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Jan Thijs/Prime Video

The Boys season four: gleefully nasty, gory and dysfunctional anti-superhero show is back

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In contrast to the noble tales of Marvel and DC superheroes, *The Boys* imagines a world where superheroes don't just use their powers to save the day but abuse them for influence and control. It's the mission of the titular Boys, a dysfunctional anti-superhero group to undermine these "supes", known as The Seven, and the company that owns and manages them, Vought International.

Based on the comic book created by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson in 2006, the TV adaptation is back for its fourth season and is still joyfully (and violently) pricking the pomposity of superhero perfection.

The original comic wore its Quentin Tarantino-esque influence on its sleeve. Although diluted, the extreme cartoonish violence, often played for laughs, has followed through to the small-screen adaptation. The season three recap is a testament to this, all exploding heads, bestiality and gleefully ejaculated expletives.

The Boys also features the ironic detachment favoured by Tarantino, which can feel at odds with its treatment of disturbing contemporary issues such as QAnon-inspired conspiracists and child soldiers.

It's the sort of show that refuses to be pinned down. For instance, it ridicules the impact of corporate meddling in creative endeavours, producing bland Hollywood films and vacuous musicals, but then includes a brazen Amazon (where the show is streamed) product placement.

It's thoughtful in its representation of gay relationships, yet exhibits a sniggering approach to the Supe characters involved in non-heteronormative sexual practices. Still, all is fair game if it's masked by the protective veneer of a knowing wink, right?

Besides, maybe that's missing the point. This is a show of contradictions. The clash of diverse sensibilities provides an energy that drives the premise – it's all about the frequent uncomfortable tonal shifts between horror and poignancy, comedy and misery. If the gears occasionally crunch, then all the better.

The Boys – Season 4 Official Trailer | Prime Video



Season four's first few episodes continue on this crunching. We join The Boys mid-mission, undercover at an election night party.

Set six months after the events of season three, there have been changes in the world of The Boys. In addition to the election of President Robert Singer (Jim Beaver) and Vice President Serena Neuman (Claudia Doumit), The Boys have come in from the cold and are operating under the auspices of the CIA.

Episode one starts with The Boys mid-mission, undercover at an election night party. To the strains of The Sex Pistols' God Save The Queen, corrupt Vice-President-elect and secret super Neuman takes to the stage to celebrate, accompanied by Johnny Rotten snarling, "potential H-bomb... she ain't no human being" – The Boys could never be accused of being subtle.

That is largely what the first three episodes of season four of *The Boys* are about – artifice versus obscured depths. Like the soulless grin plastered across Neuman’s face, surfaces can’t be trusted. And like a superhero’s mask, they obscure the truth and distort reality. In the twisted media-dominated world of *The Boys*, superheroes are not so much symbols but brands, used to promote whatever hollow product or ideology the politicians and corporations see fit.

As well as covertly supporting Neuman’s rise to power, Homelander, the chilling antagonist and Supe leader of the Vought corporation and *The Seven*, is on trial for the murder of a protester. “That’s a formality,” he tells Neuman, recalling Donald Trump’s 2016 claim that he could commit murder and not lose votes.



Newly under Vought management is the world’s smartest person, Sage (left). Jasper Savage/Prime Video

While it’s great to return to old favourites – disgraced former team leader Billy Butcher (Karl Urban) is back – much of the enjoyment of this new season lies in the introduction of new Supes and their powers. As showrunner Eric Kripke noted in an interview: “These new Supes are some of the best and craziest ever written for *The Boys*. You are going to love them. And by love, I mean be absolutely horrified and a tiny bit nauseous.”

Sage (Susan Heyward) is perhaps the most intriguing of the new characters. Her power is simply her mind – she is the most intelligent being on Earth. In a running gag, she constantly calls out anyone identifying her as the world’s most intelligent woman: “Person,” she wearily corrects.

She is continually ignored, including when she objects to the addition of “sister” to her super name by Vought, because of its racist associations. We are left wondering why would an intelligent black woman willingly work with a bigoted organisation.

I look forward to the answer being provided in the remaining episodes of the season, hopefully with typical gear-crunching and inappropriate style.