

Raised by Wolves, season 2

Daniel Lukes



Aaron Guzikowski, creator. *Raised by Wolves*, season 2. HBO Max, 2022.

The most obvious fact to state about *Raised by Wolves* (RBW) is that it's a Ridley Scott production: he is one of its executive producers (via his production company Scott Free), and he directed the first two episodes of Season 1; his son Luke Scott (director of the underrated android flick *Morgan*, 2016) also directed episodes 3,4 and 10. Ridley Scott's vision is all over RBW, so much so that it could almost take place in the extended *Alien* universe. If xenomorphs were to make their appearance somehow among the crowded gallery of grotesque creatures and entities that already populate RBW, it would hardly be a surprise. Aesthetically, RBW shares much with the underrated Ridley Scott *Alien* prequels, *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), with their muted and somewhat drab tones, colors turned down approaching grayscale, and a preponderance of dark, dimly lit settings.



Set in a future following a war between two factions: theocrats (named Mithraic, after an ancient Roman mystery cult) and atheists, which has decimated the planet, the show follows the vicissitudes of two androids, “Mother” and “Father.” This somewhat hapless couple has been sent to planet Kepler-22b to raise a family of human children, away from the pernicious influence of the Mithraic, who have also reached the planet in a colonist ship named the Ark of Heaven. Though RBW follows the various and often bloody conflicts between the Mithraic and the atheists, most of the action is filtered through Mother and Father's struggles to keep their family together and their children alive on this barely habitable and unpredictable planet. Mother, it turns out, is not a mere service model android, but actually a weapon of mass destruction, a “Necromancer,” used by the Mithraic and reprogrammed by atheist hacker Campion Sturges. Mother's violent—even genocidal—side comes out when she is provoked. Her actions provide one of the first moral dilemmas the show poses, and it is questionable whether Mother can really ever come back from her decision to exterminate circa-1000 Mithraic in the name of protecting her family.

RBW is science fiction of the “grimdark” variant, a type of sci-fi that stems from the world of tabletop game *Warhammer 40,000*, and one that generally depicts a Nietzschean universe: cold, mechanical, uncaring of human plight. In recent years, WH40K and grimdark have both been seized upon cynically by the Alt-Right, even though WH40K was originally born as a critique of heartless 1980s Thatcherism. Into this context comes RBW and its neomedievalist portrayal of future theocracy that directly recalls WH40K's Roman Empire-influenced “Imperium” and

worldbuilding. Its somewhat low-key title relates to the mythical founder of Rome, Romulus, and his brother Remus, being raised by a female wolf. *RBW*'s central theme of faith vs. atheism is treated in a direct and explicit way that brings to mind more the British atheist tradition (from Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* to Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens) than how contemporary US television typically handles faith and religion, with multiple characters here openly declaring that God (known in the show as "Sol") does not exist and is only a myth.

What lies at the heart of *RBW* are its android characters. Mother, expertly played by Amanda Collin, is an android for the ages, up there with Schwarzenegger's Terminator, Haley Joel Osment's creepy child in *AI*, and of course the *Alien* franchise androids—Ian Holm as Ash in *Alien*, Lance Henrikson as Bishop in *Aliens*, and Michael Fassbender as David in *Prometheus/Covenant*. Tellingly, Mother and Father are powered by the same milky-white "fuel blood" spilled everywhere by Ash in his famous death scene. Whether in caring or terrifying "Necromancer" mode, Mother commands attention, and is perfectly complemented by the warmer, more caring identity of Father (brilliantly played by Abubakar Salim) with his awkward dad jokes and attempts to keep the peace. The androids in *RBW* have something of a classic comic feel to them: Mother and Father's bickering are often only one step away from a Samuel Beckett play, and other androids and AIs such the medic Karl (Carel Nel) in S1 and S2's sentient quantum computer The Trust (Michael Pennington), with their varying degrees of comic relief and Britishness, feel at one remove from a Monty Python sketch, or perhaps rather the Terry Gilliam of *Time Bandits* or *Brazil*.

Leaving behind the harsh deserts and valleys of Season 1 and their uncanny rolling mountaintop clouds—both seasons were beautifully shot on location in South Africa—Season 2 is set around an atheist colony in the tropical zone. This season often feels like a cyborg reworking of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The sea (made of acid) is ever present. Characters flit about in the countryside, appearing and disappearing at will, with Kepler-22b as a new "brave new world that has such people in it," and a character even being directly called "Tempest." By the end of S2 though, the mysterious "entity" pulling strings in the background, the "Prospero" in a way, has yet to be revealed. S2's uncanny, retro-futurist ambience recalls the original *Star Trek*, with characters stumbling around an alien landscape, though with the exoticism toned down, and also brings to mind early 1980s UK TV shows like *Day of the Triffids* or *The Tripods*.

The presence of Mother's seventh child, a biomechanical "world serpent", cements the show's status as a weird retelling of the Genesis narrative. Asking the important questions here, *RBW* wonders: "What if God were an alien? And what if religious scriptures were a set of instructions for events yet to occur, on another planet?" As the assorted characters make their way around this very strange Garden of Eden, the show probes and negotiates the porous boundaries between animal, human, posthuman, and A.I. When young Campion (Winta McGrath), named after the android's "creator" Campion Sturges (Cosmo Jarvis), falls in love with the android Vrille (Morgan Santo) and wishes to welcome her into his family, though he faces strong resistance, the show's logic is firmly on his side. Likewise, the discovery that the planet's humanoid creatures, of which

there are land and acid ocean-dwelling variants, are devolved humans, feels like a piece of poetic Darwinian reverse engineering.

RBW juggles many big themes—domesticity, child-rearing, settler colonialism, survivalism, precarity, grief, our increasing reliance on A.I.—and S2 expertly balances them with unpredictable plot twists, and visuals that are beautifully-rendered and often on the edge of body horror. While not relentlessly meta like *The Boys* or *Mr. Robot*, *RBW* can perhaps be compared to series like *Yellowjackets*, *Tales from the Loop*, *Dark* or *Archive 81* for its ominous sense of impending doom introduced into the humdrum of daily life, bringing together the epic and the domestic. Wherever it goes next, *RBW* is a relevant and welcome addition to the SF canon at a time when everyday life often has the feel of a slow-motion apocalypse.

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