

HBO's production of George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* unfolds a violent, complex tale

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Based on George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire novels, Game of Thrones is now in its third season on HBO.

American author and screenwriter George R.R. Martin (born 1948) has long been highly regarded in certain science fiction and fantasy circles. Martin, the son of a longshoreman from Bayonne, New Jersey, began writing science fiction in the 1970s, and worked extensively in television (*The Twilight Zone*, *Beauty and the Beast*) in the 1980s. He began writing what would become the series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, now projected to include seven novels, in 1991.

The epic fantasy series takes place on two fictional continents, Westeros and Essos, over the course of many years and involves a civil war over the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms. It borrows significantly from events such as England's War of the Roses and various episodes of medieval history.

With the airing of *Game of Thrones* (named after the first of novel of the series) on HBO, the cable and satellite television network, Martin's popularity has taken off to such an extent that even his earlier books have been brought back into print—some more than 30 years since their first appearance and a decade since their last printing.

Martin's approach to science fiction and fantasy has always been more literary than that of many of his contemporaries. He writes at a relatively high level, sacrificing little in the way of language or story, and drawing extensively from historical, mythological and literary sources to construct his worlds.

Those who would claim that a popular audience has no patience, or cannot get through demanding material, would do well to look at the widespread devotion shown to this particular series of books, which contain intricate

plots, an extensive cast of characters and a view of the world that is harsh, but not hopeless.

Given the variability of the characters, few of whom could be considered heroic, the span of time involved and the combination of natural and supernatural elements, the translation of the books to television was an undertaking that could have gone horribly awry. This is happily not the case. The producers have largely stuck to the story, which unfolds at a pace that lets the material develop into a cohesive and elegant whole. *Game of Thrones* initially focuses on two noble families, the Starks of Winterfell in the North and that of King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), whose wife Cersei (Lena Headey) is from House Lannister, a wealthy and ruthless family. The king comes calling to ask his old friend Eddard (Ned) Stark (Sean Bean) to be his Hand, or top advisor, since his last Hand has died.

Eddard agrees and moves to King's Landing with his daughters Sansa (Sophie Turner) and tomboy Arya (Maisie Williams, who displays impressive talent). Right before they leave, one of the young Stark sons witnesses something startling involving Cersei and is nearly killed in a fall. Since the episode becomes a major plot point, this writer hesitates to give too much away.

At King's Landing, the Starks settle in, and Sansa is betrothed to Prince Joffrey (Jack Gleeson, in a chilling performance). Eddard Stark gives good advice to his friend the king, and all seems to be going fine ... momentarily. However, questions as to what became of the last Hand—and the one before that—plague Eddard, as well as what exactly caused his son's fall.

The last survivors of the Targaryen family, who lost the throne to the Baratheons, live in exile across the sea of Penton. Viserys Targaryen (Harry Lloyd), a pugnacious, pompous and determined young man, will give anything

to regain the throne he sees as his by right. The “anything” turns out to be his younger sister, Daenerys (Emilia Clarke), whom he offers to the leader of the nomadic Dothraki tribe in exchange for an army with which to retake the throne. This plan does not end well for Viserys, but launches Daenerys on an interesting path.

A number of characters in *Game of Thrones* are intensely dislikable, but through Martin’s treatment of their internal conflicts and the seriousness of the performers, even some who behave with great savagery are presented with sympathy, as it becomes clear that they are victims of external circumstances or corners they have painted themselves into.

Of particular note in this regard is the reprehensible Cersei, who puts her sociopathic son Joffrey on the throne. At first triumphant, she soon realizes that the terror he inflicts on the court and the general populace is her fault. Cersei now understands she is trapped in a situation she has created and could also easily fall victim to her son’s violent whims. Headey’s portrayal of the resigned desperation when her character is caught in an unguarded moment is moving. *Game of Thrones*’ principal writers David Benioff and D.B. Weiss have to be credited with remaining faithful to Martin’s story—even eliminating when necessary popular and comparatively “good” characters. As conditions shift, actions are often quite unexpected, but they do not beggar belief, and there are few occasions when the plot falls back on tired devices for the sake of not offending (or challenging) viewers. The integration of supernatural elements—Whitewalkers (a sort of snow zombie) and dragons—is seamless, and the latter appear as perhaps unexpected but natural parts of this fictional world.

The various kingdoms are treated more or less evenhandedly from the cultural standpoint, with none of them emerging as more “civilized” than the other, which often happens in this genre. The clash or melding, or both, of cultures that occurred in the Middle Ages is alluded to through the fate of Daenerys Targaryen, from the quasi-European Westeros, who marries into the Middle Eastern-inspired Dothraki tribe (for which an entire language was invented by Martin—many of the scenes are subtitled). A healthy part of Daenerys’ strength comes from selectively adapting to the Dothraki culture and retaining the best elements of her own.

There is a good deal of violence and sexuality in the series. In general, however, the wars and battles, the revenges taken and punishments meted out, do not have an ounce of romanticism about them. The violence is

ugly, touching every life harshly. As for the sex, it is rather graphic and only very infrequently tender. Though this may be appropriate to the circumstances, one can only wonder whether presented more discreetly the sex scenes would not have had the same, or even a stronger, impact.

For a story about maneuvering within ruling circles, *Game of Thrones* has few overtly political scenes, with the vast majority of the power-grabbing carried out through (literal) back-stabbing, secret-mongering and betrayals of trust. This seems a limitation, and suggests that the series’ creators have more difficulty with the *social content* of power struggles than their more spectacular results.

Some rulers and landowners express concern for those who live on their property, but the overall standpoint is that of the elite. The age of *Game of Thrones* is not presented as a progressive era by any stretch of the imagination. The writers do not moralize for the most part, although in certain situations—for example, the possible assassination of a pregnant girl who might someday prove a threat—they take an obvious stand and let their characters feel and face the consequences.

Martin and the *Game of Thrones* script writers centrally focus on “legitimate succession” and such questions. (As though the emergence of any noble or royal dynasty were not always rooted in ruthlessness and criminality at some point in the process.) More often than not, those on what the creators take to be the rightful side of the argument suffer, and sometimes die. The thrust of this liberal reading of history, which to its credit is neither cynical nor fatalistic, is not that the “good” never win. The idea rather is that the battle is going to be long, difficult and bloody, but worth fighting.

HBO has renewed *Game of Thrones* for a fourth season.



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