

**THE VERGE**

# Netflix's dark fantasy *The Order* is an absurdist match for *What We Do in the Shadows*

**It's werewolves versus witches in a horror story with a welcome comic angle**

By Samantha Nelson Mar 4, 2019



*Dan Power/Netflix*

The first episode of Netflix's new horror series *The Order*, which premieres on March 7th, reads like a pretty straightforward supernatural drama with a touch of dark humor. The second episode starts to get a little weird, and by the third installment, the show transitions into a flat-out hilarious mashup of college and horror comedy. Like the werewolves that are featured

prominently in its plot, *The Order* doesn't make a particularly smooth transformation, but it's a lot more impressive once it embraces the change.

*The Order* is being marketed as a drama, and the initial trailer doesn't even hint at the humor that makes the show stand out. That's bound to produce a mismatch between expectations and reality on the scale of the marketing for Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon's *Cabin in the Woods*. Unfortunately, that mismatch also afflicts the show itself. *The Order* would be better off if creator Dennis Heaton (*Ghost Wars*) and his co-writer Shelley Eriksen (*Continuum*) ditched all pretensions of seriousness and just fully committed to their silly spin on dark fantasy.

*The Order* follows Jack Morton (Jake Manley), a freshman at Belgrave University and initiate into the Hermetic Order of the Blue Rose. Jack and his grandfather, played by Matt Frewer with the same gusto for spouting ridiculous lines he showed in *Orphan Black* and *Eureka*, have plotted for years to get Jack into the secret society as a way of avenging his mother and punishing his father Edward Coventry (Max Martini). That plan involves the prerequisite conspiracy theorist cork board covered with strings, newspaper clippings, and paranoid theories that's pinned up in their garage. It comes with a whiteboard detailing a five-year plan, starting with Jack's college admission. Jack is meant to keep all of this under wraps, but he's terrible at secrecy. Along with periodically mentioning his "mission," then having to backpedal, he interrupts a campus tour led by sophomore, Order member, and immediate love interest Alyssa Drake (Sarah Grey) to show off his encyclopedic knowledge about the school. She somehow finds this charming, rather than deeply weird.

The twist is that while Jack thinks he's signing on for the plot of *The Skulls*, he's actually landed inside *The Craft*. The Order has amassed power not just through conventional means, but with magic spells that sound like they've been cribbed from *Harry Potter*, and Edward is the organization's Grand Magus. The Order doesn't realize they're being hunted by the Knights of St. Christopher, a sacred brotherhood of werewolves that fight dark magic. (Or "gender-neutral collective" of werewolves, according to the fiery Lilith Bathory, played by Devery Jacobs.) As with *What We Do in the Shadows*, the lycanthropes are a real highlight in *The Order*. The best of the bunch is Jack's lackadaisical RA Randall Carpio (Adam DiMarco) whose job includes handing out "a rape whistle and a how-not-to-rape pamphlet." When the rest of Randall's pack decides they should kill Jack for being a member of the Order, Randall demands they settle the dispute in the traditional fashion: via a game of beer pong.

It starts as '*The Skulls*,' then turns into '*The Craft*'

The show is filled with gags like this, playing with the concept of irresponsible college students who have the power to break the rules of physics. Much of the show's third episode is devoted to the shenanigans of a trio of Order initiates who learn a single illusion spell, culminating in a *Pinky and the Brain*-style "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" moment where they alternately suggest stopping the magic, trying to learn more powerful magic they can abuse, and having a threesome. The goofy humor is interwoven into the plot to produce stories that are not just surprisingly funny, but genuinely surprising. Characters who seem destined to be recurring buddies, rivals, or mentors are killed off with shocking alacrity, with magic providing an excuse for why Belgrave's campus isn't swarmed with reporters responding to those deaths.



Photo by Dan Power / Netflix

The problems come when the laughs stop, and the show grinds to a halt as it falls into boilerplate fantasy horror clichés. That weight is really felt in the scenes with Alyssa, Edward, and Vera Stone (Katharine Isabelle), the leader of Belgrave’s Order chapter. While Edward manages at least a bit of gravitas during the power jockeying and magical experimentation, their intrigues play out more like a *Vampire: The Masquerade* live-action role-playing game than a conflict with real stakes. *The Order* would do better if it just let its villains embrace full over-the-top campiness rather than trying to present them as mysterious and cool by keeping them straight-faced and grim. Hopefully, Alyssa’s mysterious past, Vera’s ambitions, or Edward’s efforts to assemble a powerful magical item will pay off as the season goes on.

The comedy is strong, but the bland protagonist doesn’t help the drama

Jack is a particularly mediocre protagonist, with the combination of a bland performance and inconsistent script making him unconvincing as an underdog townie surrounded by more privileged students at Belgrave, or even as a straight man struggling to keep up with the pace of mystical reveals. His flirtation with Alyssa is downright painful, particularly when they attempt to engage in a battle of wits with a speed match on the school’s giant chess board. If the rest of the humor wasn’t so sharp, this familiar chess metaphor would feel like self-parody. The same can be said for the scripts, which lean too heavily on buzzy phrases like “fake news” or caricatures of self-centered, entitled young people.

Visually, *The Order* sometimes seems taxed by the constraints of its presumably low budget. The first scene where Jack and the other hopeful pledges meet the members of the Order would be a

lot creepier if it didn't take place in broad daylight and if the mages weren't demonstrating their power with sleight-of-hand coin tricks that looked better when they were done in the first episode of *American Gods*. The werewolf special effects are decent enough, and a goofy color-shifting technique meant to show that a scene is being viewed by something inhuman is tolerable because it sets up a pretty clever bait-and-switch. Three episodes into the series, the magic is rarely particularly showy. But that works out fine, given the theme that suggests how just a little power can go a long way. Similarly, the clear limits on available sets work well within the constrained world of a small college campus, where it makes sense if there's really only one bar where teens can hang out and drink.

It's hard to guess where this show is heading, but it works best when it sticks to humor

Considering the breakneck speed of the plot and tonal shifts in *The Order's* first three episodes, it's hard to really guess where the show is heading. There's clearly room within its world to add even more magical creatures into the mix to serve as allies and threats to members of both factions, while expanding on the feel that basically everyone at Belgrave has had at least some brush with the supernatural. *The Order* could continue to combine the resigned way that the characters in *Buffy* treated life on the Sunnydale Hellmouth with zaniness, which it touched on when Jack asked a professor for an extension on a paper because his roommate had gone missing, and the professor and one of his colleagues pulled out custom Bingo sheets to see if they had "missing roommate" or "dead roommate" listed as a predicted excuse.



Photo by Dan Power / Netflix

A lot more could happen on *The Order*. The machinations of the veteran members of the Order could finally spill beyond the boundaries of their occult temple, causing their powers to be stretched too thin as they cover up murders and grotesque student injuries. The new pledges could get into increasingly dangerous hijinks. But whatever direction the writers take will be strongest if they scale back their halfhearted adult intrigue and embrace their well-realized juvenile humor. That could let *The Order* provide real competition for the *What We Do in the Shadows* series FX plans to premiere later in March.