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HELL ON WHEELS Season 4: The Strongest & Most Sorrowful Season of AMC's Gritty Western to Date [TV Review]

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AMC's western drama series *Hell on Wheels* has concluded its fourth and much to my surprise -- best season yet. After making the move to Saturday nights and extending the season length from 10 to 13 episodes for the first time, *Hell on Wheels* has finally found its groove and hooked me in permanently.



When *Hell on Wheels* closed out its third season, I was done. I had decided to never again watch the show that they actually film right in my backyard of Southern Alberta Canada. Elam had just fought a bear and Cullen wound up marring into a Mormon colony. The show had taken so many bizarre and terrible plot turns that I could barely stand it anymore. It was one of the worst season finales that I had ever seen and damn near unforgivable. When the fourth season kicked off, *Hell on Wheels* was still held prisoner to bad storylines that it had created prior. But that setup almost worked to its advantage as we began to see these characters break free from their awful scenarios.

Seeing Cullen Bohannon struggle to maintain his debt to the new Mormon lifestyle that he'd succumbed to last season, actually worked here plot-wise. The tension that continued to build between he and the undercover Swede was palpable. Christopher Heyerdahl is a tremendous force and he chews the hell out of any scene that he's a part of. He's definitely created one of the most fascinating television villains of the past decade. The Swede is a human cockroach who infests himself into any situation and his ability to stay alive is remarkable considering the dire circumstances he's put into season after season.

Major Spoilers Below

With so many new faces joining the cast we had to say goodbye to some of the regulars and even though the most major departure this season wasn't a planned one, it ended up becoming the most memorable moment of the series. Actor/rapper Common had decided it was time to focus on his music career. Goodbye Elam Ferguson. After his fate had been left up in the air following a bear attack in the third season finale, we catch up with Elam mid-season to find that he had been saved by Natives in the strange and engrossing episode 'Bear Man'. Elam had been scarred up, blinded in one eye and even though his body had been healed, his mind was lost.

The following episode entitled 'Elam Ferguson' was one of the best hours of television in 2014. It was incredibly difficult seeing such a beloved character suffering from a brain injury that affected his memory and made him incredibly agitated and violent towards those he once loved, but no longer recognized. His showdown with Cullen was hard to watch and shocking to say the least. Seeing our series star shooting his best friend to death after he tries so hard to bring him back was brutal. Watching Anson Mount break down and cry over Elam's casket as the episode came to a close was heartbreaking.



The rest of the season followed suit as we said goodbye to yet another longtime supporting cast member in the penultimate episode via public hanging. That wasn't depressing at all... But we did get to see some new and memorable faces in the process. Jake Weber is introduced as the deep voiced and intimidating Governor John Campbell while Jonathan Scarfe blasts his way onto the show in awesome fashion as the outlaw Sydney Snow. The introduction scene with Snow's attempted hanging in Mexico was one of the coolest character intros in quite some time and each scene involving Scarfe that followed was nothing but entertaining. The results of Snow's actions in the dramatic episode 'Return to Hell' were horrific and extremely unsettling... When you have a likeable and charming villain who is so easily capable of committing such atrocities then you've struck gold.



Showrunner John Wirth killed me in 2013 with some story decisions that I just couldn't agree with but he's steered this series back on track and managed to deliver what I consider the best season yet of *Hell on Wheels*. I will admit that I was a little let-down by the finale once again but at least the story and set up for next season made sense to me this time. Cullen has joined the opposing side in the race to build America's first country-wide railway and a wealth of longtime regulars have left Cheyenne for good. I'm looking forward to a fifth season now that my faith has been restored in this show because I've always been on the fence.

Hell on Wheels has delivered some of the lowest of lows over the course of it's run but it's also given some of the highest of highs, most of which, were absolutely in the fourth season. I gladly tip my metaphorical cowboy hat to the *Hell on Wheels* crew for a tremendous job well done.

Favorite Moments:

- Common's departure in the dramatic and emotional episode 'Elam Ferguson'. Seeing someone who had essentially been the co-lead of the series die halfway through a season in such shocking and brutal fashion was a remarkable way to exit the show and one that I applaud both the performers and writers for.
- Sydney Snow's all-out villain arc which results in the tragic death of the small Mormon boy after he burns down the church. When it's revealed that the kid had been hiding under the floorboards while the church burned to the ground, we're once again riding a rollercoaster of emotions.

Mis-Fires:

- The season finale was all set-up and had very few pay-offs. The goofy streetfight between Colm Meany and Jake Weber, although fun, felt strange considering we just went through the ringer in the prior episode watching the local church lady being hung to death.
- Shaving Christopher Heyerdahl's beard. He looked awesome with the beard and I'll miss it.



Hell on Wheels tells the epic story of post-Civil War America, focusing on a Confederate soldier (Anson Mount) who sets out to exact revenge on the Union soldiers who have killed his wife. His journey takes him west to Hell on Wheels, a dangerous, raucous, lawless melting pot of a town that travels with and services the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, an engineering feat unprecedented for its time. The series documents the railroad's engineering and construction as well as institutionalized greed and corruption, the immigrant experience, and the plight of newly emancipated African-Americans during Reconstruction. Hell on Wheels chronicles this potent turning point in our nation's history and how uncivilized the business of civilization can be.

Hell on Wheels stars Anson Mount, Colm Meaney, Phil Burke, Christopher Heyerdahl, Robin McLeavy, MacKenzie Porter, Gregg Henry, Dohn Norwood and Jake Weber. The show will return for a fifth season exclusively on AMC, airing on Saturday nights.

Keven Skinner hails from the Great White Wasteland that is Wainwright, Canada. An expert on all things Walking Dead related (he was even given a zombie cameo in the comic), he spends most of his time championing the glorious ascension of cable TV as the premiere entertainment medium.

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