

'The Leftovers' is more relevant now than ever

1 message

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Warning: This newsletter contains spoilers for the first two episodes of The Leftovers, “Pilot” and “Penguin One, Us Zero.” Wondering why you’re getting this? Catch up here with **Streaming TV Party’s** [introduction to The Leftovers](#).

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Not just a straight-up recap

Despite how underrated *The Leftovers* may be—and in his [Peabody Awards acceptance speech in 2016](#), creator Damon Lindelof poked fun at the show’s low ratings by saying that the fellow Peabody winners inspired the cast and crew “to tell stories that may only be watched by 940 people, including time-shifted viewing and streaming on HBO Go”—that doesn’t mean that nobody wrote about it at the time.

Critics analyzed it and sung its praises; fans theorized its mysteries online; fans, reporters, and critics alike podcasted about it; and journalists interviewed Lindelof, author Tom Perrotta, and the show’s cast and crew throughout. When *The Leftovers* [won the Peabody](#), it was for “telling a well-wrought story that is inventive, metaphysical, symbolic and compelling.”

There is a lot of great writing about *The Leftovers*—and if you wrote about *The Leftovers*, please send it over to me, I’d love to feature it (spoiler scope permitting). But there are also plenty of traditional recaps to read over at the [AV Club](#) and [Vulture](#), among others. I want to offer observations and possible theories, but also show just how much a show’s own narrative changes beyond what happened in an episode or two.

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The Leftovers' shocking twist from the book to the show

I'm not too concerned about *The Leftovers* as an adaptation, but as I watched the first two episodes, which I enjoyed for their weirdness but were also kind of a lot, one thing kept standing out to me. It wasn't the comparisons between the Sudden Departure and a pandemic, it was Kevin Garvey Jr. (Justin Theroux), the chief of police in Mapleton, New York, who has a different job in the book.

"We made him the chief of police because it just felt like that was a much more dynamic job," Lindelof explained in a behind-the-scenes featurette that's [on *The Leftovers* season 1 DVD](#). "And more importantly, if you're living in a world that is teetering on the brink of insanity, a cop is going to be dealing with insane people on a regular basis in a way that the town mayor probably isn't."

HBO was initially concerned that Kevin Garvey was "too nice a guy," Perrotta wrote in a [June 2014 essay for *Wired*](#), especially during a time when characters like Tony Soprano, Don Draper, and Walter White were all the rage in prestige television. "Making the character the town's police chief—a more violent and conflicted position—has definitely made the show more electric," Perrotta wrote.

And as author and *Leftovers* superfan [Grant Piercy](#) (who also pointed me in the direction of the making-of featurette) [put it to me](#), "Book! Kevin is sort of happy-go-lucky...people look up to him and just sort of seems like he's trying to live his life in a sort of denial?"

Recommended

[When They See Us](#), Ava DuVernay's vital 2019 miniseries about the Exonerated Five, is must-watch TV.

If you need something light, [The Lovebirds](#) stars Kumail Nanjiani and Issa Rae.

If you've cleaned out your Netflix queue and need something new to watch, [Amazon's Prime Video service](#) has everything from kids programming to a hefty selection of original series.*

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The Leftovers resonates now more than ever

On Monday, Vulture published a piece titled "[On TV, Cops Are Always the Main Characters](#)" an in-depth examination of how influential the myth of the Good Cop has been on TV for the past few decades; the TV landscape is [full of fictional cops](#), many of whom are portrayed sympathetically. It's a sobering read, just like the *Washington Post's* [2016 chronology of how police propaganda shaped Hollywood](#) and Color of Change's [damning report on the depiction of fictional cops](#). It's particularly relevant after more than a week of protests across the U.S. after the deaths of [George Floyd](#), [Breonna Taylor](#), [Ahmaud Arbery](#), and many other unarmed Black men and women—many of them at the hands of police officers. In many of

the protests that focused on speaking up against systemic racism and police brutality, police [responded by attacking protesters](#) and [arresting them](#). (Here is a [comprehensive list of ways to help](#).)

All of this was very much on my mind as I watched Kevin Garvey, the show's Everyman, use violence to break up a fight between Mapleton citizens and the Guilty Remnant on the third anniversary of Oct. 14, as he punched Guilty Remnant members who wouldn't let him speak to Laurie (Amy Brenneman). The second episode kicks off with a violent ATFEC raid on Wayne Gilcrest's farm. One of Kevin's officers offered to report that a truck with a dead dog was discovered several blocks from his home so as not to implicate Kevin; Mayor Lucy Warburton (Amanda Warren) is also protecting him by keeping things quiet.

The context in which force is used in *The Leftovers* couldn't be more different than the horrors and injustices taking place right now. In an [LA Times profile of Theroux](#), Lindelof noted that Kevin Garvey wasn't "some kind of corrupt cop who goes around beating people up"; not a bad apple, if you will. I know that it's not always fair to put today's lens on an older show, and for what it's worth, I've been told that *The Leftovers* veers into its own thing quite soon. But still: There's no question that Kevin Garvey, a cop, is the main character in *The Leftovers*.

But it's... actually kinda funny?

Not that I don't think that Lindelof, Perrotta, and the show's staff weren't capable of humor. But I did laugh more than I thought I would while watching the first two episodes of a series that kicks off with 2% of the world vanishing in an instant. There's the absurdity of the conclusion to a U.S. government's commission of the Sudden Departure essentially being "I don't know." Laurie's "Not A Cult" response to Meg (Liv Tyler) describing the Guilty Remnant as such. Kevin Garvey's [fight with the bagel toaster](#) and some of his more absurd visions. I totally think that the Mystery Bald Man is real and not in Kevin's head, largely for subversion purposes. And I had to double-check to make sure that Kevin's (and Theroux's) back tattoo didn't get its own flashback episode. (It doesn't!)

Some things remain the same. On the three-year anniversary of the Sudden Departure, one news report highlighted [all of the famous people who were among the departed](#), a precursor by several years to Google-friendly articles we'd see [listing the names of celebrities who've had COVID-19](#). It, more than anything, is an indication that even post-Rapture, we're *really* curious about the famous people who departed.

Next Week: Be sure to watch up to episodes 3 and 4, "Two Boats and a Helicopter" and "B.J. and the A.C.," respectively.

Quote of the week

"The Pope, I get the Pope, but Gary fucking Busey?"

—The bartender to Kevin Garvey on which celebrities made the cut on Oct. 14.

The Leftovers 1x01, "Pilot"

Now playing: [Max Richter — "The Leftovers \(Main Title Theme\)"](#)

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