STEWARDING *THE SIMPSONS*

In 1997, Matt Selman landed his dream job writing for *The Simpsons*. He's still there today as head showrunner, striving to keep the 35-year-old animated series vital and surprising while also hanging on to its humor and heart. But how long will the show go on?

By Molly Petrilla

In the fall of 1992, somewhere in West Philadelphia, 21-year-old Matt Selman C'93 sat in front of a boxy little Macintosh computer, tapping out his homage to early-90s TV.

"Life at Penn shuts down for half an hour every Thursday at 8 p.m.—and with good reason: it's cartoon time," he wrote. A moment when students of all stripes "swarm around the glowing box," he continued, "to absorb the genius of Matt Groening and pals as manifested in *The Simpsons*."

Those lines launched his student essay, published in the *Gazette*'s November 1992 issue. Four years later, to his own shock, Selman would actually become one of those Groening pals, plunked inside an LA writers' room, dreaming up misadventures and quips for America's favorite bright-yellow family of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. And in 2021, he would assume the highest post there: running the show, which he's still doing today.

"I love the challenge of keeping the show vital," Selman says. December marked 35 years since *The Simpsons* debuted on Fox, making it America's longest-running primetime series by a landslide. Its 36th season, currently airing, has nudged it past 780 total episodes. "How do I keep this show fresh and good and original and crazy after 35 years?" he says. "That's the hardest part of the job, but that's also the main reason why I do the job."

Somehow that job sounds almost normal, at least when Selman describes it. You go into an office and come up with the best ideas you can. You manage small groups. You write, you edit, you goof around with your coworkers. "I look forward to coming in every day," he says. "People think that it's just fun and games all day here with the funniest people in the universe—and it is sort of like that. But it also is like any other job."

Still, when you're showrunning *The Simpsons,* that job you're doing is under an extreme microscope. Millions of people will see your work. It will spawn think pieces, prompt countless Reddit posts, win (or lose) Emmys and Golden Globes. Some people will insist that you can predict the future. Others will say that what you're doing isn't good anymore; it sucks now, in fact. Or maybe that it's getting better. Best it's been in decades, actually.

Selman doesn't seem too bogged down by any of that, though. As a *Simpsons* fan from the very beginning, he knows that the show has evolved and will continue to—and he's okay with that. In fact, it's what he's been working toward for years.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ETHAN PINES C'92

On December 17, 1989, *The Simpsons* premiered with a Christmas special. (It's the one where Homer, trying to raise money for gifts, bets his pay from working as a mall Santa at the dog track, loses, and ends up adopting the dog, "Santa's Little Helper.") From its first moments, the show looked and sounded unlike anything else that had been on TV before.

Selman was watching from his dorm, three months into his freshman year at Penn—and he was immediately hooked. "It was a revolution," he remembers, "and I was the perfect age to get caught up in it."

When he wasn't parked in front of the nearest TV each week at *Simpsons* o'clock, he was trying his hand at journalism. He joined the *Daily Pennsylvanian* as a beat reporter in 1991 ("I wasn't good at it"), then found a better fit at *34th Street* magazine, where he became editor-in-chief his junior year. Although he now regrets using his reign to copycat *Entertainment Weekly*, he says it was "the most formative, fortunate thing that ever happened to me in terms of beginning this journey—times a million."

Today he heads up *The Simpsons'* 16-person writing team, helping to shape every episode as it evolves from idea to finished product. Each day, he works alongside his writers to "break" stories, finetune scripts, and sometimes lead them in offshoot projects—like shorts for Disney+ or a *Monday Night Football* simulcast with *Simpsons* characters that aired in December.

Wrangling all those comedy-writing creatives requires an unusual mix of expertise, which Selman says he honed at *34th Street*. "I really began to develop the skills of collaboration and teamwork, and of being a fun, goofy, creative leader of a bunch of fun, goofy people all trying to make something fun and goofy together," he says.

Roxanne Patel Shepelavy C'93 remembers Penn-era Selman as "weird, neurotic, wickedly smart, bashful—and the only person we knew who went to the gym." They met as beat reporters at the *DP* and stayed close all through Penn, sharing a house with a handful of other friends their senior year.

"I basically giggled my way through college as Matt's friend," she says, recalling his "hilarious, brilliant turns of phrase" that, in a heavy stroke of foreshadowing, felt straight out of a sitcom. He read comic books and "sat around watching a lot of *Simpsons*," she adds.

TV critic Alan Sepinwall C'96, who's written about *The Simpsons* for decades, remembers meeting Selman during his own freshman year at Penn. Selman was in his final semester and still hanging out in the *Street* office. He'd written a spec script for *Seinfeld* and passed it around, soliciting input.

"I was amazed that Matt knew exactly what he wanted to do when he graduated, that he was aiming so high, and that he was already putting in the work to make it happen," Sepinwall remembers. But when Selman asked if he had any feedback on his script, "I froze and gave a completely garbled nonanswer," Sepinwall says. "All these years later, I would say we are both better at our respective side of things."

THE *Simpsons* was in its ninth season when Selman arrived, 25 years old and terrified.

He'd snagged a writing gig on *Seinfeld* just a few years out of Penn, but it didn't last long. "I couldn't have been less qualified," he told an audience at the 2024 Austin Film Festival. "I really didn't know what story was. I really didn't know what character was. I'm not even sure I really knew what a comedy idea was."

So when he joined *The Simpsons* in 1997, he proceeded with caution. He still remembers which writer pitched each individual joke that season because he was tracking it all so carefully, afraid of losing his top-comedy-show dream job (again). He successfully hung on to his spot in the writers' room but admits that his early contributions weren't wowing anyone. Then he saw the 1999 movie *Go*—a frenetic crime comedy with interlocking plotlines—and dreamed up a *Simpsons* version.

"WHAT'S A BIG, CRAZY IDEA THAT ONLY WE COULD DO, OR THAT WE COULD TAKE FROM ELSEWHERE AND APPLY TO *THE SIMPSONS*?"

It became "Trilogy of Error," a Season 12 episode that weaves three distinct tales (Homer's severed thumb, Lisa's science fair entry, and Bart's illegal fireworks find) into a single, interconnected tale. It's complex storytelling for a full-length film—and especially for a 22-minute animated comedy.

"That's what I try to do with every episode now: What's a big, crazy idea that only we could do, or that we could take from elsewhere and apply to *The Simpsons* and keep the show fresh and original?" Selman says.

So far this season, the show has parodied *The White Lotus*, turned Marge and Smithers into wine counterfeiters, and—in a *Venom* spoof from Selman—zipped Homer into a pair of sentient, stop-motion-animated jeans ("Denim").

The Season 36 premiere, "Bart's Birthday," claimed it was the show's series finale, hosted by former *Simpsons* writer Conan O'Brien and written by an AI bot programmed to craft the perfect last episode. "I'm very proud of that one," says Selman, who proposed the idea himself. "What other show could do a fake finale that tries to end itself but also keep itself alive?"

And what other showrunner could have come up with it? After proving himself with "Trilogy of Error," Selman continued turning in strong scripts and eventually began assisting longtime showrunner Al Jean. By 2011, he was showrunning (or as it's billed in the closing credits, executive producing) a couple episodes on his own, then more in ensuing seasons, until taking over as *The Simpsons'* head showrunner in 2021.

Not every episode or every season has been beloved. Critics and viewers often call Seasons 1–10 the show's "Golden Era."

In *Vulture*'s ranking of the best *Simpsons* episodes ever, "Bart's Birthday" is the only one of the top 10 written after 1997.

"Look, no one is more aware than me of the narrative around the show's quality," Selman says. "I am the biggest fan in the world of the classic *Simpsons* years. That's when I fell in love with the show.

"[But] our goal is not to write and produce the show in the exact same style as it was in the classic years," he adds. "Our goal is to do—for better or for worse—a modern version of the show. We're not trying to revolutionize comedy [anymore], because the revolution has already happened."

He's heard all the critiques, which grow louder at some times than others. *The show isn't as funny. It's relying on tropes. Repeating plots. Trying too hard. Why aren't there more jokes?!*

"*The Simpsons*, when it first came out, was really a joke-delivery machine," Selman said at the Austin event. "My aspiration now is to make it a story-delivery machine … to just tell good stories about good people that are making terrible choices because the world is so hard and full of things that make you stupid. That's a good goal for our show in 2024."

In his quest for fresh stories, Selman's been infusing the writers' room with new talent. The earliest *Simpsons* team was almost exclusively men. Even when Selman arrived in Season 9, all 25 episodes had male writers (with a lone woman cowriter credited in one episode).

Compare that to the current season, where half of the first 12 episodes were written by women—including one from Christine Nangle C'02, a fellow Penn alum whom Selman hired in 2019.

Nangle came from the sketch and improv comedy world, starting at UCB Theatre in New York and continuing through writing jobs on *Saturday Night Live, Kroll Show,* and *Inside Amy Schumer*. When Selman asked her to join the staff, Nangle told him that she didn't have encyclopedic knowledge of the show. "Great," he told her. "Love that." Then she admitted that she hadn't actually watched it much lately. "He's like, 'Great, even better,'" she remembers.

"We've always hired the funniest people," Selman says, but in recent years, "we wanted to cast a wider net for where the funniest people were."

"I think he wanted to bring in people who had other experiences on other types of shows," Nangle adds. "Under his leadership, we've been venturing into new format-breaking episodes and playing with more experimental stuff."

Like Nangle's "Women in Shorts" episode, which aired in November. It's composed of 12 sketch-comedy-style vignettes about Springfield's female characters and packed with references: *The Nanny*, the *Barbie* movie, and even a tampon-shopping parody of *West Side Story*'s "Gee, Officer Krupke."

"*The Simpsons* on Matt's watch is a lot more structurally adventurous than the show was in its most celebrated period," says Sepinwall, who was shocked to see himself name-dropped in a *Fahrenheit 451* parody episode this season. "The range of influences is also broader," he adds, "and it often tries to be more emotionally sincere than it once was."

Post-Season 10 criticism accused the show of losing its emotional core and

A Career in Five Episodes

Selman shares the *Simpsons* installments that trace his journey with the show.

"Natural Born Kissers" (1998)

Season 9, Episode 25 (Season Finale)

Homer and Marge discover that public sex puts the zing back in their relationship—until it becomes a problem. **Why he chose it:** This was the first *Simpsons* episode Selman wrote. "My draft needed a lot of work," he says, "but the rewrite by Mike Scully, George Meyer, and the other geniuses on staff made the show into a classic."

"Trilogy of Error" (2001)

Season 12, Episode 18

Selman's script weaves three separate stories into a clever, interconnected tale of a severed thumb, a grammar robot, and an illegal fireworks stash. **Why he chose it:** This was Selman's first time concocting a format-breaking episode. "I borrowed (stole) the plot structure of the movie *Go* and made it a thousand times sillier," he says.

"The Food Wife" (2011)

Season 23, Episode 5

Marge and the kids stumble their way into foodie culture and even start a food blog. But then a fancy dinner out turns into a perilous misadventure for Homer. **Why he chose it:** This one marks Selman's first time showrunning an episode—and he wrote it, too. "I figured if I was only going to have creative control of one episode, I'd go all in on the foodie culture I was enamored with at the time," he remembers.

"Treehouse of Horror XXXIII" (2022)

Season 34, Episode 6

The "SimpsonsWorld" segment that Selman wrote for this Halloween episode is stuffed with *Simpsons* references and catchphrases—even the Springfield monorail makes an appearance. The spooky twist? Homer's not a human; he's just intellectual property trapped inside a *Simpsons* theme park. **Why he chose it:** Its annual Treehouse episodes are a huge deal at *The Simpsons*, and this was Selman's first time showrunning one. He describes "SimpsonsWorld" as "a love letter to *The Simpsons* fans and the classic era of the show."

"Bart's Birthday" (2024)

Season 36, Episode 1 (Season Premiere)

Selman wasn't its main writer, but he did coin the idea for a fake series finale episode. Brimming with celebrity cameos, it pokes fun at all the usual finale cliches—like perfectly wrapped-up storylines and characters flicking off the lights while saying "I'm gonna miss this place." **Why he chose it:** "The craziest format-breaker I showran," Selman says. "It showed that *The Simpsons* could still be audacious after 36 seasons."

narrative drive. In 2003, a *Slate* critic wrote that *The Simpsons'* characters had all become "empty vessels for one-liners and sight gags." But two years ago, a *Vulture* article announced—in a statement it felt was headline-worthy—"*The Simpsons* Is Good Again." The creative team is "putting out some of the most ambitious, poignant, and funny episodes in the show's history," Jesse David Fox wrote. He gave Selman significant credit for that renaissance.

"He always wants us to be focused on the characters and the emotion of the story," Nangle says. "Some people might think those things are too corny to care about, but I think that's one of the things that makes his episodes so good and powerful."

Shepelavy can picture Selman's own kindness trickling down into the show he runs. She describes him as bighearted and "really sweet." At Penn, she says, he was the friend who'd make sure everyone got home safely after a night out. "It's not surprising to me that the show is more emotionally rich" under his leadership, she says.

"On the outside, it is this smart, funny show that's kind of ridiculous," Shepelavy adds. "But underneath that there's a sweetness to it. That is very much like Matt."

With Selman in charge, *The Simpsons* writers' room "doesn't feel like a competition," says Nangle, who suspects that may not have always been the case. When the group is batting around ideas for gags and punchlines, she says the undertone is always collaboration and making each other's work the best it can be.

"It's not a negative space, and no one shits on people's pitches or puts down ideas," Selman says. "Without the freedom to be dumb, you're not going to be funny … [and] everyone here knows we're so lucky to have this crazy job."

But in the same breath that she's describing Selman as kind, warm, and personable, Nangle says he's also "quirky and anxious." In fact, "he has the most endearing anxiety I've ever seen," she says. "He seems to be as worried about what we're ordering for lunch as he is about the table read the next day."

Selman's job requires a lot of juggling: writers, story ideas, scripts, media interviews, brand collaborations, public appearances on behalf of the show.

We had our first call in mid-December, during which he glanced at a writer's outline ("These millennials, I tell you, they don't love page numbers") and received a holiday gift ("Is that a present for me? Ooh, alright!").

The next night, he was on stage at El Capitan Theatre in Hollywood, introducing a screening of the show's new holiday special, "O C'mon All Ye Faithful." It aired on December 17, exactly 35 years after *The Simpsons*' 1989 debut.

Wearing a baseball cap and glasses (*Vulture* writer Fox once described him as looking "a tiny bit like Krusty [the Clown] managing a Little League softball game on his day off"), he stood between show creator Matt Groening and the episode's writer, Carolyn Omine.

"Tonight's amazing Christmas episode is all about miracles," Selman told the audience. "It asks the question, *Are miracles real*? … To me, the real miracle is that after 35 years, *The Simpsons* still exists, and it's as good as it's ever been."

But it's also different—and not just in the stories he's shepherding on screen. The new holiday episode didn't run in *The Simpsons*' usual Fox Sunday night timeslot. It was only available on the streaming platform Disney+, as were three other episodes in Season 36.

"This sounds like a bullshitty thing people say, but Disney has been so terrific to us since they bought *The Simpsons* in 2019," Selman tells me. "Being bought by Disney was like a rebirth for the show in many ways." New generations of kids have been discovering it. It's opened up brand partnerships (like the *Monday Night Football* endeavor) and lets the show be even more experimental in streaming-only episodes.

At this point, *The Simpsons* is much more than a (very large) collection of episodes. It's spawned a movie, video games, board games, action figures, and theme parks at both Universal Studios' US locations. Its impact ripples across many other beloved TV comedies—*Family Guy, Bob's Burgers, South Park* and even *The Office*.

"*The Simpsons* reinvented the entire style of comedy as we know it today, to the point where it's hard to find a contemporary comedy that doesn't have some degree of *Simpsons* DNA in it," Sepinwall says. "But that also means that there is less focus on the show itself, even when it does stunts like the fake finale."

He predicts that it may eventually become a straight-to-streaming show for Disney+ (though not yet—in April it was renewed for four more seasons on Fox). But "my main question is what happens when one of the main actors is no longer available," Sepinwall says. Hank Azaria—who voices several characters and at 61 is the youngest of the show's main longstanding voice actors—recently wrote a piece for the *New York Times* predicting that AI will soon be able to recreate his *Simpsons* voices, which could be one answer. (Unsurprisingly, he hates the idea.)

For anyone under 35, *The Simpsons* has always been on TV each week, no questions asked. Most of the world would easily recognize their distinct shade of yellow, their bulgy eyes, their silly catchphrases. It's hard to imagine the family ever just disappearing from pop culture—which prompts me to ask Selman whether he thinks this show, the one he's spent tens of thousands of hours working on, will end someday, and what might cause it to.

"That's a problem for future everybody, not a problem for today," he says.

"I could definitely see a scenario where some version of it continues forever," he adds, "but I'm more worried about the next table read than I am about the existential future of the show."

Molly Petrilla C'06 writes frequently for the *Gazette*.