

## Days With “DEXTER”

Written by Abbie Bernstein

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DEXTER, the Showtime hit based on a Robert Lindsay’s novels and starring Michael C. Hall as its serial-killer hero, wraps up its fifth season this Sunday night at 9 p.m. When season four ended with Dexter coming home to find his wife Rita (Julie Benz) murdered by the Trinity Killer (John Lithgow in an Emmy-winning performance), and his infant son Harrison wailing in a pool of his mother’s blood, it was hard to imagine where the show could go from there. The latest round of episodes have been all about taking DEXTER the show and Dexter the character to new places.

These have ranged from having him cut loose very literally on a transient who makes the fatal mistake of insulting Rita’s memory, or sharing his killing ritual with the traumatized Lumen Ann Pierce (Julia Stiles), a woman who has been gang-raped and tortured and is now seeking payback against her tormentors—just the sort of people who are Dexter’s natural prey. There was also the subplot with a gang of decapitation-happy Santa Muerte cultists, with enough gore, glop and maggots to gross out even the crime-tech supporting characters.



Executive producers Sara Colleton and John Goldwyn have been with DEXTER since the beginning, while Chip Johannessen came aboard as an executive producer/writer this year, following his tenure on 24 during that show’s final season. (Other executive producers include star Hall, Scott Buck and Johannessen’s 24 colleague Manny Coto.) The three talked happily with Fango about what makes their undertaking so bloody good; despite the way season five seemed to evolve organically from the previous episodes, Colleton says the two years were

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developed separately. “We rarely go beyond one year [in planning seasons], because that has to have a season-long arc that has its own story from start to finish,” she notes. “But when we got to the end of season four, it very quickly became clear to us what the fifth had to be about. We felt we needed to start the season right where we left off, so the audience would participate in seeing Dexter dealing with the blowback of his culpability in Rita’s death.”

There are some similarities between Johannessen’s old gig and his new one. Even though nobody directly referred to 24’s protagonist Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) as a serial killer, he certainly racked up more of a body count and inflicted more intentional coercive pain than Dexter could dream of. “That’s the thing,” Johannessen says. “It’s what we called the Jack Bauer problem, which is that [he knows], ‘Because of the nature of the life that I lead, people around me are inclined to come to bad ends.’ So we did talk about that, and that’s a little bit of what catches up with Dexter at the end of season four—that [Rita died] just by virtue of his activities and in a way his hubris, that he could have taken Trinity out at all these different times, but he didn’t. Because he wanted to do it his way, he created this horrible situation for the people around him whom he loves and cares about.”

Former executive producer Clyde Phillips, now a consulting producer, was the showrunner for DEXTER’s first four seasons, and Colleton doesn’t feel the changing of the guard in the writers’ room meant a shift in tone for the show. “Clyde was a fabulous addition and will always be an emeritus part of the DEXTER family,” she says. “With Chip, it has been about as seamless as these things go, because we have the remaining pillars among the writing staff. The central idea of DEXTER is so strong and provocative, we feel that as long as every year there is new human territory to push Dexter through, rather than [just having the suspense come from] ‘Is he going to get caught?’, that will really bring our audience to us.”



Goldwyn adds, “We were very lucky to get Chip, because he’s a fan, and so he knew the show well. He knew all about the intimate aspects of the characters, and came to it with this wealth of knowledge about Dexter and the important themes and sense of discovery that the show goes through in every season.”

“I watched the season-four finale and was wondering, ‘What are they going to do next?’ ”

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Johannessen recalls. “And then suddenly, a couple of weeks later, it was, ‘What are we going to do next?’ I really seriously did come to the show as a fan. I have a 15-year-old daughter, and she really turned me onto it in a big way. During season four, we would sit on the couch on Sunday and wait for it to come on; it wasn’t something that we TiVoed. So I was really excited about taking part.”

One of Dexter’s nemeses this year has been a holdover from last season: Miami police detective Joey Quinn, played by *WRONG TURN*’s Desmond Harrington, who is both the partner and love interest of Dexter’s sister Debra (Jennifer Carpenter). Quinn has his suspicions that there’s something odd about Dexter, and has compiled evidence against him; we know that the last Miami detective who felt that way, Sgt. James Doakes (Erik King), came to a bad end in season two. Johannessen reveals that the precedent caused some concern on Harrington’s part: “Doakes was lovable in his own way, right? But Quinn has a lot more entanglements with this police department. It’s all about the personal relationships. It’s not a cop show, it’s not a procedural show. As he gets into this, it gets very complicated for him. And [Harrington] of course is wondering, ‘Does this mean I’m going to die?’ ”

Lithgow was so indelible as the Trinity Killer that season five hasn’t had one key villain. “We took a break this season from the way we plotted the series in the past four years,” Colleton explains, “which was to have one season-long adversary for Dexter. Because of what Dexter had gone through, we thought this was the perfect year to take a break from that. He’s been going through different stages of grief—although for Dexter, it’s completely unarticulated and it’s a range of emotion [where] he doesn’t really know what he’s feeling, but as he goes through different stages, there have been different characters who come in and interact. The through-line for this year is Dexter’s atonement, with different people helping him along the way in different capacities.”



One of the more helpful figures Dexter encountered this year was Stiles’ Lumen. Johannessen notes that despite Stiles’ mostly feature-film background, she adapted well to the demands of a television schedule. “I think it was a little shocking for her how fast TV moves, the first couple of days, but she’s really game. It turned out she’ll do anything. She’s a real actress, and she and Michael together are just fantastic.”

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Far less helpful for Dexter is disgraced cop turned private eye Frank Liddy (ROBOCOP's Peter Weller), who was hired by Quinn and has been finding out quite a lot about Dexter's extracurricular activities via spycams and audio bugs. “Peter was part of the original pitch [for season five] to Showtime,” Johannessen reveals. “We called [the character] Weller when we originally conceived him, and then we had to change the name once we got the guy we actually wanted. He's an ex-cop, a kind of cocaine-cowboy-era guy.”



“Dexter's not a character who experiences guilt or grief like any of us would,” Johannessen observes. “So it wasn't his intention [to find atonement] starting out, but this season became about that. As Michael sometimes says, he kind of trips into it, this sort of oddly human experience, at a time when he just feels that everything he has done that had to do with connecting with humanity has melted down in a horrible, horrible way. The last thing he wants to do is be involved with people, and yet the amazing thing about this character, who is so outside of everybody and so alienated, is that he keeps trying to claw his way back in. In the wake of Rita's death, you've seen that over the whole season.”

“Of course,” Colleton adds, “the forum that Dexter takes to seek atonement [i.e., killing more people and helping Lumen learn how to take life] is not a conventional one by any means.”

“He has an origin story,” Johannessen points out, “that was part of this. The essential discover of season one was where, when he was 3 years old, he saw his mother sawed up in front of him. He was born in blood. He now has this adult origin story in the way he brought his own life into this horrible mess it's turned into. We tried to give that the huge cosmic space it deserves. [Rita's death] at the end of season four filtered through season five the same way his origin story filtered through season one.”

Colleton believes that viewers always get something new from DEXTER. And as this year's episodes come to a close, she says the lesson is: “Human nature is incredibly flexible, and there is always something to be learned.”

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