

How “When They See Us” and “Chernobyl” Make Us Look

These new true-story series manage to make depressing, traumatic material not merely watchable but mesmerizing.

By [Emily Nussbaum](#)

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In the third episode of “When They See Us,” Ava DuVernay’s bleak, beautiful drama about [the Central Park Five](#), Linda McCray (Marsha Stephanie Blake) visits her son Antron in a juvenile-detention center. “I feel like everybody in the world hate me, Mom,” Antron (Caleel Harris) tells her. “I know it feels like that,” she says, then adds, fiercely, “But I love you enough to make up for *everybody*.” As music rises, Linda tells her son that she is always with him: “You cry, I cry. You mad, I’m mad. You scared, I’m scared. You free, I’m free.” The camera cuts to autumn leaves—and to the day of Antron’s release from prison, seven years later, as the child actor is replaced by a handsome adult, embracing his mother. “Hi, baby,” Linda says.

It’s an elegant, affecting sequence—at once grand and simple, movingly performed—which captures the central ethos of the show. “When They See Us,” on Netflix, is a harrowing story about a hideous injustice: the railroading of a group of five black and Latino boys for the beating and rape of Trisha Meili, who was attacked while jogging in Central Park, in 1989. The show portrays a racist justice system and an equally hellish penal system, as well as media that amplified the lies that put the boys in prison. But its main concern—its method and its theme—is empathy. Not a syrupy, manipulative empathy but a rigorous one, meant as a corrective. As the title indicates, it takes boys who were seen as a group—reduced to an indistinguishable pack of animals—and insists that they be viewed as individuals, children worthy of love, and then, years later, men worthy of justice. If they’re free, we’re free.

This uplifting philosophy is also what makes a series that might easily be unwatchable not merely watchable but mesmerizing. The four episodes are neatly structured: the first covers the coerced confessions; the second, the trial; the third, the imprisonment and eventual release of the four boys, along with their complicated attempts to reënter society. The final episode is a bravura, richly theatrical portrait of the life of the story’s most tragic character, Korey Wise (played with blustering vulnerability by Jharrel Jerome, from “[Moonlight](#)”), who was arrested at sixteen, then placed in an adult prison, where he spent years in solitary confinement, until, in an outcome so outrageous it would never work in fiction, he had a run-in with the man who had actually raped Meili, and whose confession led to the boys’ exoneration. That episode is smartly built, using fantasy and flashback, spiked with elements of theatrical glory and strangeness: Wise’s daydream of a date at Coney Island; a knock on his cell door that echoes the fatal knock on the window of a fast-food restaurant which drew him into the park. These aesthetic

releases highlight how trapped Wise is, but they are also there to liberate us from feeling trapped with him; they give us access to his imagination in a way that doesn't reduce him to a martyr.

The first episode is by far the most painful, because it documents exactly what went wrong; I had to hit Pause repeatedly during sequences showing the teen-agers being bullied into false confessions, by cops who practically high-five with every bit of manipulation. Meanwhile, the boys' families scramble to protect them, but mostly push them further into entrapment, often out of a desperate wish to be seen as law-abiding. Just as wrenching, in a different way, is the simple montage that opens the episode: shots of McCray sparring with his dad about the Yankees, Kevin Richardson excitedly planning on going for first chair in his school orchestra, Wise flirting, Yusef Salaam chilling out, Raymond Santana checking his reflection in a car window. Five minutes is all that DuVernay shows us of their lives before the tragedy, but it's so potent and vivid that we feel a world of potential crushed. Then the kids flood into Central Park, to the pulse of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power."

As haunting as the show can be, it is seductive, too, because it treats the viewer as an intimate, worthy of hard truths. The first episode ends with a quiet sequence in which four of the boys are gathered in a room, weighed down with guilt—not from Meili's rape, but from accusing one another to the cops. "I lied on you, man," Kevin, who is fourteen, confesses to Antron. "I'm sorry." It's brutal, a heartbreaking, childlike desire to own his mistakes. It's also something that none of the adults involved—from the prosecutor, Linda Fairstein, to Donald Trump, who took out a newspaper ad lobbying for the accused to get the death penalty—has ever done.

It may seem odd to focus on whether an excellent TV show is "watchable," but that's been a recurrent question about modern television, from "[The Sopranos](#)" to "The Handmaid's Tale." For those seeking an escape from reality, moral weight, uncut by other satisfactions, can drive viewers away. One of my favorite recent series was ABC's "[American Crime](#)," created by John Ridley. For three seasons, the show dramatized complex subjects—like the parallels between sex trafficking, foreign nannies, and immigrant field labor—that went beyond the range of most network series. It got low ratings, and I had no luck with talking anyone into watching. As hypnotic and well directed as "American Crime" was, it was also nearly humorless, requiring you to submit yourself to its methods. There was something tough and original in Ridley's vision; there was something exasperating about it, too.

In contrast, there's "[Orange Is the New Black](#)," whose final season airs on Netflix in late July. Like "American Crime," "Orange" is an ambitious multi-narrative story about the criminal-justice system, but it's stuffed with jokes, rude and wild, along with the heartbreak. This mixed tone offends some viewers, because it seems disrespectful. But I've probably absorbed more about the justice system from "Orange Is the New Black" than I did from "American Crime"—or, for that matter, from some spectacular pieces of investigative journalism—because of my attachment to the characters. That attachment is a double-edged sword. When, at the end of the fourth season, one of the show's most

beloved characters—the soft-spoken, funny Poussey—died brutally, some people stopped watching.

The two seasons that followed were the show's roughest, both because the tone darkened and because the show had trouble calibrating that change: there was a flawed but ambitious season tracing a three-day prison riot, then one that involved a transfer to a maximum-security prison, which ended with Poussey's best friend, Taystee, who is poor and black, sentenced to life, while the bougie white Piper won early release. The series was still powerful, but viewers I knew were wary: was it worth it? The final season offers a definitive answer. It's a triumphant return to form, starting with several savvy structural moves, including ditching two cartoonish villains who never quite jelled. It focusses on immigration, turning a privatized *ICE* detention center into a main setting. It explores new subjects, including restorative justice. I sobbed my way through several episodes, especially the brilliant eleventh one, titled "God Bless America." But I also kept clicking "Next episode."

I hope "Orange Is the New Black" helps shift awareness on immigration, just as "When They See Us" has helped bring attention to police misconduct. These are wildly different shows, by creators with different emphases and values, but there are many methods of spreading the bad news. Was Ezra Edelman's deeply researched documentary about O. J. Simpson better or worse than [Ryan Murphy's](#) arch, outrageous "American Crime Story" season about the same subject? Both felt necessary. In fact, they deepened each other, in their contrast, and maybe in their ability to reach multiple audiences.

The recent HBO series "Chernobyl," created by Craig Mazin, is an exemplary case of a show that should have been unwatchable but is instead addictive. Like "When They See Us," it's based on a gruesome injustice from the late nineteen-eighties, when the Soviet Union's Chernobyl power plant exploded; the government coverup made the repercussions far worse. My husband jumped ship after fifteen minutes, filled with dread. I lured him back, because, as grim as the story is, the show is intoxicating. Its five episodes are a satisfying length, like DuVernay's four. As with "When They See Us," "Chernobyl" exposes a reality that was buried, denied, and warped by the government—a distinctly contemporary theme. But where "When They See Us" emphasizes intimacy, using the fuel of family drama to power a criminal-justice story, "Chernobyl" is structured as a thriller—a distressing thriller, in which firefighters die in agony and dogs are shot, but an exciting one nonetheless. It has dry humor, as when some Soviet miners smear a government official with coal dust, then tell him, "Now you look like the minister of coal." It has MacGyver-like save-the-day twists. It has brave whistle-blowers giving stirring speeches. It also makes the choice to elide the more horrifying aspects of the tragedy, rather than revel in horror. In the era of "[The Walking Dead](#)," "Chernobyl" is unusually restrained: the birth of an irradiated baby is indicated, taken seriously, but not shown.

On *The New Yorker's* Web site, Masha Gessen criticized "Chernobyl" for its adherence to such conventions, [arguing, convincingly](#), that Soviet scientists would not have spoken so directly, as if they were in "Braveheart." It was harmful, she said, to make the story more heroic than it was—raising the stakes, to use the language of TV executives. I could

argue that the show was transparent about its manipulations, especially since it's accompanied by a podcast, which uses the show as a magnet to pull viewers toward the facts. But the truth is, hers is an argument that I agree with and also don't care about. No one tells a story straight—they're *all* distortions. There is perhaps a different movie to be made about Chernobyl, about privatized prisons, or about corrupt prosecutions: smaller scale, more grim, more abstract. I'd watch that, too. I might admire it just as much. But there's a lot to be said for well-made TV that insists on being heard about the sort of subjects that nobody wants to hear about. ♦

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