

Blood, Body and Soul: Essays on Health, Wellness, and Disability in Buffy, Angel, Firefly, and Dollhouse. Edited by Tamy Burnett and AmiJo Comeford. *Worlds of Whedon.* Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2022. 9781476667638. 309 pp. \$29.95, Kindle \$17.99.

Burnett and Comeford set themselves the admirable goal of looking at issues concerning the physical body in this group of four Whedon texts; specifically, at representations of physical injury, illness, disability, or difference, and issues of mental health tied to physical causes or conditions (4) in *Buffy* (1997-2003), *Angel* (1999-2004), *Firefly/Serenity* (2002-2003 and 2005), and *Dollhouse* (2009-2010). As they point out, “overall analysis on how Whedon and his collaborators carry out thematic concerns via the bodies of their characters is, at present, a fairly sparse area of scholarship” (3). Their hope is that readers will “take real-life lessons about our own responses to disability, impairment, trauma, illness” and other “shifts” to bodily identity in ourselves and others (8) by engaging with the seventeen original essays in this meaty collection.

While perhaps sparse at present, this new scholarly focus on the physical body is not a concern unique to Whedon studies. For example, in Tolkien studies, Christopher Vaccaro’s 2013 essay collection *The Body in Tolkien’s Legendarium* marked the first sustained attention to issues relating to physical bodies in Tolkien’s main works, and since then the field has seen a growing number of individual papers on issues such as disabilities and bodies traumatized by war. Studies of science fiction author Lois McMaster Bujold’s works often use a disability studies lens because the main characters she writes tend to be disabled in some way.

The editors of *Blood, Body and Soul* acknowledge that the field of Whedon studies is shifting from a focus on Whedon as *auteur* to a more generous and needed acknowledgment that television and film productions, such as these, are necessarily highly collaborative and intertextual. In keeping with this journal's own enlargement of focus, "Whedon" now tends to become instead a shorthand for all of the writers, cast, and crew involved in these collaborative artistic projects. It is clear, though, that many of these essays originated in the period before our recent necessary reconsiderations of Whedon-the-individual, and that dissonance sometimes problematizes how we might read these essays.

Mary Ellen Iatropoulos's lead essay in the section on disability, medicine, and wellness helpfully defines two deeply contrasting models of disability and how they demonstrate "anxiety about negotiating the marginalized self within oppressive society" (12). One is the biomedical/personal tragedy model in which the person with the impairment is seen as a problem to fix, stigmatized and unsupported by their social-cultural environment; a model which in fact "turns impairment into disability" (18). This is the model that drives *Angel's* Lindsey McDonald and *Dollhouse's* Bennett Halverson in their quests for retribution and revenge. Contrasting with this is a supportive community model, demonstrated by how the Scooby gang supportively handles Xander's loss of an eye in the final season of *Buffy*, providing an environment of honest communication where mistakes and missteps are dealt with openly and even affectionately. Environment—chosen family in particular—makes all the difference.

Cynthia Headley explores a similar oppositional pair of models about societal attitudes towards disability: the relatively standard model where disability is seen as a problem in need of

an individual or societal solution or cure, as opposed to a model where disability can demonstrate different and valuable perspectives on ways of being in the world and can even become an asset, at the very least demonstrating that the “inclusion benefits the community” (28). Headley’s presentation of Buffy and River Tam as disabled forces the reader to shift their definition of disability, but supports this contention that a community which values different abilities is stronger, healthier, and more ethical. Her conclusion is aspirational: “the disability remains, but the community gets cured of its inability to work with the disability” (40).

But the next essay asks the question: What if the community is instead exploiting the disability? As the well-known Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer meme puts it, “Deviation from the norm will be punished unless it is exploitable.” Lorna Jowett uses Wolfram and Hart, the evil corporation central to *Angel*, as a prime mechanism for exploring this issue. This essay concentrates primarily on “electro girl” Gwen Raiden, who tries to keep her independence as a freelance burglar, and werewolf Nina Ash, who remains a valued part of her blood family in spite of her transformation. The “female freak” may “transform [her] disabilities into professional assets” (43), but she still may face the dangers of dealing with hierarchical and patriarchal power structures. But both young women, like *Angel* himself, continue to view their differences as deficits and seek out cures.

Elizabeth K. Switaj further unpacks the personal versus societal models of disability, again by asking the reader to define slayerhood as a form of impairment. While there are medical or personal-tragedy aspects to the calling, slayerhood primarily prevents the girls called to this mission from living anything resembling a socially acceptable “normal” life. Buffy

is still expected to turn in her homework, hold down a job, and head up her family after her mother dies, no matter how slayerhood interferes. Models of secrecy and denial used in coping with disability explain why she does not ask for accommodation. This essay is particularly valuable in that it brings intersectionality into the picture, addressing issues of race and institutionalization that impact Kendra and of class and neglect in relation to Faith. It is only in Season 8, with the formation of a community of Slayers, that slayerhood “no longer functions as a disability” (69).

Intellectual disability as a form of impairment is the focus of Barbara Stock’s essay. The Dolls of *Dollhouse* – the Actives in their resting state – are a close-enough analogue for intellectual impairment, especially in the “social perceptions attached to them” (73) – that is, the way they are characterized as children or animals (“bison”) in particular. Like physical disability, intellectual disability is socially constructed; it is the varying demands of the person’s environment that create barriers or provide support. Stock addresses issues of caregiving ethics, legal rights, and quality of life, using the Dolls to provide opportunities to think about the intellectually disabled in our own culture.

“Normal Again” (*Buffy* 6.17) is of course one of the key episodes for considering mental health issues in the Whedonverse. Roslyn Weaver points out that the fact that Buffy’s “physical health and strength are superior to ordinary humans” lends additional poignancy to the “psychological vulnerability and fragility” shown in this episode (90). One of Weaver’s core questions here is: Does the episode “contribute to or subvert stigma” surrounding mental illness (89)? On the one hand, the clear privileging of the acceptance of responsibility as a marker of healthy adulthood is a positive, but

there are certainly disturbing and stereotypical “negative implications” in the episode’s use of “monstrosity and demonic possession” (96) as an embodied metaphor for mental illness.

Brett S. Stifflemire provides a capsule summary of the history of medical education and models of health care as a basis for his examination of Dr. Simon Tam’s journey in *Firefly*. Simon initially takes a strongly biomedical approach to caring for the crew of the *Serenity*, focused simply on repairing bodies as they are damaged; the author points to an interesting early exchange with Kaylee, where the young mechanic is attuned to the ship’s way of communicating its needs to her, while Simon in contrast is distant and impersonal with his charges. As he interacts with the crew and as together they provide a home for his sister River, this “gives way to a more humanistic, biopsychosocial method that seeks to treat the entire person” (107). Simon’s whole path demonstrates a growth in what Richardson and Rabb have called Whedon’s “alternative communitarian love ethics” (qtd. 109) and an acceptance of a role in the “humanistic morality” of resistance to the “mandated conformity” of the Alliance (111).

To conclude this section, Madeline Muntersbjorn considers the soul as part of the overall health of an individual, and particularly how *Buffy* usually privileges a strong sense of responsibility as an indicator of a healthy body/soul balance. Muntersbjorn suggests that the lesson of *Buffy* is “that our personal wellness depends less on who we think we are and more on what we do in the world” (116), and that what we do, if we have a healthy soul, is driven by a sense of nurturing and responsibility for the world.

The second section of the book deals with bodies, trauma, and recovery. Cynthia Masson’s wide-ranging essay takes a deep dive into the significance and imagery of beheading of

the separation of head from body in the Pylea arc and preceding episodes in *Angel* season 2. Beheading has a rich constellation of meanings politically, psychologically, and in folklore and literature, and it is significant in *Angel* as one of the few ways to permanently kill a vampire. The Pylea episodes are revealed to deal with issues of some importance to the characters' moral and political sensibilities, and Masson references Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, John the Baptist, the Tower of London, the French Revolution, and Judith and Holofernes, among other resonances.

While Whedon often includes scenes of torture in his television and movie work, Erin Hollis's essay considers "Hush" (*Buffy* 4.10), which "does not overtly depict literal torture," as a "metaphorical depiction of torture function[ing] as commentary on and resistance to the support of acts of torture" (146). The loss of the voice, as Hollis observes, forces attention to the body as a much more limited means of communication, but one through which the characters "regain their agency through community and connection" (154). The viewer, too, is encouraged to respond and to resist silencing.

Brian Cogan demonstrates that *Buffy*'s Xander is a surprisingly rich character to examine in light of the social construction of disability. Without any sort of supernatural abilities, he is marginalized as disabled within the core group of Scoobies and their primary opponents but becomes more comfortable with his own unique strengths after the events of "The Zeppo" (3.13). His loss of an eye to Caleb in "Dirty Girls" (7.18), however, is the true turning point in Xander's development; he has "always been disabled symbolically" but "becomes more fully actualized when he is literally disabled" (166). Here Cogan makes a parallel with the mythological pattern of bodily sacrifice in return for knowledge, as

exemplified in both the ancient myth of Odin and the more modern tale of Marvel Cinematic Universe's Nick Fury, which was a conscious reference on Whedon's part.

J. Bowers considers Spike/William the Bloody (Awful Poet) as an example of that "enduring male archetype," the "neurasthenic male": the stock character of the sensitive, ineffectual, physically timid, sexually repressed, intellectually obsessed young man which still echoes in the modern stereotypical nerd (172). William's siring by Drusilla effectually cures William of this Victorian constellation of symptoms, rendering him confident, physically energetic, untroubled by conscience, and sexually assertive. At least on the surface; underlying all these traits, Spike still suffers from self-conscious narcissism and other neurasthenic traits that come to the fore when he is injured, "neutered" by the chip, imbued with a soul, and especially under the malevolent pressure of the First Evil. Vampirism thus serves as a model for exploring illness, recovery, and relapse.

Emily James Hansen and Katheryn Wright's essay is a bit harder to fit into the framework of disability studies established previously. The key, not fully and explicitly articulated within the essay itself, is that the "affective bod[ies]" under consideration here—the bodies and minds made so acutely sensitive so that they "can't not" feel everything, as Simon says of River—are the results of externally imposed disability, and purely a side-effect of what their instigators were aiming for. *Firefly's* River Tam and *Dollhouse's* Echo are the characters explored here; River cursed with "connection without context" (191) by the Alliance as it tries to engineer her into a war machine, and Echo exploited by the Rossum Corporation for her ability to simultaneously hold all of her imprints in balance.

But “[b]oth entities miscalculate the power of empathy” (198) and thus their weapons turn back on them.

In the Whedonverse, any discussion of the body size of female characters and the actresses who play them, and the intersection between race and body size and societal attitudes, is always going to be relevant. Unfortunately, the production schedule for a book of essays like this means that Sherry Ginn’s general praise of Whedon’s feminism now feels misplaced in light of the revelations about his personal interactions with cast members (and especially young actresses), peaking with accusations by Charisma Carpenter, Michelle Trachtenberg, and Gal Gadot in early 2021. Carpenter in particular specifically reported that Whedon called her fat during her pregnancy. Ginn does raise the question: “Given Joss Whedon’s avowed feminism it is puzzling as to why he would seem to be in the mainstream of media representation in perpetuating physical stereotypes in his female characters” (203). Whedon’s frequent casting of low-BMI actresses, and treatment of body weight in his scripts and direction, takes on a more sinister tone in retrospect and is due for re-examination.

Kelly L. Richardson points out that in *Buffy*, “physical, public selves hide secret, private identities” (212), and this is as true of our heroes as it is of the monsters in their midst. Richardson examines two examples of “new bodies” as repositories of secrets in the final two seasons of the series: Buffy’s regenerated body after she is recalled from heaven by Willow’s spell, and Willow’s body enhanced by the spells she pulls out of the books in the Magic Box after Tara’s death. In both cases there is an entanglement of bodily renewal, intense mental and physical trauma, denial and self-isolation, and moral re-centering through reconnection to their community and chosen family.

Frances Sprout's "Sweetie, your epidermis is showing" is one of the most thought-provoking articles in the book, and perhaps my personal favorite. Sprout expertly deploys heavy theoretical hitters Foucault, Bakhtin, and Kristeva in an essay about that most basic and essential of things, skin. Establishing that in the Whedonverse, we find "a chiasmatically-complicated relationship between skin, doubles, and identity" (231), she focuses on Willow as a character in a complicated and unstable relationship with her own corporeality and dermal boundary. Three significant events, taken together, form an arc delineating Willow's turn away from and back to the supportive community of her friends: absorbing the dark magic from the books in the Magic Box through her skin; flaying Warren; and having her own skin flayed and consumed by the Gnarl. This journey back from "shame and self-loathing" (239) is essential to her role in overturning the patriarchal order through her release of the Potentials.

The final essay, by Tamy Burnett, focuses on *Angel* and the shadow-doubling, in Roz Kaveney's phrase, of Lindsey, Spike, and Angel himself their interlocking patterns of alliance, opposition, and opportunities for redemption and heroism. The underlying existentialist mantra of the show "If nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do" ("Epiphany" 2.16) is given symbolic life through hands, the "representation of agency and one's ability to act" (244), and their amputation and replacement. Both Lindsey and Spike lose and regain hands in the course of the series; the experience showcases their contrasting responses to opportunities to take responsibility for their actions, make amends, and choose the greater good over their personal desires.

The volume closes with an episode guide, a consolidated Works Cited list, and an index. Readers who wish to request

individual chapters through their library should make sure to request the Works Cited list as well; without it, the individual chapters will not be as useful for research. I heartily recommend this collection; it is an education in the scholarly underpinnings of body- and disability-centered criticism as well as a satisfying examination of a number of our favorite texts.

Janet Brennan Croft

Works Cited

- Croft, Janet Brennan, editor. *Lois McMaster Bujold: Essays on a Modern Master of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. McFarland, 2013.
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