

Right-sized stories

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue



ROOM TO BREATHE: Miniseries, like *Top of the Lake* (featuring *Mad Men*'s Elisabeth Moss, above), can accommodate more plot complexity than a standard two-hour feature. © 2013 SUNDANCE CHANNEL. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

For the most part we consume visual narratives either in two-hour films or in television series that stretch out for years, even decades. Films offer the pleasure of something made and done, a one-time encounter that invites reflection and judgment. The boundaries of the format can generate beauty and power, but it has limitations. How many of us, for example, have criticized a movie because the characters were not well developed or because the plot felt rushed or fragmented?

These criticisms seldom apply to high-quality serial television. With 75 to 100 (or even more) hours available, a six-to-eight-year series can explore the most intimate recesses of characters' psyches and develop story lines that mimic the complexity of real life. It is not surprising that this style of television is most often compared to the sprawling novels of Dickens and Dostoevsky—masterpieces of human psychology

and narrative.

The miniseries offers something between a film and a long-running television series. Most miniseries run for four to eight episodes. The History Channel's popular *The Bible* is one example of a miniseries with a topic too complex to squeeze into a two-hour movie but with a limit on how far its plot could be stretched. Literary adaptations fit the miniseries genre well, too. Fans of a novel may reject a film adaptation that cuts up essential plots or rewrites characters, but a six-hour or ten-hour miniseries can honor these elements (and the readers) faithfully. On the other hand, no one wants to watch season after season of new plots written for Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy.

One of the most captivating miniseries I watched this winter was Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake* (Sundance Channel). This haunting crime drama set in the New Zealand outback follows a female detective (Elisabeth Moss) as she returns to her hometown and is drawn into the case of a missing and pregnant 12-year-old girl.

Unlike *Law and Order* or *CSI*, serial crime series that rely on formulas, or *Dexter*, which uses cliff-hanger endings to tie one episode to the next, *Top of the Lake* is driven as much by Campion's austere visual style as it is by plot. She focuses on the rugged, expansive landscape—the mist of the mountain lake and the flat plains below the mountains. This atmosphere of desolation and wonder links the episodes to each other even as viewers begin to care deeply about the plot and a resolution of the crime. The genre allows the director to create a unique experience with an exposure that is longer than a film but still defined by the limited hours of a shorter series.

*A Young Doctor's Notebook* (distributed by BBC Worldwide) is a wildly different example that emphasizes the episodic nature of the miniseries. In one of the most darkly comic and outlandishly macabre shows I've seen on television, the series chronicles the memories of an older doctor (Jon Hamm) reflecting on the misadventures of his younger self (Daniel Radcliffe) in his first post in a tiny, isolated village in rural Russia on the eve of the Russian Revolution.

The series runs just under two hours and could easily have been a film. But stringing together the four 25-minute episodes would have created a deeply unsatisfying movie. The plot is made up of fragmented memories, each of which implies more about the main character's life than the miniseries reveals. This "suggestive effect"

would be lost in an ongoing series. As episodes in a miniseries, however, the fragments of memory are a perfect vehicle for exploring the allusive and elliptical nature of human memory.

As we watch some of these new miniseries, maybe we can learn something about our own storytelling techniques. We know the experience of listening to a contained sermon as well as the experience of following the narrative of a liturgical year. We know that poems, novels, and short stories have all influenced Christian ways of thinking about and communicating our sacred stories, even though we expect different things from each genre. English poetry, for example, has been influenced by the psalms, and the psalms influence what we think of poetry. And when we talk about how the Christian story shapes our lives, we largely rely on narrative assumptions drawn from psychologically realistic novels. We've long understood that liturgy is a kind of a drama.

These experiments in visual storytelling are a sign that the visual medium is maturing to encompass the breadth of our "story-love." In our increasingly visual world, the narrative styles provided by film and serial television have a counterpart in the miniseries, a genre worthy of our attention.