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## The 10 Best TV Dramas of 2014



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Blame “True Detective,” in part, which helped kick off 2014 in rousing fashion, but the blurred line between “limited series” and just plain old series has complicated the definition of a “drama.” But for the purposes of a year-end list, the two can coexist, encompassing any program presented on an episodic basis, even if the story offered closure.

By that measure, both “True Detective” and “ Fargo” — the latter categorized as a miniseries for Emmy balloting — as well as Starz’s “The Missing” can join an array of dramas that, frankly, could easily fill a “Top 20” list. But who on Earth has time to click through that?

Obviously, reducing the current age of drama to an arbitrary tally is going to overlook several heavy hitters, and the roster underwent considerable tinkering right down till the end. Series like “The Walking Dead,” “Mad Men” and “Downton Abbey” – which all would have qualified in the past – didn’t, not because they weren’t terrific, but because the latest seasons fell short of their own high standards. Others, like Showtime’s much-improved “Homeland,” Netflix’s “Happy Valley” or FX’s consistently fun “The Strain,” accomplished what they set out to do, but a Top 10 has to stop somewhere.

There’s always some risk, moreover, with including new programs prematurely, at the expense of veteran series that deserve credit for combining quality with longevity. Nevertheless, there’s something to be said for new blood, too.

So to borrow George Carlin’s joke about how the AM radio dial inexplicably ends at 540, let’s leave to the imagination all the splendid shows occupying the Nos. 11-20 slots, realizing that a list of favorite series – like one of favorite songs – is a snapshot of a moment, not a rigid document carved in stone. (Series presented in alphabetical order.)



**The Affair:** Twisty, sexy, raw and beautifully acted, this new Showtime drama deftly mixed a whodunit with a how-they-saw-it, adding a “Rashomon”-like element to the relationship between characters played by Ruth Wilson and Dominic West (pictured above).

**Boardwalk Empire:** Endings are important, and HBO’s mob drama took the ambitious step of building its entire final season around a flashback arc leading up to its grim, poignant, and once it was all over, seemingly inevitable conclusion.

**Fargo:** As it turns out, “Fargo” really was a state of mind, and the [producers](#) of this FX project — built around a chance encounter between a harried insurance salesman and a hit man, played by Martin Freeman and Billy Bob Thornton, respectively — managed to replicate its quirkiness and tone in a way that nevertheless felt fresh and original.

**Game of Thrones:** Still graced with a grandeur and scope like nothing else on television, the fourth season continued to produce shocks — including a reminder not to attend weddings in Westeros — interspersed with a dizzying assortment of characters and terrific performances.

**The Good Wife:** The only major network program to crack the Top 10, CBS’ drama took what could have been a stunt — the death of a major character, triggered by an actor’s desire to move on — and turned it into a moment that powered through the fifth season and into the sixth.

**Jane the Virgin:** CW’s telenovela-inspired soap hasn’t been on the air very long, but the series deserves acclaim not just for its pilot but maintaining that balance and quality — not easy to do, especially in this genre — through its initial flurry of episodes, all while introducing a largely unknown cast and breakout star in Gina Rodriguez.

**Masters of Sex:** Showtime’s period drama has built a classy soap around the fascinating coupling of sex researchers Masters and Johnson, beautifully played by Michael Sheen and Lizzy Caplan. Season two continued to slowly peel back layers of Masters’ character, while exploring their unorthodox romance — and its collateral damage.



**The Missing:** Abducted, missing or dead children are among drama’s more manipulative staples, but this Starz series — featuring an aching performance by James Nesbitt (pictured above, right) as the grieving, anger-filled dad pining for his son — erected an utterly absorbing

mystery around what happened, while jumping between the moment the disappearance took place, and its consequences eight years later.

**Rectify:** The second season of SundanceTV's signature hour again showcased a one-for-the-ages part by Aden Young as a man who spent nearly two decades on death row before securing his release, and the repercussions of having him released back into society. Slow to the point of hypnotic, the tone almost obscures how meticulously series creator Ray McKinnon advanced the story.

**True Detective:** Murders crossed a 17-year span in this HBO series, which took TV's most familiar genre, the cop show, and breathed new life into it. For all the talk about landing movie talent Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson at an opportune time, movie stars are hardly slumming when presented this kind of material.

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