



**FEATURES**

# How Daredevil Season 3 Depicts the Fight Against Real and Present Fears



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By **Chris Compendio**



**(Content Warning: mass shooting tragedies in the United States; Spoiler Warning for *Daredevil* season 3)**

Those living in the United States have gotten too accustomed to bad news. Every mass shooting, wildfire, and other various tragedies have become distilled to push notifications on phones and headlines on cable news. I've felt a certain guilt for an increasing indifference as the bad news has increased in volume, but I felt this even more so when the news finally reached me personally. The Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh set something off in me, as I went to school mere miles away from

there, and I visited Squirrel Hill for leisure and errands regularly. I felt sorrowful and uneasy knowing that such a nefarious act was committed in an area I once considered to be practically my backyard.

It had an eerie and troubling effect on a piece of media that I treasured, as only a couple of weeks before this real-life tragedy, Netflix released season 3 of *Daredevil*, which prominently featured a chilling scene of a fatal attack on a place of worship.

What that television show did might not necessarily be bad taste, as it released before the real-life analogous event occurred—it isn't the same situation where the Las Vegas shooting prevented the apparently-planned early release of *The Punisher*, or Paramount executives scurrying and attempting to release their *Heathers* television reboot in piecemeal, attempting to slip their tone-catcher program in-between real-life tragedies. Still, the proximity in date alone puts a shroud over *Daredevil* in my eyes, and a rewatch is impossible for me without associating it with the act of hate and domestic terrorism that happened in a city I love.

I eventually thought back to the words of Erik Oleson, the showrunner of *Daredevil*'s third season. He attended the *Daredevil* New York Comic-Con panel, where Oleson presented his thesis statement for season 3—it would be about **“combating fear and the narcissistic tyrants that weaponize it.”** The Tree of Life shooting is not the only recent news event that could be analogous to events in his show, and none of these were unfortunate coincidences—these were by the show's design. *Daredevil* season 3 tapped into our real-life fears and anxieties, and like practically all superhero fiction, it presented a fantastical story where those fears were conquered.

To anyone at that NYCC panel with their finger on the pulse, it was obvious just what (or who) Oleson was referring to. Wilson Fisk, finally embracing the role and appearance of the Kingpin, is our narcissistic tyrant.



At its bare bones, Fisk's plan to cultivate a culture of fear isn't far from how real-life tyrants do so. Despite the general public knowledge of his misdeeds, even garnering chants of "Lock him up!" outside of his lavish New York penthouse, Kingpin is able to obtain the trust of the common citizen. Fisk's apparent ace in the hole is a fake Daredevil, with a skilled FBI agent that Fisk himself corrupts by donning the red horned costume. With this terrorizing Daredevil imposter, Fisk creates a new public enemy for all to fear, projecting an image of power and safety that only he could provide.

And the imposter in question, Agent Pointdexter, is a troubled man with psychopathic tendencies and a desire to learn about empathy. Found in a vulnerable position, Dex is manipulated and deceived to enact Fisk's plan of wide-scale gaslighting. And as we find out later in the season, Fisk's corruption and manipulation of institutions such as the FBI has reached an absurd point. No character in *Daredevil* season 3 can better personify this than Agent Ray Nadeem.

In a period of time where many in the public are less trustful of law enforcement officials and the institutions that enable and protect them, it may be harder to swallow more idealistic portrayals of them through fictional portrayals. Not everyone is Special Agent Dale Cooper from *Twin Peaks* or the lovable bunch in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. But there was something captivating about Nadeem's own troubles and anxiety that brought him down to a more grounded level. His anxiety was economically based, as a result of covering his sister-in-law's health care coverage. Seeing a struggling, suburban Indian-American family just barely making it was instantly more tangible than the more lavish, romanticized views of such law enforcement officials on television.

I don't believe that anyone in this season of television had it harder than Nadeem. He is torn between his duty to provide for his family, his own moral, ethical code, his loyalty to his agency, his friendship with Dex, his desperation to fight through the bureaucracy denying him a larger paycheck, and so many other forces that are in play. By the end of his plight, Nadeem leaves a mixed legacy. While he was complicit in many of Fisk's crimes, he was also key to bringing the entire operation down. In a season where FBI agents are shown to be corrupt in a cartoonish fashion through a boardroom scene, Nadeem being the only one with an apparent conscience gives slight "not all cops" vibes, while at the same time being truly reflective of the hidden fears and anxieties even within the upper-middle class that can be exploited by bad actors.



Marvel's Daredevil

Let's rewind back to the point in which the paths of Matt Murdock, Dex, and Nadeem all converged in a manner orchestrated by Fisk. There was something powerful and fateful about the first meeting of the two "Daredevils"—halfway through the season, both characters have individually gone through radically different journeys of self-exploration, and the clash between the two was like a chemical explosion. While I reveled in the creativity of the choreography and the display of Dex's ability when the New York Comic-Con showed off the Bulletin fight sequence, something seeped into my head during my repeat viewing weeks later.

I had a sinking feeling that the context of the scene, with Dex murdering New York Bulletin journalists and the fight scene taking place in their office space, was meant to be a reference to another recent tragedy. It seemed to me at the time that this unsettling sequence was meant to mirror the real-life June 2018 shooting at the Capital Gazette building, home of publications The Capital and Maryland Gazette, where five employees were killed.

It was sometime before writing this piece that I did my due diligence and found that production of *Daredevil* season 3 ended earlier in June, a couple of weeks before the tragedy occurred. For the most part, similarities were mere coincidence. Still, anyone with their ear to the news in the United States knows fully well that this anti-journalist sentiment was alive and well before this attack. One of the more important pillars of our modern society is that of the journalist and the news publication having the freedom to hold those in power accountable to the truth. Likewise, these Bulletin reporters, led by Karen Page, were working on a piece that would have shed some light to Wilson

Fisk's fragile situation. Fisk nailed two birds with one stone, dispatching of the opposition, while also creating his false public enemy.

As with the aforementioned church attack in the show, the timing between the show's premiere date and real-life events yet again produced an unusual effect. Another pillar of our society, one based on worship and faith, was under attack by violent forces. While these fictional and real events have no direct relationship, this frightening sequence was certainly based on a real attitude of intolerance that has been pervasive for the longest time. The context and scenario are different from reality, but the imagery remains the same to recall such real-life fears and anxieties.



Marvel's Daredevil

Our main characters of Matt Murdock, Foggy Nelson, and Karen Page eventually get to a point where they must decide how to solve this impossible dilemma. The idealistic Foggy still firmly believed in the United States justice system, while a weary Matt believes that his vigilantism is the only solution. In real life, the justice system has been exploited, abused, corrupted, and has overall acted as a counter in favor of bad actors—I remained unsure of which method the show was advocating for. In the end, it seemed to favor a one-two punch combination.

If anyone is looking towards fantasy for solutions to real-life problems, they will find themselves sorely mistaken. Our current problems with combating cynicism, authoritarianism, and other negative forces will not be solved by two macho guys mercilessly punching each other in the face. While nothing will convince me that all art and media isn't political, I will concede that entertainment

such as *Daredevil* is meant to be escapism. I would argue, however, that the concept of “escapism” is grossly understood.

Not all escapist fiction is meant to completely take you away from the clear and present societal and personal anxieties. Rather, much of it is meant to take you to a place where those fears and anxieties can be confronted and defeated in a fantastical way—maybe it’s with a sword and shield, super strength, or the ability to fly. This is the fantasy that superhero fiction is able to provide.

*Daredevil* season 3 will obviously not solve any of our real-life problems—but it demonstrates that something as fantastical as the MCU can be very powerful by recalling realistic imagery and sentiments. In a society where people are fearful to live their regular lives under the threat of violence, however real or false that threat may be, and with bad actors exploiting that very fear, we need a fantasy like *Daredevil*. Season 3 is all about how he earned the famous moniker “the Man Without Fear.”

Daredevil may not be able to save us in real life, but perhaps for some people, he could inspire them to be just as fearless.

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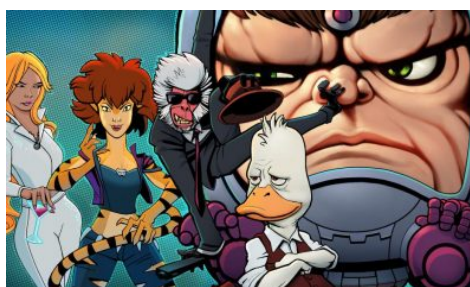
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On January 18, *The Punisher* will be back on Netflix, with **Jon Bernthal** returning to keep the character alive on a platform where Marvel shows have been producing great quality, but still haven't been able to survive. Fans were first introduced to the character in *Daredevil* season two, where fans learned the backstory of Frank Castle, a veteran and father, whose family was killed in front of him after returning from war. When Castle returned to Netflix for his stand-alone series, we got a slightly altered background story, focusing on his war buddy, Billy Russo, played by **Ben Barnes**, as a force behind the killing of Frank's family that day by the carousel.

Season two of ***The Punisher*** has some strong moments, particularly in the beginning. While season one hinted that Castle's fighting days may be over, as he took the identity of Pete Castiglione and sat in on some group therapy, season two shows that Pete is just as much of a fighter as Frank.

The first three episodes are the best of the season. These could stand alone as a new series about

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