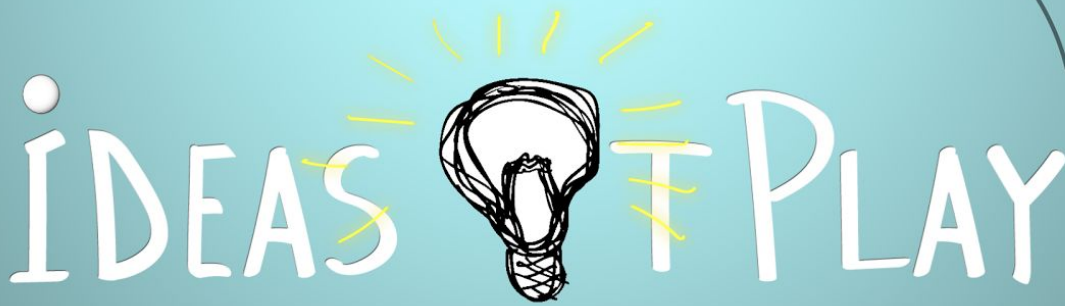




July 2017

Ideas At Play Newsletter



Hello! My name is Jackson and this is the third monthly Ideas At Play newsletter! This special reward is meant to thank my Patreon supporters and provide a look into a lot more of the stuff I've watched from the previous month. Each title includes a hyperlink to the show's trailer if you're interested in seeing a sneak peek at it or even if you just need to jog your memory. This is my first time watching all of these shows unless otherwise specified.

I've tried to keep it light on the spoilers, although I realize that talking about a show at all is going to spoil a few things. I've marked where I've deemed it a little more than light, but other than that, enjoy! Feel free to give me feedback or just talk to me in any way either on Twitter (@jackapn2) or email (bumtugglies@gmail.com)

Thanks!
Jackson



The Leftovers

HBO Eps: 101–210

It might not surprise you to learn that I'm a huge fan of *Lost*. It's a series that I've watched from start to finish a number of times, taken a class on in college, and written a 17-page paper about concerning its use of time travel (side note: avoid writing in-depth analyses on circular time travel unless you have some decent migraine medication). But despite my love of Damon Lindelof's masterpiece, I had been hesitant to get into *The Leftovers*. Part of me felt that nothing he could ever do would live up to *Lost*, which has to be one of the 10 most important shows in the history of peak TV. I mean, just look at *Prometheus* and *Tomorrowland*. But I digress. This isn't about *Lost*, it's about *The Leftovers*.

The other part of me was scared of the emotional weight of *The Leftovers*' subject matter. I wasn't super excited to spend 10-20 hours dealing with the tremendous existential weight of seeing 2% of the world's population disappear before my eyes, knowing that there are no answers. I didn't need that in my life. But I was wrong. I was so wrong (is this the real theme of this newsletter?).

It's hard not to watch this show and think of it as the spiritual sequel to *Lost*. Where the critics of *Lost* clamored about its lack of satisfying answers, *The Leftovers* tells us up front that some of these questions simply don't have answers. We'll never know, and that's the point. If you can never know, what do you do next? But, honestly, that angle sells the show incredibly short.

Lindelof's greatest strength as a writer is his ability to make you feel that there is some greater power at work. More than just hint at those unseen forces which move our story along, he gives them a profound presence that feels almost physical. You start to feel as though you're just a stick in a river, trying to make sense of where you are, while never being able to fully comprehend the vastness of the powers that guide you. It's the central conflict in a lot of Lindelof's work, but in *The Leftovers*, there isn't much to distract from that idea. The show is a meditation on coming to terms with the unknowable forces that dictate all of our lives.



When I finished the second season, I didn't talk to anyone for a solid 24 hours because I needed time to process the vast emotional depths the show had introduced me to. *The Leftovers* walks the divide between abstraction, surrealism, and reality in a way that almost begs to be left unanalysed. I could fawn over every decision the creators made: the interlocking networks of characters' stories, the depth of each character's emotional journey and how each actor communicates the complexities of them, the symbolism, the MUSIC. But what I find the most powerful is how the show resonates on a level beneath the surface in a way I have yet to fully understand. If the show is a concert, this is the vibration of the bass—far from the spotlight, yet still coloring your experience completely.

There are truly too many aspects of this show that I love to fit into 500 words, so I might revisit this in a future newsletter or make a video on it. But there's also the distinct possibility that I'll never be able to fully wrap my head around it. And that's okay too.



Six Feet Under

HBO Eps: 101–113

So you know how I said that I was worried about watching *The Leftovers* because of my fear of dealing with existential dread? Well, I doubled down on facing that fear by watching *Six Feet Under*, the classic HBO series about how death is coming for us all. So yeah, June was a lighthearted month.

But, in actuality, *Six Feet Under* deals with this impending doom with the balance of humor and respect that the concept deserves. I respect the hell out of the show for being able to position itself between these two extremes, and it's not that hard to imagine what it might have been like if it steered into any direction too heavily: either a morbid fascination—the blackest of comedies—or a straight-up depressing representation of nihilism. Instead, these ingredients are proportioned appropriately, the flavor of each balancing out the other.



This careful attention to detail treats death as a natural part of life. Death is all around the Fisher family, just as it is for us all. Every episode starts with a death and the Fisher & Sons Funeral Home doubles as the family's house. There is no escaping the presence of death, but as the late patriarch of the Fisher family says in flashbacks, "There's nothing to be afraid of; they're not going to hurt you."

While this may all seem a bit cliché, it's not something that most of us seriously contemplate enough to be defined that way. Yes, we've all heard that death is what makes life worth living, but there's a difference between that idea as an adage and as something we truly reflect on despite our reservations.

We all avoid death. It's scary AF. But it's unavoidable. Sooner or later, we all must face it, no matter how much we ignore its presence. It's one of the few things that every human will experience, and while that is intimidating, it also means we don't have to shy away from it.



Man Seeking Woman

FXX (available on Hulu)

Eps: 101–106

Changing gears to a much lighter subject, *Man Seeking Woman* is one of, if not the most, imaginative shows I've ever seen. It's not something that would be apparent from its general description: A 20-something man looks for love in a series of surreal situations. It sounds like *Scrubs* without the doctor aspect. But it's how these surreal situations are deployed that makes the show so unique. Every episode takes metaphors, analogies, and idioms and follows them down a rabbit hole to their most absurd logical conclusion. You never know when one of these might start, and the show seamlessly slips into them at every turn, making them part of the story itself. There is no "real world" to return to, just this peculiar parallel universe where the fantastical is ordinary. In the first episode alone, we see our main character, Josh, go on a date with an actual troll and witness his ex in a committed relationship with a 137-year-old Adolf Hitler, all while being completely unable to convince anyone how this is weird.



Each of these is highly symbolic, and meant to embody a specific experience in the world of modern dating. I mean, who hasn't compared their ex's new partner to Hitler? It is a fresh and bold way to write a show that doesn't shy away from any idea, no matter how outlandish (the most recent episode I watched had a bit about Sex Aliens that looked like Yolandi from Die Antwoord).

Not all of these bits are perfect, and watching it can feel a bit like a sketch comedy show (which makes sense coming from executive producer Lorne Michaels of SNL fame). It has a lot of the same problems as SNL. Some bits go on for too long, others are just a little too out there, and others just kind of don't work. But each one is unexpected, and the show commits to them in an unabashedly creative way that you can't help but admire. This show is really weird, and it's really proud of that fact. It's not hard to see why it was cancelled in 2017, but it totally deserves attention and praise for devoting itself to such a unique version of storytelling.



[The Handmaid's Tale](#)

Hulu Eps: 108–110

I've written about this show in each of my two previous newsletters, so if you want a general feeling about the show, check those out. This time, I'm going to talk about the end of the first season.

*****Spoilers*****

Throughout its first season, *The Handmaid's Tale* dealt with its heavy subject material with the same careful and thoughtful approach it applied to its cinematography. Where it would have been easy to be gratuitous with sexual violence, the show instead focused on its consequences, showing physical and



emotional pain in excruciating detail. And it is exhausting. Each episode brought moments that made you question if you could watch any more depictions of suffering, and the show, seemingly aware of that crisis in its audience would follow up with a modicum of relief. Sometimes it came in the form of a character reunion or a moment of humanity.

Most often though, *The Handmaid's Tale* would rely on music to change the mood instead, often in a jarring fashion. For most of the series, this moment would come in the final scene of an episode, to represent Offred's resolve, and her determination to keep resisting, a message that sounds great on paper. But this technique was, at best, ineffective and, at worst, distracting. In the final episode it reached a breaking point. After an hour in which Offred is beaten, discovers she is pregnant by rape, watches her daughter be threatened as a hostage, is asked to stone her only remaining friend to death, and is promised certain and severe punishment for refusal, it felt awkward to have a slow motion walking scene set to "Feeling Good" by Nina Simone.

Now, levity is an incredibly important tool, even when dealing with such heavy subject matter. It's something that I just praised *Six Feet Under* for doing. But there's a distinction between providing the audience with an opportunity to breathe and undercutting the message of the show.

It may feel like nitpicking, but *The Handmaid's Tale* is a show more about tone than anything else. It strives to embody aspects of being a woman through exaggerated and dystopian fiction. Perhaps I am missing the point because I have never had that experience, but to me this decision undercut the tone and message of the episode, and the whole season. To treat such heavy material with solemn care, only to end the season with "American Girl" by Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers, could not leave anyone with any thought other than "What?"



GLOW

Netflix Eps: 101-105



GLOW opens on Ruth (played by Alison Brie) giving an impassioned read for a part, intentionally reading the male part instead of the lackluster female lines she is auditioning for. She is rejected, obviously. This introduction to a strong woman makes her transformation to the outside-the-box role on The Gorgeous Ladies Of Wrestling (GLOW) that much more surprising. On this show-within-a-show, women are simultaneously empowered to do everything men can, and objectified in bikini-clad cat fights. And it's this cognitive dissonance that is at the core of GLOW and present in each character.

Ruth is, at the same time, both a feminist and a homewrecker. On the one hand, she is sick and tired of sticking to her lane as a woman and to her societal position as a struggling actress. She wants desperately to be recognized as an artist and not just in playing the role of a woman. But she has also torn down the most important woman in her life, her best friend Debbie, by sleeping with her husband more than once. And placing Ruth as the villain on GLOW offers her the tangible dilemma of choosing between the two.

Debbie (played by Betty Gilpin), the victim of this betrayal, made her choice at the beginning of the series. Once a successful soap actress, she gave up her career to play the role of a stay-at-home mom and wife, only to have that ripped away from her by her husband's infidelity. On her own with a newborn baby, she grapples with what roles she wants to play in life, between the hard life of being on her own and the easier but less fulfilling role of being a victim without agency.

Sam (played by Marc Maron) is not a woman, quite the opposite. This washed-up B-movie director embodies the cognitive dissonance between objectification and empowerment in his own way as he tries to make the show his own. He finds himself pulled in opposite directions by both trying to make something that he is proud of and by appealing to the lowest common denominator, of which he is a member. Does he want to make something that is a creative and artistic commentary on society or just something that turns him on and has job security? His personal conflict boils this dichotomy down and distills it to its genderless core: the choice between being true to yourself and selling out. It's a concept that every character wrestles with, both figuratively and literally.



[Better Call Saul](#)



AMC Eps: 308–310

*****Spoilers*****

Whether it's Mike's introduction to Hector Salamanca and cartel life, or Kim's drive to prove herself and stand as her own lawyer, the best thing about Better Call Saul has always been its secondary and tertiary plots. The main plot of feuding brothers has always struggled to be as compelling. Jimmy and Chuck have just been brothers who fight, make up, and repeat, even though the methods they take to attack each other's weakness are clever and interesting. There would be no stakes if they always had a baseline relationship that couldn't change.

But the courtroom episode I mentioned last month was a big turning point, not just for the characters, but for the direction of the show itself. It has had lasting consequences for Jimmy and Chuck on their own, and it effectively dissolved that baseline relationship. The show isn't about them as a unit anymore, but about each of them as totally independent characters. Without the other to use as a crutch, their flaws have to find other targets.

For Chuck, that means having to face his inner turmoil. While he was lying when he told Jimmy in the season finale, "You just never mattered much to me," it was an acknowledgement of how he's used Jimmy as a crutch. He's put off dealing with his mental health under the guise of needing to undermine Jimmy for some greater good. But now he has no choice, not after Jimmy has confronted him publicly with the psychosomatic nature of his condition. He doesn't want to focus his life around thwarting Jimmy anymore, but he's grown so reliant on chasing him that he can't do anything else. His mental health is beyond repair, his judgement is shot, he can never return to his law career, and he no longer has an enemy in Jimmy to distract him.

For Jimmy, it means finding someone else to sabotage. He starts by turning the elderly women of Sandpiper against each other under the pretense that he needs the money. And he does need the money. But what's really going on here is that he needs to find something to destroy. After all, he tells Kim, "I've always been good at tearing down things, but I've never been one for building them." In that moment he decides that in order to assuage his conscience he will turn the elderly women of Sandpiper against him, effectively making himself a pariah. At first glance, this seems like him doing the only thing he can to right a wrong, but it's much more troubling than that. He can never leave well enough alone, and his only approach is destruction. So how long will it be before he sabotages Kim, under the guise of trying to save her from herself?