

David Lavery, 1949-2016

“His dreams, as dreams often do, exhibit more wisdom than the dreamer knows.”

—David Lavery, *Late for the Sky*

“Words are only themselves by being more than themselves. Perhaps the same is true of human beings.”

—Owen Barfield, *The Rediscovery of Meaning*

“You think you know what’s to come—what you are. You haven’t even begun.”

—Joss Whedon, “Restless,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

“ . . . like nothing else in Tennessee.”

—Wallace Stevens, “Anecdote of the Jar”

[1] David Lavery, author, scholar, professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies at Middle Tennessee State University, co-founder of the Whedon Studies Association, of the *Slayage* conferences, and of this journal, died suddenly on August 30, 2016 after a brief illness.

[2] His death is an incalculable loss; his life, an even more incalculable gift. David’s work helped to establish television studies as an area of serious scholarly worth. Among other topics, he published books on (alphabetically) *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Deadwood*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Heroes*, *Lost*, *My So-Called Life*, *Seinfeld*, *The Sopranos*, *Supernatural*, *Twin Peaks*, and *The X-Files*, sometimes more than one book on the same series. His edited collection on *Twin Peaks*, titled *Full of Secrets* (Wayne State UP, 1995) is considered by many to be a watershed in television studies—a serious aesthetic appreciation, not simply an analysis of mechanics or of social implications. But David had a broad scholarly reach: his graduate work was in film studies, and he loved teaching Fellini; he created, with G. B. Tennyson, a film on philosopher and “Inkling” Owen Barfield that can be viewed on the Barfield site he maintained; he was an admirer of Wallace Stevens: his “Imagination and

Insurance: Wallace Stevens and Benjamin Whorf at the Hartford” can be accessed at davidlavery.net, the expansive site of his own works (which I hope will be long maintained). He has stated his primary interest to be not television or film or poetry but creativity. His memorial service referenced Rilke and Rumi. David’s intellectual breadth was such that, whatever the topic, he always understood the reference; he always got the joke (and loved making them).

[3] His reach was broad in other ways as well. He was the kind of teacher and mentor who not only sparked in his students the light of the mind; he also helped them, and colleagues, too, in practical ways as well, whether it was a ride to the airport, an email address for a contact, a fervent defense in an administrator’s office, or a couch to spend the night on. At his memorial service, his former graduate student, the current chair of the English department at the University of Northern Alabama, Dr. Cynthia Burkhead (later his collaborator and currently the president of the Whedon Studies Association) spoke of “the Lavery Effect”—the spreading wave that lifted people, who lifted others in their, and ultimately his, wake. At little mini-wakes around the world, people have lifted a glass to celebrate the life, the effect, of David Lavery.

[4] In the mid-nineties David asked me (and my friend J. P. Williams) to contribute to the *X-Files* collection he was editing with Jill (Angela) Hague and Marla Cartwright (*Deny All Knowledge*, Syracuse UP 1996). Thus began our long friendship and collaboration. We had just begun to know each other through the Popular Culture Association in the South; David was born in Oil City, Pennsylvania, but went to graduate school in Florida and had lived in Tennessee since the nineties; I, born in Memphis, lived in Georgia. PCAS nurtured us as it has so many others. At the turn of the century, he asked me if I wanted to join him in editing a collection on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (a collection for which he insisted my name should be listed first, despite his greater experience and equal contribution). It was David who, when the response to our Call for Papers was overwhelming, suggested that we create the journal *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*. It was David, too, who suggested that we have the first *Slayage* conference—in Nashville, sponsored by his school MTSU. After all,

England and Australia had already had academic *Buffy* conferences (where we gathered with people like future WSA president and Lavery collaborator Stacey Abbott—among many others). David would subsequently have conferences on other television series as well—most recently, *Mad Men*; but, as the readers of this journal presumably know, the *Slayage* conference is one that has continued, biennially since the first—the only regular academic conference on a single television creator (and his collaborators). In 2008, David, Tanya R. Cochran, and I founded the Whedon Studies Association, an organization that already existed in reality but which at that point gained legal status. It was one of the many (perhaps the most widely spread) gatherings of people through whom the Lavery Effect could be felt.

[5] I am one of the many beneficiaries of the Lavery Effect. David is the one who recommended to the conveners of the first academic conference on *Buffy* at the University of East Anglia in 2002 that they invite me to be the opening keynote speaker (Roz Kaveney was the closing keynoter). Had they not paid my way, I certainly could not have afforded to attend the first *Buffy* conference.

[6] My attempt to convey something of the significance of David's life to the broader academic community and to the family of Whedon scholars is plagued by insufficiency: there is so much more that should be said. I have not, for example, spoken at all about the way his own love of his family, especially his brilliant wife and daughters—Joyce Lavery, Rachel Lavery, and Sarah Porterfield—informed his interactions on the page and in person. These gaps of meaning must be filled in by you, the reader.

[7] David loved epigraphs. (David, Tanya, Cynthea Masson, and I were inconsolable when Syracuse UP told us we must remove the epigraphs from all of the essays in the 2014 collection we edited together, *Reading Joss Whedon*.) I think that multiple epigraphs, in particular, form a peculiar kind of poetry: meaning inheres in the relationships between the lines, in the gaps, and we, the readers, must participate to create a meaning that is more than any separate sentence. In the same way, television creators such as Joss Whedon invite their readers to participate in meaning-making through symbolism—verbal, visual, aural. That participation is a way we choose to create relationship

and, sometimes, eventually, to create family. David was a creator. His life was a dream of meaning. His works, as we continue to read them, and his influence, as we continue to expand it, still live. He hasn't even begun.

—Rhonda V. Wilcox
Editor, *Slayage*