



OPINION

Fall TV guide: 12 dramas to savour this slimmer, stronger season

Although there are fewer new series it promises to be a great fall TV season, writes critic John Doyle. These are the essential dramas you'll want to make time for over the next few months

JOHN DOYLE TELEVISION CRITIC

INCLUDES CLARIFICATION

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It used to be that few things were more predictable than the calendar of the TV industry: Make pilot episodes between January and April, announce new content in May and unleash a gush of new shows in the fall.

Streaming services upset that reliable timetable. As a for-instance, Netflix saved Stranger Things for summer, taking advantage of conventional TV's traditional intermission. This year, the pandemic changed everything, across every platform that delivers TV. The gush of content was certain to be curtailed eventually. In March alone, 60 shows in production in Los Angeles shut down. Some have yet to restart.

This year's fall TV schedule is slimmer than usual but strong. Fewer new network sitcoms promising hilarity from crusty-but-lovable characters. Fewer new dramas telling us that police officers are put-upon heroes. (There might be less of that to come, period.) For the viewer, this means less frivolity and more substance. There is plenty of charm, though. Love and romance galore, sometimes with social significance. (Netflix's Grand Army looks astonishing in this regard.) Top-notch mystery is coming. Political drama, too, and thankfully, a good deal of new fall TV looks more diverse and more reflective of population and culture.

In late July, TV critics gathered for the twice-yearly presentation by cable and streaming services. This time, online only. There was way more content to cover than expected, and while some creators and actors were frustrated that their series were not quite finished because of work restrictions, some of those series have become ready for your attention. It will be a great fall TV season: fabulous, infuriating, escapist and energizing.

Here are 12 essential dramas to watch in the next few months.

The Comey Rule (Showtime/Crave, starts Sept. 27)



Jeff Daniels, left, and Brendan Gleeson star as former FBI director James Comey and President Donald Trump in the limited series *The Comey Rule*.

SHOWTIME/CRAVE

This is already controversial, based only on advance reviews. A review in the U.S. edition of TV Guide carried the headline, “Showtime’s political limited series shouldn’t exist.” An outlandish assertion, but that’s the United States these days. Of course it should exist. Based on former FBI director James Comey’s memoir (he’s played by Jeff Daniels), the two-parter isn’t always subtle, but it has wit, and although you know much of the story, it grips. The first section dramatizes Comey’s role in the 2016 election. Only 15 minutes in, Hillary Clinton’s e-mail issue arises. The second portion covers his relationship with Trump, and as Trump, Brendan Gleeson is devilishly good. He gets the voice and tone correct. The Trump he plays is an empty person, a ceaseless dealer in transactional games he thinks are immensely clever. “Jim was always a showboat,” says Rod Rosenstein (played by Scoot McNairy) of Comey. Right. But have you met Trump yet? There’s a lot of exposition, and the Barack Obama figure looks about 25 years old, but this is unmissable history-on-the-run TV.

Utopia (Amazon Prime Video, streams from Sept. 25)



Utopia is Gillian Flynn's adaptation of a British series.

ELIZABETH MORRIS/AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

It's hard to believe how unintentionally timely this is. A dark-comedy conspiracy-thriller series, it is Gillian Flynn's (*Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects*) adaptation of a British series. Made before COVID-19 struck, it features a group of comic-book obsessives who believe a certain work contains prophecies about a dangerous virus. In a virtual chat with critics, Flynn summed it up as "The Goonies meets Marathon Man." True.

Fargo (FX, starts Sept. 27)



Chris Rock stars in the latest season of FX's *Fargo*.

ELIZABETH MORRIS/FX

Oh boy. Incredibly ambitious, at times outrageously inventive and breathtaking, Noah Hawley's Coen Brothers-inspired anthology series is back with a bang. Its cast is star-studded, with Chris Rock, Jason Schwartzman, Jessie Buckley, Ben Whishaw and others. It opens with sprawling overviews and dramatic synopses of crime families in control of Kansas City over the decades and settles into 1950, when the Italian mob, led by Donatello Fadda (Tommaso Ragno) and his angry son Josto (Schwartzman), are sensing danger from a Black criminal enterprise led by Loy Cannon (Rock). What plays out is baroque, droll and dangerously over-the-top, until Rock's character makes this statement: "Every country has its own type of criminal. In America we got the confidence man, snake-oil salesman, grifter. He don't rob you so much as trick you into robbing yourself. See, 'cos in America, people wanna believe. They got that dream. And a dreamer, you can fleece." That's a fair thematic summary.

Emily in Paris (Netflix, streams Oct. 2)



Lily Collins is the titular star of *Emily in Paris*.

CAROLE BETHUEL/NETFLIX/NETFLIX

Attention fans of fun and romance, especially those favouring a bewildering array of oh-là-là fashion. This is your show. Emily (Lily Collins), an earnest American go-getter, lands her dream marketing job in Paris. Culture clashes and romantic crushes ensue while an array of great berets are worn. Written, created and executive-produced by Darren Star (*Beverly Hills 90210*, *Melrose Place*, *Sex and the City*) this looks like piquant popcorn TV and intoxicating nonsense.

The Sounds (CBC, starts Oct. 5)



Rachelle Lefevre and Matt Whelan in *The Sounds*, a joint Canada-New Zealand production.

CBC

No masterpiece mystery series, this Canada-New Zealand production (already streaming on Acorn TV) is a middling-good time-waster. Maggie Cabbott (Rachelle Lefevre) goes to New Zealand from Vancouver to meet up with her husband Tom (Matt Whelan). A rich businessman, he's been finalizing a deal to build a sustainable fishery there. So what? Well, then he disappears into the water. Or does he, really? We're told far too often that New Zealand is beautiful, and Tom's dark side is telegraphed almost as often. Uncomplicated and nicely made escapist stuff.

Trickster (CBC, CBC Gem, starts Oct. 7)



Joel Oulette and Anna Lambe in CBC's *Trickster*.

CBC

This might be the best CBC drama in years. The six-part series doesn't aim clumsily for prestige-TV tropes. Instead it flows naturally from Eden Robinson's book, the source material. In the hands of writer/director Michelle Latimer, that material becomes a sophisticated and very entertaining young-adult yarn with huge appeal. The focus is on Jared (Joel Oulette), an Indigenous teen whose life in a laidback but drug-addled community involves protecting his born-to-be-wild mother (Crystle Lightning, wonderful) and others. Then the world seems to play tricks on him. Highly recommended from the get-go, this is an acute, enjoyable journey.

The Walking Dead: World Beyond (AMC, starts Oct. 4)



The Walking Dead: World Beyond is a spinoff of AMC's original smash-hit zombie series.

AMC

As the original series, once the biggest show on cable, shuffles zombie-like to an end, this spinoff looks as though it has the oomph the original once had. It's a limited series, not meant to meander for years. Set in Nebraska 10 years after the zombie apocalypse, it features "the first generation to come of age in the apocalypse as we know it." As such, available footage suggests it concentrates on the young, one of whom says, "Ten years, and the dead still have this world." There are solid reasons why The Walking Dead was once so forceful, and this spinoff may have found them.

Departure (Global, starts Oct. 8)

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Christopher Plummer, left, and Archie Panjabi, right, are among the cast of the upcoming conspiracy thriller *Departure*.

GREENPOINT PRODUCTIONS/PEACOCK VIA AP

A Canada-Britain co-production, this six-part series is a first-rate conspiracy thriller. Archie Panjabi of *The Good Wife* plays Kendra Malley, an investigator looking into the matter of a downed transatlantic passenger plane. Turns out there's one survivor (played by Canadian Rebecca Liddiard with her characteristic verve) and much murky backstory. Kendra's strings are pulled by her boss Howard Lawson (Christopher Plummer), and she eventually knows he's not the best boss for this case. All action, twists and propulsive pace, it's a great pulpy distraction.

The Salisbury Poisonings (AMC, date TBA)

[Open this photo in gallery](#)

Rafe Spall stars as a police investigator in *The Salisbury Poisonings*.

JAMES PARDON/AMC / BBC

This three-part BBC drama aired in Britain this summer to understandable acclaim. It's about the March, 2018, poisoning of former double-agent and spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the British city of Salisbury. The drama focuses less on the espionage, politics and assassination-attempt angles and more on the impact on the local community. At the heart is the local director of public health (Anne-Marie Duff). She realizes the Skripals have been poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok, a tiny amount of which could kill tens of thousands and which has spread around the community.

The Crown, (Netflix, streams from Nov. 15)

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Olivia Colman is back as Queen Elizabeth II in season 4 of *The Crown*.

SOPHIE MUTEVELIAN/NETFLIX

Olivia Colman returns as the Queen as the series heads into the Margaret Thatcher years. Gillian Anderson plays Thatcher. Fortunately for fans, Seasons 3 and 4 were filmed back-to-back, meaning it was just being finished as COVID-19 struck. Emma Corrin plays Lady Diana Spencer (the future Princess of Wales), and after this season, the role goes to Elizabeth Debicki, one of many changes for the eventual Season 5.

Roadkill (PBS Masterpiece, starts Nov. 1)

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Hugh Laurie stars in *Roadkill*, a political thriller made for BBC TV.

PBS

There isn't much to review in advance, but the mere synopsis of *Roadkill* makes it very tempting fare. Made for BBC TV, it stars Hugh Laurie as a British politician on the ropes as his shameless private life goes public. Written by playwright David Hare, it has Helen McCrory as the British prime minister. Laurie stars as Peter Laurence, a charismatic Conservative Party government minister who seems impervious to embarrassment, even as torrid tales emerge. Speculation that the character is linked to current Conservative British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is yours to indulge.

Grand Army (Netflix, streams from Oct. 16)

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Netflix's *Grand Army* is adapted from Katie Cappiello's play *Slut*.

JASPER SAVAGE/NETFLIX/COURTESY OF NETFLIX

The new series is adapted from Katie Cappiello's powerful play *Slut*, about the effects of slut-shaming and rape culture on young women. (Cappiello, a former teacher, serves as creator, writer and executive producer on the Netflix series.) Here, the play is expanded much to offer a raw, sometimes incendiary picture of life among teens at a central New York City high school. It is, on early evidence, potently contemporary about issues of race, police behaviour and, well, Trump-era urban politics. *Rolling Stone* has already called it, "Where *My So-Called Life* meets *Kids* meets *Degrassi*."

Editor's note: (Sept. 25) This article has been updated because *The Salisbury Poisonings* has been pushed back to an undetermined release date.

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