

learning history through

NETFLIXPEDIA

I started my professional career working in television in the US. In 1994, I was a writer for a news program on Univision, one of the main Hispanic television networks. I will never forget that year because, while I was working in the newsroom, there were two events that overshadowed the rest: the child abuse allegations against Michael Jackson and the O.J. Simpson trial.

I would like to focus on the second event, in which Simpson was tried and acquitted of two counts of murder for the slashing deaths of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ron Goldman June 12, 1994. At the time of the trial, Simpson was a big celebrity, participating in television shows and acting in movies after his retirement from a very successful career as an American football player. The jury's verdict that O.J. was not guilty came as a surprise to a lot of people. But the focus of this article is not about whether he was guilty or not.

I am a big Netflix fan. Looking for something to watch, I found the series *The People vs. O.J. Simpson*. I felt a personal connection with the case because of my time working in the newsroom, so I started to watch it. I was fascinated by the show and watched the 10 episodes very quickly.

Although the series is based on true events, it is a 'docudrama'. Because elements of the show are dramatized re-enactments, not everything you see is exactly how it happened. But knowing that, what I liked about it was that the series does give you the facts, not opinions. I discovered elements about the case that I did not know when I was working for Univision.

The show about Simpson's trial is only one example of how we can 'watch'

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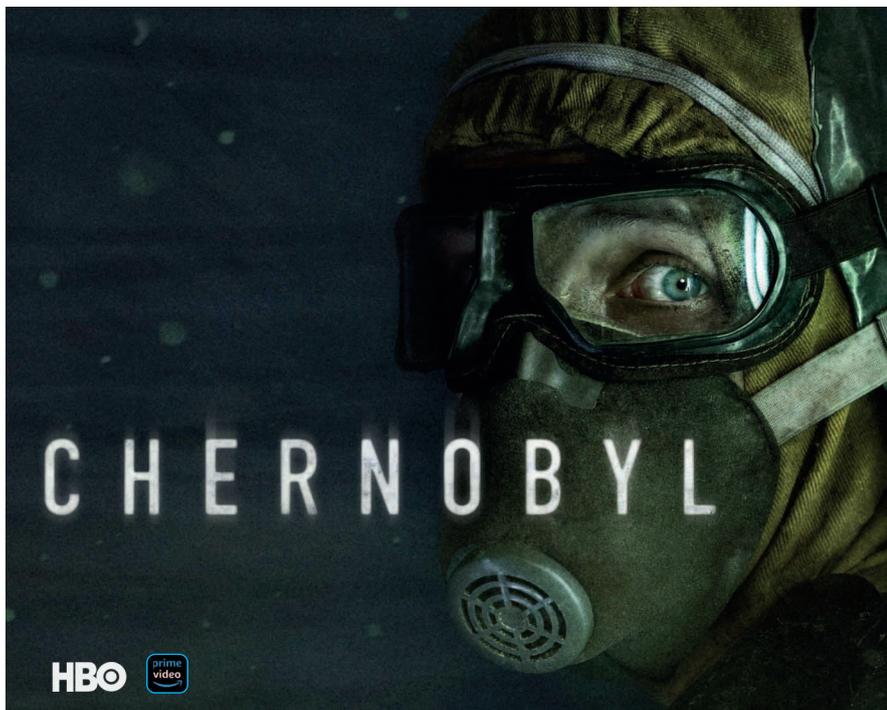
historical events nowadays. Again, while understanding that not every single thing that happens in these shows is true, they can give us a broader idea of past events and information is power. It is then up to you to decide if you think Simpson was guilty or not.

Now, I am addicted to watching TV series that are based on true events. There are more than you might think, not only on Netflix but on all the TV on-demand platforms. I have also discovered that watching these shows can be very emotional, especially if they are about injustices. One that comes to my mind is *When They See Us*. In 1989, a white female jogger was assaulted and raped in New York City's Central Park, and five Black teenagers were subsequently charged with the crime. The quintet, labelled the Central Park Five, maintained their innocence and spent years fighting the convictions, hoping to be exonerated.

Over its four episodes, the series tells the story of the pressure on the police to blame somebody for this crime. It made me sad and angry; I assure you that you will need a tissue box while watching it. As a journalist and, I admit, a 'news freak', I vaguely remembered hearing about the case when it happened. Obviously, as the years go by, more data and evidence may come to light about the events in question, so the series producers often have more information to work with as well as the benefit of hindsight.

Watching this series gave me the opportunity to think about how many injustices happen in the world. What amazes me is how, at that time of an event, everything seems so normal and everybody accepts the 'reality' created by one side of the





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story. If you do watch *When They See Us*, make sure you also watch a special program presented by Oprah Winfrey. She interviews the five teenagers, now grown men, who were eventually exonerated of the charges along with the five actors who played their roles in the show. If it was emotional watching the series, seeing and listening to the real characters was even more so.

Another show that captured my attention was *The Spy*. This six-episode miniseries follows the exploits of Eli Cohen, a Mossad spy, during the years leading up to the 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and Syria. It was fascinating, not only to learn about how Israel was able to infiltrate a spy into Syria, but also to see how he became a great friend of some members of the Syrian government at that time.

There are many series based on historical events that happened before I was born. However, the advantage of watching a series about an event that happened during my lifetime is that I can relate to it. Even though I may not have much information about that specific event, I often have an idea of what happened and what went wrong. I might also have my own opinion about whether the news coverage at the time

was accurate or based on false information.

For example, *Chernobyl* – I was 17 years old in 1986 when the nuclear disaster took place. After that tragic accident, every time I drove by a nuclear plant, Chernobyl came to my mind but I never was curious enough to find out more about it. Some friends told me about how good this show was and recommended I watch it. Not long after, I was on a 12-hour flight and saw that *Chernobyl* was an option; as you can imagine, I had the time to watch it. I found it extremely interesting to discover the story of Chernobyl. Again, fiction is woven into the story but, generally, it reflects the reality. (The series can be found on HBO and on Amazon Prime in some countries.)

I would never say that history books should be replaced by Netflix or any other TV platform, but it is good to have this kind of content available in a format that is both interesting and entertaining. These series allow us to dig into events and explore them from different perspectives. They may also serve as a reminder to question the superficiality of reading headlines and assuming the content without worrying about whether what we are reading is true or not.



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