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First Impressions: *Fear the Walking Dead*

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The Walking Dead “[companion](#)” series *Fear the Walking Dead* is the latest iteration of offshoot/spinoff storytelling around this narrative universe. *Fear the Walking Dead* premiered Sunday night on AMC, setting another ratings [record](#) for the cable channel by reaching approximately 10.1 million viewers. I’ve written about *The Walking Dead* previously on [Antenna](#), in a piece that focuses on the complexities of genre and how the show fluctuates over time to blend multiple genres, primarily by mixing western imagery to create a post-apocalyptic return to the frontier. The announcement of the new program *Fear the Walking Dead* led me to a number of questions related to how the show would work in terms of storytelling, genre, setting, and character. Without the comic book as a reference point, how would its narrative progress and/or differ from the original television show? How would its differing landscape and location, set in Los Angeles, California, rather than the American south, shift its tone and genre? What types of character would populate its world? Would it function as an ensemble cast, or would one or two characters dominate the central narrative?

While the prolific nature of film sequels and blockbuster franchises suggests the relative safety of building new pieces around known narrative worlds, the enormous popularity of *The Walking Dead* puts a lot of pressure on its new companion piece. Audiences at this point, on the cusp of *The Walking Dead*’s sixth season premiere slated for 11 October 2015, are accustomed to many of the elements that define the original show. This precursor sets up the new show in some positive and negative ways, depending on which elements of the original show resonate with individual viewers. But unlike *The Walking Dead*, *Fear the Walking Dead* will likely not be given multiple seasons to find its audience or to have the luxury of missteps along the way.

Critical reviews thus far have been mixed. Laura Bradley at *Slate* thinks it should have been a [comedy](#) so that the two shows could function as “palate cleansers for each other.” Todd VanDerWerff at *Vox* writes that “the show is basically [Parenthood with zombies](#).” But, is that a bad thing? What do we want so-called “zombie” shows to look and feel like? Do viewers want this to be the same show but in a different setting, and is that even possible? Will it create the same kind of viewer [dissatisfaction](#) that the second season of *True Detective* experienced this summer when the central story moved from Louisiana to California?

In terms of the show’s location, I wonder if the Los Angeles location might disrupt the deeply traditional gender norms that define the characters across the first three seasons on *The Walking Dead*. This isn’t clear yet, but remains something to pay attention to in the context of this show’s cast, being that Kim Dickens (as Madison Clark) is the show’s most famous cast member, who may or may not be the “Rick Grimes” (Andrew Lincoln) of this world. As well, my interpretation of *The Walking Dead* as a western is deeply tied to its location in the south and the pre-apocalyptic professions of its two main characters in seasons one and two. Rick and Shane

(Jon Bernthal), who were both law enforcement officers, have the knowledge of and access to the guns and ammunition that are key to their post-apocalyptic survival. In Los Angeles, who or what will have that kind of upper hand?

To address my pre-viewing questions: It is definitely a different show than its precedent — and it is much too soon to tell if that is good or bad. It was an entertaining hour of television that moved slowly, much like the pilot of *The Walking Dead*. Unlike that pilot episode, “Days Gone Bye,” however, the main character will not wake up after everything in the world has changed. This new show gives us Rick’s coma time, through the Clark-Manawa family, and it will take viewing a few more episodes to find out if this unexplored timeline is worthy of the screen time that *Fear the Walking Dead* is giving it.

From the perspective of the first episode, the show does one thing quite well. While not terribly visually interesting beyond the shots of a bleak, polluted urban landscape, the pilot episode of *Fear the Walking Dead* uses sound to tell its story in a fascinating way. As somewhat omniscient viewers who are aware of the events that will soon transpire, we know a lot more than the characters and it builds anticipation towards some unknown tipping point. The show plays with this audience knowledge by cleverly using the cacophony of the city to foreshadow the slow yet inevitable realization that zombies (or walkers) will soon be a threat to these characters’ existence. The characters hear sirens, helicopters, gunshots, but continue through their days with these “normal” city sounds. Cars zip by, narrowly missing people and objects. Shots are fired, and ignored. Dogs continue to bark incessantly off screen. With each scene the sirens grow in volume and proximity, building towards the one sound that viewers know, but these characters cannot yet comprehend: the telltale rasp of the undead walkers. These sounds all build powerfully as the characters move towards the knowledge that the audience already has. The city noises are a wonderful contrast to the prominent sounds of the first seasons of *The Walking Dead*: the absolute silence of a technological, industrial society that has already ceased existing punctuated by the buzzing cicadas and blood-thirsty walkers.

On the other hand, not everything in the pilot episode came together cohesively. The writing is a little clunky, the characters and their motivations don’t yet make sense, and some of the acting feels unsatisfactory. The main characters work in a high school, which the show (unfortunately) uses as a backdrop to show Travis lecture his students about the battle of man versus nature, in which “nature always wins.” In a different classroom, Madison’s daughter Alicia (Alycia Debnam-Cary) fools around with her girlfriends while her teacher lectures on chaos theory. As attempts at textured mise-en-scène or layered storytelling, these elements feel forced.

Nonetheless, after viewing only one episode into this new show, I am looking forward to watching how the questions I posed at the beginning are addressed in the coming weeks.