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K-Drama "Our Blues" Tackles Difficult Situations With a Satisfying Ending: Review

The drama paces itself to pull off a satisfying, nuanced resolution about how to live.



BY JAE-HA KIM

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Our Blues, available on Netflix, is one of the best K-dramas in recent years. At first glance, the show appears to be about a somewhat eccentric community of folks in Jeju-do — South Korea's largest island. And it is. But it's also about so much more. Over the course of 20 episodes, the series weaves together the complex stories of more than a dozen characters, creating a larger picture of love, forgiveness, and what it means to truly look out for one another.

I can think of quite a few Korean dramas that have meted out storylines dealing with child abuse, debts, teen pregnancy, savage bullying, prejudice against the disabled, and death by suicide. But I don't recall any other show that introduced *all* of those topics and resolved them in any meaningful way. *Our Blues* does that. While it starts off slowly, the pacing is part of the point: resolutions don't occur immediately, but there is a sense of cathartic release when they do.

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Eun-hee (*Parasite*'s Lee Jung-eun) is a leader in the community, and her business sense has helped her become wealthy enough to support her younger siblings. Her close-knit group includes her childhood friends Ho-sik (Choi Young-joon) — who lives with his daughter Yeong-joo (Roh Yoon-seo) — and In-kwon (Park Ji-hwan), a former gangster turned food stall owner who's busy raising his son Jung-hyun (Bae Hyun-sung). Once good friends, the fathers despise each other for reasons that will slowly be revealed. And neither is happy when they find out that Yeong-joo — the no. 1 student at school — has become pregnant by her no. 2 classmate: Jung-hyun. As the men pressure the two to abort the pregnancy, the teenagers take an unwavering stance. There are some ugly segments where In-kwon beats his son for defying him. But Ho-sik and In-kwon have to make a decision: continue to treat their children as human trophies or allow them to make their own life choices.

Meanwhile, the lack of societal approval prevents Young-ok (Han Ji-min) from telling anyone about her personal life, which includes a twin who has Down Syndrome. Orphaned at a young age and unwanted by extended family, Young-ok eventually moved Young-hee (portrayed by artist Jung Eun-hye, who has the genetic disorder in real life) into a care facility. She feels relief not having to care for her sister, but also is burdened with guilt because Young-hee tells her repeatedly she wants to live with her. Kudos to scriptwriter Noh Hee-kyung who created a fully developed character rather than a caricature. Young-hee longs for romance like the kind her sister has with Jeong-joon (Kim Woo-bin). She wants to be beautiful like her sister. She's a talented artist capable of doing many things. And she's very aware when she's being mocked. When a mother begrudgingly scolds her young child for being rude to a disabled woman, Young-hee later tells the boy that he shouldn't speak that way to *any* adult.

The most complicated storyline is one that is hinted at from the beginning – the fractured relationship between Dong-seok (*Squid Game*'s Front Man, Lee Byung-hun) and his estranged mother Ok-dong (Kim Hye-ja), a widowed **haenyeo** whose daughter died freediving. Ok-dong is gentle and doted on by the villagers, who can't understand why Dong-seok wants nothing to do with her. *He* is the problem. *He* lacks respect. *He* should apologize to her. But as their backstory is revealed, it includes a history of poverty, child abuse, and most likely mental illness.

There is a poignant subplot centering on a pre-school child sent from Seoul to Jeju to stay with her grandmother while her father is hospitalized. A remarkable actress at just five years old, Ki So-you conveys all the right emotions as Eun-gi, who refuses to believe her father won't recover. As her mother and grandmother prepare for death, the little girl prays for life. (In a clever bit of casting, Eun-gi's grandmother and father are played by real life mother and son Go Doo-shim and Kim Jung-hwan, respectively.)

Our Blues is also notable for its soundtrack, which includes "With You" – the evocative collaboration between BTS member Jimin and Ha Sung-woon. Repeated throughout the series at exactly the right moments, the lyrics initially appeared to reflect on a complex love story between Dong-seok and Seon-a (Shin Min-a). But the first lines of the song were a clue about one of the most gut wrenching storylines to come. I held in my tears for most of the finale. But the juxtaposition of images of a grief-stricken son and Jimin's voice gently singing "*I wanna be with you/And I wanna stay with you/Just like the stars shining bright*" opened the floodgates.

Unlike many K-dramas where the endings are lacking, the finale is satisfying. After all the suffering, there is a sense that everything would be OK. After all, "The living must keep living," as one of the characters says.

Of his time filming the K-drama, Lee Byung-hun **told me** last month, "I experienced touching emotions and found hope ever since I read the script for *Our Blues*. I hope this drama will be able to 'comfort all wounded souls,' as the scriptwriter once said."

Mission accomplished.

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