

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 29, 2013 at 6:00am

'Return to Downton Abbey' previews show's dip into the Roaring '20s

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"Return to Downton Abbey," No. 2

PBS: 9 p.m. EST Sunday, Dec. 1 (check local listings)

In the run-up to the premiere of season four of the international hit drama "Downton Abbey" on Sunday, Jan. 5, PBS is airing a special that recaps the first three seasons and previews the new one. Get ready to experience the Roaring '20s. Without fundraising breaks, this preview lasts about an hour. I have a feeling this preshow will be used as a PBS fundraiser again (as they did last year) and will wander into the 90-minute/two-hour zone, so you might want to set your DVRs.

This Masterpiece Classic special includes interviews with the series' creator and writer, Emmy-winning Julian Fellowes, and some of his co-producers. If you are new to "Downton Abbey" (note: it is "Downton Abbey," not "Downtown Abbey"), this tidbit will bring you up to date, but I would advise you to go back and watch the series from the beginning. All the themes of family, with the joys and tragedies that come from within and without, are present in this historical drama -- well, very classy soap opera. Additionally, it's social commentary for a changing world.

Post-World War I, nothing is the same, especially the role of women and the strain that is the result of the democratization of relationships between master and servants. Of course, the relationships between the servants downstairs are just as interesting as those above stairs. The discussion of baptizing the deceased Lady Sybil's baby a Catholic (the husband and father, Tom Branson, is Irish Catholic) by the characters in the show caused just as much discussion by viewers on Facebook, especially when Lord Grantham says the child will be a "left-footer."

We ended the last season with tragedy and sadness. How will Lady Mary cope now that Matthew is gone?

Will she find a new love? How will cousin Rose affect the social order of Downton Abbey? What will happen to Anna and Bates? And how does Branson fare as agent of the majestic English country estate?

Never fear: Dame Maggie Smith is still here as Violet Crowley, the dowager countess of Grantham.

Oscar-winning actress Susan Sarandon hosts "Return to Downton Abbey." The program is framed by three sections: "The Changing World of Downton Abbey," "The Women of Downton Abbey" and "Love and Other Relationships at Downton Abbey." These little morsels give nothing away, and if you are a fan of the series, you'll enjoy this extended Masterpiece Classic preview.

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