

In season 2, *American Gods* has fallen on hard times

Spoiler warning: This review reveals major plot points from season 1 of *American Gods*, and lays out season 2 storylines.

Neil Gaiman's 2007 novel *American Gods* tells the story of awesome, magical beings brought low by the loss of faith and the cold realities of the modern age. Now the same tragic fate has struck Starz's *American Gods* TV adaptation, which returned for season 2 on March 10th. Conflicts about the show's budget and adherence to Gaiman's story led showrunners Bryan Fuller and Michael Green to leave after season 1, which led to the loss of standout cast members Gillian Anderson and Kristin Chenoweth. Gaiman chose Jesse Alexander to take over as showrunner, but he was "exiled" from the show last fall, and Starz still hasn't named a successor. "I'm not what I once was," the goddess Bilquis (played by Yetide Badaki) says in season 1, and the same can be said about the *American Gods* show.

The first three episodes of season 2's eight-episode run try to pick up where season 1 left off while navigating around the departed actors. Season 1 ended dramatically with Chenoweth's Ostara, (aka Easter) choosing to side with Ian McShane's Mr. Wednesday (aka Odin) in his coming war against the New Gods by causing a blight meant to force people to pray to her for the return of spring. Aside from a brief background news piece, this action has no clear impact on the world, and Easter has apparently turned her back on Wednesday because he ran over some of her bunnies.

[embedded content]

Meanwhile, the New God Media, who Anderson played with an overabundance of confidence as she threatened and cajoled

heroes and villains alike, was apparently so shaken by Wednesday's display of power that she's gone into hiding to reinvent herself. New Media (Kahyun Kim) emerges in the episode "Muninn," wishing herself a happy birthday with a Snapchat-filter version of Anderson's sultry turn as Marilyn Monroe from season 1. "How is this an upgrade?" shouts her fellow New God Technical Boy (Bruce Langley). The obvious answer is that it isn't.

Gaiman seems to have gotten his wish for a more direct adaptation. He co-wrote the season 2 premiere "House on the Rock," which includes a Wednesday monologue about the creation of roadside attractions as an act of religious devotion that's almost a verbatim transcript of a passage from the book. The trip "backstage," where Wednesday's hired mortal agent Shadow Moon (Ricky Whittle) sees the gods in their true forms, is also taken directly from the book. But the decision to depict them with the same distracting superimposed glowing used on the Greek pantheon in 2010's *Clash of the Titans* doesn't help produce the intended sense of wonder.

Season 2 really goes off the rails as the writers continue the work of embellishing Gaiman's story to stretch it into a multi-season show. The episode "The Beguiling Man" is almost entirely devoted to a brief section of the book where Shadow is captured by the New Gods agent Mr. Town (Dean Winters, without any of the humor he brought to *30 Rock* or *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*). The episode combines seemingly pointless torture with flashbacks that give Shadow an even more unnecessary backstory, complete with the broadest of heroic clichés: he doesn't know who his father is, he was bullied but determined to fight bullies, his mother tragically died of cancer. Shadow worked in both the novel and the show's first season as a cypher, a stand-in for the reader/viewer, and in a broad sense, for all of humanity – an example of how a man can lose

everything, and then find faith. The attempt to add depth to the character actually makes him feel shallower.

This isn't the only time when season 2's writers seem not to understand what *American Gods* is about, and what makes it good storytelling. Season 1 delivered fierce political messages through powerful scenes like Mexican Jesus dying trying to protect a group of illegal immigrants, or the West African trickster god Anansi (aka Mr. Nancy, played by Orlando Jones) telling the prisoners on a slave ship what's in store for them and generations of their descendants. Season 2 just delivers a series of dry monologues about being black in America, and the mistreatment of Native Americans.

Season 2 also woefully squanders good ideas like having Hera's many-eyed servant Argus become the god of surveillance. In a pale imitation of the "Coming to America" interludes that were some of the best moments of season 1, Mr. Ibis (Demore Barnes) tells a version of the myth of Zeus and Io that ends with Hera giving Argus new life in America. That idea completely undermines the series canon, where gods and mythical creatures were all brought to the New World in the hearts and minds of their people.

Even if dedicated viewers can get past this thudding rewrite, the writers ignore the obvious connections that could be made between religion and surveillance: people believe that surveillance won't harm them if they're good and are willing to sacrifice their privacy for protection against the wicked and the other. Instead, the show veers into a completely unrelated story about the burning of the Library of Alexandria, and a hentai scene presumably meant to stir the same excitement Bilquis' man-eating vagina did in season 1. Argus' tale feels both incoherent and impotent compared to the chilling season 1 episode "A Murder of Gods," which used

Vulcan, now the god of guns (Corbin Bernsen) to introduce the concept of the Old Gods finding renewed purpose and power with the help of the New Gods.

Like a ruined temple, *American Gods* in season 2 seems even more tragic because so much of it is still visibly intact. Fuller and Green brought together a terrific cast that desperately needs something better to do. Putting Jones and McShane in a car together, and only using the moment to deliver a dud joke about Wednesday insulting Nancy by bringing him fried chicken, is a terrible waste of talent and viewers' time. The angry leprechaun Mad Sweeney (Pablo Schreiber) is one of the only bright points left intact, since the writers seem to have an endless supply of amusing ways to show how he's lost his luck.

And that isn't enough to salvage a show that alternates between feeling aimless, and feeling like it's moving in entirely the wrong direction. But the solid elements left over from the first season provide just a bit of hope that the show could turn around if a steadier, more insightful hand were managing season 3. Like its eponymous characters, *American Gods* has fallen on hard times. Its fate will likely depend on whether it can maintain enough true believers to survive.

American Gods airs on Sundays on Starz. The first episode is .

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