

Emily Bowens (Bowense@etsu.edu)

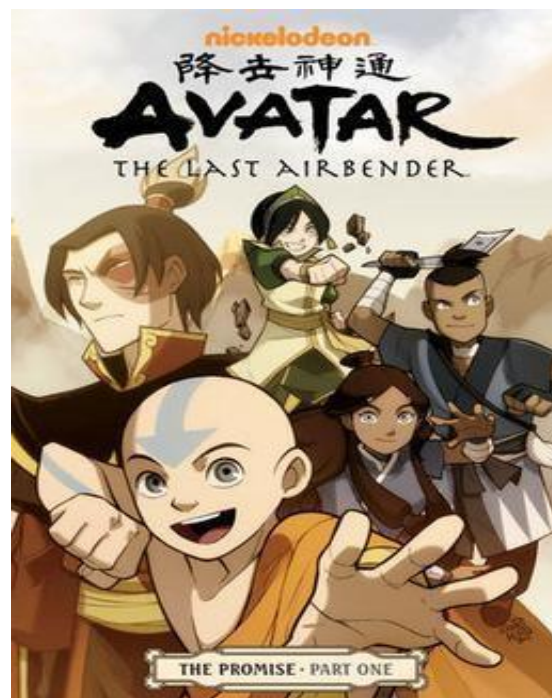
Dr. O'Donnell

Engl. 3130

12/2/20

More Than a Kid's Show: A Review of Nickelodeon's

Hit Cartoon: *Avatar: The Last Airbender*



Gene, Yang *Avatar: The Last Airbender - The Promise Part 1*
(Cover)

Fifteen years after its original air date, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has succeeded in becoming ingrained in pop culture with a recent revival just earlier this year. Put your misjudgments about kid's shows aside and become captivated by a powerful and mesmerizing story about war, violence, and the power of redemption.

A Reintroduction

At a time when all seemed wrong with the world, and anxiety was setting in after being in lockdown for two months in a Covid-ridden world, a guardian angel in the form of Netflix released the news that its streaming service would be releasing Nickelodeon's *Avatar: The Last Airbender* on May, 15 2020. So my boyfriend and I prepared to binge watch one of the most important shows from our childhood to bring back memories and cure our quarantine boredom. You may be wondering to yourself, why would you guys be so excited about a kid's show that premiered fifteen years ago? You see, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is a show that you can keep watching over and over again and keep finding new meaning every time. The show has the humor of a kid's show, but also the power to make you think more deeply and feel emotions that most kid's shows simply cannot achieve. As soon as we hit the play button that evening, we were transported back into the world of Avatars, the four nations, and the battle between good and evil. **(Beware there are many spoilers ahead including the ending of the show.)**

The Avatar's Journey

Avatar: The Last Airbender is set in a world that has four nations divided into their main element that the citizens of each nation possesses. Each nation has men and women who can learn to control any element that they were born with: fire, water, earth, or air. Every generation, one person

Show Title: *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Premiere Date: February 21, 2005

End Date: July,19 2008

Rating: TV-7

Genre: Animation, Adventure, and Action

Episodes: 61

Seasons: 3

Total Airtime: 1464 minutes

Creators: Michael Dante

DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko

Production Studio: Nickelodeon Animation Studios

Animation Studios- JM Studios and DR Movie

Composers-Jeremey Zuckerman and Benjamin Wynn

Main Cast: Aang-Zach Eisen, ZukoDante Basco, Sokka- Jack De Sena,

Katara- Mae Whitman, Toph-

Jessie Flower Azula- Grey Delisle

Iroh- Mako Iwamatsu Ozai-Mark

Hamill

Where to Watch: Netflix

is chosen to be the avatar, who will be a reincarnation of the previous Avatars. Each Avatar has the responsibility to bring peace to the human world and restore the balance between humans and spirits. Every Avatar faces a different journey and must master all four elements to save the world.

At the beginning of the show, everyone believes that the avatar is dead because of the Fire Nation's genocide of the

Air Nomads, who would have the next Avatar. Set in a grim world, the Fire Nation has launched an attack against the

other remaining nations which has resulted in a hundred years of war among the nations. Two Water Tribe siblings Katara and Sokka are out fishing one day and discover a mysterious looking iceberg. Once they are closer to the iceberg, they see the shadow of a person inside of the ice. Katara is able to break the iceberg, which happens to hold twelve-year-old Aang, the avatar and the last Airbender, using her water bending, which involves manipulating the water and ice around her with the powers she has. After this, Katara, Sokka, and Aang set out on their journey on Aang's flying Bison, Appa, to have Aang master all four elements, end the hundred years of war, defeat the current Fire lord Ozai, and most importantly, restore peace to the four nations.

Although *ATLA* is a show meant for children, there is a plethora of violent and mature topics highlighted in the show. Because *ATLA* is set in a dystopian world during the end of a hundred years of war, topics such as destruction, death, and genocide are frequently explored during the show. The show captures the responsibility and consequences of war in a way that even children can understand. One of the creators of the show Michael Dante DiMartino explains that one of the main issues with exploring these themes was that the show would need to achieve



(A fan made drawing of the four nations from *ATLA*, 2005
https://www.reddit.com/r/coolguides/comments/cwk4x8/a_map_of_the_four_nations_from_avatar_the_last)

“telling a complex story with serious themes, while at the same time ensuring the show remained fun, entertaining, and exciting to watch.” (Pumar) War and violence affect even the most innocent people throughout the show. The majority of the main characters in the show are only children and have only known a world full of violence and war. During a moment that Zuko, the Firelord’s son, tries to capture Aang, he tells him a story of “when he was just a kid.” Aang replies to this, explaining to Zuko that Zuko “is still only a kid.” Children, especially the Firelords’s children, are used as killing machines to further the rule of the Fire Nation. Other characters are denied their childhoods and even lose their parents because of the war. Although death is seldom shown, the creators of *ATLA* show the horrendous and tremendous consequences of war and violence that other children’s shows simply gloss over.

Aang’s final decision to spare the Firelord and save the world through more passive means, shows that there is power in peace. Despite living in a world full of violence and death, Aang chooses to fight the majority of his enemies through dodging and redirecting their attacks. Only when he has exhausted all his options does Aang attack his enemies directly. By choosing his attacks carefully, Aang displays the value that he has for life in a time when the value of life is threatened daily. Although his entire culture and people have been destroyed, Aang exhibits the emotional and physical restraint needed to both save the world and keep true to his culture’s ways. Often, Aang demonstrates more restraint and control than the adults around him.



(Aang takes away Fire Lord Ozai's fire bending Season 3 "Sozin's Comet" ATLA, 2008)

Rather than fall into the violence and destruction around him, Aang promotes the ideal that violence is not always the answer.



(Comparison of Zuko in season two(right) to Zuko in season three (Left)
 ATLA, 2005 <https://screenrant.com/avatar-zuko-character-arc-masterpiece/>)

The Power of Redemption

One of the most memorable elements of *ATLA*, is the show's skill with character development. Each character learns from their mistakes and utilizes those moments to grow as the show progresses. One of the biggest and most complex character developments, is

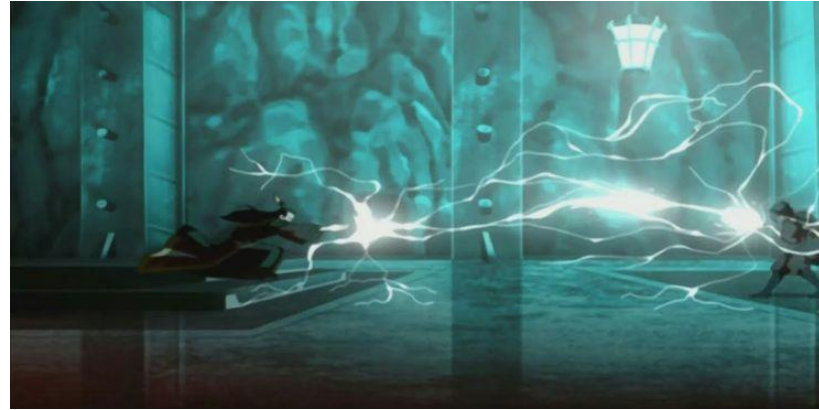
with the Fire lord's son, Zuko. Zuko spends the majority of the show as a villain and is constantly trying to capture the Avatar. Later, we find out that Zuko was banished by his father and sent on an impossible quest for speaking out against an injustice caused by his nation.

Over the span of three seasons, Zuko goes from believing the Fire Nation is the grandest nation in the world to joining the Avatar and his team to fight against his father's and his nation's twisted actions. Even when Zuko is trying to harm the Avatar, you cannot help but root for him because he is partly only a child caught up in his father's and his nation's manipulation of him. Zuko's transformation into a good person is not traditional. Although he has moments of transformation during all three seasons, when faced with the choice to do good, he often reverts back to his old tendencies. His constant back and forth and struggles makes Zuko's redemption one of the most relatable because his transformation mirrors change in real life.

Rather than letting his mistakes define him, he uses them to grow and become a better person. Zuko's journey involves him letting go of his childhood trauma, his nation's history, and his inner conflict to find peace and become one of the wisest leaders in the future. Zuko matures into the character he is by constantly questioning everything he has ever known and even his own purpose and motives. Zuko's journey is incredibly complicated and full of setbacks, but that is what makes his story and his redemption the most memorable and compelling.

The Stunning Animation and Design

Because the animation is well thought out and often breathtaking in many scenes, the animation in *ATLA* never appears kiddish or simple. The fight scenes are exceptionally detailed, with intense movements and vibrant colors swirling on the screen. The detail is not only



(Zuko redirects the lighting that his father, Fire Lord Ozai, attempts to attack him with in season 3, episode 11 "The Day of Black Sun Part 2 : The Eclipse,

in the fight scenes, rather there is detail in every aspect of the show's animation. Every character, even background ones, are incredibly detailed in their facial expressions, appearance, animations, and outfits. Everything from the scenery to the gestures of the characters are well thought out and adds to the experience of the show. Like most aspects of the show, Eastern influences appear in the soundtrack as well. Just like the animation, the music adds to the



(Katara and Avatar Aang during a moment in season two, episode 2 "The Cave of Two Lovers" *ATLA*, 2006)

atmosphere of each episode and works along with the animation to captivate and move the show's audience. Fight scenes, moments of emotion, love, regret, and so many other scenes are intensified by the often powerful and moving soundtrack. The last episode of the show even used a live

orchestra when recording the soundtrack, which shows

the efforts the creators, producers, and the entire team went through to ensure the success of *ATLA*.

In a Galaxy not so far Away

ATLA creates a world that encapsulates both fantasy and realism. While bending and powers keep the show on track for a typical children's cartoon, each nation is built on traditions and customs from different civilizations around the world. Rather than solely focus on the powers and fantasy elements like many other stories, *ATLA* blends both culture and fantasy together in a manner that feels fresh yet familiar. Similarities between water benders and the Inuit culture appear in appearances and clothing. Avatar Aang is influenced by the Dali Lama, and follows Buddhist principles such as his pacifist fighting style and his vegetarian diet. Even the nation's ideologies

are based off real-world cultures.

The Fire Nation's imperialistic culture and ruling draws a close parallel to Imperial Japan and with an even closer look American culture today. Another common trait of the Fire Nation is for schools and officials to not speak about the atrocities they commit against the other Nations. Many students in the Fire Nation do not understand the extent of how much destruction their nation has caused and are even taught they are the greatest nation in the world. Other cultures such as the



(A fan made edit comparing water benders to traditional gear worn by Inuit people. *ATLA*, 2005. <https://twitter.com/apastelwitch/status/1265794468449415169>.)

city of Ba Sing Se in the Earth Kingdom appear to be isolated from the world and horrors around them. Through the use of propaganda and controlling what information is passed on to the citizens of the city, the government controls the



(A fan made edit comparing the Dali Lama to Avatar Aang from *ATLA*, 2005 <https://sites.google.com/a/mun.ca/the-zen-of-avatar-the-last->)

population and brainwashes them into believing that there is not a war going on outside the strong walls of Ba Sing Se. The moment the city is attacked by the Fire Nation they are completely underprepared and lose the city to the Fire Nation until the end of the show.

A Show that Stands the Test of Time

Although the show is over fifteen years old, the show reminds its audience that although you may make mistakes and that all may feel hopeless, hope is never truly lost. From a world corrupted and broken down from a hundred years of war to characters that make many mistakes but still continue to improve their lives, *ATLA* reminds us that we have the strength to continue on despite our setbacks. In our crazy world today, the show leaves us with the importance of having strength and perseverance in our daily lives, while having the humor, beauty, and story telling to distract us from the bizarreness that seems to consume our lives. In the wise words of everyone's favorite uncle, "Life happens wherever you are, whether you make it or not." (Uncle Iroh).

Further Recommendations

If you are like me and many other fans of *ATLA*, you may want more content to explore. Fear not, for the creators of the show have been producing comics since 2005. Since the spinoff series is not focused on the characters from the main show, the comics explain what happened to the characters as adults. I also recommend the spin off show *The Legend of Korra*, although it does not have as good of a plot or character development as *ATLA*.

Works Cited

Avatar: The Last Airbender. Created by Michael Dante DiMartino, and Bryan Konietzko, Nickelodeon Animation Studios , 21 Feb. 2005.

Bulbulia, Ziyad. "The Cultural Influences of Avatar: The Last Airbender." *The Art Nerd*, 15 July 2019, <https://ziyadtheartnerd.wordpress.com/2018/05/23/the-cultural-influences-of-avatar-the-last-airbender/>

NA. "Air Nomads and Buddhism - Eastern Religion and Avatar: The Last Airbender." *Google Sites*, sites.google.com/a/mun.ca/the-zen-of-avatar-the-last-airbender/air-nomads-andbuddhism.

NA. "Four Nations." *Avatar Wiki*, avatar.fandom.com/wiki/Four_nations.

Paez-Pumar, Luis. "How the Creators of "Avatar: The Last Airbender" Made the Smartest Kids Show Ever" *Fatherly*, 12 Mar. 2018, www.fatherly.com/play/michael-dante-dimartino-bryan-konietzko-avatar-the-last-airbender-kids-show/.