

# Living in a neverland where you never grow up

‘The Promised Neverland’ is a faithful adaptation of its  
manga origins

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*The Promised Neverland*  
Directed by Mamoru Kanbe  
CloverWorks  
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12 episodes

*The Promised Neverland* recently finished airing with a great closing episode. It's impossible to talk about the series without spoiling the first episode. Go watch it. A perfectly executed first episode hooked me in immediately, and the worldbuilding and characterization in the rest of the show are equally impressive. The first episode should make everything clear, including whether you'd like this show or would rather give it a pass. I will try not to spoil too much, but the strength of the series comes from the tension built from its visuals, cliffhangers, and plot reveals.

Episode one opens to a lush, green forest and blue skies surrounding Grace Field House, an orphanage of children cared for by their Mother, the elegant Isabella with a loving smile. The children have gourmet food, time to play tag outside, to do chores, to study and learn, and are clearly well-taken care of. To test their intelligence, the children take mandated exams every morning. The three perfect exam scorers are the eldest of the children and our protagonists: Emma, Norman, and Ray. They are this world's Golden Trio — one athlete, one intellectual, one weirdo, with different hair colors to boot — and they become our de facto way of discovering more about this orphanage. You then notice everyone wears white clothes and sleeps in white sheets. They are forbidden from going to the gate that leads outside. The children who are adopted never write back.

The joy that seemed so palpable in such an orphanage quickly dissipates. One night, one of the children, a girl named Conny, had been adopted. She was being taken by Mother to the gate, leaving with tears but also joy at having found a family. After they leave, Norman and Emma discover Conny left her stuffed rabbit behind. They bring her stuffed rabbit and run to the gate to catch up with them. To their horror, they find Conny's corpse in the back of a truck, red flowers growing from her heart, and Mother speaking to demons about the shipments of human children for food. The next episode, Norman and Emma conclude that the purpose of the farm was to sell human children for their brains, hence the studying and examinations.

The rest of the plot plays out as an escape plot is hatched. Consequently, the narrative runs closer to a cat-and-mouse game than a B horror film, but the transition from page to screen has given this horrific element a new level: lingering shots in shadowed moments, the perpetual tension between the happy orphanage and what lurks outside. The audiovisual style is impressive. The anime's cliffhangers and the paced reveals are intelligently done, both furthering the plot and putting us in the same position as the children trying to learn the truth. I found some of the directorial decisions unnatural from the characterization of the children, like emphasizing Emma's sudden murderous expression towards Ray when she finds out he sacrificed other children to plan out his

own escape, or Ray's crazed expression when blackmailing Norman, but they're minor enough that I still enjoyed the series.

Emma, despite being the caring, maternal figure to the younger children, quickly proves to be just as intelligent and as ruthless as Norman and Ray in their attempts to escape. The trio balance each other well. Norman's intelligence, Emma's generosity, and Ray's self-preservation were shown to be essential to plotting a way for helping as many of the children escape as possible. What might turn some viewers away is the maturity displayed by eleven year olds (intelligence presumably justified by how they were raised). But in such a situation between life and death, I see it as a blessing because, without this level of maturity, the series wouldn't work as a whole, which seems hellbent on amping up tension through introducing sudden obstacles, like a Sister to the orphanage, and Mother choosing to interfere when the plot slowed.

What is most impressive are the animators, whose detailed attention to the characters' facial expressions adds to the emotional resonance of certain scenes and the fear in others. Signs of discomfort that seemed a bit off were actually right on the mark when you rewatch the series and know the whole story. I was consistently impressed by the faithful adaptation of the manga, bringing out what it does best and never straying from it. The only gripe I had was the soundtrack, which wasn't memorable and merely serviceable (except for the catchy opening song). The sound design for moments of horror worked well, and the music otherwise never intruded, for better or worse.

The anime begs you to ask the question: what is a Promised Neverland? In the anime, it's clear that the promise is not between childhood friends who wish to stay together, nor is between a child discovering death for the first time and a parent comforting the child with words that it will all be okay. It's a promise outside of the children and the parents' control by supernatural creatures that the children call demons. There's something intriguing about a *promised* neverland, a kind of utopia where you aren't able to grow up not because you chose not to, but because the choice is taken out of your hands.

Watch episodes of *The Promised Neverland* on Crunchyroll.

The Ted K Archive

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