

5 Non-Political TV Shows to Check out Over the Holidays

The Holiday Season is upon us, and those who are fortunate enough to be able to enjoy a break (from work and even politics) over these last few days of 2016 might be inclined to slip in a few extra hours of television viewing. The



networks are always good about supplying a steady stream of Christmas classics this time of year, but if you're looking for something meatier to hook you in, a good option is to introduce yourself to a new television series.

If you're set up with Netflix, cable, or just a DVD player, you may not realize that you have on-demand access to some very well-written and well-acted shows that came out in 2016. As someone who's not a big sports watcher, avoids reality television like the plague, and has to take the occasional pause from network news (to preserve my own sanity), I've checked out several series this year. As my Christmas present to BernardGoldberg.com readers, I figured I'd offer some personal recommendations (in no particular order):

1. **Black Mirror (Season 3)**

I was first introduced to the Netflix series, *Black Mirror*, a couple years ago. A friend of my wife's claimed it was great, and likened the show to a modern-day *Twilight Zone* or *Tales from the Crypt*, where each episode was its own story – an eerie one. We decided to give it a try, and watched the first episode of the first season.

Now, if you're one of the people who happens to have seen that

infamous episode (entitled *The National Anthem*), you're probably already snickering. As you know, it's quite shocking. And by "shocking" I mean "probably more disturbing and unfortunately memorable than just about anything you've ever seen on television." Sure, it was original, and the acting was strong, but it's not the kind of episode that a show's creators can air as its opening sales-pitch to viewers, and expect to retain a lot of them.

Like many people, I would imagine, my wife and I weren't all that eager to give episode two a chance. Thus, we abandoned the series until just a few weeks ago, when the release of the third season was met with almost unanimous praise from both critics and regular viewers. After some individuals whose entertainment tastes I generally trust both gave it a big thumbs-up, we gave *Black Mirror* another shot. Boy am I glad we did.

Season 3 is brilliant. Each episode takes place in the not-so-distant future, and revolves around the cultural impact of technological advances on the human condition. Everything from the need for social-media validation to the privacy we relinquish for personal gratification is explored and exploited through fantastic storytelling. The acting is first-rate and the characters are interesting and easily identifiable. Well worth your time.

2. The Night Of

The best television performance I saw in 2016 was John Turturro's portrayal of John Stone, a shady defense attorney with a nagging conscience, in the HBO miniseries, *The Night Of*.

This gripping story of a Pakistani-American college student, accused of a murder that he himself isn't convinced he's innocent of, is laid out so convincingly that you're immediately invested in the players and their fate. A

methodical plot, sympathetic characters, and a plethora of twists and turns make this show a must-see for people who enjoy slow-brew, smart television.

The series does come with a bit of a lefty social statement on our criminal justice system, but it takes a backseat to the character-driven plot.

3. The Exorcist

Let's face it...just about every television adaptation of a successful film has turned out to be pretty lame. As we found out with *Fargo* (in 2014 and 2015), however, a really good one *can* be pulled off. The secret is to avoid trying to emulate the original, and instead borrow and expand on some of the unique branding elements that made it great.

The creators of Fox's *The Exorcist* understand this, and the result has been one of 2016's best new shows. Geena Davis puts in a reliably good performance, but it's Ben Daniels (who plays Father Marcus Keane) who manages to steal every scene he's in.

The special effects are strong and genuinely creepy, and the plot stands well on its own (though the tie-in to the movie is clever).

4. Stranger Things

If you haven't yet heard about the greatness of the Netflix original series, *Stranger Things*, you've probably been living in a box. Strong word-of-mouth praise made this first season an enormous, well-deserved hit. The show is not only exceptional, but perhaps more importantly...fun.

My best single-sentence description of this youth-buddy sci-fi tale is that it's a cross between *Stand By Me* and *The X-Files*. There's heavy influence from 1980's nostalgia that not only shapes the setting and story, but also the production style

itself (even down to the opening credits and original score). This commitment to the era leaves viewers with a sense of familiarity that goes far beyond the silly trends and hairstyles we remember and laugh at while watching *The Wedding Singer* and *The Goldbergs*. The old-school *good vs evil* dynamic of the show is also a welcome escape from today's more nuanced storytelling.

5. O.J.: Made in America

A few months ago, my wife talked me into watching this ESPN mini-series with her. Personally, I wasn't all that interested in seeing it. I hadn't thought about Simpson in years, and the truth is that I've long been uncomfortable with the news-media's sensationalizing of real-life murders for the purpose of entertainment. Even shows like *Dateline NBC* kind of bother me.

I passed on the FX's *The People v. O. J. Simpson*, and I would have been more than happy to skip this documentary. But in the end, I was glad that I watched it, if only for the reason that I think it did the victims (and their families) some justice. It also exposed the ghoulishness of those who helped free Simpson – from his cocky defense attorneys (who are still quite proud of their shockingly dishonest tactics) to the juror who admits she voted “not guilty” only as *payback* against the white police officers who beat Rodney King.

O.J.: Made in America is extremely well done and stunningly candid, and it offers some amazing insight into an evil man and the media-fueled perversion of justice that so many of us watched play out 20 years ago.

Seasons Greetings!

Finally, I'd like to take a moment to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. There are certainly better things to do over the holidays than watch television, so I hope you're all able to spend some quality time with friends

and family, and enjoy the festivities. With a grueling election season behind us, and an opportunity to recharge our political batteries, it will be good to come into 2017 with a fresh perspective and perhaps even a sense of optimism.

Take care, everyone.

– John

