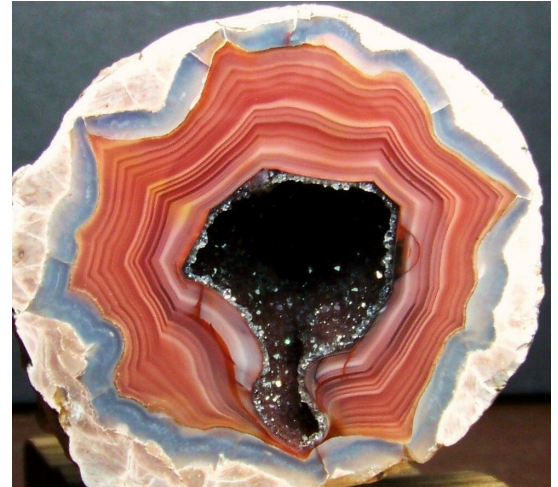


Thunderegg

*A one hour comedy series by Chris
Masson*

The official state mineral of Oregon, thundereggs look like ordinary rocks on the outside, but on the inside they often contain intricate patterns and colours.



Overview

More than ever, America is divided and the gap between liberals and conservatives is widening. In reality, we're all idiots. Thunderegg is a comedy that laughs at both sides while stitching them back together. When townspeople of all stripes in the fictional town of Thunderegg Falls, Oregon participate in an experiment in psychiatric care, they find themselves facing a lot of the same problems.

There's a small city in Belgium called Geel, where for a few centuries local people have been opening their doors to the mentally ill. It started as a religiously-motivated custom, but now the state health authorities administer the program. There are hundreds of patients (referred to as "boarders") integrated into Geel. *Thunderegg* explores what that same program would look like in America.

Many people think of weird, proudly progressive Portland when they think of Oregon. But talk to the folks outside the urban centers in the Pacific Northwest and you might think you're in the deep south. Thunderegg Falls is one part *Portlandia*, one part *Alabama*. It embodies America's contentious duality to a tee. There is a struggling

intentional community called "Shushing Breeze" on its outskirts, and a thriving gun club and shooting range at its centre. There's a nearby liberal arts college where white girls named Tamara go to learn about white privilege and systemic racism, before spending spring break heli-skiing in Colorado. There is of course a church. And right next door is an organic cafe that really wants the city to overturn its ban on recreational marijuana. With the impending closure of several local employers, including a state mental hospital, the economic outlook is grim.

Our way in to the town comes via Mercy Hancock (27) and her family. Her brother Painter (39), a therapist at the local mental hospital, convinces her and their father BJ (65) to become the first volunteers in the pilot program that emulates the Geel system. After they adapt to the initial difficulties of having boarders in their homes, the Hancocks-- especially Mercy-- becomes the Program's biggest proponents.

The conservative old guard that control city hall, including fourth-term mayor Frank Service (65), are very much not in support of having "psychos" in their community. The thrust of the first season has to do with the program moving from a pilot project of two participants to a full blown invasion, as the hospital closes, the number of households with boarders explodes, and the unseen hands pushing the program forward become more forceful. Concurrent to the expansion of the program is Mercy's rise in municipal politics. Frank's regime has been reinforcing the ideological divide in town for years, constantly doing things like denying permits to Shushing Breeze, and enforcing a strict no-unicycling-within-city-limits policy. When Oregon was in the process of legalizing recreational marijuana, Thunderegg adopted a draconian ban. When they approve plans to expand the gun club, thereby cutting down the town's favourite tree, and move to prohibit The Program

just as it picks up steam, it's the last straw for Mercy. She emerges as a potent organizer, the first person to ever rally the liberal side of the community. She will run for mayor with the continued expansion of The Program as the cornerstone of her campaign.

The series provides a canvas to tell personal character-driven stories that relate to some aspect of the socio political discourse in North America. These conflicts frequently stem from The Program, as it comes to be called, and so the participants' abilities to navigate these conflicts will directly affect the success of Mercy's mayory, putting her at wits end.

"But mental health is a sensitive topic!"

You can un-clutch your pearls, we've got some ground rules. (Side note: We seem to have no problem making mentally unwell characters the villains or objects of pity in movies and TV, but what, we can't tell honest stories where they are the comic heroes? Better to keep them hidden? I think TV can help to undo that pervasive othering.) Those ground rules:

1. No mental patient stereotypes: no drooling, babbling, raving lunatics or dangerous sociopaths. The Program doesn't admit people with those kinds of problems. Boarders have issues like depression, PTSD, cognitive impairments, etc, that allow them to flourish with just a bit of support.
2. No identifying people by their diagnoses. A given character's "problem" might not ever even be named.
3. No exploiting the vulnerable. The tenor of jokes are never "those crazies from the looney bin sure are wacky!" (Punch up, not down. Duh.)
4. No hiding the reality of being ill. Bad shit happens.
5. Every script gets a consultation from a qualified mental health professional and sociologist.

"Fine, but this is a COMEDY?"

Comedy is the new drama. There have been several successful comedies in recent years who don't operate by going for a laugh every 20 seconds (*Louie, Atlanta, Orange is the New Black, Baskets, Dear White People, Atypical, Girls, Barry...*). In them, you're as likely to get something dark, weird, awkward, existential or touching as you are to get something funny. Same here. Nevertheless, people's discomfort with dealing with the mentally ill, the absurdity of America's political divide, and Thunderegg Falls's colourful characters provide more than enough fodder for laugh-y kind of comedy.

Other side note: did I mention that we're also seeing the rebirth of the socially-conscious comedy? See *The Carmichael Show, Superior Donuts, Dear White People* and the rebooted *One Day at a Time*.

Characters

Mercy Hancock: 27. Quirky, new-agey farm girl. Bright. Smiling. Enthusiastic. Curious. Warm. Idealistic. She is a failed artist, failed midwife, failed holistic landscape designer, failed burlesque circus performer, jack-of-all-trades manual labourer, amateur tarot card reader and most recently the manager at "Service's Family Sporting Goods and Ammo." You could say she's still finding her path, but along the way she's met a lot of people in Thunderegg Falls; even by the standards of a small town, she knows everyone. She is charismatic and effortlessly builds a rapport with just about everyone she meets. Her relationship with her father is pleasant but somewhat unstable; he's always been blasé about her life goals and withholds praise. She has a tendency to revert back to behaving like a snarky teenager around him.

Burt "BJ" Hancock Jr.: 65. Lanky, with a piercing gaze. Direct and deeply patetic; he's a tough, aggressively peaceful hippie. Mercy's dad. Artisanal goat cheese crafer. He and his late wife made creating Shushing Breeze their life's work. He used to be idealistic like Mercy, but life has given him a hard edge or skepticism. ("Spend a day clearing out an acre of blackberry brambles, then see how much energy you have for an orgy.") He values truth, love, and compassion, but knows that you have to fight for them, and fighting changes you.

Tom Ranger: Early 30s. Naturally athletic build, would be hot if he could manage to take care of himself. He is a reluctant boarder in the Thunderegg program, living with B.J. Hancock in Mercy's childhood room. A former minor league catcher, Tom suffered a traumatic brain injury that left him deeply changed, with a list of problems like mood swings and memory lapses. He's erratic, one moment a gregarious bro, the next brooding like a petulant teenager. But in his best moments, what he really wants is to connect with people, and to lead a team again. He and Mercy clash at first; his headstrong cynicism clashes with her headstrong optimism. Eventually they will be (somewhat taboo) love interests and allies.

Franklin Service: 65. Barrel chested, with a great head of silver hair. Mercurial. Conservative. Proud. Gregarious, the consummate salesman. Mayor of Thunderegg Falls. He's the "bizarro" Mercy. He was an activist during the Vietnam war, only he was *in support* of the war. ("My bake sales helped fund DARPA's weather machine research. I've got a framed thank you note from LBJ!") His "Grenades for Grenada" ammo drive raised over 30,000 rounds in support of the invasion. He owns the biggest store in town. Huge John Wayne fan, avid doomsday prepper, gun club president. His wife Alice is a town councillor.

Alice Service: 60s. Frank's wife. Town councillor. Dumpy, stern-looking with just a bit of eccentric flair to her. She is vocal and adamant about her opinions, but absurdly malleable-- she'll enthusiastically defend the position of whoever spoke to her last.

Painter Hancock: 39. Mercy's brother. Looks like a big fat dumb guy, a blank-eyed teddy bear. But he's actually a very good therapist. Whereas Mercy gets worked up, enthusiastic, passionate, and then very disappointed, he is very even keeled and rarely takes on others' problems emotionally. Politically, he's practically oblivious to the divide. He really just sees people and considers issues in a vacuum. He is challenged when Mercy forces him to care personally about stuff.

Dr. Jacques: 40s. From Geel, Belgium. Squat, pot bellied, bearded. Charming, dynamic, but just a bit mischievous. Always dressed in European three-piece suits. Think: Sigmund Freud meets Santa Claus. He studied psychology, administered the Geel program, came to America to spread its gospel, backed by mysterious European foundation of sorts. Deeply religious, which helps him connect with the god-fearing locals.

Madeline Brecken: 20s. Provocative. Artistic. Brilliant. Prickly. Unpredictable. African-American. Slender and petite. A boarder in the program. She was a promising poet, performer and playwright in Portland's radical arts scene until her addiction and mental health issues forced her hospitalization. Though she is outwardly contemptuous of the small town atmosphere, she lives to shock people and finds lots of opportunity in Thunderegg Falls; being known as a mental patient, she can blow their mind with some provocative performance art, or just fuck with people's expectations of her. ("Sorry I'm late, my crazy was really acting up.")

Daniel: 20. Short, looks even younger than he is. Shy. Anxious. Lovelorn. Very smart. Mercy's first boarder. Basically lives his life on the internet.

Maya Service: 27. Frank's daughter, Mercy's frenemy. Peppy, two-faced, selfish. Grew up privileged, married a dentist. Thinks she's "woke" but is clueless and just the worst. She's not stupid or cruel, just criminally inconsiderate.

As the series progresses and the story demands it, we'll meet more people from the town-- be they liberals or conservatives-- and more boarders.

Story Ideas

These are all spread out over the course of the season-- some before Mercy's election, others afterwards.

"*Dr. Jacques*": We finally meet the man who has brought the Geel program to Oregon. He is in town to help make the push to expand the Program. He recruits Mercy and Painter to go door to door convincing people to volunteer. We get the distinct feeling that Dr. Jacques has something to hide, either about himself or about the nature of the foundation that is backing the program.

"*The Annexation*": Mercy brings her boarder friends up to see Thunderegg Falls' titular waterfall ("I haven't been up there in years," says every single townee) and discovers that the falls have been annexed by Geode Springs, the rival town upstream. Turns out they'd had their municipal signage there for years and they filed all the necessary paperwork. This scandal will not help Frank's re-election...

"*Stump Speech*": Town hall cuts down everyone's favourite tree to expand the gun range, moving it even closer to the playground. That's the last straw-- she can no longer abide

working for Frank and quits her job. Mercy makes the stump a focal point of her campaign for mayor, and the liberal community rallies around her.

"Bad News Rangers": Tom Ranger is invited to be an assistant coach for the town little league team. At the first practice it becomes clear that the other coaches just expect him to be a bat boy and not actually coach. Meanwhile, the kids are rowdy and won't pay attention to their coaches-- it's like all the worst-behaved kids in school made a team. Tom gets in mood and tells off the other coaches, instantly earning the admiration and devotion of the kids, who decide that he's their coach. He gives it a try, but his mood swings and memory problems make it go badly. It gets a bit dark for Tom. (And for the kids, but they kinda get what they deserve, the little shits.)

"Idle Boarder Hands": With the influx of boarders, there are now a lot of idle people in the streets. City hall struggles to find activities for them, and Mercy teaches an art class. Here we learn *why* she was a failed artist: she's absolutely terrible. It's clear that even her developmentally challenged students are better than her, she must overcome her jealousy and urge to sabotage them.

"Paramilitary Service" After a few idle boarders see Frank moving a variety of survival gear into his bunker, Frank begins to indoctrinate them in the importance of End Times preparedness. They are terrified and intrigued, and the training becomes more hands on. One thing leads to another and Frank finds himself in command of a small militia.

"The Return of Rocky" We've heard about the Service's eldest son in passing, but he's never been seen. Turns out he was institutionalized somewhere, basically abandoned by his parents. He has opted to be a boarder in the Program,

and is placed in the house right next door to the Services. His parents stress about the inevitable confrontation that Rocky must be seeking, but are surprised when it becomes clear his actual goal is to make his family jealous by making an over the top show of how much he loves his host family.

"The Media": The Program becomes national news as the media descends on the town. I don't have a plot in mind yet, but it's a chance to deal with the town's perception of the media, and to lampoon irresponsible journalism. Possible B-story: Madeline does her best to become the headline and create a spectacle, but Mercy successfully diverts attention away from her towards Rocky & his happy host family.