

August 29, 2012

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DVDs: HBO's *Game Of Thrones* Bloody Fun But Not Great

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GAME OF THRONES FIRST SEASON (\$79.98 BluRay; HBO) -- *Game Of Thrones* may be the biggest roll of the dice in TV history. It's based on a series of novels that tell one long story...and they haven't even all been written yet. In fact, if author George R.R. Martin continues at his new slow pace, the show may have to go on hiatus for a number of years before the series can reach its finale. And that finale will take seven seasons to satisfy fans. It's also one of the most expensive shows in TV history, telling a story laced with fantasy and set in a medieval era with all the lavishness of a feature film. Now that's bold

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and I look forward to future seasons. I just wish the first one were better. The story is one of intrigue, based loosely on the War of the Roses. Numerous royal families are vying for power while a supernatural threat from the North slowly works its way towards the "civilized" world. You get backstabbing, scheming, incest, swordplay, lots and lots of nudity and a clutch of fine actors. The problems? Casting and costuming. No expense was spared but the costumes and makeup quite often fall far short. Hair, makeup, clothing -- they should all invisibly denote the power and prestige of the wearers (or the lack). Instead, too often the costumes look just like that: costumes. Jaime Lannister is meant to be the most handsome, dashing man in the world but his clothing often looks like a Members Only jacket and the haircut and demeanor of actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau remind you of Malibu Ken, not Lancelot. Harry Lloyd also falls quite short as the intended to be menacing Viserys Targaryen. With his bleached white hair and petulant manner, he seems like Draco Malfoy's cousin, not a threat to the throne. These weaknesses continue for other minor characters and illustrate an unusual feature of *GoT*. Except for Peter Dinklage as Tyrion Lannister, almost all the "bad" guys in the series are far less interesting than the "good" guys. That's rarely the case for a genre piece like this where the villains often get the best lines and the most dastardly deeds. In contrast, the Stark clan is well cast up and down the line, from Sean Bean as the family head to Maisie Williams in the challenging role of Arya (with a special shout out to an excellent Kit Harington as the bastard Jon Snow). TV rarely tackles fantasy and almost never does it well, so that and the appeal of the books will keep me watching. Stronger tech work and some better casting (luckily, lots of people die so the show always has a chance to inject fresher, stronger talent) could turn *GoT* from a guilty pleasure into a genuine one. P.S. Maybe it's the slowdown in DVD sales, but it's great to see the cost to consumers for an entire season of a show like this come down in price, especially on sale. Less than \$40? That used to be a fantasy, but no more.



MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE (\$39.99 BluRay; FOX) -- This intriguing drama stars Elizabeth Olsen as the wayward sister who shows up looking for a place to crash but unwilling to talk about where she's been or what she's done. In flashbacks, we see her get slowly drawn into a cult led by John Hawkes (in another excellent performance). Then the phone calls and the mysterious strangers make clear that this cult doesn't let its members take off so easily. More quiet tale than thriller, the film isn't an out of the park success but delivers on its quiet premise quite nicely.



HUGO (\$44.99; Paramount) -- I enjoyed the graphic/novel by Brian Selznick, which had the much more evocative title *The Invention Of Hugo Cabret*. Changing that to just *Hugo* was the first sign this movie wouldn't deliver. The second was hiring director Martin Scorsese, a man not known for gentle family fare. But it's not entirely his fault. The appeal of the book rested entirely on how the story was told: a clever combination of images a la a graphic novel (sometimes dozens of pages would go by without any text at all, just pictures advancing the story) and text (at other times the images would stop and the text would dominate a la a traditional novel). The story itself was rather flat and unimaginative, with very little

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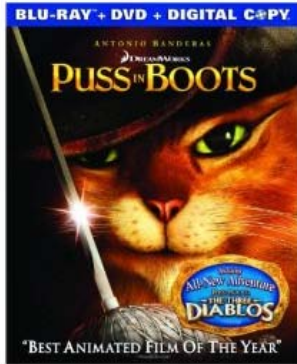
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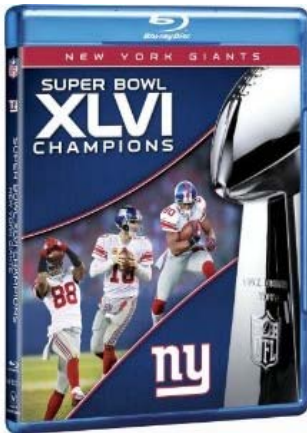
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action or change of any consequence: in essence, a kid hiding in a train station discovers the man running a toy store used to be a film director. That's about it. To bump up the action, lame subplots are introduced to the movie like a romance between two older characters and a bumbling cop given a greatly expanded role and his own attraction to a flower girl. That's interspersed with all sorts of chases and fancy camerawork. The movie looks just as artificial on 2-D at home as it did in 3-D at the theater though it's a blessed relief not to have to wear those bulky glasses when the effects were so minimal. Heavy-handed touches (like mixing the sound of a film projector unspooling early on in the movie to subliminally remind us of the pleasures of movies) can be found throughout. Dramatically static, cartoonishly acted, *Hugo* is not one for the ages, though a number of critics enjoyed it far more than me. Well, they're wrong.



PUSS IN BOOTS (\$39.99 BluRay; DreamWorks) -- I've never been a huge fan of the *Shrek* films (my favorite one is their made-for-tv Christmas special; the movies I find too enamored with random pop culture references). But thank goodness they spun off Antonio Banderas's witty character Puss In Boots. I would not want to have sat through a movie about Eddie Murphy's Donkey. This movie breathed a little creative life into a very tired franchise. It wasn't the massive success of the *Shrek* movies, but \$535 million is probably enough to guarantee another adventure.



SUPER BOWL XLVI CHAMPIONS (\$34.93 BluRay; NFL/Vivendi) -- More. That's my sole comment about this highlight DVD, which does a good job of recapping the entire season of Super Bowl champs the New York Giants and (finally) includes the extras you'd expect like post-game ceremonies, media day and the like. NFL Films really does excellent work in capturing unlikely and striking footage of games that's superior to what you see in a live game and during most movies about football. BUT why just recaps? This should be a 2 DVD set with one DVD including the entire Super Bowl game day hoopla (with commercials that aired as a bonus feature -- why not?). That should be the cheap option. But they should also offer a boxed set with every regular season game of the Giants plus the 2 DVD Super Bowl package as well. And for about \$70. Max. Finally, why not have a release for the Patriots. The heartbreaking story of the losers can make for compelling drama too. They've got the footage. Why not? This one-disc release is more complete than in past years but still feels skimpy compared to the goodies lying in their vaults unused and unseen.



ricky_martin
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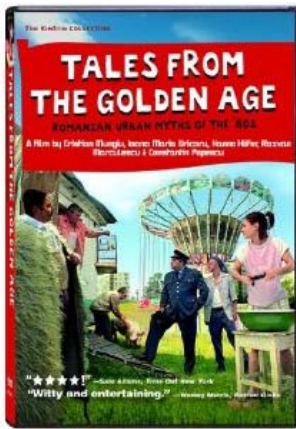


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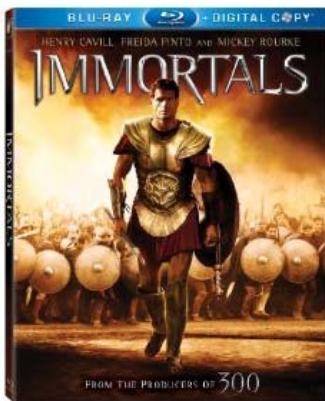


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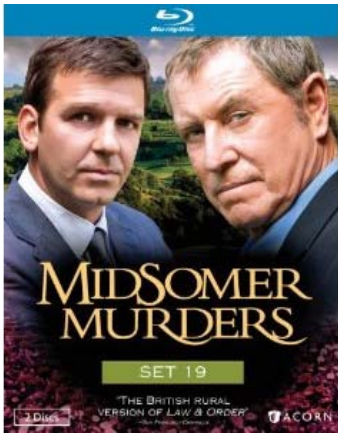


TALES FROM THE GOLDEN AGE (\$29.99; Zeitgeist) - Multi-director omnibuses -- with multiple short films strung together around an over-arching theme -- are one of the least-loved ideas in movie history and rarely worth the bother. But this one comes from Romania, one of the most innovative and exciting sources of movies in the past few years. Overseen by Cristian Mungiu (director of the acclaimed *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*), this pulls together urban myths and legends that sprang up around the final years of the brutal Ceausescu regime, a terrible era the government propaganda machine defiantly dubbed "The Golden Age." Mungiu teams with other talented filmmakers to spin multiple, mordantly funny tales. It's funny how suddenly a country can become a hotbed of filmmaking for no discernible reason, but that's exactly what's happened in Romania, making even a project like this seem a tantalizing prospect. Yes, when it comes to cinema, Romania truly is in a Golden Age.



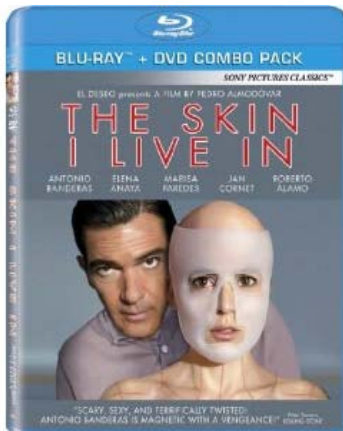
IMMORTALS (\$39.99 BluRay; FOX) -- Director Tarsem Singh has a remarkable ability to create striking imagery and it's on full display in this *300*-ish epic tale of a Theseus (Henry Cavill), a young villager handy with weapons who takes on the mad king (Mickey Rourke) threatening to destroy the world. It looks amazing, if you just turn off your mind and glance at the screen in a daze. But story? Characters? Dramatic involvement in their fates? Tongue in cheek fun? Nope. Not on the menu. But what you do find on the DVDs menu are tons of extras like an alternate beginning and two alternate endings, which should tell you something right there.



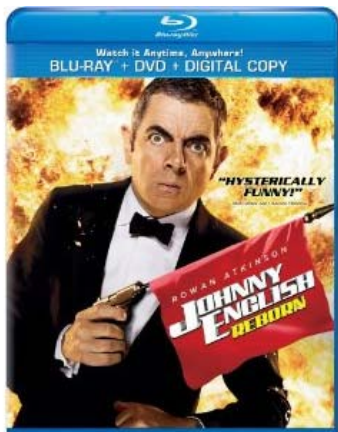


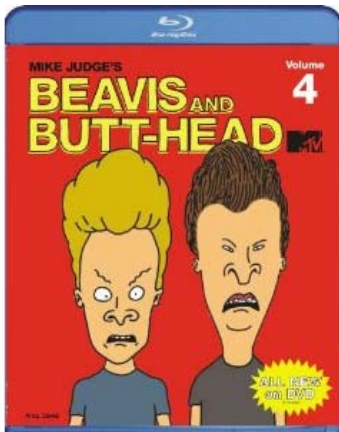
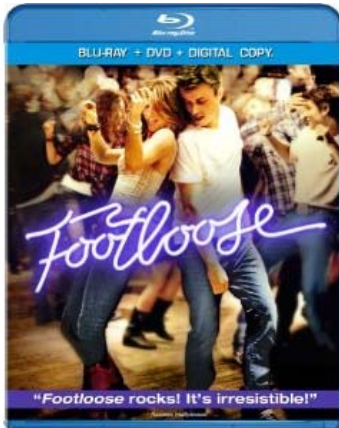
THE BRIEF COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$59.99; Acorn)

MIDSOMER MURDERS SET 19 (\$59.99 BluRay; Acorn) -- Alan Davies of the gently charming *Jonathan Creek* series paired with the team behind TV's Inspector Morse about a barrister with a messy personal life (gambling debts, an affair with the wife of a politician, etc) and far more successful legal one. Nothing groundbreaking, but Davies does have his appeal. Meanwhile, *Midsomer Murders* -- the long-running British cozy mystery series (that is, crimes set in a village setting that are gently humorous) -- continues along with no signs of stopping after its latest four installments, each one a self-contained movie of about 100 minutes. Unlike most "cozys," the murders are rather brutal in nature at times, but the general tone is still amiable if not quite *Murder, She Wrote*.



THE SKIN I LIVE IN (\$45.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Classics) -- One of the most baroque plots in director Pedro Almodovar's history (pulled from a not terribly interesting novel) is unfortunately treated with deadly dull seriousness. Almodovar long ago started making the movies he used to lovingly send up and this is a prime example, with Antonio Banderas as a plastic surgeon who has a mysterious but beautiful woman trapped in his home. It's silly from the stilted beginning to the ludicrous finale, but unfortunately the movie doesn't realize how silly the story is and we never get to have any fun.





JOHNNY ENGLISH REBORN (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

JACK AND JILL (\$40.99 BluRay; Columbia)

FOOTLOOSE (\$44.99 BluRay; Paramount)

BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD VOLUME 4 (\$26.99 BluRay; Paramount) -- Do we need another James Bond spoof? No, we do not, but Rowan Atkinson's non-Bean creation Johnny English is a lot more popular overseas so he will return. Are Adam Sandler's fans unthinking automatons? No, they are not because even they handed him a rare commercial flop with this tepid comedy about an annoying sister who comes to visit. Did anyone want to see a remake of the dated-the-day-it-was-released movie Footloose? Do they did not. I know it's nominally based on a true story but I always felt this story would have worked better set in the 1950s. Will I laugh at Beavis and Butt-head? No, I will not. Hey, I like South Park and even enjoyed Beavis and Butt-head Do America, probably because they played actual characters and had an actual story of sorts. But their TV show I find relentlessly...well, I can't say stupid because they would laugh at me and say "duh!" Dull? Yes, dull. No change but fans will enjoy these all new episodes. I guess.

MOST TITLES LISTED HERE WILL BE AVAILABLE IN MULTIPLE FORMATS AND IN MULTIPLE COMBINATIONS, INCLUDING DVD, BLURAY, DIGITAL DOWNLOAD, VOD, STREAMING AND THE LIKE. THE FORMAT LISTED IS THE FORMAT PROVIDED FOR REVIEW, NOT ALL THE FORMATS AVAILABLE. IT IS OFTEN THE MOST EXPENSIVE VERSION WITH THE MOST EXTRAS. DO CHECK INDIVIDUAL TITLES FOR AVAILABILITY IN ALL THEIR VARIOUS GUISES AND PRICE POINTS.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and BluRays with the understanding that he would be considering them for review. Generally, he does not guarantee to review and he receives far more titles than he can cover.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

[Nate35](#)

321 Fans

03:57 PM on 03/11/2012

My only niggle with this review is the criticism of Harry Lloyd. The character isn't the actual threat to the kingdom, Dany is.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

[mjredder](#)

220 Fans

04:40 PM on 03/08/2012

Viserys Targaryen is supposed to be a menace to no one but his younger sister. Harry Lloyd's performance was spot-on, IMO. Too bad he can't be recast as some other character.

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[Lamwithaplan](#)

1 Fans

03:00 PM on 03/08/2012

In regards to the shades of morality, we are expected to identify and find favour with the Starks rather than the Lannisters, however there lies the beauty of the books and hopefully the rest of the TV series. This is not your traditional fantasy stories, as the plot unravels, allegiances changes and so does our impression of the characters. There is no right and wrong, just different families and sides, all with their own set of heroes and villains, power and ambitions.

After reading the books, I think Jamie Lannister is one of the most interesting characters present. At first he appears to be nothing but the 'bad guy', but give the next season a chance and you'll see his character develop to something outside the traditional archetype.

As for the costume, I have to disagree. It looks fantastic, both the costumes and the scenery. I can only hope the second season lives up to the first.

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flyers
61 Fans

01:59 PM on 03/08/2012

Game of Thrones and Homeland were the best new series in 2011, IMO. Looking forward to season 2 for both of these shows!

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ChrisR
106 Fans

11:24 AM on 03/08/2012

So is this guy the Joe the Plumber of reviewers, or what? What a way to get free DVDs.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
threnodymarch
Art is long, life is short.
743 Fans

11:12 AM on 03/08/2012

I completely agree with your interpretation of "Hugo." When I heard the title was being changed for the film I thought it augured that it would be disappointing. I felt like one of the only people who didn't find "Hugo" to be completely and thoroughly enchanting - I thought the story was boring (and I don't use that word lightly - I don't think "boring" is a valid complaint for why a person doesn't like something), which combined with acting I thought was unconvincing and flat. I didn't think it hit on much emotional connection between the characters - for the first time, Scorsese made me not care about the people he was filming. I thought it was over-praised and I'm glad you made me feel like I wasn't the only one who thought that!

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Giltz
freelance writer
127 Fans

01:19 AM on 03/16/2012

We're not alone! :) Thanks for commenting. It can feel lonely when you're right and everyone else is wrong.

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rp2par
236 Fans

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09:48 AM on 03/16/2012

The actual childs book has been very popular for years. I have not seen the movie as yet....bought it and will watch it soon. Granddaughter (16) and her boyfriend saw it in the theaters and enjoyed it.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
andvoodoo2
My micro-bio is teeming with biodiversity.
540 Fans

11:06 AM on 03/08/2012

I was actually very impressed with the show GoT. After the season ended, I bought and read all of the series and was amazed at how closely the series followed the first book. I haven't enjoyed a show this much since "The Sopranos".

As for the casting, I think they did a pretty good job. Jamie is a character who is evolving and he's still got a long ways to go. The series had to walk a fine line to make us dislike him but still leave room for redemption. I think they've set that up well.

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Dunbar
21 Fans

06:09 AM on 03/08/2012

Well, I will agree that Sean Bean's wig sucked.

He didn't, though. I actually agree -- I like the Stark actors better, too. But let's look to next year, shall we?

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mrshasson
7 Fans

12:43 AM on 03/08/2012

"Harry Lloyd also falls quite short as the intended to be menacing Viserys Targaryen. With his bleached white hair and petulant manner, he seems like Draco Malfoy's cousin, not a threat to the throne"

This is entirely consistent with the book. Viserys is only a threat to the throne in his own mind.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
donnyraindog
Grass shack nailed to a pinewood floor
1610 Fans

07:48 AM on 03/08/2012

Was about to post the same thing ,not sure Mike has actually read the books.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
threnodymarch
Art is long, life is short.
743 Fans

11:07 AM on 03/08/2012

Exactly. Describing Viserys as "petulant" is EXACTLY the point of the character! He's supposed to be smarmy and egotistical and deluded - and that is exactly how he is portrayed on camera. I thought it was dead-on and, to me, lacked no menace. I also thought it was bizarre that he criticized the casting when the issues that he stated he had problems with seemed to fall under the category of writing than having the wrong actor for the role.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Giltz
freelance writer
127 Fans

01:29 AM on 03/16/2012

As I mentioned in my review, I have indeed read all of the books. (I stopped reading the Robert Jordan books as they got so complex because I wanted to wait until they were all done so I could tackle them all at once.) Yes, Viserys is petulant in the books. He's also compelling and viciously cruel to his sister. In the show, I found him a cartoon; just one-dimensional. I'm always happy to believe an actor could be better in other parts. But since I found about half the cast quite strong and they were in the same show with the same writers and directors involved, I felt it was more likely the blame lied with the individual actors.

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noaxe397
2330 Fans

07:52 PM on 03/07/2012

The costumes, set decoration, photography and even the sound effects were above the quality we see today in theatrical releases.....Jamie Lannister is meant to be a pretty boy, not a dashing swash-buckler, and everyone i know who watched the series had exactly that impression.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
Captain Kiddy
Try thinking! It's like a breath of fresh air!
162 Fans

07:30 PM on 03/07/2012

Yeah, I'll weigh in here too regarding Game of Thrones. The author is looking to make comparisons with artistic creations he might think should be a yardstick by which to measure Martin's creation, and in so doing he has sold both the series and himself more than just a little short (with apologies to Peter Dinklage). Casting a problem? Not on your life, buddy. There isn't a weak actor here. He doesn't understand Jaime, Viserys, etc., etc. Jaime is not never was intended to be and never will be "Lancelot." Viserys IS petty, immature and a megalomaniac, not a menace (except in his own mind . . .) Costumes lacking? Only if you think this is supposed to be the musical of "Camelot." This is gritty realism guy - people are dirty, greasy and not always prancing around in their finest. I guess he wants them to look like they just stepped out the costume shop for a high school musical. Bad guys less interesting than the good guys? This isn't the world of black and white, good and evil, but all shades of grey in between - that ambiguity is what makes them so difficult to predict or judge and oh so fascinating. Boy did you strike out on this one! This sets a new standard for fantasy drama that will be unequalled for quite a while. Sheesh. Wish I wasn't limited to 250 words . . .

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

01:10 AM on 03/08/2012

I've read the books and love all these characters. I agree there are many shades of grey but used the shorthand of good and evil. most I think identify more with the Stark family than say Jamie Lanister who has sex with his sister and tries to kill a little boy to cover his tracks. Jamie does prove more nuanced later on in the books, but he's certainly no hero. Viserys is more strightforwardly evil -- he tortures his sister and is petulant and obnoxious as written. But as written he is also more interesting. I simply felt the actor's performance was banal and simplistic. He too looked very "modern" somehow, a combination of costume and hair and the like.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

Captain Kiddy

Try thinking! It's like a breath of fresh air!

162 Fans

05:35 PM on 03/08/2012

Thanks for writing back - good discussion which you don't often get here with the regular writers (as opposed to the forum-posting community). I agree that Viserys is not as complex as in the books, but unfortunately I think that problem must be laid at the doorstep of the writers and the limitations of a television series, even at ten hours. Somewhere along the way, they were inevitably going to have to do some serious trimming or the first season would have been 20 hours long. Ah, the glory of the novel with its potentially endless scope, publishers willing and all (although even there it's possible to go too far - I'm looking at your grave Robert Jordan . . .) I don't think that Harry Lloyd did a bad job at all given that the writers did indeed make the character more shallow than in the book. And perhaps I'm allowing knowledge of things to come color my appraisal of Jaime who is indeed rather one-sided at the outset, although there must be that charm on some level or he will be too evil to everyone else's shades of greys. More to come below . . .

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

01:17 AM on 03/08/2012

As for costumes, I certainly didn't want pretty or fresh from the rack look. I felt the styles chosen -- such as Jamie's jacket and many other outfits down the line -- didn't seem authentic and of the same period as the rest of the show. I want gritty realism, not blow-dried hair. I had limited space too and in cutting down didn't make clear the nuances of character involved in the book and reflected most clearly in the first season's storyline for Peter Dinklage. It is probably already the best fantasy (as opposed to sci-fi) series TV ever did, certainly more ambitious by a mile than Xena. TV almost never does fantasy. But I feel it could be so much better and doesn't come within a mile of the books. Thanks for commenting and giving me a chance to clarify my opinion.

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LadyNorth
0 Fans

06:30 PM on 03/07/2012

I too am a huge fan of the GoT book series and totally disagree with this article. HBO has done a

fantastic job bringing my beloved books to the screen and the casting could not be better. You know nothing Michael Glitz!

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Glitz
freelance writer
127 Fans

01:25 AM on 03/08/2012

Glad you're enjoying the show. I think the women are generally much better than the men and the most important and difficult casting -- the young Stark children -- are very good. HBO spared no expense -- my complaints are not financial but creative. I hope the show builds on the good elements of the series and gets even better. PS Love the "You know nothing" reference. I can't wait to see that line in the series; it's a killer emotionally.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
Diego Native 2012
Religion is the Theft of Reason
258 Fans

03:20 PM on 03/07/2012

Personally, as a huge fan of the GoT book series I couldn't disagree more with the premise of this article. The first season was spectacular in execution and in its faithfulness to the books. Casting for Tyrion Lanister couldn't be better. Jaime was always going to be a problem because he is too good to be true and, of course, he is; but later events will humanize him. Littlefinger is just as creepy and conniving as in the books, though a bit overacted. Viserys is supposed to be a weak, petty little boy who could never be king; setting the stage for Daenerys' ascension. The series, if it continues with its current high quality and execution will become a watershed for multi-book adaptation to the screen; a yardstick by which all others will be measured and found wanting.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Glitz
freelance writer
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01:27 AM on 03/08/2012

I think we all knew Peter Dinklage had to play Tyrion the moment we read the books -- it was as inevitable as Clark Gable playing Rhett. You're right that Jamie becomes more interesting as the books go along. Hopefully the actor's performance will improve along with his costuming. Thanks for commenting.

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