

Amazon Prime's *The Rings of Power*: One show to ruin them all

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2 October 2022

Based on the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, Rings of Power began its first season on Amazon Prime in September.

The release of the fantasy series *The Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power*, the most expensive television series in history, was unveiled with great fanfare. Now one rather wishes that, like the One Ring which brought so much misfortune in the books, it had never been created in the first place.

The series sets out to explore the Second Age of Middle-Earth, the fantasy world written by J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) inhabited by Men, Elves, Dwarves, and small humanoids known as Hobbits. There are several plotlines which revolve around the forging of magical rings, the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Numenor and the Last Alliance of Elves and Men.

This reviewer was lucky enough to be a teen witness to the popular *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy (2001-2003) directed by Peter Jackson, which retells the events of Tolkien's Third Age of Middle-Earth and the destruction of the cursed One Ring. I say teen because it was derided by Tolkien's late son, Christopher, at the time as, "an action movie for young people aged 15 to 25." That it was also an "evisceration of the book" became plain later upon reading, but one was willing to forgive much.

Fast forward 20 years and *Rings of Power* is also action-packed, a literary evisceration...but no age group seems inclined to defend it this time around. On the contrary, many people are genuinely upset and outraged. Not only is it stunningly boring, but it suffers from sophomoric writing, one-dimensional characters, and contrived plot points.

At the time of this writing, a leading review site reveals an audience score of 38 percent, with

professional critics giving it 84 percent. A veritable cottage industry has spawned on the free video sharing website YouTube, with content creators "hate watching" or mocking the show.

Amazon has felt compelled to delete thousands of negative reviews on its streaming platform Amazon Prime, as well as issue a formal statement opposing the "relentless racism" directed to its castmates of color. The suggestion that complaints are predominantly racist is belied by the fact that *House of the Dragon*, another racially diverse fantasy series released at the same time on HBO, has not received any such backlash.

The series has undoubtedly touched a nerve, which says more about the present state of filmmaking and society than anything Tolkien is responsible for. The fact that it was produced by the company owned by Jeff Bezos, the world's second-richest person, generates schadenfreude on the part of some, but for the most part there is a sense of disappointment and frustration.

Young people and those who recall the Jackson Trilogy now navigate a world far more fraught with instability and anxiety. World leaders are engaged in nuclear brinksmanship, there are historic levels of social inequality, insecure work and so on. Art and particularly film are no doubt seen as a lifeline.

Tolkien wrote sophisticated fantasy literature replete with poems, songs, thousands of years of history and even entire languages. His writing was not without limitations, however, and suffused with elegies to the past. Growing up in England in the early 20th century, the experience of two world wars weighed heavily upon him, and he steered into Luddite conceptions that the bloody conflicts were caused by the industrialisation of society rather than the explosive contradictions of capitalism. At any rate, the sensitivity

and sophistication in his work is altogether absent from *Rings of Power*.

Tolkien's elves, written as ethereal and dignified beings endowed with the burden of immortality, are portrayed instead as shallow, individualist, and heartless.

The main character of the series is the elf Galadriel, who rather than being wise and perceptive as she is portrayed in the books, has been reduced to an action hero pursuing the Dark Lord Sauron. Despite being thousands of years old, she is unempathetic, petulant and in dire need of socialisation.

Elrond is rewritten as a grasping careerist and loyal bureaucrat, who schemes at the behest of his King to dissuade his friend Galadriel from any pursuit of Sauron and his remaining orcs. "It's hard to see what is right, when friendship and duty are mingled," he confides to the King.

He succeeds, however, and his duplicity is rewarded with promotion as executive assistant to Celebrimbor, who must build a forge, "more powerful than any ever built," with the somewhat limiting caveat of completing it before spring. In order to meet deadline, Elrond proceeds to wheedle an estranged friend, the dwarf prince Durin, into a building contract.

The elf soldier, Arondir, is posted to an elven military occupation over the land of men, which has been in place for a thousand years. "The blood of Morgoth still darkens their veins," one superior contemptuously remarks.

The human villagers look oppressed, unhealthy, and decidedly unhappy. "One day, our true king will return," threatens one, "and he'll pry us right out from under your pointy boots."

We are meant to invest in Arondir as he pursues a taboo love interest with one of the villagers, Bronwyn. "You're the only kind touch I've known in all my days of this land," he whispers. After all we have seen, we are inclined to believe him.

Not even the loveable hobbits are safe, who come off as mawkish and the most sinister of all. They supposedly "have each other" and "no one gets left behind," until they need to migrate apparently, in which case all bets are off, particularly for the disabled.

Permeating the whole work is the unhealthy obsession of identity politics peculiar to the upper middle class. One feels that, above all, we are meant to

be impressed with the number of lead female characters, black elves, dwarves and hobbits.

In a way, one could say that it is the best television series money can buy under the present circumstances. Projected to be the most expensive in history, its cost projections surpass \$1 billion (\$462 million on the first season alone). The rights were sold by the Tolkien estate for \$250 million prior to any written script.

Following the success of *Game of Thrones*, the highly competitive and international streaming video industry has been on the hunt for the next epic franchise. Bezos' Amazon Prime, with 200 million members, is looking to unseat Netflix's lead of 220 million. Disney+ stalks closely behind with 152 million. HBO's *House of the Dragon* is the prequel to *Game of Thrones*, though its membership base is 76.8 million.

Rings of Power is Amazon's corporate flagship in this respect, and it is too big to sink. What better way to avoid such a fate than to appeal to the lowest common denominator? This goes some way to explaining its dumbed-down, homogenised character, familiar to other recent franchises such as *Star Wars* and the *Wheel of Time*, all of which are regarded in corporate speak as valuable "IP" (Intellectual Property).

Whilst one can easily turn away from viewing the five seasons, one does get the dreadful sense that major film studios on the whole have reached new standards of profit making, in which artistically meaningful, challenging or even educational work comes to wither and die, no matter the source material.

Behind much of the show's criticism is a healthy sentiment of protest against this stultifying state of affairs, as well as the cynical use of identity politics which serves to legitimise or distract from it.

Rings of Power may attract more Prime memberships and contribute to Bezos' "flywheel strategy" of hooking consumers on to its commerce websites, but that's all that can be said for it, and perhaps all it was meant to do in the first place.



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