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Written by Maureen Younger

ARTS

Outlander's Jamie Fraser: a new kind of romantic hero?

Season two of *Outlander* starts next month. *Maureen Younger* caught up with season one and discovered protagonist Jamie Fraser might be the bravest romantic hero of all.

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Out of time: *Outlander's* Claire (Caitriona Balfe) and Jamie (Sam Heughan) stand their ground. Photos: Sony Pictures Television.

Watching *Outlander* shift in tone in its final two episodes from a Scottish *Poldark* to a Scottish *Game of Thrones* proved to be two of the most bruising and emotionally draining hours of TV I have ever watched.

Though seemingly following the tropes of your standard historical romance (a bit of time travel notwithstanding), *Outlander* actually subverts them. No more so than with its male lead, Jamie Fraser (Sam Heughan). Jamie becomes a victim of a prolonged sexual assault: in one fell swoop *Outlander* may have invented a new kind of romantic hero – and a much braver one at that.

Based on the books by Diana Gabaldon, *Outlander* is the tale of Claire Randall (played by Caitriona Balfe). During a second honeymoon in Scotland in 1945, Claire manages to fall back through time to 1743. Ah, that old chestnut I hear you cry!

For the first 14 episodes we watch our feisty heroine meet and fall in love with the hunky Jamie Fraser. Together they have to contend with their would-be nemesis in the form of ‘Black Jack’ Randall (Tobias Menzies). He also happens to be an ancestor of Claire’s husband from 1945. Relatives, eh? Can’t avoid them even while time travelling in the Highlands.

For the story to work you need to believe that Claire – a modern(ish) woman can fall in love with an 18th-century Highlander. It’s vital then that the audience fall in love with Jamie just as much as she does. Of course it helps that Heughan is stunning to look at and has a physique which, if *Outlander* were being shown on a mainstream channel, could easily have worked up a national furore similar to that created by watching Aidan Turner scything shirtless in Cornwall.

Even better, Heughan’s acting is as finely tuned as his pecs. His Jamie is enchanting, engaging and endearing. He is brave (obviously). After all, this is a man who breaks into Fort William to rescue Claire with just his bare hands and an empty pistol (don’t ask).

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But just as importantly for a romantic hero, he’s also highly sensitive with a strong moral code. Lastly, Jamie is deeply in love with Claire, and I think for many women that may be the greatest appeal – a man who can love so completely.

As for Claire: no sooner has she landed back in time, she is threatened in several instances with rape, including by Black Jack. Then we find out from Jamie that his sister, Jenny, has already been raped by Black Jack. At first I was worried *Outlander* was just another TV show with a seemingly prurient interest in portraying rape on screen.

But it turns out that Jenny wasn’t raped, as Jamie had believed; and moreover Jenny is no helpless victim. Jenny, played with real gumption by Laura Donnelly, is probably one of the few people who has managed to psychologically outwit Black Jack (no mean feat) and escape from his clutches with merely a ripped bodice and a clout around the head.

Black Jack’s sexual inclinations are not limited to women, however. Jamie reveals that years ago Black Jack offered to spare him from a severe flogging if Jamie would have sex with him. Then in the penultimate episode, Black Jack takes Jamie to a prison dungeon. We all know what’s going to happen. Jamie will be tortured – just a little bit so he can look even braver but nothing that will seriously impair his good looks – before his friends make good his escape.

Then it happens. *Outlander* sucker punches you.

Jamie has previously promised Claire he would protect her with his body. At the time you assume he means by physical force. As this is a man who singlehandedly fights off a surprise attack from behind by three armed Highlanders, you’re pretty confident who is going to win. And true to his word, he does – but in a way totally unimaginable to those of us who don’t know the book.



To save Claire, Jamie agrees to let himself be raped by Black Jack. For an 18th-century Highlander, a member of a warrior society, whose very essence is defined by his masculinity, whose every instinct is to fight and never submit, this is the ultimate self-sacrifice. Now Jamie isn't scared of dying: this is a man who stoically looked on while a noose was tied round his neck. However, he does fear this. And for the first time we see terror etched on Jamie's face.

The assault is shown in its unremitting horror over two episodes. Initially you assume what drives Black Jack is his sexual interest in Jamie: there is no doubt that Black Jack admires him. But that's because Jamie is the ultimate challenge. Black Jack knows if he can break Jamie, he can break anyone. And while rape is often mythologised into some kind of perverted crime of passion, what comes across so chillingly in these episodes is that the rape of Jamie is not a crime of lust but of violence and power. Black Jack rapes Jamie not out of desire, but because it's an effective tool to break Jamie's will and emasculate him.

When Black Jack later shows tenderness towards Jamie, it's just another weapon in his armoury. Black Jack wants Jamie to actively participate in his ordeal, thereby hoping to break him for good and sever the power that Claire has over him. After hours of pain, not surprisingly Jamie responds to this burst of affection, finally becoming sexually aroused.

Evil, as personified by Black Jack, can break people, make them do things they don't want to do. But with evil there is always some form of coercion. Only love can make someone agree to take on such pain of their own volition: to be that generous and brave. And that's the crux - Jamie chooses to submit willingly out of love to save Claire. This in turn makes it all the more powerful and brave a gesture.

And in choosing Jamie as the victim rather than Claire, *Outlander* has possibly pulled off the biggest volte-face of them all.

We still live in an age where victims of sexual violence often see little justice, are forced to suffer in silence, whose voices are ignored, who are derided and trolled on social media, who in some countries are stoned to death or hung from a crane in the town square for *their* moral laxity while the actual rapists are allowed to go on with their lives; and last but definitely not least, survivors have to face an uphill daily struggle in dealing with their pain.

Maybe then it's a fitting tribute that Jamie Fraser, a traumatised victim of a prolonged sexual assault, may prove to be the bravest romantic hero of them all.

Outlander returns to Amazon Prime on 10 April.

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