

TV Review: Netflix Continues Hot Streak with Excellent ‘Orange is the New Black’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on July 10, 2013 - 10:39am

- [Danielle brooks](#) [2]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [3]
- [Jason Biggs](#) [4]
- [Jenji Kohan](#) [5]
- [Kate Mulgrew](#) [6]
- [Laverne Cox](#) [7]
- [Michael Harney](#) [8]
- [Natasha Lyonne](#) [9]
- [Orange is the New Black](#) [10]
- [Pablo Schreiber](#) [11]
- [Taryn Manning](#) [12]
- [Taylor Schilling](#) [13]
- [Television](#) [14]
- [Weeds](#) [15]
- [Yael Stone](#) [16]

CHICAGO – Jenji Kohan’s “Orange is the New Black,” premiering in its entirety this Thursday, July 11, 2013 on Netflix for those of you who love your binge viewing, is one of those rare programs that gets better and better in memory. I encourage you NOT to watch it all in one sitting. Let it linger. Let it settle in. I have only seen the first two episodes and I’m happy to be able to anticipate the third, allowing the characters and themes of the first pair to strengthen in memory. This is genre-bending stuff, like the best of the first few seasons of “Weeds.” They could have just rode the support for “House of Cards” and “Arrested Development” but Netflix continues to impress.



Television Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Based on the acclaimed memoir by Piper Kerman, “Orange is the New Black” might have a genre all to itself — the women’s prison comedy. Kohan, who proved her interest in relatively average people caught up in a life of crime on “Weeds,” goes back to the wrong side of the law with the fascinating Piper Chapman (the fearless Taylor Schilling, “The Lucky One,” “Mercy”), a woman who was caught up in the drug smuggling operation of her girlfriend (Laura Prepon) a decade ago and now has to do 15 months for the indiscretion. She leaves behind a supportive fiancé (Jason Biggs) and plummets into a prison culture she can’t really understand. In some ways, it’s like high school with its cliques and power structures, but with a lot more actual danger.

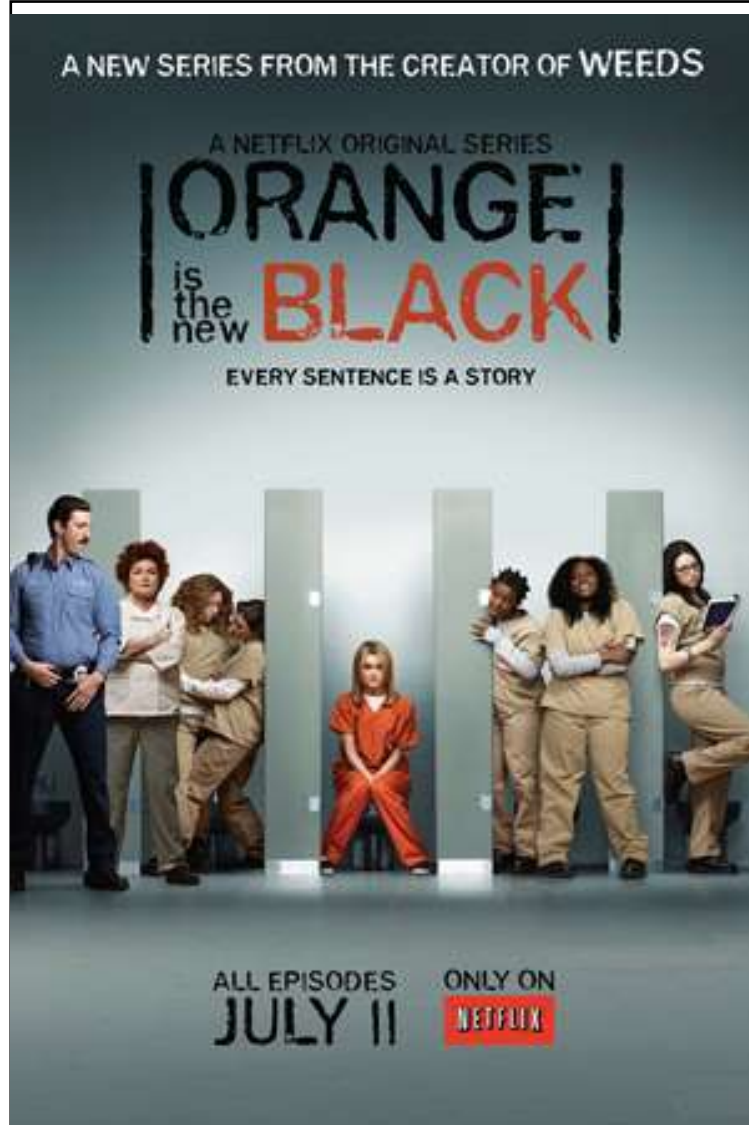


Orange is the New Black

Photo credit: Netflix

Of course, the fictional Litchfield Prison (a stand-in for Danbury from the memoir) is filled with TV-ready personalities. There’s the Russian

prison chef named Red (Kate Mulgrew), who Piper mistakenly insults on day one and soon learns that she may starve to death as a result of that drastic error. There's the caustic Nicky (Natasha Lyonne), born-again Pennsatucky (Taryn Manning), over-the-top Taystee (Danielle Brooks), transgendered Sophia (Laverne Cox), supportive Lorna (Yael Stone), and many many more. Men of this prison world are largely presented as bumbling idiots, whether it's the goofy warden (Michael Harney) or the officer known as Pornstache (Pablo Schreiber).



Orange is the New Black
Photo credit: Netflix

How do we adapt to drastic change like prison? Kohan smartly recognizes that Piper isn't going to (at least immediately) lose her basic goodness or even the personality she presents in the outside world (I love the little touches like when she asks her fiancé to wait to watch "Mad Men" till she gets out or can't understand why fellow inmates are laughing hysterically at "Good Luck Chuck.") Piper feels like a genuine, three-dimensional character, thanks in no small part to the daring performance from Schilling, doing easily the best work of her career to date. The nature of the show means that a lot of the plotting has to revolve around how Piper responds to the new people and situation in her life and yet Schilling doesn't make her merely a straight woman to the chaos. It's a performance sure to be underrated.

The supporting cast for "Orange is the New Black" is uniformly strong as well. Lyonne brings her typical energy, Stone is charming, Mulgrew dominates the second episode, and even Biggs works. It's a crowded piece with tons of speaking roles (way more than "Weeds") but Kohan proves adept at juggling multiple characters, arcs, and motivations.

I watched "Orange is the New Black" last week and have enjoyed letting it sink in. Thinking about some of the characters, laughing at jokes (the loudspeaker announcement about the upcoming presentation of "Good Luck Chuck" is hilarious), and wondering where the characters are going next. And yet, as of tomorrow, you'll be able to watch them all. Don't rush this journey with Piper. Enjoy it.

"Orange is the New Black" stars Taylor Schilling, Jason Biggs, Kate Mulgrew, Natasha Lyonne, Taryn Manning, Danielle Brooks, Laverne Cox, Yael Stone, Michael Harney, and Pablo Schreiber. It was created by Jenji Kohan. It premieres on Netflix tomorrow, July 11, 2013.



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- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/orange-is-the-new-black>
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