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***Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays*, edited by Amanda Taylor and Susan Nylander**

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Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays, edited by Amanda Taylor and Susan Nylander

Abstract

A review of the collection of critical essays, *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays*

Additional Keywords

Supernatural; death; fandom; fantasy television

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DEATH IN SUPERNATURAL: CRITICAL ESSAYS, edited by Amanda Taylor and Susan Nylander. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019. 249 p. ISBN 9781476668611. \$29.95.

ALTHOUGH DEATH IS OFTEN TIMES A TABOO SUBJECT among polite company, in The CW's long-running fantasy drama *Supernatural* (2005–2020) death appears as a concept—and sometimes as a character—in each episode. This collection by editors Amanda Taylor and Susan Nylander, *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays*, explores how the series, and by extension Western culture in general, approaches death and dying. By concentrating on the single subject of death, this book trades breadth for depth, and the collection offers a valuable contribution to contemporary scholarship while making itself accessible to the fans who might be attracted to this book by the foreword by Julian Richings, the actor who plays Death (even though most essays focus on the concept, not the character). These twelve essays examine death from various angles. While some of the arguments may be contentious or exaggerated, others—especially the ones by Michail-Chrysovalantis Markodimitrakis, Rebecca M. Lush, and Susan Nylander—distinguish themselves by their nuanced and detailed readings of a subject sometimes difficult to discuss. Granted, not all essays are as accessible as the editors' introduction makes them seem, but Markodimitrakis in particular

succeeds at providing a good argument in an accessible academic style. Overall, *Death in Supernatural* stays firmly on its titular topic. Some readers may be surprised—perhaps even disappointed—that the collection never compares death in *Supernatural* to death in other relevant fantasy or media enterprises, for instance Terry Pratchett’s highly popular character Death in his Discworld novels, but this collection nevertheless emphasizes grief as an aspect of death—a point highlighted in the afterword by Lynn S. Zubernis, a clinical psychologist. Taken as a whole, this collection helps remind us that even though death is inevitable, we can still make positive choices in life, and that grief is the ultimate price we pay for love.

The editors divide *Death in Supernatural* into five sections, each devoted in some way to death, dying, or grief: American Traditions and Attitudes, Folklore and Mythology, Resurrection, When Women Die, and Grief and Grieving. With the limited space available here, I cannot cover every essay in the collection, but my highlights should give a general sense of the volume’s strengths and weaknesses. Luckily enough, one of those highlights comes in the first essay, “Death, American Style,” where Susan Nylander explains how many of the show’s elements appeal specifically to American audiences: American-made vintage cars traversing the continental U.S.; the familiar landscape; the soundtrack; random motels; and even the name “Winchester” itself, the rifle that allegedly “won the West.” One of the charges laid upon Dean by his father John is to look out for his brother Sam, and Nylander points out that these “last words” form a sense of intimacy and connection between the living characters in *Supernatural* and those who have passed on. As she explains, these kinds of omens remind viewers that “death will come for us and those we love, and no matter how well we believe we are prepared for it, the emotions of these losses always seem to catch us unawares” (22). What makes Nylander’s discussion especially relevant is how Western approaches to death have changed in the last century: death has become more clinical, and more impersonal. While people live longer, they often die in a hospital, alone, without family surrounding them, and no one witnesses their last words.

In another strong essay, “Blood, Death and ‘Demonic Germ Warfare,’” Rebecca M. Lush comments on the Lost Colony of Roanoke and the disappearance of the English colonists in the episode “Croatoan” (season 2, episode 9). In the series, demonic germ warfare is represented as the Croatoan virus. Demons infect humans with their blood, temporarily turning them into killers—victims’ blood becomes clear after several hours, unlike what Lush calls “invisible bullets” (71), the diseases that killed the indigenous population. Unlike the original Roanoke legend, Lush notes that this *Supernatural* episode avoids the “us vs. them” binary between English colonialists and the Native Americans; instead, it attributes violence to the entire modern community in the

show. Although Lush does not suggest that *Supernatural* challenges colonial narratives in general, this episode nevertheless “implicitly raises questions about the ethics of the English colonial project and provides contemporary critique about the nation’s past” (77).

Arguably the best essay in terms of connecting fans and academics is provided by Michail-Chrysovalantis Markodimitrakis. He concentrates on a single episode, “The Mystery Spot” (season 3, episode 11), where Dean dies and comes back every day à la *Groundhog Day*. As Sam eventually identifies the Trickster as responsible, Markodimitrakis effectively captures how Sam changes during these six months of hunting the Trickster, essentially turning into his father John Winchester by doing nothing except hunt, sleep, and eat. His motel rooms are tidy; his weapons are perfectly organized in the trunk of the Impala (unlike Dean’s chaotic arrangement); and he turns into a focused, cold-blooded monster killer. Although Sam had a more strained relationship with their father than Dean, “The Mystery Spot” presents him as being closer to him than viewers may have thought. According to Markodimitrakis, the “Trickster is the divine intervention, a *deus ex machina*, whose purpose is to help Sam prepare for his eventual transition to a life without Dean” (182). The Trickster gives him a chance for a different, normal life, something that Sam has always wanted. However, this fails, and Sam’s reaction to Dean’s seemingly final death takes him down a different path—the same path his brother and father followed before him.

Unfortunately, other essays in the book are more questionable. For example, Jessica George in “Death, Resurrection and the Monstrous Evolution of the Winchesters” suggests that the main characters’ constant resurrections make them monstrous. Dead bodies that refuse to die, she argues, blur the “boundaries between living self and dead Other, and [are] therefore monstrous” (108). Although some parts of *Supernatural* support this contention—for instance, Sam loses his soul and Dean is inflicted with the Mark of Cain—George’s essay seems to overlook the fact that the brothers nevertheless remain very human until the end. Evil, granted, may tempt them for a while, but they always return to their original, human values. They are so human, in fact, that in season 5 they manage to convince the angel Castiel to question his own “orders from Heaven.” Notably, George quotes Gregory Stevenson, a professor at Rochester University who also authored an essay on *Supernatural*, who states that the “ability to act in the interests of others, to sacrifice oneself for another, that defines the human potential for good. [...] It is what makes one a human” (118). Given that this is precisely what the Winchesters do, George’s quote from Stevenson ironically contradicts the point George herself is trying to make.

In another essay, “When I come back, I’m gonna be pissed,” Erin M. Giannini suggests that the constant deaths and resurrections of the main

characters facilitate development of both the narrative and the characters. Unfortunately, her argument is relatively unfocused. Rather than a clear thesis-driven claim, Giannini outlines how death has seemingly changed the Winchester brothers, but her remarks do not lead to a clear conclusion. Multiple misstatements also mitigate the reliability of Giannini's outline. For example, although one might—for the sake of argument—concede that Dean struggles with self-esteem and considers himself the “lesser” of the two brothers (129), it seems wholly false to suggest that the demon Alastair becomes Dean's father-figure in Hell (132). The series provides no evidence of this, and, indeed, Alastair emotionally and physically breaks Dean through torture, leading him unwittingly to break the first of the 66 seals that start the Apocalypse.

However, the collection's most problematic section is “When Women Die,” which contains two essays. In the first one, “The (Dead) Girl with the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo,” Anastasia Salter argues that since women never become fixtures in *Supernatural* and most of the cast are white males, the show perpetuates white masculinity. She claims that the “show doesn't build a supportive group of women and non-white characters around its (ostensibly) straight white male leads” (140), but there is an obvious counterargument to this claim. For instance, although Charlie Bradbury is the main lesbian character, the show *does* also have several other gay characters: Max Banes, Claire and Kaia, Alan J. Corbett, Cesar and Jesse Cuevas, Demian and Barnes. Likewise, several other important women in *Supernatural*—Rowena, Jody Mills, and Donna Hanscum—all become permanent and non-trivial fixtures in the series. They may not appear in every episode—though neither does Castiel, for that matter—but they recur in arcs that span several seasons. Likewise, arguing that Charlie Bradbury dies in a role of mere “object and instrument, not of agent” (153) seems to overlook the fact that she has become a major character with personal agency in multiple seasons before her death.

In contrast to these arguments about white masculinity, Freddie Harris Ramsby explores the virgin/whore binary in *Supernatural* in her essay “I prefer ladies with more experience.” Similarly to Salter, though, Ramsby avoids discussing obvious counterarguments. For example, Ramsby suggests that *Supernatural*'s demon women are “hybrid” in that they straddle the dualism of good and evil (161), but this claim can be easily challenged; the show never presents *anything* positive about female demons. These demons are consistently manipulative and scheming, constantly possessing mortal (and even dead) bodies. The hybridity claimed by Ramsby is therefore hard to see. Still, the deaths of female demons are not that different from the deaths of “virgin” women such as Mary and Jessica. The demons Ruby and Meg die by knives thrust into their abdomens while Mary and Jessica are also impaled before their deaths; they also burn on the ceiling. Nor does the show consistently normalize

specifically *male* violence against women. For instance, Ramsby seems to overlook how the women in the British Men of Letters torture Sam in a very cold manner. Although Ramsby quotes Virginia Woolf as saying that to “fight has always been the man’s habit, not the woman’s” (157), she seems to ignore how television drama is becoming ubiquitously more violent, and the line between male and female violence is no longer clear.

Overall, though, *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays* is an interesting volume whose strongest essays will certainly appeal to academics and fans alike. Appearing in 2019, the book only covers the show’s first thirteen seasons, but many of the arguments made here still apply through the final season’s finale. While the series is overwhelmingly secular, it draws on major religious themes from the Judeo-Christian tradition—especially on Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Examining many of these elements, *Death in Supernatural* suggests that the show uses death to give us a better way to make peace with the inevitable and tells us, as Taylor notes, that “pain of all kinds is integral in shaping who we are” (201). The authors of the volume see *Supernatural* as demonstrating that living with grief and death is not only possible but unavoidable. With its engaging and thought-provoking analysis, the book offers a valuable contribution to the growing body of scholarship on *Supernatural*. While the book is mostly academic, the authors’ analysis will be of great interest not only to popular culture and television studies scholars but also to fans of the show who wish to deepen their understanding of its rich and multi-layered world. Ultimately, *Supernatural* deserves more collections like this one by Taylor and Nylander.

—Martina G. Wise



ADAPTING TOLKIEN: PROCEEDINGS OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY SEMINAR 2020, edited by Will Sherwood. Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2021. xii, 149 pp. ISBN 9781913387693. \$18.99.

While Tolkien’s mixed views on adaptation are well known, this collection harnesses the range of approaches towards altering, modifying, reshaping, and transforming Tolkien’s work. *Adapting Tolkien: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar 2020*, edited by Will Sherwood, includes six contributions ranging from illustration, film, language, music, and even naming features in space. The range of articles featured in this volume will attract a broad spectrum of interests, though some hold more firmly to the concept of adapting Tolkien than others.