

Season 4 of Netflix's *13 Reasons Why*: Biting off more than it can chew

By Nick Barrickman
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The fourth and final season of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* was released June 5. The show is executive produced and developed by Selena Gomez, Brian Yorkey and Joy Gorman Wettels, among others, and based on the 2007 book of the same title by Jay Asher.

The series chronicles the complex lives of several teenage characters in the fictional town of Crestmont in northern California. The first season, directly drawn from the book, deals with the events surrounding the death of high school student Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford), driven to suicide by bullying and abuse from classmates and school faculty and officials, along with isolation and depression. Prior to taking her life, Hannah sends a series of recordings to the individuals whom she blames in some fashion for her eventual fateful decision.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in reviewing Season 1, “The show’s main appeal is that it honestly depicts the reality of life, or aspects of life, for youth in America today. ... The characters are complex and sensitive. What comes through very strongly as the story unravels is the life-situation in which each of these characters finds him or herself and how that contributes to his or her actions.”

As the series has progressed (and gone beyond the events depicted in the novel), it has dealt, with mixed success, with contemporary social reality and events.

The second season features a lawsuit filed by Hannah’s mother against the school district on the grounds of negligence, and the eventual arrest and trial of the sociopathic Bryce Walker (Justin Prentice), the wealthy and popular student accused of sexually assaulting Hannah and other girls. This storyline, which includes hints of the Brock Turner case in 2016 and “rape culture,” ends with the publicly humiliated Bryce being sentenced to probation for sexual assault.

The third season opens as Bryce, who became a pariah in the community and was forced to face some of the pain he inflicted on others, has been apparently beaten and drowned by an unknown assailant. All of the series’ leading characters are potential suspects, all having had serious

grounds for despising him.

In the final season of *13 Reasons Why*, the principal figures find themselves increasingly weighed down and struggling to cope with a number of personal and social issues. The central protagonist, Clay Jensen (played by an intense Dylan Minnette), is struggling to maintain his sanity after barely avoiding a murder rap for Bryce’s killing in the previous season.

Clay did not kill Bryce, but he is protecting the person who did. Clay and his friends pin the murder on the sadistic Monty de la Cruz (Timothy Granaderos), another hated student in Bryce’s set. Monty, who has perpetrated a number of abusive and heinous crimes himself, is murdered in prison in Season 3 and will not be missed or heard from again. Or so they think. ...

The psycho-social drama expressed through the increasingly erratic behavior of Clay and others, as well as the pressures of young adulthood and the ever-present threats that their many “secrets” will be exposed to the authorities, plays a critical role in the series.

A host of characters in Season 4 run the gauntlet of everyday social problems. Justin (Brandon Flynn), Clay’s adopted brother, continues to cope with a serious drug addiction as well as emotional scars from an impoverished and abusive childhood. Tony (Christian Navarro), a working-class character whose family was deported by Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Season 3, is struggling to carry on life in the United States without his family.

In general, the scourges of drugs, alcohol, depression, crime and invasive authorities are ever-present. Some of these conflicts are dealt with in a convincing manner, others are not.

Although the final season of *13 Reasons Why* was completed prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the drama and conflict speak in certain ways to the social mood currently gripping the population, further proof that the coronavirus disaster was a “trigger event,” which only accelerated processes well under way. Season 4 was

released within days of Donald Trump's threats to unleash the US military on protesters and his effort to establish an unconstitutional, presidential dictatorship.

In decisions and actions that will be all too familiar to many young people, Liberty High School's administration responds to the painful dilemmas and perplexities afflicting their students with a panoply of intrusive and bureaucratic measures—i.e., essentially with police methods.

The deployment of security cameras and metal detectors, cell phone surveillance programs, a beefed-up police presence and even full-on "active shooter" drills, complete with alarms and lockdown procedures, supposedly in an effort to "keep kids safe," all this punctuates the goings-on now at Liberty. The campus hires an icy security official, Dean Foundry (Reed Diamond) to oversee such activities.

Predictably, the repressive moves have a disastrous impact, with the insidious searches, leering cops and traumatic active shooter drills creating an explosive and toxic situation at the school. The events culminate in a school-wide walkout by students fed up with the heavy-handed police presence. In scenes similar to ones that have played out over the past weeks, students find themselves confronted by cops in riot gear set to disperse their peaceful protest. The scene unfolds violently.

Much of this strikes the viewer as timely and forceful. Unfortunately, however, no sooner has the protest died down than *13 Reasons Why* begins to wrap up its various plot strands in a contrived and trite manner.

The violent confrontation with police occurs in an episode entitled "Acceptance/Rejection." That is followed by one entirely devoted to the senior prom, "Prom," with all the characters inconceivably reconciled with the school authorities. The series finale "Graduation" follows along similar lines.

The general progress (or conformist decline) here is captured in Clay's final conversation with his therapist. Discussing the clashes with police at school, Clay confides: "I realized that all the attention he [the local sheriff] had been giving me this spring? Like showing up at school and meeting with my parents—he was worried about me." Therapist: "Wasn't he just doing his job?" Clay: "Yeah...and I think maybe he's pretty good at his job." Awful.

Most problematic is how the series deals with the murder of Bryce Walker and the framing of Monty de la Cruz for his death. In Season 3, Walker and de la Cruz, while detestable, are nonetheless treated as human beings—with histories, influences and even potentially redeeming qualities.

None of that is present in the last season. Both Monty and Bryce appear here almost as vengeful ghosts sent to torment the guilty consciences of those who knew them. Doubtless,

this was a conscious decision on the part of the series' producers to minimize the backlash against the series over its "soft" treatment of "sexual predators."

Typical were the comments of *Vox* culture writer Constance Grady. "Did *13 Reasons Why* really need to spend so much time focusing on Bryce's pain? Did it really need to demonize his victims whenever they asked that the world consider their pain too?" she asked in response to the conclusion of the third season. According to the media review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, the average critical rating of that season was an abysmal 12 out of 100 based on 11 reviews.

This overwhelmingly negative reception, in part a byproduct of the reactionary #MeToo hysteria, seems to have had a chilling effect on the series' creators.

In fact, the reprehensible character of Bryce's and Monty's crimes is never for a second in doubt. What the show's detractors were disturbed by is the fact that the series hinted that broader *social processes* were to blame for the anti-social acts. The #MeToo types, ever more comfortable with the notion of "law and order," are a truly conservative lot. The series ends with Bryce's murder unsolved and Monty de la Cruz the convenient scapegoat.

In sum, *13 Reasons Why* is far more successful at unearthing and noting many of the social pressures and harsh realities facing youth in the first decades of the 21st century than with making sense of the reality and providing a helpful orientation.

One hopes that the present and coming period will provide the social and political impulse for the series' various contributors to explore more profoundly and daringly the state of American society. There will be no shortage of opportunities.

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