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A Review of *Game of Thrones* Season Eight (2019)

Reviewed by T Evans

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BURN THEM ALL? *GAME OF THRONES* SEASON EIGHT

Review by T Evans

Benioff, David and D B Weiss, creators. "Season Eight." *Game of Thrones*. Perf. Emilia Clarke, Peter Dinklage, Kit Harrington. Home Box Office. Television.

In 2011 Home Box Office (HBO) released *Game of Thrones*, an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The television series gained popularity and notoriety for making trouble, becoming synonymous with female nudity, "sexposition," rape, and graphic violence, not to mention maintaining the Fantasy genre's troubled relationship to race. Yet *Game of Thrones* also made productive trouble by crafting a textual world where people with disabilities are funny and have sex lives, where gender essentialism is regularly critiqued, and where working together is celebrated as heroic. Amid these political entanglements, *Game of Thrones* troubled the Fantasy genre itself. The series was marketed to Fantasy fans and novices alike, referred to as 'Fantasy for people who don't like fantasy.' The series fed the need for heroic journeys and magical possibilities that film adaptations of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* sparked in the early 2000s while giving us what Helen Young (2015) calls a "gritty realism" that brought us back to our own postmodern world and promised to keep a refreshing distance from generic safety. The eighth and final season of *Game of Thrones*, which aired in May 2019, was by far the most widely circulated season, and one of the major moments in the history of the Fantasy genre. The six-episode season sees the climax of two major conflicts in the pseudo-medieval world of Westeros: the long-awaited battle between the protagonists and the army of the living dead (called 'white walkers') at Winterfell and a climactic attempt to reclaim the Iron Throne in King's Landing.

What makes season eight important is not the plot but the execution and its reception. Audiences around the world vented their frustration and disappointment with the final two episodes, "The Bells" and "The Iron Throne." Two million people signed an online petition to "Remake Game of Thrones Season Eight with competent writers," and thousands of angry blog posts and Reddit threads appeared across the internet. The reasons for this dismay are complex, but can be summarised as rushed and inconsistent character development and story arcs; an anticlimactic battle against the white walkers; a simplification of the series' complex female characters; and errors in continuity and universe logic (especially the infamous Starbucks coffee cup). It is impossible to address each facet within this review or even a single book, though I look forward to the research that will deal with these responses in the detail they deserve. For now, I will address a few key scenes that make trouble for me as an expert on *Game of Thrones*, a fan, a feminist, and a Fantasy scholar.

Fantasy has a complex relationship with gender (Balay 2010; Evans 2016; 2019a; 2019b; Evans and Pettet 2018; Patel 2014; Tolmie 2006), at once a site where gender norms can be disrupted through magic and reified through patriarchal pseudo-medieval settings. These ambivalent potentialities are threaded throughout *Game of Thrones*, but the final picture that Season Eight presents is less nuanced than audiences have come to expect. Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke), the dispossessed heir to the Iron Throne and Mother of Dragons, is at the centre of many of these conversations about gender, as is the series' antagonist Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), the Queen (and later Queen Regent) of Westeros. I have written extensively about Cersei's violence and her reproduction of patriarchal power structures (Evans 2018); I love to hate her and think critically about her relation to power, gender, and the body. Past seasons have seen Cersei waterboard a nun, blow up a religious site and half of the Westerosi nobles inside it, and employ a Frankenstein-esque undead knight as a personal bodyguard. Yet Cersei spent most of Season Eight drinking wine and looking over the city from atop her balcony window. I will admit that I was convinced she had a trap waiting to snare Daenerys, or at least an escape plan. She did not. Her final moments were spent being almost-rescued by her lover and brother Jaime (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), crying about her unborn child, and dying under falling debris. What a waste of a complex villain and a reflection of the limited roles women are afforded in mainstream culture.

In contrast to Cersei's unoriginal demise, I wanted to appreciate Daenerys's descent into madness. The transformation is a middle finger to our expectations of the Fantasy genre and *Game of Thrones*, which has set Daenerys up as the rightful and moral queen. The series has a history of making unexpected generic moves like this: in Season One Ned Stark was characterised as the series' protagonist but was executed in episode nine. Later in Season Three, a mass murder known to fans as the Red Wedding saw another three major Stark characters killed by their faux-ally Walder Frey. Moves like these demonstrate the genre trouble that *Game of Thrones* makes and the way that trouble can be pleasurable and refreshing. However, Daenerys's insanity lacks the graceful way in which Eddard's death and the Red Wedding are executed. A hysterical woman going on a rampage is a tired and sexist move, and the awkward attempts to set up Daenerys's growing instability are confusing.. Once again, the patriarchal attitudes that dominate much of Western culture seep into the final season of a series that has otherwise paved new ground for the representation of strong women characters.

What are we to make of *Game of Thrones* considering these infamous endings? On the one hand, Daenerys's and Cersei's final moments may change our perspective on their characterisation in the previous seasons. Now when we see Daenerys free slaves and disrupt patriarchal power structures among the Astapori, Meereenese, and Dothraki in earlier seasons, we may see her madness foreshadowed rather than her subversive liberations. On the other hand, the long-form television format and the fandom itself may offer opportunities to reject these endings and focus on more satisfying seasons or wilfully ignore the final instalment. Fandoms have proven their capacity for forgiveness and creativity across many genres; fans of the space Western television series *Firefly* (2002-2003) campaign for additional seasons almost two decades after the series was cancelled, and many fans of the lesbian drama series *The L Word* (2004-2009) collectively choose to ignore the final

season and its random and unsatisfying ending. It is impossible to tell what (if any) strategy *Game of Thrones* fans will adopt at this point in time, although the promised release of the final two novels in the source series, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*, will likely make exciting trouble for our understanding of endings and adaptation.

The trouble with Daenerys and Cersei aside, Season Eight of *Game of Thrones* continued to offer a complex and critical discussion around violence. There are two scenes that stand out for me in this regard. My favourite is the one where Sandor 'the Hound' Clegane (Rory McCann) and his brother Gregor 'the Mountain' Clegane (Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson) face off for the final time while the royal castle crumbles around them, which is intercut with scenes of Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) escaping the destruction with the aid of a peasant woman she helped earlier in the episode. Seeking revenge has brought nothing but pain to Sandor, and his desire to kill his brother is what destroys him: Sandor pushes Gregor through the castle wall and they fall to their deaths together. The contrast is paramount here: as Sandor dies to achieve vengeance and uses violence to serve his own ends, Arya is focused on revenge for her family but she is also invested in making the world a more liveable place for everyone. While making her way through King's Landing to kill Cersei in "The Bells" she stops to help others, and later these others help her survive. The message is clear: violence should only be used to help others. Otherwise it reinforces a destructive cycle.

The final point of trouble I wish to raise here is in relation to power and reproduction. I was surprised to see that Bran Stark (Isaac Hempstead Wright), a man with a broken spine and supernatural abilities, becomes King of Westeros. Bran's inability to father children is highlighted in "The Iron Throne," and disrupts the feudal patriarchy's system of passing power from father to son. Instead, Bran is chosen by his high-class allies and is literally led by a Small Council of "cripples and bastards and broken things" made up of two disabled men (Tyrion and Sam), a queer man (Varys), a queer woman (Brienne), and two men from a working class background (Bronn and Davos). The intersectional power dynamics here are exciting and troubling: the council is almost entirely comprised of masculine people and can therefore be seen to reproduce the patriarchal structures that Bran seems to disrupt. However, there is also a promising sense of trouble because the council brings together the misfits who have been celebrated throughout the series. We so rarely see disabled men, poor men, and queer men onscreen that I want to be pleased – but I do have a nagging feminist concern over the gender disparity.

Season Eight of *Game of Thrones* leaves a lot of questions about the television industry, about the Fantasy genre, and about the promises we are made by popular culture and the feelings we have when they are not met. Was it ever possible to write a good final season of *Game of Thrones*? Were our expectations too high? Are endings always and inevitably a disappointment? What *Game of Thrones* leaves behind is a mix of the "all was well" sentimentality of *Harry Potter* crossed with Ramsay Bolton's famous line, "if you think this has a happy ending, you haven't been paying attention." We get our happy ending in the sense that the kingdom is secured and good triumphs over evil, and we get a tragedy because our hero and our villain suddenly and inexplicably lose their fire. *Game of Thrones* as a complete series offers us a rich and nuanced depiction of women and disabled people and has brought a phenomenal number of new fans to the Fantasy

genre. And yet the final season has cast a shadow of disappointment and anger over the entire series. *Game of Thrones* leaves us troubled but also invites us to question the nature of trouble and its potential to open new conversations, inhabit uncomfortable intellectual spaces, and briefly glimpse the workings of a genre, the promises it makes, and what happens when it fails to deliver.

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