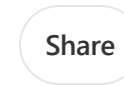
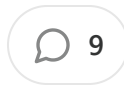
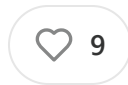


# "Narco-Saints" Tackles Drugs, Religion and, um, Skates

How much should you sacrifice for a 'better' life?

JAE-HA KIM

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Following up on my Christmas review of Hyun Bin's "[Made in Korea](#)" — which tackled South Korea's methamphetamine trade during the 1970s — I wanted to share my thoughts on "Narco-Saints," a 2022 drug-centric series that you may not have watched yet.

I found it to be funny, gross, and a nail-biter — sometimes all in the same scene.



Photos: courtesy of Netflix

☆☆☆ (out of ☆☆☆☆)

**Kang In-gu** (played by Ha Jung-woo)

**Choi Chang-ho** (played by Park Hae-Soo)

**Jeon Yo-hwan** (played by Hwang Jung-min)

**Park David** (played by Yoo Yeon-seok)

**Byeon Ki-tae** (played by Jo Woo-jin)

↑*Note: Korean names denote the surname followed by the given name.*

*There are spoilers in this review.*

I'm curious how many of you moved to a new country for better opportunities. Before we immigrated to the United States, my father's initial plan for us included moving to Brazil to run a farm, and then relocate from there to the U.S. He had also contemplated moving to Germany (by himself) to work and send money home to his family.

We eventually came straight to the U.S. But when the recession hit, he considered accepting a computer programming job in Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, he declined that position because he didn't think that move would be best for us.

My point being that many people move in search of work. And many parents (either alone or together) relocate to wherever they can in search of financial opportunities.

Such is the case for In-gu (Ha Jung-woo), who once had a promising future as an athlete. After his father dies on the job (and I honestly don't remember if his mother died or abandoned the family — sorry!), the teenage boy has to care for his younger siblings. So he drops out of school and takes whatever job he can to put food on the table.

When he marries, it's not for love, but to have someone who will take care of the house and give his family a sense of stability. He literally marries the only woman who

doesn't have any conditions (e.g. dowry, house etc.) for marrying a man who doesn't have a promising future.

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In-gu is not educated, but he's street smart. And while we never see him practicing judo as an adult to maintain his skills, he somehow is still incredibly skilled in the martial art. This prowess comes in handy at the not-quite-legal nightclub he manages — one of his many jobs. Now the father of two children of his own, he listens to his friend Eung-soo (Hyeon Bong-sik), who has a scheme that he promises will make them both rich.

Eung-soo tells him that in Suriname, the local fisherman throw out all the skate they catch, because they find the fish distasteful. Skate is expensive and in high demand in South Korea. So ... all they have to do is head to Suriname, buy the skate for pennies and resell them at a marked-up price in Korea and *voila!* They'll have enough money to take care of their families in style.

Sounds like a great plan. *What could possibly go wrong?*



Well, as it turns out, just about everything. First the military in Suriname demands protection money and In-gu — who is used to dealing with crooks from his nightclub business — negotiates a somewhat reasonable deal. Then he's shaken down by a meth-

dealing Chinese gangster, Chen Jin (played by the Taiwanese actor Chang Chen, who you'll recognize from "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon").

Chen is ruthless when it comes to protecting his drug fiefdom. He deals with one turncoat by cutting off his hands and feet and hanging him from the main entrance in the center of Chinatown. Apparently, this isn't an unusual act. The passersby don't even blink an eye as they go about their business.

Then there's the duplicitous bible-thumping, coke-dealing pastor Yo-hwan (Hwang Jung-min of *Ode to My Father*) who puts In-gu's and Eung-soo's lives in jeopardy by surreptitiously hiding cocaine in their skate shipments.

When In-gu is presented with the chance to get his freedom back, he accepts the National Intelligence Service's offer to work as a spy for them. His NIS contact is Chang-ho (Park Hae-soo), whose goal is to expatriate the pastor back to Korea to serve time for his litany of crimes.

The plot is tight and the acting is superb. Besides the leads, there are top-notch performances by Yoo Yeon-seok (playing sleazy lawyer David Park) and Jo Woo-jin (the pastor's trusted aide Ki-tae, who once worked for Chen Jin).

One of the things that surprised me was how none of the criminals bothered to check the cell phones of those who were suspected of being moles. If they had, they would've

found a string of long text messages outlining what their plans were. (The NIS had tapped In-gu's phone to keep tabs on him. The pastor could've done the same.)

There's also a cult subplot that goes nowhere. The pastor plies his followers with drugs to keep them passive. But after a feeble plea by a child to be rescued, that storyline remained unresolved.

**Casting:** Park Hae-soo's "[Squid Game](#)" co-star Anupam Tripathi makes a short appearance as a Surinamese soldier. And a big shoutout to Jo Woo-jin, who is one of Korea's most versatile character actors, whether he's playing a personal assistant in "[Goblin](#)," an English interpreter in "[Mr. Sunshine](#)," or a tough-ass lieutenant colonel in "[Happiness](#)." Here, he plays a gangster who fears no one.

**Controversy:** The government of Suriname said that the portrayal of the Latin American country was outdated and could be harmful to its citizens. In a [statement](#) released the week of September 15, Albert Ramdin — Suriname's foreign minister — said:

"Suriname no longer has the image that emerges in the series or no longer participates in these kinds of practices. It's creating a negative perception. The whole world sees these things, so this is not good."

**Airdates:** Netflix dropped all six episodes on September 9, 2022.

## Narco-Saints | Official Trailer | Netflix

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**Spoiler Alert:** In Episode 5, the pastor kills his attorney, David, thinking that he's the mole. *Oops!* Ki-tae is actually the undercover NIS agent.

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