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US rekindles its 'Downton Abbey' affair

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Americans rekindle their peculiar love affair with the post-Edwardian demise of English aristocracy on Sunday when season four of "Downton Abbey" premieres on US public television.

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The internationally-acclaimed British period drama set in a grand old Yorkshire country estate is seen in about 100 countries around the world -- but nowhere does it enjoy the kind of cult following it has in the United States.

More than 24 million Americans watched season three last year, making it the most-watched drama ever on the commercial-free PBS network, and more than double the 11.8 million Britons who've already caught season four on ITV.

From coast to coast, "Downtonians" will be at the edge of their chesterfields, keen to see what's next for the Crawleys in 1920 after the unexpected deaths of two beloved young members of the patrician family.

Many will watch at home, of course. Others will flock to "Downton Abbey" viewing parties where they might nibble on crab canapes or chicken and mushroom pie prepared from recipes in "The Unofficial Downton Abbey Cookbook."

(Chicago PBS affiliate WTTW boldly suggests chicken tikka masala, "which arrived on the British culinary scene around 1903," as an alternative best served with a Burgundy, Graves or champagne.)

Once the eight-episode season wraps on February 23, hardcore fans can don their official "Downton Abbey" T-shirts or unofficial Downton Abbey knits and trek to east-coast Delaware for a "Costumes of Downton Abbey" exhibition.

It's tempting to read something metaphorical into America's fascination with the Earl of Grantham, alias Robert Crawley (Hugh Bonneville), his quick-witted dowager mother Violet (Maggie Smith), his many children and their household staff in the twilight years of the British Empire.

But pop-culture scholar Robert Thompson of Syracuse University in upstate New York said Friday it boils down to an enduring American passion for melodrama over the ether.

"Americans have always liked good, dishy, lathery soap operas, and 'Downton Abbey' delivers," said Thompson, who acknowledges watching each and every episode since the first US telecast in 2011.

"I would put this, in many ways, in the same family as 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty' and 'Falcon Crest' and 'Melrose Place'," he told AFP, name-checking classic prime-time US soaps from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Many viewers tend to agree.

"It's evil versus good with ridiculous hair-dos and wonderous one-liners," said Brenda Clevenger, 51, of Kansas City, Missouri, who finds the show gives her "good material" for her Midlife Mona Lisa blog.

"It's the perfect combination of drama, manners and enough period-piece genre to make the audience feel smarter than it is," added advice columnist April Masini, a former TV producer once involved in the sultry beach drama "Baywatch."

In the run-up to Sunday, PBS -- funded by corporate and private donors plus a dollop of dollars from the US government -- has been teasing season four with a rich heaping of trailers on on-demand cable television.

So strong is audience support that PBS has already confirmed a fifth season, even though "Downton Abbey" failed last year to win any Emmy awards to add to the eight it had previously collected.

In a nod to its stateside popularity, season four adds a new American character, a black jazz singer in London played by Gary Carr, alongside Oscar winner Shirley MacLaine, reprising her role as Robert Crawley's American mother-in-law.

Gone forever is Matthew Stevens, the wounded World War I warrior and heir to Downton Abbey, who died last season in a car accident -- or more precisely, when actor Dan Stevens quit the cast, throwing the show's creator and writer Julian Fellowes for a loop.

"'Downton Abbey' is long past its sell-by date," wrote television critic Alessandra Stanley in The New York Times on Friday, "yet it is still remarkably palatable."

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