

# The Highlights of the 2021 Emmys

Michaela Coel's brilliant speech, Jennifer Coolidge's one-woman wavelength, and the pleasing return of dumb red-carpet questions.

By September 20, 2021

The pandemic awards show is a curious subgenre—a limited series, let's hope—but one that mirrors the herky-jerky history we've been living through. Last year's [Emmy Awards](#), with their couch-bound celebrities and hazmat suits, were socially distanced and working from home. The [Golden Globes](#), in February, were a hybrid affair; the [Oscars](#), in April, an awkward first post-vax get-together. Last night's Emmy ceremony was a tentative return to normal, appropriate for the Delta-variant era. The Zoom squares were gone, thank God. Finally, celebrities were back in the flesh, answering dumb red-carpet questions ("Please tell me," the host of E!'s red-carpet coverage said to Jason Sudeikis, "do you have your lucky socks on?"), schmoozing during commercial breaks, and trying not to trip over their gowns en route to the stage. It was a party, and parties are fun. But are they safe? "There's way too many of us in this little room," Seth Rogen, the first presenter, worried aloud. "What are we doing? They said this was outdoors—it's not! They lied to us! We're in a hermetically sealed tent right now. I would not have come to this! Why is there a *roof*?"

It took Reggie Watts, on call as d.j., to assure us the event was "following all the health-and-safety guidelines that some really smart people asked us to do," a line that may or may not have put Rogen at ease. Last year, though the nominated shows were holdovers from "the before times," the Emmys themselves were in quarantine. This year was the reverse: the ceremony was vaxxed and in person, but many of the nominated shows had been shot mid-pandemic, meaning that winners thanked their *COVID-19* crews (Ewan

McGregor, who won a lead-actor honor for "[Halston](#)") and recalled writers' meetings held over Zoom (Stephen Colbert, whose election-night coverage won the live-broadcast category). The new *COVID* protocols also made it easy to spot the publicists trying to duck out of red-carpet photos, and the stagehands accidentally wandering into frame: just look for the people wearing masks, and you've found Hollywood's version of essential workers.

Once the show got going, inhibitions seemed to fall away—on to the business of being celebrated. Last year, three shows more or less divvied up the prizes: "[Schitt's Creek](#)" (comedy), "[Succession](#)" (drama), and "[Watchmen](#)" (limited series). With all three out of the way, a new trio dominated the first hour of the broadcast: "[Ted Lasso](#)," "[The Crown](#)," and "[Mare of Easttown](#)." In the Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series category alone, "Ted Lasso" had *four* nominees. (One of them, Brett Goldstein, won.) The show kept on winning—including a lead-actor honor for its happy mascot, Sudeikis, and the award for Outstanding Comedy Series—turning the Emmys into that friend who keeps going, "Are you watching 'Ted Lasso'? You *have* to watch 'Ted Lasso.'" It wasn't a "Schitt's Creek"-level sweep, though. There were several wins for "[Hacks](#)," including a much-deserved prize for [Jean Smart](#), who was so overcome that she couldn't decide whether her agent's name was Scott or Steve.

"[The Crown](#)" also went the distance, winning for its writing (Peter Morgan), its directing (Jessica Hobbs), its Prince Charles (Josh O'Connor), its Prince Philip ([Tobias Menzies](#)), and its Margaret Thatcher (Gillian Anderson, whose accent during her acceptance speech somehow represented both sides of the pond). Its Princess Diana (Emma Corrin) did not win, but she lost to Queen Elizabeth II (Olivia Colman), which the Palace would deem proper. And Corrin *did* win for [boldest outfit](#): part synchronized swimmer, part Max from "Where the Wild Things Are," part handmaid. The "Crown" group was beamed in from a fun-looking shindig in London, held in what resembled the dining room of a cruise ship. When the show won Outstanding Drama Series, Morgan declared, "We're going to have a party now," despite the

local time creeping past 4 A.M.

Menzies was one of the few royals missing from the party, and his win, through no fault of his own, was a bit of a letdown, since it came at the expense of [Michael K. Williams](#) ("[Lovecraft Country](#)"), who died the week after Emmy voting ended. Williams was never nominated for his groundbreaking role on "[The Wire](#)," and a posthumous honor would have given the evening an emotional jolt. But the awards gods have their own ideas, and Menzies's victory in absentia bore an eerie resemblance to [Anthony Hopkins](#)'s uncomfortable defeat of [Chadwick Boseman](#) at this year's [Academy Awards](#). At least Kerry Washington's unenthusiastic acceptance on Menzies's behalf didn't close out the show. There were still two blessed hours left.

Other conspicuous non-winners included Billy Porter and Mj Rodriguez, both from "[Pose](#)," and Barry Jenkins, who directed "[The Underground Railroad](#)," an acclaimed series that went home with nothing. Rodriguez's nomination, the first in her category for a transgender actor, was historic. And yet you could sense the ceremony wanting to be more inclusive than it actually was. The producers put Black talent front and center: the host (Cedric the Entertainer, whose shtick was passable but brief), the final presenter (Angela Bassett), the lifetime-achievement honoree (Debbie Allen, who thanked both Shonda Rhimes and Captain Kangaroo, a sign of a career well spent). But the winners, save for a RuPaul here and a "Hamilton" there, not so much. At least [Michaela Coel](#) won a writing award, for "[I May Destroy You](#)," having lost an acting award to Kate Winslet. Coel's speech was one of the evening's highlights, emphasizing the virtues of solitude—a counterintuitive message at a big awards show. "In a world that entices us to browse through the lives of others to help us better determine how we feel about ourselves, and to, in turn, feel the need to be constantly visible—for visibility, these days, seems to somehow equate to success—do not be afraid to disappear," she advised. "From it, from us, for a while. And see what comes to you in the silence." Spoken like a writer.

Coel's speech was especially potent coming on the heels of Scott Frank's win for directing "[The Queen's Gambit](#)." I have to admit that I didn't make it to the end of "The Queen's Gambit," in part because I found the direction antiseptic and turgid, but I did manage to watch all of Frank's speech, which had similar qualities. When the play-off music came, Frank refused to yield, until it sheepishly faded. Then he filibustered the music a second time. By the third attempt, he finally wrapped things up. Note to award winners: when you hear that orchestra, use it as underscoring to say something inspirational, then *scram*. At the end of the night, "The Queen's Gambit" won again, for Outstanding Limited or Anthology Series, beating "Mare of Easttown." It was a victory lap for Netflix, which had just landed its first series win, for "The Crown," and a sign of a changing industry, in which the streamers are outpacing traditional networks and cable channels. But I'm not convinced, as one of the show's executive producers, William Horberg, insisted, that "patriarchy simply has no defense against our queens." In the same sentence, he credited Anya Taylor-Joy with "bringing the sexy back to chess."

Horberg might want to have a chat with [Jennifer Coolidge](#), who had the task of presenting the award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series. After taking a few moments to pant heavily, stroke her hair, and let the audience adjust to her one-woman wavelength, Coolidge purred, "I want you all to know, nominees, that you have overcome the incredible handicap in this business of being men." She added, with less defiance than cheek, "Bravo, gentlemen, wherever you are." Ladies and gentlemen, a glimpse into the Emmys of 2022: everything's coming up [lotus](#).

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