

The Expanse Season 4: The latest installment in the science fiction series

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Season 4 of the US science fiction series *The Expanse* premiered last month on Amazon Prime. The show developed a cult following during its original run on the SyFy channel and was picked up almost immediately by the streaming service after SyFy canceled it following its third season. A fifth season is already in production. The show is based on the popular series of novels of the same title, whose ninth and final installment is due to be published later this year.

The Expanse takes place several hundred years in the future, when humanity has colonized most of the Solar System. At the start of the series, an uneasy peace exists between Earth, now (implausibly) unified politically under the United Nations, and the rival Mars Congressional Republic, who are locked in a bitter struggle for domination of the system's resources.

Caught in the middle of this cold war are the Belters, human colonists of the Asteroid Belt and other smaller worlds. Although the Belt is the source of the vast majority of the system's mineral wealth, most Belters live in grinding poverty, and are brutally oppressed by the Mars and Earth-based conglomerates that rule the region. Deep opposition to their exploitation by the "Inners" of Mars and Earth has led to the creation of a nationalist movement, the Outer Planets Alliance (OPA), which dreams of an independent Belter state.

Audiences obviously find much in this premise to be familiar, and much of the show's popularity rests on its complex (at times difficult to follow) tale of political intrigue that plays upon contemporary concerns and anxieties. For the most part, the show is at least competently scripted and acted, unlike the hapless *Star Trek: Discovery*. No doubt also contributing to its popularity are the impressive-looking CGI special effects and intricately-designed spacecraft interiors.

Fans of "hard" science fiction will appreciate the fact that the show's *human* technology at least is bound for the most part by the known laws of physics, which themselves bear directly upon the show's plot in many key sequences. A

familiarity with, or even a passing interest in, the actual science of spaceflight is ironically lacking in almost all other science fiction television series.

In the first season, Belter detective Josephus Miller (Thomas Jane) uncovers a system-wide conspiracy to test the Protomolecule, an immensely powerful and dangerous piece of alien technology, on unsuspecting Belters. Joining him are the four crew members of the gunship *Rocinante*, led by the idealistic James Holden (Steven Strait).

Meanwhile, the cynical UN bureaucrat Chrisjen Avasarala (Shohreh Aghdashloo) investigates the involvement of high-ranking Earth officials in the conspiracy. Avasarala is easily the show's most repulsive character. Her dialog consists almost exclusively of rollicking vulgarity and threats directed to subordinates, and she is introduced to audiences torturing a Belter detainee in the first episode. But the character is obviously pitched to appeal to middle class layers who are thrilled to see a "strong female leader" doing the torturing and bullying.

The second season and most of the third deal with an interplanetary war that breaks out between Mars and Earth over control of the Protomolecule, which has obvious military applications. In the last half of the third season, the mysterious function of the Protomolecule is revealed when it opens up a "ring gate" connecting the Solar System to a network of similar gates orbiting thousands of distant stars, each with a habitable planet waiting to be colonized. However, the advanced civilization that built the ring network, ominously, is nowhere to be found. Holden is led by a Protomolecule-induced hallucination of the now-dead detective Miller to investigate their disappearance, and in the season finale another threat to human civilization is narrowly averted.

In the fourth season the crew of the *Rocinante* travels to one of the new worlds lying on the other side of the ring network to investigate a Protomolecule presence. They are immediately caught up in a conflict between a corporate survey team dispatched to study the planet, led by the sinister chief of security Adolphus Murtry (Burn Gorman),

and Belter refugees who have already set up a small settlement. But the conflict between the two factions is eventually overshadowed by the sudden awakening of much of the planet's alien technology, apparently in response to Holden's presence ...

Meanwhile, the characters left in the Solar System deal with the social disruption caused by the ring network. The societies of Mars and the Belt are confronted with an existential crisis caused by the sudden appearance of thousands of habitable worlds, rendering their own barely habitable worlds irrelevant and creating the grounds, inevitably, for yet another conspiracy. This time, it is investigated by Avasarala, ex-Martian marine Bobbie Draper (Frankie Adams), and two OPA military leaders, the latter of whom uncover the role in the scheme of OPA extremist Marco Inaros (Keon Alexander), a charismatic madman eager to exact revenge on Earth.

In the past, science fiction was often referred to as a "literature of ideas." Especially at its height in the mid-20th century, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Stanisław Lem and others would use invented worlds or speculative futures to critically examine contemporary mores, philosophical questions and the implications of social and technological developments.

The quality of science fiction writing, especially in television and film, has generally deteriorated since then, as the focus has shifted away from more pensive and intellectually challenging subjects toward adolescent action-fantasies. *The Expanse* suffers from this. The complex political entanglements in which its characters find themselves are inevitably resolved in a climactic hail of gunfire or flashy space battles.

Commercial pressure is not the only factor in the decline. A growing pessimism and discouragement among writers themselves about the possibility of social progress is also an important element in the difficulties. Disappointed by events and with little confidence in the future, writers have become distant from real issues, and their intellectual horizons have narrowed as a result.

This produces a vision of the future both pessimistic and unrealistic. In the universe of *The Expanse*, capitalism continues not only to exist; it has expanded into the farthest reaches of space and organized the settlement of billions of humans on alien worlds. This in spite of the fact that, under really existing capitalism, not one single human has even set foot on the moon for nearly 50 years. The privatization of space begun in earnest under Obama has seen considerable resources being wasted on suborbital space tourism ventures like Virgin Galactic and Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin, but the timelines for manned flights to Mars continue to slip into the indefinite future.

For Amazon founder and world's wealthiest man Bezos, who is reportedly a fan of *The Expanse* and was instrumental in picking it up after cancellation, the show's vision of a future interplanetary capitalist society wracked by endemic warfare, massive inequality and class oppression must be a perversely reassuring fairy tale. In the real world, the ruling class, wracked by crisis and faced with a growing wave of global opposition from the working class, can hardly see the way through the next two years, let alone 200. These very processes are already reaching their limits, posing the immediate practical need to end the capitalist system, and expropriate the wealth of figures like Bezos, to avoid the destruction of the planet.

The series' depiction of the oppressed working-class Belters is ambivalent. The plight of the exploited Belters is generally rendered sympathetically, but the direct intervention of the Belters against their oppression often quickly devolves into irrational acts of homicidal violence. The "legitimate" faction of the OPA, led by Fred Johnson (Chad Coleman), tries and fails to keep the worst tendencies of their countrymen in check.

The more popular and charismatic OPA leaders are almost exclusively gangsters and thieves, made all the more dangerous by their political convictions. The scenes with Marco Inaros are generally embarrassing to watch. It is unclear why anyone would find the character's stilted dialogue to be inspiring, and yet Inaros is able to win over many factions of Belters to his genocidal plans.

The clear implication is that the exploitation of the masses makes them vulnerable to being manipulated by unscrupulous fringe groups. This reflects the real fear of revolution among conservative and well-heeled layers more than it does anything else.

All that being said, *The Expanse* is one of the better US science fiction shows at present, although that is as much by default as by its own intrinsic merits. Many sci-fi shows have cropped up in the recent period, including *The Man in the High Castle*, *Stranger Things*, *Lost in Space*, *The Mandalorian*, *Star Trek: Discovery* and *Star Trek: Picard*, among others. For the most part, these are empty special effects extravaganzas whose principal aims are to sell new subscriptions to various streaming services.



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