

Review: John Wick Chapter 2

Petty wish fulfilment at its finest

By [Emily Taylor](#), Muse Editor (2017/18)
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Image: Summit Entertainment

★★★★☆

Director: Chad Stahelski

Starring: Keanu Reeves, Ian McShane, Ruby Rose

Length: 2hr 2m

Rating: 15

“I’ll kill them all” growls Keanu Reeves as the titular John Wick.

“Of course you will” replies Ian McShane’s Winston. That’s all the plot synopsis you need for both *John Wick* films – it’s basically just Reeves mowing down wave after wave of henchmen as an unstoppable force for revenge. In the first film, he tracks down and kills many, many men in his tracking down of Theon Greyjoy (I don’t remember the character’s actual name, but I don’t think anybody does) because he killed his puppy. In fairness, the entire audience was on his side at this point because, darn, that puppy was just such a good boy. Daisy (the puppy who is still a good boy regardless of her gender) produced more emotional impact than the million dead wives we see in standard action revenge flicks. However, Wick’s obsession is hard to morally justify and that’s one of the things that separates the *John Wick* films from the standard revenge thriller. It doesn’t rely on the protagonist maintaining some strained moral high ground to absolve his guilt and remain the “hero” despite his many murders. If anything, there is little distinguishing John Wick from his enemies. Characters flick from allies to enemies quicker than John’s wife died in the first film. But that is kind of the point. We mostly side with John because he’s the underdog and he’s our protagonist. But both films just follow cycles of vengeance which become more and more fraught as the films progress. Both films are not here to deliver a moral message. But does this

film fulfil its role as pure fantastical escapism? Yes, and then some.

One of the film's strongest aspect that separates it from your bog-standard shoot 'em up is its world building. The first film laid the groundwork, but the second instalment really built it up. It's the perfect example of showing and not telling. There's very little exposition about this criminal underground – these people communicate with bullets more than words – since we don't know everything about how this system works its leaves the audience intrigued enough to keep watching. It also keeps the pace up so the simple premise is never worn thin. The world feels lived in and realistic since we are also able to view a snapshot of a much larger picture with none of the characters sitting down to deliver out of character dialogue. It trusts the audience to keep up which many films struggle with. Though I use the word 'realistic', this is a film where approximately half of New York City are assassins. But the film is so deadpan about its absurdist premise that you can't help but suspend your disbelief.

One of the main reasons this film works is Keanu Reeves himself. He's come a long way from *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventures*, that's for sure. But his John Wick is just so badass that you can't help but root for the guy. It's petty wish fulfilment at its finest: the unstoppable killing machine just killing people who piss him off. But it also feels so far removed from reality which means the violence never feels too gratuitous – it's pure fantasy not set in our world but in the dark criminal underworld of the most paranoid conspiracy freak. I would argue that Reeves is better as a near silent protagonist as often his one-liners do feel a bit forced. This is emphatically made up for in the stunt work because Reeves inhabits that character physically more than anything else. Videos have gone viral of Reeves training for this role. That man is pretty much a killing machine now which makes his portrayal as the God-like super assassin believable. This skill also allows for smooth and beautifully shot fight choreography which is rare to see in action cinema nowadays which often have fifty cuts and shaky cam to hide the fact that Liam Neeson is now too old to jump a fence. But Reeves inhabits Wick so fully that I don't think I could every look him in the eye if I bump into him in the street.

The villains aren't quite as memorable as the former film, and the stakes not quite as visceral as justice for an adorable puppy, mostly because Theon Greyjoy was just so obnoxiously punchable. Ruby Rose was also underused in the film with only one great fight scene that was too short. Though it certainly is no feminist masterpiece with the whole dead wife trope reused, I do like its use of female characters and would like to see more of them as background characters. I don't remember a single remark against the female assassins to do with their gender which was refreshing – no out of place feminist tirades and no derogatory remarks by the male characters. Rather John Wick kills them just as he would the male assassins – a true poster boy for equality.

Pure action films have never been a genre of exquisite quality but the *John Wick* franchise is miles ahead of its competition. It has got intriguing worldbuilding, great cinematography and excellent fight sequences. But more than that it is just great fun. Yes, it is a silly action film but when it's done this well there's not much more to ask for.



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