

MEDIA REVIEWS

The Peripheral, season 1

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The Peripheral, season 1. Amazon Prime, 2022.

Amazon Prime has done a very good, though not masterful, job at something I'd long thought next to impossible: adapting a William Gibson novel for the screen. They accomplish this by essentially turning the novel inside out, giving us the same story but filming the bits that Gibson leaves implied in the text and leaving out much of what Gibson focuses on. It's a remarkable exercise in adaptation, and it very much does what Gibson clearly wants to do in the 2014 novel: to show how the seeds of the "Jackpot", the looming and multi-pronged anthropogenic disaster facing us, are already present, and what of our humanity must be sacrificed in order to survive.



The remainder of this review will contain spoilers for both book and show. The essential structure of the story remains the same from novel to series: communication is established between a parallel-world early 2100s London and what is said to be our own world in Appalachia of 2032. A somewhat less openly toxic faction of the *klept*, Gibson's word for the mostly-Russian mafia that dominate the future, makes use of the video-game skills of Flynne Fisher (Chloë Grace Moretz) for what seems to be a trivial job; other factions discover this and try to dominate Flynne's world, which they view as a "stub", ripe for exploitation; Flynne and her friends prevail upon what remains of humanity in the first faction to help them defend themselves. The 2030s characters "travel" to the future by means of inhabiting android bodies through "quantum entanglement": these bodies are the titular peripherals.

Showrunner Scott B. Smith and his team deserve our attention and praise for transforming a long prose poem into television compelling enough to deserve a renewal for Season 2, to be aired in early 2024. The production, settings, acting and episodic structure are all remarkably well-done. Especially notable is Moretz, who is a fantastic actress: she uses an entirely different set of body language and facial microexpressions when she plays Flynne in 2032 and when she plays Flynne inhabiting the peripheral in 2100, even though the peripheral is a direct copy of Flynne in appearance—even better, she plays the uninhabited peripheral on standby in a different manner. 2032 Flynne is looser and has a much greater range of expression than the inhabited peripheral, which is much more poised, and the uninhabited peripheral, which is nearly robotic. The effect of this is to subtly underline the inhumanity of the future: everything we see in 2100 is very beautiful—though much of this is in fact illusion—but has been stripped of its human warmth by the adjustments necessary to survive the Jackpot.

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Nearly all the particulars of the story have been changed, however, and this is where the show and its adaptation of the novel become most interesting. In the novel, Aelita West is murdered because Wilf Netherton wants to impress her sister Daedra by giving her access to Flynnne's world; in the show, Daedra is entirely missing and Aelita and Wilf grew up together as orphans in the worst of the Jackpot. Aelita is a socialite in the novel, but works for the Research Institute in the show—its existence, like so much else, is only implied in the novel—before stealing access to Flynnne's world in order that it not be used as fodder for experimental drugs or warfare. In the novel, the threat to Flynnne and her friends in their own world is shadowy, corporate and unclear; in the show, the threat is concrete, in the form of a human assassin hired by the Research Institute (and played very well and creepily, by Ned Dennehy). Local drug lord and car dealer Corbell Pickett (Louis Herthum) is mostly an implied menace in the novel, but very present in the show, and his wife Mary (India Mullen) is a welcome presence. Deputy Tommy Constantine (Alex Hernandez) gets his own plotline instead of being only a supporting character, and his romance is with Flynnne's friend Billy Ann Baker (Adelind Horan) rather than with Flynnne herself. The effect of all this is to concretize what Gibson leaves implied: the novel gives us everything in 2032 from Flynnne's perspective, whereas in the show, she's much more part of a group that has already organized for self-defense in a collapsing society and is thus prepared to defend itself from an incursion from an alternate future.

Whereas Gibson focuses his prose on details not germane to the plot such as what's embedded in the resin coating the inside of Burton's Airstream trailer as a means of showing the passage of time, the show drops most of this and introduces the technological changes between 2022 and 2032 directly. For example, in the book, we're told that Burton and Conner were in Haptic Recon, and left to infer most of what that might mean; in the show, at the first opportunity we're shown that Burton, Conner and their other friends have enhancements that allow them to access one another's perceptions. In the novel, we're left mostly to infer the political structure of the 22nd century; in the show, this is spelled out explicitly as a duumvirate between klept and Research Institute, with the Metropolitan Police as mediator/enforcer. The most moving chapter of the book, "The Jackpot", tells the story of the catastrophe, but through multiple filters: the narrator summarizes what Wilf, through a screen and between universes, is telling Flynnne. All of this has the effect of rendering it something of a fairy tale, as a way of showing how removed Flynnne currently is from something that will affect her and everyone else she knows. In the show, by contrast, Flynnne in her peripheral is taken to a cemetery in London where the events are [shown](#) to her. These events are much more specific than they are in the book, as well. Much of this rather different formation of "show, don't tell" is quite effective and just as moving, but with the added advantage of being easier to access for viewers unaccustomed to SF, unfamiliar with the looming catastrophe—I should note that I write this on the fourth consecutive day announced as the world's hottest day in 125,000 years—or with Gibson's poetic and challenging writing style.

What the show does best is focus on how *empty* the post-Jackpot world is. In the novel, like so much else, we're left to infer this, but one of the first things Flynnne says in the show when she

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visits 2100 is “Where are all the people?” Nearly everything is silent in the future; nearly everyone is an autonomous peripheral; Lev’s house seems homey because there are at one point five actual humans in it. All of this is allowed to hit home well before Flynnne is shown what the Jackpot was (will be) like.

Nearly everyone reading this review is going to have spent most of their life reading SF, likely including at least *Neuromancer* from Gibson’s oeuvre, so we’re accustomed to having to sort our way through the words on the page to get to what’s really going on behind the scenes, and we don’t always take into account how difficult this actually is. There are points where the show goes a little too far in the other direction: the final episode’s depiction of how Flynnne cuts off access to her own “stub” borders on deus ex machina, for example. Yet Smith and Amazon have provided us with an adaptation that has the potential both to bring far more people into contact with the scope of the Jackpot we’re all about to experience and also with SF as a genre.

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