



TV
Just what is it that makes Doctor Foster so compelling?

4 MIN

The BBC's Doctor Foster

The BBC series is, on the face of it, merely a middle class melodrama. But it's also utterly unmissable, says Ellie Broughton



By Ellie Broughton on 08.09.17

The sages of Instagram say living well is the best revenge. But what happens when your ex appears to be living as well as you – if not better? Doctor Foster is back for a second series, and in the first episode, that's exactly what we want to find out.

The first season of this gruelling series exploded Gemma Foster's perfect life into a thousand pieces when her husband bankrupted her, cheated on her, and hit her. But if that season was like watching a car crash, the second season starts with Gemma Foster crawl from the wreckage, only to walk into oncoming traffic.

But why exactly is Doctor Foster – the series, and the darkly-lit character herself – so utterly compelling? On the surface of it, this series is a very middle class melodrama: it's Unforgettable, re-written by Mumsnet; a revenge tragedy penned by Jan Moir. When Gemma accuses Simon of ruining her life, she does so from the comfort of her stylish kitchen in her big, beautiful home, Bellid lampshades and on-trend geoprnt curtains just out of focus. The viewer slips into Gemma's world as quickly as easily as if it were a John Lewis catalogue, leaving all the attention on the characters.

Dark, vengeful heroines are all the rage, and Gemma Foster is a prime example of the contemporary avenging angel. But she's also incredibly human, and the show reveals her at her worst as well as her best: the kind of heroine who breaks into her ex's home, slugs Pinot from the bottle and takes a patient on a date to her ex's wedding party.

Simon, too, has an ambiguity about him that makes his character a pleasure to watch. The last series revealed him as a cheater-cum-liar-cum-wifebeater: a kind of emotional supervillain.

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But when he and Gemma meet again for the first time in the new series, he appears even more vulnerable than her. At first he might seem calm and collected – but as they talk, his questions probe, and his remarks pick at her clothes. His controlling nature creeps back into the frame. He has learned nothing from their split, and he hasn't changed a bit. There is a bittersweet kind of justice as Gemma catches a glimpse of the man behind the façade.

For me, one of the highlights of the show is its pitch-perfect portrayal of divorce. There's incredible tension when Gemma and Simon spar, but there is also pathos when Gemma exposes her ex to his weaknesses. "Kate's no longer a secret," Gemma points out, "she's become boring. You like the intrigue." In spite of everything, she begins to feel a little compassion for Simon's new wife. Simon still wants Gemma, but whatever "erotic capital" she has, whatever power, is overshadowed by the hurt of the divorce.

It's enough to drive a woman to her limits, and after he lets himself into Gemma's home, and takes her son with him, she unpacks huge bottles of acid in the kitchen. But Madame Bovary she ain't: she pours the acid into a vase, hauls it into the garden, and drops her wedding ring in it.

There are a dozen other gasp-out-loud moments in the first episode alone: a woman caught breaking into her ex's new house; a bridegroom's hard-on for his ex at his wedding party; a bunch of flowers, the card for which reads, simply, "Bitch".

Despite everything divorce threw at her, she survived with so much: her relationship with her son has thrived, she still runs her own GP practice and she has rebuilt friendships, even with people who neglected her in the break-up. When she's creepy, unstable, reckless, or rude, not only does it make us laugh or gasp, but it fleshes out this character who could have been left a figure of despair, or – worse – some flat, heroic "survivor" archetype. When Simon tells her to move on, she tears up: "I can't," she protests. From then on, the drama leaps into action: we know she can do it, and we're dying to watch her try.

It's a little bit trashy, at times swerving dangerously close to a kind of Home Counties Dallas. But even though it's a guilty pleasure, it has a true heroine at its heart: messy, clever, funny and tough. The best revenge? Wait and see.

The second episode of Doctor Foster Series 2 airs on at 9pm on BBC One next Tuesday. The entire first series is available now on iPlayer

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