

Inside Wheel of Time, Amazon's Huge Gamble on the Next Game of Thrones

By [Zach Baron](#)

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To create the world inhabited by the show's vast collection of characters—including the fanatical Whitecloaks—Amazon spent millions of dollars erecting enormous sets outside Prague.

Not long ago, this quarry, 40 kilometers outside Prague, held a carefully built fake town called the Two Rivers. Then, a few days back, the producers and set dressers of Amazon's *The Wheel of Time* burned it down. The town's inn, an intricately rendered two-story building, is now blackened, its left side plunged into spiky rubble: Smoke machines give the impression that it is still smoldering. There are holes in roofs, artfully destroyed beams. Every house—interior and exterior—has been charred enough so that it shows on camera. The actors who wander the Two Rivers are made up to match. Rosamund Pike, who starred in *Gone Girl*, is smudged with soot. Rain has begun to come down in earnest, pooling in the muddy streets and making the extras and the stuntmen shiver. Michael McElhatton, who played Roose Bolton on *Game of Thrones* and is playing

a character called Tam al'Thor on *The Wheel of Time*, sits on a stump in the middle of it all in a big down jacket, staring at nothing in particular.

It's November 2019, and the production—comprising hundreds of, and on some days nearly a thousand, people—is filming the end of the first episode of what everyone hopes will be a television show that runs for, well: six seasons? Eight? A show that will be as epic and sensational and ubiquitous as *Game of Thrones* once was. On one side of the green, a camera sits on a long dolly track; another camera operator stalks the scene, taking various close-ups. The episode's veteran television director, Uta Briesewitz, is arranging four of the show's main cast of relatively unknown young actors in a moment of reckoning: Pike's character, a woman with mysterious powers, has arrived to awaken them and set them on their way. “Your life isn't going to be what you thought,” Pike intones, as various cameras circle her. Pike runs through her speech, which is heavy with exposition for both the characters and the audience, a few times. “Can I do one more?” she asks Briesewitz, while apologizing to the extras scattered about. “I think that one got a bit phony.”

Finally, Briesewitz calls “cut.” Pike retreats from the weather into a nearby tent. “It's not like working with David Fincher,” she says to me, referring to the *Gone Girl* director's penchant for shooting 70 takes of a scene. The production is huge and moving at warp speed. Pike has to know things backward and forward. She has to get her lines out as dozens of crew members and background actors get soaked in the cold rain and actual living horses wander around while makeup women with transparent plastic bags dart in and out to touch up extras and guys with smoke canisters paddle mist into the edges of shots. This set they're on—not just a few hollow façades set up to create the impression of reality, but real buildings, in every direction—is giant, immersive, and won't last past this episode.

Want to make the next *Game of Thrones*? This is how it begins. Viewers have become accustomed to a kind of scale, or realism, that creeps toward the actually real. “It's not like we can go say, ‘Oh, you know, *Game of Thrones*, season one, they only spent this,’ ” Mike Weber, an executive producer of *The Wheel of Time*, says. “The audience expectation is coming off of the last season of *Game of Thrones*, not the first season.” For the first season of *Thrones*, HBO spent about \$6 million an episode, a number that steadily climbed from there. Amazon and *The Wheel of Time*? They're starting at upward of a reported \$10 million per episode—for eight total, the first of which will begin streaming in November—just to get out of the gate.

“One of the crazy things about now,” Rafe Judkins, showrunner and executive producer of *The Wheel of Time*, says, “is just how ready and willing networks are to just look you in the eye, and you say, ‘I’m going to build the Two Rivers and then we’re going to burn it down at the end of episode one.’ And they’re like: ‘Great. What’s next?’ ”

That’s easy to say, of course. But then you have to go do it. You have to spend months and millions of dollars constructing the village, populating it with actors, and then staging its downfall. You have to build and build and build, just to tear it all to singed pieces in a day or two. You have to risk failing at the highest level, and in the most spectacular way possible, just to play the game. And so that’s what Judkins and his production did. They built the Two Rivers and burned it down. That was two years ago, and though they’ve gone on to make nearly two seasons’ worth of television on elaborately constructed soundstages and in remote locations across Eastern Europe, they haven’t been back to that burned out village since.



Rosamund Pike, who earned an Oscar nomination for her role in *Gone Girl*, leads a *Wheel of Time* cast that’s been filming the first two seasons of the show for the past two years.

Picture a boy: He learns to read late. Really late. Like the letters that guide everyone as they're walking around, moving from point A to B (*Is that a B? What is a B?*), are just twisted, illegible symbols to him. They're taunts. Then, at last, the boy learns to read. What does he read? Everyone else has already long since read the books you're supposed to read when you start reading. At the bookstore one day, in a corner, he sees a section of thick spines, in soft colors, with wizards and swords on their covers. No one seems to go to this corner. The boy says, *This is my corner*. The books are as long as adult books—longer, in fact—and have sex scenes and magic, sometimes in that order, sometimes the other way around. The boy becomes a fantasy reader. Not science fiction, with its clever guesses about the dystopian future, its skies the color of television, tuned to a dead channel. Fantasy.

He is—and this feels right—practically the only one he knows. The secret worlds the books encompass, full of legend and romance, sadness and heroism, become his secret worlds. Something he carries around with him, even after the rest of life—actual romance, actual sadness, sports, other types of books—arrives. Something that belongs to him and him alone. Relatively early (1991? 1992?), the boy discovers Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World*, the first book of a series that is called *The Wheel of Time*, and is enraptured. He comes to know the characters as if they were real people. He wants to find out what happens to them. So begins a tradition: He waits for a new book in the series to come out, and when it does, he reads all the old books (not including a random 2004 prequel) in order again before reading the new one, and he does this straight through the 14th and final book of the series, which is published in 2013. He reads *A Song of Ice and Fire*, too, the source material for *Game of Thrones*, with less excitement, but he reads those books, one by one, as they are published. He keeps it all like a secret.

So take that boy's word for it, how strange and unlikely it all felt when *Thrones* had its television debut on HBO in 2011 and became what it became—which is to say, one of the most watched and debated shows of this century. Watercooler talk about dragons and White Walkers? Furtive online genealogists, piecing together ancient fictional royal bloodlines? These books had many readers, of course; each new installment lived on the best-seller list. But fantasy as mass entertainment? Something normal people followed and enjoyed and talked about at dinner parties? That felt like a surprise.

More surprising: *Thrones* wasn't just popular; it altered television in some fundamental way that everyone who makes television is still reckoning with. *Game of Thrones* “changed the context of what success was,” Andy Greenwald, the creator of USA's *Briarpatch*, told me.

The Sopranos and other shows from TV's so-called golden age may have proved that TV was an adult medium, worthy of taking seriously, but it was series like *The Walking Dead* and *Thrones* that suggested that prestige TV could also be *Jaws*—something spectacular and made for all of America. For skeptical executives, it destigmatized genre storytelling: It was on a respectable network and won Emmys, setting the stage and priming the audience for the Marvel- and *Star Wars*-ification of TV now. *Thrones*—shot in dozens of locations on multiple continents with multiple casts—also proved that you could go nearly infinitely big on a small screen. “From a production standpoint, everything they pulled off on *Thrones* someone would've told you was impossible,” Greenwald said. “The sheer scale of it, the locations, the cost, the ambition of it—that blew the lid off what people were expecting.”

Money, by the standards of any other studio in the history of television, was no issue. Amazon just had to find the right project.

Nearly 20 million people watched the final episode of *Game of Thrones* in 2019 when it aired—an unfathomably large number for modern television, which by then was already well on its way to remaking itself as a fiefdom of warring streaming services. When *Thrones* debuted in 2011, HBO was still a proud old-media company owned by Time Warner; it is now a subsidiary of an ever-growing conglomerate, WarnerMedia, itself owned by a telephone company, AT&T. In the decade since the show's premiere, viewers have migrated away from cable as streaming options—like Amazon, Disney+, Apple TV, and Netflix—have multiplied. And all of them have to make the case for subscriptions, often by putting pressure on creators to deliver more and more spectacular shows. The mentality, Greenwald said, is “It's a blood sport, this is an arena, and we have to have something that will make you feel like shit if you're not watching it.”

In this competition for content and eyeballs, Amazon and Apple have an advantage over their competitors in that they are the two richest brands in the world—so rich that they can afford to follow the whims of their founders, wherever those whims may go. As Brad Stone reports in his recent book, *Amazon Unbound*, the company, under the direction of Jeff Bezos, spent \$3.2 billion on Prime Video in 2016; by 2019, that number had more than doubled, to \$7 billion. And, Stone writes, Bezos had a clear idea, he told his executive team, of what he was looking for: “*I want my Game of Thrones.*”

Bezos hoped to use Amazon's film and television projects to fuel the global expansion of the company's subscription program, Amazon Prime—but first he needed an enormously popular international hit. “It's not like he had any

particular love for *Game of Thrones*,” Stone told me. “He thought: ‘Okay, if Amazon Studios and Prime Video are going to be a calling card in all these countries around the world, [the show] has to be broadly appealing.’ ”

Money, by the standards of any other studio in the history of television, was no issue. Amazon just had to find the right project. In the end it settled on two, buying a pitch from a relatively untested television writer, in Judkins, who had grown up reading *The Wheel of Time* and had an idea about how it might work as a series. Amazon also spent a reported \$250 million on the rights to *The Lord of the Rings* and, in time, put both into production. “We are all in a fortunate position at the company,” Vernon Sanders, the co-head of television at Amazon Studios, said. “We should be swinging for the fences. So we’re swinging for the fences.”

And so these books, with their gauzily painted or starkly heraldic covers, their comical abundance of pages published for the delight of furtive young boys and girls curled up reading by themselves in bookstore corners, waiting eagerly for their authors to publish the next installment (picture me here one more time, a child again, sleepy-eyed and confused, surrounded by the battered paperbacks and hardcovers I’ve lugged to every house and apartment I ever lived in) became...this. The biggest and most expensive business in all of television.



Competition among streaming services has driven enormous new global demand for studio space—one of the reasons the *Wheel of Time* team built its own sets and studios in Prague.

A show the size of *The Wheel of Time* has to hunt for a part of the world large enough to contain it—especially at a moment when the boom in streaming television has overwhelmed studios from Los Angeles to Atlanta to London to Prague. “We are, as a worldwide industry, quite close to capacity because of this demand for content by our friends at Amazon and all the other streamers,” David Brown, the producer of *Wheel of Time*, told me. Los Angeles is booked out, and too expensive, anyway. Ditto Atlanta, where Marvel Studios regularly shoots. Ditto London, a longtime production hub that is currently oversubscribed—and, once again, too expensive. So Brown thought: maybe Budapest.

Central and Eastern Europe have traditionally been accommodating places to make movies and television. The locations are suitably grand and variable and ancient; the local expertise, honed by decades of Hollywood productions coming and going, is high-level and relatively affordable. So Brown initially looked at Hungary. But, he said, “I spoke to friends in Budapest who'd worked there, and they just said, ‘You won't get in.’ ” Then he tried Prague, and found that the waiting list for production space was just as long. So, after some consideration,

Brown and his production partners decided to create their own studio from scratch. “You know, we are a big company,” Brown, who is exacting and English and who has worked on everything from *The Phantom Menace* to *Outlander*, said. “The show is hugely ambitious creatively. So how do we fill that? That's why we're in this building that is 350,000 square feet.”

And so Jordan Studios, where the *Wheel of Time* production is headquartered, ended up in a remote corner of Prague, in a giant pale-blue complex of industrial buildings that used to be the warehouse of a trucking company. They do their own visual effects here. They have their own stunt gym, with archery targets and a rock climbing wall. They have an armorer, who is also a jeweler, and he has a 3D printer. They have a costume department that could outfit an army. They have individual offices for writers and a writers room and just about infinite space for those same writers to stand outside in the cold and smoke. Accounting is here. So is set decoration and unit publicity. They've got their own massive, football-field-size soundstages, on which they employ four different Czech construction companies to build various intricate interiors.

“In some ways we have a harder job, to tell the audience that, like: This is a show for people beyond fantasy nerds.”

Rafe Judkins

Judkins has a spare but spacious office on the corner of the first floor. He is 38, curly-haired, and a book reader, in the parlance of the set—the *Wheel of Time* books are long, and there are 14 of them, plus the prequel, and so most on the production, whether actors or producers or executives, have yet to make it through more than the first few. But Judkins has been a fan of the series going back to childhood, and knows the books as intimately as any fan. He was born into a Mormon family that moved from Salt Lake City to Pittsburgh when he was young. He realized he was gay at 18. “When I first came out, it was a little bit difficult with my family,” he told me in his office. “My parents were amazing, but just even the understanding of what it was, what I was going through...” *The Wheel of Time*—which Judkins read with his mother—helped, in complex ways that Judkins would later channel to pitch his version of the series.

What to say about these books? Robert Jordan—the pen name of a man named James Oliver Rigney Jr., who was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1948—started working on *The Wheel of Time* in 1984. By that time, he'd already graduated from the Citadel, served two decorated tours as a helicopter gunner in Vietnam, and begun a career as a writer. He had a beard, favored wide-brimmed

hats, and generally maintained the pipe-collecting vibe and demeanor of someone Ken Burns might have interviewed about the Civil War. The first book of the series, *The Eye of the World*, was published in 1990; 17 years and 11 installments later, Jordan died of a rare blood disease, with *The Wheel of Time* still unfinished. Eventually, Jordan's widow and former editor, Harriet McDougal Rigney, asked a 32-year-old fantasy novelist and former Mormon missionary named Brandon Sanderson to complete the story, using notes and deathbed audio recordings Jordan had made before he passed. It took three more sequels and five more years for the series, which has now sold more than 90 million copies, to reach its conclusion. When I say I've been reading these books for more than half my life, I mean that literally.



When he pitched the series, Rafe Judkins said he planned to emphasize the prominent and progressive way the *Wheel of Time* novels had depicted women.

Jordan was, and this is a gross understatement, a world builder—an iterator of hundreds of characters and many nations, all with their own complicated pasts and uncertain futures—which makes his plot near impossible to summarize. But the first book begins relatively simply, in more or less the same way that *The Lord of the Rings* does, with a few star-crossed young people in a small and remote town whose lives are upended by the arrival of a wise and mysterious

figure. Battles, quests, and a fair amount of sheer meandering ensue—one of the first impressions Amanda Kate Shuman, a writer on the show, had about the books, she told me, was that “a lot of characters go for a lot of walks to a lot of inns.”

Jordan may have borrowed his setup from *The Lord of the Rings* (with some real encouragement from his publisher, Tor), but in many ways his books represented “one big step out from Tolkien” for the genre, Sanderson said. Gone were the hoary archetypes—the bearded wizards and saintly protagonists, almost uniformly male. In their place were flesh-and-blood real-life characters with flaws and defects. And perhaps most revolutionary: Many of them—many of the most powerful among them—were women. Not always the best-written or most convincing women, but still: women. “That was something that kind of connected my mom and me: We could both see ourselves in these books,” Judkins said. “And then she could understand, ‘Oh, maybe being a gay man is somewhat like being a woman in terms of the challenges that you face in your life and what it feels like.’ And we can both find ourselves in this. And so when I pitched it, I said the same thing. I was like: ‘You have to connect to these things emotionally.’ ”

At the time of Judkins's pitch, the screen rights to *The Wheel of Time* were just coming out of a byzantine and uniquely Hollywood maze—the books had been optioned by two former tech guys, who in turn licensed the rights to Universal, which developed the series as a feature and then shelved it. Then the tech guys enlisted two new producers, Mike Weber and Ted Field. In time, they noticed an obscure provision in the contract, as Weber recalled. It turned out, he said, that “if you aired an episode of television, the rights will vest in perpetuity.” As in, any episode of television at all. And so one mysterious night in 2015—just before the rights to the books were scheduled to return to Jordan's widow—an episode aired on FXX at 1:30 a.m., halfheartedly adapting the first book's prologue and starring, for some reason, Billy Zane. The show, such as it was, aired only once and was never seen again. “That's not the prettiest way to do it,” Weber admitted. “But it cleaned up the rights.” (McDougal Rigney, who released an unhappy statement about this gambit at the time, has since come back into the fold as a consulting producer.)

All they needed now was a writer and an idea. Enter Judkins, at the time a veteran of series television like *Chuck* and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* “He'd already read the material,” Weber told me. “And he had this incredible presentation.” Judkins proposed emphasizing the most progressive elements of the books—their female characters, however shakily drawn; their many nations and many

racism; their modern, skeptical view of how power is wielded between the sexes—and building a series from there. The show, in Judkins's version, would be a corrective to the hypermasculine world of *Thrones*, with its casual presentation of bare breasts and ruthless treatment of its female characters. “Even the great women in *Game of Thrones*, Cersei Lannister, First of Her Name,” Judkins said, “they’re the exception to the rule. And in this show they’re not.”

There is a kind of sweetness to *The Wheel of Time*: Jordan adored his characters so much, and wrote about them in such painstaking, all-encompassing detail, that they ended up outliving him. Judkins imagined a show imbued with that kind of affection. “You know,” he said, “there were pitches right at the beginning for this show of like, ‘We open with a giant battle’ and all of this cool stuff. And I was like, ‘I just want to start with our characters in the Two Rivers and see where they came from.’ ” It would be less about sheer brutality, about showing the merciless world as it actually was when people walked around with swords and warred for power, and more about these kids and their journey. A show for the earnest readers who fell in love with these kinds of books in the first place. But also for everyone else, because it would have to be for everyone else in order to work and to justify Amazon's astronomical investment. “In some ways we have a harder job,” Judkins said, sighing, “to tell the audience that, like: This is a show for people beyond fantasy nerds.”

It's still television, after all. People need to watch.



The actors and the crew are hoping that if things go well, they might spend the next decade of their lives in Prague making the series.

The funny thing about making a show in Prague is that you have to live in Prague. When I visited the set in 2019, most of the cast and crew had just arrived, and it was taking them a while to settle in and accept the reality that they might be spending the next 5 to 10 years of their lives in this town. One sign of impending domesticity: a pet. "It starts with the dog," Judkins said. "Always. 'I just missed my dog.' And then the dog arrives." Rosamund Pike told me she got a nice house by the river for her and her partner and kids. "We've jumped as a family all over the globe," she said. "And this provides some continuity." On one of the days that I was there, her parents were visiting as well. They like to come to see their grandkids and whatever new person their daughter has become. Do they get nervous, watching Rosamund work? "Not anymore," her mother, elegant in a warm-looking hat, said. Not since her screen debut in 2002's *Die Another Day*. "The sword fight in James Bond was a long time ago," her father said, nodding.

Daniel Henney, who plays a character called Lan Mandragoran, told me that he was getting used to his new life here. "I was on a show for six years in L.A.," he said. "When I was done with that, I was ready to try something very different." He

paused to indicate the mud and the woods and the Eastern Europe of it all. “And this is very different.” He said the hardest part of being over here was figuring out how to eat like an actor from Los Angeles. He would kill for some Sweetgreen. “I’ve got a naked hot tub scene coming up,” he said, even as he was being inundated with dumplings and sausage. “What the fuck?”

One evening after their workday was done, I huddled in a sodden tent with the show's main cast. There is an art to casting a show like this, especially for the leads: You need to find actors who have the next six to eight years of their lives free, and who can age and grow along with their characters. You do not have the money or the time to cast Reese Witherspoon, nor do you want Reese Witherspoon, because who will believe in the magical and strange world you're building if Reese Witherspoon shows up in the middle of it? So you cast young, relative unknowns with time and big dreams.

Madeleine Madden, who plays one of the show's main characters, Egwene al'Vere, is Australian and voluble—a former Dora the Explorer who tends to speak for the rest of her cast. She and Josha Stradowski, who plays another main character, Rand al'Thor, were reminiscing in the tent about how they ended up on the show. “A bunch of Rands and a bunch of Egwenes were all flown into London,” Madden remembered. “So we were sitting in the room with like five other Rands and five other Egwenes. It was one of those high-pressure moments where I was like, ‘This could change my life forever.’ ” Two years later, she's still waiting to find out if it really did.

Marcus Rutherford, broad like Perrin Aybara, the blacksmith's apprentice he plays, said so far Prague was mostly lonely but he did see Henney in the gym a lot. Barney Harris, who was playing Mat Cauthon, the mischievous one, chewed energy tablets and made fun of my choice of clothing. (Correctly. Most of what I was wearing did not survive that set. Neither, in the end, did Harris, who was recast for the second season of the show under circumstances no one would discuss.)

“Showrunning is basically just laying your body over the show and trying to protect it as you take 10,000 swords into your back.”

Rafe Judkins

All over town there were people working long days trying to solve the infinite number of problems a production like this one presents. At Jordan Studios, Isis Mussenden, the show's costume designer, told me she'd made 350 costumes for

the first two episodes alone. “I’ve personally been to Madrid, London, and New Delhi to buy textiles,” she said, “because we have so little here and we need thousands and thousands of meters of fabric to create all of this.” Some miles away, in an overflow space in Barrandov Studio, where parts of *Mission: Impossible* and *The Bourne Identity* were shot, Nick Dudman, the legendary creature designer and veteran of both the *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* franchises, was building monsters. In an early episode of *The Wheel of Time*, beasts called Trollocs show up—but what, for the purposes of this show, was a Trolloc?

First, Dudman had to figure out what they were not. “You’re sort of saying, ‘Okay, you can’t have any influences or imagery tying into orcs and *Lord of the Rings*,’ ” he said. Then he had to figure out how to make something that a stuntman could sprint around in a forest in. Trollocs are supposed to be tall. “But I didn’t want to put them on stilts because of the fact that we’re running through woodland, and running downhill on stilts is just really not a good idea.” In the end, Dudman’s team decided to use the same Kevlar prosthetics they give to people who have lost limbs. “And the stunt guys were up on them and off, straight away. It’s actually been a very good call.”

But Dudman also needed a lot of Trollocs. “If you’re making, say 20, how do you make it look as though you’ve created 40 or 50?” he asked. “And the answer is: They’ve all got horns. One of the things we decided early on is, they all have a variety of horn shapes. So if all those horns attach magnetically, and every single horn can swap with another horn on a different head, and they can also have two or three ways of putting them on, then you actually end up with 30 different silhouettes of creature for no extra money.”

In the end, Mike Weber told me, the Trollocs looked so good on camera that a whole tranche of their budget that had been slated for VFX, to make the monsters look real, was saved for something else. And this is how you make a show like *The Wheel of Time*.



Pictured: the actress Sophie Okonedo. Behind the scenes, the show's artisans are responsible for a dizzying array of small details. The production employs an armorer, who is also a jeweler, equipped with a 3D printer.

“Your life isn’t going to be what you thought,” Pike once again intoned, this time onscreen, as the ruined remnants of the Two Rivers set smoldered behind her. It was July now, nearly two years later, and Judkins was still fine-tuning the show's first episode, scheduled to premiere in November. Pilots are notoriously hard. The first episode of *Thrones* famously cost \$10 million and had to be entirely reshot. The pilot needs to establish the look and feel of the show. You have to introduce the main characters, who they are and where they come from. In fantasy, you have to give a sense of the rules too: Is there magic? What kind of magic? And you can't forget, while doing all this exposition and groundwork, to make something people actually might want to watch. When Judkins asked David Benioff and Dan Weiss, the creators of *Game of Thrones*, for advice, they'd told him: “Just do what you're going to do. You know what this is. You have to believe in it. These kinds of things have to have an extraordinary clarity of vision to work.”

But the first episode of a series also has to satisfy everyone involved in releasing it, including the executives overseeing the production. Amazon had taken the

unusual step of renewing the show for a second season before the first season had aired, and so Judkins and his cast and crew were currently in the midst of shooting that second season—meaning the production had now been shooting two hour-long episodes at a time for nearly two years straight, interrupted only by the occasional global lockdown, piloting a giant ship into increasingly unknown waters. “We’re getting into more of a rhythm of how you make a huge feature film every two months,” Judkins said. But that also meant that even as Judkins had spent the summer filming the second season in remote and inconvenient places, he was getting notes from Amazon, often via satellite phone, asking for postproduction changes to the first season.

“I say sometimes that showrunning is basically just laying your body over the show and trying to protect it as you take 10,000 swords into your back,” Judkins told me wearily one day over the phone. He said he’d had his assistant keep track of how many suggestions Amazon had had, just for the pilot. In the end “we got 11,000 notes,” Judkins said. Actual number. “Even if I only do like a 10th of those, that’s still like multiple notes per second,” he said. Executives had questions about individual shots and how the show was depicting magic. They had questions about style and tone. And they were friendly questions, but they were also infinite, and every time Judkins got one—usually while he was on some faraway set full of new and different problems to solve—he had to consider whether it was worth doing or whether to dig in. “It’s very hard to take your little precious kernel of an idea and deliver it at the end of the production-and-notes process,” he said.

And it was almost time to promote the show. Starting in July, Amazon had begun to release a strategic trickle of first-look images and teaser trailers. These materials had a tricky job to do: They had to alert most of the television-watching world that the show was on the way but also soothe the many readers of the books, who have their own, sometimes inflexible ideas about what *The Wheel of Time* is and who search every frame of every image for clues about whether it has been adapted correctly. When Brandon Sanderson took over the task of finishing the series from Robert Jordan, he recalled, “I basically became stepdad to millions and millions of fans.” He laughed. “Now I’ve been able to hand that burden off to Rafe.”

Failure would be letting all those millions and millions of fans down, in the ineffable way that art can come up lacking in the face of intense expectations, and also in the cold-blooded way that television executives at places like Amazon measure dollars and subscribers, money spent versus money gained. But success was also strange to contemplate. If the show worked, its young actors would

grow to become old and famous and synonymous with the people they had spent the past two years playing, performing in the forests and fields outside Prague for no audience beyond their own crew. “Something that’s really profound that stuck with me,” Madeleine Madden said, “is when you hear the *Game of Thrones* actors talk about growing up with the characters.” She was hoping to get the chance, she said, to grow up with Egwene.

And between editing one season and shooting a second, Judkins was working long weeks, up to 100 hours, one after another. “I thought that was a joke—that people did that in movies about Wall Street,” he said. “But then I actually did it. That’s the reality of where we are right now.” His reward for success would be doing so more or less indefinitely. “If you’ve read the entire series,” Mike Weber said, “the thing really wraps up beautifully in book 14. I don’t know how many seasons that would be—I mean, that’d be like the rest of my professional life if we did that. But at a certain point, while maybe condensing some books, I think bringing this entire series to a conclusion is everyone’s goal. And that is certainly, like, a daunting reality for everyone involved. But you know: This is what you wish for.”

A reviewer once suggested, unhappily, that Robert Jordan was trying to write “the longest story in genre history.” But I have to say, that was always part of the appeal: You build relationships with the characters over time. As you grow, they do too. It’s no wonder television has come to love fantasy—both are mediums without any set end, mediums that thrive on near endless renewal. I recognized the anxiety that Judkins and the rest of the cast and crew felt as they readied themselves to push this thing out into the world. They were all waiting to see for how long the show will get to go on.

Zach Baron is *GQ*’s senior staff writer.

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