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DVDs: Last Minute Boxed Sets and Gift Guide

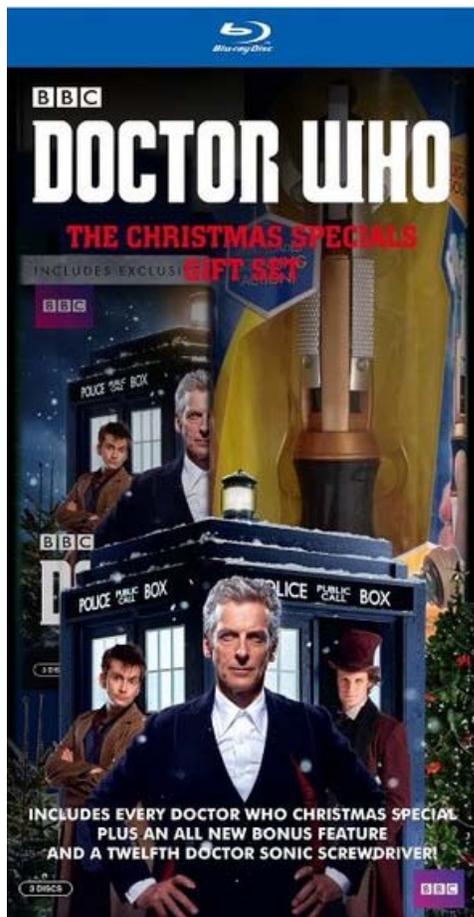
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Michael Giltz

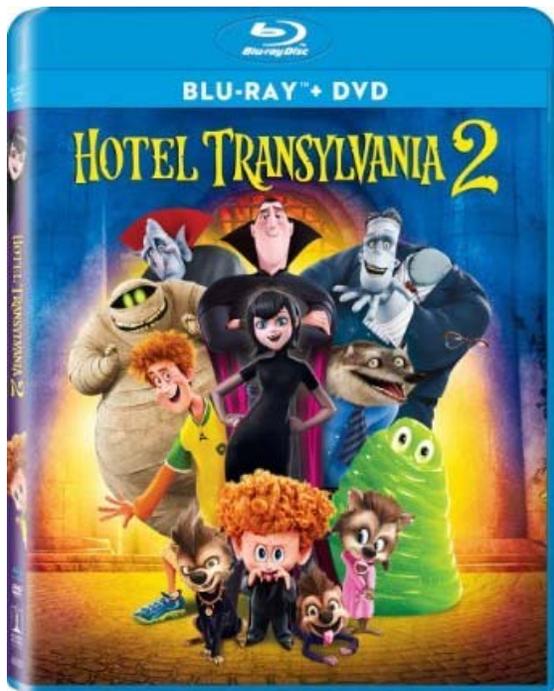
Freelance writer

Don't panic. You still have time to get some great gifts. Sure it seems like streaming video means every movie and TV show ever made is available on demand. But it's not true (yet). And figuring out where and when some beloved favorite is actually available and forking over the monthly fee so you can access it is becoming as expensive as that cable package. Besides, people love celebrating the entertainment they really love and nothing says "I'm a fan!" like a physical copy on your media shelf or an elaborate boxed set. Many big box stores have those very boxed sets piled up on display (or you can still overnight a copy if you're really desperate). So here are some of the best boxed sets and recent titles you can grab for that "one final gift" idea or stocking stuffer. Of course, you'll need some room on that credit card you've been using nonstop since Thanksgiving. *Now* you can panic!



DOCTOR WHO CHRISTMAS SPECIALS GIFTSET (\$57.98 BluRay; BBC Home Entertainment)

Every Doctor Who fan knows about the Christmas specials -- the annual TV event where the good Doctor takes part in a holiday-themed adventure. Traditionally, it aired in the UK and only popped up in the US much later. Then it started airing on TV in the weeks after Christmas. This year, fans can go to the movies on December 28 or 29th and watch the latest TV special with bonus features in a one-off (or is that two-off?) event including some bonus material. But dear God, putting a movie ticket under the tree just isn't as fun as spending the holiday itself with the Doctor. Why not take the sting out of that delay by including the ticket inside a package with this boxed set? You get eleven Christmas specials, a bonus feature about the tradition of a Who-vian Christmas and a 12th Doctor Sonic Screwdriver! Ok, a replica of the 12th Doctor's Sonic Screwdriver.



HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA 2 (\$38.99 BluRay combo; Sony)

Someone forgot to tell actor Adam Sandler his career was over. People have been bad-mouthing the amiable actor for a few years. Why? Probably because he'd turned into a solid actor with some excellent films to his credit. A one-note performer got some props from critics...and then continued to deliver the silly, lowbrow comedies his fans love. In the last decade, he's become an even bigger worldwide star than ever (a rare feat for a comedy star), while the press makes it sound like he's been in nothing but flops. And now he's enjoying the biggest hit of his career with this silly, family friendly animated movie that Sandler co-wrote, co-executive produced and stars in. And guess what? It improved on the original even with those cranky critics.

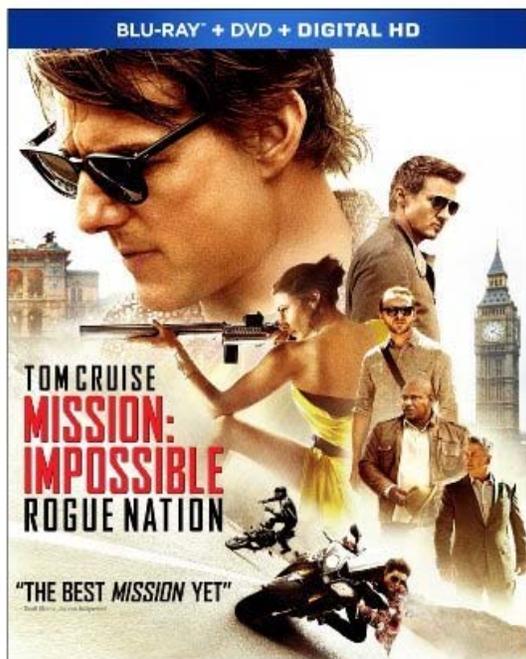


THE X-FILES COMPLETE SERIES COLLECTOR'S SET (\$299.99

BluRay; Fox)

The X-Files is back. A six episode miniseries debuts on January 26, 2016 on FOX. What better way to prepare than to dive into all 202 episodes of

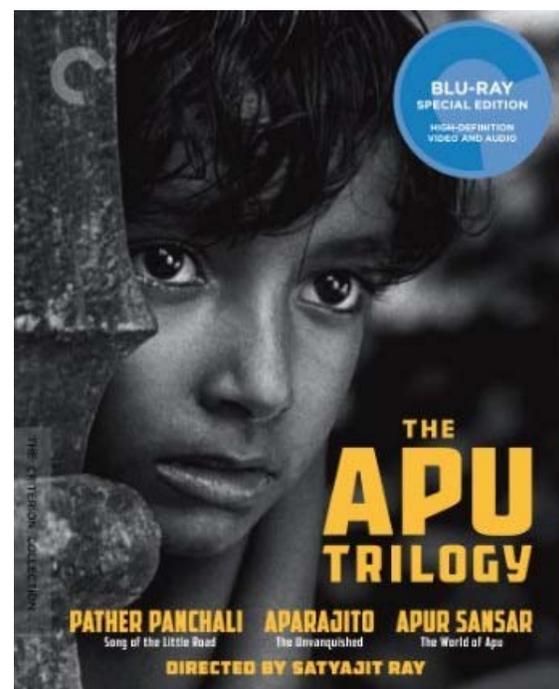
its nine season run? The show was groundbreaking in its ambition and sometimes spotty in its delivery. (I'm the sort who preferred the stand-alone episodes to the increasingly elaborate mythology episodes that deepened the paranoid over-arching storyline of the series.) But any short list of great sci-fi shows begins with *The Twilight Zone*, ends with *Battlestar Galactica* (the best of all time, I'd say) and includes *The X-Files*. Two key reasons? The two leads and their excellent chemistry. But beyond the good-looking David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson (perhaps the best actors to ever grace a sci-fi show), the series itself was awfully good-looking too. It had cinematic level production values and was shot in widescreen even before widescreen was common. This BluRay boxed set looks sensational, from the visuals to the sound. It's rather pricey given the show went off the air more than a decade ago. But it certainly offers excellent quality as far as the presentation itself. The boxed set is rather modest too, with a slot for the upcoming miniseries already in place. But the two feature films are not included or even given a little slot of their own. Were the movies a feint, meant to distract us from the real storyline of the show? Will the miniseries reveal them to be part of an elaborate plot to confound us with (too much) plot? The truth is out there.



MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: ROGUE NATION (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Paramount)

Adam Sandler isn't the only movie star laughing all the way to the bank. Tom Cruise has just delivered his biggest franchise hit to date with the fourth Mission Impossible flick. It's not as good as the fourth film in the series because Ghost Protocol marked the live action directorial debut of Pixar's Brad Bird. But it's silly fun with some notable stunts and Cruise

holding it all together. BluRay and a good home theater system let movies like this deliver in your family room almost as well as they do in the cinemas. Yes, of course there will be a sixth impossible mission. Still, I'll probably stick with business class when it comes to flying; I don't think Cruise's option is a wise move, long term.



THE APU TRILOGY (\$99.95 BluRay; Criterion)

If you want to know what BluRay and DVD releases surprised and delighted and entertained me throughout 2015, you can always start with any list of movies put out by Criterion. But nothing could top my anticipation and delight in the release of the Apu Trilogy. This masterpiece by Indian director Satyajit Ray is a landmark in cinema, but "landmark" makes it sound imposing and rather severe. But few movies are as delightful and universal as *Pather Panchali*, which brings alive the life of a small boy in a village in India. The trilogy as a whole is essentially one long movie. But you can watch each individually and with pleasure. Despite Ray's revered status, his films had fallen into disrepair. But in the last few years the essential work of restoring them has been tackled and a steady stream of releases of other works have done much to show how Ray's body of work is truly impressive in its scope and range. Then along comes the trilogy we all know him for just to remind us how great it is. *The Apu Trilogy* alone would keep his name alive forever. Any true film lover must watch these movies. The set is absolutely gorgeous (I've never seen these movies in remotely as good condition) and filled with the varied and intelligent extras one expects from Criterion. If you have a movie buff on your list, any 2015 release from Criterion will be a welcome gift. But it all starts here.



WOLF TOTEM (\$34.99 BluRay 3-D; Sony)

While *Wolf Totem* is no *Never Cry Wolf* as a movie, it is an often gorgeous-looking movie and a fascinating glimpse into China. French director Jean-Jacques Annaud helms this period drama about the Cultural Revolution and a young teacher sent among Mongolian herders who adopts a pet wolf. A famed (and presumably resonant) story to the Chinese, it's mostly just a feast for nature lovers in the rest of the world. Annaud's movies are often problematic but they're always interesting and admirably offbeat, from *The Bear* to *Quest For Fire* to *Seven Years In Tibet* and now this. The extras make clear the elaborate, almost unprecedented lengths they went to film the wolves safely.



THE CAROL BURNETT SHOW LOST EPISODES ULTIMATE

COLLECTION (\$206.95 DVD; Time Life)

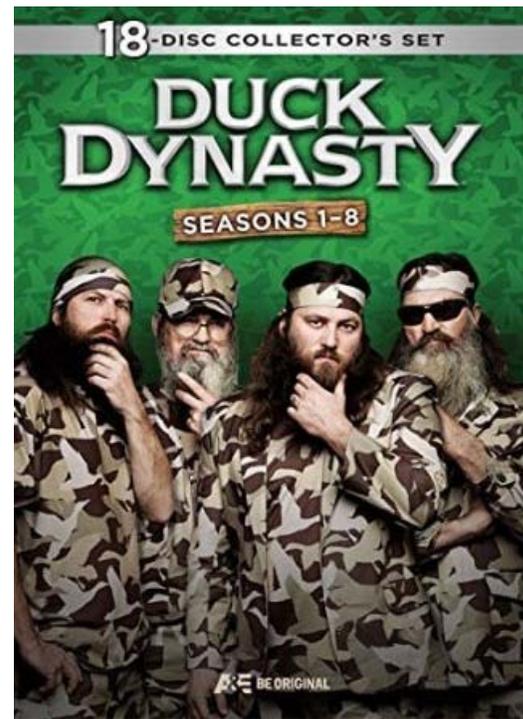
If you've got a fan of Carol Burnett on your list, you can wow them with a collection of "lost" episodes from her iconic variety series. True, most fans think they know all of her shows by heart, along with beloved sketches like "Went With The Wind." But for various copyright reasons, shows from the first five years haven't been seen since they originally aired from 1967-1972. You literally watch the show come to life, find its footing and launch the first of classic, long-running bits. If you're a fan, it's a treat, a way to see "new" episodes for the first time in decades. If you're not a fan, you'll become one. The set is presented with care by Time-Life, which has made a name for itself with quality, elaborate (and expensive) boxed sets of classic TV. However, multiple versions of this set are for sale, including less complete but still very fun (and much more affordable) versions than the one shown here.



ANT-MAN (\$32.99 BluRay combo; Walt Disney Studios)

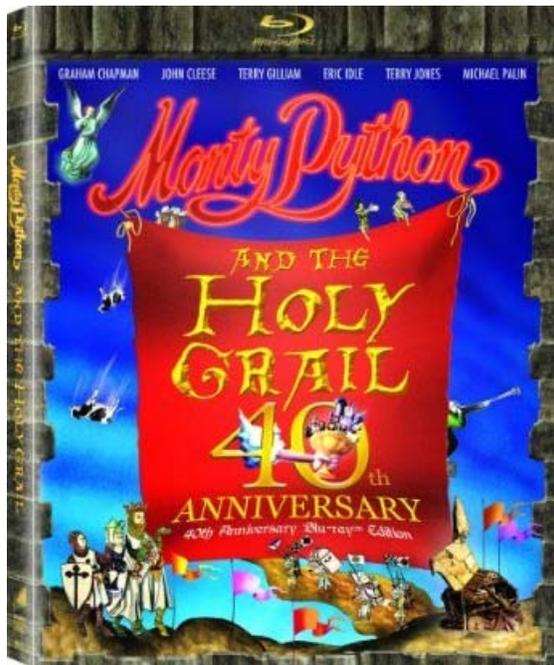
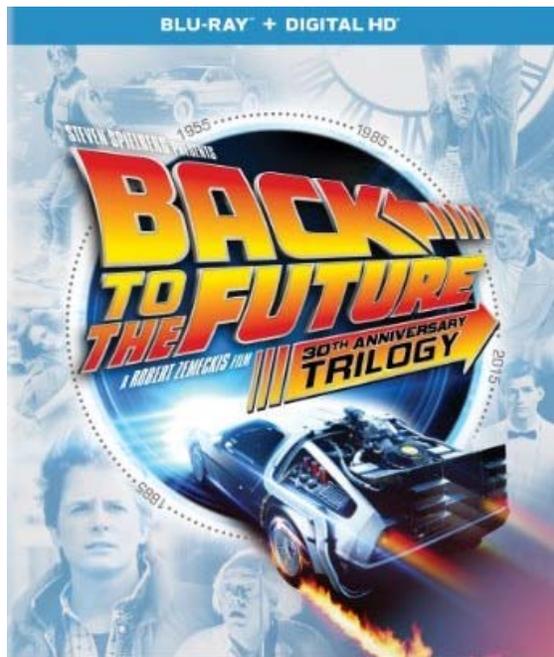
Did this movie sort of slip by you? I'm a big fan of Paul Rudd because, well, I have taste. So I didn't miss it and knew early on this was a winner, a loopy, goofy flick that captured the loosey-goosey, jokey nature of Marvel comics better than almost any other entry except the first Avengers movie. And guess what? Other than Iron Man, this is the most successful launch for a solo hero yet. Ant-Man made more money worldwide than Captain America and Thor and of course The Incredible Hulk. (Guardians of the Galaxy is more of a team effort, I'd say, and it beats even the original Iron Man.) I credit Rudd's self-effacing but charming vibe, a strong supporting cast and a fun score that gives the movie a unique character all its own. Can't wait to see how Rudd

interacts with the other Avengers, but I'm predicting a wise-ass demeanor that makes Deadpool seem polite in comparison, and a lot more amusing. So if you've got Marvel fans who let this movie come and go before checking it out, give 'em a treat.



DUCK DYNASTY SEASONS 1-8 (\$119.98 DVD; A&E)

So what do you get the Trump supporter in the family that you dread talking to on Christmas Day? How about the first eight seasons of Duck Dynasty? You get 89 episodes and even some extras, so that should give everyone plenty of TV to watch and giggle at without actually discussing politics! Just don't take the bait when they say, "You know, Phil Robertson makes a lot of sense!"



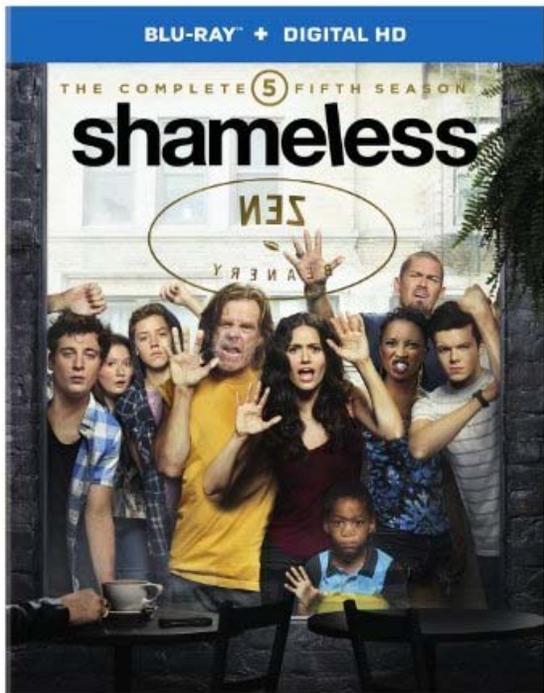
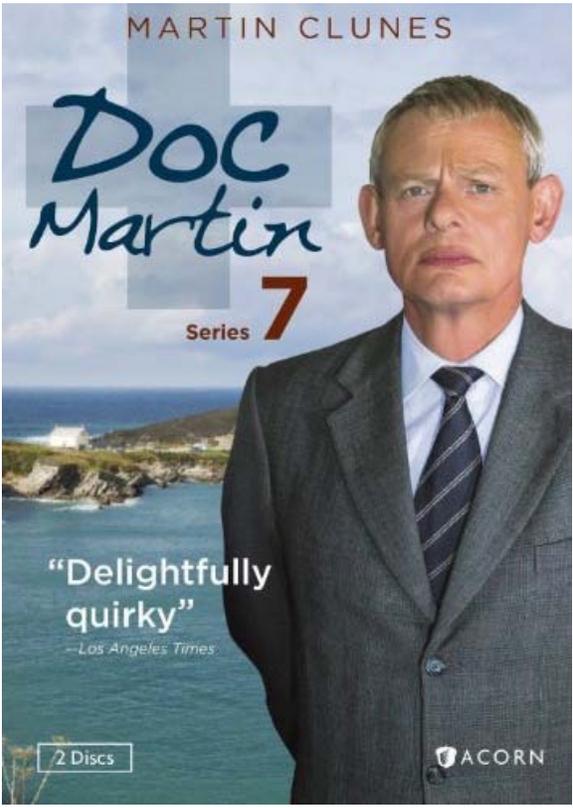
BACK TO THE FUTURE 30TH ANNIVERSARY (\$49.98 BluRay; Universal)

MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL 40TH ANNIVERSARY (\$19.99 BluRay; Sony)

If any of the kids on your list are getting a hoverboard, for the love of Pete get them *Back To The Future* as well! Surely they should know the origin story of where hoverboards began (sort of), not to mention one of the wittiest and clever summer blockbusters in Hollywood history. Yes, popcorn movies used to actually be good, kids!

If you've got a Monty Python fan, you can pair up a can of Spam and the 40th anniversary edition of their greatest movie, *The Holy Grail*. If they

immediately point out that Spam does not actually FIGURE in the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, but only on the TV series *Monty Python and the Flying Circus* and then they proceed to name every sketch included in their first film, well then you KNOW you bought them the right movie.

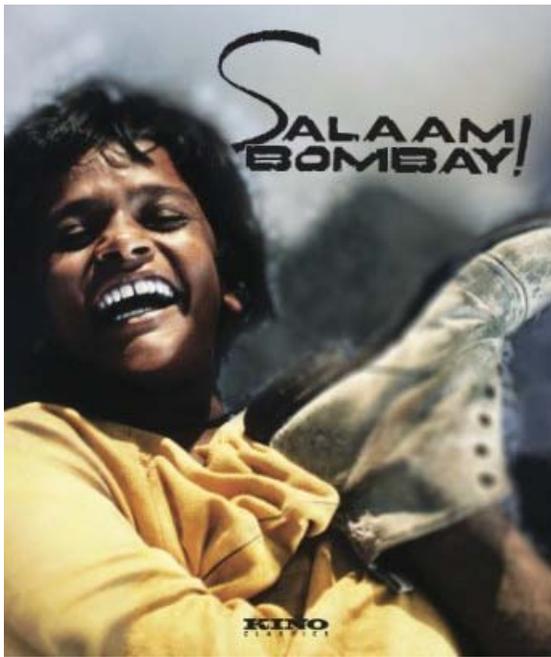


DOC MARTIN SEASON 7 (\$39.99 DVD; Acorn Media)
SHAMELESS SEASON 5 (\$44.96 BluRay; Warner Home Video)

I find it impossible to resist the TV series *Doc Martin*. It's a frustrating show, one of those romances where you wait forever for the two leads to get together and even when they do all sort of artificial roadblocks keep them from happiness. (Think Sam and Diane from *Cheers*.) Here it's the prickly doctor (Martin Clunes) and the adorable schoolteacher Louisa Glasson (Caroline Catz). They're finally and forever together, but each season they seem to get drawn apart in some way before ending up right back where they started at the end. But the two have marvelous chemistry and the supporting cast is often excellent, though Eileen Atkins has been almost criminally wasted and Sigourney Weaver was in just a blink at you miss it storyline as a tourist). And still, the town (the only sunny seaside resort in England), the people, the ambiance and the two leads keep me returning.

Certainly *Shameless* on Showtime deserves more love. The original UK series enjoyed great acclaim but this US version has flown mostly under the radar despite starring the dependable William H Macy in the comedic role of his career. I dove back in because Cameron Monaghan was so electric as the progenitor of the Joker on *Gotham*. Here he plays the gay teenage son Ian and is just one of a very strong cast in this over-the-top comedic drama. Season six starts on January 10 so start bingeing now.

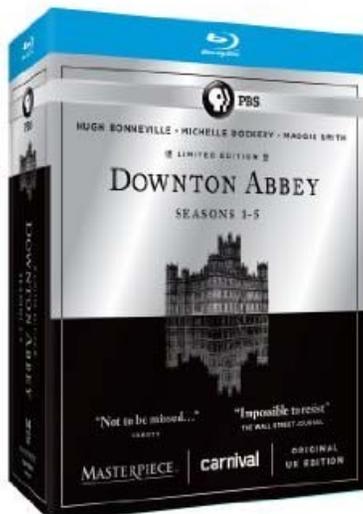


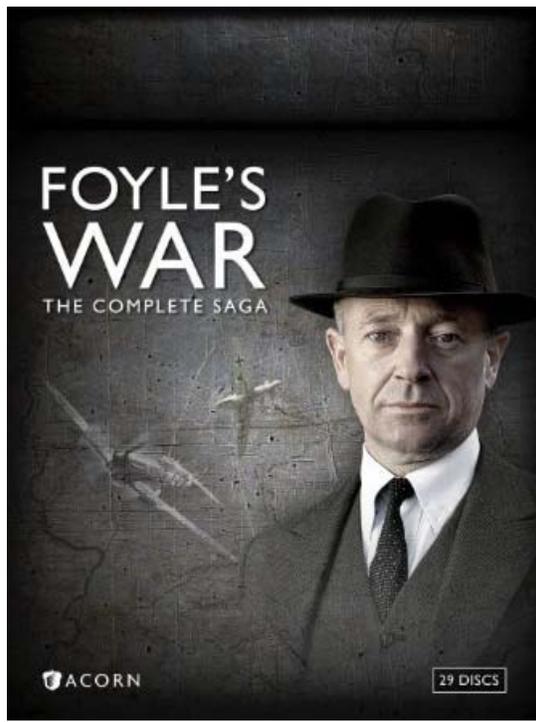


THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHER (\$34.95 BluRay; Kino Lorber)

SALAAM BOMBAY! (\$29.95 BluRay; Kino Lorber)

Got a lover of international cinema in the family? Here are two terrific choices. *The Kindergarten Teacher* is an absorbing, critically acclaimed drama about a teacher who becomes very supportive of a student with exceptional skills and then a little too supportive and then downright obsessive. It confirms writer-director Nadav Lapid is a genuine talent. *Salaam Bombay!* did the same for director Mira Nair in this 1988 charmer about life on the streets of Bombay for a little boy. It comes out on BluRay for the first time and is a great reminder of how much we've lost by not having more female directors like Nair get a shot at the big leagues.





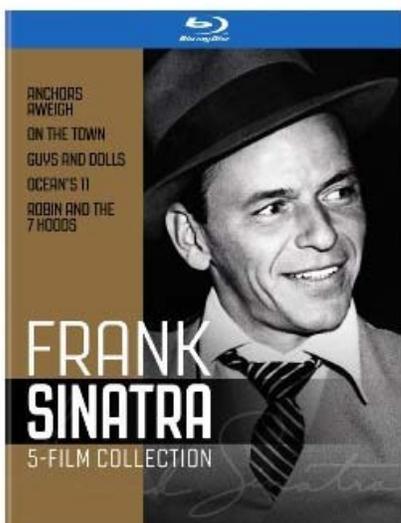
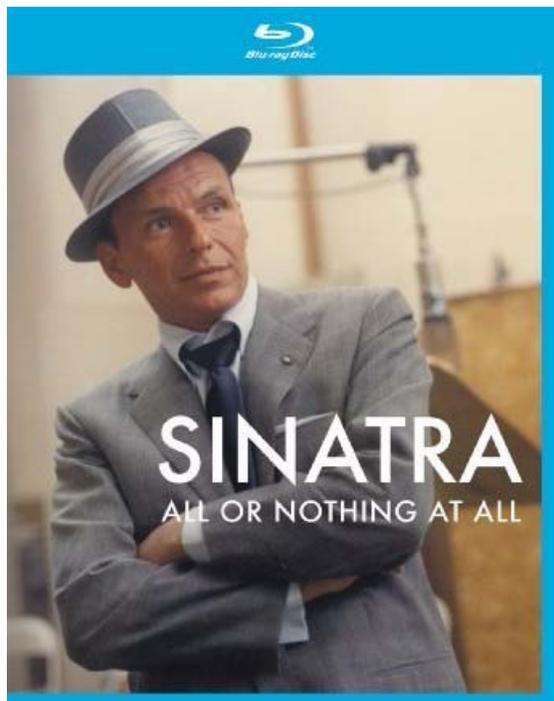
DOWNTON ABBEY LIMITED EDITION SEASONS 1-5 (\$109.99 BluRay; PBS Home Video)

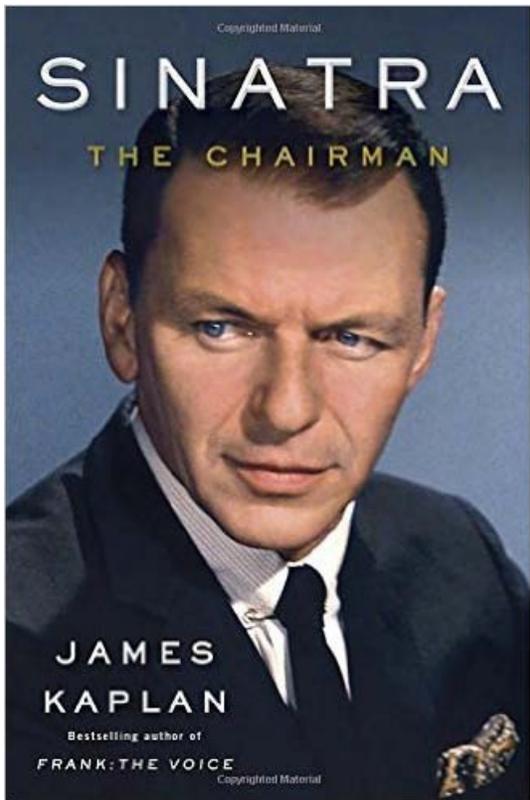
FOYLE'S WAR: THE COMPLETE SAGA (\$199.99 DVD; Acorn Media)

If you're in the UK, you're about to see the final Christmas special for *Downton Abbey*, a TV movie that will wrap up the series once and for all. If you're in the US and not being naughty (Santa won't bring you gifts if you stream overseas TV shows), then you're eagerly waiting the start of the final season on January 3, 2016. If you just can't wait -- or you want to give a treat to someone who loves the show -- this limited edition BluRay set lets them binge-watch in style. You'll find the first five seasons, with the original British cut of the episodes all looking impressive enough to placate the Dowager Countess. Of course, I still insist that it's not a patch on the original *Upstairs, Downstairs* but if you want the holidays to be happy, I've learned it's best sometimes to keep your superior TV insights to yourself. Also, this set will be superseded by a boxed set that presents the entire series, but you knew that already, didn't you?

Well, fans of British mysteries won't have to suffer from feelings of incompleteness-boxed set-itis when it comes to *Foyle's War*. The show is absolutely, honestly to goodness done after having one series finale and then coming back for another few specials/seasons. Here you've got the entire saga, as the boxed set proclaims, though "saga" sounds too big and sprawling for a series that delighted in the low-key, magnetic performance of Michael Kitchen as Foyle. Initially set during WW II, Foyle is forced to remain at home keeping crime in check when he'd rather be off fighting the Nazis. Typically, each episode would use a crime as an

excuse to explore some facet of the war, such as the black market for food and fuel, Nazi sympathizers, the tension between Allied soldiers and locals and more. But it shone thanks to an excellent cast that also included the beautifully named actress Honeysuckle Weeks. In retrospect, the series began at its peak, maintained excellent quality for a few years then slowly declined. But even the post-war episodes with Foyle entering spy territory had its moments and Kitchen never faltered in a performance that is one of the greats in TV history. He did more with a raised eyebrow and a simple "Really?" than Columbo could do with a half hour of rambling questions or Holmes with a full array of evidence from tobacco to muddy boots.





- SINATRA: ALL OR NOTHING AT ALL** (\$29.98 BluRay; Eagle Rock)
- FRANK SINATRA COLLECTION** (\$69.96 BluRay; Warner Home Video)
- SINATRA: THE CHAIRMAN** By James Kaplan (\$35; Doubleday)
- SINATRA: A VOICE ON AIR 1935-1955** (\$69.99 CD; Sony Legacy)

Since it's the 100th anniversary of the birth of Frank Sinatra, surely there's some swinger in the family who wants to remember Sinatra. You can start with the documentary *All Or Nothing At All*. It cleverly uses the first "retirement" concert of Sinatra as a backbone, using the set-list to tell the story of Sinatra's remarkable career. As a buff, I can't get enough of archival footage and hearing this story again and again, though only

newer fans will hear a lot of new stories or gain new insight. Still, it's a thoughtful, family-approved work. You get the substantial film on two discs, plus the entire 1971 concert in full on a third and a Walter Cronkite interview of Sinatra on the fourth disc.

First and forever, Sinatra is a singer. Nonetheless, he had a formidable movie career and this five film set is definitely totemic. It doesn't contain his five best films but it certainly contains five films that capture Sinatra at his movie star peak and his ring-a-ding-dingiest. *Anchors Aweigh* and the landmark *On The Town* are two delightful musicals with Sinatra in top form. *Guys And Dolls* is one of the tragic misfires in movie history, with Marlon Brando absurdly tackling a musical comedy role that is legendary and one that fit Sinatra to a t. Meanwhile, Sinatra has a lesser, secondary part. *Ocean's 11* is essential for understanding the Rat Pack appeal of Sinatra and his pals, an almost puzzling phenomenon now given how lazy and unredeeming their movies proved. Case in point: *Robin and the Seven Hoods*, a flick where the lunatics are clearly in charge of the asylum, the director was lucky if they showed up to deliver even one take and the material at hand wasn't worth much more than that anyway. And STILL it's sort of watchable, with Bing Crosby making the most of the movie's one good new song, "Mr. Booze." Someone is trying to turn this into a Broadway musical. Let's hope they're writing a bunch of new songs and a whole new book.

James Kaplan just delivered the second of his two-volume work about Sinatra. I slightly preferred *Frank: The Voice*, just because it dealt with his rise to fame. A young, struggling Sinatra is a lot more appealing than Sinatra in his prime. This volume covers the glory days of the Capitol years, the Reprise years and all those movies and radio and TV specials. Sinatra is the king of the world and Kaplan's book is too obsessed with gossip and whether or not Sinatra slept with this gal or that gal and whether JFK did too. For me, the roughly 100 pages from both books that actually focus on the recording of his music are what matters. There Kaplan delivers some marvelous context, the viewpoints of others like musicians and his peerless arrangers (led by the great Nelson Riddle of course). Any insight into his classic work is precious and when it comes to music, Kaplan's attention to detail is appreciated. If you want the good, the bad, the ugly and the tawdry, well this is the book for you. As much as Kaplan takes his subject seriously, it's a tabloid life at heart.

But it's the music that matters, the music that endures. If you've got a serious Sinatra buff on your list you will delight them with the new four CD set *Sinatra: A Voice On Air 1935-1955*. It's almost inconceivable that there's new Sinatra material to be unearthed, but indeed there is. This set covers Sinatra's radio career, from his tentative early appearances to the

string of shows he starred on. Radio was the TV of its day and that's where Sinatra honed his craft and created a bond with his audience that would last for decades. He is one of the great recording artists of all time and his appearances on radio mean a wealth of songs Sinatra never officially recorded, songs performed with new arrangements, duets, and more. In some ways, this set has it all. You get 106 tracks, ranging from theme songs to commercial breaks to medleys to comedy routines, introductions and (mostly) full blown performances of great songs. A significant portion are first-timers, tunes we haven't had on disc yet by Sinatra, but everything is of interest to a fan. It's a pleasure to dive into, from the creamy sound of young Frankie to the sharp, insightful powerful snap of the mid-1950s Sinatra on the brink of recording the greatest music of his career after the greatest comeback in music history. Give it to a genuine fan who already owns a bunch of Sinatra and they'll be delighted.

Who could ask for anything more? Well, I could. First, there's a FIFTH disc of music from this era. It's only available from [Smithsonian directly](#). [It's called *Frank Sinatra: Lost And Found -- The Radio Years*](#). Why oh why would you make buffs wait decades for a proper boxed set of his radio performances than relegate a fifth CD of worthwhile material to another label? It makes no sense. In a further slight to collectors, the set lazily doesn't include chapter breaks at the beginning of songs whenever possible. Many tunes include radio introductions or a show theme song opener before a song begins. Sometimes, it's not possible to create a smooth break. But many, many times it is and simply including a chapter break would have allowed people who had listened to the set to pull out and make a playlist of -- for example -- the "new" songs Sinatra never recorded or their favorites from this collection and so on. It's sheer indifference to the listener not to do so. Finally, the set halfheartedly makes a stab at creating the experience of listening to a radio broadcast, thanks to the welcome inclusion of all those show intros and some fun commercial breaks. However, the commercial breaks are often tacked on at the end of a CD. For a more pleasurable listening experience when hearing the boxed set as a whole, those breaks should be sprinkled naturally throughout.

So putting all those caveats aside, what do you get? A good boxed set that will be catnip to Sinatra fans but is definitely not the place to start for newbies. I found it fascinating on two levels: the personal and the artistic. On the personal level, we see Sinatra grow by leaps and bounds. In his first appearance, he's so tongue-tied that Sinatra can barely mumble out one-word responses to softball questions. For quite a while, he remains, the unctuous student of his betters, fawningly (but genuinely) paying homage to the songwriting greats and other artists of the day. Every once

in a while, an audience is present and his singing is interrupted by the seismic screaming of teenage girls over Sinatra's every utterance. You're reminded of how Beatlemania came in the wake of the Sinatra swooners, those frenzied bobby soxers who loved The Voice. Then things change. Sinatra moves from the butt of jokes to the maker of jokes. As he grows in commercial clout and confidence, suddenly it's the guests who pay homage to him. Sinatra never could tell a joke (or play the straight man) to save his life. But by god he's gonna make the jokes and the hangers-on laugh more and more. The second level is the artistic. Everyone knows Sinatra progressed from a hearts and flowers crooner, The Voice, into a singer of extraordinary talent. You can hear that happen on these discs. He's always good. But the Sinatra of 1935 couldn't hold a candle to the Sinatra of 1955, who is suddenly snapping off lines, giving weight to the lyrics and doing much more than making a pretty sound. It's thrilling to know he was on top of the world commercially for almost two decades and yet still getting better and better as a singer. You can hear it happen right before your ears.

And that's the final caveat. With Sinatra, more is always better. We've had the complete Columbia, the complete Capital and the complete Reprise boxed sets. After all this time, we deserved the complete Radio set. It couldn't be actually complete, naturally. But this set is discerning and smart and is of remarkable sound quality given the years that have passed. Yet it stops right when Sinatra is becoming greater than ever. Why? They should have made one big set, *Sinatra: On The Air 1935- whenever his final radio appearance occurred*. The second half would kick the ass of the first half, so at least we can look forward to an even better set covering 1956 and beyond. And no final disc of material handed off to third parties! When it comes to Sinatra, you want it all.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and Blu-rays with

the understanding that he would be considering them for review. Generally, he does not guarantee to review and he receives far more titles than he can cover.

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CONVERSATIONS