



Think of it this way: at least you're not locked down with drunken, misanthropic bookshop owner Bernard Black

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Our writers nominate the TV series keeping them entertained during a time of COVID.

Imagine if you were locked down with a recalcitrant alcoholic who belligerently passed scorn upon anyone who came into his orbit. A man who bullied and cajoled the only other person locked in with him, gaining sadistic pleasure from psychological torture.

Well, this is who I am spending my pandemic with. Luckily, he is on the other side of the screen. His name is Bernard Black.

Running for three seasons from 2000 to 2004, the television series Black Books starred Dylan Moran as the perpetually drunk and surly bookseller Black, Bill Bailey as his innocent and naïve offsider Manny Bianco and Tamsin Greig as fellow red wine connoisseur and best friend, Fran Katzenjammer.

The main plot revolves around the misadventures of the three main characters, mostly instigated by Bernard's misanthropic distaste for anyone who dares enter his bookstore or, indeed, the public at large. This includes any loose associations with people he refers to as "friends".



Bernard spends most of his time in a bookshop he doesn't want anyone to come into, with an assistant who annoys him with his constant desire to please. Fran is continually trying to improve Black's attitude and behaviour to the outside world — and always failing dismally.

Come to think of it, Bernard would probably relish being in lockdown.

'A death ship'

Moran, the series' creator, told *The Observer* in 2000:

Running a second-hand bookshop is a guaranteed commercial failure. It's a whole philosophy. There were bookshops that I frequented and I was always struck by the loneliness and doggedness of these men who piloted this death ship.

Bernard loathes going into the outside world. On the rare occasion when he does, things always turn out bad for him. He is the epitome of the stereotyped drunken Irish rogue who sees his bookshop as his castle of misery. Inside it, he subjugates anyone foolish enough to enter with belittling and insults.

In the hands of a lesser talent this would come across to an audience as boorish and puerile. But in the hands of Moran, with his clever word play and childlike antics, the character is almost charming and witty.

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The fact that Bernard's tantrums and bad behaviour always end up backfiring on him is central to the show's success. He's the one who suffers the most from his churlishness.

Still, Moran doesn't get to steal every scene. He plays off against the seasoned performers Bailey and Greig, each with comedy chops as finely honed as Moran.

Usually, television comedies get better the longer they run, as the characters are fleshed out more and the actors get more comfortable with the material. Think how much better the later episodes of Friends or Seinfeld were compared to the earlier ones.

But Black Books doesn't suffer from this slow start. The earlier episodes are as great as the later ones. And there are cameos from some of the best of British comedians: Martin Freeman, Simon Pegg, David Walliams from Little Britain and Academy Award winner Olivia Colman.

A comedy booster

It is a very British comedy, often leaning into the abstract and surreal in the tradition of The Young Ones, Father Ted and Monty Python.

Who can forget Bernard's couch, which swallows children whole? Or when Manny is trapped in the bookstore overnight and roasts dead bees found on the window sill on a campfire spit?

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In one episode, when Manny asks "Is space hot?", Bernard replies,

Of course it is, where else do you think we get pineapples from.

It's a shame Black Books didn't run longer. It certainly wasn't stale by the end of its third season. But British TV comedy shows are renowned for not wearing out their welcome.

Other major sitcoms of the same era like Spaced, Extras, The Mighty Boosh and even the immensely popular Little Britain and The Office only ran for two or three seasons.

Perhaps Black Books isn't enough to see you through all of lockdown. But it is a much needed comedy booster shot (pardon the pun). At the very least, it will make you thankful you're not locked up with Bernard Black.

Black Books is available on Netflix, Britbox and Apple TV.

British comedy Lockdown TV

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