

Season Three of *Better Call Saul*: Objection! Relevance!

Ed Hightower
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A show honestly exploring the ins and outs of the legal profession, particularly those of its younger members, could hardly fail to win an audience. Who are these people who, after four years of undergraduate study, take the Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT), apply to the best law schools they might expect admission to, then study the official rules of social and economic life for three more years; study for a comprehensive licensing exam (the bar exam or simply “the bar”), and then finally earn the right to represent clients in court and with it, a chance to repay their massive student loans?

What motivates such students? Hope of riches? The fight to protect the innocent, or to compensate victims of official wrongdoing? What are their struggles? Do they have a family or personal life? How do they sharpen their skills, get along with their opponents and judges, and their employers?

Better Call Saul is the prequel to *Breaking Bad*, a hit drama about financially struggling high school chemistry teacher Walter White (Brian Cranston) who turns his life upside down when he begins to manufacture the highly addictive drug methamphetamine. Walter White employs the crooked, flamboyant attorney Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk) to handle legal problems and otherwise assist in directing the operations of a drug cartel.

In *Breaking Bad*, Odenkirk masterfully portrays the life-like Saul Goodman—born Jimmy McGill, he changed his name to a Jewish one to entice prospective clients who prefer a lawyer who is, in his words, “a pipe-smoking member of the tribe [of Israel].” Throughout the show, Goodman spouts such gems as, “Remember, there’s no honor among thieves, except for us,” and “I once convinced a woman I was Kevin Costner.” His comic relief is welcome, and his

thwarting of the law enforcement agencies encircling White earns sympathy, even for a lawyer bending the rules to assist a meth dealer.

To the credit of *Better Call Saul*’s creators, Seasons One and Two told a story about Jimmy McGill the young go-getter who takes correspondence courses in law while working in the mail room at his brother Charles’ enormous law firm, Hamlin Hamlin McGill. Certain scenes in these prior seasons rang true. One montage stands out, showing Jimmy making the paces defending indigent clients day in and day out for the lawyer’s equivalent of minimum wage, as he endears himself to the courthouse power brokers: the sheriffs’ deputies, prosecuting attorneys and, most importantly, the clerks.

Jimmy’s eagerness for success convincingly takes the viewer through a number of problems that most all lawyers encounter, including clients with unrealistic expectations. One woman insists that her husband, who embezzled \$1 million from the local government, should serve no jail time *and* get to keep the money. Another wants to pay Jimmy to help him secede from the United States, and to pay him in money that he himself has printed. And an elderly woman wants to describe each and every figurine she has and ensure that her last will and testament spells out who will receive each one...and she only has \$20 to pay him.

Even at its best *Saul* was always at least half cop drama, however.

To that end, a miserable character who ultimately becomes Saul’s private investigator plays a role that earns at least as much screen time as the ostensible protagonist himself does. The ex-cop-turned-crook Mike Ehrmantraut faces hackneyed moral dilemmas as he tries to support his daughter-in-law and granddaughter. As background to the story, his son was

killed by fellow police officers when he refused to conspire with them to deal in confiscated contraband.

In Season Three, the cameras virtually caress Ehrmantraut as he uses high-powered rifles, GPS tracking devices, and otherwise plays cat-and-mouse games in furtherance of various crimes. One scene of him tracking and being tracked by up-and-coming meth kingpin Gus Fring carries on for what seems like hours. This clever tough guy with a family to protect largely aims at the viewer's simplest instincts.

As the season wears on, the practice of law falls off the map almost entirely when Jimmy suffers a suspension of his law license. (The disciplinary process is very well done, both dramatically and cinematically.) Episodes that concern Jimmy's venture into advertising are unwatchable. One gets the sense that the creators have run out of anything meaningful to say.

Worse still, they undermine what was left of Jimmy as a character supposedly torn between vice and virtue. In order to procure his fees in a lucrative civil case, Jimmy connives to destroy an elderly client's quiet, peaceful life without a second thought. Prior relations with that client portrayed Jimmy as genuinely empathetic to this woman, and eager to get justice for her. To watch the backstabbing is to witness not character development, but rewriting. It is as lazy as it is unconvincing.

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In this and many other instances, the creators of *Better Call Saul* flirt with the old prejudices against attorneys, espoused most consciously by the extreme right and other advocates of big business.

Reality, and history too, diverge from this gross oversimplification and irresponsible misrepresentation. A list of historical figures that knew their way around the courtroom would include Lincoln, Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, Darrow, Kafka, Robespierre and Lenin. There is not a charlatan or self-seeker among them.

In contrast to Jimmy's derangement, drug kingpin Gus Fring presents as a model employer at the money laundering front he operates. When a rival cartel terrorizes Fring's employees, he makes a nauseating speech afterwards about not backing down, not in the United States, where good people have nothing to fear etc.—and he gives them overtime and paid counseling

should they need it. Nice fellow!

One wants to point out to the show's creators that if the front business—a fried chicken restaurant—is so successful, why don't the kingpins just sell fast food?

Greed, in short, seems to be their answer to everything, a supra-historical character flaw, almost an original sin in the case of Jimmy McGill.

Better Call Saul will appear on AMC for a fourth season. One imagines that little light will be shed on the practice of law, or the social relations it is rooted in, or much of anything else, saving most screen time for cops and robbers. The latter can be seen on virtually any other channel too, of course.



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