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## ‘Hell on Wheels’ is gripping, gritty television



Courtesy of Entertainment One

The second season of *Hell on Wheels* returns this Sunday, but audience members have a chance to play catch up before Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount) continues his adventures in the West. The inaugural season of the AMC series is now available on Blu-ray and DVD, and the 10-episode package provides comprehensive insight into arguably one of the best (and most overlooked) shows on television.

Bohannon is a man with a sketchy past. He used to own slaves on his land in the South, and he lost his wife during the Civil War. Now that the conflict is over and the North has won, Americans are turning west toward the far reaches of North America. To get there, they don't plan on walking or running. Instead, it's all about train technology and the adventurous exploits of Thomas Durant (Colm Meaney). With a ragtag team of ex-soldiers and ex-slaves, Durant sets out to build the connection between the East Coast and West Coast. Money is on his mind, much more than patriotism or gainful employment for his men.

Bohannon arrives on Durant's team after murdering a man back home. The audience comes to learn that this shadowy figure with the grizzled beard and Indiana Jones hat has one purpose in life: He wants to kill the men responsible for his wife's death, and he will stop at nothing until his goals are achieved.

Common plays Elam, a fellow worker, and Dominique McElligott is Lily Bell, a woman who enters Bohannon's life. These actors, along with Meaney and Mount, make up some of the most inspired principal casting on television. They live and breathe their roles, and the grittiness of the drama is evident in almost every shot. Characters are killed. Battles begin with the Indians. Money is on the mind of so many. *Hell on Wheels* feels like a cousin of HBO's *Deadwood*, another great series that dealt with the changing frontier.

The treatment of the freed slaves by some of the characters is difficult to endure. The show's writers don't hold back on the racism of the times and the great disparities among the different groups on the work site. Meaney's Durant character is a treacherous villain with an acid tongue. He degrades his men and has very little patience for anyone not thinking about money. Mount's central character is more even-tempered, a man with some great sins on his heart. There's a lot of dread and mayhem in the series, but it's intended to propel the story forward, much like the railroad itself.

Joe Gayton and Tony Gayton have created a remarkable show so rich in detail that it never ceases to hold our interest. The trials and tribulations of these characters are not easy viewing, but they make for gripping television. *Hell on Wheels* sheds light on an historical era that should be understood by all Americans.

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