

Easy: Human interaction is not ...

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By exploring the relationships among a group of mostly middle class Chicago residents through a series of loosely interwoven vignettes, the Netflix series *Easy* reminds the viewer that human interaction is always intensely complicated.

The third and final season of *Easy* premiered in May 2019. It depicts arguments in marriage counseling sessions, bad dates, workplace crushes, parents who have sex lives and awkward single people who don't. The dramas and comedies are not earth-shaking, and the particular "slice of life" on display here is relatively narrow, but the series has certain rewards.

Creator/writer Joe Swanberg (born 1981) stands out for his three-dimensional characters and realistic, almost tangible dialogue. Success here springs not so much from his own mind. Rather, he casts a broad net for real-life input at every level of production in a highly collaborative and improvisational approach to filmmaking characteristic of a genre called "mumblecore."

Each episode of *Easy* begins life as a five- or six-page outline in prose, largely without dialogue. The actors hold extensive discussions with Swanberg, sometimes over the course of months, enriching the "script" with material from their own lives. The collective effort continues onto the set, where the first take is referred to as a *writing take*. The actors' participation finds its way into post-production as well.

Swanberg also deserves credit for his effort to draw characters "who are very much trying to do the right thing at all times" as he put it. With this thematic anchor, the approach taken in *Easy* tends to produce a dynamic, but still cohesive, story.

Its creative fruits are seen in season three's episode "Spontaneous Combustion," which revisits the young lovers Chase (Kiersey Clemons) and Jo (Jacqueline Toboni). Their story began in the first season of *Easy* with one of the series' best, most relatable episodes,

"Vegan Cinderella."

In that earlier segment, the young women locked eyes at a concert, danced and went home together. Differences emerged the following morning on the subject of breakfast. Jo—activist, artist, avid cyclist, generally a youth who knew something about herself—proposed a vegan breakfast. Chase was more conventionally "feminine," had only determined her sexual orientation through Jo and admired the latter so much she quickly adopted her personality, veganism and all.

In "Spontaneous Combustion," the pair mulls renewing their lease as they leave a semi-formal feminist roundtable. Chase is eager to socialize with friends afterwards and hurriedly explains that she wants to talk it through later (assuring Jo it's no big deal), but doesn't want her friends to leave her as they head for the bar—a telling synecdoche for the central conflict in the relationship itself.

While Jo powers through her work assignment on the day following their breakup, Chase relocates to a friend's sofa and plays the field for a month or so. In one romantic interlude, she warms to a photographer who uses a Polaroid camera to flirt. The instantaneous and more whimsical photographic medium makes a suitable metaphor for a fling.

The ending leaves Jo and Chase on an ambiguous note capturing the attraction-repulsion dynamic of romance. More prominent than the final outcome are the minutiae along the way: consoling discussions with friends, little gestures between lovers—the half-hugs and broken gazes. The devil is in the details, and so is much of life.

Other episodes in season three consider themes of the bohemian lifestyle versus convention, career and stability versus passion and romance. The themes aren't new, but they come across with subtlety and authenticity, as they generally did in previous seasons

of *Easy*.

At its best, *Easy* engages in challenging subject matter, and one has to assume at considerable risk to Swanberg, in the case of his treatment of the #MeToo sexual witch-hunt.

Season two featured humorous jabs to that effect in the episode “Side Hustle.” There, actress Annabelle—played by the talented Jane Adams—gave an open mic rant attacking such novel and unromantic concepts as “the moment of consent.” This came at the urging of her new friend Sally (Karley Sciortino), a sex-positive feminist writer who quietly takes pride in her other, more lucrative career as a high-level call girl with a penchant for helping her clients overcome sexual and psychological dysfunction. Dicey content, but powerful drama. One wonders how Swanberg avoided the golden pitchforks of Ronan Farrow and the rest of the privileged cabal!

In season three’s “Blank Pages” episode, Annabelle’s old friend and new lover, semi-famous graphic novelist Jacob (Marc Maron), faces #MeToo-style fallout, including the cancellation of a speaking engagement, as a former graduate student of his, Beth (Melanie Lynskey), prepares to publish an unflattering account of their brief affair 15 years before.

The old writer and his former student attempt a reconciliation over a cup of coffee. Beth’s account of the one-time sexual encounter and its ruinous effects on her life reeks of the middle class bitterness that echoes in a thousand “safe spaces” across a thousand campuses. Every twist in her life “has been about something a man has wanted” and not about her own happiness. For 15 years—*years*—self-doubt consumed her, prevented her from publishing and so on.

In the course of a true-to-life discourse both sides of the equation find expression. Jacob regrets that he panicked after the love affair and avoided contact. Beth took this as a rejection of her work. Reconciliation emerges within the framework of an *interpersonal relationship* between two imperfect individuals, and not as an episode in the defining political crusade of the modern age.

The episode “Number One Seller” about an ambitious but prodigal street vendor feels uninspired and decidedly weaker than the rest. “Private Eyes” indulges in long scenes of sexual encounters, an aesthetic concern that creeps into some of the stronger

episodes too. Of course, sexuality matters in relationships and in life—sometimes it merits depiction to further the plot and character development—but at times *Easy* feels like exhibitionism.

In any event, *Easy* reflects sincerity and care in its treatment of challenging topics.



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