

*Sorry for Your Loss*'s quiet exploration of race

## A white woman, her black husband, and the struggle to be known

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [February 26, 2020](#) issue



Facebook Watch

In its pretensions to take over all of social life, Facebook has jumped into television, producing original shows that are available only on the Facebook platform (and with a Facebook account). The best of these is *Sorry for Your Loss*, an addictive drama about grief, loss, and—perhaps unintentionally—the ethical perils of being white in America.

The face of lead actress Elizabeth Olsen is mesmerizing. At times her wide eyes and open expression are a clear pool, offering a vulnerable invitation into her private self. At other times, the pool becomes a glassy mirror, deflecting attempts to get inside her inner life. She invites and withholds in equal measure.

Olsen plays Leigh, a young widow whose husband Matt (Mamoudou Athie) died in a hiking accident that might have been suicide. Leigh's grief is compounded by her

growing sense that she never really knew Matt, whom we get to know in a series of flashbacks. From Matt's perspective, we also get the sense that he never felt known.

In an early episode, Leigh and Matt both recall an event in their marriage, but each remembers it quite differently. Matt's interior experience is not visible to Leigh, who needs Matt to play a certain role in her life. At the end of her account of the event, she begs Matt never to leave her. At the end of his version, he feels like a fraud.

This play of different memories illuminates a central theme: that it is impossible to ever fully know someone else's experience. Leigh cannot know Matt's depression. Leigh and her sister, Jules (Kelly Marie Tran), fight regularly about how little Leigh understands what Jules is going through as a recovering alcoholic. Leigh feels that no one can inhabit her grief—not even Matt's brother, who argues that his own grief is of a different magnitude because Leigh can find a new husband but he can never get a new brother.

These aren't petty squabbles. In paying so much attention to the difficulty of accepting others' pain on their own terms, the show suggests that empathy is an ethical challenge. But the work of empathy is harder for Leigh than it is for others. We begin to suspect that she willfully chose to know only the part of Matt that conformed to her desires.

All of this drama might be just about interpersonal relationships and the difficulty of knowing another person. But it is also an exploration of race in America, even more so because it never explicitly discusses the subject.

Leigh is white and Matt is black. One can imagine any number of conversations the couple might have had as they navigated their marriage—about their childhood experiences of race, about family customs and culture, about the way their relationship is perceived by others. We never see them talk about these topics at all. One has to assume the show actively chooses to avoid race as an explicit subject. But by centering on an interracial couple without making race an explicit object of exploration, the show raises questions about how race shapes us—and it helps us see whiteness as a particular way of being in the world.

Leigh's whiteness is a subtle thing, a fleeting trace. It expresses itself in Leigh's desire to fix things, including Matt, and a self-confidence that her own opinion and diagnosis are best. It appears in the way her own emotional needs take precedence over anything else. In other flashbacks, she minimizes Matt's account of his

depression. She insists that he should want from his life what she wants for him. When he protests, she blames his disease for preventing him from seeing things clearly. Her open, vulnerable face starts to look more like a trap rather than an invitation to intimacy, her deflection of him a way of rebuking him for refusing her demands.

Popular culture frequently offers stories in which mourning is a process of self-discovery for a white woman, an occasion for rebellion against the constraints of white female perfection and the roles that define white women's lives: icy boss-lady, neurotic mother, spiritual seeker (*Dead to Me*, *Big Little Lies*, and *Wild* are three that come to mind). By refusing to talk about Matt's blackness, the show makes Leigh's racial identity more visible—and we can see in Leigh that whiteness itself is perhaps the identity from which she needs to be free.

Leigh's grief is real, palpable, and devastating, and it is clearly conveyed in the many close-ups of her face. But that same face is a porcelain mask, hiding the control and entitlement that prevent the intimacy and freedom she seeks.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Grief complicated by whiteness."*