

You Can't Take *Firefly* from Me: Twenty Years Later and Still Missed

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In her introduction to Nancy Holder's essay in *Finding Serenity*, Jane Espenson stated that "*Firefly* represents an interesting phenomenon, the celebrated failure. It disappointed some fans as it unfolded, and disappointed the rest when it folded. But the fact that we're still talking about it—that must count for something too" (139). That was in 2004. Now we are here, 2022, and we are still talking about *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Still disappointed that it folded, still watching our DVDs, still following the actors as they star in new series and films and from con to con, still reading anything—everything—we can get

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our hands on about our beloved *Firefly*. And, luckily for us, the Powers that Be continue the storyworld of the 'verse in novels, comics, and graphic novels that allow us to continue the love we feel for Mal and crew.¹

As we write these words in late Fall 2022, we are appalled at the parallels we can see between our world and the 'verse. Leaving Earth-That-Was to start over but instead perpetuating the glaring -isms of the time and place left behind *Firefly* perhaps meant to warn us of things-to-come. It is eminently recognizable. As Gregory Erickson points out, "The show's depictions of the abuse of power and the subjection and alienation of marginalized populations are only slightly more extreme examples of current human and social conditions" (168). The storyworld of *Firefly* and *Serenity* showed us that, even in a new space and time, classism and elitism followed humans from Earth-that-Was as did poverty and prejudice. The "haves" still had it, and the "have-nots" did not: neither power, nor privilege; neither safety, nor security. And the attempts to terraform planets for use by humans yielded their own problems as each new world seemed just a little "off."

Earth-That-Was appears to be very close to Earth-That-Is. Humans used up the planet and had to go to the stars for survival. In the *Firefly* storyworld, that move to the stars occurs 500 years into our future. Yet, looking at 2022 Earth-That-Is now is frightening. Climate change is decimating Planet Earth. Heatwaves in the US and Europe have left thousands dead, from either the heat itself or the droughts caused by the heat. Fires are burning homes, businesses, and land across the globe. Four dangerous hurricanes developed in the Atlantic Ocean in 2022; one devastated Puerto Rico, still unrecovered from a hurricane in 2017, and two had devastating effects on Florida. Monsoons in Pakistan killed thousands of people and livestock,

leading to food scarcity and disease. Water rationing is occurring in some parts of the US and rolling blackouts are the new norm as temperatures rise and the electrical power grids cannot cope with the demand. The world population reached the eight-billion-mark 15 November 2022; less than one century ago it stood at 2 billion (Adam). The US election results were surprising, upsetting decades of political theory with respect to incumbent Presidents and Congressional midterm representation. Voters indicated that the economy and abortion were their primary reasons for going to the polls, with many politicians not understanding that abortion is not just a social and political issue, but an economic one as well.

Reading the news is a sure way to become depressed and stressed about the future. Do we really think that human beings will be able to figure out a way to keep the worst-case scenario from happening? A worst-case scenario in which people have to fight for food because fertile land is disappearing as is the water needed to irrigate fields? Will we be able to stop the dreadful effects of climate change before we reach the point of no return? And will our scientists be able to ensure the future of our species? How did Earth-That-Was manage to build the spaceships that carried humans into the 'verse? Did all humans on Earth-That-Was make it off the planet? What about the many plants and animals (billions of species)? Were they evacuated too? Obviously, we did not get the answers to such questions given *Firefly's* abrupt cancellation; we can only wonder.² Eric Benson speculates that once humanity consumed

most of the natural resources on the planet, whatever was left was likely fought over, adding to the pressure and immediacy to leave and find New Earths. The lyrics 'Burn the land and boil the sea' from the *Firefly* theme song ...

also offer a fairly big clue that after Earth ‘was used up’ and ‘couldn’t sustain us,’ global warming made the planet uninhabitable. (97)

He adds that “humanity faced a combination of overpopulation, overconsumption, and global warming in its last centuries on Earth” and “it would be tough to avoid armed conflict when overpopulated areas struggle for resources” (100). Howard Kuhn considers that “the issues of overpopulation and resource exhaustion have true significance in understanding present-day society as the global population continues to expand and absorb a greater share of the available natural resources” (167). Thus in *Firefly* we took to the stars for a new start, but what did we find?

Unfortunately, one thing we learned about the future as envisioned by Whedon was that it was more of the “same old, same old.” People were still greedy and mean, still hungry for power and control, still willing to do unto their fellow men and women whatever they could get away with.³ Lawrence Watt-Evans acknowledged that “The very basis of *Firefly* is that even centuries from now and light-years from Earth, human beings will still behave like human beings, and will create the same familiar problems for ourselves that we always have” (19). Luckily we found some people who were not so cold-hearted: those who could look out for their own, honor a pledge, and try to live an honorable life (even if it occasionally involved crime): people like Mal, and Zoë, and Wash, and Inara, and Simon, and Book – even Jayne (yes, Jayne had a code that he lived by, even if it was one that favored himself first).

The ‘verse as depicted in *Firefly* and *Serenity* resonated on many levels with fans of Joss Whedon. With three academic books focusing on the series and film in print as of 2018 and countless essays in all manner of publications, scholars who

were often also fans of Whedon's work explored the myriad themes and characters illustrated in these properties. Their interest does not appear to be waning either. The ninth biennial *Slayage* Conference was held Summer 2022. Forty papers were presented, of which five were about *Firefly/Serenity*. We asked the six authors of these papers some questions about their scholarship and received responses from five of them. Although the sample size is small, the respondents show that interest in critical analysis of *Firefly* and *Serenity* continues to the current time. All indicated that we could use their responses as needed.

Four of the five respondents had presented at *Slayage* in the past, all four having presented in St. Augustine, FL (2010, #4) and Vancouver, BC (2012, #5). Two of them had presented in Sacramento, CA (2014, #6), two in Kingston upon Thames, UK (2016, #7), and two in Florence, AL (2018, #8). The same four had also presented about *Firefly/Serenity* at previous *Slayage* conferences. Asked what made them watch the series, respondents indicated it was the characters on the series (1 respondent), previous experience with Joss Whedon's series (3), curiosity (2), and friends' recommendations (2). The respondents presented a variety of reasons for having presented about the series at past *Slayage* conferences. These reasons included: the richness of the characters, like Kaylee and the different ways in which she is "coded"; the fact that little had been published (when the series began) compared to *Buffy* and *Angel*; the fact that the series was short enough to use in a typical semester-length college course to introduce students to Whedon studies; and the genre "mash-up" the series presented, i.e., a science fiction western. Each author had his or her own reason for deciding to present about the series and film in 2022. These included the timing of the conference, i.e., the 20th anniversary of the series seemed a good time to present

something new with respect to the series, from a timeline of the 'verse for use by scholars in the future to its “not-yet-completely-understood aesthetic mechanisms”⁴ suggesting a new line of research for exploration. The individual who had never presented at *Slayage* proposed their paper for this conference in order to present their research on their timeline project, stating that it seemed appropriate to present the project at the conference closest to the 20th anniversary of *Firefly*'s debut on Fox. Agnes Curry stated that

Firefly/Serenity came out during a politically fraught time in our collective history, and if anything, it has gotten even more politically relevant in the years since its production. Subsequent events have made even clearer how fragile many of our institutions and communities are. In this context, investigating how the power of popular culture works to shape imagination seems an increasingly important topic of investigation. *Firefly/Serenity* is an especially rich site for such investigation. From its large-scale depiction of possible trajectories of our current world's geopolitical and economic dynamics, to its fraught place in a Hollywood whose institutions and power structures enable patterns of sexism and racism to repeat, *Firefly/Serenity* can be re-read on so many levels.⁵

Curry's words resonate with the authors of this essay as we compare the Earth-That-Was with Earth-That-Is. We write these words the day after the 2022 midterm elections in the US and while over 90 countries⁶ in the world have gathered in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt for the United Nations Climate Change Conference. Indeed, in 2004, Mercedes Lackey pointed out that

The Alliance uses a lot of the same psychological weapons on its own people that all the major governments of the world used back when I was growing up and are still using today. Demonization of the enemy, even the construction of enemies that don't exist, create the fear of nebulous threats and the willingness to sacrifice freedoms for security. By using smoke screens, misdirection and distraction, those with power keep the attention of those who are controlled off what is really happening. (64)

Such misdirection and distraction in our time means more worry about “them,” the dreaded other that is amassing at the Southern Border or demanding that their civil rights be honored. Allegations of “wokeness” with absolutely no understanding of what the word means or using terms like “fascist” or “socialist” without knowing the definition or the history of the terms. Attacks on the LGBTQIA+ community, on women's rights to choose their own healthcare options, on the right to earn a living wage, on election workers. Yet if recent election results in the US and in other countries have shown us anything, it is that the majority of people in the world want stability and centrality and not extremism, either right- or left-wing.

Sadly, our beloved *Firefly*, as already mentioned, simply shows that stability is something found on the Central Planets. Those who live away from the Core, whether by choice or not, experience more difficulty. The Alliance, stretched thin and incapable of providing support or supplies as needed beyond the Core, seems perfectly willing to allow anyone to maintain order for them on the Rim Planets, from criminal warlords to corrupt mayors and governors.

Enter then from stage left, our heroes, a motley crew of people looking for a job to help out the family back home (Kaylee and Jayne), freedom from governmental control (Mal and Zoë), escape from scandal (Inara),⁷ a ship (any ship) to fly (Wash), a refuge and safe haven (Simon and River), or a mission to save souls, including his own (Book). K. Dale Koontz considers that *Serenity*'s crew is a family, much as Whedon's other series *Buffy* and *Angel* were about chosen family, because "family is who we say it is" (70), even if it does squabble and fight. Tanya R. Cochran agrees, noting that *Serenity*'s "crew members are ragtag vagabonds" who "create a chosen family in her womb-like belly" (150). Furthermore, "A chosen family is the group of people to whom you're closest; they know when you're in pain, or they are the people you care about enough to lie to," according to Emily James Hansen and Katheryn Wright (189). They are the people who have your back and are proverbially the people who will always take you in when you need them to. But that does not mean they do not drive you crazy at times. And we certainly observe ways in which the crew do that, even in a short 14-episode-series and a two-hour film. We screamed, we cried, we pitched fits, but alas! We have been unsuccessful (so far!) in our quest to get them back.

And so, fans carried the banner (sometimes literally) for the 'verse as they devoted themselves to keeping it alive. Fans fighting to bring back a beloved show is neither a very old phenomenon nor a very new one. As Stacey Abbott points out, "Both prior to and following *Firefly* fan protests, numerous television series from *Star Trek* (1966-9) to *Farscape* (1999-2003), *Beauty and the Beast* (1987-90) to *Angel* (1999-2004) have witnessed fans galvanizing their efforts to see a much-loved series return to the screens" (236). Fans' fights for their shows are sometimes successful, such as with *Family Guy*. Cancelled

in 1999 by Fox, many fans of *Family Guy* tried letter-writing and reaching out to executives in an attempt to get their show back on the air with little success. That is, until 2005, when something did bring the series back to life: DVD sales. As discussed by Megan Jones in “Fox Reuniting itself with Family Guy”:

Gary Newman, president of 20th Century Fox Television, remembers getting his first inkling that his company shouldn't have pulled the plug on “Family Guy” while giving a talk at Yale University. When it came time for questions, he recalled, “about 20 hands shot up, and they all asked about *Family Guy*.” But the DVDs were what really caught Newman's attention. With no new episodes to watch, fans quickly snapped up more than 1 million copies of the first two seasons of “Family Guy” (as well as T-shirts, ball caps and dolls). More than 3.5 million units have been sold at a rate that has at times outpaced that other off-kilter Fox animated family, “The Simpsons.”

The successful un-cancellation of *Family Guy* serves as example that it can be done.⁸ With a fandom that aligns itself with a group of Independents, the Browncoats, fighting the big bad Government/Corporate power structure, it is unsurprising that the fans have fought this long.

The fans of *Firefly* have long held themselves as a part of the *Firefly* family; in many ways fans believe it belongs to them. Discussing this fan ownership, Stacey Abbott states,

In the case of *Firefly/Serenity*, this vision was transformed from Whedon's vision of the *Firefly* universe to a shared belief in the series after its cancellation and then to a

shared ownership of its big screen incarnation though official recognition of the role played by fans in making the film possible. This ownership of the *Firefly* / *Serenity* text by fans was reinforced by their own identification with the series' Browncoats. (237)

Another aspect of this engagement is that the actors in the series are just as much fans of the show and believed in the series as much as the fans.⁹ As Amy Pascale points out, “after the series was cancelled, actor Alan Tudyk took an item from the set: the recall button from the episode ‘Out of Gas.’ ... [H]e sent it to Joss, with the instruction to hit the button when his miracle finally arrived” (222). This miracle arrived with the film *Serenity*, but that single victory was not enough. The Browncoats wanted more, as when, “in 2011 Nathan Fillion, who played Captain Malcom Reynolds, tweeted if he ever won the lottery he would buy the rights to the series so they could continue the show. Fans sprang into action, ultimately raising thousands of dollars for ‘Browncoat Redemption’” (Sterba 114). Although unsuccessful, the funds were returned or donated to charity. Yet this campaign illustrated that when opportunity strikes, these fans mobilize.

The family of fans begotten by *Firefly* in turn created *Serenity* through their perseverance and preservation of the fandom, but they did not stop there. Their dedication turned towards activism, not just for their beloved series, but to do good in the world. As Jack Milton describes these fans in his essay “The Power of Fandom in the Whedonverse,” “Some Browncoats would argue that they are much more than just fans and identify themselves as fan activists” (276). This activism has taken many forms over the years with one of the main one being “Can’t Stop the *Serenity*” events which raise money for

charities such as Equality Now. The first occurred in 2006 in Portland Oregon when a fan set up a screening of *Serenity* with all proceeds going to Equality Now. Events such as this have grown, and they went global in 2010. Over fifty-two events have been sponsored worldwide; for each, at least seventy-five percent of all profits must go to Equality Now (Anderson 238). These events have recently restarted after a pause for the pandemic. The Browncoats Ball, which is mostly a fan event, includes a “Can’t Stop the Serenity” screening in most years along with other charitable fundraising events. Browncoats also have their own regional organizations, such as the California Browncoats, whose website advertises itself as connecting fans with charities throughout the ‘verse.¹⁰

The influences of *Firefly/Serenity* can be seen not only in these large events and charitable contributions, but in the Browncoat community itself. One does not need to look far at a convention to see *Firefly* fans. They are easily spotted wearing their Jayne hats. These knitted hats in orange, yellow, and red appeared in only one episode of the series (“The Message” 1.12). This episode was not actually broadcast, but as Elizabeth Rambo points out, “Jayne’s cunning hat’ may be more iconic for *Firefly* fans (also known as Browncoats) than any other item associated with the *Serenity*verse” (191). For years the hat was recreated personally by fans knitting copies themselves, getting them from knitters at cons, or from crafty people online or on internet shopping sites such as Etsy. That was until 2013, when Fox decided to create licensed Jayne Hats and send cease and desist letters to those homemade hat makers. Rambo points out that, “Extratextually, *Firefly* fandom has come to associate Jayne’s hat with devoted family ties and with fearlessness in the face of opposition, such as the corporate interests that doomed *Firefly*...” (191). So the irony of Fox coming after the maker of

these hats was not lost on the fans and knitters. Jayne Hat knitter and owner of the website Ma Cobb, Angela, told Ellie Hall of *Buzz Feed* as much, stating, “I started selling [Jayne hats] to fill a need that just wasn’t being met for Browncoats... . I had the skills to fill a need, and make Browncoats happy... . The irony of it is that it’s the fans of the show who have propelled the hat into the iconic symbol that it is.” The sudden licensing of the hats angered many fans who then expressed their anger to the sellers of these corporate hats so much so that the website ThinkGeek decided to stop carrying the hat and to donate all profits from the hats they sold from their remaining stock to “Can’t Stop the Serenity.”

The fan community has kept *Firefly* relevant and in the popular culture vernacular for years beyond when an eleven-aired-episodes series would. Mentions of the series can be found across popular culture: from passing references in the shows like *Bones* (2005-2017), where Hodgins teases Zach about a robot he built that is not responding, “Your robot reminds me of you. You tell it to turn it stops, you tell it to stop it turns, you ask it to take out the garbage it watches reruns of *Firefly*” (“The Man in the Fallout Shelter” 1.9, 01:02:47 01:02:53) to the not-so-subtle references in *Castle* where Nathan Fillion’s character dresses up as a space cowboy in his full *Firefly* costume for Halloween (“Vampire Weekend” 2.6). Then there is of course *Con Man* (2017), originally a fan-funded web streaming series that was later picked up by the SyFy network, created and produced by Nathan Fillion and Alan Tudyk. The series was launched as a campaign on IndieGoGo and raised over \$3.1 million dollars to produce the first season.¹¹ The fictional series follows an actor, Wray Nerely (portrayed by Tudyk), from a failed but extremely popular science fiction television series, *Spectrum*, as he lives his life on the convention circuit. The

connection to *Firefly* is not lost on anyone, with the series website even commenting, “Yes, this should remind you a lot of *Firefly*.”¹² The second season was picked up to air on Comic-Con HQ and even spawned a game app, all followed and originally paid for by the fans of *Firefly* nearly 15 years after its cancellation.

This fan ownership, activism, community, and engagement might never have happened if the series had not been cancelled. In his article “How *Firefly*’s Cancellation Transformed TV’s Relationship with Fans,” Joel Draba-Man states,

Cancellation has only added to *Firefly*’s myth, adding to the show’s reputation as a cult classic and a ‘TV martyr’. Fifteen years on, its legacy is arguably enhanced by its early exit. But it was the way in which fans and creators responded to the show’s troubles that really shifted things in the television landscape. Whedon, the writers and producers proactively started reaching out to fans through the internet.

Conversations online between fans and series stars and creators are more prevalent now than when *Firefly* was on the air, as is fan activism and charitable work. Much of this can be attributed to the internet and maybe some can be attributed to the success of the fans of an early cancelled series, *Firefly*. Twenty years later we are still talking about it, as Alan Tudyk said in an interview at San Diego Comic-Con for the 10th anniversary:¹³ “As sci-fi fandom has grown, *Firefly* seems to have become one of those genre staples It’s almost like if you want to be a nerd, which is a cool thing to be these days, and you haven’t seen *Firefly*, you will be shamed” (Tomashoff).

Many years ago, Rhonda V. Wilcox asked, why does Buffy matter? We ask here now, why does *Firefly* matter? We say, as its most basic reason, because we say it does. This series, which had only 14 episodes and was cut down in its prime, spoke to us in so many ways. Like an onion that can be peeled layer after layer to its core or even like matryoshka nesting dolls, *Firefly*'s layers of meaning resonated with its viewers and continue to resonate today. We chose *Serenity*'s crew to be part of our family. We claimed them as our own. They are our family, for better and for worse. Shiny.

Notes

¹ Well, maybe not. Not to reveal any spoilers, but in the post-*Serenity* comics, the Operative, Jubal Early, Ma Reynolds, Mattie Cobb, a Wash-bot, and someone very close to Jayne make appearances.

² Not according to Greg Pak's *Return to the Earth That Was* comic. Those left behind did not have an easy time, with various groups vying for power. Some groups eschewed technology, and others did not, à la *Dollhouse* Epitaph episodes. And, even worse, the Alliance developed portals that unscrupulous people used to travel to Earth-That-Was and plunder items to sell to collectors back on the Core Planets. Needless to say, *Serenity* flew through a portal and landed on Earth-That-Was. Naturally, Jayne looked for plunder.

³ Reading the novels published currently but that are set between the end of *Firefly* and a return to the 'verse in *Serenity* allows us to see the crew in their usual harebrained heists. However, the comics that take place after the film are quite depressing as the crew is scattered, almost irretrievably broken. The "promises" that seemed so possible at the end of *Serenity* fall far short of the happy endings we would wish for our crew. Of course, many people will not read them, claiming they are not "canon," which is an argument for another day. Would that it were that easy! It in some ways reminds us of the discord roiling throughout the Whedonverse.

⁴ Josef Velazquez, personal correspondence.

⁵ Personal correspondence.

⁶ Unfortunately, there are 195 countries in the world, so fewer than half attended the conference. The US delegation consisted of 15 members, including the National Security Advisor and the Secretaries of Agriculture, Energy, and State.

⁷ The idea of the scandal comes from narratives by Chris Robinson and James Lovegrove.

⁸ A T-shirt came out shortly after the announcement of the revival of *Family Guy* depicting one of the characters saying, “We’re back! Your stupid letter-writing campaign actually worked.”

⁹ See, e.g., Rhonda V. Wilcox, “Whedon, Browncoats, and the Big Damn Narrative: The Unified Meta-Myth of *Firefly* and *Serenity*,” especially on Nathan Fillion and fan activism, pp. 107-111.

¹⁰ For more information go to www.californiabrowncoats.org

¹¹ *Con Man* has a direct competing web series that went up on IndieGoGo only days after the launch of the *Con Man* Campaign, *Kings of Con*. *Kings of Con* was a similar concept about the hard life on the convention circuit starring two supporting actors on the series *Supernatural*, Rob Benedict and Richard Speight Jr. *Con Man* was eventually more successful, gaining a second season, whereas *Kings of Con* did not. One could postulate that *Con Man* was appealing to a fan group that longed for their series to return, whereas *Supernatural* fans were still able to watch their beloved series.

¹² www.conmantheseries.com

¹³ It is also of note that for the 10th Anniversary at Comic Con people lined up around the building for the panel. As Tim Minear pointed out in his interview, “The enthusiasm was amazing. Comic-Con is not usually about nostalgia. It’s about what’s the next big thing that’s about to be launched. And yet, all these people showed up in this big hall to see an old, canceled show’s cast and writers” (Tomashoff).

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