



Set in Israel, *The Promise* was an overfamiliar tale of love across the divide

It's not believable – and that's a huge barrier

There are very few caveats or exemptions when it comes to culture exercising free speech or taking what it wants in its pursuit of creativity, but you and I might think more than twice before exhibiting newsreel footage of Belsen to add an introduction of shock and gravitas to a Sunday-evening drama-romance.

The Promise is set in Israel, with a pair of connected stories about a British soldier during the occupation of Palestine in 1946 and his granddaughter visiting present-day Israel. Their narratives are about the troubles in that region the way that *Gone with the Wind* is about the American civil war; while the background politics added an element of chiaroscuro, suspense and righteous indignation, it was really just set dressing for an overfamiliar tale of love across the divide in a time of adversity, as well chewed as a Mills & Boon; the rhythm of each scene a limerick of yearning or misunderstanding.

The contemporary story was mildly more believable than the post-war one, where the staging and the costuming were wholly unconvincing. The script was the predictably scant and underwritten first draft we're used to seeing thinly stretched across the screen. If Channel 4 had spent half the money it put into advertising on the writing, it would have been greatly improved. The performances by a young and nervous cast occasionally rose to be adequate.

Television

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- *The Promise* (C4, Sunday)
- *Outcasts* (BBC1, Monday)
- *Faulks on Fiction* (BBC2, Saturday)
- *A History of Ancient Britain* (BBC2, Wednesday)

Nobody looked like they trusted the script to get them to the end of the scene, let alone another job.

So, altogether, a faint and shrill co-production, and still we were left with a retinal image of the Holocaust that overwhelms the make-believe. It was an attempt to conjure feelings that made you wonder at the process whereby any number of editors, producers and co-producers could have nodded it through, saying: "Yes, that'll grab an audience before the first commercial break. That neatly fills in a back story." Among all the crass and shaming layers of wrong in plagiarising the Holocaust is the

simple fact that this film record of the final solution was specifically made to show Germans it was not all propaganda and fiction; that this really happened. Appending it to a TV romance with actors who get up after they're shot traduces the very reason it was made in the first place.

I can't say that science fiction or fantasy (what's the difference? No, really, what is the difference?) is my favourite genre. It must be responsible for more bad culture than any other, but the shadow of Doctor Who looms over the little screen like a Death Star eclipse. It has a loyal audience who, because of their nature and hygiene standards, don't get out much. And you can sell sci-fi stuff around the world – possibly multiple worlds. For those who are still watching reruns of *Blake's 7* and *Red Dwarf*, there was *Outcasts*. Earth is dying (you have to say this in a gravelly voice), humankind has taken in the limitless skies to find a Goldilocks planet not too close and not too far from a sun, where there can be a new home, a new start, a new story. Bring on Carpathia.

If that sounds familiar, it's because it's the premise for every other comic book and *Battlestar Galactica* that is possibly still running in a galaxy not so far away. It's also rather like *Lost*. The new planet looked a lot like America, which is a comfort, but not a surprise. The cast are a good collection of actors who all behave with a contagious and

desperate energy. There is much gritting of teeth and knuckle-clenching. It's not a bad start. The drama was taut, the dialogue stagy, but then that goes with the distant territory, and the atmosphere was breathable. But I suspect it will have infuriated sci-fi wonks that there weren't any robots or plastic beamish death rays. There was precious little kit and hardly any jargon, and there wasn't much sitting in front of screens jabbing buttons like a sugar-sated three-year-old. But there was kissing, and kissing is Kryptonite to sci-fi androids. They really don't like love or romance. It spoils it. They don't mind sex, as long as it's with someone who has a prosthetic head.

The premise of *Outcasts* is that man may change planets, but he still takes his human nature with him, which is sort of obvious. It would be weird if we left it behind. *Outcasts* is good, it's just wearing the wrong label. Really, it's a cowboy story without the hats. Small town in the newly opened west; sheriffs and deputies trying to keep order; train/spaceship arriving with bad guy; everyone has a past; everyone wants a better future; lots of kissing and campfires... This is a western that's lost its horse.

Faulks on Fiction – is it a book, is it a TV programme, is it a programme of a book or a book of a programme of the book of the programme? Faulks began by telling us this was a look – not a book or a programme – a look at the English novel, but in a new way.

We were, he said, used to talking about authors, but he was here to talk about what really mattered: characters. And he got stuck into heroes. Well, hold on a minute. As an author, he may well spend time talking about authors. In my recent fraudulent appearances at literary events, I'm amazed at how real authors, nothing but authors and rarely characters, or indeed books; but, as a presenter, I think most people can't remember the author is and talk about characters. So I have doubts about Faulks's presentation.

He started with *Robinson Crusoe*, invariably you must, the first hero of the novel, and to illustrate what he was he found some footage of an old film show. Then he marched on to *Tonno* and we got the television adaptation of *Jones*, then there was *Sherlock Holmes* on the TV, and *Winston Smith* and *Lucretia* and *John Self*, who's the bloke from *of the Dead* and *Paul*. Faulks might have been talking about people in books, but what we were watching were people in primetime series. So in his next programme, *Lovers*, we got *Mr Darcy*, who is *Colin Firth*, of course, and all the women in *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations, and all together it sounds like a pass notes and those cribs that you find for GCSEs off the internet – five minutes you must mention about *Tess Durberry*. I really wanted this to be a thoughtful, a lot more authorial and

My favourite programme of the week was Neil Oliver's *A History of Ancient Britain*. Oliver was wearing a workmanlike Belstaff jacket with the belt done up at the back, cargo trousers and hiking boots. It says country, not town. But mostly he was wearing Lorna Doone's hair. Oliver is an immensely popular presenter who has a knack for making dry facts and stories sizzle and glisten. He told me about this series when we happened to be caught together for a day in Dublin. Within two minutes, I was enthralled.

It's about the people who lived in this place before it was even an island. They left barely nothing behind them – a few scrapings, a shard, a footprint, some bones. It's not promising material for show-and-tell, but it's fascinating and oddly moving. The sliver of horse bone with a tiny scratched drawing of a horse on it was deeply memorable and surprising, and it made me realise how much of our early story is told back to us by foreigners. The Romans, the Norsemen and the Normans mediate our story until we get to Chaucer. But this is all before recorded time or humanity. These small keepsakes are far more strange and amazing, far more telling and inspiring and memorable, than any science fiction.