

It's winter ... time to binge



"Let me run upstairs and slip into something more comfortable," my wife, Yolanda, says with a sly smile.

It's Saturday night, and we've returned home from the local Mexican restaurant, La Casa Del Sol, after Mass at St. Anthony's.

I kick off my shoes, draw blinds, fluff pillows and flop onto the couch. Yolanda is now in the other room, a wonderful fragrance wafting through the doorway. I savor the scent, a married man in full, content to linger in the moment.

"Wow," I say as Yolanda enters, the aroma enveloping her.

"You like?" she says, brown eyes shining.

"What's not to like," I say, patting the pillows.

Yolanda snuggles close.

"Let's do it," she says.

I flick off the lights, ready to indulge in one of life's great gifts: Binge watching streaming TV series.

"Hey, baby," I say, as the opening credits roll, "this popcorn tastes better than it smells."

"Gracias, mi amor. Now, what episode are we on?"

The bingeing started two winters ago when our son, Michael, set up Netflix and Amazon Prime on our Wii, a device

which sat unattended when he and his sister, Anissa, left for college years earlier. In so doing, he introduced us to an alternative entertainment world and unwittingly triggered a cold weather addiction snapped only by the spring thaw.

Yolanda and I started tentatively, watching reruns of the "Andy Griffith Show" and "The Office." Next, a movie here and there, mostly classics like "Casablanca" or "To Kill a Mockingbird," shows often mangled by commercials, if televised at all. It was fun, something we could take or leave.

Then, one chilly winter night, bored with the traditional TV lineup of never-ending reality shows, overwrought dramas and one-lining sitcoms, we searched the streaming catalog and watched "Breaking Bad." We were hooked.

When not teaching night classes or otherwise occupied, we flipped on Walter White's tale of woe, binge watching four episodes a night, pausing for short breaks between every couple of episodes. Next came "The Sopranos," then "House of Cards" and "Justified."

This winter, we're watching "The Wire," a show produced just after 9/11, focusing on inner city Baltimore. It ran for five seasons and is a reminder of how much and how little things have changed in the last decade. Yes, cellphones and electron-

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ics have advanced by leaps and bounds, but problems with drugs, disintegrating families, lack of good paying jobs, political corruption, a 24/7/365 media-hyped world and failing public schools seem worse than ever.

Perhaps not the most uplifting thing to watch in the middle of a dark and dreary winter. Yet the superb writing and acting of "The Wire" draws bingers into the world of inner city Baltimore, and we find ourselves rooting for the likes of Omar Little, a stone cold killer and thief, but one who never shoots anyone not "in the game." He only robs drug dealers.

"A man got to have a code," Omar says.

In one memorable scene, Omar testifies at a murder trial against a hitman. Such testi-

mony is rare as witnesses fear reprisal, i.e. death. A corrupt attorney, Maurice "Maury" Levy, who is paid by the hitman's drug king boss, questions Omar's credibility:

Levy: "You are amoral, are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You are stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off ..."

Omar: "Just like you, man."

Levy: "... the culture of drugs. Excuse me? What?"

Omar: "I got the shotgun, you got the briefcase. It's all in the game though, right?"

True dat, we immersed bingers think, nodding with the jury.

Levy's rattled. The hitman is convicted.

When caught in the grip of a streaming binge, Yolanda and I stock up on kernelled corn and kosher salt from Jerry's IGA, our eyes fixed to the floor as the cashiers and baggers exchange knowing glances.

Oh, yeah. They know.

They're on the front lines. Seen more bingeing streamers than they count double down on our addiction and become junk food junkies as well. It's not pretty, but until someone wants to help themselves there's nothing anyone can do. So the cashiers avert their eyes and ring us up with a forgiving smile

and a "God bless."

January is perilous for Midwestern bingers.

The holidays are over, the sun sets early, if it even appears, and it's freezing outside. The TV's warm glow beckons. Self-discipline wanes. We wallow in whatever streaming world ensnares us, becoming half-baked method actors, reality compass spinning.

Engrossed in "The Sopranos," we wonder if the mafia's "it's business, not personal," way might be effective when an elderly neighbor informs us her snowy sidewalks aren't being cleared in a timely manner by the guy she hired. We pull up the collar of our black leather jacket and promise her that we'll "have a talk with the mope."

At work, at the gym, in the classroom, in church, we day-dream about the next streaming fix. We ignore the stares as we pile junk food into our shopping cart, knowing a binge-busting spring will arrive soon enough.

Until then, a la Omar, we bingers refuse to be hypocrites about how we live. Heck, everyone has some kind of guilty pleasure. "Just like you, man ... it's all in the game though, right?"

True dat.

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