

Abortion Onscreen in 2018

Portrayals of Abortion on American Television

2018 marked an important moment in fictional abortion stories on television: a shift towards highlighting the nuanced experiences of women of color, more specifically Black women. This year, we identified 18 plotlines where a character has an abortion, discloses a past abortion, or considers getting an abortion. Of those, four of the five characters who obtained an abortion in the course of the plotline were either Black or biracial women.

This year's depictions often portrayed Black women having abortions with the support of friends, partners, or ex-partners, debunking the myth that people have abortions in isolation from those they love. Instead of having characters conform to stereotypes of Black women as angry, callous, irresponsible, or being manipulated in their reproductive decisions, these characters were complex, thoughtful, and approached their abortions with a range of human emotions including courage, hope, and humor, alongside disappointment and relief. *Empire*, *Dear White People*, and *Claws*, in particular, truly delved into what it means to portray a Black woman's abortion experience. These are important stories; the majority of abortions in this country are obtained by women of color, and we cannot understand abortion in the contemporary American context without the variety of their experiences being front and center. Our past research has shown that they have been overwhelmingly overlooked on television, but this year marks a shift in this pattern.

We did see other trends continue: a greater proportion of abortion stories continue to appear on comedies (*Superstore*, *Dear White People*, *Claws*, *Insatiable*, *Big Mouth*, *Insecure*), instead of the fraught medical and legal dramas that were the traditional genre for such depictions. We also found that medication abortions were not portrayed at all in 2018, a significant change given the few depictions in recent years. Given that almost a third of abortions in the United States are induced via pills, this is an important omission that could skew how the public understands abortion.

Overall, this year's shows had a lower proportion of abortions obtained, as opposed to abortions disclosed or considered (down to one-third from one-half). However, the high proportion of disclosures of past abortions (*Law & Order: SVU*, *Insecure*, *Mayans M.C.*, *Big Mouth*) suggests that this shift represents a step towards including new ways of incorporating abortion stories for television characters, rather than a shift towards avoiding and averting abortion stories.

Star (FX)

Episode: "Rise from the Ashes"
Air Date: March 28, 2018

Set in Atlanta, *Star* is a musical drama that follows three young women as they try to make it in the music business. One of the singers, Alex, has an abortion while her boyfriend Derek is in the hospital after a car accident. Alex lies about the abortion, telling Derek and her friends that she had a miscarriage. In this episode, Derek and Alex break up, and Alex confesses that she had an abortion. Derek says that he would have supported her, and that he's angry that she lied to him. The show portrays the abortion as part of a series of poor decisions on Alex's part, including lying, stealing, and cheating on Derek.



Empire (FX)

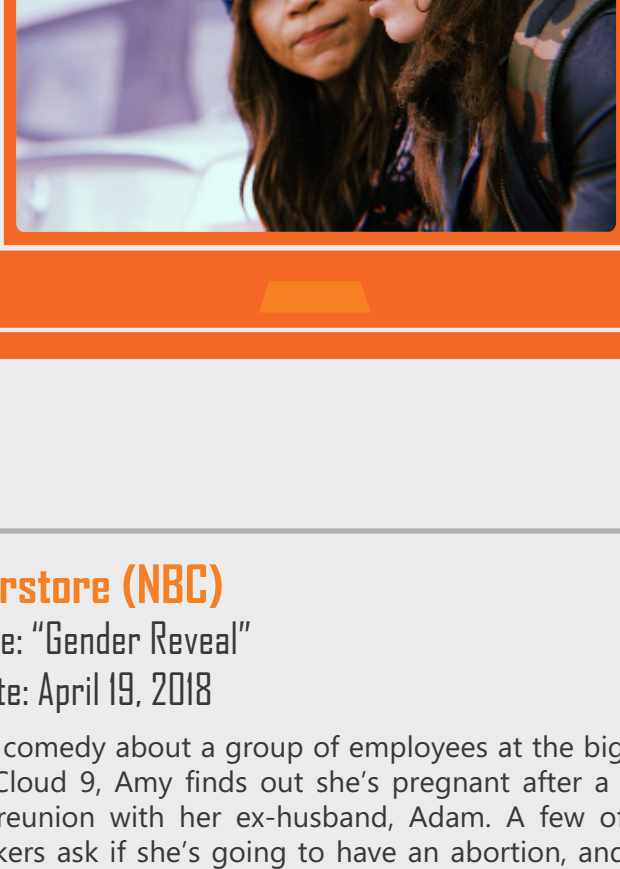
Episode: "Sweet Sorrow"
Air Date: April 11, 2018

Becky, an executive at *Empire* (the show's music label), is resolute in her decision to have an abortion and keep it a secret from her ex-boyfriend, a gospel singer business meeting named J Poppa. However, in an awkward business meeting with him, she blurts out that she's pregnant. He is excited about the possibility of finding a way to parent together, and is crestfallen when she says that she does not want to have a baby. Becky goes to Planned Parenthood accompanied by her supportive friend, Jamal. Right after a nurse calls Becky, J Poppa arrives at the clinic saying that he prays on this, and that while he doesn't agree with the decision, he loves Becky and doesn't want her to go through this without him. They embrace, she thanks him, and she follows the nurse to the procedure room. Through the examples of both Jamal and J Poppa, this episode depicts both a friend and a partner supporting Becky with compassion, regardless of how they feel about the abortion.

Rise (NBC)

Episode: "Bring Me Stanton"
Air Date: April 17, 2018

In this fictional drama, high schooler Sasha considers having an abortion. Her guidance counselor informs her that the law requires her to obtain parental consent to see a doctor while pregnant, but Sasha is afraid to share the news with her father, her primary parent. In a later episode, Travis, the father of the pregnancy, offers her a \$200 to have an abortion, and Sasha shares that she hasn't yet made a decision. Her friend Michael also makes it clear that he thinks she should have an abortion, and he accompanies her to a clinic, where they see an ultrasound of the 9 week embryo. Sasha is emotional about the ultrasound and wonders if this is her chance to build a family of her own. Michael recruits the guidance counselor to help him talk to Sasha, and the guidance counselor reveals that she gave birth as a teen and placed the baby for adoption. She says she'll support Sasha every step of the way no matter what she decides. The season ends with Michael and Sasha kissing, and without Sasha making a decision about her pregnancy. (Unfortunately, the show was canceled, so this plotline will remain unresolved.)



Superstore (NBC)

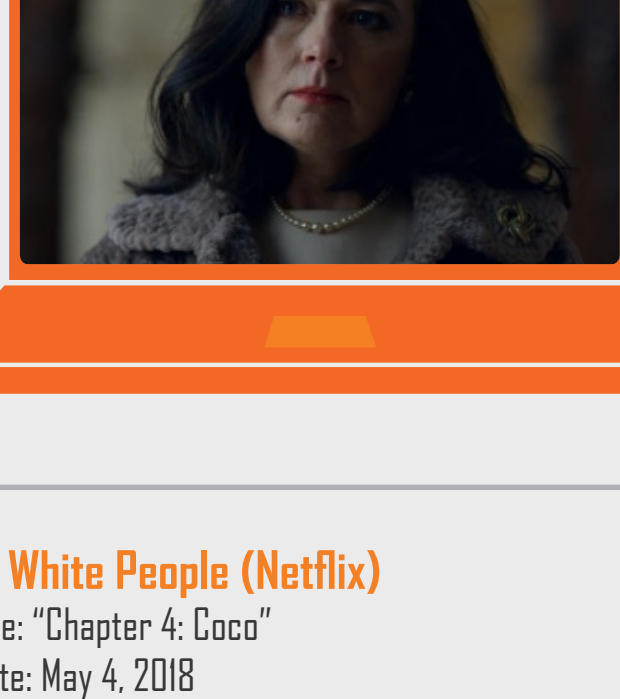
Episode: "Gender Reveal"
Air Date: April 19, 2018

In this comedy about a group of employees at the big box store Cloud 9, Amy finds out she's pregnant after a one-night reunion with her ex-husband, Adam. A few of her coworkers ask if she's going to have an abortion, and she doesn't say no, but she declines an offer to be driven to an abortion clinic. Amy wonders aloud if having a second child will prevent her from pursuing her goals, and Dina, her coworker who is also pregnant (as a surrogate for their boss), comments: "You can always find a reason not to do anything. If there's stuff you want to do, do that stuff." The next season opens with a very pregnant Amy, and the pregnancy is used as a source of drama and hijinx with her new boyfriend and co-worker, Jonah.

Trust (FX)

Episode: "John, Chapter II"
Air Date: April 29, 2018

In this drama about the infamous Getty kidnapping case, billionaire J. Paul Getty, Sr., age 81, finds out that Belinda, one of his many girlfriends, is pregnant. Paul immediately dismisses her and tells her to "get rid of it," reminding her that pregnancy is a breach of their contract. However, Belinda is clearly pleased with the idea of her pregnancy, viewing it as her last opportunity to have children. She chooses the pregnancy over him, and rejects his later offer to pay for their son's education. Paul's insistence on abortion is meant to show his cold-heartedness and his disappointment in the children and grandchildren he already has, an illustration of the character of a man who refuses to pay ransom for his kidnapped grandson.



Dear White People (Netflix)

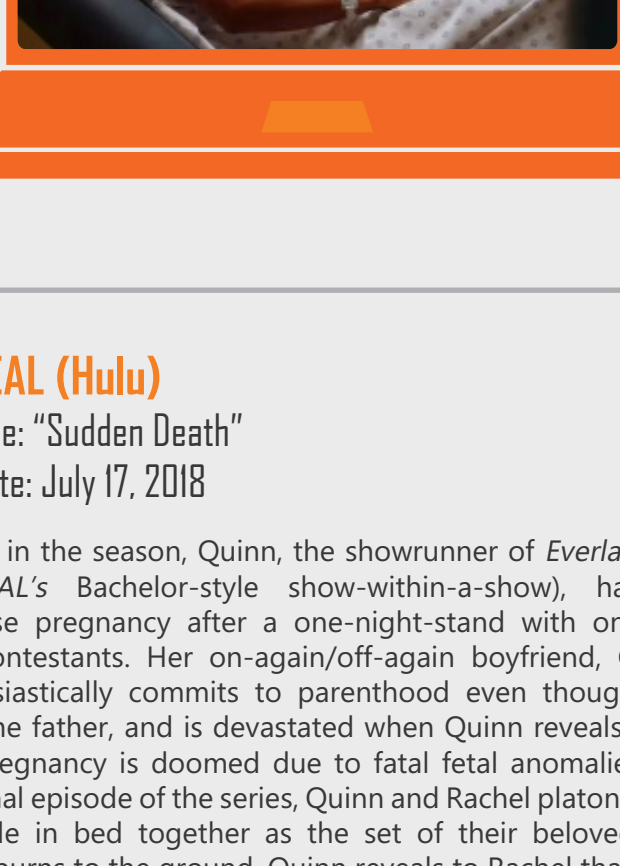
Episode: "Chapter 4: Coco"
Air Date: May 4, 2018

On this Netflix comedy-drama, Coco Connor is an ambitious star student at Winchester University who discovers she is pregnant. Her roommate, Kelsey, shares that she'll support Coco no matter what decision she makes, giving Coco a massage, making her tea, and comforting her. Coco in TV discussions about abortion, Coco talks about using birth control (which, obviously, failed), enjoying the sex that led to her pregnancy (instead of retrospectively regretting it), and being thankful that she doesn't live in a state with extreme abortion restrictions. Coco and Kelsey go to an abortion clinic together. While waiting, Coco imagines what her life would be like if she decided to continue her pregnancy, picturing dropping out of college, parenting a brilliant attorney who gets into Winchester, and dreaming that her daughter can pursue the career Coco gave up. Coco snaps out of the dream sequence as the clinic staff call her name, and she walks towards the camera with a confident, resolved look on her face.

Claws (TNT)

Episode: "Cracker Casserole"
Air Date: June 17, 2018

Virginia, a manicurist at the Nail Artisan Salon, has an abortion with the support of her friends and her boyfriend, Dean. Virginia's friend Quiet Ann accompanies her to the clinic, and they discuss (lack of) taxpayer funding for abortion, contraception, and stereotypes of people who have abortions. Polly's abortion also spurs disclosures from her friends: Polly shares that her dad raped her babysitter, who had an abortion; Quiet Ann says that she got pregnant when she was 14 and wanted an abortion, but couldn't get one, and is still upset with her parents for sending her baby away. Jennifer says she had two abortions and "didn't think twice about it." Virginia wonders if her baby might be "the next Obama," and Quiet Ann comforts her by saying she's not the smart one, and they laugh together. After the abortion, Dean proposes to Virginia.



UnREAL (Hulu)

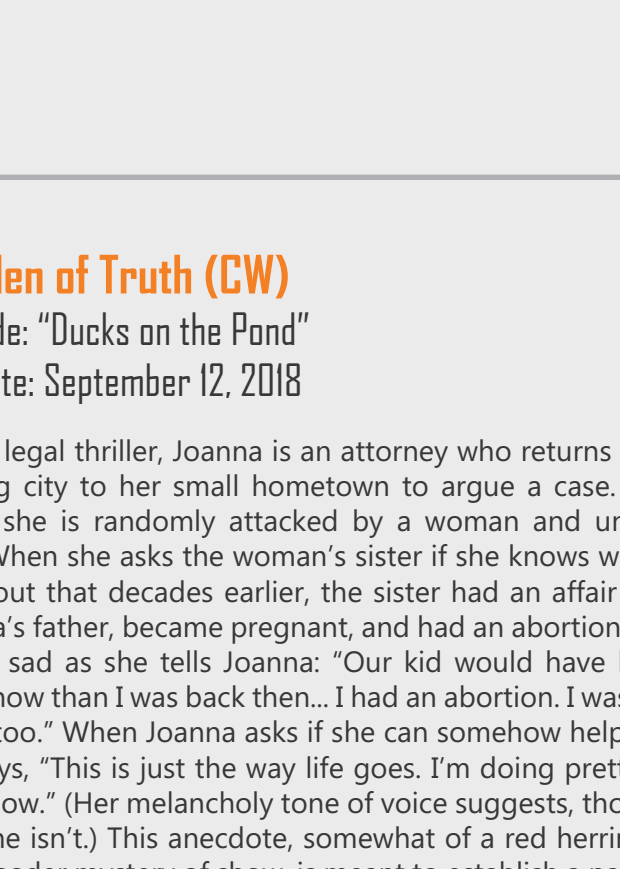
Episode: "Sudden Death"
Air Date: July 17, 2018

Earlier in the season, Quinn, the showrunner of *Everlasting* (*UnREAL*'s Bachelor-style show-within-a-show), has a surprise pregnancy after a one-night-stand with one of the contestants. Her on-again/off-again boyfriend, Chet, enthusiastically commits to parenthood even though he isn't the father, and is devastated when Quinn reveals that the pregnancy is doomed due to fatal fetal anomalies. In this final episode of the series, Quinn and Rachel platonically snuggle in bed together as the set of their beloved TV show burns to the ground. Quinn reveals to Rachel that she had an abortion, and when Rachel asks if there was really anything wrong with the baby, Quinn replies that it does not matter, since she wasn't meant to be a mother. After multiple seasons of scheming with and against each other, this scene cements the true love story on the show: that of the often-fraught friendship between Quinn and Rachel. Quinn's abortion is an affirmation of her commitment to her career, and, perhaps, a rejection of her toxic relationship with Chet and *Everlasting*.

Insatiable (Netflix)

Episode: "Wiensers and Losers"
Air Date: August 10, 2018

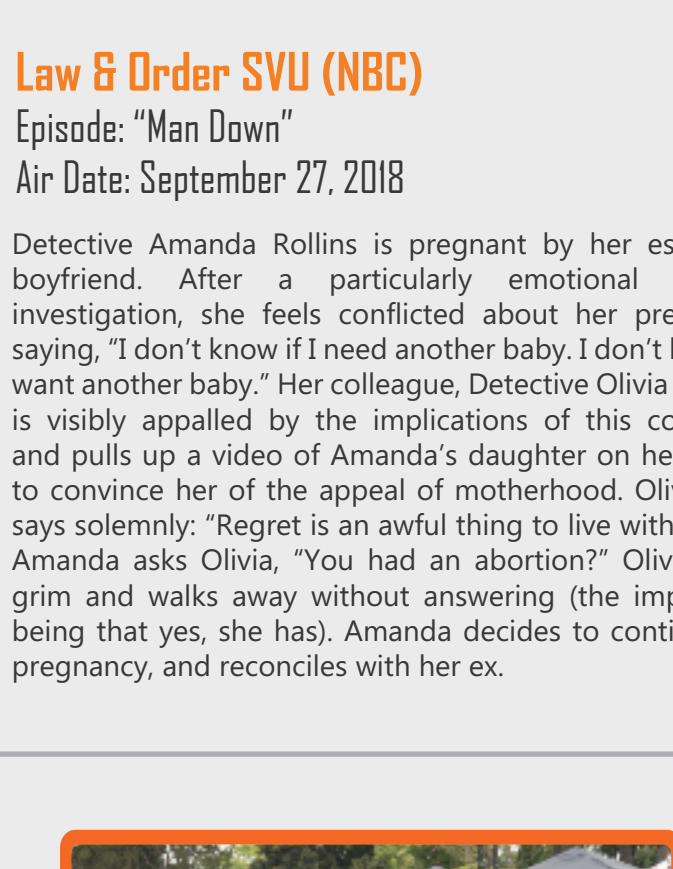
Insatiable follows the story of Patty, a formerly overweight teenager who enters the world of beauty pageants. Patty discovers she's pregnant after losing her virginity, and is dismayed that the state of Georgia requires her to get parental consent for an abortion. She briefly considers carrying the pregnancy to term after talking to her mom, who shares her own story of planning to place Patty for adoption, until she held her in her arms after birth. Patty's friend reminds her that she doesn't have a job and hasn't graduated high school yet, and Patty decides to have an abortion. Her pastor finds out that she's pregnant and says he has to strip her of her "Miss Magic Jesus" crown. Michael, the pastor's son and the boy who got Patty pregnant, wants her to carry the pregnancy to term so they can be "a shining example of family values." In the midst of her telling him it's "just cells" (as a way to explain her reasons for getting an abortion) she falls on the floor in pain. It turns out she was never pregnant; she has a "teratoma" inside of her, a parasitic twin that she absorbed in utero.



Burden of Truth (CW)

Episode: "Ducks on the Pond"
Air Date: September 12, 2018

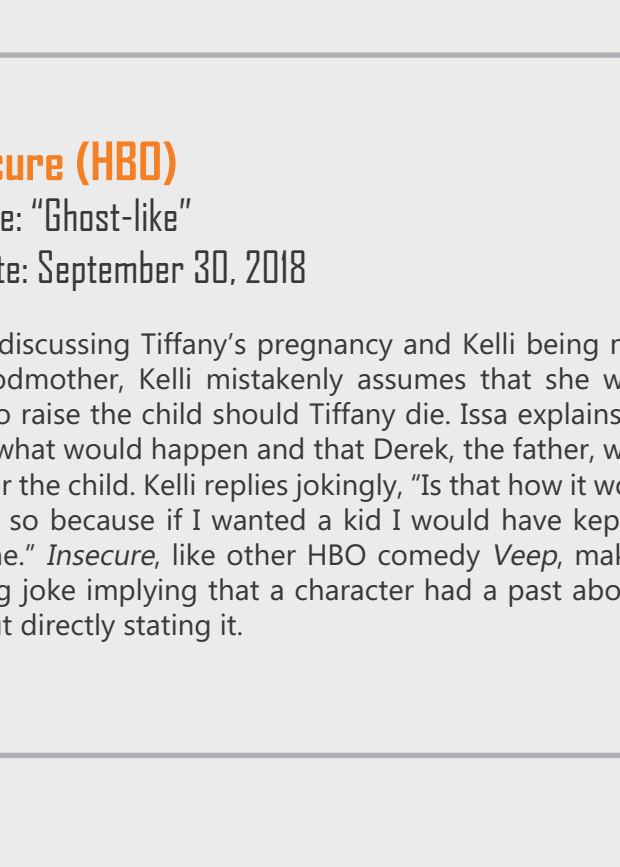
In this legal thriller, Joanna is an attorney who returns from the big city to her small hometown to argue a case. One night, she is randomly attacked by a woman and unsure why. When she asks the woman's sister if she knows why, it turns out that decades earlier, the sister had an affair with Joanna's father, became pregnant, and had an abortion. She seems sad as she tells Joanna: "Our kid would have been older now than I was back then... I had an abortion. I was just a kid, too." When Joanna asks if she can somehow help her, she says, "This is just the way life goes. I'm doing pretty ok right now." (Her melancholy tone of voice suggests, though, that she isn't.) This anecdote, somewhat of a red herring in the broader mystery of show, is meant to establish a pattern of people hurt or injured by Joanna's father.



Law & Order: SVU (NBC)

Episode: "Man Down"
Air Date: September 27, 2018

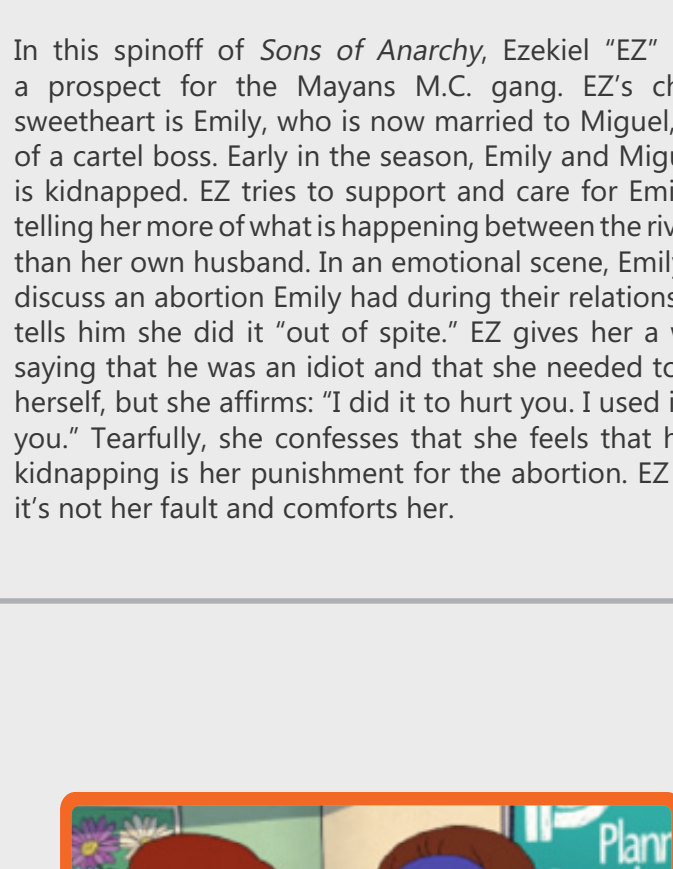
Detective Amanda Rollins is pregnant by her estranged boyfriend. After a particularly emotional criminal investigation, she feels conflicted about her pregnancy, saying, "I don't know if I need another baby. I don't know if I want another baby." Her colleague, Detective Olivia Benson, is visibly appalled by the implications of this comment, and pulls up a video of Amanda's daughter on her phone to convince her of the appeal of motherhood. Olivia then says solemnly: "Regret is an awful thing to live with." When Amanda asks Olivia, "You had an abortion?" Olivia looks grim and walks away without answering (the implication being that yes, she has). Amanda decides to continue her pregnancy, and reconciles with her ex.



Insecure (HBO)

Episode: "Ghost-like"
Air Date: September 30, 2018

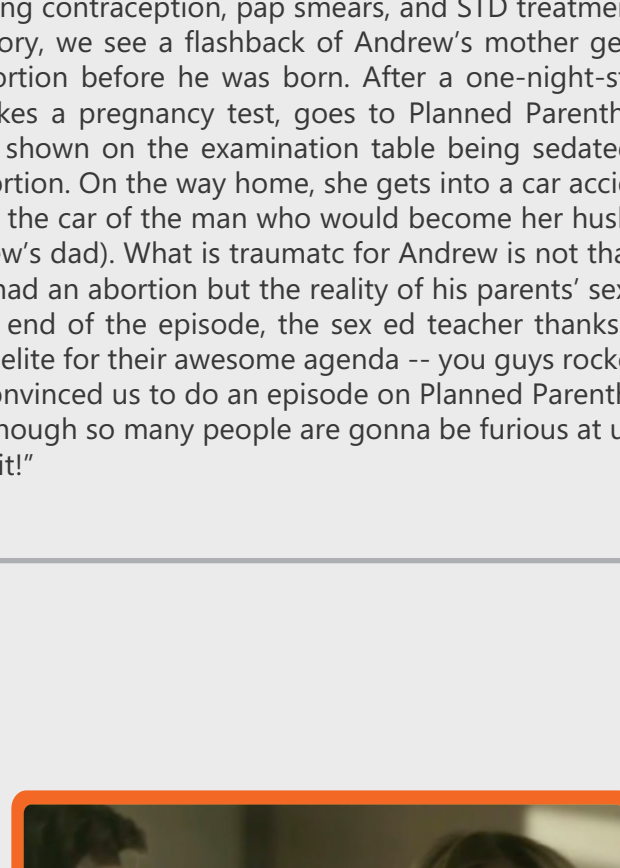
While discussing Tiffany's pregnancy and Kelli being made the Godmother, Kelli mistakenly assumes that she would have to raise the child should Tiffany die. Issa explains that is not what would happen and that Derek, the father, would care for the child. Kelli replies jokingly, "Is that how it works? I hope so because if I wanted a kid I would have kept the last one." *Insecure*, like other HBO comedy *Veep*, makes a passing joke implying that a character had a past abortion without directly stating it.



Mayans M.C. (FX)

Episode: "Uch/Opposam"
Air Date: October 2, 2018

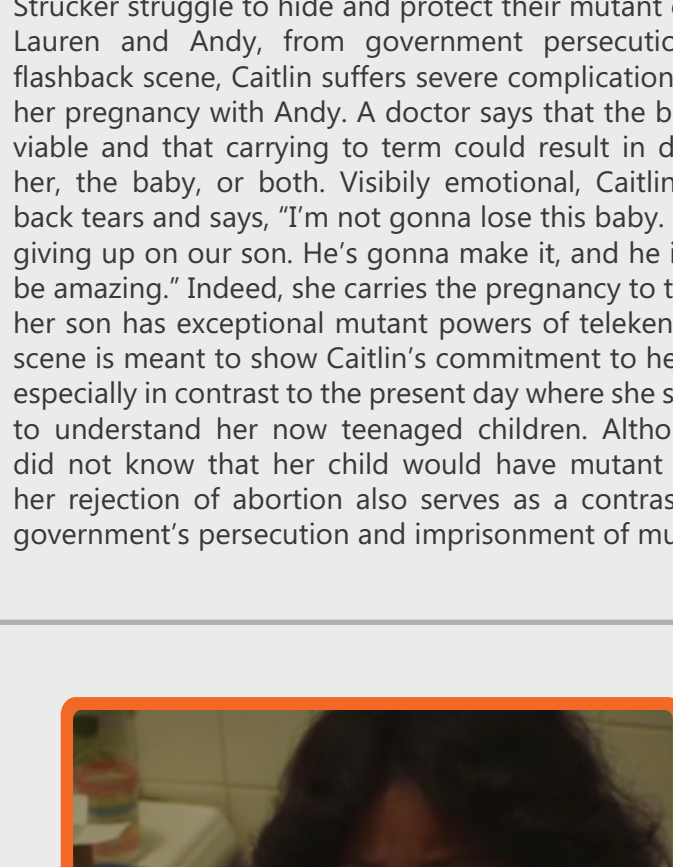
In this spinoff of *Sons of Anarchy*, Ezekiel "EZ" Reyes is a prospect for the Mayans M.C. gang. EZ's childhood sweetheart is Emily, who is now married to Miguel, the son of a cartel boss. Early in the season, Emily and Miguel's son is kidnapped. EZ tries to support and care for Emily, often telling her more of what is happening between the rival forces than her own husband. In an emotional scene, Emily and EZ discuss an abortion Emily had during their relationship. She tells him she did it "out of spite." EZ gives her a way out, saying that he was an idiot and that she needed to protect herself, but she affirms: "I did it to hurt you. I used it to hurt you." Tearfully, she confesses that she feels that her son's kidnapping is her punishment for the abortion. EZ tells her it's not her fault and comforts her.



Big Mouth (Netflix)

Episode: "The Planned Parenthood Show"
Air Date: October 5, 2018

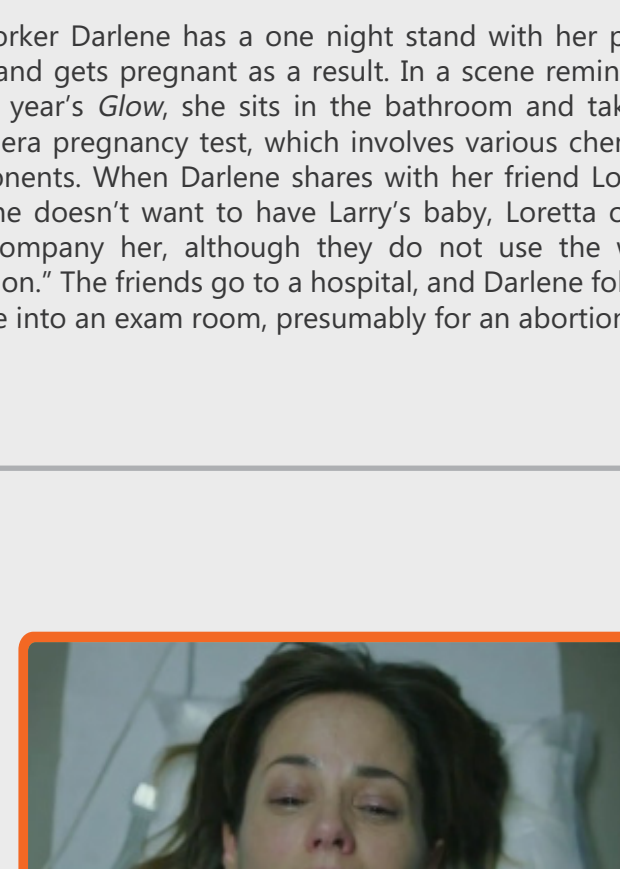
In this cartoon coming-of-age comedy about puberty, young teens Andrew and Nick sit in sex ed class and, through a series of vignettes, learn about Planned Parenthood's services including contraception, pap smears, and STD treatment. In one story, we see a flashback of Andrew's mother getting an abortion before he was born. After a one-night-stand, she takes a pregnancy test, goes to Planned Parenthood, and is shown on the examination table being sedated for an abortion. On the way home, she gets into a car accident, hitting the car of the man who would become her husband (Andrew's dad). What is traumatic for Andrew is not that his mom had an abortion but the reality of his parents' sex life. At the end of the episode, the sex ed teacher thanks "the liberal elite for their awesome agenda -- you guys rocked it! You convinced us to do an episode on Planned Parenthood even though so many people are gonna be furious at us for doing it!"



The Gifted (Fox)

Episode: "outMatched"
Air Date: October 16, 2018

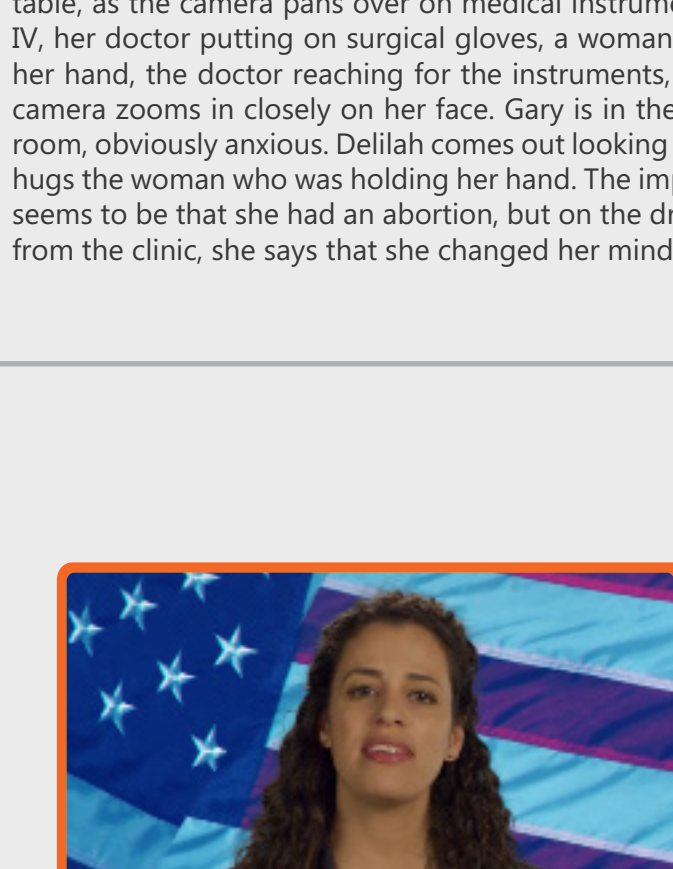
In this *X-Men* spin-off series, parents Reed and Caitlin Strucker struggle to hide and protect their mutant children, Lauren and Andy, from government persecution. In a flashback scene, Caitlin suffers severe complications during her pregnancy with Andy. A doctor says that the baby isn't viable and that carrying to term could result in death for her, the baby, or both. Visibly emotional, Caitlin chokes back tears and says, "I'm not gonna lose this baby. I am not giving up on our son. He's gonna make it, and he is gonna be amazing." Indeed, she carries the pregnancy to term and her son has exceptional mutant powers of telekinesis. This scene is meant to show Caitlin's commitment to her family, especially in contrast to the present day where she struggles to understand her now teenaged children. Although she did not know that her child would have mutant abilities, her rejection of abortion also serves as a contrast to the government's persecution and imprisonment of mutants.



The Deuce (HBO)

Episode: "The Feminism Part"
Air Date: October 21, 2018

Sex worker Lareyn has a one night stand with her pimp, Larry, and gets pregnant as a result. In a scene reminiscent of last year's *Glow*, she sits in the bathroom and takes a 1970s-era pregnancy test, which involves various chemical components. When Darlene shares with her friend Loretta that she doesn't want to have Larry's baby, Loretta offers to accompany her, although they do not use the word "abortion." The friends go to a hospital, and Darlene follows a nurse into an exam room, presumably for an abortion.



House of Cards (Netflix)

Episode: 6
Air Date: November 2, 2018

President Claire Underwood faces a public relations crisis when news of her three abortions is leaked to the media. She is particularly vilified for having had an abortion at 16 weeks gestationally. While previous seasons of *House of Cards* had discussed Claire's abortions (and her need to address them to the public), this moment reveals to viewers that she had a later abortion. Claire gives a televised statement directly to the American public, explaining that she and her husband, former President Frank Underwood, wanted to become parents, but the pregnancy was not viable. In the show's classic direct-to-viewers address, Claire then reveals that, "the pregnancy was viable, Frank and I as parents were not." This disclosure is meant to highlight Claire's deceptive and self-serving nature -- while most viewers would likely agree that she would not be a suitable mother.

