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TV

## What to know about 'Station Eleven,' a new show about a post-pandemic world

A deadly flu kicks things off, but the show is more about the survival of culture.

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**By Randee Dawn**

"Station Eleven," HBO Max's new miniseries about a flu pandemic that ravages the world in a matter of weeks (and makes COVID-19 look like a mild allergy), has just begun airing the first few of its ultimate 10 episodes.



— Kirsten (Mackenzie Davis) reads from "Station Eleven," the graphic novel. HBO max

And it might seem like a curious time to do so: Now heading into a third year of our own, all-too-real flu-resembling-pandemic, do we really want to watch a fictional end of the world? Haven't we been there, done that with shows like "The Walking Dead" and "The Stand"?

The thing is, "Station Eleven" isn't exactly the same old end-of-the-world scenario. Yes, there's a plague. Yes, civilization falls to its knees. But there's a curious calm and even humor (though not straight-up laughs) to the story, which blends the lives of several characters with a theater troupe who truly believes that amid the rubble of the world that was, the show must go on.

— Kirsten and the rest of the traveling theater troupe. HBO Max

So what do you need to know before turning to the "Station"? Here's what we know so far:

## "Station Eleven" is based on a book

Emily St. John Mandel published "Station Eleven" in 2014, and it quickly became one of those books you saw everyone reading. It won the Arthur C. Clarke Award (for the best science fiction novels in the U.K.) and was a National Book Award finalist. But the miniseries is taking liberties with the story, so there's no requirement that you read the book first.

## What's the plot?

The series starts with a startling, yet peaceful image: The interior of a theater, overgrown with greenery and populated by feral pigs. There is no performance, it's just abandoned. Sun shines from a hole in the roof, and there are no people. Next is a quick cut to the last production to play on that stage, "King Lear." An actor dies, an audience member rushes to help. The rest of the night proceeds as the plague takes hold, and characters scatter to the winds.

— Himesh Patel (kneeling on the left) as Jeevan, and Gael García Bernal (lying down) as Arthur. HBO Max

The rest of the series will largely take place in the future, after that theater and the rest of the world (shown in brief, bright green flashes in episode one) moves on and tries to rebuild. Based on the book (which means some things may change), there is a theatrical troupe called the Traveling Symphony, a Museum of Civilization that pays tribute to life before the apocalypse, a terrible religious zealot and moments of transcendent human experience.

As the head of the committee that awarded "Station Eleven" the Clark award noted, "While many post-apocalypse novels focus on the survival of humanity, 'Station Eleven' focuses instead on the survival of our culture, with the novel becoming an elegy for the hyper-globalised present."

— Jeevan (Himesh Patel) and Kirsten (the younger version, played by Matilda Lawler) become a team in "Station Eleven." HBO Max

## Is it scary or gory?

That's hard to say. This is HBO (Max) after all. But the early episodes point to a gentler, less "Walking Dead" look at the end of the world (though – slight spoiler! – a main character does commit murder). The first episode shows just one dead body, and the rest of the series takes place after the first enormous die-off.

But the book does focus on death, suicide and sexual assault, so there's no guarantee those elements won't make it into the final series. Still, there's a lightly charming appeal to the early episodes, which may show a plane crashing into Chicago but don't focus on the carnage.

## What is Station Eleven?

It's a reference to a graphic novel the actor who dies in the first episode gives to a young girl and focuses on a man in a space station. The magical realism element of the series has already given us a scene of the resident ("Dr. Eleven"), looking down at Earth; it's a fair bet we're not meant to interpret him as stranded up there while the plague rages. If the show adheres to the book's story, the young girl's knowledge of the book as an adult will be a critical factor in saving lives.

— Matilda and Jeevan do a (pretty huge) grocery shop ahead of the plague. HBO Max

## When will the episodes drop?

Episode one, "Wheel of Fire": Dec. 16

Episode two, "A Hawk from a Handsaw": Dec. 16

Episode three, "Hurricane": Dec. 16

Episode four, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Aren't Dead": Dec. 23

Episode five, "The Severn City Airport": Dec. 23

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Randee Dawn (she/her) is a veteran entertainment journalist and author based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for outlets including TODAY.com, Variety and The Los Angeles Times, she's the co-author of "The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion" and co-editor of "Across the Universe: Tales of Alternative Beatles." When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she nurses her sourdough starter and dreams of the day she can travel again.

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