



Nicole Kidman plays Julia Edwards in series two of Top Of The Lake

TV Top Of The Lake, a crime drama that truly explores violence against women

4 MIN

Nicole Kidman joins Elisabeth Moss in series two of Top Of The Lake. And the unsparing examination of the abuse of power continues

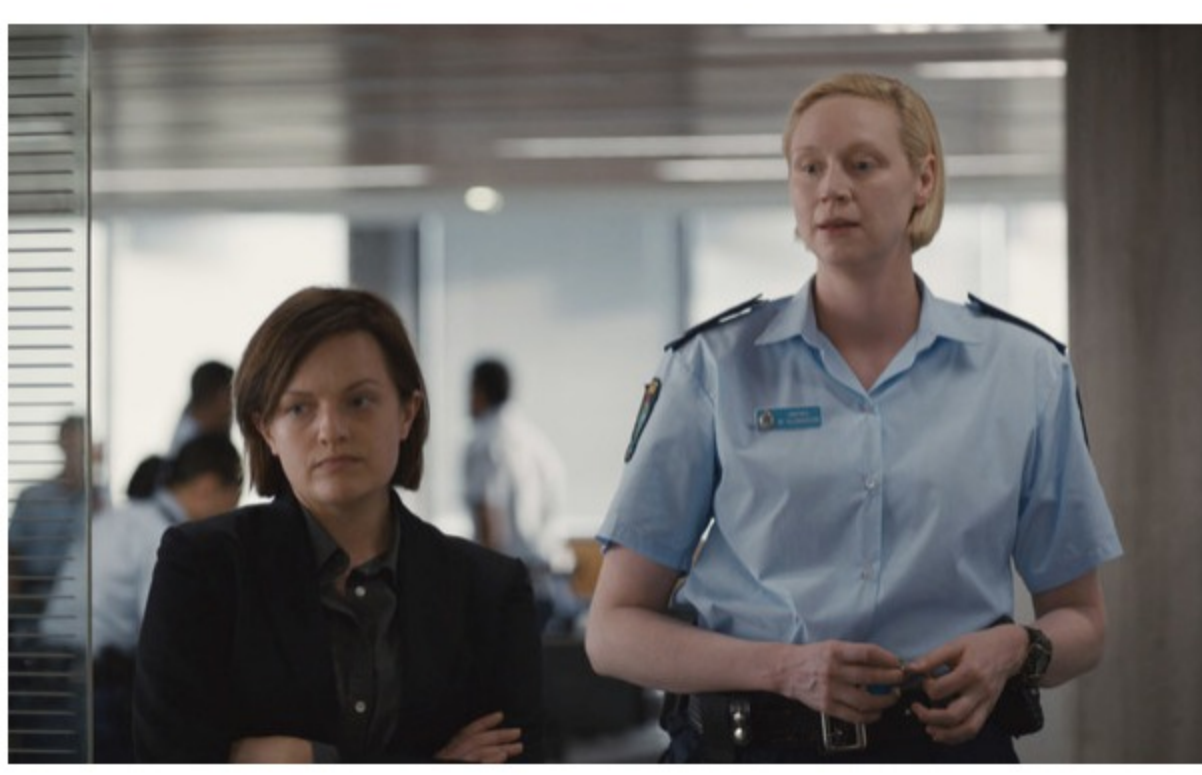


By Ellie Broughton on 28.07.17

Twelve-year-old Tui Mitcham is missing. A search party of farmers and bikers meets in the town's dive bar, gathered under her father's leadership. From the front of the room, his gaze pans the room. His eyes drift over a woman at the far end of the bar, dressed in a pristine black parka, and snag on her for a moment. Robin Griffin grew up in that town, and she got out: now she's back to investigate Tui's case. Matt Mitcham might have the microphone, but Griffin has the power.

In the first series of Top Of The Lake, Sydney detective Robin Griffin (Elisabeth Moss) goes back to her hometown to investigate a case that stirs memories of an assault she herself went through there years before. If audiences were waiting for "white knights" – colleagues or boyfriends or fathers – to ride in and save the day, they were disappointed.

When the first 14 episodes of this "Kiwi noir" came to our screens in 2013, the female gaze of its director, Palme d'Or winner Jane Campion, fell on dozens of characters and moments that seared my brain with their originality: a hot sex scene in the toilet of a dive bar, the glowering landscape, Holly Hunter's turn as the acid-tongued leader of an all-women cult, and Peter Mullan's portrayal of a psychopathic small-town patriarch ruling home and neighbourhood with growled threats.



Elisabeth Moss and Gwendoline Christie as Robin Griffin and Miranda in series two

Top of the Lake was a series by women, about women, for women. Until then, detective crime dramas tended to put Moses, Wallanders, Luthers and Gene Hunts on screen. They were great roles, sure – but was equality and diversity in the force actually worse in TV land than it is in real life? Sure, sometimes actors like Keeley Hawes got to read criminals their rights. But, while few and far-between, our female detectives tended to be husky-voiced and ultra-femme, scripted and directed by blokes. This series changed all that.

Since then we've seen a growing interest in women's friendships and relationships in crime drama too – recently, for example, in Big Little Lies. The runaway success of Paula Hawkins's The Girl On The Train could argueable be put down to the way the story makes relationships between women more important, more redemptive, than their marriages and affairs

The second season of Top Of The Lake, which began last night on BBC2, swaps moody shots of mountain-tops and small-town subterfuge for Bondi, barbies and bodies in suitcases, and stars Nicole Kidman and Gwendoline Christie as well as bringing back Elisabeth Moss. It moves from Queenstown to the red-light district in Sydney. writer-director Jane Campion has mentioned in interviews that she insisted on talking to sex workers as she wrote it in order to learn about rules, clients, how appointments proceed and how women get into the industry.

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This project is the latest flourish in Campion's career-long mission to make charged, action-packed, heartbreaking stories that put women up front. Throughout her career, she's handled subjects as diverse as cult rescue, domestic violence, art, bereavement, adultery, schizophrenia and lobotomy, from the artists' stories in An Angel At My Table (1990) and Bright Star (2009) to fever-raising films The Piano (1993), The Portrait of a Lady (1996) and Holy Smoke (1999). In the first season of Top Of The Lake, her sensitive direction and writing drew out great performances from lead actors. More importantly, though, the series made space to have a sophisticated look, not only at rape itself but abuse of power, the impact of rape in close-knit communities, and how women survive and cope after assault.

Top Of The Lake shows that there's more to detective dramas than bungled rape stories. It not only puts plenty of female characters in front of the camera but also gives these characters plenty of dialogue. We get to follow their conversations, and their stories. Characters get to lead their own stories about how to survive.

In the first episode of the first series, Tui Mitcham walks into a mist-furred lake as the sky grows light over the mountains. Watching the scene, we experience with her the stillness and isolation, the beauty of the landscape, her desperation. She wades in; we follow.

Series 1 and 2 of Top Of The Lake are also available on BBC iPlayer now

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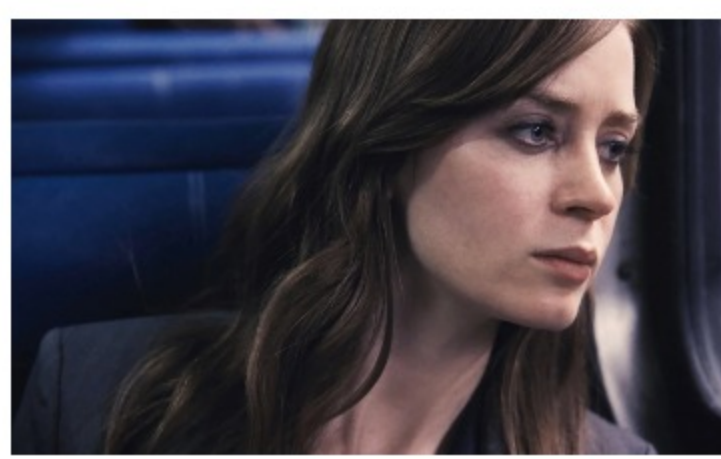
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