



A scene from *No Gain No Love*, streaming on Prime Video. PRIME VIDEO

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BY JAE-HA KIM



There are so many good K-dramas this year that it is truly difficult to select just 13 for a best-of list. Some highly-awaited shows aren't even out yet. For instance, the second season of *Squid Game* will be released on December 26 on Netflix. Meanwhile, other K-dramas like the gripping thriller *When the Phone Rings* only dropped six episodes so far. (And as much as I've enjoyed what I've seen, I can't recommend a K-drama before I see the ending.)

The dramas that have resonated the most with me this year offer an eclectic mix of topics that deal with revenge, mental health issues, competitive sports, child abandonment, time travel, and gay relationships. So if you're looking for something good to watch over the holidays or all year round, check out this list of the 13 best K-dramas of 2024.

### ***Family by Choice***

If there's one thing this K-drama gets across, it's that keeping secrets from children about their own history is never the way to go. This lovely slice-of-life series addresses what makes a family. Three biologically unrelated children are motherless. Ju-won (Jung Chae-yeon) can't remember her mom, who died when she was young. But San-ha (Hwang In-youp) and Hae-jun (Bae Hyun-sung) remember the mothers who abandoned them all too well.

Ju-won's dad takes in Hae-jun and becomes his de facto parent, while San-ha lives one floor up in the apartment complex with his father. The children are each other's fearless ride-or-die best friends. Eventually, one of the "brothers" pursues a romantic relationship with Ju-won, which doesn't go over well with the other "sibling." The

scenario is handled with care and sensitivity, giving the characters space to grieve and reconcile their newfound dynamics. (Viki)

### ***Love in the Big City***

Based on Sang Young Park's bestselling novel of the same name, the K-drama adaptation was overshadowed by the film version, which stars Kim Go-eun (*Little Women*) and Steve Sanghyun Noh (*Pachinko*). But this series is so relevant as it matter-of-factly addresses homosexuality — a topic not often depicted in South Korean media in any meaningful way. Four directors tackle each arc in our protagonist's life. Go Young's sexuality makes him neither a hero nor villain, but rather a young man trying to live a joyous life that matters. Lead actor Nam Yoon-su offers depth and heartaching vulnerability, making viewers root for his happiness. The tragedy in this series isn't that Young is gay. It's the narrow-minded, often well-meaning people who view his sexuality as something that's *fixable*, when there's nothing that needs to be fixed. *Love in the Big City* is a unique K-drama experience with an ending that feels right, even as it breaks your heart. (Viki)

## ***Queen of Tears***

This superb K-drama starts off with a henpecked husband who is so miserable in his marriage that when he finds out his icy wife is dying, he's not unhappy about it. In fact, he's a little giddy. But by the end of the series, we are left feeling teary-eyed and hopeful about the power of love. Hyun-woo (Kim Soo-hyun) and Hae-in (Kim Ji-won) seem like the perfect couple. Except her chaebol father owns the company they work at, while his family's modest income isn't comparable. This imbalance in power results in his being bullied and taken advantage of by his in-laws, who view him as beneath them. Most of the characters in this show have unresolved issues that keep them emotionally stunted. Ironically, Hae-in's immature brother (Kwak Dong-yeon) is the one character who is completely besotted with his wife and their child. He refuses to give up on the woman he loves, even after it appears that she has misrepresented herself. As for tropes, we have them all here: brain tumor, memory loss, overbearing parents, and an evil adoptee. But it all works, making *Queen of Tears* one of 2024's best K-dramas. (Netflix)

## ***Lovely Runner***

A time travel love story that spans two decades, *Lovely Runner* centers on Sol (Kim Hye-yoon), who is confined to a wheelchair, and Sun-jae (Byeon Woo-seok), who feels trapped by his K-pop stardom. She lives in an ableist society that doesn't concern itself with her disability. He has to navigate a life that no longer makes him happy. Through a time portal that doesn't make sense if you think too much about it, Sol finds herself in the past as a high school student. And guess who else is a student, too? Knowing what she does in the future, Sol attempts to rectify some of the tragedies that seem inevitable (including a serial killer subplot that could've been omitted). But overall, *Lovely Runner* is compelling and tackles some tough subjects, like suicide, dementia, and the negative side of idol culture. (Viki)

## ***The Trunk***

Adding a twist to the contract marriage trope, *The Trunk* tackles the plot device from a film noir perspective. When his manipulative ex-wife Seo-yeon (Jung Yun-ha) orders Jeong-won (Gong Yoo) to enter into a one-year contract marriage, he marries In-ji (Seo Hyun-jin), who works for a high-end company that pairs up clients with suitable temporary spouses. Initially, all Jeong-won wants is Seo-yeon, who dangles the possibility of their getting back together after their respective contract marriages end. But as his relationship with In-ji becomes more real than fake, Seo-yeon's unhinged behavior escalates. While the titular trunk is seldom seen, it works well as an allegory in this quiet thriller. We think we know who it belongs to, but what secrets does it hold? While the nudity and sex scenes may turn off some viewers who prefer their K-dramas cute and innocent, the stellar acting, gorgeous cinematography, and twisty plot will keep viewers engrossed. (Netflix)

## ***Marry My Husband***

Office worker Ji-won (Park Min-young) is married and has a stable job and a loyal best friend who is there for her during her cancer treatments. But all is not as it seems. After catching her husband and BFF having an affair, she “dies,” before miraculously waking up in the past. After Ji-won figures out she can change the course of her life by transferring her misery to someone else, she vows to make her boyfriend and best friend pay for betraying her. This fast-paced revenge drama is filled with intrigue, humor, and much-needed girl power. The scriptwriter also includes a meta moment involving a timeline of BTS’ music. Proclaiming hit songs from the future as their favorites, two time travelers realize they have more in common than not. As Ji-won’s boss, Na In-woo creates a character who is awkwardably adorkable, but one that is clearly meant to get the girl. (Prime Video)

## ***A Shop for Killers***

This fast-paced K-drama kills off its protagonist (Lee Dong-wook) early on, but we see him throughout the show in flashbacks. He was the owner of a mysterious online mall where buyers could order mundane gardening hoses. But after his death, his niece (Kim Hye-jun) realizes her uncle had led a double life. He was a retired assassin who ran a site on the dark web selling military-grade weapons. As his enemies send teams of well-equipped mercenaries to kill her, she recalls the lessons he taught her — which seemed random at the time. And though she doesn't realize it yet, viewers ascertain early on that uncle and niece are more alike than not. (Hulu)



## ***No Gain No Love***

Hae-yeong (Shin Min-a) doesn't need to get married to appease her parents. But she does need a husband to prove to the higher ups at work that she's responsible enough to be promoted. (Wrap your head around that for a second.) Knowing that she's being penalized for being a single, successful woman, she hires the local convenience store part-timer, Ji-wook (Kim Young-dae), to pretend to be her spouse. That they will fall in love is a no brainer. But the joy of this series is watching how they get there. There's a lot going on in these 12 episodes, with some of the best scenes centered on Hae-yeong's best friends — one writes racy web novels, while the other is in an open relationship. The three women own their sexuality, as well as sex toys that make a surprising appearance during a home invasion. (Prime Video)

## ***Welcome to Samdal-ri***

This K-drama explores the romance between childhood friends Yong-pil (Ji Chang-wook) and Sam-dal (Shin Hye-sun), but it's their ongoing friendship that ties this series together. Their relationship is complicated by the death of one of their mothers and a bitter father who blames the survivor (and her innocent child). Secrets are kept to the detriment of everyone involved. As an adult, Yong-pil is a weather forecaster in his hometown. Though he has opportunities to work in a higher profile position in Seoul instead, he chooses to stay home. As for Sam-dal, she left for Seoul after high school and is now a prominent fashion photographer. But after a jealous former assistant accuses Sam-dal of abuse, her career is destroyed. *Welcome to Samdal-ri* moves at a pleasantly languid pace, showcasing the beauty of Jeju-do. But even more importantly, it depicts the emotional growth of these characters, whose friendship is unconditional. *Welcome to Samdal-ri* aired from December 2023 to the end of January 2024. (Netflix)

## ***Queen of Divorce***

Equal parts comedy and revenge, *Queen of Divorce* tackles the dirty deeds that occur during divorce proceedings. Sa-ra (Lee Ji-ah) is a brilliant attorney, whose husband and monster-in-law set her up for a crime she never committed. After being sentenced to prison, her manipulative husband divorces her. While she loses her license to practice law, she gains a will to fight. Literally. Since she can't resume her legal career, Sa-ra opens a divorce resolution business, where her newfound martial arts skills are put to use. The team's unorthodox methods may not be one hundred percent legal, but they get the job done. Throughout it all, Sa-ra works diligently to get back custody of her own child, while simultaneously meting out punishment on those who set her up. (Kocowa)

## ***Like Flowers in Sand***

Once a *ssireum* prodigy destined to outdo his brothers and father, Baek-doo (Jang Dong-yoon) — now in his 30s — knows it's time to consider retiring from competitive sports. But what else can he do? He's not qualified to do much more than wrestle. Meanwhile, a serial killer is on the loose in his small town, but the nosy residents seem more excited than frightened by the threat of danger. Meanwhile, Yoo-kyung (Lee Ju-myung) moves into a house previously occupied by Baek-doo's childhood best friend, Doo-sik. He's convinced that they're one and the same, but the newcomer denies it. All of this brings up painful adolescent memories for Baek-doo, who needs some kind of resolution before he can get closure and move on. Though this K-drama premiered in 2023, eight of the show's 12 episodes aired in 2024. (Netflix)

## ***Doctor Slump***

Former high school rivals Jeong-woo (Park Hyung-sik) and Ha-neul (Park Shin-hye) form a truce as adults after both face slumps in their medical careers. Celebrity plastic surgeon Jeong-woo loses his lucrative practice after a patient dies during surgery. Anesthesiologist Ha-neul takes a break from her career when she can no longer tolerate her abusive and sexist boss, who steals her ideas and promotes men over her. Jeong-woo's well-connected family is less concerned about his mental health than how his failure can impact negatively on his father's medical career. And Ha-neul's image-conscious mother tries to push her daughter back to work, fearful that *she* will be deemed a failure if Ha-neul is no longer a physician. Thankfully, Ha-neul works out her feelings of obligation, disappointment, and confusion with the help of a therapist who is there to do what few in her life are willing to do: listen. Her influence also helps Jeong-woo realize what really matters in life. As Ha-neul says, "Life is a long journey. I'm not worthless because I didn't reach a specific goal at a designated time. Good fortune exists and is waiting for me." (Netflix)

## ***A Killer Paradox***

If you accidentally murder a serial killer, are your actions justified? Or are you just as evil as the man you killed? That's the moral dilemma Lee Tang (Choi Woo-shik, *Parasite*) faces in this darkly humorous series, which pits the newbie killer against gung-ho detective Jang Nan-gam (Son Suk-ku, *My Liberation Notes*). Upon first meeting, it appears that the calm cop has the upper hand. But *A Killer Paradox* clues viewers in as to where this series is headed. The title in Korean (살인장난감) translates to *The Murderer's Toy*. So who will Lee trifle with? Jang's full name literally means *toy* in Hangul. Jang knows Lee is the killer, and Lee knows that Jang knows. After his first kill, Lee is suicidal. But after he murders a second victim, who also turns out to be a serial killer, Lee is emboldened. He justifies his actions as a form of divine intervention to rid the world of immoral trash. Never mind that he has crossed over into that category himself. The once-bullied student who was too frightened to fight back finds his killing sprees to be thrillingly liberating. And redemption is something he's not actively seeking. (Netflix)



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**Jae-Ha Kim** is a columnist for the Chicago Tribune news syndicate. Born in Seoul, Kim specializes in covering Korean entertainment for outlets such as Teen Vogue, Rolling Stone, TODAY.com, NPR, **K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim**, and many more. An in-demand voice on Korean culture, Kim has been featured in... [Read more](#)



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