

Why is HBO's *Game of Thrones* so popular?

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25 September 2018

The HBO series *Game of Thrones* demonstrated its great popularity once more September 17 when it received a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series, for what has widely been regarded as its weakest (and seventh) season.

The announcement that George R. R. Martin, the author of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the fantasy novel series on which the television show is based, will publish a new book (not directly part of the series) in November may placate some fans of *Game of Thrones* who were disappointed to discover that it would not have an eighth and final season until 2019.

Even if no new book were released, however, the show is so enormously popular that millions will watch it for the first, second or third time and dozens of blogs and podcasts will continue to discuss and review the seven seasons for the rest of 2018.

Game of Thrones, based on Martin's five novels, has received 47 Primetime Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Drama Series three times, more than any other primetime scripted television series. It began airing on HBO in April 2011, surpassed the popularity of HBO's *Sopranos*, and by its seventh and most recent season in 2017 averaged over 30 million viewers per episode. It runs in over 170 countries and has been illegally downloaded more than any other program.

Both the series and the novels concern the fate of members of noble and royal families during a civil war over several years in a fictional world on a continent called Westeros. Palace intrigue, betrayal, coup and counter-coup, sieges and battles occur there for the most part, but other military and political developments in lands adjacent to Westeros also take place.

What explains the popularity of this show?

As several critics have pointed out, the television series was guaranteed a certain degree of success because George R. R. Martin's books were already well known by 2011. The first in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, *A Game of Thrones*, was published in 1996. The second novel, *A Clash of Kings* (1998), and the third, *A Storm of Swords* (2000), were already on the *New York Times* Best Seller List. Martin's 2005 *A Feast for Crows* became the number one bestseller in November of that year.

More than 70 million copies of the books have been sold to date, translated into 47 languages, although much of this is undoubtedly due to the prominence of the HBO series. After the box office success of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (2001-2003), Martin began receiving inquiries for film and television versions of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* books.

The fact that the well-crafted and complex character of Martin's work is brought to the screen in HBO's *Game of Thrones* undoubtedly accounts for its popularity to some degree. The writing is intelligent as a rule and the acting is also at a high level: sometimes it is excellent as in the case of performances by Peter Dinklage as Tyrion Lannister, the dwarf outcast from the powerful ruling Lannister clan, and Lena Headey, who plays Tyrion's sister, the scheming queen Cersei Lannister.

Game of Thrones breaks down into roughly three plotlines, all of which have a "historical" or even "epic" semblance: Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) must lead wars of conquest until she regains her rightful throne; Westeros's ruling Lannisters must suppress rebellion and defend the capital of Kings Landing; and a small band of guardians in the far

north led by Jon Snow (Kit Harington) must alert the world to and make risky alliances in the face of an existential threat.

There are also supernatural and mystical elements. Daenerys Targaryen has fire-breathing dragons at her command. An invasion by telepathically manipulated undead from the frozen north threatens the more civilized lands to the south. Assassinations may be carried out by evoking evil spirits. A boy merges with animal and tree spirits and becomes clairvoyant. The dead come back to life.

These features, cast within a generally medieval social order, fit into the popular artistic genre known as high fantasy or epic fantasy, pioneered in the late 19th and early 20th century by writers such as William Morris and Lord Dunsany. Its most popular and gifted exponents in the aftermath of World War I were J. R. R. Tolkien and T. H. White. High fantasy has an appeal to many viewers, although there are many people who avoid the genre because of its non-rational and semi-religious elements.

The mass popularity of *Game of Thrones* must have something to do with how its audience feels about the current world, including perhaps their illusions and misconceptions. Masses of people have the desire to be entertained, but ideas of what is entertaining change in different social circumstances.

There is unquestionably something in the show that viewers feel reflects reality in a way that is not, on the whole, present in many other films or books. There is an "epic" sense to *Game of Thrones*, a big, rough, disturbing quality. The series features grand panoramas, vistas of large groups of people assembled in armies or cities, the hugeness of a wall of ice separating civilization from disaster.

Life for millions of people at present, particularly those in their twenties and thirties (according to one survey, 72 percent of the show's viewers are aged 18-30), is insecure. War, official violence, social inequality, the ruthlessness and shamelessness of the rich, these are everyday realities. The future seems dark to many.

Moreover, there is no adequate establishment explanation for many dramatic and shocking developments in recent decades, from hijacked elections to illegal invasions and unexamined terrorist attacks. Great numbers of people in their daily lives feel at sea.

There are few artistic works that are oriented toward the conditions and sentiments of masses of people and give them rational and complex representation. In the past, novels with large casts of characters were able to deal with contemporary problems or those within recent history of their times. One thinks, for example, of those written by Scott, Dickens, Balzac, Stendhal, George Eliot and Tolstoy in the 19th century or Thomas Mann, Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos in the 20th.

Works like these, in fiction, film or television, are missing in the 21st century. In fact, high fantasy is one of the few artistic genres in which great issues are fought out—or appear to be fought out—on a broad geographical and historical canvas. In both the *Game of Thrones* series and in Martin's books people accomplish, or tragically fail to accomplish, important—distinctly political—aims.

Events in *Game of Thrones* are undoubtedly serious. People are tortured, betrayed and murdered in the quest for power and wealth. The show's writers have managed to create enormous tension, since outcomes and

personal fates are not easily predictable in typical Hollywood style. Rebellion and political repression are elements in complex plots that involve scores of characters.

For example, several episodes of the HBO series concern a power-play by a leader of a fanatical religion that resembles a militant order within the medieval Catholic Church, or, perhaps, echoes the religious fanaticism that is prevalent in some areas of the United States or other parts of the world today.

Westeros' noble families, for all their feuding, face the common external threat of invasion by armies of the revivified dead who are barely contained by an enormous wall of ice and a small garrison of watchers in the far north.

In the first season, two characters discuss the art of ruling a people:

Joffrey Baratheon [the heir apparent to the crown, played by Jack Gleeson]: I'd crush them. Seize Winterfell and install someone loyal to the realm as Warden of the North. Uncle Kevan, maybe.

Cersei Lannister [his mother]: And these 10,000 northern troops, would they fight for you or their lord?

Joffrey: For me. I'm their King.

Cersei: But you've just invaded their homeland, asked them to kill their brothers.

Joffrey: I'm not asking.

Cersei: The North cannot be held... not by an outsider. It's too big and too wild. When the winter comes, the Seven gods together couldn't save you and your royal army. A good King knows when to save his strength ...

Game of Thrones, like Martin's novels, has the "feel" of history to it. Characters refer to the deeds of their grandparents, to wars and strategic victories or defeats in the past and seem to live in a world, while not of their own choosing, that was created by the activity of their forebears. Martin was influenced by classic and contemporary science fiction and fantasy writers and has himself said that his *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels are modeled on Maurice Druon's seven-volume series *The Accursed Kings* (*Les Rois maudits*) (1955-77), historical novels about the French monarchy at the outset of the Hundred Years' War in the 14th century.

The spirit of intrigue, violence and dynastic succession in Druon's books and to some extent in medieval European history itself, finds reflection in *Game of Thrones*. Others have compared the events in the series to the War of the Roses (1455-87) in medieval England. But this comparison has its definite limits.

While most of life in the television show and the novels looks and feels like Europe in the high Middle Ages, as a rule, life in rural areas, where presumably most of the population lives, is hardly shown. Most of the drama takes place among members of the nobility and those close to them.

Ordinary people play only a small role in *Game of Thrones*, and the most tragic characters, the "oppressed" of the series, who are generally the most complex and interesting, come from the nobility but are disadvantaged in one way or another: a dwarf (Tyrion Lannister), a bastard (Jon Snow) or female (Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen). It is they who undergo tests to their courage and perseverance.

One book on the philosophical conceptions in Martin's *A Game of Thrones* has called it a "genuine exploration of human nature in uncertain times." And certainly, many people have the sense that we live in uncertain times now.

But the times in *Game of Thrones* are not *our* uncertain times, or any historically concrete uncertain times—neither the end of the Roman Empire nor the age of peasant rebellions in China—that ever existed.

Even the wildest fantasy has to correspond, in the end, to the way life is for us. The series does not present the "human nature" of specific classes in specific societies. The "feel" of history is not the same thing as the drama of human beings acting within definite historical circumstances. Great drama presents the collision of *social forces* as it finds particular expression. The element of *necessity* is missing here.

Overall, the representation of high politics fought out in civil war by heroic (or anti-heroic) personalities has only a limited value. *Game of Thrones* rubs out the real historical process itself. Semi-sentient dragons which can breathe fire to devastate armies—of both humans and zombies—and break monarchies, remove history not only from the physical laws of nature, but also the social limitations of history. It is a false "freedom."

Game of Thrones inevitably offers only a static, pretend and bowdlerized "feel" for history. It is not history, but pseudo-history, not epic but pseudo-epic. For all the complexity of character, plot, with mixed or indeterminate outcomes, the oppositions within the series and the novels are relatively shallow: lust, greed and perhaps insanity are the great motivators of human behavior. The conflict between individuals, even when they are cast on large scale with armies, over great distances and for high stakes, are personal and, for the most part, petty.

In other words, this version of history—generally speaking—is not going to help people feel any truly less at sea.

Moreover, one senses that both Martin and the series' writers feel they must make up for the relative absence of the intrinsically interesting behavior of rich and deeply motivated characters with a good deal of sex and, even more so, porno-sadistic violence. Although Seasons 5 and 6 especially were criticized for their scenes of torture and rape, Martin, in fact, has proved to be more excessive in this respect as he has proceeded in his writing career.

On the other hand, there is little in Westeros and its environs that produces the noble characters who might be prepared to sacrifice themselves for a cause or a greater good. The historical Middle Ages had such people, the English rebel John Ball (about whom William Morris wrote a short novel) associated with the Peasants Revolt of 1381, for instance, or the leader of the German peasant uprising of 1525, Thomas Müntzer.

The immense popularity of *Game of Thrones* indicates the desire for something more than formulaic and cheery fare. The younger generation has little to turn to in the mass entertainment media except action-adventure films vaunting mind-numbing good vs. evil themes or sentimental romances, or some combination of both.

But viewers accept a little too easily that history is merely a sensationalized game of kings and queens, and that political power leads inevitably to corruption or death. "It's only entertainment," people will say. Yes, but entertainment too can be more challenging and enlightening.

The exceptions to the current state of affairs, such as the BBC's excellent version of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and Mike Leigh's *Peterloo*, prove the rule.



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