LIFE

‘LANTERNS’: LESS CAN BE MORE IN SCI-FI

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Despite being the newest addition to James Gunn’s fledgling DC cinematic universe, “Lanterns” has quickly cemented itself as one of his most popular releases.

The original HBO series follows former marine John Stewart as he trains to become a backup member of the Green Lantern Corps, an intergalactic peacekeeping force. However, John finds his training complicated by an alien conspiracy brewing in the Midwest, which might only be a secondary danger to the antagonism he faces from his trainer and Earth’s current Green Lantern, Hal Jordan, who suspects that John serves a more nefarious purpose than just being mere backup.

Inexplicability, both protagonists also find themselves also actively pursuing married women.

Welcome to the first issue of Future Tense, a new biweekly column that looks at science fiction media and analyzes the works’ underlying narratives or messages.

I chose “Lanterns” as the first topic for this column because it’s a fascinating example of how sci-fi concepts are often utilized in modern stories. But before I get into that, I want to establish some ground rules about what exactly science fiction is as a genre.

For the purposes of this column, I define sci-fi as a genre of fiction that encompasses stories which make use of futuristic technologies or ideas. You may notice that the definition I have provided is quite vague, and that’s primarily because sci-fi is a very broad genre which authors struggle to define. To complicate the matter, most stories written today are rarely classified as just sci-fi, with most writers usually coupling it with fantasy or simply using futuristic elements in a mostly modern setting, which is the route “Lanterns” takes.

“Lanterns” is an adaption of the “Green Lantern” superhero comic series by DC.

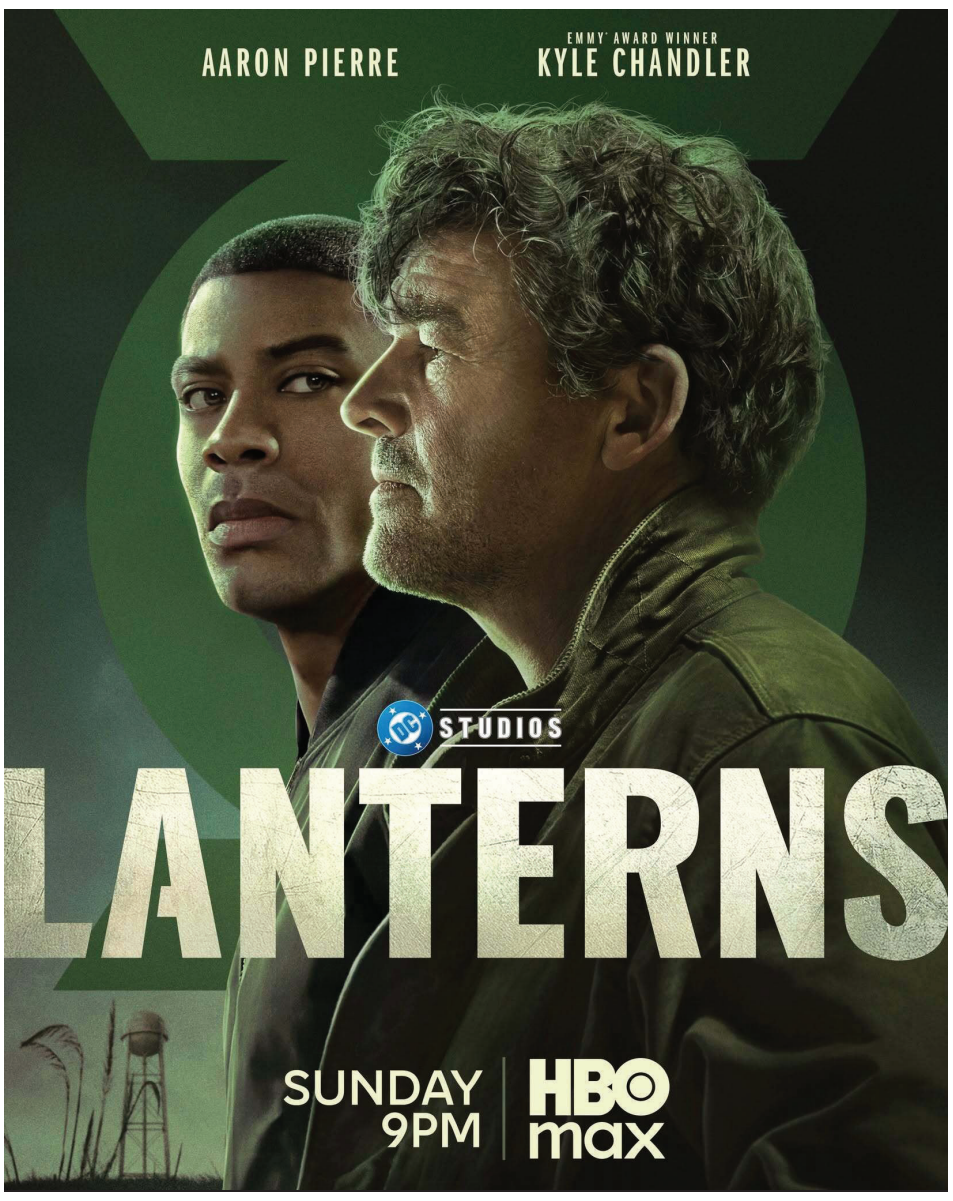
Now, Green Lantern, the character, has existed for over 86 years, and the lore surrounding the superhero has changed drastically over time. In 1959, the most popular version of the character, Hal Jordan, was introduced. In his origin, Hal is a test pilot who receives a Green Lantern ring from a dying alien that crash lands on Earth. He then uses this ring, which was developed using advanced technology by the alien race the Guardians of the Universe, to gain superpowers and defend Earth. Over time, other characters were introduced that also carry the title of Green Lantern, with many becoming staples of DC’s comic mythology.

As you can see, following its reinvention, “Green Lantern” is evidently an inherently sci-fi property, and most of its most famous stories include key elements like space travel and intergalactic wars.

It was an interesting choice by the “Lanterns” writers to set the character’s first high-budget live-action television show almost entirely in rural Nebraska.

On a meta-level, some believe this creative decision stemmed from the writers’ embarrassment of the original comic, instead pursuing a more grounded, adult version of the superhero. This is a take I heavily disagree with, as the show is still, at its core, a strange sci-fi narrative, but it deliberately chooses to develop this narrative while keeping a grounded aesthetic.

For instance, while the show takes place entirely on Earth, the story still follows a space cop in training and a superhero, as they try to track down an extraterrestrial threat on Earth. This is not a side element of the show, but rather the core story presented in the first five episodes.



The official poster for the new TV show “Lanterns” on HBO Max. The show is the latest release to James Gunn’s DC cinematic universe.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GREEN LANTERN ON FACEBOOK

While thus far most of the aliens featured in “Lanterns” are presented as taking human form, this is evidently an intentional creative decision, as it’s the source of all the tension in our protagonists’ investigation. Instead of having characters just tackle the huge blue and red aliens, they must investigate and discern if who they’re dealing with is an alien menace or just an eccentric Nebraskan native. Overall, it’s a decision that’s paid off big time and has led to fantastic scenes like Hal’s interrogation in the pilot.

Moreover, by reducing the series’ overt sci-fi elements, the ones that are explicitly present feel even more impactful. Every time the Green Lantern ring is used to create structures or simply fly, it feels awe-inspiring because it’s used sparingly. If the show constantly featured Hal or John swinging giant green weapons around the ring, those scenes would feel less special.

Taking a broader view, the show almost reminds me of a sci-fi version of an urban fantasy story. Urban fantasy is a more recent genre of story-telling that uses supernatural elements in a modern urban setting. Today it’s most popularly used as a vehicle for paranormal romance stories. Think, my crush is secretly a vampire, werewolf or monster.

Without getting into spoilers, the show does have a bit in common with that last note on urban fantasy, although overall, I’d give the show a minor two out of 10 on the freak meter, graciously making it the first HBO show I’ve ever been comfortable watching with other people.

“Lanterns” is an excellent addition to the DCU while also being a highly competent drama that stands on its own two legs. I’m looking forward to seeing how it progresses over the next three episodes and answers its longstanding questions. Who’ll end up wearing the Green Lantern ring? What is Hal Jordan’s fate? Will Mr. Stewart ever go after a woman his own age?

Well, my predictions are (1) John; (2) he’ll become the supervillain Parallax and (3) never.



A snapshot from episode six of the new TV show “Lanterns” on HBO Max. The show quickly gained popularity following its release.

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