

Forever Review

While Starz show *Outlander* is entertaining audiences with the prospect of travelling *to* the eighteenth century, another production with quite the opposite premise is struggling for its life. ABC's procedural crime drama *Forever* may not feature time travel as such, but its story of an immortal man, born in eighteenth-century Britain and now working as a medical examiner in modern-day New York, works similarly to a time-travel narrative, inviting reflections on the nature of historical progress and the value of the past.

It should be noted that *Forever* does not represent historical events very extensively. Each episode includes flashbacks, but these rarely go as far back as the long eighteenth century and their primary function is to shed light on the case at hand rather than to depict a given historical moment with great accuracy. As this review will go on to show, there are various problems with the programme's historical engagement, however one can still be grateful for the ideas it raises and for the way it has risen above the constraints of its crime-of-the-week format. What could have been a stale *CSI* clone has emerged as something rather more stimulating. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the recent episode, 'Dead Men Tell Long Tales', whose flashbacks are set in 1814.

Each time that Henry Morgan dies, his body disappears and he is resurrected in water. For the modern-day action of the programme, this is normally New York's East River. The reasons behind the scenario, rich in absurdity as much as symbolism, have gone unexplained for most of the series. In finally portraying the very first of Henry's deaths, 'Dead Men Tell Long Tales' starts to give some explanations that are satisfying both in terms of narrative logic and moral weight.

It would seem that Henry's miraculous immortality came about as a direct result of his family's involvement in the slave trade and his attempts to end that involvement. It is guilt that has kept him alive as much as anything else. While investigating a rather humdrum murder mystery relating to a salvaged shipwreck, Henry remembers how he tried to free the slaves on board this very ship, encouraging them to revolt before being shot himself and thrown overboard for his troubles. He has spent the last two hundred years believing that he failed; in the episode, he learns that the slaves were in fact successful in their revolt, and the immortality which he had interpreted as a curse starts to look like something else.

First and foremost, the character's longevity is an opportunity for him to witness and judge human nature, to see whether things get better over time and whether people are capable of change. In moving between past and present, the show normally offers its audience quite an optimistic, whiggish tale of improvement (though this improvement has apparently brought no significant reduction in the number of outlandish murders committed on a weekly basis). The weakness of this approach – and a missed opportunity for the programme as a whole – is that Henry himself does not change at all. His perspective is always that of our own century, and he seems as out-of-place in the period of his birth and first life as any other time traveller would be. One might contrast this with other immortal figures in fiction – for instance, the character of Hob Gadling in Neil Gaiman's celebrated *Sandman* graphic novels. Hob was implicated in the slave trade and ends up having to explain both to himself and his African-American girlfriend how he could ever have thought the way he did. The show, on the other hand, cannot begin to account for the evils of slavery, because the hero at its heart is always as baffled and outraged as we are by the source of his family's wealth.

Moreover, there is no sense of this outrage arising as part of a broader abolitionist movement. Henry Morgan's moral compass is unswerving because that is who he is and who he has always been; to contextualise his goodness would presumably only dilute it in the eyes of the screenwriters. It is certainly odd that they have chosen 1814 as the date of Henry's defiant protest. The fact that the slave trade, albeit not slavery itself, had been abolished in the British Empire in 1807 is never mentioned either in this episode or in the series' previous sojourns to this time period. One would have thought that Henry's father or the captain of his slave vessel would at least have been aware of the penalties they might face for flouting the law. The overall effect is to make our hero yet more exceptional, as well as to elide Britain's abolition timeline with that of the U.S.

Apart from his fundamental decency, the only other thing that Henry Morgan carries intact through the centuries is his English accent. Given that it is quite distinct from actor Ioan Gruffudd's own Welsh cadences, this seems a decision calculated to appeal to fans of *Sherlock* and its American relative, *Elementary*. But the show also invokes memories of Gruffudd's previous eighteenth-century incarnations. The adventuring spirit of his Horatio Hornblower is there, as is the crusading passion of *Amazing Grace*'s William Wilberforce. The latter connection makes it all the more disappointing that no further effort is made to explore the formation of Henry Morgan's character within his original social context. That said, there is in his immortality itself an interesting prioritisation of the Romantic period, an implicit acknowledgement that this is the origin point for many modern ideas of conscience and the persistent self. One needs to read between the lines to reach such conclusions – audiences coming to this programme primarily for its eighteenth-century content will not find much to satisfy them – but there is enough here to make *Forever*'s lacklustre viewing figures and likely cancellation regrettable. They were always tempting fate with that title.