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# FIRE CANNOT KILL A DRAGON

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# FIRE CANNOT KILL A DRAGON

GAME OF THRONES
AND THE OFFICIAL UNTOLD STORY
OF THE EPIC SERIES

JAMES HIBBERD



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*For my mom,*
*who read the stories*

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PREFACE

# Finding Westeros

Hundreds of men are screaming.

The armored soldiers charge forward, howling with rage, their swords and shields clashing, their boots struggling for purchase in the thick mud. Slowly, agonizingly, some of the fighters are pushed back against a looming tower of corpses. The body pile is a mixture of slain men and horses, gorily intertwined like some gothic rendition of hell. In the distance, flayed men burn on crucifixes.

"You are dying!" yells an assistant director. "That's the main thing to remember, you are dying!"

It's October 2014. There are six hundred crew members, five hundred actors, and seventy horses in a Northern Ireland field to film the Battle of the Bastards.

At the center of the mayhem is Kit Harington, who plays the reluctant hero Jon Snow. He's been fighting Bolton soldiers for days, furiously swinging a hefty broadsword at one attacker after another. During one take, he performs a dozen intricately choreographed strikes that he has drilled perfectly into his muscle memory.

Well, *almost* perfectly. Harington suddenly gets knocked down into the field's boggy, mudlike soup. Weeks of battle filming have transformed the soil into a foul mix of dirt, horse manure, urine, fake snow, sweat, saliva, and bugs.

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The star gets wearily back onto his feet.

"'Become an actor,' they said," Harington groans. "'Think of all the fame and glory,' they said . . ."

Watching this battlefield spectacle from the sidelines, I marveled at the audacity of making *Game of Thrones*.

My journey with the HBO drama series had begun years earlier when I accepted a routine assignment. In George R. R. Martin's novels, the smallest decision in a character's life can have the greatest of consequences. But back on November 11, 2008, I had never heard of him.

I was a senior writer working for *The Hollywood Reporter* when I interviewed a pair of first-time showrunners, David Benioff and Dan Weiss. HBO had just green-lit the duo's pilot based on Martin's books, and the show was an . . . adult fantasy drama? What, you mean like *The Lord of the Rings*?

Not like *The Lord of the Rings,* Benioff and Weiss explained. No wizards, no elves, no dwarfs—well, maybe one dwarf.

"It's not a story with a million orcs charging across the plains," Weiss said, while Benioff added: "High fantasy has never been done on TV before, and if anybody can do it, it's HBO. They've taken tired genres and reinvented them—mobsters in *The Sopranos* and Westerns with *Deadwood*. . . ."

My resulting story was utterly routine. The headline—"HBO Conjuring Fantasy Series"—didn't even include the title *Game of Thrones*. The idea that TV's most prestigious Emmy-winning network would take a crazy gamble on an expensive fantasy show for grown-ups was considered the most newsworthy hook.

And that should have been the end of my *Thrones* journey. But Benioff and Weiss's intriguing description of Martin's story stuck in my head. I bought a copy of the first *A Song of Ice and Fire* novel, *A Game of Thrones*. Like countless others, I fell headlong into Martin's daringly original world. Within a few weeks, I finished the third book in his saga,



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*A Storm of Swords,* which was the most exciting and horrifying stretch of page-turning twists and turns I had ever read.

I began obsessively covering the progress of HBO's pilot. Colleagues would ask: *Why do you write so much about that one show?* I would reply: *Because if they can pull off adapting the books—and I don't think anybody can—it will change television.*

By the time the first season of *Game of Thrones* premiered in 2011, I had moved to *Entertainment Weekly,* where I embarked on a series of annual visits to the *Thrones* set. I was in the desert when Daenerys stood outside the gates of Qarth; bared witness to Sansa and Tyrion's awkward wedding; watched Joffrey suffer his well-deserved demise; was among the crowd for Cersei's Walk of Shame; trekked on a frozen lake during Jon Snow's quest beyond the Wall; and paced Winterfell's ramparts during the climactic Long Night.

Over the years, I grew to admire the cast and crew's dedication to making the best possible show, a commitment that often resulted in outright suffering. We're so accustomed to seeing life on movie and TV sets depicted as soft and easy: stars lounging between takes in posh RVs, directors riding around in golf carts on sunny studio back lots, a cast of heroes filming against a green-screen backdrop for computer animators to later insert them into fabrications of harsh environments and deadly peril.

The glamorous and comfortable vision of the entertainment world does exist if you're on a big-budget production in Hollywood filming on a major studio lot. That was never *Thrones*. The show was unlike any production, film or television, I have ever seen before or since. Working on *Thrones* was being wet and freezing for eleven hours, night after night, week after week, and learning to accept that sometimes you were going to be utterly miserable in order to get a shot just right. *Thrones* was being six-foot-six-inch Rory McCann, an actor made even bigger by his character's heavy costume and boots, whose only way to rest after shooting an exhausting action sequence was to curl up on the hard floor of a tiny utilitarian trailer, his face half-covered in suffocating latex, a space heater



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making the drafty caravan either too hot or too cold. And while the production sometimes relied on green screen, more often *Thrones* actors worked on wholly immersive sets that made you feel like you had literally been transported into another world.

By the time the show concluded in 2019, I had written hundreds of stories covering the series. Yet there was much to the making of *Game of Thrones* that was left untold. *What was Benioff and Weiss's first fateful meeting with Martin really like? What went down during the filming of the show's unaired original pilot? How did* Thrones *pull off its first major battle in season two? What happened with the Dorne storyline? Why did the showrunners decide to end the series after eight seasons? What were those grueling fifty-five consecutive nights filming "The Long Night" really like? And hey, why didn't Lady Stoneheart ever show up?*

My list of lingering questions, along with a desire to create a unified story from my decade of experience covering the show, is the reason for this book. *Fire Cannot Kill a Dragon* includes more than fifty exclusive new interviews with *Game of Thrones* producers, executives, cast, and crew that were conducted after the series finale. There are also many quotes that were previously published by *EW,* as well as occasional quotes that were reported in other outlets (which are attributed in the text along the way).

Of course, no single book can capture the entirety of making a production as long-running and complex as *Thrones*. But it's my hope that readers will find some fascinating behind-the-scenes stories here about the characters and moments they love the most. *Thrones* was also, it should be said, controversial—from literally its first episode to its last—and many of those topics are likewise addressed by the show's producers, directors, and cast (surely not to the satisfaction of all, but you'll now learn *why* certain choices were made).

Mainly this book seeks to chronicle the colossal effort that went into making an extraordinary show. There is nothing more rare in pop culture than to build an alternate world so popular, sophisticated, and engrossing that it's globally embraced as a place almost as real as our



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own. J. R. R. Tolkien did it with *The Lord of the Rings*. So did George Lucas with *Star Wars,* J. K. Rowling with the Harry Potter series, and Marvel with its cinematic universe. *Game of Thrones* gave rise to a living, breathing world due to the passionate and tireless efforts of thousands of people.

But it's worth remembering that it all started with one man. . . .



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CHAPTER ONE

# A Dream of Dragons

Before the Starks and the Lannisters, the Dothraki and the direwolves, before the continent of Westeros had formed and the first dragon had been born, there was a boy whose imagination could not easily be contained.

George Raymond Richard Martin grew up in a federal housing project in 1950s New Jersey. His father was a longshoreman, and his mother worked as a factory manager. He wasn't allowed to have dogs or cats but was permitted to own tiny dime-store turtles, along with a toy fortress to put them in. His first fantasy story—the first he can remember, at least—was titled "Turtle Castle." He imagined his tiny reptiles were competing for power and vying for a little plastic throne.

One day, Martin made a shocking discovery: His turtles were dying. Despite his best efforts to keep his pets alive, his heroes still perished. It was a twist he hadn't seen coming. So Martin began to weave their fates into his fantasy. Perhaps his turtles were killing each other off in sinister plots?

As the years passed, Martin put his fantasies to paper. He wrote monster stories and sold them to other kids for a dime apiece. He fell in love with comic books. He later sold short stories to pulp magazines, and then penned sci-fi and horror novels.

In 1984, Martin moved to Hollywood and landed a job writing on

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CBS's reboot of *The Twilight Zone*. Martin's first aired episode was, as fate would have it, a fantasy tale about medieval knights and magic. "The Last Defender of Camelot" was an adaptation of Roger Zelazny's short story about Sir Lancelot living in modern times. The climax is set in an otherworldly version of Stonehenge, where Lancelot fights an enchanted suit of armor—a silent mountain of a warrior called the Hollow Knight.

In Martin's original script, Lancelot and the knight fought on armored horses, but that idea was deemed unworkable by the show's line producers. "They told me, 'You can have Stonehenge or you can have horses,'" recalled Martin. "'But you cannot have Stonehenge *and* horses.' I called my friend Roger Zelazny to pose the question to him. He sucked on his pipe a minute and said, 'Stonehenge,' and so it was. They fought on foot."

Undeterred, Martin moved on to another CBS fantasy show, 1987's *Beauty and the Beast,* where his scripts continued to bump up against the network's creative limitations. "Counting how many times we could say 'damn' or 'hell,' telling us a corpse's makeup couldn't be 'too horrific,' eliminating a news report on a TV in the background because it might be 'too controversial,'" Martin said. "Bullshit changes, sheer cowardice, afraid of anything that was too strong, anything that anyone might be 'offended' by—those [restrictions] I hated and railed against."

Martin grew frustrated, disillusioned. He returned to writing novels full-time in 1991 and a couple of years later he had an idea for a fantasy story—a "reaction," he once dubbed it, to his years spent writing for television. It was a sprawling epic like J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings,* a saga that Martin adored, except Martin's tale was inspired by actual European historical events such as the Wars of the Roses and reflected the true brutality of the Dark Ages. The first book, *A Game of Thrones,* was published in 1996. Sales were, as Martin later wrote on his blog, "nothing spectacular."

In rapid succession, Martin followed up with two more books in the saga. Their popularity spread by word of mouth, enthralling an ever-growing fandom with a complex story that shattered the fantasy genre's long-held rules. Beloved heroes died horribly, loathsome villains became



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strangely sympathetic, the wise and cunning were toppled by the slightest procedural error, and the power of magic was considered unreliable at best.

Along the way, Martin threw in all the horses and castles and sex and violence he wanted. This wasn't the story of one fantasy kingdom but seven! Each realm had its own distinct history, leadership, and culture (plus there was a whole *other* continent of diverse cities across the Narrow Sea). There were more than two thousand named characters, a figure that doubled the count from Tolkien's saga. Plus there were massive battles—one involved four armies, tens of thousands of soldiers, and hundreds of ships. Even meals in Westeros could be extravagant, such as a banquet that included seventy-seven distinct courses. Often such feasts were lavishly described ("elk roundels with blue cheese, grilled snake with fiery mustard sauce, river pike poached in almond milk . . ."). The books' adult content was equally voluminous, with shocking acts of torture, rape, and incest. Martin penned paragraphs that single-handedly would have consumed an entire season of a network TV show's budget, gotten a show kicked off the air, or both.

He called this epic *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

Hollywood took notice. By the early 2000s, Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was blowing up the box office. Then, in 2005, Martin's fourth installment in his saga, *A Feast for Crows*, debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list ("A fantasy realm too vile for hobbits," declared the *Times*). Martin's novels made the rounds among agents and producers. His phone rang with offers of easy money and silver-screen glory.

Martin, then fifty-seven and enjoying a quiet life in Santa Fe, was wary. . . .

**GEORGE R. R. MARTIN (*author, co–executive producer*): The Peter Jackson movies were big. Everybody was looking for a feature fantasy**



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series for films. Everything was being optioned. I started [*A Song of Ice and Fire*] thinking it couldn't be filmed. I was like: "How are you going to make a feature out of this that's two and a half hours? You can't get it all in." Jackson took three movies to do Tolkien's books, but all three of Tolkien's books were as long as just one of mine. How are you going to do this?

The answers I got back were not ones I wanted to hear, like: "[Fan-favorite Stark bastard] Jon Snow is the central character, we'll focus on him and cut the rest away." Or they pitched, "We're not going to cut anything, we'll keep it all, but we'll just make the first film and then make more if it's a big hit." Well, what if it's *not* a big hit? You're saying it's going to be *The Lord of the Rings,* but what if it's more like Philip Pullman's [failed 2007 *His Dark Materials* adaptation *The Golden Compass*]? You make one movie, it bombs, and then you have a broken thing. No. I wasn't interested in anything like that.

Martin's literary agent sent copies of the *Song of Ice and Fire* novels to David Benioff, a thirty-five-year-old novelist and screenwriter, and suggested he might consider trying to adapt them for a feature film. Benioff was an up-and-comer in the industry, having penned the acclaimed 2002 crime thriller *25th Hour,* along with the screenplays for the films *Troy* and *The Kite Runner.*

Eight chapters into reading *A Game of Thrones,* Benioff was stunned when seven-year-old Bran Stark—who had just witnessed an act of incest between the queen of Westeros and her brother—was mercilessly shoved out a tower window. A few hundred pages later, when Martin killed off the book's main character, the honorable and heroic Ned Stark, Benioff phoned his friend and writing partner, Dan Weiss.

Weiss, thirty-four, had met Benioff a decade earlier while the two were studying literature at Trinity College Dublin. They'd bonded over things like Irish literature and "trying to find a functional gym in Dublin in 1995," as Weiss told *Vanity Fair.* Weiss was an author as well, having



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published his debut novel, *Lucky Wander Boy,* in 2003. Benioff asked Weiss to read Martin's books "to make sure I wasn't crazy."

"We'd been reading fantasy books since childhood and never encountered anything as good as what George had written," Benioff said.

Benioff and Weiss, like others before them, wanted to adapt *A Song of Ice and Fire*. But they quickly ruled out making the books into a movie, deciding instead that only a TV series could capture the scope of Martin's narrative. At least, the duo hoped it could—neither had ever worked on a TV show before.

Martin agreed to meet Benioff and Weiss for lunch at the Palm Restaurant in Los Angeles to hear their pitch. The meeting lasted four hours and would ultimately produce a pop-culture dragon: the biggest global television phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Yet it all might have been derailed by Martin asking a single unexpected question.

**DAN WEISS (*showrunner*): We were nervous. When you start working in Hollywood, every meeting is nerve-wracking because you feel if you don't do it right it's the last meeting you're ever going to have. I had gotten long past that. You get used to meetings, and most never amount to anything. But this felt like the first meeting I'd ever taken all over again because we knew this was a one-of-a-kind opportunity and if we didn't get this job we'd never have a chance to work on something like this again, because nobody had ever seen anything like this before. There was one keeper of the keys, and that was George. If George didn't say yes, all of our dreams were dead in the crib. So we were under pressure to get it right.**

**DAVID BENIOFF (*showrunner*): Part of the meeting was talking about where George came from and the science fiction writers he knew. Part of it was talking about his books and our passion for them, for him to see that we had really read them. Having worked in Hollywood before, George knew about people who read [a synopsis of a book] and then say,**



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"Oh, this could work as a *Lord of the Rings* knock-off." The fact we read the books and could speak to them with some degree of knowledge I think meant something to him.

DAN WEISS: When converting to Judaism, the rabbi's job is not to convince you to convert but to talk you out of it. There was an element of that with George explaining to us that the reason he left television to do full-time writing was to write things you *couldn't* produce. George told us about the horses and Stonehenge. He said: "My imagination is bigger than 'the horses and Stonehenge'; I want Stonehenge and the horses *and* another twenty Stonehenges *and* another million horses." He wrote the books to use the entirety of his imaginative capacity and wrote it almost intentionally to be unfilmable.

DAVID BENIOFF: George created a world so rich that you're coming into the story 95 percent of the way into it. So much happened in the past—like the Targaryen invasion of Westeros—and you need to understand that stuff in order for the current story to make sense. Books have a more elegant way of putting backstory in. On television, you either do a flashback or boring exposition. So one of George's questions was: "How are you going to let the audience know all this stuff that's so crucial?" I don't remember what our answer was. We probably came up with some bullshit.

DAN WEISS: In the course of making the show, you develop your approach to those things. But looking back on it, the history he built, even if you take out 90 percent, it's like the scaffolding on a building. You don't see the scaffolding after you take it away, but the fact it was there is what makes the building look right. You feel that 90 percent of history through the 10 percent that's on-screen. There's this overarching sense of backstory and connection and logic to why characters feel the way they feel about each other. It's never just people fighting because it's dramatic.



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GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: They were very persuasive. They loved the books and wanted to adapt the books to a different medium, not change them or "make it their own." I hate that in Hollywood, when I go in pitching a book and meet with writers and they're like, "Here's my take on it." I don't want your take on it! Don't reimagine it, don't make it your own, just adapt it.

I told them, "I want a faithful adaptation. I don't want it to be one of those things where you take a title and write a whole new story." And I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to be a producer on it and write some scripts. "And it can't be for a [traditional broadcast network]. I don't want the sex and violence cut out. A season for each book." So we were on the same accord.

The meeting was going well. The lunch crowd had long since departed, and the restaurant staff was preparing for dinner. Then Martin asked Benioff and Weiss a question that might have ended their tentative partnership right there. One of the biggest mysteries in Martin's novels is the secret of Jon Snow's parentage. The Stark bastard is described as the son of Ned Stark and an unnamed mistress he met during Robert Baratheon's rebellion against Aerys II Targaryen, "the Mad King." Martin had scattered clues along the way hinting at Jon Snow's true identity, and fans had several theories.

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: I did famously ask them the question: "Who is Jon Snow's mother?" They said they read the books. I wanted to see if they had *really* read the books and how much they had paid attention.

DAVID BENIOFF: We were weirdly prepared for that question. We had discussed that the day before. We had just started to talk about it and came up with our theory, which just happened to be right.

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: They knew the answer, which was good.



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**DAVID BENIOFF: After we got the Jon Snow–mother question right, he gave us the backing to try and go out there and sell it.**

**GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: It was a strange situation. It's hard to remember now, but when we sat down, I had way more television experience than David and Dan. I spent ten years in television. I had gone through the ranks from staff writer to a supervising producer. If fate had been a little different I might have ended up a showrunner myself. And here were these two guys who were very talented writers but had never done anything in TV before. So a part of me wanted to do it myself, but I hadn't finished writing the books. I still haven't finished the books. I didn't see *that* happening.**

Pitching *Game of Thrones* as a television series was the first of many uphill battles the producers would fight to get the show on the air. While the *Lord of the Rings* films were hits and other parties had approached Martin about making a possible movie, fantasy on television was associated with low-budget, all-ages syndicated fare like *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*. Martin's books were very R-rated, and fantasy for grown-ups was a largely untested market. "You talked dragons, you got smirks," as Harry Lloyd, who played Viserys Targaryen, put it. And even a scaled-down version of *A Song of Ice and Fire* would be prohibitively expensive. There were only a few networks at the time that allowed adult content and might be able to afford the show.

Benioff and Weiss drafted a confident-sounding (and, it turned out, prophetic) proposal that included lines such as, "People are hungry for *Game of Thrones*. . . . They will watch it, and keep watching it, and tell everyone they know to watch it, and never stop talking about it at dinner, at work, at home. When we give them this show, they will lose their fucking minds." In their pitch, the duo promised the show would have "none of the things that can make fantasy feel creaky, corny, or kiddie."

They tried to sell their adaptation to three outlets. One potential buyer was DirecTV, which was looking to fund original content but was



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also considered a rather unexciting option with a limited platform. Benioff and Weiss also pitched Showtime, which was interested, but the CBS-owned cable network was known for modest spending. Said Benioff, "We intuitively knew that even the most expensive Showtime show ever made couldn't come close to getting this where it needed to be."

That left HBO, which Martin, Benioff, and Weiss had agreed over lunch would be the ideal home. And if you wanted HBO to buy your pitch, there was one person in particular you had to impress: then–programming president and nineteen-year HBO veteran Carolyn Strauss. The executive's power at the network, combined with her inscrutable demeanor and penchant for wearing all black, gave Strauss a reputation for being, as Benioff put it, "the scariest person in Hollywood."

**DAVID BENIOFF: We were told, "She's not going to smile at anything you say, she's not going to laugh, just be prepared for that."**

**CAROLYN STRAUSS (*former programming president at HBO; executive producer*): The idea [for *Thrones*] wasn't something I necessarily gravitate toward. But being an executive is not necessarily about doing everything you like to do.**

Benioff and Weiss booked a pitch meeting with Strauss and other executives.

**GINA BALIAN (*former vice president of drama at HBO*): The vibe in the room was very quiet. We were listening intently. The pitch was very similar to the story of the pilot. They walked us through that first hour and ended with the cliffhanger. My mouth was gaping open. *The kid was pushed out a window?***

**DAVID BENIOFF: We talked about how fantasy was the most popular genre there is. Loosely defined, *Star Wars* is fantasy, Harry Potter is fantasy, and even [superhero movies] are their own kind of fantasy.**



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CAROLYN STRAUSS: There were a fair number of reasons not to do it. There are many ways a fantasy series can go south. Any show that relies on a mythology that isn't thought out in enormous detail can go off the rails. You're maybe good for a season or two and then after that you start running into brick walls. Plus, this was clearly going to be expensive.

DAVID BENIOFF: We said most shows begin only knowing their first season. Because of the work George had done, we had a sense of where this was going for many seasons. Even then we knew—though George's books hadn't gotten there—that [exiled heroine Daenerys Targaryen] would come back to Westeros and fight for the throne. We had a good sense of the show five years down the road, and that's a rare privilege for television.

CAROLYN STRAUSS: The way they told the story in that meeting made it sound much more involved and complex and character-driven than I usually feel from fantasy stories. It was not a story of good vs. evil but characters who had elements of both those things.

DAVID BENIOFF: At one point, Carolyn laughed and we were like, "Oh my God, we're in! We made Carolyn Strauss laugh." We felt good by the end of the meeting that they were interested.

GINA BALIAN: This wasn't your usual HBO show. So after the pitch I ran down to Carolyn's office: "We're going to buy this, right?"

HBO agreed to take *Game of Thrones* to the next step: negotiating with Martin for the rights to *A Song of Ice and Fire*. This alone ended up taking nearly a year due to legal hang-ups.

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: The big sticking point was the merchandising. We didn't know that would be big going in, but HBO's lawyers didn't want to set the precedent of giving away something they hadn't given away



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before. I was saying, "I can't give you everything you want. I already have a video game in the works, a role-playing game in the works. I've already given the rights to a guy to make replica coins." Who knew *Game of Thrones* replica coins would be a thing? So we were in this endless negotiation of parsing individual items, like, "You can have bobblehead dolls, I get key rings. . . ."

Then came another stumbling block. Strauss, who had become a strong advocate for the show behind the scenes, stepped down from HBO in 2008. Strauss shifted to join *Thrones* as an executive producer, but regime change at a network often spells doom for titles developed under the previous boss. Somehow, Benioff and Weiss had to convince a new leadership structure led by HBO co-president Richard Plepler and programming president Michael Lombardo to spend at least $10 million on a pilot that was wildly unlike anything else HBO—or any network—had ever made.

MICHAEL LOMBARDO (*former HBO programming president*): HBO was still coming out of *The Sopranos, The Wire,* and *Deadwood*. We were getting questions like, "Why did you not get *Mad Men*? How come you didn't pick up *Breaking Bad*?" We had been the place for all things quality drama and were looking to regain our footing. But *Game of Thrones* didn't seem to fall into our category. This didn't scream "Emmy voters." This was not a genre embraced by the voices HBO traditionally listened to for drama series. It had a lot going against it.

But Carolyn said, "This is a really good script, you should read this," and it read like a page-turner. The writing was sharp and clear. You get to Jaime pushing Bran out the window and I was like, "Holy shit, this isn't like anything I've read." Still, *The Lord of the Rings* had been out and was done pretty damn well. How do we compete with that? How can this feel, from a production standpoint, as textured and credible? We knew it had to be able to stand next to projects in this genre being done on the big screen, yet with a more limited budget.



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Hanging over *Thrones* was the fallout of another HBO title, 2005's *Rome,* an ambitious and compelling period drama co-produced with the BBC that cost a staggering $100 million for its first season. HBO had axed *Rome* due to low ratings before its second season aired. The network was understandably reluctant to sink tens of millions into another swords-and-shields costume drama when they just had one that didn't work.

Benioff and Weiss tried to assure HBO executives that *Thrones* would remain far less expensive than *Rome,* which, of course, wasn't remotely true.

**DAN WEISS: A story of this scale had never been told within filmed entertainment, to my knowledge. Nowadays it's economically viable to make a television show at this scale. Back then, it just wasn't done. HBO had tried with *Rome,* which was a step in that direction. One thing we felt like we had going for us is we said, "It's not a symphony, it's a chamber piece."**

**DAVID BENIOFF: The lie we told was that the show was "contained" and it was about the characters.**

**DAN WEISS: We knew most of the people making the decisions were not going to read four thousand pages [of Martin's books] and get to the dragons getting bigger and the [major battles]. The show was exactly what we told them it wasn't. We were banking on them not finding out until it was too late.**

**MICHAEL LOMBARDO: I'm not sure I ever really believed that. We knew it was a gamble. We were budgeting it and scratching our head whether we should go ahead and green-light this. We were trying to figure out the production challenges.**

There was something else going against *Thrones* as well. Benioff and Weiss had never worked on a television show before (at least, not one that



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made it past the pilot stage). Typically in such situations a network would bring in a veteran writer-producer to take the lead on the project. But HBO insiders said Benioff and Weiss continually impressed them with their insights during the show's development process.

CAROLYN STRAUSS: I'd worked with series producers where we forced them to hire other writers. But Dan and David were always confident they could do it, and they were very open to learning what they didn't know. They're incredibly fast learners. We would bring in producers or department heads who were more experienced and had a certain conventional wisdom, and time and time again Dan and David would prove their instinct was the right one. Bit by bit, they earned our trust.

In the fall of 2008, the decision of whether to order the *Game of Thrones* pilot was hanging over the network. Lombardo went to his gym, the Equinox in West Hollywood. As it so happened, Weiss went to the same gym.

MICHAEL LOMBARDO: And I see Dan on one of the bicycles. He was reading this dog-eared copy of the first book, and it had underscores and yellow highlights [on the pages]. He didn't know I saw him. And I thought, "We're going to figure this out. These guys breathe this show in a way that doesn't happen all the time." I found that little window into Dan in that quiet moment, that this is what he was doing in his free time. It was such an acknowledgment of everything I suspected about those guys, and it made me determined to figure this thing out.

RICHARD PLEPLER (*former co-president and CEO of HBO*): You could see they were breathing this. There's a feeling when great artists are talking about their passion and are immersed in a subject. It's the same feeling you get when [*The Wire* creator] David Simon pitches something or when Armando Iannucci pitched *Veep* or Mike Judge pitched *Silicon Valley*. I just had that feeling about them.



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In November, Benioff and Weiss got the news they had waited three years to hear. HBO had agreed to green-light a pilot for *Game of Thrones*. The duo was relieved and elated. But before they could celebrate, they wanted to make sure of one last thing.

**GINA BALIAN: David and Dan told me, "We can't have you guys come back to us later and say we can't kill the lead character because suddenly you really like him." So when we got the okay to make the pilot I remember running to Mike and barging in and going: "Just double-, double-, *double*-checking: We're killing the lead and there's dragons."**



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CHAPTER TWO

# Casting Tales

Nothing about making *Game of Thrones* was easy. When building a new fantasy world on a relatively limited budget, nearly every aspect of production comes with an unprecedented degree of difficulty—starting with the casting.

First there was the sheer number of roles. *Thrones*' debut season had dozens of speaking parts and twenty core cast members, or "series regulars." Tougher still, many of these roles were for children. Finding one excellent child actor can be hard enough. *Thrones* needed six Stark kids who could look and act like a cohesive family while also handling adult content and making a years-long commitment to the show.

Though HBO gave *Thrones* a generous budget (roughly $20 million was eventually spent on the pilot and then another $54 million on the rest of the season), the money was needed to build out Martin's new fantasy universe. When you create sets for a period drama set in medieval times, or in ancient Egypt or Rome, you can replicate designs from a historical record. Every set, costume, and prop in Martin's books needed to be unique. For instance, Martin describes the seat of power in Westeros, the Iron Throne, as a towering monstrosity of spikes and jagged edges; twisted metal forged from a thousand swords into a piece of furniture so jagged and uncomfortable that it can literally kill a person (and has). How do you adapt that description into a realistic-looking chair

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that blends with its environment and that actors can sit in for hours during filming?

Then there were all the computer-generated (CG) special effects—far fewer than in the show's latter seasons, but almost certainly more effects than any other TV show at the time.

So there wasn't much left in the budget for hiring a lot of well-known stars. The producers would instead have to largely cast *Thrones* the hard way—by hunting through thousands of audition tapes.

"On paper, *Game of Thrones* is the stupidest idea on the planet to invest in," noted actor Liam Cunningham, who came on board in season two to play Davos Seaworth. "To have a production hanging on nine-year-old children in the pilot to get you through the rest of the show eleven years later."

Filling at least one major role seemed like it would be rather easy (because the perfect actor was obvious), but it was also nerve-wracking (because he wasn't initially interested). Tyrion Lannister, the cunning and sarcastic black sheep of the powerful Lannister family, is a fan favorite from Martin's books. Peter Dinklage was considered the ideal choice, as evidenced by his work in *The Station Agent* and his scene-stealing roles in *Elf* and *Living in Oblivion*.

Yet Dinklage was coming off another fantasy role in 2008's *Prince Caspian,* Disney's modestly performing sequel to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* and was looking for something different. Dinklage was also wary of the genre's stereotypical use of little people. He once cited *The Lord of the Rings*' infamous dwarf-tossing joke as particularly galling and would later use his first Golden Globes acceptance speech in 2012 to draw attention to a real-life dwarf-tossing victim.

**GEORGE R. R. MARTIN (*author, co–executive producer*): We thought right away that role would be the trickiest. We all agreed we wanted an actual dwarf to play Tyrion; we didn't want to do what *Lord of the Rings* did where they take John Rhys-Davies and shrink him down to play Gimli. If Peter had turned us down we would have been screwed.**



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**PETER DINKLAGE (*Tyrion Lannister*): I wouldn't go anywhere near that stuff—fantasy. As soon as I heard about [*Thrones*] I was like, "*No.*" In fantasy, everybody speaks in broad strokes. There's no intimacy. There's dragons and big speeches, and there's nothing to hold on to. And for somebody my size, it's fucking death, the opposite of [the activism] I was involved with.**

But Dinklage knew and respected showrunner David Benioff's writing, and it didn't hurt that the actor was friends with Benioff's wife, actress Amanda Peet. So when Dinklage read the *Thrones* pilot script, he had a change of heart.

**PETER DINKLAGE: David and Dan are incapable of doing [fantasy tropes]; they're too good. I told them that I love turning people's expectations on their heads. You overcome stereotypes when people least expect it. You do it quietly. You don't do it through a bullhorn. And I felt like that's what they were doing with Tyrion. In another show it would be focused on the people on the throne looking down on me.**

Dinklage had at least one rule: no beard, which is why Tyrion is clean-shaven during the show's first few years despite the character having a beard in the books. The actor later eased off that requirement and grew a modest beard after his character was firmly established. "I just didn't want a long beard in a dwarf–in–*The Lord of the Rings* way," he explained.

The actor also urged his longtime friend Lena Headey (*Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*) to try out for the role of Tyrion's ambitious and cunning sister, Cersei. "We met lots of others too, but it was clear she was the most interesting and best choice," said Nina Gold, who served as *Thrones*' casting director along with her partner Robert Sterne.

While the producers were looking to stand apart from *The Lord of the Rings*, they nonetheless cast Sean Bean in the role of the honorable Stark patriarch Eddard (a.k.a. Ned). Bean had played another ill-fated fantasy warrior from a noble family, Boromir in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. "Sean



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was somebody we talked about from the very beginning; he seemed like the prototype of the Guy," said Gold.

Dinklage would be the show's only American actor for most of the series. Gold and Sterne searched for the rest of the roles out of London. Westeros was based on what's now known as the UK, and there was a long tradition of historical-style dramas using actors with British accents. Benioff, Weiss, and Martin were heavily involved in the selection process, as was the director of the series' original pilot, Tom McCarthy, who was brought on board having previously directed Dinklage in *The Station Agent* as well as acted with Peet in the film *2012*.

**GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: I was a big part of casting in the early seasons. They would send me a link every day with like twenty-three different people who read for various roles. I would watch every one of them. I would write David and Dan these really detailed six-page evaluations.**

Also weighing in on casting—unofficially—were Martin's readers. *A Song of Ice and Fire* fans lobbied online for certain actors to be considered for key roles, sometimes quite successfully. The fans were also quick to make their disapproval known when a casting choice fell short of their expectations for a character—such as when Danish film star Nikolaj Coster-Waldau landed the role of Cersei's legendarily handsome and arrogant knight brother, Jaime Lannister.

**NIKOLAJ COSTER-WALDAU (*Jaime Lannister*): I had a meeting with Dan and David and Carolyn Strauss, and they told me the whole story and it sounded amazing. Then about a half hour into the conversation they said, "Oh, yeah, he has a special relationship with his sister—they're lovers." I thought that was interesting. Then there was some discussion [among fans] about my nose—that I had the wrong nose.**

**DAVID BENIOFF (*showrunner*): We learned to cast the actor who was best for the role, not whose face matches whose in the books. That means**



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**we got certain complaints in the fan community. People complained Peter was too tall and that Nikolaj's nose was too big. [Theon Greyjoy actor Alfie Allen] doesn't look anything like the character in the book, but his audition blew everybody else out of the water.**

Allen didn't originally think he would make a great Theon either. The English actor first tried out to play Jon Snow, and producers were inspired to ask him to come back and read for the role of the traitorous Stark ward (this wasn't unusual, as many *Thrones* actors tried out for multiple parts on the show).

Yet Martin's fans scored a bull's-eye by suggesting Jason Momoa, an American actor best known for *Stargate: Atlantis,* for the role of the fearsome Dothraki warrior Khal Drogo.

Momoa arrived at his audition wearing an open black chest-baring shirt and a tribal-looking necklace. Given Drogo's lack of dialogue, Momoa asked producers if he could perform a Maori-warrior haka dance to visually demonstrate some of his physical menace before reading his lines. The actor furiously stomped, chanted, and pounded his chest while giving a threatening Drogo-like glare.

**JASON MOMOA (*Khal Drogo*): I was born to play this role. When I read they were casting Khal Drogo, I couldn't believe it was happening. I had to have that role. I've never gone out for something before where I was like, "No one is going to take this from me." I was pretty adamant about it. I just remember giving it my all and leaving it going, "Good luck finding someone who's going to play Drogo."**

Northern Ireland television and theater veteran Conleth Hill tried out to play the bald eunuch royal advisor Varys, despite some initial reluctance.

**CONLETH HILL (*Varys*): I resisted for so long. I remember telling my agent I wasn't interested. I thought it would be like Dungeons & Dragons.**



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But Belfast was only an hour away and I loved Tom McCarthy's movies, so I figured I would go meet them. I taped for King Robert, but when I came out, I saw Mark Addy was up for that part as well. I knew he was perfect, so I thought that was a no-go.

The producers said, "We'll come back to you." I thought that was bullshit—nice bullshit, but bullshit. Then they had me back in again doing Varys's big speech where he talks about his past. I was thinking, "What a journey for this character." They asked, "Do you mind getting your head shaved?" I had never shaved my head before, and [at first] I was very depressed.

For Scottish actor Rory McCann, landing the role of Prince Joffrey Baratheon's fearsome bodyguard Sandor "the Hound" Clegane wasn't just another acting gig but a matter of actual survival. The actor told *The Independent* in 2019 that before being cast on *Thrones,* he was homeless, sleeping in a tent, and stealing food.

DAVID BENIOFF: We had trouble finding someone for the Hound. That's a tricky role. It's gotta be someone who's genuinely intimidating but who you also believe has a soul. Nina and her team would put all these videos online and there were hundreds of Hound interviews. Then we got an email from George saying, "Have you looked at Rory McCann?" We clicked on that one. It's when he's yelling at Sansa and goes: "*Look at me!*"—the way he snarled at camera made us both [lean back]. Rory is a very sweet, gentle person, but he definitely has that anger within him.

Northern Ireland actor Kristian Nairn was tapped for the role of hulking yet sweet, mono-word-uttering House Stark servant Hodor.

KRISTIAN NAIRN (*Hodor*): I was in the middle of my day and got a phone call from a guy who had acted as my agent saying, "We have an audition for you. You need to find a child." I obviously didn't have one with me. But he told me about a birthday party where one would be.



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**GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: Then we got this tape of Kristian Nairn and he's in a backyard staggering around with a kid on his back, shouting, "Hodor!"**

German actress Sibel Kekilli paid out of pocket to fly to London for the opportunity to audition for Tyrion's wily prostitute lover Shae in person. After the meeting, however, Kekilli changed her mind about the role. The script pages she'd read during the scene were originally closer to the book's portrayal of Shae as a heartless opportunist, and she felt uncomfortable playing such a character opposite Dinklage.

**SIBEL KEKILLI (*Shae*): When I got the part, my first reaction was I didn't want do it. I said, "No, thank you!" I knew Peter Dinklage was a great actor, but I was thinking [based on the audition lines] that they wanted to make fun of little people—make fun of the situation. David and Dan sent me a beautiful letter saying, "Please-please-please, you are our Shae. You did a great audition and we're going to change Shae a bit. We'll do it different than the books," and they convinced me.**

Scottish actor Iain Glen already had some Hollywood genre-movie experience thanks to major roles in films such as *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* when he tried out for banished Westerosi knight Ser Jorah Mormont.

**IAIN GLEN (*Jorah Mormont*): No one knew anything really about it except that it was HBO and so many [British actors] were going out for it. I met with them, felt pretty good about it, then it all went silent. I said to my wife—and I never usually say this—"I really, *really* want that job." She asked why. "Honestly, I don't know," I said. "Because I know nothing about it. I just got a funny feeling. . . ."**

For the pivotal role of exiled princess Daenerys Targaryen, the producers originally cast English actress Tamzin Merchant, who was coming off



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Showtime's period drama *The Tudors*. Daenerys was one of several younger characters that had been slightly reconceived to fit the chosen actor.

**GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: I based the books on the Middle Ages, when girls were getting married at thirteen. The entire concept of adolescence didn't exist; you were either a child or an adult. So Dany is thirteen years old in the books. But it was against British law to cast anyone in a sexual situation who is under seventeen. You can't even cast a seventeen-year-old to play a thirteen-year-old if it's a sexual situation. So we wound up with a twenty-three-year-old playing a seventeen-year-old and had to adjust the timeline.**

For bullying teenage prince Joffrey, producers auditioned many young actors who read their lines as an obvious "demon seed," an *Omen*-like child villain.

**DAVID BENIOFF: We were auditioning for Joffrey, and we found a kid we thought was perfect, so we thought we were done with that role. Then we went to Dublin to cast for other characters and there was one kid who had been scheduled to read for Joffrey and we didn't want to cancel on him. So basically, just as a courtesy, we agreed to see Jack Gleeson. He started speaking and changed our concept of the character. We didn't expect to spend as much time with Joffrey until we cast Jack. There's something so loathsome yet so believable about [the performance]. He's not supernatural, he's not the servant of darkness, he's just a believably awful human being.**

Seventeen-year-old Gleeson's most notable prior credit was a small part in *Batman Begins*. The young Irish actor said he had looked to other big-screen villains for inspiration.

**JACK GLEESON (*Joffrey Baratheon*): My characterization came from those first sides that I got and a collection of evil characters I've seen over the**



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**years. Joaquin Phoenix's Commodus in *Gladiator* had a big impact—the smirk. Also the monster Hexxus from *FernGully*. Those would be the two biggest. He's a product of his setting and context. Everyone has met Joffrey in some shape or form.**

The toughest role to fill on *Thrones* was Arya Stark—the crafty, strong-willed young heroine who defies gender stereotypes and endures monumental hardships throughout the series.

**GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: I despaired for a while that we couldn't find an Arya. We read more girls for Arya than anyone else. Most child actors in sitcoms, they just have to be cute and snap off one-liners. This part deals with real violence and grief and fear. Three-quarters of the girls we saw were just reciting lines; there was nothing else going on there. It's a big thing for a ten-year-old to recite those lines, but there was no acting. The rest were kids who obviously had gone to acting classes and some coach had told them they had to emote and they were emoting all over the place. They were all grimacing and rolling their eyes. I'm looking at this saying, "We're doomed."**

Then twelve-year-old English actress Maisie Williams, in her second audition for a role ever, recorded a tape playing Arya during her lunch break at school.

**GEORGE R. R. MARTIN: Holy hell. Her facial features weren't at all what I had described in the books, but she was perfect. She was Arya! She was alive!**

For Arya's prim, idealistic sister, Sansa Stark, thirteen-year-old Sophie Turner was urged by her drama teacher to try out for the role. She later said the taping just seemed like "a fun, jokey thing to do." She didn't even tell her parents about the role until she made it to the final seven.



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NINA GOLD (*casting director*): Sophie likes to say we found her in a field somewhere in Warwickshire, which isn't quite true, but it's almost true.

ROBERT STERNE (*casting director*): We went to her school, and she just clearly from the start had some connection with the material.

Williams and Turner met for the first time at one of their auditions and were partnered together for a chemistry read.

MAISIE WILLIAMS (*Arya Stark*): I came out of it thinking: "Even if I don't get the part of Arya, I want Sophie to get the part of Sansa."

DAVID BENIOFF: Maisie and Sophie liked each other right away. There was real chemistry even though the characters are not supposed to like each other at that point. From then on, they would be, like, giggling and laughing together, then the second you say, "Action," they were at each other's throats in a completely believable way. Being friends makes it easier for actors to play hostility between them. It was the same with Peter and Lena.

NINA GOLD: From the first read-through, they just became inseparable.

Williams and Turner would later get matching tattoos of the date "07.08.09," commemorating their casting.

SOPHIE TURNER (*Sansa Stark*): That date always meant a lot to us, and we always said we were gonna get it done. We'd been filming [season seven] for a week and were having the best time ever, and so we were like, "Fuck it, let's just do it!"

English actor Isaac Hempstead Wright had no interest in performing until he joined a drama club at school. He was just ten when he was cast as Bran Stark, the boy who winds up disabled, yet with a mystical destiny.



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**ISAAC HEMPSTEAD WRIGHT (*Bran Stark*): I had three auditions and then just forgot about it over the summer. I was running around playing football or whatever. Then one day I came out from school and got in my mum's car and she said, "Congratulations, Bran Stark." Oh. Cool!**

Scottish actor Richard Madden was twenty-two when he was chosen for the eldest Stark son, Robb. (He shifted his accent to closer match Bean's Yorkshire dialect.) Like Joffrey, Robb is a character that the showrunners expanded from the books due to the strength of their actor's performance. "At first we just liked Richard because he was the odds-on favorite for 2009's Best-Dressed Man in Scotland Award," Weiss said in the book *Inside HBO's Game of Thrones: Seasons 1 & 2*. "He did indeed win, and in addition to his clothes, we got an amazing talent." Madden would later tell *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* that he was so destitute at the time he was cast, the role saved him from having to move back in with his parents. (Perhaps he spent too much on clothes?)

English actor Kit Harington was also only twenty-two and without any screen credits when he auditioned for the role of Stark bastard Jon Snow. But he was already acclaimed in the London acting community for his starring role in a West End production of *War Horse*.

**KIT HARINGTON (*Jon Snow*): Every young male actor in the UK went in for the role. I psyched myself up massively. I remember thinking, "This is one I might be right for." Actors generally are perceptive to the energy in a room. David and Dan had been sitting in the room all day looking for a person they liked, and you could feel them . . . [*leans forward*]. After the second audition I thought I was on to something and if I lost it I would be upset.**

To help sort through the audition tapes, the producers enlisted the help of Bryan Cogman, a screenwriter and a Julliard-trained actor whose wife worked as a nanny for Benioff and Peet. Cogman devoured Martin's novels and became an expert on *A Song of Ice and Fire*'s mythology.



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Initially hired as Benioff's assistant, Cogman would rise through different roles throughout the series as he wrote episodes, supervised on set, and became a co–executive producer. "They gave me way too much responsibility early on, considering I had no experience," Cogman said. "But you know what? They didn't either! I think they valued the fact that I was an actor and had some training."

BRYAN COGMAN (*co–executive producer*): This is embarrassing. We were casting ladies for the character that became Ros. At that point the character was just "redheaded and a whore." One day, David, Dan, and Tom McCarthy weren't available and I was tasked with auditioning actors for this role. This Northern Irish actress comes in. I was terrified because it was this randy scene and what the fuck did I know? The sides were all these double entendres and the young lady did a nice job but she kept looking at me funny and I didn't know why.

I said, "Okay, let's try one more." Because I guess we should do more than one? She read it again, and I said, "Okay, that's great!" And she stood there for a minute and said, "Well, I guess I'll go now. . . ." The next day Nina Gold calls me and goes, "You didn't have her strip to her underwear!" She had been waiting to be told to take off her clothes. I guess that's normal when casting those roles. I felt immense guilt. Later, Esmé Bianco came in and won the role.

NINA GOLD: We don't *have* actors take their clothes off in the audition, I have to say. Though some take them off on their own accord.

ESMÉ BIANCO (*Ros*): "The Redheaded Whore" was the character name then, and she was originally just going to be in the pilot. I auditioned in my underwear. They do that because some actresses will say they are okay with doing nudity at an audition but then on the day of shooting will not be okay with it. At the time I was doing burlesque shows and lingerie modeling, so this was like just another day in the office. When the show got green-lit, the producers reached out: "Would you be interested in



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doing more scenes?" It was George R. R. Martin who said, "Maybe you should give her a name instead of referring to her as 'the Redheaded Whore' for the entire season."

English actor Joe Dempsie was coming off the provocative UK hit show *Skins* when he was cast as Robert Baratheon's abandoned bastard son Gendry.

JOE DEMPSIE (*Gendry*): I auditioned for two or three parts before getting Gendry. I initially thought when I wasn't getting those parts that they thought I was terrible. In hindsight, they identified people they wanted to work with and after that they were figuring out what piece in the jigsaw you are. That we have a bunch of actors that get on so well and have such good work ethics and professionalism is not by chance. David and Dan created that atmosphere. Nobody is bigger than the show. So there was very little ego.

DAVID BENIOFF: We have a lot of friends who [write on TV shows] and the problems we had to deal with over the years in terms of cast misbehavior was so minuscule compared to what most people deal with. I don't know if it's a UK thing or what, but we got so lucky given the size of the cast it's incredible. We only had like one or two dicks in minor roles.

NINA GOLD: One actress—who got the part but shall remain nameless—was reading for Robert [Sterne], and to everybody's great surprise suddenly she straddled him and started trying to take his shirt off. Robert, being a complete trouper, didn't say, "Stop, cut, how dare you," and just went with it. I could see Robert's hair slightly standing on end as he was thinking, "How do I get out of this one?" And didn't she try to kiss you?

ROBERT STERNE: Yeah, it's all about being committed to it, and sometimes they want somebody to hang on to when doing these kinds of scenes.



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But the pilot's best audition story belongs to British actor John Bradley, who had just graduated from drama school when he got an opportunity to read for lovable yet blundering Night's Watch conscript Samwell Tarly.

JOHN BRADLEY (*Samwell Tarly*): I wasn't thinking it was one of the most important days in my life. It's only since then that I see it that way. I had to go to London from Manchester, where I live. So I gave myself four hours to make the two-hour journey, only to find the direct train to London had been canceled. So I had to take this huge detour.

DAN WEISS: We'd probably seen seven or eight Samwells in person that weekend during a four-day stretch. We had found a guy who was great—and it was not John Bradley. Nina said, "There's a fellow who's coming in and his train is late, would you mind waiting?" We're thinking, "It's hot up here and we're kind of hungry. But he took the train from Manchester; we can't just not see him."

JOHN BRADLEY: I've always been an overplanner and overthinker. I probably would have overthought myself into distraction and tied myself into knots about the audition if I had time on the train. But I was going at such a breakneck pace I didn't have time to think.

DAN WEISS: He ran from the station. Then he found out the elevator was out.

JOHN BRADLEY: So I ran up three flights of stairs and burst into their office. I was so grateful they didn't decide to just call it a day. I had to go in completely breathless and with all this nervous energy, which fed into my interpretation of Sam.

DAN WEISS: He looked like he was ready to pass out. He was drenched in sweat. And within thirty seconds we realized he had just cost this other guy his job, because he was completely perfect.



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CHAPTER THREE

# "You Guys Have a Massive Problem"

The original *Game of Thrones* pilot began shooting on October 24, 2009. Filming lasted twenty-six days. But first, the producers had to make a decision: Where, exactly, was Westeros?

While the series would ultimately film in many countries and locations, the team needed a primary production hub as their base of operations. Picking somewhere in the British Isles made the most sense as the show was inspired by historical wars in what's now the United Kingdom. Shooting in England and Wales was quite expensive, which left Ireland, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. David Benioff and Dan Weiss were familiar with Ireland, having attended college in Dublin. But its neighbor to the north offered lucrative tax breaks that would offset the show's production cost. Northern Ireland's capital city of Belfast also had some existing studio infrastructure and crew, and its surrounding countryside had plenty of rustic filming locations and medieval ruins.

"Northern Ireland offers a broad array of diverse locations within a short drive," Benioff wrote in *Inside HBO's Game of Thrones: Seasons 1 & 2*. "Windswept hilltops, stony beaches, lush meadows, high cliffs, bucolic streams—we can shoot a day at any of these places and still sleep that night in Belfast." At the time, Northern Ireland was considered a bold choice, as the country had only recently emerged from a period of

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