

So I finally got around to watching the first episode of Game of Thrones, on HBO. Those of you know who know me well know that I absolutely ADORE the book series. I would like to try to write a review every week of my thoughts on the show. Those of you who know me well enough know that I don't just like to stir up controversy JUST for the sake of controversy (though sometimes I admittedly do). While disagreeing with people is exceedingly amusing, I am much more amused by truly intelligent banter. By this, I mean that I like to back my (often) strong opinions with what I'd consider logical reasoning. Of course, it means that I occasionally come off as an obnoxious prick, but hopefully people can empathize with me and see that I just like to give reason to my opinions. That said, if you have a differing opinion, I'd love to hear it...so long as you have your reasons to back it up. Otherwise, you're probably a waste of my time. (This is the part where I exude ostentatiousness).

I will be adamant about keeping these reviews relevant to only the episodes that have been aired thus far, and respectfully request that any comments shared on the wall lack any and all information regarding the impending storyline of the book series. An aim of these reviews is to cater to an audience outside of solely those who have read the book. Thank you for taking your time to read my intro, and here goes the review:

GAME OF THRONES EPISODE 1:

WINTER IS COMING

As many of my friends know, I, personally am a fan of change from book to screen. I am a firm believer that many things that work so wonderfully in a book fail to translate when brought exactly to screen word for word. (Case in point, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone). Bearing this in mind, know that I think most of the changes made for screen for Game of Thrones (although relatively lacking in quantity) were done seamlessly. I thoroughly enjoyed the opening discovery and subsequent chase sequence. I think its differences from the prologue of the novel were minimal in scope, and instilled in the audience the importance of the land's ubiquitous fear of the white walkers (referred to the as 'the others' in the books). I think the opening did a fabulous job of setting the tone of the story. This opening told us everything we need to know about the style of the show. I've outlined my in depth reasoning through these three bullet points, in order to explain why I think this sequence was effective:

1. For one thing, the audience is informed of an important ground rule, and that is that desertion from the night's watch means death. This is important because as is hinted at by several characters in the episode, the night's watch will play an important role in the story of Game of Thrones. Thus, by establishing this ground rule off the bat (and following with a character's execution) the audience is informed of the important role the night watch plays in protecting the land of Westeros.
2. For another thing, it's bloody dark. In full view of the camera, one member of the hunting party's head is cut off by a shadowy figure as another member of the hunter's party watches helplessly. This tells our audience that this is no fairy tale world. In fact, I'd compare this to the introduction of Peter Jackson's LOTR (Lord of the Rings) trilogy. In the opening 5 minutes of The Fellowship of the Ring, we are informed of not only the

ring's history and its deadly implications, but we are forewarned that this is not a pleasant fantasy world. If audience members were looking for Never Never Land, they had best look elsewhere. As I said, I'd liken this scene of GOT (Game of Thrones) to LOTR because in GOT, after we are introduced to The Starks of Winterfell and their (relatively) peaceful existence, just as we were exposed to The Shire and the hobbits in LOTR after the exposition of the one ring. The bleak opening paints a very strong picture for audiences, especially considering the piles of dead bodies we are exposed to. Setting a tone for an audience is very important, and the show's creators Dan Weiss and David Benioff, under the careful direction of Tim Van Patten (who directed the pilot) have effectively shaped an introduction to the dark world of Westeros.

3. Lastly, and perhaps least important to storytelling, is the sheer beauty of the surrounding land. The scenery is picture perfect, and the layout is simply gorgeous. While this may simply be a factor of a rather high budget (approximately \$5-10 million went into the filming of the pilot), it is so strongly imperative towards hooking an audience. Yes, this is H.B.O., and they can take more liberties with their shows, and get away with weirder and more provocative material than other television networks, but the fact remains that making money comes first. And with this in mind, masking whatever faults the show may possess through a curtain of impressive landscape design (money) is a hook, and people are more likely to believe that they will enjoy this show more than they ordinarily would. Am I fooled? No, but I can't wait to see how dark and dreary some of the scenes in upcoming episodes will be.

After the opening sequence, the rest seemed to pass by in a blur. I'd already heard online that Arya Stark's (Eddard's younger daughter) introduction was perfectly set up without so much as a peep. I must say that I concur with the online praise. I'm pretty sure that this entire sequence of introducing the Stark family through the lens of teaching Bran to shoot an arrow was quite pleasant. It was a nice expository scene (among many more to come), and quite nicely displayed Eddard and Catelyn Stark as the loving parents watching over their children.

I liked when the man with the funky tied white beard (Maester Luwin?) not only mentioned that there had been a *deserter*, but more specifically that there was a deserter from the *night's watch*. It was a nice reminder of what the characters in the opening sequence had discussed, and as I've mentioned, I'm a strong advocate of this show being as basic as possible for a little while in order to attract new viewers. As such, it doesn't matter to me how neatly the plot is spelled out for us, or how simplified the expository dialogue of the first few episodes is. There is PLENTY of time later on in the season, and in future seasons for more intricate plotlines to develop and stop being oversimplified. If what they are currently doing helps to maintain viewers who have never read the books, then that's more than O.K. with me; there is still plenty I can enjoy regardless.

Also, to cap off this scene, I really liked the glaring look that Catelyn gave Jon Snow. It is certainly a nod to the fans who already know that Jon is Eddard's bastard child. New viewers might not even notice this sequence when they watch it, but as Jon's bastard origin is explored later in the episode, a repeat viewing from even a GOT newcomer might glean a greater appreciation for this quick moment.

Not much for me to report about the execution scene, other than I thought it was fantastic. It was every bit how I always imagined it in the book, and showing the head come clean off was SO classically H.B.O. (ROME, anyone?) After this was the finding of the direwolves. I must say that I wasn't the biggest fan of this scene. Something about it felt off...maybe not enough emphasis was placed on the fact that each Stark child, including Jon Snow, now has a wolf pup to own and raise. Perhaps the direwolves will not be as important to the story in the T.V. show as they are in the books, and frankly I'm O.K. with that. Yes the direwolves are frakkin' awesome but considering the limited amount of time to tell the story (ten episodes for this first season), if the direwolf plot gets shunted to the side, I'm O.K. with that.

Much of the rest of the episode's plot regards the mysterious death of Jon Arryn, the hand of the king. Cersei and Jaime Lannister establish their identities as queen and queen's brother, and Cersei expresses concern over whether they will be implicated in Arryn's death (which they confide they are in fact responsible for). Although Jon Arryn's name is mentioned five or six other times throughout the episode, I do believe that this plotline will be rather confusing for the new viewer, who will be having enough difficulty keeping track of the alive characters, let alone trying to memorize characters who begin the show deceased (Jon Arryn). This exchange between Cersei and Jaime however is very important, because if the confused viewer can glean even one thing from their conversation, it is that they are antagonists. And this understanding will set the stage for the story yet to come.

On to the Godswood. A nice little shot of Ned (Eddard), piously in prayer, sitting under a tree with his greatsword, Ice stationed across his lap. I remember reading somewhere online that an early reviewer was displeased with the look of the Godswood. I could not disagree any more

strongly. I think the Godswood should be one of the most beautiful places in all the land. It is one of the few places that the much beleaguered Ned Stark can take solace and go to his happy place. I do not know how far into A Song of Ice and Fire's religion the T.V. show will dwell, and so I do not know how important it is to know that Ned Stark's character in the book is devoutly religious to the old gods of the North. Westeros' religious debate may become more important as the story continues, but for now gods worship is unimportant.

A perky little scene with Robb Stark (Ned's eldest), Jon Snow, and Theon Greyjoy was next. The character of Theon has yet to be firmly established, but again doesn't matter for the sake of the first episode. I will remain spoiler free on Theon, as those of us readers know that he will become highly relevant as the story progress, but for the time being does not matter. However, this new scene was a nice touch to establish a friendly relationship among the three elder teenagers of the household.

Over the next few scenes we quickly meet the Stark children in rapid succession. We see Bran climbing anything and everything, Arya wearing a helmet and initially missing from her family's king-welcoming party, and Sansa acting rudely towards Arya. All nice little touches, I thought. Arya was very confused about where 'the imp' might be, and we are informed in the next scene that 'the imp' is in fact Jaime Lannister's younger dwarfed brother, Tyrion. He is evidently quite the heavy drinker and appreciates a brothel here and there (though we novel readers know much more about the inner motivations for Tyrion's character). Did anyone else feel butterflies in his or her stomach when Tyrion spoke his first lines? Perhaps it's just something about seeing Tyrion on screen for the first time, and knowing that it's all real; A Song of Ice and Fire has officially been produced by for the television screen, as evidenced by the

sheer fact that I am now listening to Tyrion Lannister actually speak dialogue (perhaps this was only my inner monologue, but I digress...).

King Robert Baratheon saying ‘You got fat,’ was perhaps my favorite line of the episode. The group with which I watched the pilot burst out laughing at this very line, and we probably laughed for a good ten seconds (Dean, George, Justin, and Harry, this is your shout out). It was a good way to explain that Ned and Robert have a long history together, and that Ned is clearly on a first-name basis with the king. Their walk in the crypt below Winterfell further explores their history together, and explains that Robert was never supposed to marry Cersei, rather he was actually betrothed to Ned’s sister, Lyanna, who was murdered.

Robert: “In my dreams, I kill him every night.”

Ned: “It’s done, Your Grace. The Targaryens are gone.”

Robert: “Not all of them.”

Immediately preceding this exchange, we are swept across the narrow sea to begin Daenerys’ and Viserys’ story. I very much liked Ned's and Robert's dialogue exchange, because although new viewers might get a little muddled amidst the amount of information thrust at them, the fact that the dialogue referenced the Targaryens being almost entirely wiped out will make Viserys' quest for power in the next scene make a lot more sense.

This brings me to the next plot thread, which is the introduction of Viserys and Daenerys. I love Daenerys’ look; I think Emilia Clarke is every bit as gorgeous as Dany (Daenerys) was always described in the books. Viserys has a certain Malfoy look to him, but I think it works, as he is clearly not a nice person (again, spelling things out for our new audience = good). Their

nature of their twisted relationship was established right off the bat, and gave their characters objectives. Viserys wants his rightful kingdom, and Dany doesn't want to wake the dragon (rather, she just wants to please her choleric brother).

Kahl Drogo has a strong introduction and seems rather indifferent to his new wife-to-be (Dany). I wasn't a fan of Illyrio's introduction to Viserys as the "rightful king of the Andals." I think this will be confusing to new viewers, and it would have been easier to just say 'rightful king of the Iron Throne.' In this sense, it can help to tie the Viserys/Daenerys plotline back to the main events of the episode. After Drogo's introduction, Viserys and Dany fight about Dany's impending marriage. "I would let his whole tribe fuck you. All 40,000 men and their horses too, if that's what it took," says Viserys maliciously. This gives his character very strong motivation and fortifies his dominance over his sister.

Next is a brief scene about Sansa's desires to marry Prince Joffrey, a plotline that will be unraveled in later episodes. After this is a quick scene between Ned's brother Benjen and Jon Snow. They discuss the wall, but this conversation is over soon so we can get to one of the strongest scenes of the episode, which is an intimate discussion between Jon and Tyrion. In this scene, we learn of both of their resentments of their families, House Stark for Jon, and House Lannister for Tyrion.

"What the hell do you know about being a bastard," quibbles Jon.

"All dwarves are bastards in their fathers' eyes," replies Tyrion.

I very much liked this scene in the books as well as in the show because it involves two of the book's most strongly written characters and aligns them. These two characters will always

be outcasts to some degree, and through their familial schisms they will always be united as outcasts. This is followed by an exchange between brothers Ned and Benjen where they rehash the Stark family motto: “Winter is coming,” a nice contrast to the prior scene between Jon and Tyrion. The motto is not only literal because the people of Westeros do not know when the seasons will change, but also because hard times are ahead. However, Jon and Tyrion seem ready to face such hardships as they agree that they are already accustomed to it.

Next are two parallel scenes. One between Catelyn and Cersei, and the other between Jaime and Eddard. Each scene has necessary tension built in. I like the way each of the Starks exchanged words with each of the Lannister twins one after the other (Jaime and Cersei are indeed twins). When Jaime asks Ned to provide him some competition in the next tournament, Ned simply replies “I don’t fight in tournaments because when I fight a man for real, I don’t want him to know what I can do.” I was a huge fan of this scene, although it is new, because it further pushes the notion that Jaime is a provocative prick and that Ned is a subdued but tamed wolf (direwolf! Ha!).

Ned and Catelyn then share a quiet bedroom scene until they are interrupted with exigent news from Catelyn’s sister, Lysa Tully. Nothing to report here, just more exposition, yet if there is one thing that I did like, it was the very long zoom in on Ned’s face as he sat there and considered his options of either going south to King’s Landing as the King’s Hand, or staying up north with his family. Again we are segued back to the plot across the sea with Maester Luwin’s simple line “A different time. A different king.”

I must be honest. If there was any scene that I didn’t like, it was Dany and Kahl Drogo’s wedding scene. I think it dragged on entirely too long, and that the pacing was very slow. We

don't need countless scantily clad women, reckless swordplay, disgusting food choices, maggots on the food, public raping, and visible gut-spillage to reinforce the fact that the Dothraki (Drogo's clan) are savage tribals. Some of this in moderation is more than enough to reinforce that fact. I think that Ser Jorah Mormont, who presented Dany with books from Westeros, and the presentation of the stone-turned dragon's eggs could have been held off for several episodes. There was enough exposition going around without throwing in these plot points as well. Ser Jorah could very well have met Dany in the following episodes, and the dragon eggs, which have turned to stone over the years, could be given to Dany as a belated wedding present in the next episode. I just didn't love the wedding scene, and quite frankly felt a little uncomfortable during the marriage's 'consummation.'

After several other quick character exchanges, we are brought to the final sequence of the episode. Reading the books, I was so positive that this would be the end of the first episode. I mean, what better way to bring new viewers back than to see this innocent child, to whom viewers may have already grown attached through his rebellious pension for climbing, murderously thrust out a window? From what I understand, there is much speculation online among new viewers as to whether Bran was killed or not. As I said, this review will stay spoiler free for ongoing episodes, and so I will neither confirm nor deny anything. However, I must question the way the last shot was filmed. Rather than having Bran fall into the camera, I actually was partial to the way that this happened in the book. At the end of the chapter, after Jaime says "The things I do for love," Bran's body is seen sprawled on the ground, in the distance a wolf could be heard howling, and the crows could be seen circling above. Although I'm not one to copy out of the book, I think this imagery could have been spectacular on film, but maybe that's just me...

So there you have it, my review of the first episode of Game of Thrones. Yes it is long, but I'm pretty sure this is one of the most in depth reviews that can be found on the internet. I didn't touch on the acting at all in this review, so I'll quickly cover a couple of standouts. For me, Sean Bean stood out immensely as Ned Stark. It is good that the central protagonist of this series is played by such a strong character actor. Sean Bean has typically played a side role, such as Boromir in LOTR, or Odysseus in Troy, yet finally he has found his calling. He was BORN to play Eddard Stark. From what I've seen so far, the other standouts for me are Michelle Fairley as Catelyn Stark, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, and little misses Sophie Turner Maisie Williams. I will have more in depth acting analyses in the following reviews, as well as a deconstruction of the score, once I've heard it in several more episodes.

Thanks again for reading!

-Squinty

