

The CW's Coroner is the Quiet Contemplation of Grief We Need Right Now

When so many of us can't grieve as we'd like to, pop culture can be a release valve.

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Photo: CBC

In one of the pandemic's pop culture gifts, [The CW](#) is now airing CBC's 2019 drama **Coroner**, which has already aired 2 seasons in Canada and has been renewed for a third. Serinda Swan plays Jenny Cooper, an ER doctor who, when

we first meet her in the premiere, has lost her husband suddenly to a brain aneurysm that occurred at their teenage son's swim meet. Jenny quits her job and becomes a coroner, moving her son Ross (Ehren Kassam) out of the city to a ramshackle home of one of the first deceased people she examines, a home that comes with its own handyman, Liam Bouchard (Éric Bruneau, in a rare English-speaking role).

Is the title a bit on the nose? Yes. Is the [title card](#) perhaps the most CW thing I've ever seen? Sure. Do I wish Ross hadn't said "obvs" in the pilot when talking about how he wished his father hadn't died? I think you know the answer to that is also a resounding "obvs." Is the use of a black dog as a symbol of grief, whether it's a reference to a hellhound, a grim, or the [hound of heaven](#), quite [obvious](#)? Absolutely.

But there's something distinctly Canadian in the show's quiet, contemplative approach to grief that we need right now. There's a stillness to it, an unwillingness to flinch from reality coupled with a touch of gallows humor that makes it feel like a show about death and grief made by people who actually know what it's like. At a time when so many of us can't grieve as we'd normally like to, and when there's a dearth of national mourning that's so badly needed, pop culture can be something of a release valve, holding some of the space we don't have elsewhere in our lives.



Too often, televised grief is all gnashing of teeth and histrionic fits, public spectacles at climactically inopportune moments and graceful breakdowns, crying that's just the right amount of funny or *authentic* without ever tipping into true ugly-cry territory. But on **Coroner**, grief isn't convenient or pretty or even something the show can wrap its arms around in a few episodes or, presumably, a season. It's something Jenny and Ross are swimming in, and likely will be for the rest of their lives, like so many of the people Jenny meets through her job, the loved ones of the deceased people she examines.

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Unlike many other takes on women's grief and trauma, the show doesn't rely on the usual obvious visual cues. Jenny doesn't drink giant goblets of red wine in the tub or cry in the shower. While she does do "the dramatic chop" and cuts off all her hair after her husband dies, the show lampshades it with her son and his boyfriend joking about it and how she's coping.

At a time of global mourning that is anything but ordinary, there's something comforting about a show that acknowledges how deeply weird and inconvenient grief can be. Death has always had a weird side, something we strive hard not to acknowledge here in the U.S., and the pandemic has only exacerbated it. Transporting bodies is suddenly more complicated as states censure one another for their COVID-19 levels, and there's a cap on how many people can attend funerals, causing some to opt for gatherings over zoom or hold off until some unknown future time when we can all



be together.

The only thing stranger than grief is grief delayed, and in their own way, both Jenny and her son attempt some version of it. They flee the city. They often tiptoe around talking about *him* and the impact his death has had on their lives, including the immense financial toll his hidden gambling addiction took posthumously. Jenny goes to therapy and is on some form of medication, but it's clear she's uncomfortable opening up and mostly just trying to keep her head above water.

Jenny retreats from her entire life and especially her profession, unable to face what it means that she, a doctor, couldn't save her own husband, laying an immense burden at her own feet. Ross retreats from the swim team – his father died at a meet, but more than that, his father was the overly-involved parent who harangued his son toward greatness. Without his father, the sport



feels empty and scary.

Coroner leans into the weird in its most extreme with Jenny changing her job and moving them out of Toronto into rural Canada, but the smaller moments of strangeness are perhaps more recognizable to the average viewer.

Jenny accepts an offer from Liam, the kind, hot handyman (a veteran of the war in Afghanistan who clearly has his own trauma to process) to grab drinks, and then vacillates between treating it like a date and therapy. When Jenny meets other women who have lost their spouses, she often hesitates to tell them how acutely she knows their pain, still unsure of her new identity as a widow – even more so when people see her wedding ring.

To be clear, Jenny isn't the weird one here – it's the situations that arise in a society that is simply ill-equipped to handle an adult woman straightforwardly saying, "my husband just died, but I haven't stopped wearing



my wedding ring yet." So usually-matter-of-fact Jenny stutter-steps, contorting herself around these strange situations, never sure when to tell the truth and when to shield everyone else around her from her grief. Far too often, other people's comfort is just one more burden laid at the feet of the grieving.

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One of the moments that plays strangest is also one of the best – when a fellow widow calls Jenny lucky because her husband died of an aneurysm. She must realize how she sounds because she looks back at Jenny and says, "I'm sorry, but you are!" There's something so deeply honest about her saying so, even if we, the audience, know that death-by-aneurysm actually made his death uniquely painful for Jenny.

It's the kind of thing only another widow would say, and for just a few conversations in that episode, Jenny



isn't bending to polite company, trying to cry in her car so her new coworkers don't see it. She's just one widow giving it straight to another widow – and I doubt Jenny would've solved the case without that clarity of insight.

Early on, multiple characters question Jenny's fitness for her job, assuming she can't handle so much exposure to death and the darkest of humanity, in spite of her experience as an ER doctor. It's an odd assumption – after all, what does an intimate knowledge of trauma and grief even look like? But they don't know that Jenny lives and breathes death and despair, because she has what Stephen Colbert has called his "secret name." In an [interview with Oprah](#) about the loss of his father and two older brothers, he explained:

"For years, I sort of thought that was my secret name. That that loss was my name. I like the idea that you have a secret name. You have your name but then you have a secret name, and



that's a name that no one can ever really pronounce because that's who you are. And there's a magic to your secret name. And that was my secret name, the loss of my father and my brothers."

Jenny very much has a secret name, one she protects fiercely. Whether or not you believe losing her husband changed her from [the person she was meant to be](#), she's certainly not the person she once was. After a loss, none of us are. But **Coroner** allows us to watch – both in real time and for the long haul – as grief changes Jenny and Russ, and as they remake themselves around their grief. At a time like this, there's something uncommonly comforting and even hopeful in that honesty.

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