This weekend, stream a different version of Aquaman from home

There are so many streaming options available these days, and so many conflicting recommendations, that it's hard to see through all the crap you could be watching. Each Friday, The Verge*'s Cut the Crap column simplifies the choice by sorting through the overwhelming multitude of movies and TV shows on subscription services, and recommending a single perfect thing to watch this weekend.*

What to watch

The season 5 *Smallville* episode "Aqua." Alan Ritchson guest-stars as Arthur Curry (nicknamed "A.C."), a mysterious tourist who pops up one day at Crater Lake, just in time to save Lois Lane (Erica Durance) from a near-fatal diving accident. Clark Kent (Tom Welling) becomes suspicious about how fast A.C. can swim, and investigates to determine whether he's some kind of supervillain with nefarious plans for Smallville. Instead, Clark discovers he's a champion of all aquatic life, disturbed by recent environmental damage in the area, traceable to the town's resident scheming billionaire, Lex Luthor (Michael Rosenbaum).

[embedded content]

Why watch now?

Because the big-budget DC Universe movie *Aquaman* opens this weekend.

First introduced in comic books in 1941 (not long after Marvel Comics debuted a similar hero, the Sub-Mariner), the Atlantean

adventurer Aquaman has had a choppy journey to the big screen. Never the most popular of the DC superheroes, the character has been rebooted and retconned multiple times over the past 70-plus years, although the basic elements of his origin story have remained fairly constant. Arthur "Aquaman" Curry is the mixed-race son of a human lighthouse keeper and a refugee from the underwater city of Atlantis. He has the power to communicate with aquatic creatures, and to perform superhuman feats of strength and speed underwater. As a founding member of the original Justice League back in 1960, he's part of DC's core.

In the past, TV and movie writers have struggled with how to use a superhero who swims pretty well and can talk to fish. Aquaman had his own cartoon series (*The Superman/Aquaman Hour of Adventure*) in the late 1960s, and was a big part of the 1970s animated favorite *Super Friends*. But for the most part, he's been the butt of joking memes and stand-up comedy routines. When HBO's Hollywood satire *Entourage* wanted to make fun of the superhero blockbuster phenomenon, the show had its main character reluctantly agree to play Aquaman. Given all that, it's almost hard to believe that a $200 million Jason Momoa-starring *Aquaman* movie is opening, to comparatively positive reviews).

"Aqua" – which originally aired on October 20, 2005, about four months after *Entourage* began its Aquaman storyline – winks at that other show by having A.C. tell Clark, "I don't travel with an entourage." And it effectively solves the "How do you do Aquaman in live-action?" problem by ditching the fish-chatter, and instead having Ritchson play Arthur as a scruffily handsome, environmentally conscious surfer dude… the kind who by the end of this episode can tell his new buddy Clark, "Stay super, brah." *Smallville* emphasizes the "guy from the ocean" aspect of the character, not the "ancient Atlantis royalty" part.

Who it’s for

Fans of classic DC comics and the current crop of CW superhero shows.

When *Smallville* debuted on the WB in October 2001, the series’ co-creators Alfred Gough and Miles Millar initially pledged “no fights, no tights” – insisting they wanted to tell Superman stories that were about growing up, not thrashing bad guys. Over the course of the show’s 10 seasons, though, more and more elements of the classic DC comics mythology began to creep in, including various members of the Justice League of America, who started showing up in season 4. By the time the WB became the CW in 2006, *Smallville* was more unapologetically a superhero adventure, with occasional guest appearances by JLA characters who’d soon get their own TV series in *Arrow*, *The Flash*, and *Supergirl* (albeit in very different versions, with different casts).

“Aqua” is noticeably – even self-consciously – hesitant about its super-heroics, especially by comparison with the flat-out costumed craziness of *DC’s Legends of Tomorrow*. Aside from Aquaman’s first appearance, swimming underwater at the speed of a torpedo, his powers remain only a minor part of the story. If anything, the episode treats the character’s true identity as an inside joke. Not long after Clark meets A.C., he mumbles, “There’s something fishy about this guy.” Lois makes fun of the new kid’s . When A.C. remarks to Clark that the two of them should form a Junior Lifeguard Association, the Kryptonian replies, “I’m not ready for a JLA just yet.” (That line is an inside joke *about* the inside joke.)

None of this detracts from how entertaining *Smallville* is. While “Aqua” only teases the existence of Aquaman – as well as

the Superman villain Brainiac, stealthily introduced in this episode as a college professor played by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s James Marsters — it's still fun to spend time with these character in a lower-stakes, "just hanging out" way. Not every minute of every superhero story has to be about saving the world, or about an infinite number of CGI fish. And not every hero needs to be Superman. Some can be buff beach bums with a zen attitude.

Where to see it

Hulu. Arthur Curry appears three more times on *Smallville*, in the episodes "Justice" (from season 6), "Odyssey" (from season 8), and "Patriot" (from season 10). The *Smallville* creators also made a pilot for an *Aquaman* TV series (starring Justin Hartley, who later played *Smallville*'s version of Oliver "Green Arrow" Queen). While that pilot isn't any subscription streaming service, for $1.99.

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