The Passage is a terrific horror series about terrible ideas

Spoiler warning: This review reveals some plot points of the first three episodes of *The Passage*.

The road to hell may be paved with good intentions, but in Fox's new show *The Passage,* which premieres on January 14th, the road to the end of the world is paved with bad ideas. Based on Justin Cronin's best-selling trilogy about the vampire apocalypse, the show uses voice-over from spunky orphan turned government test subject Amy Bellafonte (Saniyya Sidney) throughout its first episode to provide ominous foreshadowing, showing how the characters' mixture of bad circumstances and highly questionable responses are going to lead to even more horrible outcomes. "I didn't used to believe in monsters, but I do now," Amy says. "I saw them change everything."

The bad ideas start with Dr. Jonas Lear (Henry Ian Cusick), who is driven by personal reasons to fast-track an expedition to Bolivia to investigate stories of an extremely long-lived man. Dr. Lear enlists the egomaniacal Dr. Tim Fanning (Jamie McShane), who in turn gets support for the project from the US government, guaranteeing it won't be put to purely altruistic ends.

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Then Dr. Fanning gets too close to the ancient Bolivian, ignoring warnings from the natives, who keep the man in a cage and feed him buckets of blood. When Fanning is transformed into a vampire – referred to as a Viral by the scientifically minded, who refuse to call bloodsucking near-immortal monsters by their traditional name – he becomes patient zero in Project

Noah, a secret experiment meant to harness the virus' healing abilities, while negating all the nasty side effects. When Project Noah's scientists fail to get their desired results with any of a dozen death-row inmates, they decide the key might be to experiment on a child. Meanwhile, they're ignoring evidence that their lab-created vampires might be even more dangerous than they seem.

Characters making the worst possible decisions is a horror trademark, but *The Passage* stands above the usual genre clichés by providing stakes that justify the characters' actions: a devastating strain of bird flu is ravaging China and threatening to turn into a deadly pandemic. With more traditional medicine failing to find a vaccine, the doctors at Project Noah believe the vampiric virus' ability to eradicate diseased cells might be humanity's best hope.

The various government officials and scientists feel like gamblers who should have left the table long ago, but just keep rolling the dice in the hopes that they'll eventually score a win that will make up for everything. The conversations between them show their desperation – they're deeply burdened by guilt and debating whether they still have any ability to grasp what's ethical, after years of working in isolation with only similarly morally compromised and desperate people to talk to.

Photo: Eliza Morse / FOX

Cusick, who played the tortured longtime castaway Desmond Hume on *Lost*, doesn't have too far to stretch to play the tortured Dr. Lear, who watches the project he started with the best of intentions spin desperately out of control. McShane brings palpable malice to every scene he's in, particularly shining in the nightmares and dreams he uses to communicate with his fellow test subjects. Shauna Babcock (Brianne Howey) does excellent physical work with her strangely predatory motions

in her vampiric state, and brings a feral energy to her human moments, providing a brilliant contrast with the stoic calm of the project's newest death-row inmate, Anthony Carter (McKinley Belcher III). Even roles that could have easily been one-note, like the brutally pragmatic Project Noah overseer Clark Richards (Vincent Piazza), or janitor Lawrence Grey (Jason Fuchs), who serves as Renfield to Fanning's Dracula, have some nuance, thanks to strong performances and Liz Heldens' lean but sharp script.

But the best work comes from Amy and her captor-turned-guardian, Brad Wolgast (Mark-Paul Gosselaar). Sidney plays Amy ferociously as she schemes to make the best of a series of terrible situations. Recent media has been especially rich with young heroines – it's no mistake that Amy's most prized possession is a battered copy of Madeleine L'Engle's classic YA novel *A Wrinkle in Time* – but Amy is a standout because her circumstances are so bad that every moment of peace or tiny victory feels like an accomplishment. She's already toughened before the show starts, as the neglected child of a drug addict. After her mom overdoses, Project Noah takes Amy in knowing that no one will miss her. That leads to her being involved in multiple shootouts, experimented on with a terrifying virus, and getting very unwanted attention from Fanning and his minions.

Photo: Eliza Morse / FOX

But she deals with it all with a poise and humor that brightens the often bleak subject matter. It's easy to see how she charms Brad, who feels like *Stranger Things*' Jim Hopper if he were played by *Guardians of the Galaxy*'s Chris Pratt. Brad is a perfect ally and foil for Amy, delivering a mix of good-natured paternal protectiveness and humor in his social scenes, while bringing precision and intensity to the show's fast-paced action sequences.

In the early going, *The Passage* is a largely faithful adaptation of Cronin's novel, apart from tweaking some characters to add diversity to the cast, and aging Amy up from six years old to a more TV-friendly 10. But the main change Heldens makes involves slowing the story down. Before things go apocalyptically bad, she takes plenty of time to examine Project Noah's psychological toll on everyone involved. The series certainly touches on classic horror imagery, enhanced by the excellent makeup styling for the vampires. But most of the drama focuses on characters trying to live with the decisions they've made, and decide just how far they're willing to go to save lives or protect themselves. The test subjects and Project Noah personnel are all scrambling to find some way to control their circumstances, as events get more and more out of hand.

That dynamic is what makes Fanning such a powerful villain — he always seems to have a plan to subtly turn things to his advantage. And when he gets what he wants, it's clear that will mean nothing good for anyone who isn't on his side.

Photo: Eliza Morse / FOX

The Passage is just the first novel in a trilogy, and the first three episodes of the show barely get 150 pages into the plot of the nearly 800-page first book. With such a rich supply of source material, the show has the potential to go on for years, tracing the way the vampiric virus changes not just the infected and those who work with them, but the world at large. If the show keeps its strong mix of character-driven narrative and palpable dread, all the bad ideas in its plot could add up to something brilliant.

The Passage *airs on Monday nights at 9PM ET on Fox.*

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