

## TV Review: HBO's Amazing 'Game of Thrones' Returns With Dark, Foreboding Premiere

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CHICAGO – I know what you're saying — how can a show that ended with as much death as the first season of "Game of Thrones" return even darker? Watch the season premiere of HBO's brilliant (and, currently, best) series — "The North Remembers" — and tell me I'm wrong. HBO's Emmy and Golden Globe-winning fantasy returns riding a wave of hype and expectation, starting with an episode that feels a bit transitional but quickly moving into the arcs and drama that will define the season in the even-better second episode. One of the most addictive programs on TV is back.



TV Rating: **5.0/5.0**

I will avoid spoilers for those of you who have not read the books by George R.R. Martin but the second season of "Game of Thrones" picks up very shortly after the end of the first one. Child king Joffrey Baratheon (Jack Gleeson) remains in power and wields it like the power-hungry fool he proved himself to be in season one. After nearly drowning a man in wine and continuing to emotionally devastate poor Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner), he unleashes pure evil at the end of the episode, something for which there will be no karmic return. Of course, he's ably assisted by his demented mother Cersei (Lena Headey), a woman forced to continually deny the growing rumors about her incestuous relationship with her brother Jamie. Thankfully, Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage) serves as the child King's Hand and tries to bring some reason to the throne, keeping both Cersei and Joffrey in check.



Game of Thrones

Photo credit: HBO

And, of course, that throne is still being regularly contested as war rages around Westeros. Rumors of Joffrey's incestuous origins as well as his illegitimate claim to the title of King threaten to bring down his regime before he fully hits puberty. The writers of the season premiere of "Game of Thrones" — D.B. Weiss and David Benioff — expertly shuttle viewers around the land of Westeros to the key players, most of whom seem to be moving toward King Joffrey with plans to depose him the hard way.



Game of Thrones

Photo credit: HBO

There are the players familiar from last year: the empathatic Jon Snow (Kit Harington), a man making deals for passage and partnership to keep his quest alive; Arya Stark (Maisie Williams), the daughter of Ned who is still trying to pass as a boy; Robb Stark (Richard Madden), the son of Ned who still holds Jaime (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) prisoner; and the lovely Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke), lost with her people in an arid wasteland but now accompanied by the thought-extinct dragons that she "birthed" at the end of season one — like most of these characters, even she seems to be marching toward nothing but enemies. There are also new players, including Robert Barratheon's brother Stannis (Stephen Dillane) and a mystical woman named Melisandre (Carice Van Houten) who seems to guide him like a pagan Lady MacBeth.

All of these characters and I haven't even mentioned scene-stealers like Aiden Gillen (Petyr Balish) or the great Iain Glen (Jorah Mormont). One of the most notable accomplishments of "Game of Thrones" is the program's ability to keep so many plates spinning, so many characters in motion, and never feel like the show is getting overly complicated or weighed down with speaking parts. The show lost some of its most recognizable faces in season one, but it feels like an even more notable and accomplished ensemble now. There are no weak links but Dinklage, Van Houten, Headey, and Gillen get the meatiest material in the first two episodes.



Game of Thrones

Photo credit: HBO

As with a lot of "Game of Thrones," there's a large amount of conversation in the first two episodes of the new season and it's often punctuated by brutal violence. There are thematic commonalities in the stories here as the writers (and, I imagine, Martin in the source material) seem to be exploring what makes a leader. Is the throne something that is taken or earned? And is it earned by birthright or blood? Taken or bought? By "iron or gold," as a character says on the show? "Game of Thrones" seems to be a program heavy with potential leaders and yet the worst kind of King stands in power. And there's a definite sense of dread as there is also the little issue of that



ever-coming "winter," the uncertain threat beyond the wall. As a child commits atrocities to maintain his reign and forces conspire against him, there could be something much more dangerous on the horizon. This is daring, complex writing that features dialogue and exposition that must be digested and fully considered in the context of everything that's going on to be appreciated. It's some of the best writing on TV.

Technically, there's no more impressive show on television than "Game of Thrones." The visual palette of the show feels even more consistent and accomplished than in season one. This is a VERY complex show and the directors and producers have found a visual language to help keep viewers up to speed. With no title cards or character names on-screen, it's remarkable how much the team behind "Game of Thrones" use visuals — the stone of the castle buildings, the snow-covered woods of Jon's journey, the desert of Daenerys' trek — to keep us mapped to the storytelling and character arcs.

It feels in many ways that even with all of its action, season one was just the set-up for the action of season two — the journey to this tortured landscape. "Game of Thrones" is a beautiful, enjoyable, entertaining show about horrible things including murder, incest, torture, and pain. Tyrion says at one point about his journey in season one, *"I found it surprisingly beautiful, in a brutal, horribly uncomfortable sort of way."* There may be no more surprisingly beautiful show on TV than "Game of Thrones"...in a brutal, horribly uncomfortable sort of way.

*"Game of Thrones" stars Peter Dinklage, Michelle Fairley, Stephen Dillane, Carice van Houten, Liam Cunningham, Charles Dance, Lena Headey, Emilia Clarke, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, Aidan Gillen, Iain Glen, Kit Harington, Richard Madden, Maisie Williams, Isaac Hempstead Wright, Sophie Turner, Jack Gleeson, Alife Allen, and Rory McCann. It returns on HBO on April 1st, 2012 at 8pm CST.*



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