Culture



Owen Cooper and Erin Doherty star in "Adolescence." (Ben Blackall/Netflix)



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This review contains spoilers.

"Adolescence," the British miniseries directed by Philip Barantini that premiered on Netflix this spring, begins with armed police rolling out of their vans, surrounding a quiet suburban home and using a battering ram to break down the door of 13-year-old Jamie Miller's home.

This is how we meet Jamie, his parents and his older sister. The fear and violation felt by the boy — he even soils himself before being taken into police custody — is juxtaposed with the horror of CCTV footage showing him repeatedly stabbing a young female named Katie to her death in a parking lot.

The visual of such a young teen murdering another is confusing and hard to bear. Jamie is just a child, radicalized by online masculinity content — does he understand what he has done? Another child is dead — does it really matter whether or not he understands?

Jamie's capability for murder is horrifying in part because he appears to be a "normal" adolescent boy; he doesn't exhibit the unnerving signs of a young sociopath. And therein lies the greatest shock: the story of "Adolescence" is not a total fiction. The show's co-creator, Stephen Graham, (who also portrays Jamie's dad), was moved to make this series after hearing of similar crimes committed by "normal" male teens.

We learn that the trouble began when a classmate circulated a topless photo of Katie in an act of what is known as "revenge porn." Jamie sees the photo and asks Katie out via Instagram, where she promptly rejects him with mocking emojis. Tension builds, culminating with Katie taking to social media to call Jamie an "incel," slang for "involuntary celibate" and used to describe a man who believes women are denying him sex to which he is entitled. Not long after, the fatal stabbing occurs.

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Each of the four "Adolescence" episodes is done in one long take, which is powerful from a cinematic perspective because it forces an intensity merited by the sober plotline; and, what's more, asks the viewer to take a long, hard look at how we may have been complicit in standing by.

Graham, who wrote the series with writer Jack Thorne, told the Los Angeles Times that he wanted to push beyond our tendency to stop at solely blaming the parents, and instead foreground the social problems that fed Jamie's radicalization. Social media channels are creating echo chambers that inflame and essentialize discussions of masculinity. Because social media algorithms feed users similar content, they are not likely to see content that challenges a hegemonic masculine worldview. This is especially dangerous for young boys who do not have the media literacy skills to understand and verify information presented online.

Boys like Jamie are courted by the "manosphere," a conglomerate of online men's rights activists, podcast hosts, influencers and far-right politicians. By Donald Trump's first presidency, terms like "men's rights" had emerged in public discourse, and the president's emboldening of the online manosphere played a large part in his second election win. Christian nationalist Nick Fuentes spoke for this subset of the population on Nov. 5, 2024, when he tweeted, "Your body, my choice. Forever." Many men and boys increasingly attacked women and girls online following Trump's election.

Related: Ye's Trump dinner is a high point for Catholic nationalists' influence campaign

Catholicism is not immune from the manosphere – far from it. A growing cohort of Catholic "TheoBros" idolize a violent Christian masculinity. It's no surprise that these are the same influencers reposting videos of JD Vance calling for more American babies: Vance's pro-natalist stance reinforces the idea that men who cannot "get" women are failing not only themselves, but their societies and their God.

The troubling history behind JD Vance's natalism

On Jan. 13 of this year, Eric Sammons, editor of Crisis Magazine, posted a picture of Fr. James Martin against a pride background with the caption, "Why Catholic young

men are attracted to Andrew Tate's message in one image." Four years ago, Fr. Rob Esdaile asked: Does the Catholic Church have an incel problem? It would seem the answer was – and still is – yes. We are in desperate need of healthy examples of masculinity, like Pope Francis offered with his vision to "demasculinize" the church. We need more examples like Martin. Will Pope Leo XIV pick up where Francis left off? Only time will tell.

We never learn the outcome of Jamie's case, only that he tells his father he plans to plead guilty. There is no catharsis here; only a warning and a cry for help. We'd better be listening.