

How do you translate existential dread and astrophysics into something that fits neatly between snack breaks? If you've read *The Three Body Problem* series to the end, you already know human triumph, endurance, evolution forgets itself, becomes something else entirely—something a 21st-century Earthling might not even recognize. Liu Cixin doesn't offer hope or heroes. He offers scale. The kind that makes you feel like a moth attracted to light that zaps you and evaporates all your internal fluids instantly. So when Netflix decided to adapt this cold, cosmic slow-burn on survival and insignificance into a polished TV drama with all the performative, algorithm-approved, societal checkboxes checked, **I was... "Concerned..."** You give it a Breakfast Club of scientist buddies. You trim the philosophy, flatten the existential, nihilistic themes and kill off the woman who doomed the planet *off-screen*. This isn't a takedown—I liked the show, but didn't love it. However, I loved the books, and somewhere in the transition from page to screen, a lot got lost in translation. Let's talk about that.

Major Spoilers ahead for both the books and show...

3 Body Problem: Season One (2024)

Writers: David Benioff, Liu Cixin

Directors: Minkie Spiro, Jeremy Podeswa, Derek Tsang, and Andrew Stanton

Stars: Jovan Adepo, Liam Cunningham, Eiza González, Jess Hong, Benedict Wong, Mario Kelly, Sea Shimooka, Alex Sharp, Rosalind Chao, Saamer Usmani

IMDB Rating: 7.5/10 Stars

Rotten Tomatoes Score: 78%

Runtime: Approximately 8 hours.

I have only one real issue with the shift in setting and characters and that is the Oxford Five or the Breakfast Club mentality of it. I have had problems with this in the past with other stories self-containing their open world universe or logic in which the story resides in. This isn't about opposing ensemble casts—some of the best stories thrive on tight-knit groups—but in this case, that creative choice shrinks a story that's supposed to feel big and *cosmic*.

—for me it is a *coincidence cluster* where the entire fate of the planet rests on one tight-knit group is what you'd expect from a Young Adult story, not a sweeping existential hard sci-fi epic. It ends up shrinking the scale of the story, ironically, when the *Three Body Problem* should feel *big*, messy, and global. It condenses itself to this small group who all seem to know one another intimately. The McGuffin here with this group is far too obvious compared to the randomness of the book and how it deals with the characters. In the book, the randomness of the characters—how they *don't* know each other, how they're chosen by circumstance or profession, not friendship—adds to the realism. The "*Oxford Five*" structure gives the show a kind of Netflix-approved checkbox-template for assembling the storytelling, but at the cost of thematic richness and believability. It's exactly how they did the Star Trek films. Confined galactic crises to one ship's crew or the handful of people on the bridge that we follow throughout the story opposed to using the open world environment to help drive the plot.

The book was inherently diverse *without trying too hard*, because it was rooted in genuine cultural contexts. **I'm not against diversity**—I'm against *performative* diversity that trades authenticity and complexity for visibility checklists. The show's approach to representation feels more like a studio mandate than a natural outgrowth of the story. —just like the books were—but when that representation is assembled with an overly fixated feel, it comes off as inauthentic or fake. It starts to look like box-checking rather than genuine world-building and character building. The show tries so hard to be “*universal*” that it paradoxically becomes more narrow. I apply this more to that Star Trek mentality of confining the story, plot, characters.

I thought it was weird they shifted characters to; they all know each other, all came up together, all have a unique and important part in the plot. On a planet of 8-billion, these five, who all know each other, grew up together, went to school together, hang out together, are this important. It's never even explained in the show why this is, where in the book it isn't important because all the main characters come from all over. Even though the book is more focused on Chinese politics and told from a Chinese point of view in the confines of the story, the book version had more diversity than the show even though the show tries to be more diverse with its cast of characters. In the show it seems more forced.

Netflix, like many modern studios, often leans into Diversity-Equity-Inclusion themes in a way that feels like branding rather than grounded storytelling on what is happening in society. In the realm of hard science fiction, themes like ideology, identity, and survival usually emerge from the plot and world, not the other way around. Ironically, science fiction authors tend to portray social dynamics and human diversity more organically than many studios can manage—because they're writing from within the world, not from outside it with a checklist. For context, I'm not aligned with either political camp. I don't buy into a lot of progressive dogma when it contradicts logic, law, or biology—but I also don't support turning every critique into a culture war skirmish. My issue here isn't with inclusion—it's with storytelling shortcuts that treat representation as an end rather than a means. All these characters are all old friends *and* pivotal scientific minds *and* are emotionally entangled. Feels like the writers couldn't let go of serialized prestige-TV formulas. The show plays more like a CW show pretending to be *Contact*.

Ye Wenjie's life, ideological evolution, and influence on the fate of humanity are dramatically reduced in the show. In the book, she's a deeply complex character—both a victim of cultural trauma and an intellectual radical whose personal choices shape the entire course of human civilization. We spend significant time with her on the mountain, fully understanding her psychological state and the weight of her decisions. Her transformation feels earned and haunting in the book. The show, while telling her backstory in a more fluid, cinematic way, through flashbacks, which is still the same as far as details go, but strips it down to the bare bones emotionally and psychologically. Her arc is flattened. Her moral ambiguity, intellectual ferocity, and long-view reckoning with her past are collapsed into something far more pleasant—and far less haunting. In making her more digestible, the show misses the whole point: that **Ye isn't meant to be liked**—she's meant to be *understood*. She's treated more like a background figure, and by the end, her impact is diminished to the point of being an afterthought. This is especially frustrating because it's Ye Wenjie who introduces the foundational idea of **Cosmic Sociology**—the philosophical seed that leads to the Dark Forest Theory. Her insight about the universe being a deadly, silent battleground is what gives humanity a fighting chance. That kind of influence shouldn't be sidelined.

Worse, the show has her killed off-screen in Episode 7, not by a known faction or meaningful rival, but by Tatiana—a completely invented character who feels like a stock assassin cultist. In the books, Ye Wenjie survives long enough to witness the consequences of her actions and even comes to regret them, adding real existential weight to her arc. The show robs us of that. And then there's Tatiana. She's not from the books at all, and seems to be a stand-in for the kind of fanaticism the ETO cultivates, but without the philosophical

depth. In the novel, the Earth-Trisolaris Organization is ideologically fractured—Adventists, Redemptionists, Survivalists—each with compelling (if disturbing) motives. In contrast, the show portrays them more like a Bond villain death cult. Tatiana's actions feel more like plot convenience than logical extensions of belief.

Even the presence of Sophon in the book—an AI avatar acting as the manipulative enforcer behind the scenes—is replaced in the show with these less convincing human proxies. It waters down the eeriness and otherworldly reach of the Trisolarans. Overall, Ye Wenjie's portrayal in the show lacks the moral and philosophical depth that made her such a powerful figure in the novels. The Sophons, the great technological feat by the aliens are a single proton, enlarged to the size of a planet so a computer can be graphed onto it and then shrunk back down. The Sophon can travel faster than light, interfere with human technology at the subatomic level and imprint images onto human eyes. They basically can do anything they need to do, but their effects at the macro level are mostly visual. The book spends quite a bit of time explaining the Sophons and their creation but the show strays too far from the hard science fiction awe of what it is the Trisolarans are doing. In the show, it's almost glossed over, and the alien menace loses some of that epic, existential, unknowable quality that makes the books so much better.

The renaming of the Trisolarans to the San-Ti is honest to the Chinese version of the book and is relabeled in the American translation of the books. Not necessarily changing the name. But for this review or discussion I will call them the Trisolarans. The organization that are the alien sympathizers is known as the ETO, Earth Trisolaris Organization, and is never mentioned in the show by name. In the book, *Trisolaris* reflects the triple-sun problem—chaotic orbital mechanics and environmental catastrophe. We call this the Three Body Problem. The inability to accurately predict three solar bodies orbiting one another. The book and show both throw a wrench on the concept by adding a planet that can support intelligent life but due to the unpredictability we see how intelligent life would have to evolve to escape this prison and prosper as a civilization. This is where the VR game comes into play.

The book also spends a lot of time inside the game. I am not entirely sure if the game in the book and the game in the show are conceptually the same thing. In the show, to me, it seems like a recruitment tool for the Trisolaran sympathizer group on Earth. In the book it feels more like Trisolarans want humans to understand them. I am not entirely sure, if in the book and the show, if the Trisolarans are wanting to consume humanity from the start or not. In the show it seems like the aliens want to work with humans but once they learn of how humanity really is; with dishonesty and malice as an integral part of our civilization, they turn into wanting to wipe out most of humanity. In the book, the Trisolarans want to keep some alive as a human-like zoo project in Australia centuries later. The Trisolarans are cold and calculating. They see humans as ants, but they're not vengeful. They want survival. The game is a way to explain their difficulty and test human potential. In the show, it does feel more like a recruitment tool, as if they're trying to manipulate rather than educate.

Western storytelling, especially for mainstream TV, struggles with the kind of philosophical detachment and subtle emotional current that Chinese literature often embraces. Liu's work doesn't spoon-feed you drama—it reflects on history, suffering, insignificance, and collective fate. This westernized-adaptation trades that in for something more character-focused and emotionally “relatable,” but often feels like it cheapens the stakes. In Liu's work, love is abstracted—people love ideas, humanity, the stars, not just each other. That's part of the appeal. —without reading the books, many viewers will be lost to the more deeper themes. The concepts are too big, and the pacing too jumpy, for a cold viewer to fully absorb the stakes. The show definitely lacks the more existential tone of the books, but tries hard in pacing and switching the chronology of the story to make up for this. The show includes scenes or scenes that setup *The Dark Forest* (Book 2) and *Death's End* (Book 3). It makes it harder to get this right because of the Chinese nature of the original writings. The Chinese tell stories differently. How they handle, love, affection, poetry is all different than how the United Kingdom and

United States do it. The transition from source material to adaptable Americanized TV-show deviates far too much for me to love this. I do like it, and they do a decent job of trying to condense these huge concepts, but I also do not love it for that same reason.

While some of the characters from the show are written better than others. Other characters, specifically of the Oxford Five, are combinations of characters from the books. You will have two or three characters that have specific traits show up in the show as one made-character. I get this. I don't exactly hate it, but at the same time traits that should be there are not there and traits that are there shouldn't be there. I feel like Saul, who is supposed to be Luo Ji is written poorly. Instead of going weed smoking, womanizer in the show they should have gone with a more Elon Musk-type mentality. Someone more detached from social settings and thinks at a high level. This character seems more/less just to stumble around, but I guess has super genius qualities that we don't really get to see and are usually setup as backhand comments rather than being someone that might be on the spectrum and just so happens to be a super genius. The book does this pretty well, but makes for a boring character. The show tries to spice this up by making him a everyday-man but who really isn't everyday due to his physics knowledge? Yeah, I am not buying that one too well. Mike Evans, the radical ETO leader, is totally erased in the show in a sense—or his role is drastically minimized. He was a crucial figure in the book's idea of misanthropic idealism. In the show he is more like a religious fanatic with money.

—there's no perfect way to adapt *The Three Body Problem* without reordering and cutting major content. That's not the core issue. The core issue is that the adaptation often misunderstands *why* things in the book worked so well. It would have been more satisfying to slow down and stick closer to the structure of *one book per season*, while letting each idea breathe more and only subtly mentioning aspects from the other books to setup future seasons, which they do –do in the show fairly well. I think it is a pretty good show, but it lacks the existential dread and pacing of the books. Also that hard science-fiction awe is missing and along with the Breakfast Club of scientists and main characters I can only give this a 7 out of 10. Its good by itself, but the book series is great. The series glimpses the dark forest, but it doesn't linger there long enough to feel the fear—or the awe.

Probably one of the best book series or “**the**” best I have ever read. This would have been better served as a mini-series, four to six, two-hour episodes, than an eight episode, one-hour series we got. I still want to see Season two, but I hope the showrunners recognize the narrative gravity of what they're adapting. If they plan to take on all three books, they'll need to commit to the depth—not just the spectacle. There are moments in the later books—especially one involving a storm that doesn't move and a kind of ‘magic’ born from the wreckage of higher dimensions—that simply can't be filmed in any literal sense. Not because of budget, but because our perception of reality isn't built for that kind of awe. If the series ever gets there, I wonder whether it will hint at that existential impossibility, or just render it as another visual effect and move on.

While the fourth book is considered canon by the author it is mostly looked at as fan-fiction, but in its defense, it is rare for fan-fiction to get a stamp of approval by the original author, creators of the original source material. I have written about Three Body in the past, but I only just now watched the show in the hopes that I would be interested in it enough to watch season two. I am. Its good. But it isn't great. It's not cheaply made, but I do not believe on the writing-side of this, enough care was taken with the source material. However, it is better than its Chinese counter-part. A thirty-hour series just focusing on the first book, but heavily edited and recreated for Chinese audiences. I'd think the reasons would be obvious. Let's not paint the Chinese as creating a human through their own tyrannical government processes that ends up taking it upon herself to destroy all of human through her original reply. “Come, we cannot save ourselves...”

“The universe is a dark forest. Every civilization is an armed hunter stalking through the trees like a ghost, gently pushing aside branches that block the path and trying to tread without sound. Even breathing is done with care. The hunter has to be careful, because everywhere in the forest are stealthy hunters like him. If he finds other life—another hunter, an angel or a demon, a delicate infant or a tottering old man, a fairy or a demigod—there’s only one thing he can do: open fire and eliminate them. In this forest, hell is other people. An eternal threat that any life that exposes its own existence will be swiftly wiped out. This is the picture of cosmic civilization. It’s the explanation for the Fermi Paradox.” — **Cixin Liu, The Dark Forest**

3 Body Problem: Season I vs The Book(s)
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