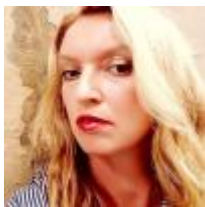


[Culture](#)



Stephen Root, Matthew Rhys and Kate O'Flynn star in Apple TV's "Widow's Bay." In its first season, the mayor of a small town on a remote New England island hopes to turn his community into a tourist destination. But an ancient curse stands in the way. (Apple TV)



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You can deny history's nightmares, but they'll haunt you anyway. And if you live in the quaint but cursed island community of "Widow's Bay," they might just creep up in the form of a killer clown or a sea hag.

The premise of Apple TV's horror-comedy series "Widow's Bay," with [19 Emmy nominations](#), is fairly simple. Tom Loftis (Matthew Rhys), the earnest, awkward mayor of a small town on a remote New England island, is determined to revitalize his community by making it a tourist destination ("the next Martha's Vineyard"). But behind the town's quaint veneer is a disturbing history of murder, madness, even cannibalism. The residents say the island is cursed, and that anyone born there will die if they try to leave, but Tom waves this off as superstition. Then the tourists arrive, and the island's sinister powers awaken, forcing the characters to confront both their community's history and the truths they've avoided in their own lives.

It might not sound like a very humorous tale. Yet "Widow's Bay" is, amid the horror motifs and a few genuinely tragic moments, one of the funniest shows I've seen for a while. Critics have described it as a mashup of workplace comedy and a Stephen King story, but it also has a whisper of magical realism, as the supernatural is juxtaposed against the ungainly challenges of existing as one embodied human among others.

The motif of a cursed history invites comparisons with original sin. Your ancestor crossed a line, and the effects reverberate into the present. What's the solution? In "Widow's Bay," religion doesn't offer one. The island was founded by Puritans, for whom religion was more affliction than salvation. The one clerical character doesn't survive long, and his death is not heroic. When a solution to the curse arises, it's in the form of a trolley problem that invites critique of both secular utilitarianism and Christian doctrine.

Katie Dippold, the show's creator, also worked on the sitcom "Parks and Recreation," and "Widow's Bay" has a similar vibe, with its idiosyncratic characters immersed in small-town drama. The story is the result of nearly 20 years of writing and rewriting, but its initial inspiration was Dippold's teenage experience of passing a supposedly haunted house in her New Jersey hometown.

"I would be so giddy going out on a summer night because I knew I was going to be scared, but we would also laugh and it was very communal," Dippold said, in [an interview with TheWrap](#). If you're inclined to think "very communal" means something fluffy and pleasant, "Widow's Bay," like Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery," reminds you that community can be a site of horror.

The series' first few episodes function almost as standalone horror vignettes, though with a motif of comedy. Tom stays overnight in a haunted inn and meets the killer clown. His prickly assistant, Patricia, tries to rectify her outcast status by throwing a fabulous party, but it almost becomes a human sacrifice. We learn that these frightful incursions are due to the town's founder, centuries ago, having made a devil's bargain to ensure his people's safety.

Perhaps the funniest episode is when the founder is inadvertently resurrected. Initially he agrees to give himself over to the sea to release the island from its curse, but then he gets cold feet. Imagine if Jesus, at the last minute, decided he would rather not be crucified. Imagine if Peter and John wrestled him onto the cross anyway.

Cleverly articulated horror tropes keep the story moving but didn't keep me on the edge of my seat. My investment was more in the characters and their relationships. Rhys' stammering, tentative Tom Loftis, like many "Parks and Recreation" characters, threads the needle between too annoying to identify with and too good to be true. As the story unfolds, we learn that his revitalization project is not about ego, but about protecting his son.

Tom's assistant Patricia (Kate O'Flynn) has become a fan favorite. Initially brittle and bitter, Patricia seems positioned to evoke the condescension with which the world regards single middle-aged women. Yet her nuanced, multilayered performance deliberately alludes to Shelley Duvall in "The Shining" — who would have fared better without a man in her life. Patricia's wide-eyed manic determination morphs into fierceness, and she gets to be a Final Girl who's not only grown up but fed up.

These are, by all accounts, quirky people. Or maybe they're just realistic, complete with sags and wrinkles, not glamorous influencers with six-figure wardrobe dodgers inexplicably shoehorned into a poky little town. Lacy Baugher, [writing for Den of Geek](#), points out that on other shows these characters would be "doomed to die in an early episode to prove the supernatural powers of the island mean business. Here, they form the bedrock of the town's community." Rosemary, the bitchy

genealogist (Dale Dickey) and Wyck, the fisherman who's a true believer in the curse (Stephen Root), are both hilarious. But they're crucial players, not mere comic relief.

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The horror in "Widow's Bay" isn't really all that horrifying, but the series captures the strange unarticulated zest lurking beneath communal terror. Are we all so lonely, we're secretly grateful when disasters bring us together? Are killer clowns and cursed books, especially when they terrorize the whole community, a relief from our atomized psychic agonies?

The last episode of the season answered a lot of questions but left the problems unsolved. When it turns out that one of the founder's descendants is still alive, the trolley problem comes in. Though Tom isn't thrilled about it, he determines that it's licit to sacrifice the one to save the many. Unsurprisingly, this doesn't work either, and Tom has a new burden to carry.

Jameson Cockerell, [writing about the series for Word on Fire](#), diagnoses a "post-Christian fatalism," because there's no salvation on the horizon, no heroic self-sacrifice, no divine grace from on high. The characters must fend for themselves. Yet that is the reality that millions of vulnerable people face every day, and when anyone plots a rescue, our fellow Christians are often the first to argue that we don't need to make sacrifices for strangers.

Maybe we should take a lesson from "Widow's Bay" and look at our own history — and the church's ignominious role in it.

"Widow's Bay" isn't fatalistic. There may be no deus ex machina in view, but the characters don't let that stop them from taking risks to protect one another. And that's another lesson Christians would do well to take from this story.