

Hell on Wheels (2012)

Reviewed by [Ken Tucker](#) | Aug 02, 2012



Image credit: Michelle Faye

HEAVEN 'ON WHEELS' The Western, complete with a cast of cooky characters, has revived the genre of yesteryear

EW's GRADE

B+

Details Start Date: Aug 12, 2012; Network: [AMC](#)

The Western is alive and well on Sunday nights. That's where A&E's *Longmire* and AMC's **Hell on Wheels**, now entering its second season, have proved that this genre can flourish, if a series is built around a quiet but forceful hero, black-hearted villains, and attractive yet ruthless womenfolk.

Indeed, despite all the media attention for *Mad Men*, *Hell on Wheels* in its debut season was the second-most-watched show on AMC, after *The Walking Dead*. Viewers got caught up in the post--Civil War tale of former Confederate soldier Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount, so soulfully handsome his name has probably lent itself to many a clumsy sex joke). Cullen started this 19th-century-set series helping to build the transcontinental railroad, a chunk of which is being overseen by the corrupt overlord Thomas Durant (Colm Meaney, also living up to his surname).

Cullen came complete with a tragic past (dead wife and child, vowing revenge on the Union soldiers who killed 'em), but *Wheels* creators Joe and Tony Gayton mix things up with characters like a shrewd freed slave played by Common and an impeccable but hotsy British widow — Dominique McElligott's Lily — who proves almost as conniving as Durant.

The new season commences with Cullen doing something other than laying railroad track — robbing trains with a bunch of ex--Union boys. (*Hell on Wheels* likes its heroes to be antiheroic whenever possible.) We catch up with characters who've been brought low by railroad life, such as Tom Noonan's preacher Cole, now a pathetic drunkard, and Christopher Heyerdahl's Thor, a.k.a. "The Swede," a former Durant henchman who hasn't quite overcome the humiliation of being tarred and feathered last season. It's a measure of how absorbing *Hell on Wheels* is that each of these characters has evolved into someone we know and, in varying degrees, root for. The series remains visually impressive: The AMC budget to build a railroad can't be huge, but the scenes of labor and train travel are vividly expansive. The show manages to both exploit cowboy-and-Indian clichés with Cheyenne and Sioux tribes — hey, Westerns thrive on such antagonism — while also avoiding a lot of Native American stereotypes.

Ultimately, though, the show rises or falls each week on the strength of the moments when Mount and Common dominate. Each actor in his own way is capable of lifting *Hell on Wheels* to the level the series so clearly wants to attain: a fresh take on the old macho code of a-man's-gotta-do-what-a-man's-gotta-do, without posturing or a self-consciousness about the century of Westerns that have preceded it. **B+**

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Originally posted Aug 01, 2012 Published in issue #1219 Aug 10, 2012