

WHY AN OLDER WHITE GUY LIKES A NETFLIX SHOW ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE OF COLOR

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When I was a child, no one on television looked like me – like us. Maybe that's why my father surrounded our family with the comedians who ran free during the early days of TV. Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca; Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams; Steve Allen and Jayne Meadows; Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows brought humor into our homes, maybe because reality was in such short supply.

As a white kid growing up amid America's largest minority – poor people – I can only imagine what it's like to live within the sliver of society known as a racial minority, an even more alienated subgroup in that economic underclass of poverty. *The Cosby Show* was not their family, just as *The Brady Bunch* was not mine.

That's why I think the Netflix show *On My Block* is so important.

The families I saw on TV when I was a kid were not mine. My Mom didn't wear heels and pearls around the house like Mrs. Cleaver on *Leave It to Beaver* and my Dad didn't go to work in a suit and tie like the father on *Make Room for Daddy*. John and Leah were not *Ozzie*

and Harriett. The closest TV family to mine was Ralph and Alice Kramden on *The Honeymooners*, and they didn't have kids.

That's why I think *On My Block* is so important.

Full disclosure: I would not know about *On My Block* if not for the fact that my son-in-law Jeremy Haft is a co-creator along with his writing partner Eddie Gonzalez and Lauren Iungerich, who brought *Awkward* to MTV. Hell, I didn't even have a Netflix subscription until Season 1 of *On My Block* dropped in March 2018.

Now Netflix is my constant companion. I spend a lot of time in hotel rooms traveling to golf tournaments and already this year *The Kominsky Method* and *The Crown* have gotten me through some tedious weeks, not to mention catching up on past seasons of *The Blacklist*.

I started watching *On My Block* out of family devotion and ended up devoted to the show, its characters and the story it tells. I've watched the first two seasons multiple times and I love the recent news that Season 3 has been green-lighted. This is a good show that gets better as each character is more fully developed and more characters are more thoroughly explored.

The five main roles of *On My Block* are extremely compelling, complex, well written and well played. But among the show's strengths are the fascinating fringe

roles. I find myself rooting for Spooky, and he's a gang member. Abuelita, the pot-smoking granny, has some of the funniest lines. And Chivo, the gnome whisperer, is as quirky as any character to come along in quite a while.

On My Block is important because the key characters are not white, not rich and they've had to bend their moral framework to fit the world handed to them. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of *On My Block* is that it shows an economically challenged neighborhood not as a scary place but as a vibrant community of family, faith, loyalty and love all wrapped in challenges.

These are good people and those on the fringes of goodness – gang members – are presented as people, not stereotypes. And even good people have challenges. Issues like drugs, alcohol, gun violence, teen sex, gangs, PTSD, immigration, single parenthood, deportation and homelessness are dealt with in a way that is so casually honest it all feels very real.

This honesty, this sense of reality, is not what we are used to. Until recently, with the emergence of alternative forms of distribution beyond the movie studios and TV networks, a sheltered few determined entertainment for the many. As the king says in *The Wizard of Id* comic strip: "We must all live by the Golden Rule. Whoever has the gold makes the rules."

But now diverse voices have platforms. When I was a kid, TV showed me a world of heels and pearls; suits and ties. But my father wore grease-stained work clothes and drove a ladle crane in the steel mills. My mother held a bunch of factory jobs, mostly as a welder, and supplemented her income as a cleaning woman in offices and private homes at night and on weekends.

The people I see in *On My Block* are different than me, but the same. I relate to where they are from because it is not all that different than where I am from. Like my grandparents, theirs are immigrants. Our skin color differs and they speak Spanish while my parents spoke Hungarian; but both fought to hold on, fit in, and move up.

And that's why this show is worth watching. In understanding our differences we embrace our similarities. The humanity of the characters in *On My Block* is developed so thoroughly that anyone will understand them, no matter their background.

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When I was a very young child and lived on Sheep Hill on the south side of New Castle, Pa., if there was a wedding, the reception after the church service wasn't a catered affair, it was a community affair, held in the volunteer fire hall, the trucks removed to make room for tables and a dance floor.

The day before the reception, a bunch of women would gather in our basement and, while sipping from a jug of red wine and laughing, make stuffed cabbage, pirogues and poppy seed rolls for the reception where everyone would dance to the music of Tommy Gonda and his accordion.

Later, when we moved to the north side of New Castle so my mother could get me into a better school district, I was very much like the main characters in *On My Block* and my family was very much like theirs: Holding on while looking for a way out, but loving where I was.

In *On My Block* I see the same sense of community I knew as a child. In the kids in *On My Block*, I recognize me. In the families in *On My Block*, I recognize my family and those around us. In the economic struggles and difficult ethical decisions in *On My Block*, I see challenges we faced.

This show is such an honest look at minority culture that it makes us realize we are all in this together. It makes us realize that our nation's majority is nothing more than a bunch of minorities stitched together. That's a really important message, especially in this divided time.

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It's the show I wish I could have watched when I was a kid. It's the show in which anyone of any age or background can find humor, truth and get a glimpse into a community that is so honest our similarities drown out our differences. This show is real; it's about *our* block.

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