

'Men in Trees' starring Anne Heche swings to desirable new time slot

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NEW YORK (AP) - When "Men in Trees" premiered in September, its prospects were dim. After a minimal promotional push from ABC, its isolated Friday time slot seemingly ensured the series starring Anne Heche would meet a swift cancellation.

But over its nine-episode run, the show's enticing concept has gradually been nurtured into a delectable treat, ultimately earning a full-season pickup and a new 10 p.m. EDT Thursday home following television's most popular show.

Fans of "Grey's Anatomy" may be wondering if they should stick around for a program that seems to be arriving from nowhere - a show that no one seems to talk about, that is not available online and that is headlined by an actress with a lingering past.

Just as it sometimes takes a chapter or two before a good book takes hold, some TV shows need a few episodes before fully demonstrating why they deserve an audience.

"Men in Trees" has only become more gratifying with each new episode.

At its core, it's a show about the journey toward self-discovery and the relationships that often dictate the paths we travel in our pursuit of love and happiness.

The premise has a familiar ring to it. Marin Frist (Heche), a relationship coach and bestselling author from Manhattan, discovered her fiance was cheating while en route to a speaking engagement in Elmo, Alaska, a beautiful small town where men dramatically outnumber women.

The title "Men in Trees" comes from a forestry sign Marin bumped into as she was walking through town.

No longer able to write her next book about achieving her goal of getting married, she realized that she clearly had much to learn about men, relationships and, in turn, herself. So she embraced the inviting, unfamiliar world as an opportunity to explore her life in a different context.

It's understandable that some people might be skeptical about a show that stars Heche as an expert on relationships. Her tabloid history with Ellen DeGeneres, Steve Martin, aliens and alter egos still haunts her public persona.

But try to push that aside. Heche shines in the role, and her past merely provides an additional depth of understanding to a character eager to learn from life's unexpected twists and turns. She has softened with time and clearly has the chops and charisma to lead this endearing ensemble.

"Men in Trees" will stir up fond memories of the quirky 1990s series "Northern Exposure." It also unapologetically follows in the fashionable footsteps of "Sex and the City." In merging the two contrasting and often conflicting worlds, it refreshingly succeeds in refusing to dumb down the locals nor chastise the

visiting urbanites.

Each of the characters have developed into unique, empathetic individuals who independently grapple with universal demons.

Marin's guide in Elmo is Patrick (Derek Richardson), a 26-year-old mama's boy who runs the town's radio station and inn. Since Marin's arrival, he has fallen in love with Annie (Emily Bergl), Marin's most avid fan. He also discovered that his father is the town pilot, Buzz (John Amos).

These developments have been especially difficult for Patrick's mother, Celia (Cynthia Stevenson), the lonely, socially awkward police chief who arrests people when she craves companionship.

Wealthy bar owner Ben (Abraham Benrubi), a compassionate teddy bear, works alongside his estranged wife Theresa (Sarah Strange), a former rock musician who has chosen to take advantage of the abundance of men surrounding her.

In turn, Ben rekindled a relationship with Sara (Suleka Mathew), a single mother who supported herself as the local prostitute. But after Ben offered to help her pursue her dream of becoming a medic, she was plagued with insecurity and fled.

Back in New York, Marin's supportive workaholic editor, Jane (Seana Kofoed), has been trying to adapt to her best friend's broadening perspectives, including the foreign concept that the quest for fame and fabulousness may not overlap the path toward happiness.

And then there's Jack (James Tupper), the soft-spoken resident hunk and wildlife expert. While he and Marin have established a strong connection and have acted upon their mutual attraction, they are both still struggling with the fragile wounds from freshly broken hearts.

On ABC's website, series creator Jenny Bicks discusses her belief that the key to finding love involves focusing on who you are and what makes you happy. Once you're on your own path, everything else seems to fall into place.

"Men in Trees" appears to be following that philosophy. After forging its own identity alone on Friday nights, it has been given the opportunity to attract a large audience. If it stays on its current path, viewers should fall in love.

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