hacking, for which he is on probation that contains a proviso that he is not to go online for any reason. Of course, he does, and, of course, he discovers the truth behind the illicit caper that reaches to the very top of the Australian government. There are spies, cops, gangsters, and rural characters all clashing in threatening and often violent ways. Unlike similar series with similar settings and plots, though, this one manages to

generate genuine suspense and to avoid predictable plot twists and turns. It's impossible to know who's good, who's bad until the end, and even then, it's not a sure bet. Sterling performances by a number of actors, including Adele Perovic, Dan Wylie, and Dan Spielman give this both legs and depth. It's a cut above the average, more violent and sexy without being gratuitous than typical, and although exploitative of the familiar thesis—"Poor Australia, caught between superpowers."—grabs and won't let go. **Netflix**

The Courier ★★★

This slowly unfolding spy thriller has much to recommend it, although it lacks the slick, high-tech and suspense-laden atmosphere of a James Bond-style caper. It is also based on a true story. Featuring an astonishing cast, including Benedict Cumberbatch, who seems to be in almost everything these days, Rachel Brosnahan, on a break from the *Mrs. Maisel* series, but playing largely the same character without the jokes but with a terribly bad blonde wig, Zeljko Ivanek, best remembered from *Madam Secretary*, and several other quality actors, including newcomer Jessie Buckley, all of whom rise to the occasion, the film is more or less a docudrama about a hapless, forty-something industrial salesman, Greville Wynne, who travels conspicuously into Eastern European countries as part of his business. Wynne, a real person and a real hapless salesman as depicted, is recruited incongruously by cooperative agents from the CIA and MI-5 to make contact with a high-ranking GRU officer who has access to classified documents concerning the USSR's nuclear capability, and who, because he is alarmed by Khrushchev's saber-rattling rhetoric, decides to become a spy for the West. This is no spy-thriller. Wynne's reluctant participation is encouraged by his handlers, but he is no hero. He is merely a decent, middle-class man with little ambition beyond being a good husband and father and making a good living for his family. Hopelessly caught up in intrigue, though, particularly as the infamous "Cuban Missile Crisis" develops, he discovers a deep friendship and commitment to his Russian counterpart, and that overrides his fears and apprehensions to a dangerous extent. Well-acted and well-directed, the movie suffers from a ham-handed script that is about as predictable in dialogue as it is pedestrian in development. Khrushchev is misquoted and out of place in his few appearances, and Moscow is probably presented in starker contrast to the decadence of the London nightclub scene than is necessary to make the point. The villains in the piece are unintentionally presented as the CIA/MI-5 agents in their callousness toward expendable assets; the KGB is brutal but not particularly evil in their pursuit of the truth. Overall, this worth more than a look, but it probably shouldn't be at the top of anyone's list. **Amazon Prime**

The Defeated 🍷

This rather weak attempt to tell a dramatic story set in Berlin during the weeks and months immediately following the surrender of Germany goes off the rails fairly quickly. Attention to background detail is meticulous, but carelessness in other areas undermine its seriousness. The main character, a Brooklyn police detective who has somehow been "assigned" to help organize a police force in the rubble of Berlin, but who, in spite of being a tough hombre and in great health escaped military service, is actually on the hunt for his AWOL brother, who has a long history of psychiatric problems that would have made him 4-F from the outset. The brother is apparently on some kind of murderous rage against former Nazis, after having been traumatized by liberating a concentration camp, although he is not Jewish. The heroine is a gorgeous Berliner, whose husband is being held POW by the Soviets, who are called "Russians," no matter what, and who is trying improbably to command a police precinct (which should be called "district") headquartered in a bombed-out bank. Matters are further complicated by a mysterious and villainous

character who is known as “The Angel Maker,” as he provides abortions on demand for raped Berliners. There’s more and more; too much really. Our hero effortlessly maintains a three-day beard and looks consistently rugged and handsome, although he is often frustrated and seldom if ever washes up; he is, never-the-less, the sexual target of some American diplomat’s alcoholic wife, a sexy Brit. Almost all Germans speak first-rate English, as do most of the Soviets and French. The whole thing has the look and feel of a bad romance novel with a crime element. Not really worth the effort. **Netflix**

The Derry Girls ★★★

Another Northern-Ireland-set series, this surprisingly fresh and often hilarious sit-com features a quartet of teenaged schoolgirls, all firmly Catholic, during the “Troubles,” and focuses on their fairly typical adolescent shenanigans as they try to their place in an adult world. It’s quick and witty, and ironically does not exploit the girls’ sexiness or really make them too beautiful or smart or talented for their age. Fans of *Bridgerton* will recognize Nicola Coughlin as one of the quartet, a youngster so beset with the conflict of mischief and Catholic guilt that she is hilarious. The leader of the pack, played by Saoirse Monica Jackson, is neither too pretty nor too smart but just enough of both to lead her into trouble. Her parents are hilariously depicted as both confused and perpetually angry contemporary Belfastians who are trying to make their way in a violent world that strives for peace but seems to be devoted to verbal if not physical violence. The antics of the girls who are in constant conflict with their school’s headmistress, played with caustic irony by Siobhan McSweeney, are hilarious to watch, as their mode seems to vary from careful plotting to total panic when things don’t work out. And they somehow never do. There are sentimental moments and some serious and sobering undertones associated with the civic unrest, but on the whole this is a delightfully different piece of comedy. **Netflix**

The Deuce ★★★

This three-season series features a fine cast headed by James Franco and Maggie Gyllenhaal and is set in the early 1970s, when Forty-Second Street in New York was the hotbed for prostitution and crime of all sorts. It follows the life of twin brothers, both played by Franco, one a decent guy trying to get ahead in spite of the odds and the other a ne’er-do-well compulsive gambler with a careless manner and violent streak. They are paralleled by the life of an aging hooker, played by Gyllenhaal, who doesn’t have the body for the role but pulls it off, anyway, who discovers that there is a market for porn films. She becomes a kind of Linda Lovelace type, a woman who is smarter than her actions would indicate and understands how to make a fortune exploiting the oldest profession and a common vice. A host of bad guys, ranging from pimps to gangsters to corrupt cops and politicians round out the seamier side of the Big Apple before it cleaned up its Midtown act. There’s a good deal of violence and nudity, and the period detail is very nicely handled. The final episode is a mark of genius in terms of styling and perfect mixture of cinematography and musical score; pathos is layered on thick, but the dark side of life never looked better than in this fine treatment. **Amazon Prime**

The Dig ★★★

This movie was quietly released on Netflix and stars the always pleasing Carey Mulligan in the leading role, as a widowed woman, part of the English Gentry, who, in 1939 with war in the offing, engages an excavator to

dig into some ancient mounds on her property. She has a “feeling” that they conceal something worth finding from England’s past. The excavator immediately chooses the largest mound and discovers a boat that was apparently part of a burial ritual, interred with the body of an Anglo-Saxon noble, earlier than anything that had been previously found. The ensuing drama involves the struggle between the local museum and the British museum for rights to the artifacts discovered in the fragile remains of the vessel, as well as a moderately intriguing love-story between a young RAF flier (nephew to the heroine, Mulligan) and an attractive but married archeologist who for some unknown reason has married a homosexual man who has little interest in her. All based on actual events, it departs from the facts a bit more than it either should have or needed to, but it remains highly entertaining and sustains suspense and interest throughout. **Netflix**

The English Game ★★

Focusing on the enormously popular game of “football,” or what Americans call “soccer,” as it developed, this is a class-warfare centered drama set in the latter part of the nineteenth century when playing the game competitively was reserved for “gentlemen” and excluded working class teams from entering the national competition. The plot centers on love and animosity among players, particularly when two “ringers” are brought into a mill town to bolster their chances of advancing in the standings, although they are still up against a team made up of public school boys who are all champion quality. It is remarkably well done and accurate in historical detail, although the game sequences seem truncated and scaled back in favor of the personal dramas as they play out. **Netflix**

The Eyes of Tammy Faye ★★

This feature was released quickly to Netflix, and probably for good reason. In spite of a brilliant performance by Jessica Chastain, cast against type, as the iconic and infamous Tammy Faye Bakker, the film stumbles and gropes its way through a biopic account of the Bakkers’ rise from obscurity to international prominence and unimaginable wealth, then their fall when their financial shenanigans are discovered. Andrew Garfield is less than convincing at the philandering and utterly corrupt hypocrite and TV confidence artist, Jim Bakker, and Jessica Hahn does not have a characterization. The villainous nature of televangelists is at the forefront of this picture, but rather than reveal the deep ugliness and depravity of these people, they are somehow redeemed by their expressions of blind faith and devotion to fundamentalist doctrine. It was as if the filmmakers couldn’t make up their minds about the Bakkers, or perhaps they were afraid of being sued into oblivion. Much of the story is left untold, particularly the darker tales of behind the scenes shenanigans, and more of it could have revealed the more evil, seamier side of this cultish phenomenon in American culture. It was, on the whole, disappointing. **Netflix**

The Five ★★★

Here, familiarly, is another British crime drama with the usual high stakes, gruesome plot developments, and final solution to the case all coming as the series unfolds. What sets this one apart is some fine writing with credible and unpredictable plot twists, seriously and credibly flawed characters, all of whom are likable on some level in spite of their misdeeds and marginal competences. It’s all about an attempt by four childhood friends, now all grown up and mutually entangled, to solve the mystery surrounding the

disappearance of the younger brother of one of them. Drama unfolds around the families as well as the individuals, and there are numerous twists and turns that leave the audience guessing for a time until each is explained. Far better than average. **Netflix**

The Forest ★★

French rural crime drama that works nicely and will definitely hold attention. It's only one season, but it is a bit on the different side and well worth watching. **Netflix**

The Frozen Dead ★

Norwegian crime drama with a lot of twists and turns and some very nice acting and writing. It all is shot in winter and snow and ice are significant factors. Good directing, but it's a touch confusing in places. **Netflix**

The Innocent ★★★

This Spanish crime/police thriller series is both confusing and complex, made no less so by the fact that several of the principals, including the leading actors, have drastically different hair styles and colors and physical appearances in flashbacks from the present-time sequences. About one third the way through, the initial mystery is set aside for several episodes while a whole new one is introduced and brought up to date and speed with a whole different cast of characters, but they do ultimately cojoin in a complex series of mysterious connections that perplex the characters as much as they do the audience. Since almost no one tells the truth to anyone and everyone is keeping secrets, it's difficult to know what's what and who's who for the longest time, but ingeniously, all clarifies in the end. Slick production values, gruesome violent details, a good deal of candid (not erotic) nudity is involved, and no one is ever who he or she seems to be most of the time. It's well acted, slickly directed and filmed, although too many sequences are obscured by shadows or darkness for entire clarity, but it's intriguing; it requires some intense concentration to stay with it. **Netflix**

The Investigation ★★

These Danish police procedural features numerous Danish actors who will be familiar to any who've watched much Danish television at all, particularly *Borgen*. It concerns the murder or suspected murder of a female reporter aboard a homemade submarine that sinks in the straits between Denmark and Sweden. Unlike other police dramas, this neatly sidesteps the usual confrontations that have become virtual cliches. The accused perpetrator of the murder never appears, and the Chief Inspector neither interviews him nor reviews video of his questioning. Although it moves with the speed that resembles concrete decomposing, the characterizations are strong, and the emotional intensity is fairly well sustained throughout. But this is no action police series, and it is not for anyone who hasn't the patience to watch an investigation unfold, piece by frustrating piece. **Netflix**

The King's Choice ★★★

Viewers disappointed in last year's *Atlantic Crossing* will be pleased by this Norwegian version of events that led to the fleeing of the King of Norway to England in advance of the Nazi invasion of the country in

1942. This is no simpering and improbable romance; nor is it a brutal war movie. Instead, it's a fascinating study of an aging man having to make a terrible decision that will prove not only his own honor and personal integrity but also will stiffen the backs of his adopted countrymen against the Nazi invaders and traitors in their midst. Meticulously detailed, it suffers from too low a budget, but convincing combat scenes emerge nonetheless, and an absence of sentimentality is made up for by an active presence of character study. The film suffers, perhaps, from a sense of incompleteness, in the sense that the story is not finished at its ending, but otherwise, it's wholly satisfactory and credibly acted. **Amazon**

The Knick ★★★ 

This 2015 Cinemax two-season series starring Clive Owen didn't get much buzz when it was on originally, but it's gaining a second life on Amazon. It concerns the storied New York City Hospital, the Knickerbocker, and its head of surgery, a cocaine-addicted surgical genius who, along with a highly talented team of skilled sawbones, developed dozens of surgical techniques, perfected dozens of surgical methods, invented dozens of surgical and operating room instruments, in their "operating circus," which often had full audiences of medical students and fellow MDs looking on. As the Knick, as its affectionately known, was loosely affiliated with the Catholic Church, it operated as a charity hospital, offering treatment and cures for the indigent poor, principally immigrants from the Tenderloin and SOHO areas, as well as the Bowery and Little Italy. The series plays somewhat fast and loose with the historical facts, setting itself in 1901 rather than 1913, when the Knickerbocker opened on 139th Street West in Harlem, and rather locating it downtown, with a prospective move uptown when a new building is available. There is also some fudging with regard to some innovations such as X-Ray and skin grafting, moving them up in time for dramatic effect. Well-acted and generally well written, although a bit heavy on the social messaging theme that runs throughout, it manages to draw in many crackpot theories of the day, such as Eugenics, and experiments with hypnosis and other risky ventures that sometimes pay off and sometimes do not. Opium addiction has a large enough role to be a veritable character. All of this is mixed with the "new idea" of psychology, as well as some odd experimental treatments for behavioral disorders. The romances that surround the action are borderline scandalous and intriguing, and the class warfare with a full cast of robber-barons, Tammany Hall grafters, and top-to-bottom corruption that simmers beneath the surface and somewhat distracts from the cringes that come from witnessing the administration of curare as a numbing agent and mercury to treat venereal disease, scenes of "rat-stomping" as a sport, and prostitution as a recreation, exploding ether and the use of telephone wire to locate shrapnel, or watching in gory, closeup detail complex surgery being conducted bare-handed and without reliable anesthetics. The special effects are simply marvelous. The lack of knowledge about such things as radiation and, of course, antibiotics, which were not developed for nearly thirty years after, is balanced against the thirst to find cures and treatments for chronic diseases ranging from typhoid to plague, cancer to appendix removal. Other innovations such as the motion picture camera, the recorder, electric lights, the vacuum cleaner, electric cars and the idea for using gasoline as fuel all flit around the edges of the story. Otherwise, though, attention to period detail is very, very good, and there are very few verbal anachronisms. It's highly entertaining and somewhat compelling. Another season was planned, but between COVID and the death of some principal actors, it probably won't happen. **Amazon Prime**

The Kominsky Method ★★

Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin head a highly talented cast that features a number of cameos of Hollywood's most famous aging stars, often playing themselves, sometimes playing characters *a la* the Larry David series, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, on Amazon, only this time with better writing and a continuing plot that makes sense. Douglas's natural ability and penchant for comedy shines against Arkin playing, well, Arkin, or at least the character that he's been playing over and over since he made *Catch 22*. That's not a bad thing, if one likes wry and dark one-liners with a distinctively Jewish irascibility and certain amount of self-deprecation thrown in for flavor. The story line is well developed, and the characters are consistent, and the depiction of life among the sometimes rich and used-to-be-famous in Hollywood is interesting and, at the same time, a little sad. There's a lot of wit, a number of zingers, some occasionally touching moments, and a lot of belly laughs, inside jokes, and barbed comments flying around all the time. Not recommended for binging, though, as the humor and characters quickly become predictable and punch lines can be seen coming from miles away if one falls too much into step with it. For a half-hour at a time, though, it's quality distraction and well done in two seasons with a much weaker third season tacked on. **Netflix**

The Little Things ★

A highly improbably police caper with a lot of familiar pieces that add up to a fairly cliched crime drama. It's not without its moments, but nobody wants to think too hard about it. Denzel Washington more or less phones it in; he's gaining a lot of weight. **Netflix**

The Mire ★

This of two-season series is a Polish crime drama with some interesting minor characters and astoundingly mundane leading character actors involved in a highly complex murder mystery set in a remote Polish forest. It's not without interest, and it does command attention. But it's also somewhat overdeveloped and twice as complex as it needs to be. Emphasized is how depressing it must be to live in modern Poland. **Netflix**

The Night Of ★★★

Another legal thriller focusing on a New York City public defender, played with brilliant seediness by John Turturro, who struggles mightily to get justice for a wrongly-accused young Hispanic boy who "steals" his father's taxicab—which he really does not. As the justice system grinds through the case, the boy's forced incarceration leads to a steady decline into a world of criminal behavior while he is jailed and awaiting trial on Riker's Island. This is detailed in counterpoint and heart-rendering. Very well done series. **HBO** and **Amazon Prime**

The Nightingale ★★

This period Indie film shot totally in Tasmania with Australian actors by an Aussie company offers a standardly plotted pursuit/revenge story with a heavy emphasis on historical revisionism to illustrate the cruel ineptitude and caustic indifference of the British Army as it settled the mountainous and forested

island colony mostly with transported Irish and low-born English convicts who set about stealing from and killing the aboriginal tribesmen who inhabited the land before they arrived. Racism vies with sexism and physiological dysfunction to create a portrait of a place where no one is happy and everyone is taking out their misery on someone else. Fine acting lifts this above the sordid and unappealing background that is historically accurate in detail down to the meticulous points, but which offers little in the way of news about imperial subjugation of native peoples and creates a far more sympathetic view of black/white relationships than was probably extant at the time. It's a sad story of rape, murder, mayhem, and doom that is relieved only in part by fine performances and the deliberately implanted raising of social consciousness. **Netflix**

The Outsider ★

A Stephen King vehicle, this returns to many notes familiar to long-time fans: children in deadly jeopardy or serving more or less as clairvoyants owing to their entire innocence, vengeful adults suffering from grief or reacting to anger and behaving murderously, a savant, a bewildered but tragically marked cop determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, bloody and frightening violence, conflicted skeptics, and by-standers who are always in the way and handy to become potential victims—and, oh, yeah, a bogeyman, demon, monster lurking in the supernatural shadows of a commonplace community that dotes on Little League, gardens, well-kept lawns in front of antique houses badly in need of renovation in which otherwise affluent people are content to live. In sum, Stephen King same-old, same-old. It's still suspenseful and compelling, at least until the monster is revealed to the characters; the audience gets a taste of him early on, and there are some surprising twists and sharp left turns here and there. It's hard to know who to trust, so no one trust anyone, of course, another King staple. It's standard SK fare, in short, relieved by a fine cast of familiar faces and slick production values. Entertaining to a point, sort of like watching a soccer match or maybe a golf tournament; better than network sitcom and scrubbed raw crime capers, for sure. **Netflix**

The Serpent ★★★

Set convincingly in the mid-1970s, this true-crime docudrama, of sorts, imagines the background behind a serial-killing-gem dealer in Thailand. The caper is based on his ability to meet, befriend, lure and then murder and rob young Europeans and Americans who, typically in the period, were traveling in aimless adventures in Asia and elsewhere. Meeting them in Bangkok, Hong Kong and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, while the War in Vietnam plays out in the background, these young, latter-day "hippies" come seeking sites, drugs, entertainment, and adventure laden with music and alcohol, bags filled with traveler's checks and a thirst for sinful adventure. Alain, the villain of the piece, played by French actor Tahr Rahim, is a half-French, half-Vietnamese, French-educated scoundrel whose ability to lie, cheat, and steal as well as kill, abetted as he is by an Indian henchman, is remarkable mostly because of his smooth, cosmopolitan demeanor and cold-blooded lack of conscience or compassion; although in terms of dramatic range, Rahim hits only one note, over and over again. His paramour and partner in crime is "Monique," played by the astonishingly attractive and almost overwhelmingly sexy Jenna Coleman, (*Dr. Who*, *Victoria*, as the young queen) a French-Canadian beauty who gets caught up in his schemes, having fallen in love with both the slickly cosmopolitan and smooth-talking Alain and the lifestyle he offers her. Police corruption thwarts the efforts of a minor factotum, Herman Knippenberg, at the Dutch consulate who is determined to find out what happened to two young Dutch citizens who were found murdered, and the plot's afoot. Knippenberg (played by Billy Howe) is doggedly on the trail of Alain, the murderer and thief, but is thwarted at every turn

by incompetent and corrupt officialdom as well as diplomatic indifference to the fate of irresponsible young people traipsing around Asia with more money than sense and indulging in all kinds of illicit activity. He refuses to give up, enlists his lovely and long-suffering young wife in his efforts, and insists on playing “by the rules,” in spite of encouragement to do otherwise by a Belgian operative disguised as a diplomat, played with convincing verve by Tim McInnerny (*Game of Thrones*), who constantly and unsuccessfully encourages Herman to put aside his more humane and proper methods for drastic measures. Although somewhat crudely shot with annoying filters that make everything look hazy and glare sharply, and occasionally ham-handedly directed, it does offer an at-first slow but rapidly building suspense that is punctuated by explanatory flashbacks that are only minimally annoying. The series does capture the milieu of the early 1970s with supreme accuracy, right down to the heavy metal music and latter-day hippie culture, that was already fraying at the bell-bottomed cuff and paints a less-than-flattering portrait of generational decadence and aimlessness that makes victims out of the naive. The situation is actual; the dialogue is imagined but convincing. The time spent watching this series is worthwhile. **Netflix**

The Shack 🌳🌳🌳

Although you have to read the loglines closely to spot it, this is a Christian film that promotes the idea of redemption from guilt by acknowledging self-sacrifice and love of others. That’s something of a yawn. It still might have worked, but about a third the way through, it shifts into a fantasy mode that presents Viola Davis as the “Father,” living in a garden forest with her carpenter son, who is clearly of Middle Eastern origins, and a beautiful young woman who represents the spiritual completion of the Holy Trinity. Typically obscure language offers tired old bromides and confusing non sequiturs in response to the mortal sinner’s direct questions and gradually converts him from agnostic to believer. Few obvious licks are missed, including a handful of miracles, symbolic baking of bread, and the poisonous roots in the garden, in case anyone hasn’t caught the message by half-way through. For some reason, almost everyone whispers all the dialogue. Unless there’s a need for reaffirmation of one’s faith, this one probably deserves a miss. **Netflix**

The Sinking of the Laconia ★★

This limited series sea yarn from World War II is a bit of a yawn, as it offers stereotypical characters (sympathetic German U-Boat commander, fanatical Nazi, an attractive German Jewish refugee—a spy?—a British dowager, a handsome young merchant naval officer, etc.) all tied up in a single event. Based on the actual sinking of the *HMS Laconia*, by a German U-Boat in 1942, the story begins as a kind of suspense-war-thriller. The ship was designated as a troop carrier, but it actually is transporting Italian POWs under the armed guard of Poles who have been commissioned as auxiliary forces of the Allies, out of the fighting in Africa to camps, presumably in England. The ship is spotted and sunk off the coast of West Africa, below the Equator, although there’s no explanation as to why it’s so far south if it was leaving North Africa for the British Isles. The conflict comes because the U-Boat commander, a dedicated seaman, falls back on maritime tradition, rescues the passengers and some of the prisoners from the doomed ship and brings them aboard the submarine, then broadcasts a clear message that he will not attack any ship of the Allies that comes to collect them. The production is crudely made, and the acting is sometimes a bit wooden and leans too much toward the sentimental, but there are some fine roles displayed, particularly the ship’s captain, played with irascible credibility by Brian Cox. It’s not so much entertaining as informative, but it’s worth a look. **HBO**

The Sinner ★★

A macabre crime series that examines the deeper psychology of pathological killers and psychologically disturbed victims who lash out. This has a lot of oddity about it, just enough to keep things suspenseful and moving forward. The small-town settings in upper New York State work nicely. Each season involves a different crime and psychological mystery. The only consistency is the leading actor's character, a somewhat somber, seriously flawed, ruffled and distressed detective who often seems more victim than sleuth, played with understated intensity by Bill Pullman; at the same time, it's captivating and compelling and never boring or lacking in suspense. **AMC** and **Netflix**

The Stranger ★★★

This eight-part miniseries filmed in Manchester, England, features Siobhan Finneran in a TV adaptation of Harlan Coben novel by the same name. It's a mystery that unfolds from the discovery of a pattern of secrets emanating from a mysterious woman in the small-town community. Although engaging and entertaining, it isn't, alas, particularly memorable, although the performances are excellent, pacing is great, and suspense builds nicely. **Netflix**

The Trouble with Maggie Cole ★★

This somewhat soapy and somewhat confused little melodrama has more going for it than might first be evident. Starring Dawn French (*The Vicar of Dibley*, from old PBS files) as Maggie Cole and rounding out the cast with Mark Heap and Judy Hesmondha (also from *The Vicar of Dibley*), it is set in a pleasant little village with Medieval roots, a place where the Normans came ashore to defeat the Saxons and take England for themselves in 1066. This is a modern story, though, and Maggie, sort of the town gossip, gets in trouble when she offers a wine-fueled interview to a radio reporter and sets off a firestorm of acrimony and accusation and insult that threatens to destroy the tight-knit community. Maggie, for all her foolishness, is a charmer, though, and while she ultimately becomes a catalyst for the foiling of a criminal plot. There are some rather large stretches of credibility as well as some dangling threads when it concludes, but it's entertaining all the same. **PBS**

The Undoing

Nicole Kidman and Hugh Grant and Donald Sutherland head the cast on this tepid and ultimately dissatisfying thriller about a brutal murder and search for a killer in fashionable New York. The solution to this whodunit is revealed, falsely, early on, and then twisted at the end for what should have been a surprise finish. But it's not. Mostly it's a chance for Nichole to look pouty, thoughtful, and pensive as she eases into a graceful middle-age and attractive but not quite so spritely matron. **Showtime**

The Valhalla Murders ★★

And Icelandic murder mystery with a very convincing cast of detectives and believable situations. The Icelandic language is interesting to experience from a non-speakers' viewpoint, and details of Icelandic life and culture are informative. **Netflix**

The Vast of Night ★★

This curious period piece is set sometime in the late 1950s and takes place during the time required to play a high school basketball game, which is attended by the entire population, almost, of a small New Mexico town somewhere in the vagueness of the southeastern part of the state. It concerns a sudden phenomenon of a strange radio signal that is communicated by telephone to a sixteen-year-old central operator in the small town, one of the few people not at the game, for some unknown reason. She shares the sound with a boy she has something of a crush on, an eighteen-year-old smart-ass disk jockey at the local radio station, who is instantly intrigued. All of this sets into motion a series of events that unfold with the spiraling speed of a car chase. The only slow-down occurs when two people who say they recognize the strange sounds spend a good deal of film time explaining how they know what they know; neither is really a principal in what passes for a plot in this semi-serious tale that pays strong homage to Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* in both structure and logic. Saving the film and making it worth watching is the sterling performances by the two principal actors, Sierra McCormick and Jake Horowitz, as well as rapid-fire, fast-paced and totally credible dialogue that manages to transport viewers past points of incredulity and captivate them in a moment in time and place that can only be an intersection between reality and.... **Amazon**

The Wall 🍷

Set in the northern Canadian arctic, or nearly, on the Labrador/Quebec border, this murder mystery rather languidly herks and jerks forward with the usual plot lines, somewhat complicated by a Quebec City detective's arrival and her apparent predatory nature toward young, handsome men. This is a subtle subplot, though, and it is overwhelmed by a vastly complex array of killings, past and present, a confusing number of suspects, all against a background of politics and mining interests in the area that are, unfortunately, far more interesting than the murder at hand. This is a sad attempt to recreate some of the better British crime series, flawed by it being almost entirely in Canadian French, which is confusing to listen to, as it's not precisely French, and an incredible number of secret love affairs and sexual intrigue among a very small and intimate population that goes about in -30-degree weather without head coverings, gloves, or mittens for the most part. They are either the toughest people in the world or are impervious to frostbite. Overall, it's something of a slog, with what amounts to illogical twists and turns and mistrust of everyone for everyone else keeping things moving, somewhat. **Amazon Prime**

The Way Back ★★

This marginal remake of a sorts of *Hoosiers* puts Ben Affleck in the Gene Hackman role and makes him the alcoholic that Dennis Hopper brought to that earlier film, then relocates it from the basketball crazy Midwest to the declining minority neighborhoods of Los Angeles, a handy commute for most of the actors involved. It also downsizes things from a university team to a Catholic high school squad from a school that is more or less on its uppers and spends a lot of energy look back to the glory days of the late 1990s. Generally, this is a sports story with the usual plotting device of a loser team being rebuilt with the application of confidence and discipline along with some basketball sense brought to it by Affleck's character, an untrained, uneducated coach who was a high school star, but whose cage savvy and natural skills as a motivator save the day, at least for the team. In the background is a sentimental story of parental loss and self-destructive behavior born out of guilt and remorse, providing a morose and somewhat somber

backdrop for a bittersweet and largely unsatisfying ending. It's worth watching, although the game sequences are fragmented and lack the excitement of other sports films—in their defense, basketball is not an easy sport to direct for a movie and film in a coherent manner. It's worth a watch, but not really very inspiring. **Netflix**

The White Lotus ★★★

This quirky, off-beat dramady set in the incredibly beautiful islands of Hawaii, something the producers are apparently totally captivated by, if the long, wasteful shots of the sea, the flowers, the beach, the sea life, sunsets, and so forth are any indication, tells the tale of three groups of guests at an all-inclusive resort, The White Lotus, that is managed by a reformed alcoholic manager and his boyish staff. The three tourists groups—a totally mismatched married couple on their honeymoon; a family of four headed by a successful businesswoman matriarch, Connie Britton, and her haplessly lost husband, Steve (“If you haven’t seen me in other roles on other shows, you just haven’t been paying attention”) Zhan, their gorgeous but snotty daughter and bored and naïve son and the daughter’s college roommate friend, who have a myriad of problems ranging from drug abuse to sexual insecurity to identity crises; and an overweight and completely neurotic but fabulously wealthy older woman, played to exquisite extreme by Jennifer Coolidge, with wonderful comic timing, come to scatter her mother’s ashes over the sea. The nervous and outwardly obsequious hotel manager, played by Murray Bartlett in a marvelous recollective homage to John Cleese in *Fawlty Towers*, is the glue that holds most all of this together, with the only “normal” individual being the hotel’s spa manager, played by Natasha Rothwell, who manages to draw pathos out of a character who reminds most audiences of who they are. This series won’t please everyone, as it fails to bring a satisfactory recompense for bad behavior to anyone, save one, and ultimately displays the complications of human relationships and the search for meaning in a world where the trappings of reality seem stripped away, leaving only the incredible natural beauty of an island paradise. Part comedy, part tragedy, this parade of separate stories is brought together by the whole vacation experience. But this is not *Fantasy Island* by a long shot. There’s a sinister element always at work in it—and homages, again, to Stanley Kubrick’s film techniques are heavily layered in; the score is also an odd mix of Hawaiian natural music and classical masses with a great deal else mixed in and sometimes abruptly halted with the mood shifts. The series captivates and holds attention for no reason that can be easily explained; a second season is already in the works. **Amazon Prime**

This is a Robbery 🍷

This documentary centers on a major art theft that took place at a Boston museum in 1990. A unique Rembrandt as well as two other pieces by him, along with a Matisse and some other substantial works were stolen by persons unknown in an overnight robbery. There were suspects aplenty, many of whom came to bad and violent ends, over the years, and numerous leads and investigative trails were established, all of which ultimately ran into dead-ends and went cold. The overall documentary suffers from horrific repetition and a confused timeline as well as a bewildering geography of Boston that leaves viewers scratching their heads as it winds down to an inconclusive ending. It runs about six episodes in a limited season, but there was only material for about two hours, and the stretch is hard to endure. **Netflix**

Tijuana ★★

A Mexican TV series that offers a look at the mortal danger for journalists in cartel-controlled Mexico. This is a one-season series that works nicely. It's exceptionally well-acted and offers a compelling and sometimes engrossing portrait of the modern Mexican border town and the undercurrent of violence that stalks Mexico and extols the vital importance of a free press and the tragedy that takes place when it is attacked. It makes a nifty companion to *Narcos Mexico*, mentioned above. **Netflix**

Tokyo Trial ★

This multi-lingual series, mostly in English, focuses on the Dutch justice sent to Tokyo in the fall of 1945 to sit on the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, appointed and, really, controlled by General Douglas MacArthur, to try the leadership of the Japanese government and military following the surrender of Japan. Proposed initially by Japanese Public Broadcasting, the mini-series' apparent intent was to demonstrate the heavy-handedness exercised particularly by the Americans and British, who did the bulk of the fighting in the Pacific Theater of Operations, and whose own civilians and military suffered the most. The thesis of the series, which was mostly filmed in Lithuania, for some reason, was that the tribunal was conflicted from within, as many of the so-identified war crimes of which the Japanese were accused were not, in fact, crimes at the time they were committed, but were actually deemed to be crimes, principally by the Nuremburg Tribunal that tried the Nazi leaders in the Hague the previous year. Marred by wooden acting and crude cross-cutting of stock footage of the actual trials into the muted color drama unfolding, it focuses on Bert V.A. Röling, the Honorable Justice of the Netherlands, played with an almost uncanny lack of emotion by Marcel Hensema, as he attempts to find neutral ground between the vengeful Brits and Yanks, Filipinos and Chinese, and the more moderate Aussies and French and Russians. An almost intolerably bad portrayal of MacArthur is offered by Michael Ironside in almost criminal act of miscasting. Stacey Keach's lackluster narration completes a collection of vignettes that are overly truncated, disjointed, overbaked, and fail to deliver much more than an off-hand condemnation of western justice that makes the honorable justices seem more like a lynch mob than a tribunal. **Amazon**

Unforgiven ★★★

This film offers the inimitable Sandra Bullock being cast against type and cast against character to some extent. She plays a somewhat depressed ex-con who has been released from prison after serving the minimum sentence for killing a sheriff who was also her friend during a forced eviction. Struggling to reenter society with a record and forced into nasty hard labor as the only employment she can find, she is determined to be reunited with her kid sister, a child at the time of the killing, who has been adopted by a well-meaning and generous couple who dote on her and regard her as fully their own. The drama is a bit plodding in places, and the sentimentality fairly drips from some scenes, but Bullock sustains the gritty and seedy mood with her grim single-mindedness. Like any number of aging actresses, she seems more than willing to set aside her attractive and somewhat sexy image in favor of more serious acting creds. This is worthwhile but a bit depressing and, as the McGuffin of the plot becomes apparent, less interesting in the ending than it is in the unfolding. **Netflix**

Unforgotten ★★

a BBC crime drama that has a lot of interesting perspective, particularly from the point of view of forensic investigation of cold cases that are reactivated by the discovery of new evidence. It's well-acted and highly watchable, but on a casual basis. A final third season may leave a lot of viewers disappointed. **Netflix and Amazon Prime, PBS**

Unhinged 🍷

A Russell Crowe vehicle with a young Wynona Rider look-alike, act-alike in the female leading role (See *Stranger Things* on this point.), this action flick offers a series of highly improbable car chases and is punctuated by some of the bloodiest and most violent killing scenes of recent vintage. The main question a viewer will have about this sad and pointless flick is why an actor of Crowe's ability would make it. He is also revealing that he has not lost the weight he put on to play Roger Ailes in the recent Showtime series about FOX News, for which he should have received at least an Emmy. This flick is a popcorn movie for any who are abjectly bored and don't want to think too hard. Shot in New Orleans, it has some commendable moments, but overall is not quite worth the time. **Amazon**

Upstart Crow ★★★★★ 🍷 🍷

This is an *utterly hilarious* British farce that depicts William Shakespeare as something of a buffoon who stumbles into success because of the wittiness and depth of his servants and a highly compelling and super-talented, creative, and intelligent but sexually frustrated daughter of his landlady in London. Featured characters are Edward De Vere as the Bard of Avon's nemesis, Burbage as his theatrical cohort, and "Bottom" as his manservant. The actress playing Anne Shakespeare is very good, as is the daughter. This is a laugh-riot reminiscent of *Black Adder*, particularly if you know your Shakespeare. **PBS**

Vera ★ 🍷

Eleven seasons, sort of a British *Columbo* but with a wonderful older female detective. Based on a series of novels by Ann Cleeves, it stars Brenda Blethyn as the title character, Vera Stanhope, a fractious, older, unmarried woman with little interest in establishing personal relationships but a relentless commitment to solving mysteries. It's slow in places but entertaining and compelling; by the eleventh season, though, Blethyn is getting sort of long in the tooth and the drama seems more sublimated to set-piece scenes with actors more or less reading their lines. There's a predictability about it that falls short of intriguing by the final seasons. Each episode offers a new crime (making one wonder why anyone would want to live in Northumberland, as criminal activity there seems to be epidemic), but the scenery and detail are stunning. There are some comic elements that are highly entertaining, a la *Columbo*, and very little violence or sexual interplay. By the eleventh season, things are starting to wear out, though, and the jokes aren't funny, and the old side-plots and background intrigue has all disappeared. **Amazon Prime, Britbox, Acorn**

Wallander ★★★

We got through all of the PBS version, set in Sweden but entirely in English, with Kenneth Branagh as the detective in the title role; it was good but not great. The original Swedish version, in Swedish, with an older actor and a more believable character is somehow more credible and more entertaining, although some episodes are identical in plot to the BBC series' episodes. All of the plots have gaping holes that you could drive a SAAB through. Still, it's entertaining enough. Avoid *Young Wallander* at all costs. It's a joke. **MzH** and **Netflix**

Wanted ★★★

An Australian chase thriller with a consistent and credible "frying pan into the fire" device in play throughout, involves two apparently innocent female bystanders at a gangland/corrupt cop killing. They are totally but unintentionally involved, suddenly, with a dead corrupt cop on the ground and a bag full of cash and car full of heroine as well as a fairly (by Australian standards, apparently) "posh" car. As the corrupt cops' corrupt superiors find out who they are and put out their photos as armed cop killers on the lam, the gangsters want their dough and are pressuring the cops. Throw in a ruthless hit man, a vengeful family already after one of the women, and one honest cop among the host of police searching the Outback for the pair of hapless fugitives, one of whom is a spoiled and shy and self-styled fragile urbanite with a host of imaginary health issues and no world experience, but who has actually embezzled millions from her company, and you have a cocktail full of twists and turns that the writers have somehow and in almost all ways made both credible and logical. Season Two moves first to Thailand and then to New Zealand, with no shortage of gorgeous scenery footage in the background of both, as the duo attempts to at once evade the law and the bad guys and to save the son of the older woman from ruthless gamblers to whom he owes money. Meanwhile, the principal villain and his minions stalk them across the Pacific Rim. Season Three moves back to Australia and prison, then an unintentional escape from custody. The chemistry between the two lead actresses is very strong, although the plot starts to strain at the seams by the end of Season Two. There's considerable violence, but there's also considerable comedy as the "odd couple" of women find comfort in one another, although they couldn't be more different. It's really a fun romp, in spite of the bloodletting, and it underscores, once more, how culturally primitive the Outback truly is and how beautiful that part of the world can be when ruthless killers aren't on the hunt. **Netflix**

What's the Problem with Jon Stewart? ★★

Fans of Stewart's previous late-night program on the Comedy Channel may be disappointed with this incarnation of the more serious activist that Stewart has actually become. This hour-long talk show focuses on a different issue each time, each one serious and each one close to crisis mode. His decidedly liberal stance is softened by comic jibes, self-effacing jokes, and some absurdist inserts, with some intercuts of production meetings between him and what one presumes are his principal writers for the show, none of whom seems to be all that sharp, if their pointing out the obvious is any indication. The focus of each episode, though, demonstrates Stewart's talents and abilities as a first-class interviewer, one who refuses to accept side-steps and equivocation in lieu of direct and concrete answers from his subjects, who are sometimes squirming under the lights as they attempt to avoid committing themselves. This is not the clownish, impish Stewart of old; it is a provocative and thoughtful investigation of much that is wrong in

our nation. It's worthwhile, if somewhat redundant—there is sometimes the sense that they're straining to full up the entire hour. **Apple TV+**

Who Killed Sarah? ★🐞

This Mexican vehicle follows a less direct pathway than most. Although set in contemporary Guadalajara and involving political corruption and violent crime, there is no mention made of drugs or cartels. In this case, the mayhem is more traditional—murder and prostitution, or white slavery as a motif. The first season follows the exploits of a recently released and falsely accused and unjustly condemned hero who is unaccountably benefitted by a fellow inmate with a vast amount of his ill-gotten gain, presumably from past crimes, on the promise that he will seek justice. The inmate, who agreed to plead guilty to the murder of his sister—for no apparent reason—in exchange for money needed for his mother's operation, money that was never claimed, reinserts himself into the lives of the crime family with whom he and his deceased sister were originally involved. Marred by flashbacks that are more interruptive than clarifying, the plot winds its way around a series of other crimes, indiscretions, betrayals, and double-crosses that involve fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, friends and spouses in a morass of disgusting behavioral patterns that demonstrate, mostly, and with no surprise that money and power corrupt. The first season is entertaining enough, all the same; but in the second year's extension, it seems that the writers were given free rein to make it up as they go along. Through yet another series of layered flashbacks, previously unknown complications and details emerge to send the whole thing spiraling into a confused swamp of improbability. The final season (available), alas, seems to be groping for a purpose, and new criminal elements and flashbacks offering previously irrelevant plot twists seem too much tacked on to be credible. Stop after two seasons and call it a meal. **Netflix**

Wisting ★★

A Norwegian crime thriller that offers two seasons connected loosely by plot and backstory subplots involving several characters, with more to come, this is a remarkably realistic police caper that starts with the search for a serial killer and ends with the resolution to an old mystery and cold case file that keeps things off balance. Although the pacing is sometimes painfully slow, the story holds interest. Police are sent off investigating clues that the audience already knows are dead-ends and red herrings, while the actual criminal is held in the background for as long as possible, unrevealed and marginally surprising when exposed. Dialogue is sparse and lacks crispness, and the audience is required to fill in a lot of gaps. Keeping up with the Norwegian names is something of a challenge. It is one of the few Nordic mysteries that actually uses the weather and climate as significant factors in the story line, with some very realistic snow and ice scenes. **Amazon Prime**

Yellow Rose ★★

The best thing about this quiet little Austin-filmed flick is the idea behind it and the voice of its lead, Eva Noblezada, a Filipina with a stunningly fine country twang that makes her perfect for the part. Thankfully, she's not too pretty or too sexy and is convincing as an older teen seeking to find her place in a world that doesn't want her. The problem with the movie is that it descends from a "high point" of depicting the plight

of DACA youth and their parents who are forcibly deported at the hands of the US Government and its policing arm, ICE Agents, who use tactics reminiscent of German Gestapo as they go about rounding up undocumented workers and setting their children adrift in the world. The mercilessness of US Policy in this regard during the Trump years is on full view and could have made a great movie premise; unfortunately, this all takes place as a kind of backdrop for the “Star is Born” plot line. Rose, the main character, is, through a variety of hard-to-swallow circumstances befriended by B-level country singer Dale Watson, who sees her talent and attempts to develop it, all the while developing a paternal attitude toward her that soon is reversed when she attempts to return the affection. Things move along at far too fast a clip—this movie wanted to be a half-hour longer to do all it wanted to do—and ends unresolved, for the most part. Original music, mostly written by Watson, is better than most that he’s ever recorded for himself and is worth the time invested in the film, and Noblezada’s voice is genuinely good, good enough for top forty radio, for sure. In the end, poor writing, low budget, and improbabilities pull the whole thing down to a more mediocre result. **Netflix**

Yellowstone ★★

This is kind of *Dallas* meets *The Godfather* with some *Longmeyer* thrown in for western flavor. Set in Montana (filmed mostly in Utah), it stars Kevin Costner in the leading role as a wealthy cattle rancher who is beset on one side by hostile Native Americans who want their land back and on the other by commercial developers who want to cut up the ranch into subdivisions and modern resorts. Credibility is strained from the outset, and unrealistic events unfold with handy regularity. There’s an Elmore Leonard feel about it, although it’s not his. As the seasons progress, budget cuts are evident as background is truncated and becomes less complex and simpler, and the supporting cast shrinks accordingly. Still, it’s entertaining and somewhat compelling. A prequel is available. Originally available through both. **Netflix, Amazon Prime**, it now has moved entirely to another platform, **Paramount**, requiring another subscription of pay-per-view. It might not be entirely worth it. **Paramount**

ZeroZeroZero ★★

An Italian-made series in three languages offered without apology offers a convoluted plot involving Italian drug distributors, Mexican cartel drug manufacturers, and American drug brokers, who are dealing with fifty tons of cocaine shipped in containers ostensibly containing jalapeño peppers on a cargo ship owned by the brokers. Things go awry as internal fighting among the Italian mafia families disrupts plans and threatens to interdict the shipment, while internal fighting among the Mexican cartel and Mexican federal police struggles to keep in en route, and the Americans struggle to keep their end of the deal held up, as they’ve run into huge debt backing the whole thing. Shifts back and forth in time are confusing, as is keeping all the players straight. It’s violent, vicious, and vivid in language but somehow more real than is entirely comfortable. **Netflix**