

SIDDHARTHA 3.4

a fanzine from Ian Williams

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This is a special issue devoted to a recent British tv drama series which has engaged his attention like no other before. It just would not let him go until he's written about it to communicate his enthusiasm for it to others. This is its first publication anywhere but, he hopes, it may not be the last.



Skins 3

an extended essay by Ian Williams.

Skins 3 is a 10-part drama series from Channel 4, shown Jan-March 2009, available on DVD, UK rated 18.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This is about an obsession-

and about the best British television drama dealing with young adults ever. It's fascinated me more than any other tv drama and I've watched it more than any other tv drama. Why I, and hundreds of thousands of other people, have become obsessed with programme I don't really know, though I hope, by looking at and discussing it in some detail that I may actually learn the answer.

I can say that part of the reason is that I find mid-adolescence a fascinating period in a person's life. It is full of discovery, change, emotional traumas, learning, personal growth (hopefully), and making stupid mistakes. It is, perhaps, the most intense period in anyone's life. I even wrote a novel about the problems of self-discovery under the guise of a science fictional metaphor in **The Lies That Bind**, (Purnell/Simon & Schuster 1990). So my interest is nothing new.

What I'm *not* watching it for is this-

Although sex is a strong part of the various characters motivations, there isn't really any explicit frontal nudity and any sex scenes tend to be relatively obliquely shown. *I don't watch it for prurient reasons*. If I want to see attractive clothed and naked women kissing and having sex, I have five seasons of **The L Word** to watch (although latterly I've been muttering at the screen, "Enough with the sex, get on with the story." I also, I may as well be completely honest here, find the idea of men of my age leeching over teenagers to be rather repulsive.

There is copious drug-taking too, something I personally have little interest in whether copious or minimal. My own illegal drug consumption is limited to a handful of times over twenty years ago. I'd never even heard of MDMA until I watched Skins. Actually, having just looked it up on Wikipaedia I now understand one episode a little better and I'm also wondering where I can get some.

Photographs.

All photographs in this piece are taken from the Skins website and are (presumably) copyright Channel 4. They are reprinted here to illustrate the essay and enhance, as they say, the reading experience.

Sources.

The DVD extras - a mixed bag with much of interest, some rubbish, and a fair bit of entertainment value.

The official Skins website- <http://www.e4.com/skins/index.html> -which is an excellent and huge resource containing not quite all -I can't find a complete credits list, for example- you want to know about the series. The music info is outstandingly good and was of particular use to me in this extended essay. Ditto the photographs (see above). Some of the site's content is duplicated as extras on the DVD.

After Ellen website- www.afterellen.com -this is the website for information about gay and bi women in entertainment and the media (and quite a bit more). It's a broad church, open to a wide range of opinion, as long as it's essentially gay supportive of course, which is as it should be. It's wide ranging, informative and entertaining.

I first discovered it when looking for information about **The L Word** and found Scribe Grrrl's wonderful recaps of the show. Scribe Grrrl published each of her recaps within hours of an episode being shown and I stand in awe of her. Not only were her recaps a model of accuracy but they were also amazingly funny, so funny that they could be enjoyed as a separate entity on their own apart from that series and I wholeheartedly recommend them to everyone. If only I could recap a tenth as wittily as her.

Anyway, it isn't surprising that After Ellen has supported Skins 3 given a particular storyline which it's too early to go into here. But do visit the site.

Skins Background.

This is Season 3 but effectively it is also Season 1. Only two leads, one set of parents, two faculty members and a handful of minor briefly-appearing characters are carried over from the previous seasons and none of this affects the new series in any significant way. It can be watched and as much gained from it without any prior knowledge of previous seasons' events. The location is the City of Bristol, located on the mouth of the river Avon, in south-west England.

Our heroes are, as the series opens, all about 16 years old. Unlike the previous two series, the group does not yet exist. It's their first day at the fictional Roundview College, a tertiary college for A-levels, NVQs, vocational courses and the like. Everything is waiting to happen.

And happen it does.

And you can expect to find-

Most of the text is essentially a recap, synopsis or interpretation of each episode which will include general comments, assessment, criticism, analysis of what's on screen, plot, acting, music, etc. Each episode is dealt with in varying detail.

Synopsis details will depend on how interested I am in, or affected by, a particular scenario. Much will be omitted as I focus on what I consider to be the key elements of an episode. Some quoted dialogue may be edited, abridged, or paraphrased.

Other than outlining events and quoting dialogue, everything else is simply my opinion, my interpretations, and as such is no more valid than anyone else's. This is my subjective impression and not intended as any form of definitive statement.

One of the good things about this show is that it is open to different interpretations. We all bring our own baggage with us and mine will have shaded my understanding of Skins. This is intended as a contribution to the debate among Skins fans and a taster for those who haven't seen it but hopefully will be encouraged to by this piece.

Episode 1: Everyone.

It opens with **Freddie** (Luke Pasqualino) skateboarding down the road to meet his two friends, **JJ** (Olly Barbieri -by some odd coincidence, a few of the actors seem to be of Italian origin) and **Cook** (Jack O'Connell).

Freddie is the good-looking one that the girls go for but he doesn't seem arrogant or conceited about it. To me Freddie comes over often as diffident, sometimes dour, hesitant. He also has a strong conscience, he's sensible and compassionate, though not always wise and, to me, not that interesting.

JJ suffers from some form of autism. He's intelligent and can function in society, albeit highly dependent on his two old friends to calm him down and pull him back to some semblance of normality. In class later that morning, he describes himself as, "Being in the top 0.3% of people with mathematical ability which is an interesting statistic in itself but oddly in the bottom quarter for social adaptation," at which point the teacher cuts him short. When excited or disturbed he can get 'locked on', a fugue state where he stammers out synonyms and can't stop. He also likes girls and has high hopes in that respect from college.

Freddie arrives to find Cook smoking his (Freddie's) last spliff and on his fourth pint and it isn't even 9.00am. Cook is a monster, a walking unstrained id. All he seems to care about, apart from his two friends, is unrestrained gratification. He has no thought to any consequences of his actions to either himself or anyone around him. If he does control himself it's because it amuses him. He also appears to possess a superhuman capacity for alcohol and drugs without doing himself any damage and an appetite to match.



L-R: JJ, COOK, FREDDIE

It's Cook that caused me to switch this off halfway through the first episode because I found him just so intensely annoying. I didn't return until the fourth episode when I heard there was going to be a lesbian sub-plot. While Cook was in it, he didn't dominate in the way he had that first half hour.

Their attention is engaged by the arrival of **Effy** in her father's car which is involved in an accident. Effy sits in the passenger seat, smoking, coolly distanced from events.

The scene cuts to the home of twins **Emily and Katie** (Kathryn & Megan Prescott). Emily is waiting for her sister to get out of the bathroom and kicks her pre-pubescent brother who has his eye to the keyhole. Despite being identical, Katie is dominant, "I'm prettier than you, I wear clothes better than you, boys all like me." She has a moron footballer boyfriend who drives them to college where she flaunts him to the envy of the airhead girls. She's dressed more ostentatiously than Emily, ironically as she's 'borrowed' Em's clothes, and wastes little time in putting her sister down.



L-R: EMILY, KATIE

Observing their arrival is **Effy** (Kaya Scodelario) and her friend Pandora (Lisa Backworth). Effy and to a lesser extent Pandora are the only characters to reappear from the previous season, Effy being the younger sister of Tony, one of the leads. Effy is quiet, thoughtful, oblique, observant, murmuring as Emily walks past following in Katie's wake, "You hate her, don't you?" As usual, Effy is right but also very wrong. A little later, Katie, having decided that she and Effy are the best looking girls in the class concludes, little realising Effy might have a different idea, that they should be best friends

Effy is cool and desired by all who meet her, quickly becoming the destructive focal point of a Freddie-Effy-Cook triangle. She is also damaged by low-self esteem and would rather have casual sex than make any form of commitment which would involve her caring.



EFFY (smiling, unusual)

She does, however, care for Pandora though more in the way one would care for an eager innocent dim-witted puppy that just wants to please. Indeed she engenders similar feelings towards her from many of the cast, most of the audience, and also me. Like Effy, we want to pull her gently against us, kiss her on the forehead and reassure her that everything will be all right.

Ladies and gentlemen, meet **Pandora**, the Skins character I love and cherish more than any other. Fresh-faced and stocky in build, as you can see for yourselves below, her appearance matches her inner self to perfection. Naively exuberant, clumsy in speech and deed, with a lovely rounded West Country accent -or as Panda would pronounce it-arrkcent. Her manner of speech seemingly comes from a different time. "Whizzer" is her favourite word, generally denoting excitement at something but capable of nuanced meanings. Stuck in the Hair & Beauty class (everyone wears the same tunic, has similarly styled blonde hair, and identical reactions -yes, that includes the boys) away from Effy, she makes up the perfect excuse of the imminent appearance zits in order to leave.

Any dialogue involving Pandora is a joy to hear to but when between her and Effy allows the writers to come up with things like-

Effy, "It's inexplicable."

Pandora, "What's that mean?"

Effy, "Can't explain."

Pandora, "Be like that then."

Or, when Effy learns of her parents breaking up, she says, **"They fuck you up," /Pandora, "They don't mean to, Effy."/ "But they do," she replies.**

Perhaps the writers are just larkin about.

To an exasperated Effy's father, having just lied to her mother on the phone, Pandora says, **"Oh, you can't tell my mum the truth, she'd only do agony flip and go rah-rah."** Effy explains, rather pointedly to him, **"She means the truth hurts, dad. It's for her own good."**



L-R: PANDORA, EFFY

Last to arrive is **Naomi** (Lily Loveless) who is called a 'lezzie' by Katie for having kissed Emily earlier that year at their old school. Emily and Naomi's expressions suggest this isn't quite the truth and we soon find out that, whatever Katie believes to the contrary, it was the other way around, though Naomi won't tell Katie that. Naomi is feisty and doesn't appear to be easily intimidated, not by Cook whom she pulls up and she's more than a match for Katie's bitchiness. Cook likes her for her willingness to take him on, possibly and wrongly suspecting a kindred spirit. Naomi is a complicated character and not easy to pin down. Though assertive, she's something of a loner who gradually becomes a part of the nascent group possibly because of Emily who would appear to want to be her friend whether she likes it or not.



L-R: EMILY, NAOMI

There are adults in the show and they're uniformly excellent, often comedians or comic-actors. Harry Enfield plays Effy's foul-mouthed father (and has also directed episodes in Season 2), Morwenna Banks is her mother, David Baddiel (in real life, Banks' partner) appears as her mother's lover, Maureen Lipman is Pandora's eccentric aunt, Ardal O'Hanlon is Kieran a teacher who hates teaching and kids (in a funny way), Sally Philips is Pandora's mother, Roni Ancona is the twins mother, Simon Day is Freddie's dad, Mackenzie Crook is a comedy gangster. Naomi's mother, Angie Colman, not an actor I remember seeing before, is terrific, as is the twin's protective father who runs a get fit business. Doug (Giles Thomas), the head of year, is full of vitality and loves the kids, seeing potential in all of them. He's also a well-meaning and funny prat. Darkness to his light is the college director (Victoria Wicks) a cynical short-tempered woman.

Despite the calibre of the adult cast, they rarely appear for more than one episode except as a voice off-screen. Probably this is for the best as it would be too easy for them to overshadow their young colleagues.

Episode 2: Cook.

My second least favourite episode.

It's Cook's 17th birthday and he drags Freddie and JJ to a pub run by his eccentric uncle and drug-dealer (the legendary Geoffrey Hughes) for a party. The girls arrive with Naomi the last to turn up. Cook does his usual over the top act including eating an entire chocolate cake brought by Emily, but things soon go flat. Searching for fun Cook finds out that Freddie's sister Karen is at an engagement party. They turn up only to be stopped by a bouncer. Karen appears with the lucky girl in tow and, as Cook has drugs with him, lets them in.

Unluckily the proud parent is (comedy) gangster Johnny White (Mackenzie Crook acting on the principle that if there's a top he'll sail over it). Cook inevitably upsets things and Freddie has to save him from, at the least, a severe beating. Things break up. Effy has to look after a totally high Pandora who unwittingly imbibed a large dose of Cook's uncle's special concoction. Katie and Emily have had enough and Naomi left earlier. Cook wants Freddie and JJ to keep looking for fun but Freddie has had enough; he's sick of saving Cook's bacon, he's sick of the messes he creates and he turns his back on him. More happens, including Cook in a rage almost blindly hitting JJ but the Cook-Freddie rift is the significant development and everything else is just the build up to that.

The aftermath in a brothel where Cook and JJ find Johnny enjoying being on the receiving end of some masochistic bondage but, other than Cook's rage (see above), it's sound and fury signifying nothing.



Episode 3: Thomas.



Don't worry, you haven't missed anything. **Thomas** (Merveille Lukeba) has only just arrived, on a false passport, from the Congo. He's a nice guy, a good musician, although a native French speaker he has speaks English well if in a somewhat mannered way -favourite phrase: **"Hello, my name is Thomas. So very glad to meet you."** -is keen to find work and ends up sweeping floors at Roundview. He is also extremely cold.

Having rescued an Asian shopkeeper from thieving kids, he's sitting hungrily eating doughnuts from a large bag with Effy and Pandora next to him. After accepting a doughnut, Pandora explains they've just been getting drugs, takes a drink of Irn Bru, a toke from Effy's spliff, throws up over herself and then passes out. Thomas carries her to Effy's house where her mother is having sex with her lover.

Earlier he'd found an empty and total dump of a flat which he now finds is owned by Johnny White who demands £300 by *Desperate Housewives* on Thursday. Getting the job cleaning he bumps into Pandora who takes him for a walk in the country to her eccentric Aunt Elizabeth's house. Her aunt brews a particularly potent green tea grown from seeds left by a recent Jamaican lodger and has a lot of plants. Thomas is no fool (neither, incidentally, is chainsaw-collecting Elizabeth who knows exactly what the plant is) and sees a way of getting the money he needs. After having it explained to her, Pandora hesitantly kisses him. He then shows her how it should be done and she's in love.

Pandora enlists her friends to help her sell the weed which happens to be at an underground rave which happens to be being run by Johnny White to sell his own drugs. Before the inevitable encounter and chase, during which Thomas is helped out by two black rappers who drag him on stage and he raps in French to enormous applause. There are several character moments involving Effy, Naomi, and Emily where Emily admits she knew exactly what she'd been doing when she kissed Naomi months earlier.

The gang caught, Thomas tries to save his new friends by offering to go one on one with

Johnny any way he wants. Johnny, being a comedy-gangster, offers trial by chilis, the hottest known to man. He munches on one. Thomas picks up a handful and quickly devours them. In one of those coincidences known only to scriptwriters, his mother grew them for sale and naughty Thomas used to steal and eat them. After trying to match his opponent's consumption and making a series of bright red contorted faces, Johnny shits himself.

At the drink and dope celebration later, Pandora is all ready to surrender her virginity to Thomas when his mother arrives early, is horrified at the debauchery on display, and orders him back to the Congo. The final image is of a forlorn Pandora resting against her Aunt Elizabeth's knee who has a chainsaw on her lap and spliff between her fingers.

Truthfully I'm torn on this episode. There are a lot of good things in it, not least being Maureen Lipman's aunt. We see the group beginning to cohere. The music (and I'll come back to the music used in the series in detail later) is mostly West African in origin, something of a favourite of mine, so that's a nice bonus. Lukeba is believable in his role as Thomas, coming originally, albeit many years earlier, from the Congo can't have hurt.

But it felt contrived somehow. And when I watched the extras on the DVD I understood why. Until a few weeks before filming started the character had been intended to be Polish but it was changed at the last minute. My guess is that they realised that no-one in the group came from an ethnic minority and this was the easiest way of doing it. Although Thomas does soon return, it's never as a member of the core group.



Episode 4: Pandora.

The previous three I saw first in full on DVD. Within a few weeks of watching this episode I'd ordered the box set of the first two seasons.

The more I watch it, the more convinced I am that Lisa Backworth is going to be the breakout actor of this new show. She may not be as famous as Lily Loveless could become, but she'll never be out of work. The sheer skill it takes to portray a character like Pandora is enormous. Backworth can switch from comedy to pathos almost within the same expression. She is breathtaking. Pandora has to be the hardest character to do well, to be convincing in her naivety while aware of worldly (read: drugs) matters, sophisticated in her dealings with her fucked-up mother (see below), shade into tragedy, and more. If I had to give you only one reason to watch *Skins 3*, it's Lisa Backworth as Pandora.

Here is a posed publicity shot for the episode.



L-R; EFFY, EMILY, PANDORA, KATIE, NAOMI

Note: Emily's fringe hangs to her left, Katie's to her right which is about the only way to tell them apart, though Katie's is often curled up at the edges as above.

It opens at Effy's house where Panda's been sleeping. The arrival of the lover and subsequent walkout of her father causes Effy to run out of the house with Panda in hot pursuit. When Pandora catches up with Effy who's sitting smoking down by the river she is asked, **"Why are we friends, Pandora?"**

"Oh that's super easy. You're the coolest ever and I'll do anything you say and none of your boyfriends want to surf and turf me cos I'm useless." There are more reasons but this is also a part of the truth.

At this point, Katie arrives with her lecherous and stupid footballer boyfriend. It's obvious, probably to everyone but Katie, that Effy is *not* her newest best friend and indeed only just tolerates her as she brushes off Katie's, "I've been ringing you loads."

Eventually Pandora, Effy, and Katie arrive at Pandora's home for her pyjama party. It has already been established: no boys, no drink, no boys, no drugs, and definitely no boys. By this time, Panda is as high as a kite (in a natural way) and has to be calmed down by her mother (Sally Phillips) who doesn't like boys and has insisted her daughter doesn't go out with one until she's an adult, preferably a pensioner.

What follows is a scene which is by turns funny and painful as we learn about Pandora's home life and her relationship with her strait-laced puritanical mother. It also becomes clear that her mother is not used to Pandora having one friend let alone several. Naomi (who was invited because Emily wouldn't come if she wasn't) and Emily arrive and we learn that Katie has spiked the chocolate brownies with 'forty fucking quids worth of MDMA'. Emily is annoyed but Naomi takes Katie's side and the two swap lesbian-referenced banter, alienating Emily even more.

Steely Dan's 'Do it again' (which I liked so much, reader, I bought the CD) starts playing as Mum (or MUMMM!!! as Pandora usually calls her) stares entranced into a bowl of green wobbly jelly while Effy, equally high, dances in the background. Going upstairs Mum suddenly hears strains of **Bon Jovi's 'Living on a prayer'** and the whole group start dancing and singing along (reader, I did *not* buy the CD). When Pandora discovers what's going on, she loses it and runs to the toilet. Red-faced and in tears, she screams into Effy's face, **"I wanted to eat jelly and play Twister and later you were going to tell me how to do sex with Thomas and you've ruined it all. It's always what you want, never what I want!"**, and she locks herself in the loo. Protests to no avail, Effy retreats to the other toilet. Mummm!!! has now passed out and been dumped on her bed.

Meanwhile, Cook and JJ have arrived with Cook determined to get inside as he fantasises aloud the lurid things the girls might be getting up to. JJ is seriously unhappy and after Cook gets inside he frantically phones Freddie, then makes his own way into the house where Emily and Naomi are talking in the living room.



If I have to say who these two are then you aren't paying attention

Emily stares at Naomi and, hesitantly says, "Give me a fucking..." and breaks off, then again, "Give me a..." and, unable to complete the sentence, she leans forward and lightly kisses Naomi on the mouth.

Naomi, "Oh." She shakes her head, says, "It's the drugs, isn't it?" Emily nods and this time Naomi kisses her. **Lily Allen's 'The Fear'** plays in the background. Annoyingly it was replaced on the DVD by the more obvious **Katie Perry's 'I kissed a girl...'** (her album I bought months ago as a cheap Amazon download, and I now have both).

When they break, Emily says, "You liked that."

Naomi cocks her head to one side but doesn't comment. "You're gay," she says and walks away.

"Yes," says Emily, finally acknowledging the truth to herself and, by her smile, happy that she has.

Unseen by them, JJ staggers out of the house muttering, "Oh my giddy giddy aunt."

A few minutes later, Katie dreamily ambles downstairs, looks through the window and sees Emily & Naomi jumping about on the bouncy castle. They fall over, Emily bends forward bringing her head down to Naomi's and Naomi's arms slide around her back. Katie is distracted by the raucous arrival of her boyfriend, his colleagues, and their WAGS.

Effy discovers Cook locked in a cupboard in Mummm!!!'s bedroom where she joins him for a fuck. Somehow they fall through a secret panel into -Narnia!- sorry, a bedroom next door which is set up as a boudoir with camera equipment. Cook slips in a DVD that is sitting in the tray and they find themselves watching a heavy slap-wearing Mummm!! have sex with the snotty guy who lives there. Mummm!!, unknown to Pandora, has a secret life.

Freddie arrives at the now-crowded party to find and rescue JJ who is locked on, frozen into place. Effy follows them out and tries to explain to Freddie who, while sympathetic is more concerned for JJ and departs in a taxi leaving Effy to wander down the street alone with **Cat Power's 'Fool'** playing in the background.

The party now over, Pandora emerges from the toilet to find only Cook who is in a subdued mood. She tells him she just wanted to play Twister and find out how to do sex. Cook suggests they play Twister which they do and enjoy themselves. Finally Cook suggests he show Panda how to do sex. She kisses him. **Kanye West's 'Love lockdown'** plays wistfully as they do sex.

Next morning, Effy returns to Pandora's house, hiding as she hears Cook at the door. After he's gone Effy confronts her.

"One of the reasons we're friends is because you don't surf and turf my men. You said that yourself."

Pandora replies, **"He's not yours. He'll never belong to anyone and you don't even want him. And you know nothing about me, you know nothing about my mum. I know everything about yours. Just cos I'm useless don't mean I'm nothing."** She continues in this vein, forcing Effy to reluctantly acknowledge just how one-sided their friendship is. This is really a continuation of Pandora's tirade from the party.

Then Thomas arrives.

There's a lot going on here, not least the truths coming out about the Effy-Pandora relationship which needed to be spoken. We also see clearly Panda's vulnerabilities but also that she isn't as obtuse as she sometimes appears. She knows well the imbalance

between them but puts up with it, not because she doesn't have any friends, but because she genuinely likes and admires Effy. Here the balance starts to tilt a little towards Pandora. For Emily, it marks the moment in her life when she finally, consciously accepts that she's gay and she's happy with it. Now she knows and accepts who she *is*.

However, despite this being Pandora's episode, the characters who have caught the attention are Emily and Naomi. Naomi finally begins to admit that the attraction isn't one-sided and that, whether she's happy about it or not, she *likes* Emily. This relationship will build steadily throughout the rest of the series, hitting peaks in Episodes 6 and 9. It will also be by far the most popular sub-plot with the audience and Emily and Naomi the most popular characters. And, as can be expected, it isn't smooth going by any means.

What it really has going for it are two very likeable actresses. Kat Prescott as Emily portrays a sympathetic blend of vulnerability and determination. Lily Loveless does quirky and appealing very well. And, absolutely vital, they have this tremendous chemistry together which rivets your attention to the screen. Much more on this later.

The music is pretty damn good in this episode, which is when I first really noticed how effective it was, and I've discovered a few good songs and artists throughout this season. Just as I was watching a section of it to get the dialogue right, I listened to 'Love lockdown' for about the sixth time, broke off and downloaded it from Amazon just as, a few weeks ago, I'd bought the Steely Dan compilation 'Showbiz Kids' on the strength of the fragment played earlier (okay, I was also familiar with some of their other stuff). Skins has exposed me to some modern pop music which I'd never heard before or previously been remotely interested in. Now I'm not going to rush out and buy more of Kanye West's music but I am keeping my ears open a little more and am currently compiling a Skins play list on my Ipod -up to 15 tracks and 58 minutes so far.

The back-room team on this show are great at picking the right song for the right moment -just wait until Naomi's episode for my favourite example. The Cat Power song cited earlier is another perfect choice. Again, more later.



L-R: MUMMM!!! (not yet stoned), EFFY, KATIE

Episode 5: Freddie.



L-R; DAD, KAREN, FREDDIE

I hate this episode, well large chunks of it, for one particular reason. Sister Karen is in the finals of a repulsively sleazy TV talent contest to be the new third member of an established girl band Sexxbombzz and the songs are crudely sexual and awful to boot and you can't get one of them out of your mind ([Ass to ass with you/I wanna get/ ass to ass with you](#)) no matter how much you might want to. Plus Karen is a self-centred manipulative bitch who exploits the memory of her dead mother (something that haunts their family) to get sympathy votes and performs a horrendous trick on Freddie in episode 5.

After a row with Dad over Karen, Freddie goes outside to his teenager-designed shed, finding Effy sitting in the garden. Inside the shed she offers him a spliff and asks what a large bottle of yellowish liquid is and he explains that it's for when they're too stoned to go to the toilet. Effy hurriedly puts it down.

Cook and JJ arrive and there's a certain tension at Effy's presence. JJ takes Freddie's spliff to apparently swallow it in a magic trick. He starts choking, grabs the bottle, swallows then sprays it across a lit lighter causing a ball of flame. He'd planted this months earlier. His attempt to defuse matters doesn't work. When Cook wants sex with Effy she refuses because of Pandora. He tells her to leave and neither Freddie nor JJ will support her. The rift between Freddie and Cook deepens further.

Freddie's family problems deepen further as Karen manipulates their father into giving her his total unconditional support.

In his English class, Freddie is all too aware of Effy sitting at the same desk and their hands a hairsbreadth away. When the teacher (formerly the careers officer in previous seasons) asks the class what Hamlet's about, Naomi says that Hamlet's a teenage boy

wanking off about Ophelia but doesn't have the nerve to do anything and would be better off dead. And she looks pointedly at Freddie. When informed that there is no wanking in Hamlet she says that there is, it's just called soliloquising.

Attending Karen's TV interview, Freddie gives monosyllabic unenthusiastic replies and finally exasperatedly turns on the oleaginous loathsome presenter who in turn asks him how being an angsty little prick is working out for him. There is only one answer to this but it goes unspoken.

Finding a bracelet Effy left in the shed he goes to see her. The timing is bad as her parents are in the middle of a row, her father packed up and ready to leave, and she rejects him. Skateboarding to let off steam, his timing is awry and he scrapes himself badly. Next morning he finds his father has converted the shed from his den into Karen's rehearsal space.

With nothing else to do, he attends the pub quiz organised by Cook's Uncle Keith who is having a surreal line in questions. Naomi and Emily are there together and Effy soon arrives with a guy we've never met before and whose name she can't even remember. Cook is in an expansive mood and things seem okay until JJ lets slip that Cook once fucked Freddie's sister. Drunk and angry Freddie returns home for another upsetting encounter with Karen and a physically bruising one with his father who doesn't know who his son is any more, unable to understand his aimless drifting. Next morning he leaves his board at the skate-park and walks away.

He finds Effy in the park on a floating platform in the middle of the lake. Although they swim towards each other and kiss passionately, Effy can't commit herself to him.

Karen loses the final by a mere 15 votes, the complement of Keith's pub at the time of voting as Cook gleefully tells Freddie and that it was in payment for Karen taking their shed. Freddie grabs Cook and nuts him hard in the face. Cook kisses Freddie on the mouth and says, "I fucking love you, you bastard." Storming out, he smashes the photograph of Freddie's mother with the family.

Freddie goes to see Effy only to find her with Cook.

This is a painful and unhappy episode where things only get worse. It's not an exaggeration to say that it's almost unrelieved gloom and it's all made worse by Freddie himself.

I can't get away with this character but whether this is the fault of the writers or a miscast actor I'm not sure. In the first season we had the charismatic, handsome, devious and manipulative Tony Stonem (Effy's brother) so it would be a mistake to repeat with a similar character. However, Freddie seems to be the anti-Tony, dour where Tony was charming, drifting where Tony always had purpose, apathetic where Tony was dynamic, uncertain when Tony was never uncertain about anything. The only thing they do share is the good looks which might be okay for the straight women and gay men in the audience but does nothing to enlist my sympathies.

Freddie **does** have a good heart, he is compassionate and caring but he's also a kind of a wimp. Maybe he is dragged down by family circumstances but this is hardly unusual. In *Skins*, most families are dysfunctional.

It might be, in Season 4, that just as Tony received his comeuppance, Freddie may change into a more likeable active, rather than reactive, character. Casting a positive angle to this, this season may be the fire through which he has to pass in order to be transformed into a more mature and more effective human being.

Episode 6: Naomi.



To my relief, we've got to one of the best episodes in the series. In fact the following three are all pretty damn good, but this is great.

We have several plot strands:

Naomi and Emily.

Naomi vs Cook for school president.

Naomi and Emily

Naomi's home life and her mother.

Naomi and Emily.

Naomi and Kieran the teacher.

And, nearly forgot, Naomi and Emily.

Plus one of the best uses of a pop song in a drama, ever.

I love this episode. Let's get started.

Naomi's earth-mother mother has turned their home into a commune and Naomi hates it. Waking up to find the smelly sock belonging to yet another self-proclaimed Messiah, in your mouth isn't a good way to start the day, nor is scrambling out of bed only to realise you're standing naked in front of said s-pM who casually remarks that Naomi has tits like her mum -but we only see her back.

In conversation with another woman, her mother (Olivia Colman) is discussing if bananas should be removed from the shopping list because of their phallic shape and patriarchal implications, while a man naked but for Ipod, belt, and headphones sits down for his breakfast. Naomi calls her unperturbed mother a fucking cow, eats the banana and stalks off.

At Roundview and to the sound of the **Human League's 'Love Action'** (acquired years ago), Emily is at the top of the steps scanning for Naomi. Naomi successfully avoids her and goes to see Kieran the lecturer for a pleasant if rather pointless chat. Inside (where we see

Thomas arriving as a student) an announcement is made of an election for student president. Emily tries to talk Naomi into standing but is interrupted by Cook who suggests it might be a good idea if they had sex which allows Naomi to say-

"You stand as much chance of fucking me as becoming student president," which Cook takes as a challenge. He still suggests they get together and feel all right which earns this wonderful reply from Naomi, **"You couldn't make me feel all right if you stapled your tongue to my clit and stood on a cement mixer."**

She goes home with Kieran who hopes to persuade Naomi into standing and, while outside her house, notices, appreciatively, her mother standing in the window waving at them.

She finds Emily already in her room with the same idea as Kieran. Emily only wants to help but Naomi is being snippy so she leaves only to return a moment later to say, **"Just so you know, the first thing I think when I see you is not 'I want to fuck that girl'. We've kissed twice. It was nice. But it's also nice just being with you. When you're not being a prick that is."** Naomi relents and invites her to stay.

They lie next to each other on the floor, drinking vodka and talking, genuinely relaxed with each other. When Naomi asks her about what lesbians do, Emily has to confess she doesn't know and that she hasn't been with anyone. The conversation gets silly and then it's morning and they're in Naomi's bed -a sleepover, nothing more. Naomi reaches out to touch Emily's hair, then rolls over and gets dressed without waking her.

She arrives at Roundview just as Cook is making a Che Guevara of himself with the help of JJ. She stops next to Freddie who alludes to the rift between himself and Cook. Naomi understands it's about Effy. Freddie says, **"It should make a difference when someone loves you, shouldn't it?"** But Naomi doesn't reply.

Emily catches up with her and when Naomi tries to explain something, Em says, "It's okay, I get the message. Friends. I can live with that." She says.

The campaign resumes.

When Cook interrupts Naomi making a speech, Emily foolishly has a go at him which rebounds, humiliating Naomi. Cook continues, **"You know what my slogan is: I'm Cook, Vote for me: I don't give a fuck either."**

Running to Keiran for consolation, he tragically mistakes her interest and makes a pass.

At home in her room and crying she finds a note on her bed that reads, "Emily slept here." She crumples it up and tosses it away, only later picking it up again and staring at it. When she wakes next morning the note is pressed against her cheek and in the mirror she sees Emily's name on her face. She picks up the phone and says, "Can we go somewhere? Anywhere."

The next scene is simple and charming but given added nuance by the song -**The High Places: Jump In**- a gentle piece with jangly backing, really barely guitar and percussion, female lead and female backing vocals and utterly appropriate lyrics as the two young women ride down a country road laughing and relaxed together. It's a light confection but one that makes a point and the final two words (as heard in the show) are particularly appropriate.

**If you never take the first step you cannot go too far
I'm sure you know that
You strike me as a smart kid
And you've got good friends and good things and good good goals**

So get a move on
 Jump in
 Hey hey hey hey hey hey
 Girl jumping in
 Today day day day day day
 It begins..



They arrive by a small secluded lake. One of my favourite places, Emily tells Naomi as she starts to strip off down to her underwear. Naomi is aghast. "I haven't got a costume." "Neither have I," Emily replies. "Well don't look, then."

Emily does look of course, both fondly and appreciatively and gets accused of perving. Naomi pushes her in the lake and then jumps in herself.

Unfortunately, there's no scene in the water because it really was too cold for either actor to continue and Prescott was suspected of suffering from hypothermia.

Later, it looks like it's been raining, they're sitting next to each other and Emily is rolling a spliff. Naomi asks if Emily is all right. "No, I'm having the worst time of my life. The weather's shit and the company's worse." But she's only joking, as her hand tentatively covers Naomi's.

Emily lights the spliff and asks if Naomi's ever done blowbacks. She hasn't and knows it will be crap but goes ahead anyway. Naomi says, "Say something." Emily answers, "I'm all about experiments me," and Naomi kisses her and they begin to make love, tentatively then ever more passionately.

The entire scene is achingly sweet and lovely, full of humour and unspoken emotion and need. There is no nudity and nothing salacious. Instead it is something that has been building since the beginning, a culmination. The two young actors are utterly believable in this, warming the hearts of the audience with their love story. It's this that's caught the imagination of so many viewers, gay and straight, target age and older. It's one of the sweetest most enchanting things I've ever seen on the screen. The skill of the actors, the direction, the music, the setting, the photography, have made us all fall in love with Emily and Naomi.

Sadly the magic doesn't last. Early morning and once again Naomi gets up and walks away from a sleeping Emily but this time she's caught out. **"I know you Naomi,"** Emily shouts after her. **"I know you're lonely and need someone to want you. Well, I do. I want you. So be brave and want me back."**

Naomi keeps going and does not turn around.

(On the other side of the screen, vast numbers of the audience are trying to stifle sniffles.)

Home now, she goes to see her mother only to find Kieran sharing her bed. He'd called round to apologise, met her mother and one thing led to another. But Naomi doesn't want to know and runs away.

At school, she's in an empty classroom when Doug and the Director arrive with the ballot papers. Naomi hides before they see her. The director makes it clear that Cook will not win and pressurises Doug into agreeing. She stuffs Cook's votes into her bra which is a mistake as, on announcing Naomi's victory minutes later, Naomi pulls them out and declares Cook the winner. The riot starts.

As mayhem overtakes the college, Naomi makes peace with Kieran and tells him to go see her mother. She finds Cook in a classroom and they start kissing but then Naomi stops and tells him it isn't a goer. Cook is okay with this because, having respect for her, he realises she must have a very good reason.

Home again, she sits down to talk with her mother who tells her that she's cleared the place of everyone but some mad Irishman who thought that Naomi wanted him in her bed. She goes on to say that, much to her surprise, ever since she was born, Naomi completed her life 'and made it pretty fucking wonderful'.

"People who make us happy," she says, **"are never the people we expect. So when you find someone, you've got to cherish it."**

This is a lovely performance from Colman who delivers her lines in a warm, calm and understated manner making Naomi's mother the most likeable parent we've so far met. It's her only appearance and I hope we see more of her in Season 4.

Naomi turns up on Emily's doorstep but Emily's been crying and won't open the door. Instead they sit down on opposite sides. Naomi confesses that when she's with Emily she feels happier, less lonely, less alone, and a better person. Emily slides her hand through cat flap. Naomi takes it in hers.

"Can we just sit like this for a bit?" she asks, her voice choked.

"Yeah," Emily answers. "We can. For a bit."



The student election is the mcguffin. It's there to bring people together at places where the story needs them to be. A plot device, yes but it works very well in the context of the college. But what this episode really deals with is loneliness: Naomi's loneliness primarily, but also Emily's loneliness, Kieran's loneliness, and her mother's loneliness though this last is only really apparent when we see her delight in finding a potential partner in Kieran.

Naomi, more than any of the rest of the cast, has been the loner. Though superficially self-assured she seems to have no friends from the past other than a brief connection with Emily. Whether this is deliberate on the part of the writers or because they couldn't find a way of referencing it, but more than all the others she seems to have no past other than that she went to the same school as the twins. But this is a technical criticism and I'm looking here at Naomi.

It seems that she uses her humour as a way of maintaining a distance between herself and other people and yet she voluntarily comes along to activities which involve the still-nascent group. It's as if she's giving off mixed signals because she doesn't really know what she wants. Perhaps this is exemplified best in her attitude towards Emily of one step forward followed a very quick two steps back. She allows Emily close and then backs off at the slightest hint of genuine intimacy, either physical or emotional. Basically she's a confused young woman.

This episode is about Naomi arriving at an insight into her own behaviour as she realises she can't manage on her own and that other people, specifically Emily, are her salvation. She can't go on as she has been, an island. She wants to be with Emily but she isn't sure she can accept her on the terms that Emily requires, that their relationship is a lesbian one, even though it's obvious that Naomi is physically, sexually attracted to her. They've now made love properly for the first time but still she holds back.

This won't be finally resolved until Episode 9.

Episode 7: JJ



JJ is suffering from more and more rages and the pills he's taking aren't helping. He's angry because his friends hate each other and don't listen to him. But then no-one does. Certainly the psychiatrist at the mental health clinic who just mutters platitudes and offers a new kind of pills -S.T.U.N. They will help calm him down.. Still frustrated, JJ leaves the offices, stomps a waste bin flat and knocks over some racks. No-one pays any attention. Then he sees Emily standing there. She's been having counselling to help her be more honest with people and has been given some pills to help -more STUN. JJ comments they must be pretty good if they calm you down and help you be more honest. Emily decides to start being honest with JJ and says, in a way that is both charming and disarming-

"I want to have sex with girls. I like girls. I like sex with girls. I like their rosy lips, their hard nipples, bums, soft thighs. I like tits and fanny you know? There, I said it." And she looks so pleased with herself, but it's too much information for JJ who faints.

Recovered from fainting, they sit together in a park overlooking the city and Emily begins to get to know the real JJ, a JJ who wants to be normal, to have sex, to be able to stop his friends hating each other over Effy who he also loves. Not meaning to say that last part, he locks on into a tirade of demeaning epithets against himself. Emily jolts him out of it by flashing him. This is shot from behind, so don't get excited. JJ also wants to be taken seriously and to be considered.

"Why don't you just ask for what you want?" she says. This isn't her best idea of the year and it marks the start of a series of upsetting encounters for him.

Arriving at Freddie's, Karen appears at first confused by Emily's appearance but then gleefully leads them upstairs. When Freddie rebuffs JJ's timid knock on the door, Emily shoves it open and they find Katie and Freddie having sex, which is just what Karen

wanted. The four-way conversation is heated and JJ accidentally blurts out about Emily being gay. "You're not," says Katie. "You promised me."

In the shed together, JJ wants Freddie to make up with Cook but he won't and insists JJ make a choice. JJ is fed up with all the lies and deceit. **"I'm the normal one,"** he says.

Back home he finds his mother asleep on the couch, a bottle of wine on the floor near her. Scattered across the table are reports on his autism and some of his own childhood scribbles. In his room he empties pills across his bed and contemplates them but whatever his intentions he's distracted by Cook on his mobile wanting him to go out that evening. Not realising he hasn't switched his off, JJ overhears Cook talking to a girl, (who he assumes is Effy) he's having sex with, about him. Accordingly he goes to see Effy who hasn't seen Cook for days. She can't help him either because she's screwed up too and she won't stop coming between his friends but she won't -or can't- say why, though she does want to be his friend.

Next up is Cook's place, a room in a student hostel. He arrives in time to see Cook's lover leaving -it's Pandora whose identity Cook, displaying discretion for once because of the trouble it would cause, won't reveal to JJ. JJ asks him if it's wrong then why not stop? The question is meaningless to Cook who doesn't care about anything or anyone. **"Then start caring!"** JJ yells. **"Start caring about me you fucking twat!"**

Interrupted by the police while trying to get pills, JJ offers Cook some of his STUN, making sure he takes more than he should.

Outside the club, Naomi arrives to find Effy and asks where Cook is. Effy says that she's fucking him occasionally not 'seeing' him and pointedly asks where Emily is. "I'm straight," Naomi replies. Effy, "Sure?" Naomi, "If I said *no* would I regret it?" Effy, "Probably. But not because of me."

Naomi sees Freddie with Katie, notices Effy's reaction and realises what's going on. Just then Thomas, who's the organiser, drags the four inside -"Friends don't pay."- with Cook and JJ following. Emily is already there, dancing and either stoned or drunk. Cook wastes no time in groping her which she either doesn't notice or doesn't care about. Katie rescues her.

Stoned himself, Cook dances wildly barging into several people and pissing them of so badly they turn on him. Freddie finds out from JJ what he's done and together they wade in and rescue Cook.

Calmer now but still under the influence of the pills, Cook starts telling the truth beginning with the fact that Effy loves Freddie but can't stand it so she fucks Cook but it's hurting him. That's why he goes with Panda. But he knows he's shit. Thomas hears him mention Pandora and Freddie has to pull him away from Cook.

Outside, JJ finds a now sober Emily who asks him how asking for things went. He decides it's too early to say. Emily doesn't want to go home because Katie's-- locked on, JJ suggests- yes, locked on. In bed in his room, Emily offers him sex, a one-off never to be repeated charity event between friends. "And I can be quite cute," JJ says. "Yes," Emily says, "you can."

Next morning they go downstairs for breakfast where his mother is. JJ introduces Emily then they talk between themselves. The camera focuses on his mother's face as she watches the two, Emily smiling, chatting to JJ, laughing at his jokes. His mother's expression, initially neutral, breaks out into a quiet smile as she realises her son is being -normal.

This, ultimately, is a powerful and emotional episode where we really get to know JJ, his needs, his frustrations, his problems, how he sees things, his motivations. It allows a wide-ranging yet always consistent performance from Olly Barbieri who, on this showing, surely has a very promising career ahead of him. There's no hint of the actor pretending to be JJ, there's just JJ himself, warts and all.

It's difficult to portray someone with mental dysfunction without either demeaning them or appearing patronising. Whatever else happens, JJ maintains a certain dignity and integrity. In some ways he's far less screwed up than his friends.

This episode is a journey. It starts in the aftermath of a rage but builds as he learns things from each successive encounter. The encounter may or may not be successful, usually the latter, but he learns about others and about himself, even that he can be vindictive as when he plies Cook with pills. And, at the end, he learns that he can be accepted and liked. For being just who is, by a pretty girl and that, harking back to the first episode where his interest in girls is made clear, is something to give him hope for the future.

JJ is a very important character in that the portrayal of him as an individual with special needs and one who is integrated into the community is done with such dignity. He is shown as being able to contribute to the group as much as any so-called normal person and his normal needs are shown as simply normal without hiding his 'problems'. Without preaching to its audience, *Skins* is putting over a very powerful message of tolerance for the 'different'.

Several days after first drafting this section and I've only just realised that I haven't mentioned the music at all. Simple reason for this; most of it consists of piano pieces by Debussy. They work perfectly well as soundtrack music but, not being attuned to classical music, tend to fly under my radar.



L-R: JJ, KAREN, EMILY (they are watching Katie and Freddie)

8. Effy.



Effy starts in a bad place and ends in a worse one. But it's nothing compared to what happens to Katie in *Skins* answer to *Deliverance*.

Cook is having sex with Effy but Effy is just going through the motions and not even feigning enthusiasm. He finishes and leaves. Downstairs her mother is going through a newspaper and calling every man she sees a bastard. Effy leaves and goes to see Freddie who is in his shed snogging Katie who makes a point of emphasising how close she and Freddie are, though it rings hollow. Does even she believe it, one wonders. However, they are having a quiet party in the woods but need Effy to drive, just don't tell Cook who seems to have become a pariah.

Effy goes outside and, well, the picture is above. **Portishead's** bleak and foreboding **Machine Gun** plays (and I decide to download the track) and continues into the next scene. It seems to foreshadow something, but what? Read on.

Crammed into the car, the gang's almost all here, including Thomas who is still ostensibly Pandora's boyfriend. Almost there, they have a scary encounter with some locals - "Beware the moon." - which suggests a horror movie scenario is imminent. Is **Skins** about to change its name to **Skinned**?

Cook appears at Effy's house with a cake. Her mother tells him she's not there, takes the cake and shuts the door.

Arriving at Gobbler's End, they fool around and gradually set up camp. There's something up between Panda and Thomas but nothing overt is being said. Then Effy finds some mushrooms and not the sort you fry with bacon and eggs. Katie is pissed because it wasn't

supposed to be a druggy occasion but everyone else, even Panda eventually, eats some. Cue waving sparklers, silly grins, dancing erratically, sharing spliffs, echoey voices and hazy shaky out of focus camera work. Far out. Soon most of them become too stoned to move and are flat on their backs.

Effy becomes aware that Katie is standing over her having a go (that's like dissing, bro') because she's trying to steal her boyfriend. Effy walks away and realises their bags have gone missing. Then the gunfire starts.

The woods are full of the sound of guns and strange noises. The group panics but Freddie tries to take charge telling people to turn off lights and douse the fire. They huddle together not knowing what's happening. Sounds come from the shadows, bushes rustle. A bright light shines on them. Someone's running towards them screaming. Effy gets up and hits the figure with a lump of wood.

Are you surprised it's Cook?

He took their gear but the gunfire is just from the poachers elsewhere in the woods. He's laughing but it soon turns nasty when Freddie grabs Cook who says to him, "D'you want my blood now? You've taken everything else. Effy doesn't want me now, do you princess?" Effy stares at him then says, "No."

Katie, who's already had one go at Cook, steps in. "Well it's too late. Freddie's my boyfriend now. Aren't you?" But when Freddie is slow to come out with an affirmative, though it does come, Katie goes off for a walk.

Now even JJ turns on Cook, screaming into his face that no-one likes him and no-one wants him around. But Cook has one last twist of the knife to deliver. He tells Effy how Pandora regularly betrayed her with him. Then he approaches Thomas, trying to goad him but Thomas treats him with contempt and then expresses how Pandora has hurt him. "This new girl, I don't like her, she makes my heart hurt," and he walks away.

Pandora punches Cook viciously in the face, bloodying his nose, and vainly pursues Thomas.

To the sound of **Joy Division's She's Lost Control** (reader, I bought the greatest hits CD), Effy starts tripping again, runs off into the woods and bumps into Katie. Realising Effy's vulnerable, Katie first torments her by telling her she has bugs in her hair, then she starts crying, begging Effy not to take Freddie from her. But when Effy tried to comfort her, Katie changes again, becoming verbally aggressive and denigrating the girl before pushing her to the ground, slapping her and spitting in her face. Barely aware of what she's doing, Effy grabs a rock and slams it into the side of Katie's head, knocking her senseless. Effy gets up and wanders off, leaving Katie alone and bleeding from a head wound. She finds Freddie, tells him to hit her but he kisses her instead and they make love.

Early morning and Naomi emerges from a tent, Emily just behind her. Naomi picks a leaf from her hair and they share a smile. This is so simple yet says so much. It's a shame it's almost, but not completely, undercut by JJ coming out of the same tent.

"Phew, me and two girls in the same tent. Nightmare. You ladies like to wriggle, don't you?" This line is so funny as, unknowingly, JJ has just lived a popular male fantasy, but it would still have been more effective had it been left to the leaf and the smiles.

Freddie and Effy appear. Freddie, answering Emily, supposes Katie is still in the tent. She isn't but they find a depressed Pandora who says that Thomas has gone home.

(At this point I'd like to wonder how both Thomas and Cook managed to get home from a wood, in the middle of the night, a place that had to be a minimum of twenty miles away -geography is always hazy in Skins- and with no transport. I'm still not sure how Cook got there in the first place.)

They go looking for Katie but don't find her. Effy says nothing, but on the way home she makes an excuse of needing to pee and surreptitiously phones for an ambulance.

Home and Effy's mother looks after her and after that Effy phones everyone but no-one is answering. **Florence & the Machine's** brilliant (yes, I downloaded it) **Dog Days** is playing in the background. Eventually Freddie rings. Katie has been found, she has nine stitches in her head and she's still unconscious.

But by the time Effy gets to the hospital, Katie has come round. Freddie, in the company of Emily and Pandora, turns on her and then leaves. Even Pandora won't speak to her.

Effy's sitting in the back seat of a car and smoking a cigarette. She stubs it out, climbs into the front seat and lights another.

"It's you and me," says Cook. "It'll always be you and me."

This is one episode that pretty much speaks for itself. Everything is in plain sight. If there is a theme it's rejection. There are no subtleties, just a build-up to tragedy. The poachers are a red-herring, a clever misdirection so that the real drama comes when you think it's over.

Effy's story is a tragedy but she is also the author of her own misfortune because she can't allow herself to accept the love that Freddie is offering perhaps because she believes herself to be unworthy of it.

In a sense this inability to accept love or to give it and the consequences of that is an overriding theme of this series. Just as Effy rejects Freddie, so too, in a sense, does Pandora reject Thomas by going with Cook behind his back. And we all know about Naomi and Emily.

The group is shaken, fractured, and divided. Can be healed? We learn some answers in the final two episodes.

In the next one the Katie and Emily's differences finally come out into the open and Naomi makes her choice.



Conspicuous conshroomption

9. Katie & Emily



EMILY, KATIE

High heels, tight skirt, undulating thighs, the sound of **Lady Gaga's 'Beautiful, Dirty, Rich'** enhancing the confident sexy swagger, Katie Fitch has arrived at Roundview to take her history exam. It's only when she sits down that JJ, sitting at the adjacent desk passes her a note which reads -You're Emily'.

For a while, when I first started watching this properly on TV I wasn't totally convinced that there were twin actors playing the twins and that it was clever SFX disguising the fact that it was only one person. Having watched the series several times, particularly those episodes with Emily & Naomi, I still can't really tell the difference between the two except by the hair, though some people claim they can (and sometimes I think I can, but only sometimes), but I do accept that there really are twins playing twins.

Time out: the concluding two episodes have a similar character structure, albeit different in the amount of time devoted to them. Here we have a triangle of Katie-Emily-Naomi which is paralleled in E:10 by Freddie-JJ-Cook. Then two estranged couples: Pandora and Thomas, Freddie and Effy. So the series concludes with a form of symmetry. I don't know whether this was intentional or just fortuitous the way things worked out, or if I'm reading something into it that isn't there. But symmetry is a good structure for a drama and, perhaps, could have been used more in *Skins*, similarly the use of parallels. I've been trying to see if there is some overriding structure to the series above the story-lines but it would appear not. Or I'm just obtuse and they are there.

Oh well, back to the plot. This episode, by the way, is set against the background of the impending end of term 'Love Ball' hosted by Doug and the college is littered with posters advertising it.

At home, a bruised and depressed Katie has her mother (Roni Ancona) trying to cheer her up but it's a waste of time. When the history exam is mentioned (her mother doesn't realise that Emily is sitting it), Katie says, "I'm rubbish at history. I'm rubbish at everything, not like Emily."

After the exam, Emily as Katie is sorting out Katie's locker. Closing the door, she finds Naomi standing next to her. Like JJ, Naomi isn't fooled. Naomi tells her she's going away for the summer, to Spain or Cyprus, on her own, to think. She says, "Let's just be friends." "We say that, don't we," says Emily. Naomi walks away.

"I'll miss you," Emily says and is the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Naomi turns round, goes to Emily and kisses her. They kiss for several seconds until they're interrupted by other students and break apart before anyone sees them kissing.

Katie is staring at a picture of her and Freddie. She tears it up. **Lady Gaga's 'Brown Eyes'** is playing (reader, I bought the CD). She goes to Emily's box of secrets but doesn't know the combination. Her young brother appears and he knows what's in it. "Fannies," he says gleefully. "It's full of fannies."

Emily and Naomi are naked in Naomi's bed. Naomi is stroking Emily's arm. Emily wonders if anyone will disturb them but Naomi says this is her room, no-one else is allowed.

This is very different from Emily's experience. She has no secrets, no privacy, everything is shared with Katie. She says, "Until we were nine we even used to take a dump at the same time." "And what about *this* secret?" Naomi asks.

Emily wants to tell people about them being together. She wants Naomi to go to the ball with her like they're together. Naomi doesn't. She's not sure of her sexuality the way Emily is. **"Maybe I just like boys apart from you."** This angers Emily, **"I'm not your fucking experiment,"** she says and gets out of bed and starts to dress herself but can't find her shoes and leaves them. Her parting words are, **"Still holding hands through a cat flap, aren't we. Have fun in Cyprus."**

Cold and crying at the bus stop, she meets Thomas who offers her his trainers and a jacket to wear. A version of **Bronski Beat's** classic **Smalltown Boy** is playing in the background (a gap in my collection now filled with a download). She asks, **"What do you do if someone you love really lets you down?"** **"You must try to stop loving them,"** he says. Emily: **"Is that possible?"** He says, **"No, I don't think so,"** and we know he's talking about himself.

Evening meal with the Fitches. Fitness trainer Dad is in expansive form, a wide smile, full of enthusiasm, in this case the home-made soup. Katie's younger brother begs to differ. "This tastes like bollocky wankshite." He's influenced by the family of his best friend but it doesn't go down too well with his own father. It's a funny scene but not important enough to detail.

Emily arrives looking like she's been dragged through a hedge backwards. Her parents think she's been fighting. She doesn't want to talk about it but her mother persists despite Katie trying to intervene. Establishing it wasn't a boy who did this, her mother says, "You've been fighting with a girl."

At which point Emily loses it. **"No, I've been making love to a girl. Everybody satisfied?"** After a moment's silence, Katie tries to say that Emily's lying but Emily won't shut up. **"Her name's Naomi. She's rather beautiful. So I was nailing her."**

Another pause, then her father grins and says he knows she just winding them up, telling him to mind his own business. Emily leaves the table.

Katie arrives in their room having spent an hour trying to convince their mother that she

made it all up. "You're not gay, you're just stupid. You conjured this thing with Naomi because you're jealous of me. I get more boys than you, I look better in clothes than you, and I'm more popular than you."

Emily retorts that at least she doesn't fuck someone who's in love with somebody else. "Nobody hits **me** over the head with a rock. Loser." Deeply hurt, Katie goes to bed without speaking.

Next morning, Naomi appears on their doorstep and bumps into the twins mother who believed everything Emily said and warns Naomi off, thinking her to be the instigator of the affair and that Emily is impressionable and easily influenced.

When the girls wake up, Katie apologises using their special language which, Emily points out, they don't do any more. Katie persists and Emily apologises the same way which, apparently, resolves the previous evening's difficulties. Katie tells Emily that they're going shopping for clothes for the Love Ball and that they'll go together.

Before they do, Katie picks up Emily's box of secrets. Emily protests but Katie says she knows what's in. "Has it made you happy?" she asks and puts it away in a cupboard.

In town they meet Pandora who also doesn't have a date and invite her go with them. Then the twins go shopping in one of those typical shopping montages with backing by the little known girl group **The Millionaires** singing **A-L-C-O-H-O-L** a very rude and very jolly song (and another download) which comes to an end when they see Freddie and JJ.

Katie tells Freddie that he owes her and that he and JJ will take them to the ball. At which point Freddie, assuming Emily tells Katie everything, just like JJ tells him, casually mentions about Emily and JJ getting it on. Katie pretends she knows and later plays hell with Emily for not asking her permission and for going with a 'mong'. "Not gay! Stupid!"

Naomi keeps ringing Emily until she finally answers and they arrange to meet for coffee. Only it isn't Emily who answered the phone or who meets her. It's Katie. Katie warns her to stay away from the Love Ball and also tells her about Emily fucking JJ.

"Why are you so horrible?" Naomi asks.

"Because I love her more than you ever can," Katie replies.

Freddie and a very nervous JJ arrive to endure the traditional excruciating wait with the girls' parents. It's another very funny scene but, again, not important.

The Love Ball and Pandora arrives on her own though, unknowingly, she is watched by Thomas. Doug engages her in a conversation of misunderstandings and invites her to have the first dance with him. "That's great cos I'm a wicked dancer," she says. And she is too, if the concept also encompasses eccentricity. Doug struts his disco stuff. And is that a glint of jealousy in the Director's eyes as she watches them dance to **The Ting Tings** **'That's not my name'**?



Outside the Love Ball entrance, JJ and Freddie are standing apart from Katie and Emily, a bottle of JJ's father's vomit-inducing potato moonshine between each pair. Their separate conversations follow almost identical lines and, simultaneously, both couples come together to go in.

Then Naomi arrives and Emily's heart clearly leaps at the sight of her.



Naomi: gorgeous, sexy, and a psycho-killer.

"Ah, how sweet," Naomi says. "Out on a foursome. Emily's great in the sack isn't she, JJ?" "I wanted to tell you," Emily says. "Yeah, but you didn't, did you, hon?" And Naomi walks up the steps past them. Emily runs away and Katie goes after Naomi. The boys do nothing.

Catching her by the lockers, Katie starts slapping Naomi around as the two hurl abuse at each other. "You didn't need to blab about JJ," Naomi says. "Well, she fucking deserved it." "What did I deserve?" asks Emily. We don't know whether she's come after Naomi or her sister. Emily turns and walks away. Katie goes after her but Emily turns on her screaming, "You fucking cow," and they start to fight.

On the dance floor, the Director, whose name we finally learn is Harriet, is making her move on Doug but they are disrupted by Katie and Emily.

This is a no-holds barred fight, all the frustrations and resentments of years are coming out as they hurtle around the room, smashing tables as they claw and tear at each other. When Doug tries to separate them, he's sent flying by Emily's fist.

Finally Emily knocks Katie to the ground, battering at her, drawing back her right fist ready to send it against Katie's already bloodied face, the camera showing it from Katie's pov. But this isn't Emily's way.

Instead, she lowers her fist and helps Katie to her feet, pulling a strap back over Katie's shoulder.

"You've got to understand," she says as she pulls off her dress and removes the high heels, **"I'm not you."** A few feet behind Katie is Naomi. **"I love you,"** Emily continues, **"and I'll never really leave you. But I can't fix this. I like girls. No, I like a girl. No, I love her. I love--"** she gestures towards Naomi and there are gasps from the crowd, **"--her."** The camera pans towards Naomi. "Okay?", Emily says. "Okay," Katie agrees as the camera looks over her shoulder to Naomi who is holding out her hand towards Emily.

They come together and, holding hands, walk slowly towards the exit. Students and staff gently applaud them, perhaps for their dignity, their honesty.

Pandora is one of those watching but, all too aware of her own situation, looking unhappy. She turns and sees Thomas behind her. "Please," she says tearfully, "can we start again?" He smiles and says, "Hello, my name is Thomas. So glad to meet you."

Power ballad **'It's my own cheating heart that makes me cry'** by **Glasvegas** has begun slightly earlier and plays us out. Another perfect choice which I'll download as soon as I stop typing this.

Outside, Emily and Naomi walk down the steps towards the camera.

Naomi says, **"I love you too."**

"I know," replies Emily, and so, all along, did we even if Naomi didn't.

They walk under the camera and out of shot and the episode ends.



And which photograph would you have put here?

Maybe it isn't quite how we saw the ending, but it's the one we all wanted.

Twin sisters reconciled to their differences. (Well, maybe...)

Love declared.

Love accepted.

Love finally and unconditionally requited.

Lovers united.

(And Pandora gets a happy end. Or beginning.)

Back to the serious stuff.

The idea of identical twins being gay and straight is well documented. Quite recently two female twins were both members of Parliament, one is straight, the other gay. Gay pop star Will Young has a straight twin brother, so it's not unreasonable that physically identical twins can be emotionally and psychologically different in other ways. Not all twins are one identical mind, in identical bodies. As far as I'm aware, however, Kat and Megan Prescott get on perfectly well, unlike their fictional counterparts.

Emily and Naomi are, without doubt as the Skins website poll alone proves, the most

popular characters by far on the show. That in itself, I think, proves just how far attitudes have changed over recent years. Cynics might, however, argue that the popularity of two teenage girls hesitantly embarking on a lesbian affair owes more to the skills of the scriptwriters, the skills of the actors portraying the couple, and the production team behind the show.

The truth is that I'm right and so are the cynics. Attitudes have changed towards homosexuality. Civil marriage is accepted without question, except by the usual bigots, in this country and society hasn't collapsed. It's not that long ago I remember the tabloid shock of -LESBIANS!- adopting children, of -HAVING THEIR OWN!- by various means. These days, nobody blinks an eyelid at it. But then this is Britain.

That the Emily-Naomi romance didn't cause a stir surprised no-one. But I'm willing to guess that the sheer popularity of the couple and their storyline surprised everyone behind the programme.

But why? How did it happen?

Try: synergy, synchronicity, serendipity. Everything coming together. Picking the perfect actors (not necessarily the best, though they may well be, but those who possessed the perfect qualities) for their roles. The magical chemistry shared between the two actors; it's either there or it isn't and it can't be faked -we believed in them completely. Lack of it has ruined major movies no matter how individually talented the stars may have been. The dialogue given to the characters which the individual actors could speak perfectly to each other -and to others. The social environment which the characters inhabited and interacted formed a convincing milieu.

Naomi could have been a defensive bitch but Loveless gave her a vulnerability and a quirkiness which made you like her. The writers crafted speech patterns she could deliver perfectly.

Emily could have been put in the shade by the ostensibly stronger character of Naomi but Kat Prescott brought a feisty doggedness to Emily. She might get knocked back but she never gives up.

Quite simply, you loved these two and you wanted them desperately to be happy. You, the audience knew what they wanted, what was right for them before they did. You knew Naomi was falling in love with Emily even if she couldn't see it. And we could see how happy the presence of Naomi made Emily even when they weren't interacting.

We care about them.

Their fame has even spread to America which hasn't, officially, seen the show yet (at the time of writing). In the **After Ellen** (see page 2) lesbian website's annual, for fun, poll of the hottest 100 women, Kat Prescott was about No.26 and Lily Loveless three places below her. And when you see some of the amazing women below them you'll realise just how much their characters have been taken to people's hearts.

Just one thing that's been bugging me. It's Emily's declaration of love. Let's look at it again but broken down into sections.

"You've got to understand,"

she says as she pulls off the dress and removes the high heels,

"I'm not you."

A few feet behind Katie, and slightly out of focus, is Naomi.

"I love you," Emily continues [to Katie], **"and I'll never really leave you. But I can't fix this.** [beat]

I like girls. [beat]

No, [beat] **I like a girl.** [beat]

No, [beat] **I love her.** [beat]

I love--" [beat]

she gestures towards Naomi and there are gasps from the crowd,

--her." The final word is spoken in a lower, softer tone so that the **her** becomes everything.

It's very hesitant -I've put in [beat], which isn't quite a pause, to convey the way it's spoken. It doesn't flow, it's repetitive and it's awkward.

And I'm conflicted about this. Is this just awkward clumsy writing which has produced something which doesn't flow? Almost all the dialogue in the series does flow.

Is it Kat Prescott's reading of her lines? Emily isn't normally hesitant but as sharp in what she says as Naomi.

Or, is it how a real person might speak when saying something so important to them? Because real speech doesn't always flow. It **is** hesitant and repetitive. Drama, indeed any writing which has the capacity of being rewritten, and in the hands of a competent writer, flows as we say 'naturally'. But it isn't natural, it's artifice.

To have something so real injected into artifice makes it dramatically unreal.

So I don't know. Sometimes I feel it works, sometimes I don't. But I still love the scene.

Let's not forget that this is also Katie's episode. This is where we see the real Katie, a Katie that is more than just a vain boy-obsessed bitch, though she certainly is that too. Her relationship with Emily is complicated and deep. She needs to dominate her sister yet is utterly dependent on her being there. Only in this episode do we learn that while demeaning and denigrating Emily, she also feels intellectually inadequate in comparison. When she says to Naomi, "I love her more than you ever can," she is speaking what she believes is the absolute truth, but it also shows that she is frightened of losing Emily to her, losing the love she needs from her sister. But Katie's love is jealous and possessive. It is strong and powerful but ultimately destructive and confining. The love Emily offers is joyous and enhancing based on respect for the other, for Naomi, as is Naomi's for Emily. Naomi loves Emily for who she is and together they offer each other a freedom that Katie would deny -a freedom to be themselves.

I suspect Megan Prescott has probably been underrated in this series, not least, until now, by me. Annoying as Katie is, she provides a vital foil and counterpoint to Emily. Megan does well in an unsympathetic role.

And what, one wonders, is going to happen in the next series?

It's already been announced that due to the huge popularity of the Emily/Naomi storyline they will be very prominent in the next season. But the writers of *Skins* have never been known for doing the obvious. The obvious to me would be what the effect of their being together has on other people. It seems unlikely that Naomi's mother would be anything but supportive, Emily's anything but, seeing Naomi as a corrupting influence. It probably won't affect the dynamics of the group. Everyone likes Emily and Naomi and almost certainly will be supportive. So will an outside influence destabilise their relationship? Or will they direct their joint energies in some as yet unknown direction?

Answers on a postcard...

How will Katie change? Will she accept the new status quo and try to become someone more independent, a better person with her own new sense of direction? As the series thrives on conflict and people usually making the worst decisions possible, this seems unlikely. A happy cast of characters would be boring and pointless.

What does the future hold for Pandora and Thomas? Her mother's reaction should be good for a funny scene at least. Other than that I have no idea.

Enough for now. Even though it seems like an anti-climax, there is still one more episode to play.

10. Everyone.



Well, not really though that is the episode title.

Cook and Effy wake up in the open on the edge of a small decaying post-industrial coastal town. They've been travelling from one no-place to another and Effy thinks this is just another. It isn't; it's journey's end, for this is where Cook's father lives.

And Cook's father is Cook, thirty years on: a drunk, a misogynist, a gambler, a self-centred repulsive creature who lives on a boat and inhabits a seedy pub where even there he is despised and barely tolerated. In Cook and Cook's father we see mirror images and pretty damned unpleasant it is too.

Sickened by Cook Snr, Effy leaves and bumps into Donny the pub owner's not-really-tearaway son and his two mates. He's very interested in Effy but there's no harm in him. They're straight-edge: fit, no drugs, no drink, no cigarettes. Cook drags Effy to a club with his father and our straight-edge friend makes a play for her. A fight starts and Cook quickly has a close encounter with fists followed by floor.

Back on the boat Dad tells Effy she's breaking Cook's heart. Effy's answer is that he's been doing it every day of Cook's life.

JJ and Freddie have a summer job and are getting on each others nerves. JJ has had enough and walks out. Sitting on a hill, a popular location, overlooking the city, playing with a pack of cards, he's come across by Effy's mother. They talk and she tells him that Effy has so much love in her heart that it scares her to let it out.

Karen and JJ walk in on Freddie masturbating to computer porn. JJ's come to motivate Freddie to do something. The phone rings and it's Effy telling them that Cook needs help but she can't do it because she loves him, Freddie.

Cook Snr enters Cook in the town's Solstice Steeplechase against Donny, until then the only entrant; the stakes are his pub debt against his boat.

Freddie and JJ arrive in town, sit down outside a pub and the paraphernalia of the

steeplechase is assembled around them. Cook is pissed off to see them and suggests Freddie enters the race, the winner to keep Effy. Freddie isn't impressed but enters anyway. So does JJ. Then we find out why it's a steeplechase -they're the horses and they're carrying a pensioner each.

Cutting to the chase (ha ha), Cook knocks Freddie down, gets into an altercation with Donny near the finishing post and JJ wins. Because Cook didn't win his dad's boat is still forfeit.

At the celebration party, Cook gets pissed off but JJ takes control and makes them do what he wants, which is getting together with Effy, in a room. "Not you, loser," he snaps at Donny who's made to follow them. Now he's going to sort it and he forces Effy to choose and, with just a glance at Freddie, she does. Cook storms out followed by JJ.

"This is all your fault," Freddie says to her. "You made it a game with that stupid list on the first day." "I know," Effy replies. "You know." Then they come together.

Morning and Cook finds his dad making the boat ready to get under way. He doesn't want Cook, he never did. In tears, Cook takes the engine keys and his father threatens him with a lit flare. Freddie knocks him unconscious and drags him inside.

Cook and Freddie are reconciled but Freddie wants more, he wants Cook to be okay that he and Effy are together. But Cook can because he does love Effy. JJ and Effy turn and JJ takes charge. They're going home, on the boat.

They only just get under way when Donny, father and friends arrive on the jetty. Cook Sr wakes up, pleased at what's happened, and screams at them, "Fuck you! I'm Cook! I'm Cook!"

"No," Cook says, "I'm Cook." And he pushes his father overboard.

They're heading out, JJ's at the wheel, Effy and Freddie are sitting at the back and Cook bring them cans of beer. Freddie gestures for him to sit down between them. There are looks and silence. Finally Freddie says, "So, what do we do now?"

Find out in January 2010.



JJ takes charge.

Truthfully, this really is the least interesting episode as far I'm concerned -even E.2 was much more entertaining- primarily because I can summon up no emotional investment in either Cook or Freddie. I could spend some time going into the psychological disaster area of Cook and his father and how that dictates Cook's actions and behaviour throughout the series but I'm simply not interested. What I did like was JJ's assertiveness and common sense. He was the only one of the four displaying any emotional maturity; which is rather ironic.

Similarly the unrequited love between Effy and Freddie that runs under the surface of the series just doesn't resonate at all. I've deliberately avoided referring to previous Skins seasons as much as possible but it has to be said that Effy was a far more interesting character in Season 2. (In Season 1, she never spoke until the last episode.) But here she's a walking disaster area. Her inability to show warmth makes her a cold character who avoids relationships of any kind. Pandora is more a pet than a friend and she shows little interest in Naomi whose strong character and integrity could make her a good friend to have. Stuck in her own self-pity, and possibly self-hate, Effy just makes no effort.

Her unspoken love for Freddie just doesn't ring true because there is no reason for her to love him. Fancy him, yes. He's good looking and it would be perfectly understandable for her to want to shag him. But on an emotional level they display no real connection. They seem to interact by glances from afar. They don't interact on any meaningful level. They barely seem to talk to each other. Compare this with the sparks that fly between Emily and Naomi whenever they are on-screen together. They don't even need to speak -just Naomi removing a leaf from Emily's hair and the shared quiet smiles says volumes.

Now that matters appear to be resolved I'll be very curious as to where the Effy-Freddie relationship goes now that they have to interact.

Equally I wasn't grabbed by the music. Whether it was because it was a poor choice compared to other episodes, or simply not to my taste, or because I had no emotional investment as I mentioned above. With the exception of JJ's episode which was mostly Debussy's piano pieces, the ones where the music got to me were the ones I liked the most -Pandora, Naomi, Effy, and Katie/Emily.

This episode was, for me, a coda rather than a climax. The satisfying emotional pay-off came with Katie, Emily and Naomi. Still, there is the symmetry, of a sort, coming full circle to where it began with Freddie, JJ, Cook, and Effy, but it's a weak one.

Unanswered Questions: a few last things.

There are quite a few things in *Skins 3* which nark me (that's more than niggle but less than annoy), more in the sense of omissions rather than commissions. We'll look at them in the form of questions.

Why is it always cold at night?

This seems a daft question, doesn't it? Bare with me a moment while I explain. The time-scale of the series seems to cover the span of the British academic year, which is to say from early September to late June/early July. Nights can only be considered to be noticeably cool to cold from late October until around mid-April. Just a day or so before the Love Ball, which can't take place any sooner than mid-June, when Emily encounters Thomas at the bus stop, she is freezing and he's wearing three jackets. Given that he probably arrived here in early October, he should be acclimatised by now and Emily shouldn't be particularly cold at all.

Of course we know it wasn't filmed then and it probably was cold when it was shot. But why make a point of how cold it is when it shouldn't be?

Okay, maybe this one was just a niggle. Try this.

Why have none of the parents met their children's friends until it suits the exigencies of the story?

Effy and Pandora have been friends for months before Effy finally meets Panda's mother. Why haven't Emily's parents met, or even *heard* of Naomi, until the morning after Emily has mentioned her for the first time? They only meet JJ and Freddie on the evening of the love ball and Freddie has to introduce himself and JJ despite the fact that he was going out with Katie for an unspecified time but probably a few weeks. Only Effy has been to Freddie's house (Cook and JJ don't count as they've been friends for years) until he starts going out with Katie. Naomi's mother has only met Emily once and, as it's never stated to the contrary, none of Naomi's other friends.

If your answer is -well, they just haven't, no big deal- let me ask a couple of supplementary questions. Doesn't anyone in the group take photos of their friends on their mobile phones? Don't they ever talk about their friends to their parents?

When Naomi calls round late at Emily's house, how come only Emily answers the door? Why doesn't someone else see who Emily's talking to? There's no suggestion that she's home alone. The reason is so that Naomi can meet her mother for the first time in Episode 9.

A couple of longer questions with no suggested answers.

if Thomas is being deported (as Pandora states), why isn't he escorted to the airport rather than just turning up on his own and what happened to his mother and siblings?

How come Thomas gets back into the UK so easily given that he arrived on a fake passport in the first place and was deported in the second?

Whatever happened to taking responsibility for your actions?

It seems to me that, and admittedly this is my interpretation, but by the end we are supposed to feel sorry for Cook because of his father, because he has grown up in the image of his father and that excuses his behaviour?

Excuse me?

Plenty of people have rough childhoods but that doesn't turn them all into serial killers, child abusers, rapists, junkies, racists, etc. They overcome it, they learn what not to do. Cook is the way he is out of choice. He chooses not to care about other people, he chooses not care about the effects his actions have on other people. Every time he commits an action which harms someone

whether emotionally or physically, he is making a conscious choice. He doesn't have to behave this way, he does it because he and because he wants to. This is why I dislike the character so much.

He has no moral centre.

Neither is there any sign by the end of the series that he has learned better. I find this aspect of the show to be very dispiriting.

Effy too, while not a monster like Cook, allows her depression or low self esteem to dictate her actions in a negative way. Freddie accurately points out that (at least in part) the bad things that happened are a result of her negative choices. At least, however, with her the series ends with the implication that she has learned from her mistakes and that things will be different.

Before I finish, despite my criticisms of the characters, I have great respect for the two actors playing them. O'Connell and Scodelario are completely convincing, so convincing in O'Connell's case that you wonder how much of himself he brought to the part -a scary thought.

And lastly, which of these young actors is going to make it big?

Not easy and whoever I pick I'll probably get it wrong. Let's face it, who would have predicted that **Dev Patel**, the likeable sex-mad Moslem from *Skins* 1 & 2, would, within a year, take the title role in a multi-Oscar winning movie and bag his beautiful five years older leading lady for a girlfriend (**Slumdog Millionaire** and **Freida Pinto** respectively)?

Nevertheless, and I'm sure this will come as no surprise, my picks for potentially long acting careers are Backwell, Barbieri, and Loveless.

Lisa Backwell, in particular, I can imagine fitting perfectly into any Victorian drama -Austen, Bronte, even Dickens- with her fresh faced English rose complexion and gift for innocent enthusiasm. But I could also see her being terrific in pretty much anything from serious drama to soaps to sitcoms. I really believe she has enormous potential, maybe not as a front-rank star, but definitely as a terrific and versatile character actor.

Olly Barbieri has similar potential as a character actor.

Lily Loveless has that certain *je ne sais quoi* but I just don't know what it is (sorry: old joke) -whatever, you simply can't take your eyes off her when she's on screen.

That doesn't, however, mean I'm disparaging the others in any way -Kathryn & Megan Prescott, Pasqualino, Lukeba, O'Connell, and Scodelario are all good in their parts whether you may like an individual character or not. It's extremely difficult to doubt that the production team have got the cast right. Had they got it wrong, I wouldn't be writing this and the ratings would stink.

Skins 3 deserves to be seen more widely than it is because people who haven't watched it simply have no idea how good it is. I've never seen a TV series that has engaged my attention so much, that I've watched so many times with such close attention -not even *Buffy* or *Battlestar Galactica* come close, or movies, not even *Evil Dead 2* or *King Kong* (the original version and probably the closest)- or that I wanted to talk/write about so much.

And even now, after writing all (16,000 words) of this I'm still not sure. Is it really this good or just a middle-aged man's irrational obsession?

Reader, watch it and you decide.