

# MONTHLY MOVIES

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## ‘Sandman,’ ‘Rings of Power’ offer cinematic wonders

### Streaming services offer break from outdoors

*By T. Rob Brown*

**T**here are many reasons as of late to want to stay indoors. From the summer heat, as I write this, to the recent rainfall, to COVID-19 and monkeypox, to the shrill chirping of the male cicadas, it’s no wonder some of us decide to remain inside.

For those of us whose eardrums are just too tender to take any more of that incessant vibration of the tympanic membrane of a creature so arrogant that it’s called a superfamily, we can turn our eyes and thankful ears toward our TV sets. You’ve heard of locusts, right? Those are a specific type of grasshopper, which often gets confused with cicadas. The term “17-year locust” actually refers to the cicada. Thank goodness some of their species only emerge from the ground every seven, nine, 13 or 17 years. Imagine if all of them emerged every single year.

Anyway, summer comes to a close and it’s time to take a look at what’s available to watch on various streaming services.

Netflix may not be everyone's favorite, but it's the oldest streaming service. We already know *Stranger Things* is still going strong, but in its top shows right now is the first season of *The Sandman*. I've watched through all 10 episodes plus the bonus 11<sup>th</sup> episode for Season One. It's off to a great start with compelling characters, an interesting story and the series is not afraid to try some new things.

*The Sandman* is based on the comic books and graphic novels of the same name, written by Neil Gaiman, a big name in fantasy—quite popular for his stories steeped in mythology. As far as conversions of his work to the screen, this one may be the best one yet—especially in cinematic beauty. The comics published from 1989 to 1993 under DC Comics, then 1993-2020 on DC's Vertigo, then 2020 to present as DC Black Label.

If you're not much of a reader, no fear. You might have seen other works based on Gaiman's writings.

*Stardust* (2007), based on the novel of the same name, starred Claire Danes, Charlie Cox, Sienna Miller, Ricky Gervais, Peter O'Toole, Michelle Pfeiffer and Robert De Niro with narration by Ian McKellen. Rated PG-13, this fantasy adventure runs 2 hours and 8 minutes with a Certified Fresh 77% Tomatometer score and an 86% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.6/10 on the International Movie Database.

*Coraline* (2009), an animated film also based on the novel of the same name, starred the voicework of Dakota Fanning, Teri Hatcher, Keith David and John Hodgman. Rated PG, this kids and family fantasy runs 1 hour and 40 minutes with a Certified Fresh 90% Tomatometer score and a 73% audience score, plus a 7.7/10 on IMDb.

*Good Omens* (2019) is based on a comedy co-written by Gaiman and Terry Pratchett on Amazon Prime, Rated TV-MA and stars Michael Sheen, David Tennant, Frances McDormand and Jon Hamm. This fantasy series was renewed for a second season, which is currently under production, with the first season receiving an 84% Tomatometer score and a 90% audience score, plus an 8.0/10 on IMDb. Be forewarned though, this fantasy series covers religious themes that some might consider to be blasphemous. I view it as it was intended, as fantasy, and not as fact.

*Lucifer* (2016-2021) is a detective story on Netflix, Rated TV-14, featuring characters created by Gaiman and stars Tom Ellis, Lauren German, DB Woodside, Kevin Alejandro and Lesley-Ann Brandt. This urban fantasy series received an 88% Tomatometer score and a 73% audience score, plus an 8.1/10 on IMDb. Be forewarned though, this fantasy series also covers religious themes that some might consider to be blasphemous.

*American Gods* (2017-2021), Rated TV-MA, on Starz is an adaptation of his novel and stars Ricky Whittle, Ian McShane, Emily Browning, Pablo Schreiber and Bruce Langley. This urban fantasy series received a 77% Tomatometer score and a 69% audience score, plus an 7.7/10 on IMDb. I haven't seen this one myself, so I can't give you any feedback on it yet.

Bringing us back to the newest visual work in his portfolio, *The Sandman* is the story of Dream, the cosmic being who rules the realms of our sleep. The series covers several instances of chaos that occur, and Dream must repair the damages. At first, I wasn't sure what to expect from this series. As I continued to watch the episodes, I was quickly hooked and eager to find out what would happen next.

Even with the first season completed, I see a future for this show, but we're not sure yet if it will be renewed.

On his Twitter feed, Gaiman said Netflix was keeping a close eye on the viewership for the show to consider if it would get a second season. I hope it does. I think it's one of his strongest visual works yet—and I enjoyed *Good Omens* and *Lucifer*, despite my own faith.

*The Sandman* (2022-?), Rated TV-MA, on Netflix is an adaptation of his comic books and stars Tom Sturridge, Gwendoline Christie, Vivienne Acheampong, Boyd Holbrook, Charles Dance and the voice of Patton Oswalt as Matthew the Raven. This fantasy series received an 87% Tomatometer score and an 81% audience score, plus an 7.8/10 on IMDb. I give it two thumbs up and look forward to Season Two once Netflix gives it a green light.

Fantasy seems to be all the rage right now. Perhaps I should be pitching my *Rise of the Broodslayers* screenplay to the steaming services? Anyway, Netflix isn't the only one getting in on the action. We have the new entry in the *Game of Thrones* series called *House of the Dragon* on HBO Max. I want to see this one once I get HBO Max again. Over on Amazon Prime, we have the newest entry in *The Lord of the Rings* series called *The Rings of Power*.

I watched the first two episodes of the new Tolkien-based high fantasy series and I look forward to seeing where it goes. Cinematically, the show is gorgeous—just visually stunning. It takes us farther back, thousands of years, to a time before the first War of the Ring, when young Lady Galadriel and Lord Elrond began to learn their roles in the fate of elves and men.

Despite the lush visuals, this show is getting bombed by a low audience score of 39% on Rotten Tomatoes. Meanwhile, the regular Tomatometer rates the show at 84%. That's quite a discrepancy between the two ratings. I will hold my full feedback until the season completes and I can see where the story is headed. Some of its direction is currently unclear, but that could be cleared up in future episodes.

Speaking of fantasy's recent popularity, *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* is slated for a 2023 cinematic release. The film stars Chris Pine, action star Michelle Rodriguez, Hugh Grant, Regé-Jean Page, Sophia Lillis, Justice Smith, Chloe Coleman and Benedict Cumberbatch. I doubt they let Cumberbatch play a sorcerer, considering his leading Marvel Cinematic Universe role. Regardless, this is the biggest-name cast of actors to ever lead a D&D movie—yes, there have actually been four D&D movies, if you count that 2008 animated *DragonLance* movie that starred the voice acting of Kiefer Sutherland and Lucy Lawless. Only one D&D movie ever made it to the cinema before, though.

Breaking slightly away from fantasy—but not completely—we find a new Netflix film, *Day Shift*. I scrolled across this one and immediately thought it was a new version of the old cult classic Russian films *Day Watch* (2006) and *Night Watch* (2004). I was incorrect.

Jamie Foxx and Dave Franco lead, including Snoop Dogg, on a comedic vampire-hunting journey—at least I hope they intended it to be comedic. It keeps getting listed as just an action/horror film. The whole father whose ex-wife is about to move away with the kid routine is a little old and stale. Nevertheless, the writers decided to use that old cliché as the central character's motivation to go killing vampires. Apparently, the teeth are worth some money. Why? This is never explained.

This move was a fun romp. If you just want to see vampires die in lots of fun ways, it's worth a watch. If you want to see Foxx's best acting—he can really act—this isn't the picture for that.

*Day Shift* (2022), Rated R, on Netflix, stars Foxx, Franco, Dogg. This 1 hour and 53-minute film received a rotten 56% on the Tomatometer and a 71% audience score, plus a 6.1/10 on IMDb. I give it one thumb up and one thumb down.

Speaking of comedic Netflix films, here's a mini-series that had me cracking up: *The Pentaverate*. If you're a Mike Myers fan of his *Austin Powers*-style work, this might be something you've been waiting for. Most of us have been waiting since July 30, 1993, when Myers' first film, the romantic black comedy *So I Married an Axe Murderer* introduced us to the Scottish-accent-laden ranting conspiracy theories from Charlie MacKenzie's father, Stuart. Nearly 30 years later, we finally understand what that crazy old coot was talking about.

With co-starring and wacky roles by Keegan-Michael Key and Ken Jeong, the zany antics don't stop at Myers—who, as usual, plays multiple roles. Even Netflix Executive Donald Sage Mackay makes an appearance in a couple episodes.

*The Pentaverate* (2022), Rated TV-MA, on Netflix, stars Myers, Jennifer Saunders, Jeong, Key, Debi Mazar, Lydia West, Maria Menounos (as herself), Rob Lowe (as himself) and the voice of Jeremy Irons (as himself). At 2 hours and 40 minutes total for the series, it received a rotten 28% on the Tomatometer yet got a 61% audience score, plus a 6.1/10 on IMDb. I give it one thumb up and one thumb down.

Keeping the comedic theme, the last Netflix movie I have space for is Judd Apatow's *The Bubble*. When I heard the premise of this show, I was really looking forward to it. A group of actors during 2020 are one of only two film groups making movies at that time in the entire world. Then I saw the amazing cast and my hopes for the film grew. Sadly, it did not deliver. Yes, it has some good moments. It also has some creepy moments. It has many cheesy moments. The laughs sometimes fail. There were times when I laughed that I felt most people, who aren't cinema buffs, may not have gotten the industry-insider jokes and references.

If you're the type of person who watches all the behind-the-scenes documentaries and keep up on Hollywood trends and actors, you might enjoy this film for what it represents. If not, you're probably going to at least dislike or even hate this film.

*The Bubble* (2022), Rated R, on Netflix, stars Karen Gillan, Iris Apatow, Fred Armisen, Maria Bakalova, David Duchovny, Keegan-Michael Key, Pedro Pascal and Leslie Mann. At 2 hours and 6 minutes, it received a rotten 21% on the Tomatometer and a 30% audience score, plus a 4.7/10 on IMDb. I give it one thumb down.

"The show must go on."