

Review: A Series of Unfortunate Events

[Oscar Bentley](#) reviews Netflix's rendition of a childhood classic

Sunday 26 February 2017



Image: Netflix

★★★★☆

Netflix's recent version of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* manages to do what the 2004 Jim Carrey starring film missed: create an engrossing, comprehensive adaptation of Daniel Hander's series of novels. Rather than shoehorn and manipulate the events of the first three books into a less than two hour long film where the narrative comes second and is predominantly a Jim Carrey vehicle, Netflix's eight episode attempt adapts the first four books (of thirteen total), giving each room to breathe.

The show itself follows the series of unfortunate events that are dealt to siblings Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire, who, after their parents perished in a mysterious fire, are sent to live with the wicked Count Olaf, who wants nothing more than to get his hands on the Baudelaire's fortune. After Olaf's initial failed attempt to gain their fortune, the Baudelaire's are sent to guardian after guardian while Olaf continues to pursue them, taking on a new disguise each time.

A new subplot featuring Cobie Smulders and Will Arnett as Mother and Father, revolving around the mysterious society VFD that the Baudelaire's parents were involved in is also present here, which in the books isn't introduced until much later, and helps to add a narrative arc to an otherwise episodic show.

Netflix affords each book two episodes to tell its story, and with episode lengths ranging from just under 45 minutes to over an hour, when combined these basically act as a 90+ minute film for each book. Netflix's box set all at once release model works extremely well here, as each two-parter really calls to be watched in one sitting, rather than spread across two weeks as they would on broadcast.

The series itself takes place in an indeterminate though obviously in slightly historic period, with a distinctive visual style that recalls German Expressionism and Gothic Victorianism – one review refers to it as *Pushing Daisies* Goth cousin – with an air of steam punk also present. All of this works extremely well though, as the series is set in a clearly not real world, with the melodrama ramped up to 11. The title sequence, sung by leading man Neil Patrick Harris, physically tells the viewers to 'look away', as does the marketing of the series, a nod to the direct style of the novels, which implore the reader (or in this case, viewer) not to read/watch this sorry tale.

The series also makes ramps up the role of Snicket himself (Patrick Warburton) as an onscreen narrator, and the absurdity of his appearance in the strangest of places with the strangest of costumes only adding to the wonderful absurdity that runs throughout. It's also incredibly clever, postmodern, and surprisingly educational, constantly defining various words with Snicket stating '[obscure word] is here a word which means...'.

Patrick Harris' turn as the villainous Count Olaf is also miles better than his predecessor's, fitting into the pantomime role (and its various sub-roles: Count Olaf is an actor who uses a multitude of (admittedly terrible) disguises and characters) perfectly. The downside to Patrick Harris' brilliant turn is the unfortunate event (geddit?) of the casting of Malina Weissman and Louis Hynes as Violet and Klaus Baudelaire, who, while they give it their best shots, give performances which are simply not enough to shoulder the major story points that are required of them.

The individual pairs of episodes/stories also differ in quality. While *The Reptile Room*, peaking at *The Wide Window*, and *The Miserable Mill* are all engrossing, *The Bad Beginning* is a little lacking and, at times, boring, although from personal recollection of the novels *The Bad Beginning* was always a little boring, so it may be a problem with the story itself rather than the actual episodes.

Luckily, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* has been renewed for a second series of 10 episodes to adapt the next five books, so in the not too distant future there'll be much more to enjoy. And, whatever the opening titles may state, you most certainly won't want to look away.



One comment

dennis ray

27 Feb '17 at 1:50 am

Have always hated Harris in TV series but he is an amazing villain in this series. I never connected Count Olaf with this Harris until reading this and then looking him up. He is an amazing villain and actor. I underestimated him as an actor. The review is spot on except I liked the child actors better than the reviewer. My 12 year old son and I enjoy this series immensely.

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