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TV

11 Best K-Dramas of 2021

Add these to your to-watch list.



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The best K-dramas of 2021 offered something for everyone.

While some people may conflate K-dramas with daytime soap operas — and there certainly are some that fall into this genre — in reality, Korean dramas are simply series that originate from South Korea. Some offer messages of hope (*Racket Boys*), while others (*Taxi Driver*) seek to right society's wrongs, one criminal at a time. There's no one way to make a K-drama.

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And 2021 has been quite the year for Korean entertainment. *Squid Game* and *Hellbound* set international records as two of the **world's most-watched series** on Netflix. Both are gory and set in bleak surroundings, but they also deal with very real sociopolitical issues that have resonated with viewers beyond South Korea.

Narrowing down the best-of list to just 11 K-dramas was painstaking. But these shows from 2021 are must-sees that you will want to add to your watch list. Below, dive into the best K-dramas of 2021.

Happiness

Sae-bom (Han Hyo-joo) and Yi-hyun (Park Hyung-sik) are childhood friends who are kinda/sorta married. An outbreak causes the infected to quench their thirst by sucking blood from their victims. But unlike the zombies in *Train to Busan*, there is hope that the bloodsuckers can be cured. Sae-bom, who has been bitten but shows no signs of infection, is intent on saving as many people as possible. It's her ruthless neighbors she fears more than the contaminated victims. This is Hyung-sik's first K-drama after completing his mandatory military duty, and he projects compassion and vulnerability and shares amazing chemistry with Hyo-joo, whose character is girl power personified. (Wiki)

D.P.

The Korean War has technically **never ended**, which is one reason why all able-bodied South Korean men still have to enlist for mandatory military duty. *D.P.* depicts how brutal life can be for enlistees who aren't strong – or connected – enough to combat the bullies on base who revel in torturing their underlings. Joon-ho (Jung Hae-in) is assigned to be a D.P. (Deserter Pursuit), where his job entails bringing back soldiers who tried to escape. There are some well-intentioned officers who offer platitudes. But as one abused soldier points out, “You all knew about all of this, but you did nothing.” (Netflix)

Move to Heaven

This exceptional series focuses on a young man (Tang Joon-sang) with Asperger's Syndrome and his slovenly uncle (Lee Je-hoon), who comes to live with him to help out with the family's trauma cleaning business. They are hired to handle the cleanup after the most traumatic deaths: a young man bleeding out after an on-the-job injury, the elderly who die alone in squalid conditions, an adoptee who perishes because he can't afford to treat his medical condition. This K-drama also does a great job of normalizing a character who happens to have a disability. (Netflix)

Navillera

One of the sweetest K-dramas of 2021, *Navillera* isn't focused on a romance, but rather the unlikely friendship between a young ballet dancer (Song Kang) and an elderly man (Park In-Hwan) who wants to realize his dream of dancing to *Swan Lake* on stage before he dies. His wife and children are horrified that someone his age would embarrass himself – and *them* – by pursuing something men *shouldn't* do. He should stick to hiking like other grandfathers, they tell him. There are so many generations of people who sacrificed their own dreams and happiness to do what was expected of them. It is heartwarming and revelatory to watch a series that encourages viewers – no matter their age – to never give up on their dreams. (Netflix)

Squid Game

The *It* series of 2021, *Squid Game* was written off by some critics as a needlessly violent show about a group of losers. But along with the blood and gore – and there is plenty of both – the series tells the stories of the underdogs who never had a fighting chance in *civil* society. That’s why they came to this makeshift thunderdome to fight for their lives. Without that prize money the organizers literally dangle above their heads, they have no future to return to. Poverty, classism, sexism, imperialism – they’re all intricately woven into this series about survival. (Netflix)

Melancholia

This nuanced series depicts how a math teacher (Im Soo-jung) encourages her morose student (Lee Do-hyun) to live up to the potential he had as a child genius. While his parents care about him, they also view him as their human trophy – someone to brag about to all their friends. Jealous students plant rumors that the two are involved in a relationship and all hell breaks loose. *Melancholia* is the kind of K-drama where the viewer is begging for satisfaction on behalf of the main characters. (Viki)

Taxi Driver

There's a fine line between justice and revenge. At least that's how the Rainbow Taxi Service sees it. Taxi driver by day and vigilante by night, Lee Je-hoon portrays Do-gi, a former elite soldier who can beat up an entire gang of thugs and walk away relatively unscathed. He and his colleagues go undercover to right the wrongs of the prosecutors and police, which allow murderers to re-enter civilian life after a few years in jail. What happens when Do-gi captures them? They end up imprisoned in an underground facility that makes prison look like a resort. Yes, it's all kinds of illegal. But it's also highly satisfying. (Kocowa)

Mine

Kim Seo-hyung (*SKY Castle*) and Lee Bo-young (*Mother*) front this powerful women-centric series that includes extra-marital affairs, death, adoption, underground fight clubs, chaebol children gone wild, and a poignant LGBTQ subplot that isn't utilized for prurient purposes. *Mine* tells the story of an incredibly wealthy family that has little genuine love for one another. The one exception is the fierce devotion Hi-soo (Bo-young's character) has for her son. But because she's his stepmother, she is constantly questioned about how she could possibly love a child she didn't give birth to. For many of the characters, bloodline is the cause and effect of their downfall. (Netflix)

Racket Boys

The protagonist of this series is a middle school boy (Tang Joon-sang), who is not happy about leaving behind his Seoul school – where he was a star baseball player – and moving to the countryside. Even worse, his father is the badminton coach at his new school. Reluctantly, Hae-kang agrees to play badminton for him, under the condition that if the team does well, his dad will hook up Wi-Fi in their house. There is teenage angst and puppy love, as well as thrilling badminton competitions (and no, that's not an oxymoron. Competitive badminton is awesome!). The series beautifully depicts how a community of outsiders grows on the residents, who eventually accept them as their own. And there is a poignant story arc that shows how this kind of caring attention can save a person from attempting to die by suicide. (Netflix)

My Name

Han So-hee is perfection as a highly skilled fighter who infiltrates the police force to take down the cop who killed her gangster father. After teaming up with her dad's best friend (Park Hee-soon) – the most debonair crime boss *ever* – she comes to terms with the fact that nothing is as it seems and no one is to be trusted. Our female lead is no one's damsel in distress, but rather a woman who's strong enough to take care of herself, and then some. (Netflix)

Vincenzo

The titular character is the *corn salad* for the Italian mafia. That's what his newfound Korean friends call him anyhow, since *consigliere* isn't a word that comes easily to native Korean speakers. Raised in Italy by the Italian mafia (*that's right, just go along with it*), Vincenzo – played by a very charming Song Joong-ki – returns to his birth country in search of gold. In the process, he falls in love with one woman, and is reunited with another from his past. Kudos to Ok Taec-yeon for his portrayal of an ambitious law intern who's not what he seems. (Netflix)

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