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TV

38 Best K-Dramas of All Time

These are definitely worth a watch.



BY JAE-HA KIM

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When you think of the *best* K-dramas, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, *Under the Queen's Umbrella*, and *Little Women* may be on your radar. But there's also a rich K-drama history to explore. To discuss some of the best K-dramas *ever*, we need to go back into the past to see how we got here.

Lasting just one episode with a run time of 15 minutes, 1956's *The Gates of Heaven* was South Korea's first Korean drama. In the following decades, Korean creatives would produce K-dramas that were loved at home, but were a niche market outside of South Korea and some Asian countries. But in the aughts, streaming sites like Viki (and the late, great Dramafever) changed all that by making Korean (and other Asian) content accessible to viewers by providing subtitles in multiple languages. Today, we have mainstream platforms like Netflix, Disney+, Hulu, Prime Video, and Apple TV+ that have jumped on the K-drama bandwagon, airing (and in some cases producing) Korean content.

Of those streamers, Netflix is the most ubiquitous. In 2023, **the streaming site invested \$2.5 billion** – doubling its previous financing of new K-content– which includes popular reality shows like the *Physical 100* franchise and *Culinary Class Wars*. Netflix is getting a lot of K-dramas in 2025, including the highly anticipated IU and Park Bo-gum drama, *When Life Gives You Tangerines*.

Read more: K-Drama Star Park Ji-hu Talks *All of Us Are Dead*, NewJeans, and Crafting Empathy for Her Characters

Growing up in the United States, I didn't watch all the shows my cousins were tuning into every week in Seoul, because it wasn't possible back then. There was no Netflix for streaming. Rather, I watched whatever my parents rented from the local Korean grocer, who had bookcases filled with grainy (and most likely illegally-dubbed) tapes that we rewatched before returning. The oldest K-drama I recall enjoying was *Love and Ambition*, even though we didn't see it for a decade after its 1987 release. Helmed by Kim Soo-hyun — the writer, not the actor — the 96-episode (!) series was immensely popular in Korea, with a cast that included future Academy Award winner Youn Yuh-jung (*Minari*).

Each of us has our own favorite K-dramas that are informed by our own personal experiences (and access). For instance, I was never able to get my hands on South Korea's early dramas like *Death Row Prisoner*, which premiered in 1956. Therefore, my picks are influenced by what I've seen, which are primarily shows from 2000 onward.

In 2025, we can expect to see a slew of new dramas starring A-list actors like the aforementioned IU and Park Bo-gum, Kim Soo-hyun (*Knock-off*, Disney+), Kim Go-eun (*The Price of Confession*, Netflix), Lee Dong-wook (*The Divorce Insurance*, Prime Video), the dream-team of Gong Yoo and Song Hye-kyo (*Slowly and Intensely*, Netflix) and Lee Jung-jae (*Squid Game 3*, Netflix).

Related: [The Best K-Dramas of 2024](#)

Still, I wanted to have an expert weigh in on what makes for a memorable and great K-drama. “By showing multiple relationships and the complex and interwoven lives that are filled with tension, conflict [and the] memories they create, a great K-drama gives us multidimensional characters and stories to which viewers can relate,” says Hye Jin Lee, a professor at the University of Southern California who teaches a class on Korean pop culture. “A great K-drama understands that everyone has a story and gives all the characters a chance to share them with the viewers.”

As for Lee’s all-time favorite K-drama? It’s *My Mister*, a brilliant series which is one of my picks as well. Discover the best K-dramas of all time that I rewatch and recommend to anyone who’ll listen.

Autumn In My Heart

A melodramatic love story laced with tragedy and an ending that will likely leave you weeping, this 2000 series is one that I watch on repeat with my mother. The plot includes a lot of K-drama tropes: rich man/poor woman, babies accidentally switched at birth, are-they-or-aren’t-they-siblings who fall in love and, ultimately, a tragic fate that is heartbreakingly unfair (but conclusive). Song Hye-kyo (*The Glory*) was just 18 at the time of this show’s release and she is radiant as the female lead. She exhibits subtle nuance as the grownup version of one of the switched babies whose fate changes when she’s reunited with her biological family. *Autumn In My Heart* is the first of director Yoon Seok-ho’s quartet of seasonal K-dramas, which also include *Winter Sonata*, *Summer Scent*, and *Spring Waltz*. (Kocowa)

Something in the Rain

It's unfortunate that Netflix didn't stick with the original Korean title of this 2018 K-drama, which translates to "Pretty Noona Who Buys Me Food." (*Noona* is what boys/men call their older sisters. But it is also used colloquially by younger boys/men to older girls/women they are close to.) While there are rain scenes, *food* is an integral part of the plot, especially initially. Joon-hee (Jung Hae-in) is romantically interested in his sister's best friend, Jin-ah (Son Ye-jin), who only regards him as a kid. When he asks her to buy him a meal, it isn't because he can't afford it himself. Rather, he knows that even if she won't date him, she won't turn down a request to buy a younger friend dinner. It's his way of spending time with her.

Through these shared meals, Jin-ah begins to fall in love with him as well. K-dramas are famous for having awful meddling mothers, but hers may be one of the most horrible yet. Though her own family isn't wealthy or particularly notable, and though she is fond of Joon-hee as her son's best friend, Jin-ah's mom doesn't think he's a suitable match for her daughter. Why? Because his mother is deceased and his father has been divorced several times. What's worse is that when she tells him this, she assumes that he will understand her out-dated views. (Viki, Netflix, Kocowa, Prime Video)

Stairway to Heaven

Park Shin-hye (*Doctor Slump*) made her acting debut in this 2003 K-drama, playing the younger version of the female lead (Choi Ji-woo). If ever there was a *makjang* (or over-the-top soapy drama) that grabbed Koreans' attention, this was it. There are plots and subplots that symbolically converge together at the end. But before we get there, our protagonists Jung-suh and chaebol heir Song-joo (Kwon Sang-woo), will go from childhood best friends commiserating over her mother's death from eye cancer and his father's fatal car accident, to romantic interests. Remember this, because how their parents died plays an integral role in this series.

There are tropes galore explored in each episode (e.g. mistaken identity, a second male lead in love with Jung-suh, and the one-two tag team of an evil stepmother and her jealous, conniving daughter). But despite the histrionic attempted murder and coverup story arc, there is selfless redemption. A man sacrifices his life so that the woman he loves can survive. In 1970, the novel *Love Story* (and subsequent blockbuster film of the same name) culled a catchphrase: “Love means never having to say you're sorry.” At the end of *Stairway to Heaven*, there is a tender voiceover that explores how loving someone isn't a competition: “He may have loved her more than I did, but that doesn't mean I loved her any less.” This K-drama doesn't have the slick look of today's hit shows, but it is a reminder that without this drama from the early aughts, there would be no *Penthouse: War in Life*, *Perfect Marriage Revenge*, or *The World of the Married*. (Kocowa, Viki)

SKY Castle

When *SKY Castle* premiered in 2018, it became an immediate sensation in South Korea. At first glance, it appears to be a night-time soap opera filled with affairs, murder, and a secret child whose father never knew existed. But as the story unfolds, the plot focuses on hyper-competitive students whose parents will do anything to ensure that their child ranks at the top of their class. Are some of their methods illegal? Only if they get caught, they reason.

Kim Hye-yoon (*Lovely Runner*) stars as one of the high school students who feels the pressure of getting into a SKY university to study medicine, just like her father and grandfather did before her. SKY is an acronym for the country's three most prestigious schools: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. While *SKY Castle* is fictional, it hit a raw nerve with Koreans not just because of its focus on education, but because it depicted how brutal it is for the children to be forced to get the grades that many are incapable of achieving and then being punished for having dreams they won't be allowed to pursue. (Netflix)

Love in the Big City

Divided into four arcs that are directed by different directors, and focusing on four pivotal relationships, *Love in the Big City* is a ground-breaking K-drama that tackles a gay man's complicated love life. Because some homophobic South Korean organizations found the idea of a gay protagonist to be offensive, protestors initially tried to prevent the show from being publicized or airing. Based on Sang Young Park's bestselling novel of the same name, the 2024 series deftly balances drama, humor, and pathos.

When we first meet Young (Nam Yoon-su), he is a college student reveling in being away from home, where his religious mother refuses to believe his sexuality and tries to *convert* him into being something he's not: straight. Many of his initial trysts are fun, one-night hookups with men he meets in gay bars. Whether he's looking for personal growth or attempting to live a life with just one partner, his fear of monogamous intimacy is always lurking. In eight episodes, this show takes viewers on a journey where Young's glib and sometimes hurtful remarks hide his tender heart. Spoiler: the ending is sad but contemplative, leaving a sense of hope that Young's future will not be defined by his past. (Viki)

Her Private Life

This 2019 K-drama starts off as a cute comedy about a cultured art curator who's also a diehard K-pop stan and fangirl, and the standoffish artist who becomes her boss. But with the progression of each episode, the series morphs into so much more.

Duk-mi (Park Min-young) is unapologetic about being a fangirl, because it brings her joy. But when a K-pop idol's fans mistake her for being his girlfriend, the very fandom that she is a part of turns on her. The irate and unhinged girls dox her, pelt her with eggs, and hit her. Instead of including a scene that highlights the consequences of such toxic behavior, the showrunner takes the easy way out. Duk-mi ultimately chooses to forgive the girls, because they are teenagers. Still, *Her Private Life* tackles childhood abandonment and the lingering trauma that lives on, and reflects on how some well-adjusted families are borne from tragedy. The series also tackles fan culture in a meaningful way that is both funny and authentic. (Viki, Netflix)

Squid Game

Since its 2021 premiere, *Squid Game* reigns as Netflix's most popular series *ever*. Now two seasons in – with its finale slated for later in 2025 – the brutally gory take on South Korea's capitalist society hit a nerve with viewers worldwide. The series focuses on Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae), who isn't necessarily a sympathetic protagonist. He's accumulated insurmountable debt that he unsuccessfully tries to pay off by gambling. He steals money from his elderly mother, who can't afford to get treatment for her diabetes. And he breaks promises to his tween daughter, who he loves, but is incapable of properly parenting.

When he's offered the opportunity to enter a competition to win \$31 million USD, he believes this can solve all his problems. What he learns after the first game is that in order for anyone to win the pot, 455 other competitors will have to die first. Though it's easy to write off the debt-ridden contestants as losers who are bad at saving money, *Squid Game* makes it clear that when you have an imbalanced system — with only a small percentage of the population accumulating any wealth at all — it's nearly impossible for the average citizen to save what they don't have. (Netflix)

One Spring Night

Many fans of K-dramas are already aware of the stigma against single mothers in South Korea. In this 2019 series, everyone in the show — including the protagonist himself — realizes that his marriage options are limited ... because he's a single father. Never mind that Ji-ho (Jung Hae-in) has a great job as a pharmacist, loving parents, and swoon worthy looks that make women weak in the knees. When he meets Jung-in (Han Ji-min), there is a slow and simmering chemistry.

Ji-ho is the one man in her life who treats her as her own person. Her father views her as property to marry off. And when she breaks up with her boyfriend, he refuses to be an ex and boomerangs repeatedly back into her life. The cinematography is beautiful in this series, showcasing a moody side of Seoul that matches the characters' own ennui.

(Netflix)

Misaeng: Incomplete Life

Based on the webtoon by Yoon Tae-ho, this 2014 series is a beautiful microcosm of modern-day South Korea, where a so-so employee with a college education trumps a bright worker who never had the opportunity to attend university. It's also one of the few Korean series that doesn't focus on romance.

Misaeng: Incomplete Life stars Im Si-wan as a temp who is reminded by everyone that after his contract is up, there is no opportunity for him to be hired full time at the company. Why? Because he doesn't have a college degree. This may sound like a dry

concept for a series, but each of the 20 episodes are exceptionally layered. There are subplots addressing rampant sexism, workplace abuse, and sexual harassment which, unfortunately, is written off as a quirk rather than a crime. As for the ending? It is satisfying and offers hope that hard work and talent can overcome that lack of higher education. (Netflix)

Because This is My First Life

Ji-ho (Jung So-min) dreams of penning her own K-drama. Instead, she is stuck negotiating product placements for shows that others have written. After a colleague attempts to rape her, her boss writes it off as a *boys will be boys* stunt and advises her to forgive him for the sake of their “work family.” Se-hee (Lee Min-ki) is an office worker who owns a tidy home that he can’t afford to pay for by himself.

The two become roommates and enter into a marriage contract to get his nagging parents off his back. Though that bit is played for laughs in this 2017 show, the script writers deftly illustrate the additional burdens placed on married women. Even in a fake

marriage, Ji-ho feels she has to please his family members, who expect her to do all the domestic chores and cooking on holidays. As the series progresses, subplots are introduced that tackle the #MeToo movement, stalking, parents breaking up relationships and, finally, true love. (Viki)

Extraordinary Attorney Woo

Park Eun-bin gives an extraordinary performance playing the titular role of a highly-functioning autistic attorney in this 2022 K-drama, which has been nominated for an International Emmy Award. As whip smart as she is whale obsessed, Woo Young-woo is treated by some colleagues as a freak show know-it-all, while others are drawn to her unique qualities.

Although it's thrilling to watch our extraordinary attorney Woo solve cases in every episode, it was just as exciting to see her experience her first romance with a man worthy of her love. If there is an area that could've been improved, it would've been casting autistic actors to play some of the guest characters on the spectrum. (Netflix)

Sandglass

Regarded as one of the most influential Korean series ever, 1995's *Sandglass* was so immensely popular in South Korea that it had a peak Nielsen rating of 65 percent of Korean households tuning in. (The lowest was 30 percent.) Besides criticizing the country's military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, the series also delved into nepotism, human rights issues, democracy, and the **Gwangju Uprising**. It did all this in an unflinching manner that caused an uproar and the eventual prosecution (and jailing) of former president Chun Doo-hwan.

The 24-episode series is also a precursor to the K-drama format we know today: finite hour-long episodes running for one season, as opposed to the longer format (up to 200 episodes!) that had been popular. Choi Min-soo (*Lawless Lawyer*) is glorious as a gangster whose adversary is a childhood friend. Viewers were also introduced to the then rookie actor Lee Jung-jae (*Squid Game*). I am sorry to report that I couldn't find any legal sites that are streaming this K-drama.

My Love from the Star

This 2013-2014 series catapulted Kim Soo-hyun (the actor) to international stardom. Kim teams up with his *Thieves* co-star Jun Ji-hyun in this K-drama that offers humor and pathos as it delves into sacrifice, alienation, and what true love encompasses.

Do Min-joon is an extraterrestrial being who was sent to survey Joseon. While rescuing a young girl, he is left stranded on Earth and has to wait over 400 years before he can be transported back home. With just weeks left before he can return to his planet, Min-joon meets Cheon Song-yi — a movie star who reminds him of the child he saved centuries ago. Does he stay on Earth, where he is slowly dying? Or does he return home where his health will be revived, but he'll have to leave her behind? The finale offers a bittersweet ending, but one that holds hopeful promise for the future. (Wiki, Kocowa)

Mr. Sunshine

Lee Byung-hun and Kim Tae-ri star in the 2018 series about Joseon's freedom fighters. Set in the early 1900s, *Mr. Sunshine* isn't for the faint of heart. I'm not talking about the violence — though there is plenty of that — but rather the fatalistic theme that runs throughout this sweeping K-drama.

It starts with the death of the protagonist's parents and ends with a finale that will leave viewers weeping. The ending is true to the story's overall thesis that the survival of a country depends on the sacrifices of many. Kudos to screenwriter Kim Eun-sook for creating a world full of real-life history, while also including current pop culture meta moments — for instance, one of the characters is named after Kim Nam-joon, the leader of BTS. (Netflix)

My Mister

If you need proof that Lee Ji-eun is one of the best idol actors in the business, check out 2018's *My Mister*. Better known to music fans as IU, the actress stars opposite *Parasite* actor Lee Sun-kyun. He is the *mister* in question. A mid-level engineer, Dong-hoon spends more time with his mother and siblings than he does his wife, who is having an affair with one of his colleagues. At work, he meets Ji-an, a disheveled 20-year-old temp who pilfers instant coffee packets to take home because she's too poor to buy the treat with her earnings. This is one of the few K-dramas I've seen that isn't spurred by romance. Both actors are superb in their roles in a bleak series that addresses poverty, infidelity, what it means to be a family, and true alliance with no strings attached. (Viki)

Happiness

Sae-bom (Han Hyo-joo) is an elite police officer who dreams of living in her own home. To fulfill her goal, she and her childhood friend Yi-hyun (Park Hyung-sik) marry, with the understanding that this is a marriage of convenience. Their beautiful apartment complex quickly turns into a nightmare when an outbreak causes infected residents to satiate their thirst by drinking blood from their victims. Unlike the zombies in Gong Yoo's film *Train to Busan*, there is hope that the bloodsuckers can be cured in this 2021 series. 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. In his first post-military K-drama, Park projects compassion and vulnerability. He shares amazing chemistry with Han. Viewers will root for this couple's survival (and relationship) from beginning to end. (Viki, Netflix)

Coffee Prince

Beyond the rich man/poor woman trope that is common in K-dramas, *Coffee Prince* explores what it means to live in a society where your chance of finding meaningful work increases if you are mistaken for a man. Yoon Eun-hye portrays the only working member of her family, who she is responsible for supporting after her father's death. Although she is beautiful and super tiny, her short hair throws people off. A rich man (Gong Yoo at his finest) mistakes her for a man and asks her to pretend she is his gay lover. Why the ruse? He wants to get his marriage-minded meddling grandmother off his back. Eventually, he hires her to work at his coffee shop, where all the employees are handsome young men (aka *princes*). One of the things this 2007 series does so well is showing the growth of the protagonist, who realizes that love is love, even if it goes against society's norms. (Viki, Kocowa)

Mine

Mine is a women-centric series centered around Hi-soo (Lee Bo-young), her sister-in-law Seo-Hyun (Kim Seo-hyung), and mysterious tutor Ja-kyung (portrayed by *Under the Queen's Umbrella's* Ok Ja-yeon). It's driven by the immorality of the men – starting with the patriarch's infidelity decades ago that has catastrophic consequences for one of his sons. The women are left to clean up this dysfunctional mess. But make no mistake. It's the women who drive this K-drama, which explores sisterhood, what it means to be a *real* mother, and sexuality. Story arcs include two gay subplots in this 2021 show. One involving men is played off for laughs. But it's the repressed, lingering affair between two women that is heartbreaking. They are unable to live as who they are due to society's malignant prejudices. (Netflix)

The Moon Embracing the Sun

A sweeping *sageuk* — or historical drama — set in the Joseon era, this 2012 K-drama is filled with political backstabbing, humor, and a tale of undying love. Kim Soo-hyun stars as a Crown Prince who is forced into a marriage that's meant to strengthen his kingdom. But he pines away for his childhood sweetheart (who his half brother also is in love with). *The Moon Embracing the Sun* has it all – romance, sword fights, shamanism, gorgeous sets, intricate period costumes, and a thrilling storyline that made me wish this series' 20-episode run had been longer. (Kocowa, Viki)

Crash Landing on You

By now, we all know that *CLoY*'s **Hyun Bin and Son Ye-jin** are the proud parents of a baby boy. Their real-life marriage is the delightful culmination of a K-drama love story that viewers worldwide adored. The series, which premiered in 2019, is both a fish-out-of-water story (South Korean Se-ri accidentally finds herself in North Korea), and a parable of how we are more alike than not, no matter our backgrounds. As with many K-dramas, child abandonment, evil step families, and chaebol members fighting for power are explored. But the core of this show is the chemistry between the leads, who make an unbelievable story ring true, while also leaving viewers desperately wishing for a fairytale ending. (Netflix)

It's Okay to Not Be Okay

This **2020 show** tackles mental health issues and disabilities within its vigorous storyline. Kim Soo-hyun plays Moon Gang-tae, who is struggling to keep up the facade that he's okay with being the lone guardian for his older brother. Seo Ye-ji is icy perfection in her portrayal of a macabre children's book author. And as Gang-tae's autistic older brother, Sang-tae, Oh Jung-se is phenomenal in his portrayal of the sibling who is well aware that he is a burden to his younger brother. The series finale offers hope and a sense of peace. But it will also make even the most unflappable viewers tear up. (Netflix)

Under the Queen's Umbrella

Kim Hye-soo stars in this 2022 Korean drama as a fair and open-minded queen who serves her king, but lives for her rambunctious sons. After her eldest, the crown prince, falls deathly ill, the battle over succession begins. His title won't automatically be passed down to her other children if the Queen Dowager (Kim Hae-sook) has her way. She despises Queen Hwa-ryeong and has plans of her own: to have a prince borne to one of the king's many concubines ascend in the royal hierarchy, kick out (or kill!) Queen Hwa-ryeong, and have the preferred concubine become the king's new queen. What follows is a murder mystery and a tale of political vengeance with an adorable love story thrown in for a bit of levity. The final episode offers the characters – including a prince who is finally able to live his true life outside of the confines of the palace – closure. (Netflix)

It's Okay, That's Love

Jo In-sung and Gong Hyo-jin star in this 2014 series about Jae-yeol, a famous author, and psychiatrist Hae-soo. It's funny, romantic, and sexy, but it also takes a serious look at how childhood traumas inform adulthood. Do Kyung-soo of the K-pop group EXO more than holds his own against these acting veterans. He plays Kang-woo, a high school student who befriends Jae-yeol. There are many secrets – almost all tragic – that unfold throughout the series. But the one that stuck with me after all these years is the story arc that ties together Jae-yeol and Kang-woo's past. There aren't many shows in general that deal with mental health issues in a dignified manner. *It's Okay, That's Love* hits all the right notes. (Kocowa, Viki)

Mother

A disturbing look at child abuse, this series tells the story of Soo-jin (Lee Bo-young), an elementary school teacher who kidnaps an abused child after the girl's mother Ja-young (Ko Sung-hee) and her boyfriend literally throw the girl out with the trash. Ja-young's abusive boyfriend is played by Son Suk-ku — who everyone adored in *My Liberation Notes*.

Son plays one of the most despicable characters I've ever seen in a K-drama. He kills the little girl's hamster, force feeds the child, and is on the verge of sexually assaulting her when Jae-young walks in. Instead of protecting her daughter, she blames her for *seducing* him. Heo Yool was just eight years old when she tackled this role. She's a natural in her portrayal of a little girl who still loves her mother, despite all the abuse she's suffered at her hands. All of the major characters have histories of abuse and/or abandonment. But this 2018 series doesn't allow them to use their pasts to rationalize their current behavior. (OnDemandKorea)

Goblin

Also known as *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God*, this series' finale at the time held the record as the second highest-rated series in Korean cable TV history. (The first

was *Reply 1988*.) Premiering in late 2016, the series informs viewers on the double-edged sword of living forever without aging, but having to watch loved ones grow old and die over generations.

Gong Yoo (*Train to Busan*) plays the *dokkaebi* (or goblin) who has lived over 900 years and accumulated a vast amount of wealth. Kim Go-eun (*Little Women*) plays a poor high school student who may be the Goblin Bride, who can break his curse. Notice, even in a series with a supernatural male protagonist, the rich man (*er, goblin*)/poor woman (*um, teenager*) trope exists. As vested as I was in their relationship, I was just as interested in the bickering bromance between the Goblin and the Grim Reaper (Lee Dong-wook), who added levity at all the right moments. (Viki)

Weak Hero Class 1

Park Ji-hoon is almost unrecognizable from his Wanna One days in this K-drama, which is based on a webtoon. Leading this cast, which also includes Choi Hyun-wook (*Twenty Five Twenty One*) and Hong Kyung (*D.P.*), Park is so intensely good as a bullied boy who

uses classical conditioning (Pavlov's Dog) and Newton's Laws of Motions to fight back against his tormentors. Unlike most bullied kids, Si-eun isn't afraid of his persecutors. He views them as aggressive blockades to academic excellence.

Not one who feels the need for friends, Si-eun eventually finds himself aligned with fellow class outcast Beom-seok, and Soo-ho – who's the school's best fighter. Midway through, there is a plot twist that will leave many viewers shook. Be forewarned: the ending is definitive and bleak. There is speculation, but no confirmation yet, that there will be a second season of this 2022 K-drama. (Kocowa, Viki)

Reply 1988

The final series in the *Reply* trilogy, this 2015-2016 production is the strongest and best, though the first episode is a bit slow. *Girl's Day*'s Lee Hye-ri plays the female lead, whose four best friends are neighborhood boys played by Park Bo-gum, Go Kyung-pyo, Lee Dong-hwi, and her real-life beau Ryu Jun-yeol – one of whom she will marry. Set in 1988, when South Korea was preparing to host the Summer Olympics, *Reply 1988* showcases a

country that hadn't yet become a super power. Though the focus is on the young teens and their growth, this K-drama also beautifully weaves in the stories of their parents and the friendships that bind them together. (Viki, Netflix)

Move to Heaven

Released in 2021, *Move to Heaven* focuses on a young man (Tang Joon-sang) with Asperger's Syndrome and his seemingly irresponsible uncle (Lee Je-hoon), who helps out with the family's trauma cleaning business. Hired to handle the cleanup after the most traumatic of 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 normalizes a character who happens to have a disability. The series does an admirable job of examining how a broken family pulls through after a devastating death. It also depicts how childhood memories of what happened, without knowing all the facts, can tear even the most beloved siblings apart. (Netflix)

Hotel del Luna

Lee Ji-eun (known to music fans as IU) and Yeo Jin-goo lead this 2019 K-drama where the concept of falling in love with someone who's not quite human is explored. Lee has the difficult responsibility of taking a not-so-likable character and turning her into someone we root for. Her complicated backstory unfolds slowly, building up suspense with each episode. She operates Hotel del Luna, a top-tier hotel that's a purgatory of sorts for dead souls who haven't yet been sent to either heaven or hell. He is an Ivy League-educated hotelier who works for her.

This Hong Sisters show depicts mild horror, but that's less relevant than the story arcs of repentance, love, and revenge. As for the finale, most loose ends are satisfyingly tied up, leaving viewers with a sense of much-needed closure. (Viki)

Signal

This crime thriller tells the story of two police officers who are living in different decades, but are somehow able to speak to each other at precisely 11:23 each evening. Released in 2016, this series tackles real-life Korean tragedies, such as the Hwaseong serial murders and the Seongsu Bridge disaster.

For the younger officer (played by Lee Je-hoon), this ability to learn what happened in the past *as it's happening* is his key — he hopes — to get justice for his brother, who was wrongly accused of masterminding a gang rape. Choi Jin-woong is the older officer who, from the past, helps close unsolved cases in the future. The cast also includes Kim Hye-soo as the first female police officer in the squad. Hired as a nod to diversity, she eventually becomes her department's strongest leader. (Netflix, Paramount+)

Search: WWW

Women lead this 2019 K-drama, which focuses on workplace competition and the sacrifices that are made to rise to the top. Friends since high school, the trio supports each other through marital affairs and office politics. One of my favorite subplots is the inclusion of a soapy K-drama *within* this series called *What's Wrong With My Mother-in-Law*, which is so over-the-top good that I really wish it had been spun off into its own show. Veteran actors Im Soo-jung and Jeong Hye-jin are the stars of *Search: WWW*, which also introduces Lee Jae-wook (*Alchemy of the Souls*) as the seaweed-slapping actor (see trailer below!) who falls in love with the trio's *maknae* (Lee Da-hee). (Prime Video, Viki)

Boys Over Flowers

This is a gateway K-drama for many people. I acknowledge that there are quite a few problematic storylines that are presented as almost normal. The script writers are very skilled at playing with viewers' emotions, so we almost forget that the incredibly good looking actors — *hello Lee Min-ho!* — play privileged bullies, who think nothing of beating or kidnapping classmates just because they can.

Filmed in 2009, the series has a dated feel both in production and style. But the evergreen thrust of the rich boy/poor girl storyline is weaved together well. Yes, we're screaming at the heroine (Ku Hye-sun) to get her act together and grow a spine. But we're also rooting for the boys to recognize that being kind to the one girl they're all enamored with isn't the same thing as treating everyone well because it's the right thing to do. (Viki, Prime Video, Netflix)

Kill Me, Heal Me

Before *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* earned praise for its portrayal of mental health issues, 2015's *Kill Me, Heal Me* tackled dissociative identity disorder. Do-hyun (Ji Sung) is a wealthy man who hires psychiatrist Ri-jin (Hwang Jung-eum) to treat him (and the six other personalities that live within him). The K-drama starts off as a wacky potential rom

com before it delves deeper into the ramifications of how chronic childhood abuse manifests in broken adults.

The second male lead here is Ri-jin's brother (Park Seo-joon), who is clearly in love with his adopted sister. Though I could've done without this subplot, I do give the showrunners credit for reconciling why it's absolutely *not* OK for siblings – even those who aren't biologically related – to pursue romantic relationships with each other. (Viki, Kocowa)

Our Blues

A beautifully-executed K-drama that deals with teen pregnancy, bullying, death by suicide, child abuse, insurmountable debts, and profound prejudice against the disabled, *Our Blues* manages to inject humorous subplots that balance the show. The first episode isn't indicative of the quality of writing that will follow, or the stellar performances by lead actors Lee Byung-hun and Shin Min-a — neither of whom are overly likable in the beginning.

But the series — released in 2022 — does such a great job at depicting how childhood traumas aren't something people can just grow out of. The repercussions are complicated, especially when a family bets its entire future on the success of one child. *Our Blues* is also one of the few shows I've seen where teenagers are given ownership over their bodies, stand up for their beliefs, and don't capitulate to the brutal demands of adults to do "what's right." (Netflix)

Healer

Without losing any momentum, this 2014 K-drama races to its satisfying finale with intrigue, action, comedy, and a bittersweet love story that depicts how the lead couple (played by Ji Chang-wook and Park Min-young) share a common history. In a K-drama rarity, there is no second lead to interfere as these two fall in love.

Jung-hoo (aka Healer) is a mercenary for hire who will do everything *except* kill. Youngshin is a reporter at a tabloid who dreams of one-day working as a journalist for a respected publication, where her assignments won't include stalking celebrities to capture illicit photos. Both orphaned – or so it seems – they work together to find the person responsible for their parents' deaths. (Viki, Kocowa, Prime Video)

Go Back Couple

This 2017 series gets it right when it comes to exploring how difficult a marriage can be when a newborn baby is introduced into your family dynamics. Fatigued and struggling to pay their bills, Jin-joo (Jang Na-ra) and Ban-do (Son Ho-joon) don't talk to each other so much as they bicker. When Jin-joo tells her husband she wants a divorce, he agrees. Neither really wants this, but they're both too proud to take their words back. The next day, they each wake up in their respective childhood bedrooms.

The almost 40 year olds have gone back in time to when they were care-free 20-year-old college students with their futures ahead of them. The perspective depicted in this K-

drama has a poignant effect. *Go Back Couple* explores how our memories aren't always truthful when it comes to remembering the so-called *best years* of our lives, and that fighting for your family during the hard times is rough, but worthwhile. (Viki, Kocowa)

W

Director Jung Dae-yoon described *W* as the “story of a man and a woman who discover their reason for existence, while living in different dimensions in Seoul.” Because it’s difficult to describe the series without giving away a plot device, I’m going to give you a **SPOILER ALERT** now. OK, so this 2016 K-drama explores a parallel comic book universe that was created by an artist, whose daughter somehow is able to travel back and forth between the two realms.

Lee Jong-suk stars as Chul, who doesn’t realize he’s a webtoon character, and Han Hyo-joo portrays Yeon-joo, the real-life woman who falls in love with him. How will this couple survive a relationship that appears impossible to navigate? That’s addressed near the end of the K-drama. The concept for this show is refreshing, with gorgeous animation, as well as superb acting by the leads. (Viki)

Kingdom

I'm including both seasons of this *sageuk* that's set in the Joseon era, since the series only had 12 episodes total. Zombies add a clever twist to this thriller, which has Ju Ji-hoon portraying Crown Prince Lee Chang. Because he was born to a concubine, Lee Chang can't automatically ascend to the throne if his father dies. If the young pregnant Queen gives birth to a boy, he will at best be ousted from the palace, but most likely will be killed so as not to be a threat to the throne. When he discovers a grave secret about who is keeping his father alive, he embarks on a mission to protect his entire kingdom. Bae Doona is excellent as a physician and ally, who is less fearful of the zombies than of not finding an antidote. The acting, direction, and cinematography for this show, which premiered in 2019, is as much of a prestige drama as anything else out there. It more than holds its own with the best of the best. (Netflix)

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Jae-Ha Kim is a columnist for the Chicago Tribune news syndicate. Born in Seoul, Kim specializes in covering Korean entertainment for outlets such as Teen Vogue, Rolling Stone, TODAY.com, NPR, [K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim](#), and many more. An in-demand voice on Korean culture, Kim has been featured in publications like ... [Read More](#)



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