

Cobra Kai: The reboot of *The Karate Kid* film series

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Netflix began streaming the first and second seasons of *Cobra Kai* in September to considerable fanfare. The series is named after the karate dojo featured in John G. Avildsen's *Karate Kid* film franchise—*The Karate Kid* (1984), *The Karate Kid Part II* (1986) and *The Karate Kid Part III* (1989).

The new series, originally filmed in 2017 and 2018 and first distributed on YouTube's Red and Premium networks, takes place 34 years after the original 1984 film and returns many of the *Karate Kid*'s original cast members in starring roles.

The series' initial airing in May 2018 on YouTube's platforms became the widest-viewed digital programming on the internet for that month. Since appearing on Netflix, the series has become the platform's most popular program. A new season is planned to appear on Netflix in the early months of 2021 and a fourth season has already been announced.

Cobra Kai's reception is undoubtedly linked to the popularity of the original *Karate Kid*. In broad strokes, the 1984 film tells the story of Daniel LaRusso (Ralph Macchio, who performs in the present show as well), a working class youth who has recently moved to the Los Angeles suburbs. Far from his New Jersey roots, Daniel runs into troubles at school, where he is bullied by teenagers who are trained at a local karate dojo (where the series' name comes from) by the sadistic sensei John Kreese (Martin Kove). Kreese, a former Special Forces soldier, preaches a quasi-fascistic creed of "no mercy" to his pupils.

LaRusso is taken under the wing of the stoic and humble Mr. Miyagi (played memorably by the late Noriyuki "Pat" Morita). Miyagi, a World War II veteran, reluctantly agrees to teach Daniel an advanced style of karate, which the teen uses to defeat his antagonists in a local martial arts tournament, winning

respect and admiration through his determination and use of Miyagi's "crane kick" technique.

The new series focuses on Johnny Lawrence (William Zabka, now in his 50s), Daniel LaRusso's former teenage nemesis in the 1984 film. The series' opener ("Ace Degenerate") finds the former *Cobra Kai* living a down-and-out existence in a low-income neighborhood in Reseda. Beset by alcohol and self-pity, he is a "deadbeat dad," embittered and constantly ruminating over his tournament loss to Daniel. Lawrence is also a bigot, making crude remarks to his Spanish-speaking neighbors.

Lawrence's life is contrasted to LaRusso's. LaRusso-Macchio has gone on to live the good life, owning a successful luxury vehicle dealership (complete with obnoxious billboard and television ads proclaiming he "kicks the competition," etc.) and pursuing a seemingly idyllic upper-middle-class lifestyle. This reversal of fortunes between the once-wealthy antagonist Johnny and the nouveau riche LaRusso creates an interesting dynamic in the drama that unfolds.

Things begin to develop when Lawrence, in a scene that parallels a well-known plot point in the original film, uses his karate skills to defend a socially awkward teen, Miguel (Xolo Maridueña), from a group of bullies. In a bid to teach Miguel and others how to defend themselves, Lawrence re-opens the old *Cobra Kai* dojo and revives its ruthless credo: Strike Hard. Strike First. No Mercy.

Without chasing down too many plot strands, Lawrence's effort encounters difficulties both externally (including from the well-connected LaRusso, who remembers *Cobra Kai*'s destructive past), as well as internally, from the dojo master's own desire to do right by his pupils.

Cobra Kai confronts, if unevenly and obliquely,

significant aspects of social reality. The series is most effective in its portrayal of the Lawrence-Zabka character. Beginning as an almost hopeless and semi-degenerate figure, Lawrence gradually evolves in a far healthier direction as he comes to care sincerely for the lives of those around him, as well as his own.

At the same time, LaRusso-Macchio, while generally a sympathetic character, nonetheless exhibits less overt, but equally undesirable attitudes and behaviors absorbed from his wealthy milieu. His generally arrogant dealings with the less well-off Johnny and other attendant insecurities lead him to hopelessly enflame conflicts. This behavior sometimes carries destructive consequences.

The series also deals convincingly and sympathetically with the social pressures that youth and teenagers face. Many of the series' young characters, trying merely to eke out an existence in their high school-social pecking order, understandably leap at Johnny's tough-as-nails persona and hard-charging karate style only to find themselves still confused, still anxious, and now ... with knowledge and training in a deadly fighting art.

If only inadvertently, the series manages to say something about the conditions and generally backward social culture that has facilitated the horrific epidemic of school shootings, along with the growth of drug use and suicide among youth recorded year after year in America. The fate of several of the series' young protagonists offers some insight into just how such tragedies come to pass.

Unsurprisingly, one of the series' weakest aspects is its constant and self-conscious effort to associate itself with the original movie. From references, dialogue, footage cribbed from the original, to the use of the same actors, *Cobra Kai* seems desperate to tell you that it is in the *Karate Kid* canon. This constant self-referencing makes one want to ask if these characters have anything worth talking about besides what they did in 1984. In any case, such a premise seems too narrow a basis for drama taking place almost 40 years later.

This is related to other recent Netflix efforts that consciously seek to recall fads and cultural moments of the 1980s. When asked about the series' success, Martin Kove, the actor who plays the villainous Kreese, told *Men's Health* "COVID-19 [may have benefited

us]" because "Everybody needs to feel good [right now] ... Within the series, it brings you back to that good feeling that you had back in the '80s."

Obviously, the 1980s were far more complex (and painful) than much of what the suburban-themed "feel good" culture of the period may have suggested, and there is more than an element of escapism in such nostalgia today.

Also, the appeal of movies such as *Karate Kid*, *The NeverEnding Story* (1984), *The Goonies* (1985), *Adventures in Babysitting* (1987) and numerous others was related to their depiction of "normal," working class or otherwise unassuming young people overcoming difficult odds against powerful enemies or forces, often in fantastic style, to achieve victory in one or another form. This *fantasy* storyline coincided with the *actual* decline in living standards and expectations for millions in the US.

In addition, the series is hobbled by its creators' noticeably ambivalent attitude toward Johnny's no-holds-barred karate methods. When the latter declares "I'm going to teach ... the style of karate that was taught to me, a method of fighting your p--- generation desperately needs," one feels the show's makers urging you to get behind him and cheer. To *Cobra Kai*'s credit, however, it does take a more critical approach to this attitude as the series progresses.

As far as popular television is concerned, *Cobra Kai* is more interesting and serious than most.



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