COMMENT

FAMILY GUY

In the pilot episode of "The Sopranos," which Home Box Office first aired on January 10, 1999, a thickening son of Essex County, New Jersey, reluctantly visits Jennifer Melfi, a psychiatrist, at her office in Montclair. His name is Anthony Soprano and he has been depressed.

Tony lives in a "French provincial" McMansion in North Caldwell with his wife, Carmela, and their children, Meadow and AJ. He works as a "waste-management consultant," as he all too modestly informs his doctor; in fact, his interests extend to the docks, "no show" construction jobs, paving and joint-fitting unions, an "executive card game," a sports book in Roseville, loan-sharking, coffee-shop and pizza-place protection rackets, truck hijacking, HUD scams, fell-off-the-back-of-a-truck consumer goods, a strip club in Lodz, and extensive holdings in real estate, vinegar peppers, and geomanth.

Tony Soprano, as everyone in north Jersey and beyond has come to know, is the head of the Di Meo crime family. He has been suffering from panic attacks. Business is uneven. His associates and his children lack focus. His uncle resents his authority. His wife resents his late-night romps with yet another geomanth. And his mother, the Medea of Bloomfield Avenue, never loved him (and may yet give the signal to have him whacked). The pressure is really something. Just recently, he tells Dr. Melfi, he was short of breath, tingly inside—"It felt like ginger ale in my skull." He collapsed while grilling pork sausages on the barbecue:

TONY: The morning of the day I got sick, I been thinking. It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came in too late for that, I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.

DR. MELFI: Many Americans, I think, feel that way.

TONY: I think about my father. He never reached the heights like me. But in a lotta ways he had it better. He had his people. They had their standards. They had pride. Today, whadda we got?

And so began Tony's quest for a renewed sense of family, heritage, coherent truths, mental health, and a prime cut of the Esplanade construction projects. "The Sopranos," the richest achievement in the history of television, comes to an end June 10th, after eighty-six episodes. It has been with us a long time—longer than the Bush Administration (and nothing seems more interminable than that). In his first hour onscreen, Tony, played by James Gandolfini, still had a modest shock of hair and a Gleason-esque lightness to his step. He had not yet achieved the menacing rhino plopped that would come with time, anxiety, and fifteen thousand buttered bialys. We'd yet to glimpse his ages, and his accent was less mobbed up, almost refined. He sounded more Summit than Newark.

Nevertheless, to an astonishing degree the characters and the ideas—comic, dramatic, and social—in "The Sopranos" were in place from the start. Even though its creator, David Chase, never had the luxury of a novelist's control of length and narrative destiny, he has rarely faltered. The show evolved in the manner of a sprawling social novel of the nineteenth century, constantly sprouting new plotlines, developing recurring jokes, images, and characters. Dickens would have seen a kinsman in the creator of "Paulie Walnuts" Gualtieri. Besides, there are fewer dull patches in "The Sopranos" than there are in "The Mystery of Edwin Drood"—all due respect.

Like John Updike's Rabbit series or Philip Roth's novels of the past decade, "The Sopranos" teems with the mindless commerce and consumption of modern...
America. The drama and the comedy are rooted in the particulars of life as it is lived from the Pulaski Skyway to Bergen Avenue, and yet the larger events of the world are never completely scaled from view. There are always televisions playing in the background—the local news in offices and hospital rooms, the “Hitler channel” in Tony’s living room—and so world politics is the undercurrent rumbling beneath the ordinary nights in New Jersey. History echoes the domestic catastrophes. As Bobby “Bacala” Baccalieri puts it with dire resignation, “Quasimodo predicted all of this.”

No matter how funny or blatantly cartoonish some of the supporting players are (Steve Van Zandt’s Silvio Dante seems less like a human being than an animated Fellini figure), the mobsters and their families in “The Sopranos” are a recognizable reflection of all of us. The epic is peppered with every variety of twenty-first-century character imaginable: mobsters, yes, but also shadow communities of smug and equally troubled psychiatrists, disillusioned F.B.I. agents and cops, neurotic priests, immigrant “caregivers,” screen-added teenagers, earnestly self-indulgent Columbia students. It is an Essex County of Italians, Irish, blacks, and Jews, but also of new immigrants: Koreans, Russians, Ukrainians, and Arabs. Other television series have guests, character types who make a purposeful one-night stand and are then replaced with new types in new situations. In “The Sopranos,” characters arrive and take full human shape; children grow into adults—and sometimes, without explanation, like a Russian mobster fleeing through the snowy woods of the Pine Barrens, they inexplicably disappear and frustrate our TV-shaped need for lessons and resolution. It doesn’t matter that we come to “like” Adriana La Cerva. Chase has no use for our sentiment. He kills it off with a .38.

“The Sopranos,” like its predecessor, Martin Scorcese’s “Goodfellas,” is about the ruthlessness of petty lying crooks, but the best-downs, strangulations, and shootings are the least of the violence. Chase is merciless with his exposure of the ordinary disappointments and tragedies. He has immersed us for years in an examination of addiction, twelve-step recoveries, teen-age depression, modern pharmacology, suicides, sexual indulgence, family betrayals, financial manipulation, accidents, heart attacks, strokes, death and dying—and always, afterward, the inability to summon a language to equal the emotion. “Whaddya gonna do?” is the shrugging motif. A young, healthy thug dies reading a magazine on the toilet. An S.U.V. flips over on a slick road. “Whaddya gonna do?”

Michael Corleone almost convinces us, in his autumnal walk with Kay Adams, that he is the moral superior of a senator. Chase’s vision is darker, and as we descend into the death spiral of the final episodes it only gets worse. Just when we begin to grow too fond of Tony, when we get all gooey about his plight as a misunderstood son and overextended executive and father, Chase has him do something to undercut our sympathy. After his son, A.J., has tried to kill himself by pulling a plastic bag over his head, tying a cinder block to his foot, and jumping into the family’s back-yard swimming pool, Tony explains to Dr. Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) that A.J. survived because the rope was too long. Maybe he’s just “an idiot,” he declares offhandedly, his paternal grief mixing with loveless dismissal. “Historically, that’s been the case.” Even Tony’s clear-eyed and maternal wife, Carmela, played by Edie Falco, is willing to set aside her occasional outbursts of umbrage for the price of an Hermès scarf. “They say it’s the best,” Tony informs her, as the marital storm passes.

Everyone in “The Sopranos” has grown older (and we along with them). One after another, the made men and crew members disappear from the stage—an accelerated version of what happens naturally. “Hope comes in many forms,” Dr. Melfi tells Tony in one of their first sessions. “Well, who’s got the time for that?” he replies.

The end is a mystery, but we know one thing: “The Sopranos” defied Aristotelian conventions. It is a comedy that ends with a litany of the dead and missing. Whaddya gonna do?

—David Remnick

DEPT. OF BELATED THANKS
A THOUSAND WORDS

Sig Gissler, the administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes, keeps four prize-winning photographs on the wall above his desk. One is of Babe Ruth’s farewell, at Yankee Stadium; another shows Presidents Kennedy and Eisenhower walking