

Unlikely sage

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue



IRREPRESSIBLE: Rescued from a cult in Indiana, Kimmy (Ellie Kemper) starts life over in NYC. Photo by Eric Liebowitz. courtesy of Netflix. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Tina Fey and Robert Carlock's new series for Netflix, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, is a strange combination: it's a show about surviving religious and sexual abuse and also a relentlessly upbeat feminist comedy. Kimmy (Ellie Kemper) and three other "Indiana mole women" were kidnapped and imprisoned for years by the outwardly charming but evil cult leader Reverend Richard Wayne Gary Wayne (Jon Hamm). As the series begins, they have been freed from their underground bunker and are traveling together on a talk show circuit.

At one point an interviewer asks one of them how the reverend managed to kidnap her. She explains that he was a customer at a restaurant where she worked, and he "invited me out to his car to see some baby rabbits, and I didn't want to be rude so . . . here we are." The talk show host responds, "I'm always amazed at what women will do because they're afraid of being rude." Fey does this combination of funny and devastating better than anyone.

Kimmy doesn't want to be known as an Indiana mole woman, so when her friends return to Indiana, she stays in New York City, takes a job as an assistant to the unhappy and wealthy Jacqueline (Jane Krakowski), and finds a roommate, Titus (Tituss Burgess), a failing actor who needs Kimmy to help pay the rent.

Kemper plays Kimmy with sunny optimism. Kimmy's innocence and lack of knowledge of the world turn her into an unlikely sage, one who helps those around her see the world in a better light.

Toward the end of the first season, Kimmy faces her kidnapper in court. Reverend Wayne serves as his own counsel. Hamm plays the character with a powerful attractiveness, demonstrating an eerie but real phenomenon: charismatic people sometimes get away with outrageous and horrible behavior. He uses the prejudices of the small town jury against Kimmy. "The Big Apple," he sneers. "Just like the one Eve gave Adam. And that's when all our earthly suffering began. Mortality. Shame in our nakedness. Burning your tongue on cocoa, junk mail, Mondays!"

Wayne's attempt at manipulation demonstrates Fey's humor. *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* combines the twisted and the ridiculous brilliantly, and there's something delightful in the show's audaciousness. But I became uncomfortable with using the implied horrors of Kimmy's past as a plot device. Kimmy's relentlessly positive attitude is the only antidote the show offers to abuse and psychological manipulation, and it isn't enough. We need not just survival but healing—something that *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* does not even begin to address.