THE SIX COMMANDMENTS OF MATT AND TREY
What South Park's creators have learned in fifteen
seasons of outrage and quiet episode-ending morals. By Margaret Lyons

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN sentient faces, Helen Keller musicals, and the tale of one Scurvy McBoogerballs, South Park went from culty
cable series to one of the major forces in American comedy, and its creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, became masters of the epic
puppet action film (Team America: World Police) as well as Broadway (The Book of Mormon). But one thing remains constant: The still
crudely drawn grade-school stars always learn a valuable lesson at the end of every episode, even if that lesson is something subversive
or gross or politically ambivalent or, ideally, all three. “That always ends up being the last thing we put in the show,” says Parker of
the moral. The lessons tend to just emerge as he and Stone write the episode, they say. Sure, they’ve taught us about gnomes who steal
underpants, and the dangers of being an Apple fanboy, but Parker and Stone have learned a few things themselves along the way:

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PLOT SHOULD REVEAL THE THEME, AND NOT VICE VERSA.
Parker explains: “That’s when you feel the best: when you
don’t need someone to stand up on the
soapbox at the end and say, ‘You see...’”
It’s a lesson that
inspired one of The Book of Mormon’s
most judicious cuts: Elder Price, the Goody
Two-shoes who experiences a major
fall from grace over the
course of the show,
used to have a
monologue explaining
his journey of
enlightenment (and back). They cut it to
two sentences.

TRY NOT TO CARE
SO MUCH...
“A lot of times we’ve erred on the side of”
overexplaining,
Stone says, “Now we
don’t care anymore.”
This has led to an
increasingly liberated
South Park, the
creators’ greater
comfort with unusual
or strange moments
within an episode,
what Stone calls “anti-messages.” Parker
says it changed when
we stopped being
brooding twenty-
somethings”—here he
breaks into garbled
 gibberish in a
high-pitched, whining
voice. His point? as
they grew up, they
realized “we don’t
know what the fuck
we’re talking about.”
Which took the
pressure off being
precise.

...BUT DON’T BE
MAD AT YOUR
AUDIENCE FOR
CARING A LOT.
The second-season
premier, “Terrance
and Phillip in Not
Without My Anus,”
elicited an unexpected
backlash from fans
because it didn’t
explain the first
season’s cliffhanger.
“We thought people
would love it,”
Parker says. “We
thought of it as
almost a meta-
television joke. And
people hated it. They
were like, ‘But who is
Cartman’s dad?’ And
we were like, ‘Who the
fuck gives a shit? He’s
not real. It’s whoever
we say it is!’ But it was
a big lesson that the
audience doesn’t like a
joke on them.”

SIMPLE IS BETTER.
Parker describes
himself as a huge fan
of the Food Network
(which sort of explains
season fourteen’s
“Crème Fraîche” episode) and of simple,
straightforward
ingredients. He says
their entire approach
changed after a 2001
episode called “Scott
Tenorman Must Die,”
in which Cartman
seeks revenge on an
older kid who makes
fun of him, eventually
torturing Scott
Tenorman to the point
where Cartman licks
tears off his foe’s face.
“We used to have an
A-story, a B-story, and
sometimes a C-runner,” Parker says
of early seasons. But
for “Tenorman,” he
says, “we just had this
simple story, and as we
were doing it, we were
like, ‘This is cool!’”

YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH ANYTHING AS
LONG AS YOU DO IT WELL.
Mr. Hanley is not
‘talking poo just for
the sake of talking
doing it,’ Parker insists.
“It had a point.
It’s about Kyle feeling
like an outcast,
feeling like he can’t
relate to Christmas
in the way other
kids can, and it works.”

DON’T BE AFRAID TO SURPRISE YOURSELF.
Last June’s final
episode—You’re
Getting Old—turned
the world of South
Park on its head by
going after cynicism,
with Stan discovering
that his critical gaze
was alienating him
from everyone he
cared about. It set off
rumors that Parker
and Stone were
signaling they were
done. “We’re making
fun of Kevin James
and Adam Sandler... But
we have to include
ourselves in there,
long can you keep
making those movies?
Well, that’s us, too,”
Parker says. “How
long can you keep
doing this?” Their
contract goes for two
more seasons.