

## A QUEER LOVE STORY FOR THE AGES FROM THE LAST OF US

When it comes to depictions of queer love in popular culture Frank and Bill's story is downright radical, Lyla Miklos writes.

By Lyla Miklos, Contributor

Sat., Feb. 25, 2023, 5 min. read



Frank (Murray Bartlett), right, and Bill (Nick Offerman) bond over the perfect Linda Ronstadt song in Episode 3 of "The Last of Us." **LIANE HENTSCHER/HBO / TNS**

When the promos for the new HBO series "The Last of Us" first came out I wasn't too interested. Zombies. Pandemics. Post-Apocalyptic Horror. I'll pass thanks. I was never a fan of "The Walking Dead" or other zombie related media that had previously entered the pop culture zeitgeist.

While we still live with the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, mass entertainment depicting the destruction of our society due to a pandemic cuts far too close to the bone. Also, after last year's devastating miniseries "Station Eleven" based on the 2014 novel by Canadian writer Emily St. John Mandel there couldn't possibly be another piece of media that could so sensitively tackle the subject matter of a worldwide pandemic.

I was wrong.

The Last of Us stars Pedro Pascal ("The Mandalorian") and Bella Ramsey ("Game of Thrones") as Joel and Ellie. Two world weary survivors of a global calamity who are forced to band together. The show is based on a video game created by Neil Druckman. Druckman is also the co-producer of the series along with Craig Mazin ("Chernobyl").

In the alternative universe of the series, humanity is destroyed by a fungal infection in 2003 that gets into the world wide food supply. The infected turn into zombie like creatures whose minds and bodies are controlled by fungi.

Seeing social media blow up after the first episode of "The Last of Us" aired signalled to me that this was going to be one of those water cooler shows that everyone would be talking about. So despite my initial hesitation I tuned in. I appreciated the craftsmanship going into each episode, but I was still somewhat emotionally removed from the characters and their journeys.

That was until the third episode of the series aired entitled "[Long Long Time](#)". It starred the unlikely couple of Nick Offerman ("Parks and Recreation") and Murray Bartlett ("The White Lotus") as Bill and Frank. Penned by series co-creator Mazin and directed by Peter Hoar ("It's A Sin") this nearly 90 minutes of television turns into a beautiful portrayal of finding love later in life in a world without much left to live for.

The episode completely upends and subverts the usual [bury your gays trope](#) that far too often becomes a fait accompli for queer characters in popular media. Think of the lesbian couple Willow and Tara in "Buffy The Vampire Slayer". When queer characters fall in love, they are not allowed to survive or be happy together.

In the original video game the show is based on Bill is an angry paranoid man who lives alone. His former partner, Frank, died by suicide after the two had a falling out. Frank's suicide note to his former partner is cruel and his death is graphic. A story line that was incredibly problematic on several levels.

Druckman and Mazin knew they needed to give these two characters a re-imagining that lifted up queer lives rather than adding them to a far too long list

of disposable queer characters whose entire existence is to assist the heterosexual protagonist on their hero's journey.

Bill is a survivalist loner who proudly displays his "Don't Tread On Me" libertarian flag amongst his stockpile of weapons and surveillance gear. Frank is an extrovert who loves a good wine pairing, making friends, playing piano, gardening and painting. Their first intimate moment makes me tear up every time because it is so tender and filled with hope and longing.

Series co-creators Druckman and Mazin are not queer, so they knew they needed to reach out to queer artists to help them craft an authentic queer love story. Mazin texted Broadway's [Seth Rudetsky](#), an out gay composer, to ask for the perfect song for Bill and Frank to literally express their love. Rudetsky suggested Linda Ronstadt's "[Long Long Time](#)". Bill's voice cracking when he responds to Frank's question about who's the girl he is singing about – "there is no girl" – made my heart burst.

Bill and Frank go through a lot together, for over two decades, but they have each other right until the very end. They live and end their lives on their own terms. When it comes to depictions of queer love in popular culture their story is downright radical.

The episode is already getting wide spread praise for its writing, direction and acting with many already claiming that it should win several Emmys come awards season. The episode can stand alone as its own mini feature film.

When [Max Richter's "On The Nature of Daylight"](#) plays near the end of the episode you almost wish everyone could live through an apocalypse like Bill and Frank. Exchanging rings, getting old together and celebrating nearly a lifetime of memories over a favourite meal.

Bill says to Frank "This isn't the tragic suicide at the end of the play." A line which Mazin admits in the [HBO Podcast](#) for the episode he stole from the play "The Boys In The Band" by gay writer Mart Crowley. Crowley's landmark 1968 play about the lives of gay men has been adapted twice for the screen (1970 and 2018). The men in Crowley's work are toxic and self-destructive as they live in a world filled with hate and homophobia which they have all internalized. Bill does not have that societal pressure. His life with Frank has been filled with acceptance and love, so he concludes his speech with the words "I'm old. I'm satisfied. You were my purpose."

During the COVID-19 Pandemic so many put the possibility of finding love and physical intimacy on hold because they were actions that could tragically lead to death. Taking the risk of having your heart broken went far beyond the poetic. Bill and Frank take the figurative and literal risk of heartbreak with their leap of faith.

“The Last of Us” demonstrates that the stories we truly care about aren’t filled with special effects, but with fully drawn characters whose journeys we are invested in. Bill and Frank’s lives together are filled with meaning, beauty and compassion despite being surrounded by a crumbling world filled with chaos, trauma and suffering. That this story of hope is centered around queer love and joy is a celebration. They not only live. [They live their best lives ever.](#)

***Lyla Miklos (she/her) is a queer feminist labour activist, broadcast journalist, education worker, publicist, vocalist, UU & Trekkie.***

<https://www.thespec.com/entertainment/television/opinion/2023/02/25/a-queer-love-story-for-the-ages-from-the-last-of-us.html>