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## ***Supernatural*: The End of the Road: A Reflection**

### **Part Two: NOW**

#### **Introduction**

**Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown**

*Endings are Hard...endings are impossible. You try to tie up every loose end, but you never can...There's always gonna be holes. And since it's the ending, it's all supposed to add up to something.*

— Chuck (“Swan Song” 5:22)

*Supernatural* is over. After delays to filming due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the last episode of *Supernatural* aired in the USA, with some degree of fanfare and hullabaloo, on the CW on November 19, 2020. In the UK, the last three episodes shuffled quietly off the screen on December 18, 2020, buried on the 4Music channel. There were tears and there was anger, not least from UK *Supernatural* fans who missed episode 19 because 4Music mis-identified it as episode 9. However, now that the dust has settled and Jared Padelecki is already gracing TV screens (with a far less appealing haircut) as *Walker: Texas Ranger* (2021-), what has it all added up to? What can we say by way of introduction to this reflection on the series finale? As Chuck quite rightly says; endings are hard.

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**Dr. Stacey Abbott** is a Reader in Film and Television Studies at the University of Roehampton. She is the author of numerous articles and books on horror film and television, including *Celluloid Vampires* (2007), *Angel: TV Milestone* (2009), *Undead Apocalypse* (2016), and co-author, with Lorna Jowett, of *TV Horror* (2013). Her most recent publication is the BFI Classic on *Near Dark* (2020). A fan from the start, in 2012 she began her academic journey with *Supernatural* by co-editing, with David Lavery, *TV Goes to Hell: An Unofficial Road Map of Supernatural*. The journey continues...

**Dr. Simon Brown** is Associate Professor of Film and Television at Kingston University. He has published articles on numerous TV series, including *Alias*, *Dexter*, *Under the Dome*, *The X-Files* and, of course, *Supernatural*. He is the author of *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television* (University of Texas Press, 2018) and *Creepshow* (Auteur Press, 2019). He is currently writing a monograph on British horror author James Herbert. His patronus is a Chevy Impala.

This is particularly true for a series that has run for fifteen years, has a loyal and very vocal fan base, and has been, as Erin Giannini discussed in her article in part one of this issue, a tentpole show for the CW. This puts significant pressure on a series that elected to end on its own terms, to which can be added the fact that over the years individual *Supernatural* seasons have ended so many different ways that it would be hard to imagine something fresh. Sam and Dean ended season 1 seemingly dead in a car wreck; both Dean and Sam have actually died, and gone to hell (Dean at the end of season 3, Sam at the end of season 5); the gates of hell have opened (season 2, season 14); Lucifer has risen (season 4); Dean has headed off to live a normal life (season 5); Dean has gone to purgatory (season 7); the angels have been expelled from heaven (season 8); Dean has been possessed by a demon (season 9) and by an angel (season 13). Having had Sam and Dean overcome demons, angels, archangels, Leviathon, Lucifer, the King of Hell, God's sister and Death, and now facing a showdown with God himself, how then do you end the Winchester's journey? With defeat, or with victory? With life or death? What can emphatically end the show and satisfy the fans who have kept it on the air all these years?

In the end the *Supernatural* finale comprised two episodes ("Inherit the Earth" 15.19 and "Carry On" 15.20) plus an hour-long retrospective with cast and crew interviews ("The Long Road Home"), and over the course of those three hours the showrunners elected to deliver a variety of endings to suit all tastes. The penultimate episode, "Inherit the Earth," brought together and entwined the show's religious and philosophical themes, as examined by Regina Hansen and Galen Foresman in this special issue, by resolving the decade-long subtextual arc which explored the Winchesters' place in the universe created by Chuck/God and their fight for free will. By allowing themselves to be savagely pummelled by Chuck, distracting him through refusing, as ever, to stand down while Jack absorbed Chuck's power, Sam and Dean finally defeated their ultimate nemesis and freed themselves from Chuck's narrative. In doing so they provided the audience the satisfaction of seeing Sam and Dean as masters of their own fate. Free to choose their own path, they elect to do what they've always done; hit the road, together, in the Impala, saving people, hunting things. The family business. It is a fitting ending to their screen journey.

And then.

Along comes "Carry On." Having offered a happy ending for the show, the last episode presents the alternative, one that circles back to the pilot and sees Dean dying while on a standard case, impaled on a rebar as he and Sam clear out a vampire nest. Because they have been freed from their previous life of being controlled and directed by Chuck, this time Dean's death is for keeps. After an emotional farewell with Sam, Dean finally gets

the hunter's funeral that he has always said awaited him, and Sam gets the 'normal' life that he gave up fifteen years and 300-plus episodes earlier. This is the ending in which Sam and Dean are separated. Together their fate – their choice – is to ride off into the sunset in the Impala, chasing another case around the backroads of America. As individuals, however, these too are appropriate ends – Dean dies in battle while Sam lives peacefully to a ripe old age with a family of his own. This was precisely where their paths were leading when we met them for the first time.

And then.

Having offered two opposite but equally viable, if heart-wrenching, endings, the final episode then presents us with a third; a vision of a new and improved heaven (courtesy of Jack) in which there are no monsters and eternity can be spent driving by day and drinking beer by night with old friends including Bobby, Castiel, John and Mary and, one would assume, anyone and everyone met and lost along the way. This utopian vision presents a heaven in which all the good things prevail (family, friendship, the open road, beer, food, music) and all the bad things (monsters, danger, threat) have been washed away. Reunited in heaven after Sam's eventual death from old age, Sam and Dean end their journey together, on a bridge, in the wilderness, looking out over a peaceful heaven. This is an alternative version of the first ending in which Sam and Dean end up together, but this time there are no monsters, no need to hunt, and all the good they've done, all the sacrifices they have made, are finally visible.

Each version of the Sam and Dean relationship therefore gets an ending. There's an ending for the hunters; the righteous brothers of vengeance for whom facing and killing monsters is their only way of life, a moral duty to perform until the end. There's an ending for the two brothers who throughout the series have remained entirely committed to each other, but who were also aware of the sacrifices that commitment required. For Dean, the tortured soul, who knows precisely where his path leads but who cannot turn from it no matter what, he finally dies on the job and leaves Sam. Sam then gets his own ending, finally escaping the life bestowed upon him by the bond between he and Dean, but finding emptiness alongside the peace of family life. The brothers get what they both feared and wanted at various times throughout the show, a hunter's death for Dean, a normal life for Sam. And there's the ending where they get their reward. They stay together as brothers, but in a world of peace, devoid of monsters.

And then.

In the very last moments, on that same bridge, Jared and Jensen break character and thank the fans, and are joined by the crew for a final farewell wave. This acknowledges that beyond the Winchester family, beyond the wider diegetic *Supernatural* family who will be drinking beers on the porch

into the night for all eternity in heaven, there is a wider, equally special family of behind-the-scenes workers and fans who all deserve their own ending, an opportunity to reflect upon a symbiotic relationship which has granted so much to both. This theme is picked up in the special episode “The Long Road Home,” in which the stars and creatives on the show discussed what it, and the fans, have meant to them.

How then do you end the seemingly un-endable show? Every possible way it turns out. Sam and Dean ride off into the sunset to fight monsters, and then they both die, and then ride off into the sunset again, this time in heaven where they finally have peace. Finally, the show reminds us that while they may die and their journey must end, it will nevertheless continue in the memories of those who took the long road together. As we pointed out in the introduction to Part one of this two-part special issue, our aim with this reflection on *Supernatural* was to acknowledge that the response would be both professional and personal. Not only is this evident in the essays that are included, it also formed an essential part of the finale itself.

Because of the passion of the fans and the carefully fostered sense of ownership they had over the series, a connection with the creative personnel behind it, the ending not surprisingly divided opinion and was not without controversy, as Lynn Zubernis discusses in her essay for this issue. Particularly problematic was the fact that the romantic relationship between Castiel and Dean, very popular within *Supernatural* fandom, was ultimately teased rather than made explicitly canon (“Despair” 15.18). This proved highly divisive, as did Dean’s untimely and meaningless death, followed by Sam’s rather pedestrian-seeming post Dean life. Yet as Melissa Edmundson argues in her essay, for all that the final episodes were divisive, they were not out of character for the series, openly referring back to the very first episodes of the first season and bringing the narrative full circle. Another element that dissatisfied fans was the relatively small number of cast members who made guest appearances in the finale. Nice as it was to see Jim Beaver back as Bobby, his tantalising suggestion that Castiel, Mary and John were nearby remained merely a suggestion, while stalwarts such as Jodie, Donna and others were entirely absent from the finale(s).

Of course, there were legitimate logistical reasons for this, because Season 15 of *Supernatural* was brought to you by the covid apocalypse. In our introduction to Part 1, we not surprisingly reflected on how the show was impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic and along with it our special issue of *Monstrum*. We concluded writing the introduction just as the cast were returning to Vancouver to begin shooting the final two episodes. At that point, the world was starting to feel a little normal again. Of course, since then we have experienced the second and third waves of the pandemic,

and, while there is a vaccine there are also new variants, so the road ahead still feels long. With this in mind “Inherit the Earth” seemed strangely resonant, poignant and hopeful. In terms of the show’s serial narrative, Chuck ‘Thanos-ing’ the global population into oblivion with a snap of his fingers and leaving Sam, Dean, and Jack alone – with no-one left to save – was an apt end and a seemingly appropriate final hurdle for the brothers to face. The apocalypse finally happened and they had to live with the repercussions – positioning them for a brief time alongside Robert Neville from *I Am Legend* as the last men on earth. Dean, like Neville, even had the fleeting comfort of finding a dog still alive only to have it taken away by Chuck in a knowing nod to Richard Matheson’s novel. The epicness of this apocalypse (even Thanos only vanished half-the population) was profound and forced Sam, Dean and Jack to delve deep in order to not give up but keep fighting the good fight. This ending was also quite practical given the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on television production. They were able to shoot safely on empty streets with minimal cast and crew. That they didn’t give up despite the despair and loneliness is classic Sam and Dean.

Significantly, however, this episode also seemed to step outside of its own narrative arc, offering a timely reflection on the global events of 2020. This may or may not have been intended in August and September 2020 as they were filming in Vancouver but it was felt as we watched the episode in November 2020, once again in lockdown. Once Jack became the new God, with a snap of his fingers he restored the world’s population. Sam, Dean and Jack walk through the streets that once were empty, abandoned and desolate, now bustling with activity, community, life. It seems fitting that a horror television show that began its journey with the heroes fighting mythical monsters should conclude with an apocalyptic vision of the diegetic world that was both impacted by, and reflected, the very real horrors of the non-diegetic world. The image of streets filled with people, now restored and returned to their friends and families felt strangely timely, poignant and reassuring, a reminder that the apocalyptic journey we have been on this past year will one day end. We just need to stay strong like Sam and Dean – and keep fighting.

So *Supernatural*’s ending, offered many things: hope, grief, pain and loss. As ever, the show began and ended with family, born and chosen, and this seems like the best place for the series to end...for Sam and Dean....for us all. *Supernatural* was born in a different era of genre television, an era of 22(-ish) episode seasons, an era in which TV horror was masked by genre hybridity, an era where “bullcrap” was the outer edges of acceptable swearing. Over 15 years *Supernatural* remained steadfast and true to itself as American genre TV, and TV horror, changed around it. It is one of a kind. It is the the last of its kind, and it is possible, even probable, that we shall

never see its like again. But like Sam and Dean, *Supernatural* will go on. Its place in TV history is assured and its fans and fan-scholars will continue to explore its rich history. Over beers on the porch, with a bit of luck.

Annnnnnd....CUT!.

### **Acknowledgments**

Once again we would like to extend our thanks, both to the editors of *MONSTRUM* for allowing us to split this issue into two parts, and to our contributors for responding so quickly and so expertly to the end of the show. In our introduction to part one, discussing the longevity of the series and its marking of the passage of time, we wrote about our dog, Max, who was just a puppy when the show first aired in 2005. He passed away on November 11, 2020, one week before the finale aired. The personal and the professional merged again, and for us this was the end of an era in more ways than one. For this reason, we dedicate our contribution to this issue to Max. Carry on our wayward son.

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**Many (Un)Happy Returns:  
Haunted Memory and Nostalgia in the Final Season of *Supernatural***

**Melissa Edmundson**

*Supernatural* is a Gothic television series. The Gothic has been updated, but it's still there. We have our brooding, tormented heroes, Sam and Dean Winchester. The setting has moved from dark European forests to the backroads of rural America. The Victorian suit and waistcoat have given way to flannel and jeans. The castle—that symbol of ancestral inheritance, the piece of property that has been passed down from one generation to the next—has been replaced by a muscle car and a bunker. And blaring classic rock takes the place of echoing organ music. Over the years, *Supernatural* has also given us that other Gothic stalwart: ghosts. And plenty of them. Aside from demons and angels, ghosts are the most recurring supernatural entities on the show. During the first two seasons, ghosts were the preferred antagonists for the Winchesters. As the series progressed, they became vehicles for allowing Sam and Dean to briefly reconnect to loved ones, such as Bobby Singer and Kevin Tran. The ghosts that inhabit *Supernatural* haunt and yet are also haunted by unfinished business that prevents them from moving on to either Heaven or Hell. Often, these spirits are connected to an object of great meaning, making these items symbolic of the ghost's lingering trauma and inability to move on and be free.<sup>1</sup> As *Supernatural* has gotten darker and more complex in its 15-season run, so, too, have its ghosts and its emphasis on how haunted memory affects individuals who are very much alive, namely Sam and Dean Winchester.

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**Dr. Melissa Edmundson** is Lecturer of English at Clemson University. She has published numerous articles and books on women's supernatural literature, including *Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (University of Wales Press, 2013) and *Women's Colonial Gothic Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Her most recent work includes the critical anthologies *Women's Weird: Strange Stories by Women, 1890-1940* (2019) and *Women's Weird 2: More Strange Stories by Women, 1891-1937* (2020), published by Handheld Press. She has been a fan of *Supernatural* from the series' beginning and edited the collection *The Gothic Tradition in Supernatural: Essays on the Television Series* (McFarland, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of *Supernatural's* ghosts and their connection to haunted objects and human remains, see Rebecca Stone Gordon's chapter "Got Salt?: Human Remains and Haunting in *Supernatural*," in *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays* (McFarland, 2019), pp. 35-50.

This connection to—and imprisonment by—a traumatic past provides the show with another important Gothic concern: nostalgia. Just as the show’s ghosts are bound to the earth by some connection to a troubled past (such as a violent death, physical and mental abuse, or lingering guilt caused by some misdeed), living characters are also bound to a past that is marked by regret, loss, and frequent attempts to come to terms with previous mistakes. Like ghosts, these emotions keep characters from fully living in the present. *Supernatural*’s emphasis on these issues and the pull of the past on Sam and Dean marks the series as an important example of how nostalgia, which is often referred to as a positive—or at least a harmless—emotion, can easily become perverted and adopt Gothic characteristics. The word itself comes from the Greek “nostos,” meaning “return home” and “algia” meaning pain or longing. Ralph Harper describes the almost supernatural, “magical” nature of memories and how these memories connect to a lost past: “Nostalgia combines bitterness and sweetness, the lost and the found, the far and the near, the new and the familiar, absence and presence. The past which is over and gone, from which we have been or are being removed, by some magic becomes present again for a short while” (1966, 120). *Supernatural*’s ghosts have reflected these concerns from the very beginning. In the pilot episode (“Pilot” 1.1), the “woman in white,” Constance Welsh, says repeatedly, “I can never go home.” Likewise, in the first season episode “Home” (1.9), when Sam and Dean return to their birthplace, Lawrence, Kansas (after Sam is haunted by nightmare visions of the brothers’ childhood home), the spirit of their mother Mary Winchester appears in order to save the brothers from the violent poltergeist present in the house. The Winchesters, with the help of Mary, are able to rid the home of the entity, but the episode also makes clear—through the presence of both the ghost and the poltergeist—that their childhood home will always be a site of trauma and unfinished business. This fragmentary nature of the Winchester family is also emphasized by the fact that we see John Winchester at a neighbor’s house at the end of the episode, but he remains separated from Sam and Dean in the present (both are unaware of his presence in Lawrence), just as Mary remains separated from her sons in the afterlife. This fact is further emphasized when the spectral Mary tells Sam that she’s sorry before once again leaving her sons. What exactly Mary is sorry for remains ambiguous, but because she directs her words to Sam, she is expressing regret for leaving him with the family “curse” (a connection to demons). This connection directly results in his girlfriend Jessica’s violent death, which subsequently forces Sam back into the life of a hunter. On a more general level, Mary also feels that she has let her sons down by not being there for them. Throughout the series, returning home has been

complicated for the Winchesters, and it is not until they find the Bunker in Season 8 that they have any real place (besides the Impala) to call their own.<sup>2</sup>

Nostalgia's emphasis on the interplay of the past, present, and future (and the often negative effects each has on the others) has always been a central concern of *Supernatural*, and the anxieties that result from past family trauma have provided the show with much of its Gothic underpinnings. In *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw describe three conditions that allow nostalgia to form: "a secular and linear sense of time, an apprehension of the failings of the present, and the availability of evidences of the past" (1989, 4). Stuart Tannock has likewise described nostalgia in very *Supernatural*-esque terms, claiming that one of its major concerns is the idea of "that was then, and this is now" (1995, 456). In *Supernatural*, both ghosts and the objects/people they haunt represent these anxieties, but so, too, do the Winchesters. Gothic nostalgia is concerned with the incessant pull of the past and trying to keep alive something that we know we should let go of. These anxieties are ever-present in the series and tend to take two distinct forms. The first is recalling and reminiscing in an attempt to reconstruct a sense of "normalcy" (to use Dean's words, the "apple pie life") or to reinforce the brothers' bond through shared experience. Yet this form of nostalgia has a negative side. Sam and Dean frequently try to recapture a past that has always been unavailable to them (or, in many ways, a romanticized past that never truly existed). The Winchesters' relationship with the past is filled with absence and presence. The "normal" childhood they never had, but which the brothers, and particularly Dean, often try to recreate as a coping mechanism. Nostalgia also surfaces in the series, in even darker forms, when the past is recalled through traumatic memory, a haunted, troubled history that keeps returning (like a ghost) to foreground the losses experienced by the brothers, as well as their continuing doubts, fears, and anxieties (about self and brother/other). This dark nostalgia takes shape when the brothers recall personal or communal suffering during various trips to Hell, the many (temporary) deaths of both Sam and Dean, the loss of close family and friends, and all the attendant memories that come with such physical and emotional pain. This form of nostalgia becomes dangerous and perverted, and therefore Gothic, when it keeps Sam and Dean

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that both the Impala and the Bunker are inherited (from John Winchester and the Men of Letters, respectively). So, in a way, these locations also carry a fair amount of emotional and historical baggage for both Sam and Dean. For a discussion of the Impala as the modern-day equivalent of the Gothic castle, see Thomas Knowles's "The Automobile as Moving Castle," in *The Gothic Tradition in Supernatural: Essays on the Television Series* (McFarland, 2016), pp. 25-36.

from fully moving into the present (and future) due to their inability to relinquish the past.<sup>3</sup>

This haunted aspect of memory and the incessant pull of the past are themselves Gothic preoccupations. Isabella van Elferen has suggested a thematic overlap of nostalgia and the Gothic, stating: “In the Gothic genre, the past always lingers in the present, whether as a disturbing shadow, a reverberation in a hollow space, a mental reflection, or a projection of the unconsciousness” (2007, 2-3). Working with the ideas of Fred Botting regarding the influence of the past on the present, van Elferen argues:

In whatever form, the Gothic recasts pasts upon presents, and brings with it unease and uncanniness as well as nostalgia and longing. The Gothic gaze into the past is not passive, and does not result in mere mirrored images. Gothic nostalgia is a gesture, a movement, an *act*, and one that intervenes with the structure and nature of the thing remembered. (2007, 3, emphasis in original)

Like a ghost bound to an earthly object, the past can prevent us from fully living in the present. In *Gothic Hauntings* Christine Berthin uses the theories of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok to discuss haunting as a “transgenerational” phantom because “it takes the shape of a secret transmitted within a family or a community without being stated because it is associated with repressed guilt, shame or is the result of a trauma that has not been worked through” (2010, 4). In this way, trauma can haunt us as well as any ghost. By exploring the many (un)happy returns in the final season of *Supernatural*, we can appreciate how the series interrogates Gothic issues of haunting, traumatic memory, and nostalgia and how Sam and Dean battle both interior and exterior ghosts while also navigating their relationship with the past, present, and future.

The fifteenth and final season of *Supernatural* returns to some familiar territory. Sam and Dean Winchester are once again on the road “saving people, hunting things” as the ghosts and demons they dispatched in previous seasons

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<sup>3</sup> Just as the show’s meta episodes allow the viewing audience to enjoy inside jokes that only the fan community can recognize, its frequent emphasis on nostalgia likewise allows us to make connections with past episodes and thus interact with the narrative on a deeper and more emotional level which represents the collective memory of *Supernatural*’s super-loyal fan base. In its final season, viewers are invited to become nostalgic for past seasons while watching the Winchesters and other characters in turn become nostalgic over a lost innocence and a past that cannot return except in supernatural, otherworldly ways.

have now returned, angrier and more dangerous than ever. Specifically, we see the return of Mary Worthington (Bloody Mary) from the first season, along with historical figures, such as Lizzie Borden (from the Season 8 episode “Clip Show” [8.22] and the Season 11 episode “Thin Lizzie” [11.5]), John Wayne Gacy (from the Season 14 episode “Lebanon” [14.13]), and Francis Tumblety (aka Jack the Ripper). In this way, the Winchesters are literally being haunted by the past, but these spirits also serve as reminders that the brothers’ work is not done; the past is never behind them. Through direct nods to the show’s early seasons, events and characters return in uncanny forms, while the brothers must come to terms with past transgressions and their family’s own haunted legacy. The show itself has repeatedly returned to explorations of the cyclical, haunted nature of the body and mind, and Season 15 is no different. In the premiere, fittingly titled “Back and to the Future” (15.1), Sam’s self-inflicted wound from the Equalizer in the finale of Season 14 refuses to heal. Dean notices that there is “no exit wound” as he tends to Sam, and Dean reminisces about distracting Sam with bad jokes while tending to Sam’s injuries when they were younger. This scene returns viewers to earlier instances of Dean protecting and caring for his younger brother throughout the series. The wound leads Sam to once again experience disturbing visions, a haunted return of traumatic memory that also harkens back to previous seasons where Sam has continuing nightmares and premonitions about future events.<sup>4</sup> Dean likewise (re)experiences his past when he is reminded of the torture he inflicted in Hell, which the demon Belphagor—himself a specialist in torture—describes as a kind of “art.”<sup>5</sup> In an effort to distance himself from these unpleasant memories, Dean replies, “That was a long time ago,” but Belphagor quickly responds by saying, “depends on how you look at it.” Dean is visibly uncomfortable as Belphagor reminds him that the past is never really that far behind. In the last scene of “Back and to the Future,” Sam and Dean decide that this final fight against Chuck/God is worth it because they have the chance to finally be free. We see Sam and Dean standing over the trunk of the Impala, and Sam says, “We got work to do,” before closing the lid of the trunk, which recreates the same scene that ends the pilot episode.

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<sup>4</sup> In “Bloody Mary” (1.5), we learn that Sam dreamed of Jessica’s death before it happened. In “Nightmare,” (1.14), Sam has his first waking vision.

<sup>5</sup> In “Back and to the Future,” Belphagor inhabiting Jack’s dead (spiritually empty) body makes that body another example of a haunted/possessed space, as well as a physical reminder of the loss of Jack for Sam, Dean, and Castiel.



Figures 1 and 2: Sam and Dean standing over the open trunk of the Impala at the end of the pilot episode (1.1, top) and the brothers in nearly identical positioning at the end of the final season episode "Back and to the Future" (15.1, bottom).

This lets viewers know that, in this final season, we are indeed going “back and to the future” as Sam and Dean continue their fight to gain full control over their lives while also battling the ghosts, monsters, and demons of the past, including the inner demons which are formed through the brothers’ traumatic past. In “Proverbs 17:3” (15.5), Sam’s visions are about possible futures (the endings that Chuck has planned for them), but they also connect to past trauma. The brothers’ past battles, where one may have to kill the other, are seen in the first vision of the episode. Dean approaches from behind Sam (who is wearing a white suit reminiscent of the Season 5 episode “The End” [5.4]), where Dean meets Lucifer in the guise of Sam) and says, “Please forgive me” while he aims the Colt at Sam’s head and pulls the trigger. This calls to mind Dean’s earlier anxiety over Sam’s demon blood while also serving as a reminder to viewers of John’s warning to Dean that he may have to one day kill his brother. Sam then raises his head from the table and shows red eyes. He tells Dean, “We both knew it had to end this way.” Then Dean burns in flames. Yet the return of these anxieties about one brother having to harm the other don’t end there. The episode moves to Sam and Dean working a case of a possible werewolf attack, and the nostalgia returns. They use the U.S. Wildlife Service IDs with photos of their younger selves (in a nice nod to the Season 1 episode “Dead in the Water” [1.3]).



Figures 3 and 4: The U.S. Wildlife Service IDs used by Sam and Dean in the Season 15 episode "Proverbs 17:3" (15.5)

Sam says, “Hamill and Ford. Wow, that is a deep cut,” while Dean says, “Look at you. You look like a baby.” When Sam remarks about how young his brother looks in the photo, an incredulous Dean says he looks “exactly the same” and that “nothing has changed.” This exchange invites both the Winchesters and the viewers to go down memory lane while at the same time recognizing that the brothers have indeed changed. While working the case, they meet Josh and Andy May, werewolf brothers who, like the Winchesters, are deeply protective of one another. Andy, the younger brother, tells Josh, “I didn’t want to hunt people in the first place,” while Josh insists that he will always “look out for” his brother. When Andy is forced to kill Josh, we see the scenario of brothers killing one another yet again. Towards the end of the episode, when Sam tells Dean about his visions, he says he thought they were “some form of like messed up PTSD.” Sam then wonders, “But what if they’re not?” In actuality these visions are both. They stem from years of battling inner and outer demons while at the same time they are glimpses into possible futures. Dean says, “We were free and now...” The pause and blank space that follows the “now” is symbolic of the Winchesters’ continuing discomfort with living in the now but also hints at their inability to fully inhabit a “free” life. This makes one wonder if it isn’t Chuck keeping them in the “hamster wheel” after all, but their own inability to venture out of the hamster’s cage. They need to be set free, but they also need to let go.<sup>6</sup>

Nostalgic touches occur in every episode of the final season. In “Last Holiday” (15.14), the wood nymph Mrs. Butters, who guards the Bunker because of her past attachment to the Men of Letters, allows Sam and Dean to briefly experience the “normal” life they never had growing up. They celebrate birthdays and holidays, and Dean embraces the chance to have a routine and be spoiled for the first time in his life. In a montage, we see the brothers happily grab their prepared lunches each day as they go off in search of the next monster while “Cleanin’ Up the Town” from the film *Ghostbusters* plays. Yet there is also a darker side to this otherwise lighthearted section of the episode. Mrs. Butters

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout the series, Sam and Dean have had to deal with being controlled or possessed (or both) by various higher powers. In the original series arch that was supposed to conclude with Season 5, Sam was possessed by Lucifer, while Dean was meant to be the vessel for the archangel Michael. When Sam returns from Hell without his soul in Season 6, he must confront his traumatic memories. In “The Man Who Knew Too Much” (6.22), Castiel breaks “the wall” inside Sam’s head, which was originally installed by Death in order to block out Sam’s memories of his time spent in Lucifer’s Cage in Hell. Sam collapses, but within his own mind, he faces both his soulless doppelgänger and a version of his tortured self in Hell. Though his tortured self warns Sam of the emotional consequences of remembering, he chooses to reintegrate all his traumatic memories.

is giving the boys something they have never had, so in essence she is creating a nostalgic moment for them that reinforces (and calls into greater focus) what never existed in their past. This sense of perversion is essentially Gothic in nature because it is false and illusory; it was never real so is something that can never be returned to.

Other nostalgic moments in the final season are meant to provoke sadness and bittersweet emotions in viewers, most notably in “Despair” (15.18), when Castiel sacrifices himself for Dean and leaves a bloody handprint on Dean’s jacket, an image which harkens back to the handprint on Dean’s arm after Castiel raises him from Hell at the beginning of Season 4. In “Gimme Shelter” (15.15), when Dean asks Amara why she brought Mary Winchester back to life, she tells Dean that the real Mary was better than the myth Dean had created in his mind: “the myth you’d held onto for so long of a better life, a life where she’d lived, was just that, myth. I wanted you to see that the real, complicated Mary was better than your childhood dream because she was real. That now is always better than then.” She says that only by accepting this can Dean “finally start to accept [his] life.” Amara is letting Dean know that he must let go of a mythic past in favor of the present. His perverted view of the past, his anger and guilt, the ancestral curse that Dean has largely created for himself, are negatively impacting his present moment. “Now is always better than then,” is, of course, a direct reference to the series’ title cards “NOW” and “THEN” that begin each episode, but in this context it is also a comment on how the Winchesters will need to come to terms with living in the “now” after defeating Chuck. This present may be unknown, but as Sam says, the brothers have the opportunity to write their own story and move forward with their lives by focusing on the present/future.

The final flashback episode (as well as the final monster-of-the-week episode) of the series, “Drag Me Away (From You)” (15.16), is perhaps the most nostalgic, and it is no accident that the episode contains ghostly versions of past selves and emphasizes the lingering effects of haunted memory.<sup>7</sup> The setting immediately evokes memories. The Rooster’s Sunrise Motel recalls the most memorably bad (or wonderful, or wonderfully bad) motel rooms of the series. The bright orange décor, heavily patterned wallpaper, wood paneling, and vending machines haven’t changed in decades. When an old friend of the Winchesters is seemingly killed by the ghost of his former self in the motel, Sam

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<sup>7</sup> The title of the episode is inspired by a line in the chorus of Toto’s “Africa,” released in 1982, and along with the reference to *Ghostbusters* (1984) in “Last Holiday,” is another example of 1980s nostalgia that recurs on the show.

and Dean are asked by his sister Caitlin to investigate. We then get a flashback of the group as kids when they first met at the motel in January 1993. The Winchester brothers are left alone once again by John. Dean is his brother's caretaker, as ever, and, through the flashback, we once again see the amulet which the teenage Dean wears.<sup>8</sup> The ongoing debate over the brothers leading "normal" lives comes back into focus by having a younger Sam and Dean thinking about what they will do when they are adults. We see Sam's struggle to live a "normal" life juxtaposed against his first real supernatural case involving the family business. When Dean tells him he'll never go to college, Sam responds by saying "that's what normal people do." This struggle is perfectly encapsulated when we see the *American College Guide* sitting next to a gun and knife on the bed of the motel room after the brothers check in.

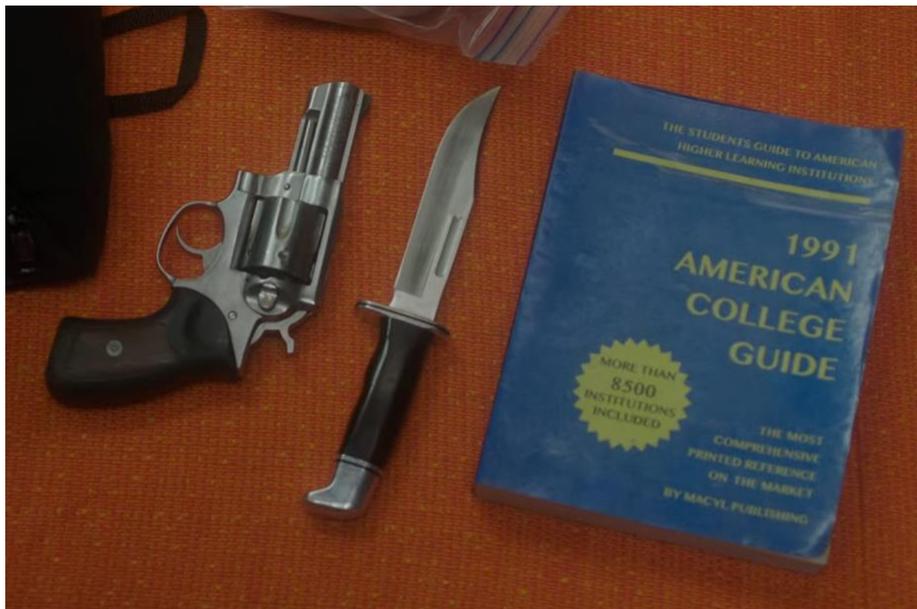


Figure 5: Items belonging to the younger Sam Winchester in the episode "Drag Me Away (From You)" (15.16)

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<sup>8</sup> The presence of the amulet also returns viewers to "A Very Supernatural Christmas" (3.8), in which we have nostalgia on multiple levels. Set during the holiday season (perhaps the most nostalgic time of year), the episode brings back childhood memories of Christmas television specials. It is also a flashback episode that shows Sam and Dean spending Christmas together in a motel room, as we see Sam giving Dean the amulet, a gift originally intended for the absent John Winchester. Like most glimpses into Sam and Dean's past, this vision is bittersweet. Stuck at the motel without their father, Dean scrapes together some meager gifts for his younger brother as the pair try their best to celebrate the holiday.

While investigating the case in the present day, Dean is literally haunted by the past when he comes face to face with his former self in the motel's hallway. The young Dean preys on the older Dean's need to always be the strong, protective one by telling him that he's failed. After hearing this, Dean comes close to stabbing himself but is saved when Sam approaches. When Sam asks him about his experiences with the supernatural presence years earlier, Dean responds with the characteristic remark that he "shoved it down the old memory hole." Yet he later admits that he had nightmares about it for years and is clearly still haunted by seeing the Baba Yaga's "nest" of dead children, including a vision of young Sam's body amongst them. The monster-of-the-week format allows viewers to once again see Sam hitting the lore in order to provide necessary information about how to defeat the Baba Yaga. Towards the end of the episode, young Dean tells Sam they made a good team, something he tells Sam at the end of the pilot episode in an effort to keep his brother with him. This reminds viewers of the conflicted life that is ahead for both brothers, particularly Sam, who we know does get to Stanford but decides to leave and return to the family business after Jessica's death.

At the end of the penultimate episode "Inherit the Earth" (15.19), after the Winchesters defeat Chuck and part ways with Jack (the new God), Sam and Dean are seen together in the Bunker, having a celebratory beer as Dean says, "To everyone that we lost along the way." Sam responds by saying that both brothers can now write their own stories, and Dean says they are "finally free." The scene then cuts to an extended montage of all the past characters who had some influence on the Winchesters' story. This symbolizes the ever-present past and its impact on the two, but there is also a new emphasis on the present and future that is indicated through the brothers' conversation immediately before the montage, as well as Sam and Dean in the Impala hitting the open road and heading off into the sunset (which is interspersed within the montage). The past will always be with them, but its pull is not as unrelenting. Almost every season of the show has focused on the ominous "what next?" but this is something different, something equally unknown, but hopeful. The brothers are now truly writing their own story.

The final episode of the series, "Carry On" (15.20), brings themes of family, memory, and nostalgia to the forefront. The co-showrunners have both commented on how the finale focuses on the close bond between Sam and Dean and signifies the journey the brothers have taken together through nods to previous seasons, particularly Season 1. Andrew Dabb stated, "We wanted it to, in some ways, hearken back to where the show began, which was two guys on the road saving people, hunting things," and Robert Singer noted, "It's a

very emotional episode. It's a personal story really about the boys" (qtd. in Highfill "*Supernatural* Boss"; qtd. in Highfill "Celebrating"). The episode begins with lighter nostalgic moments such as Sam and Dean's visit to "Pie Fest" and the familiar monster-of-the-week format (which also calls for the return of John Winchester's journal), but it quickly takes a darker turn by delving once again into equally familiar territory involving haunted memory and the persistent pull of a lost but ever-present past. When Sam mentions missing Castiel, Dean agrees but says, "That pain's not gonna go away" and that they have to keep living. This emphasis on learning to live with grief and loss—one's personal ghosts—will become even more relevant for Sam later in the episode.

During Dean's death scene, the writers return to dialogue from the pilot. When Dean tries to convince Sam to join him in trying to find their father, he says, "I can't do this alone." When Sam replies, "Yes, you can," Dean responds by saying, "Yeah, well, I don't want to." Only this time, it is Sam telling Dean that he doesn't want to continue the family business without his brother, while Dean reassures him that he can. There are also similarities with the Season 2 finale "All Hell Breaks Loose," (2.21) in which Sam dies in Dean's arms after being stabbed in the back. The color blocking and positions of the brothers are nearly identical (figures 6, 7, 8 and 9, next page).

These recurrences allow viewers to see how far Sam and Dean have come and how they have matured emotionally, even as we also recognize that the show has always been about the bond between the brothers—something that has remained constant through fifteen seasons. Dean accepts his death and asks not to be brought back. While Sam reluctantly accepts his brother's final wishes, it is clear that he never fully overcomes the trauma of his brother's death, becoming the epitome of Gothic nostalgia and haunted memory: he wears Dean's watch, keeps the Impala, names his son "Dean," and teaches his son how to be a hunter. He visits the Impala in the garage and it's clearly painful for him, but he returns to it nonetheless. The car is covered and hidden away, but its meaning (and memories) are ever-present for Sam. He lives in the present but remains connected to the past through grief and the loss of his brother. The car scene is even more poignant because Sam is using it to try to reconnect to a past. This also marks a significant shift in how the brothers have experienced traumatic events because instead of trying to forget painful things, he is now trying to remember. He returns to the car like someone who returns to an old family home in an effort to be closer to lost loved ones. Sam is forced to live in the present but is continuously haunted by the past, forever suffering from nostalgic absence and presence. Likewise, the absence of Sam affects Dean after death, who calls Heaven "almost perfect." Just as Sam sits in the car in an



Figures 6 and 7: Sam dying in Dean's arms in "All Hell Breaks Loose (Part 1)" (2.21)



Figures 8 and 9: Dean just before he dies in Sam's arms in "Carry On" (15.20)

attempt to reconnect with a lost past, Dean drives the Impala (complete with its original license plate) while he awaits his brother's arrival. When Sam gets to Heaven, the final scene shows them wearing almost identical clothes to what they wore in the pilot episode, and standing on a bridge. The brothers are reunited. Their mutual heavens are being together, on the road.



Figures 10 and 11: The clothes Sam and Dean wear in the pilot episode (1.1 top) are reproduced in the final scene of the series finale episode "Carry On" (15.20 bottom).

Gothic nostalgia is not desiring to look back but being compelled to remember. In his last dying moments in the barn, Dean reminisces about having doubts when he visited Sam at college to ask for his help finding the missing John Winchester. But in this moment, we begin to see the final shift that *Supernatural* makes from haunted memory to something more positive for Dean. He is able to accept his present situation, to tell his brother how proud he is of him, and to urge Sam to live in the now and not try to bring his dead brother back to life. In other words, Dean can finally let go. As the final episode of the series progresses, viewers recognize that Sam, like Dean, can only truly escape his haunted past at his death (many years later). Significantly, it is not until the Winchesters become supernatural beings themselves in Heaven that they can fully leave traumatic memory behind them. But the series finale makes it clear that they will not become the vengeful and unsettled ghosts that the brothers have fought for the past fifteen seasons because Sam and Dean are no longer tied to the living world through pain and suffering.

By repeatedly pointing back to the first season during the fifteenth season, and especially in the series finale, *Supernatural* comes full circle. We began with two brothers and we end with two brothers. Throughout fifteen seasons of battling an array of monsters, demons, angels, and ghosts, while at the same time dealing with their own personal demons, the Winchesters find the meaning behind their own story. It's no surprise that the Kansas song that gives the series finale its title—the nostalgic song that has recurred throughout the series and one which has great meaning for the characters and fans alike—assumes its greatest emotional power, “There'll be peace when you are done.”

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## **Agency and Identity: How to Get the Ending You Want Every Time**

**Galen Foresman**

*I spent so long searching for happiness, contentedness. In creation... or the Winchesters. But the only ones who will ever really "get" us... is us.*

— Chuck (“Unity” 15.17)

It’s often said that the Lord works in mysterious ways, and yet, there seems no shortage of people confident in their understanding of those ways. Despite explicit claims to the contrary in the Old Testament (Isaiah 55:8-9, Habakkuk 1:5, Ecclesiastes 11:5)—shared teachings among the Abrahamic religions—efforts to justify, excuse, or simply make sense of God’s doings are the currencies through which many contemporary organized religions trade. Through the divinely inspired word of the prophets, God’s will is revealed, and through religion that will is interpreted in many different and sometimes opposing ways. There was an easier time, however. A time when gods served to explain the common, yet, misunderstood occurrences of the natural world. The daily activities of the deity Apollo explained the sun’s perceived movement across the sky for classical Greeks and Romans. Their gods of mythology cared little for the totality of humanity but nevertheless served as a tool for humanity to explain the unexplainable.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and David, on the other hand, is said to care deeply for humanity, going so far as to pick favourites and maintain a chosen people. For Christians, that god miraculously became human and spent about 26 – 29 years working to develop and clarify that relationship. Despite

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these presumed efforts, the results have been surprisingly mixed. The fact that an omniscient and omnipotent god wants a relationship with humanity at all is puzzling, but the surprising lack of agreement over that god's will—and the real human suffering that results—is worth considering, even if our limited intellects only extend so far. After all, it is difficult to form a close relationship with anyone, much less a god, if we do not have a reasonably accurate understanding of them.

It is, of course, no coincidence that the “God” of *Supernatural*, Chuck, has unclear motivations. But to be fair, the motivations of any agent are rarely made explicit, and when they are—“I did this for the betterment of humanity!”—the need to announce the motivation tends to undermine its authenticity. When ascertaining the motivations of ordinary, mortal agents like humans, we typically use a method of inductive reasoning, e.g., an inference to the best explanation. From someone's actions, we infer their motivation, and if the proposed motivation is the best explanation for an agent's action, then it is reasonable to conclude that it is probably the agent's motivation. Unfortunately, this type of reasoning is less conclusive for Chuck or the god of the Old Testament. They aren't ordinary, mortal agents—limited by time, space, power, and intellect.

This essay explores the role agency plays in the identities of Sam, Dean, and Chuck. *Supernatural* explores this theme extensively, and although the show is ostensibly fictional, it is nevertheless another human adaptation of the classic tale of God's relationship to man. The well-worn tropes of free will and its presumed antithesis, determinism, present in *Supernatural* are relevant, but can eclipse the interrelated themes of personal identity, self-actualization, and how those core internal beliefs define many aspects of our relationships and vice versa. I know I am not alone in admitting that my feelings for many characters on the show have shifted significantly in its 15-season run. I had absolutely no love for Dean at the show's outset in 2005. Now almost 16 years later, I find myself grasping at amateur psychoanalysis to explain to new viewers how Dean's off-putting uber-masculinity masks the deep trauma of a broken person. So, either I have changed or Dean has changed, or both. The lesson further explored here, of course, is that who we are and who we want to be shapes our relationships, even with our favourite fictional characters.

## Worthy to be Praised

*Look, I get it. You wanted him to care about you, but humans... they'll break your heart every time.*  
— Chuck (“Unity” 15:17)

I have no issue assuming from the outset that our limited nature curtails a greater understanding of the gods. If their prophets are to be believed, we were made this way quite intentionally.<sup>1</sup> We can hardly be blamed for not knowing them fully when we are not equipped to do so, and fortunately, neither Chuck nor the god of the Old Testament seem to care that we know them perfectly anyway. Instead, they appear more concerned about what we do for them. Where the Greek and Roman gods served human needs as useful explanations for otherwise unexplainable events, Chuck and the god of the Old Testament demand that we worship and serve them to some extent, but really, *how* we serve them matters most. It is not enough that Jack be killed in “Moriah” (14:20); Dean must do so willingly. Likewise, it is not enough that Isaac be sacrificed on a mountain in Moriah (Genesis 22:2); Abraham must do so willingly.

In the philosophy of action, “agent” is a term for something with the ability to act, and the concept has far reaching implications for our lives and our relationships (Schlosser 2019). Not to be confused with “mortal agent,” which is simply a term I made up for an agent who is mortal, most humans are a special kind of agent called, “moral agents.” While many non-human animals can act, we humans have the ability to control our actions through the choices we make. At least, most of us think we can, and thinking that we are capable of this type of control over our actions is generally enough to hold ourselves and others responsible for the choices we act upon.<sup>2</sup> From *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, Russ Shafer-Landau explains that moral agents are “those who bear responsibility for their actions, and who are fit for praise or blame... [They] are those who can control their behavior through reasoning” (Shafer-Landau 2018,

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<sup>1</sup> Humanity in the Old Testament and on the show *Supernatural* is explicitly the result of God’s/Chuck’s will.

<sup>2</sup> Because we think we can control our actions and that we could have done things differently had we wanted to, we assume our choices are our own and that the choices of others are their own. As a result, we hold others responsible in the same way we hold ourselves responsible. Whether or not we can, in fact, control our actions through our choices is irrelevant to our subjective experiences of them. It feels like we can control our actions, and that is enough for us to feel justified in claiming ownership of those actions and acknowledge that ownership in others as well.

77-78). Unlike the real world, *Supernatural* is filled with a myriad of non-human moral agents with whom Sam and Dean regularly interact, some mortal and some immortal. Castiel, Crowley, Rowena, Jack, and Lucifer, to name a few, are each responsible for their own choices, because they all have the capacity to think through and control their own actions. If they did not, then we could not praise them for the good that they do or blame them for the evil they inflict.

As far as gods go, Chuck is surprisingly insecure. His self-esteem is easily undermined, and he seeks reassurance from humans: “It's not about that,” he says. “It's about everywhere I look, I'm reminded of my failures. Like, why did I go with carbon-based life? Why not silicon? Or yttrium? Zeroing out-- starting fresh. That's what I need” (“Unity” 15.17). Contrary to Psalm 18:3, Chuck doesn't believe himself to be worthy of any praise. But if anyone is responsible for anything in *Supernatural*, then surely Chuck Shurley is responsible for virtually everything, isn't he? Chuck made the sun, the moon, the stars and Heaven above, the Hell below, the Purgatory adjacent, and all the agents and non-agents that fill the Universe and every other Universe in every other dimension, with the one clear exception of Amara, his twin sister.<sup>3</sup> Chuck Shurley seems to be a moral agent. Not only did he decide to aid the Winchesters in averting the Apocalypse, Sam and Dean were able to convince him to help stop Amara from destroying all of his creation. In both cases, Chuck could be reasoned with, and so it seems as though his actions were under his control. He does things for reasons, which is quintessentially what it is to be an agent. Although, extrapolating these features isn't entirely obvious with Chuck.

How can an all-powerful god “control” his behaviour through reason? Being all powerful or having limitless power means there isn't anything you can't do, like be controlled, so we're left with what appears to be a bit of a paradox. Chuck can't be controlled, but Chuck can't fail to control himself. And so, for the sake of discussion, we will assume that limitless power can control an all-powerful entity, and when the limitless power and control of the all-powerful entity are one in the same, Chuck, the contradiction fades. Chuck is a moral agent that controls his actions according to his reason alone. So, despite what his son the Archangel Michael confesses he led humanity to believe, Chuck is worthy to be both praised and blamed (“Inherit the Earth” 15.19).

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<sup>3</sup> Death and the Shadow both claim to be as old or older than Chuck as well, but Death can't remember for certain and while the Empty existed before Chuck made everything, the fact that the Shadow always sleeps makes it difficult to know when it came into existence.

## Free Will, Responsibility, and Identity

*I don't know how to explain it, but what I found out about Chuck... it's like—it's like I wasn't alive. Not really. You know, like, my whole life I've never been free. But like, really free. But now... now me and Sam, we got a shot at living a life. Without all this crap on our backs.*

— Dean (“Unity” 15.17)

As I noted at the outset, the concept of moral agency is often associated with free will because it is commonly assumed that free will is necessary for moral responsibility. How could anyone deserve a punishment like Hell if not for their own freely made choices? If people had no freedom to make their own choices, then an afterlife of eternal suffering would serve no motivating purpose, since there would be nothing a person could do differently to avoid it. This is largely why Sam and Dean take great umbrage when they discover friends and family have been sent to Hell after freely choosing to sacrifice themselves saving humanity. The life choices made by Kevin Tran, John and Mary Winchester, Adam Milligan, Eileen Leahy, and others were all praiseworthy and deserving of something good. When they got the opposite, it struck the brothers (and most viewers) as entirely unjust. Hell is a place for people who choose to do wrong things, like curse a bus full of children or sell their soul to a crossroad demon for a Supreme Court seat. Those types of people are responsible for the bad things in the world. They are moral agents, and they could have chosen to do otherwise and avoided the horrific consequences. They could have chosen to do good, or at very least, something neutral, but they did not. And so, they got what they deserved. At least, this is the common way of justifying the existence and use of Hell as a punishment.<sup>4</sup>

If not for this line of thinking, we could lay all the blame at Chuck’s feet. The “Free Will Defence” is a popular theodicy among Churchgoers wishing to sidestep the Problem of Evil (Plantinga 2014). In *Supernatural*, the fact that humans have a choice means Chuck is not to blame for all the terrible things people do or the fact that there are so many people suffering in Hell. It also means Chuck cannot take credit for all the great things people choose to do either. Moral agency means having control of our actions and being responsible for the bad and good things we do. Ultimately, this is the foundation for Dean’s utter contempt for Chuck, and not surprisingly, it is the main thrust of the entire show’s penultimate and final climactic moments.

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<sup>4</sup> There are many reasons to think Hell is unjustified even if humans are moral agents and have freewill (Foresman 2015 and Foresman 2013).

For the Winchesters, free will isn't simply an explanation for the good and bad ways agents act in the world. It is, for them, the only power they have in the face of impossible odds. When the deck is utterly stacked against them, Sam and Dean can still ignore all the rational alternatives, and in an utterly mystifying way, choose to take on the impossible, like the Apocalypse, Death, the Darkness, Nazi Necromancers, God, etc. Whatever it is, Sam and Dean are down for the fight. That is just who they are, and like everyone else, their identity is formed through their choices. But, when that foundation is rocked with the knowledge that those choices were contrived by God, it is enough to make Sam and Dean—mostly Dean—question whether they are just the protagonists in an otherwise tragic puppet show. A surprisingly persistent, 15-season puppet show that we all very much love.

For Dean, free will is the tool by which he chisels his identity. The French Existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in *Situations* 9:101 said, “you can always make something out of what you’ve been made into,” which underscores this central connection between personal identity and our freedom to choose (Flynn 2011). When it is revealed that Chuck has been pulling the strings from the beginning, team free will literally experiences an existential crisis. As a result, Dean struggles to find a distinct identity for himself that is free from Chuck’s meddling. Dean is no longer the self-sufficient, full grown, adolescent, man-child of his own making. And while that would come as a relief to most, Dean the “Meat-Man” Winchester has grown rather fond of seeing himself that way. Discovering that Chuck had been pulling the strings all along meant Dean lost himself.

Predictably, Dean is entirely incorrect in his personal self-assessment, which fans should recognize almost immediately, because Dean reacts exactly how we’d expect him to. He gets angry and wants to kill God. Perhaps it is this very predictable nature that infuriates him; maybe he sees it as evidence of a lack of free will, complete powerlessness to do anything other than what Chuck Shurley wants him to do. Worth noting, none of this really matters to the audience. We like Dean either way; he’s a praiseworthy guy most of the time. The fact that he is a character on a television show with absolutely no real control over how he’s written, makes no difference to us. We give him credit for the good things he does, and we are disappointed with him when he behaves reprehensibly. With a wilful suspension of disbelief, we hold him responsible for his actions regardless of whether he could control them.

## The Principle of Alternative Possibilities

DEAN: *Just when we thought we had a choice. You know, whenever we thought we had free will. We were just rats in a maze. Sure, we could go left. Sure, we could go right. But we were still in the damn maze. Just makes you think, if all of it... you know, everything that we've done... What did it even mean?*

SAM: *It meant a lot. We still saved people.*

(“Back and to the Future” 15.1)

In a surprising reversal of roles, Dean’s introspection is met with blunt pragmatism from Sam. In the final season, we find Dean’s straight-forward, uncomplicated approach to hunting monsters and fighting for family has found an anchor in Sam, who is more naturally the morose and self-reflective of the two. Nevertheless, Sam is still a thoughtful guy, and his attitude reflects a measured approach to moral agency called, “compatibilism.” In most introduction to philosophy texts, compatibilism is situated as a theory of responsibility among alternatives like free will and determinism. In Sam’s response to Dean, he seems to think it doesn’t matter whether they are determined to do the things they do; they are, nevertheless, responsible for the good that they’ve done for others. As we’ll soon see, our perspective as viewers may be very different from Sam and Dean’s subjective experiences, we assume they are responsible for all that good too, which is a part of why we like them.

Often, compatibilism is somewhat mistakenly defined as a form of “soft” determinism, the philosophical theory that combines the concepts of responsibility with determinism. Determinism—also vaguely misogynistically referred to as “hard” determinism—is the position that every event, every action, every choice, etc. is determined entirely by preceding events, actions, choices, etc.<sup>5</sup> According to the hard determinist, because every choice and action is determined by preceding events, then no choice or action is ever free, so we cannot be responsible for them. Hard and soft determinists agree over the claim that everything is determined by preceding events, but they disagree over whether we can be responsible for our actions as a result of that determination.

Compatibilism is generally equated to soft determinism, because it argues that responsibility is compatible with determinism. This is mistaken because it

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<sup>5</sup> Not to be confused with “fatalism,” which is the philosophical position that holds that we are fated, inevitably to do the things we do, regardless of preceding events. Hard determinism holds that we will do the things we do precisely because of preceding events.

only tells half the story. Compatibilism holds that responsibility is compatible with both determinism and *indeterminism*, the position that not all actions, choices, events, etc. are entirely determined by preceding events. If at least some actions are not determined, then indeterminism is true. Free will theories deny that all actions or choices are entirely determined by prior events. Free will is typically conceived of as the ability to make a choice that is free—to some degree—from the constraints of prior events, actions, and choices. Of course, prior events are going to have some bearing on our situation and will thereby have an impact on our options and the reasons we use to deliberate, but for the free will advocate, those prior events do not entirely determine what we will choose to do. There is some indeterminacy in our choices which permits free will.

The problem, however, is that indeterminacy can preclude responsibility as well. Since, under this view, I am free to make choices unfettered by prior events, then my choice could be anything among the possible options. This may sound reasonable, but it leaves no way to determine what I might choose, even for me, the one making the choice. The person choosing is doing so arbitrarily, because nothing determines what they we do. If, for example, I give a reason for choosing apples over oranges, then my reasons—among other things—determined what I chose. If I have no reason for choosing apples over oranges, then the fact that I did so is random happen stance. If others were happy about my choice of apples, I should not be praised for my decision. I didn't really make a decision. I allowed randomness to select apples instead of oranges. While I was the person to get the apples, indeterminism means I played no role in choosing the apples.

The point, here, is that neither determinism nor its opposite, indeterminism, provide a sufficient conceptual framework to account for our ascribing responsibility to someone's actions. There is no question that responsibility hinges in some way on our actions, but the type of actions—if any—we are responsible for remains unclear. Ultimately, how we conceptualize responsibility has significant repercussions for how we evaluate our actions and the actions of others. A demon possessed person has no control over their actions, and we blame the demon for whatever the meatsuit appears to do. The same is true for the vessels containing angels, although the individual would be responsible for giving the angel permission to be used as a vessel. In either case, the problem with holding a vessel or meatsuit responsible is that the vessel (or meatsuit) has no control over the actions of their body.

Dean's crisis of identity stems from what appears to him to be a lack of control over who he is and what his life has been about. In his words, "All my

life, I've been nothing but a hamster in a wheel. Stuck in a story. And you know whose fault that is? Chuck's" ("Drag Me Away (From You)" 15.16). He played no role in the seeming choices that he identifies with, because he could not have chosen to do anything else. He could not have chosen a different car to love. He could not have chosen to eat healthier. Mistakes and successes in his life are no longer his own; they are the machinations of Chuck Shurely. Sam's pragmatic response to Dean, on the other hand, while none the less angry to find out what Chuck has been doing, appears far less concerned about the status of his choices and identity. Sam's more concerned about the consequences of their actions, which are undeniably heroic. The difference in their reactions appears to be the result of a tacit assumption made by Dean called the "Principle of Alternative Possibilities" (PAP). According to PAP, "a person is morally responsible for what she has done only if she could have done otherwise" (Robb 2020). Since Dean believes he could not have done otherwise than what Chuck has had him do, Dean concludes that he is not his own person. He cannot claim responsibility for his actions or who they have made him.

### The Equalizer

SAM: *You know what, I've been thinking about something you said, about how we don't make the rules, and you're right. We don't. We never have. But that doesn't mean we can just give up.*

DEAN: *Oh, come on, man.*

SAM: *We have moves to make here, Dean. We do. I mean, you think Chuck wanted me to shoot him? Of course not.*

DEAN: *You sure about that? Maybe that was part of the plan, you know? That's the thing, man. I don't know what's God and what isn't, and it's driving me crazy.*

SAM: *All I'm saying is we'll find a way to beat him. We will. I don't know how yet, but we will 'cause we're the guys who break the rules. But I can't do it without you. I can't. Just like I couldn't do it today without you. I need my brother.*

("Golden Time" 15.06)

The Principle of Alternative Possibilities has been a common assumption in discussions of moral responsibility for literally thousands of years, extending at least as far back as the ancient Greek philosophers (Robb 2020). Intuitively, it seems true. If Dean could not do otherwise than what he did, then he had no real choice in his actions. The choice he thought he made

was, in fact, merely an illusion, and if this is true of every choice Dean's made throughout his life, then what does that say about him and who he thought he was? Once the locus of control is removed from our lives, we aren't much different than those meatsuits and vessels controlled by demons and angels alike.

Fortunately, in his ground-breaking article, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt (1929 – Present) argues that PAP is false (Frankfurt 2003). According to Frankfurt, PAP's intuitive plausibility trades on our belief that coerced acts are also beyond the scope of our responsibility. If you have a big bag of your boss's money that you've promised to deposit in the bank and a mugger threatens to kill you if you don't hand it over, then the fact that the mugger is coercing you by threatening your life typically ameliorates the blameworthiness of handing over the money you promised to deposit. Of course, that is not say you couldn't refuse, so the coercion doesn't completely absolve you from some responsibility, but the idea that your responsibility varies depending on how much you were pressured to act is the very same thinking that makes PAP intuitively plausible. By making the alternative option so unpleasant that it is virtually unthinkable as an option, coercion can make it nearly impossible to choose to do something other than the coerced act. PAP simply takes that reasoning all the way to its logical conclusion such that you are no longer being coerced into doing something. Instead, you are entirely unable to do that thing (Frankfurt 2003).

But, what if a person were already going to do something that an external force is going to force them to do anyway? Suppose Sam and Dean are asked by Bobby to investigate a murder case. The murders are horrific, as all murders are, and they quickly discover that the killer, a librarian named "Susan," is possessed by the demon, Banal. After a quick "SearchtheWeb" research session, Sam discovers Banal enjoys killing people in utterly pedestrian ways, mostly by pushing people into heavy traffic. (Not one to be accused of being overly picky, Banal will also push someone in front of a moving train if an otherwise unassuming opportunity presents itself.) Once captured, during the exorcism (back when Sam and Dean did exorcisms), Banal reveals that every time he was about to force Susan to push a person into traffic, Susan went ahead and did it on her own. In fact, Susan does not even know she's been possessed, because Banal hasn't ever had to force Susan to kill anyone. Susan was going to push them into traffic anyway. She wants to do it and quite enjoys it.

According to Frankfurt, a case like Susan's *demonstrates* PAP is false. Susan could not have done otherwise than what she did, because at a moment's hesitation Banal would have taken control and pushed the person into traffic

anyway. Susan's actions are motivated by her own wants and desires, and so the fact that Banal is at the standby—there to prevent her from doing otherwise—is completely irrelevant to Susan's moral culpability. If during Banal's confession, Susan argues for a reprieve because Banal would have done it anyway, it is unlikely Sam or Dean would sympathize. As Frankfurt explains following his example starring Jones and Black:

This, then, is why the principle of alternate possibilities is mistaken. It asserts that a person bears no moral responsibility—that is, he is to be excused—for having performed an action if there were circumstances that made it impossible for him to avoid performing it. But there may be circumstances that make it impossible for a person to avoid performing some action without those circumstances in any way bringing it about that he performs that action. It would surely be no good for the person to refer to circumstances of this sort in an effort to absolve himself of moral responsibility for performing the action in question. For those circumstances, by hypothesis, actually had nothing to do with his having done what he did. (Frankfurt 2003, 174 – 175).

And so, in laying PAP to rest, Frankfurt dispatches the keystone to Dean's existential woes. The fact that neither Sam nor Dean could ever do anything other than what they have done makes no difference to their status as moral agents. More importantly, it makes no difference to who they are, which Sam desperately tries to remind Dean. They are the brothers Winchester, and they break all the rules and always find a way. Central to their identities is their relationship, and it is that relationship that Sam leverages to help Dean find a path forward. One brother cannot lose faith in who he is without both brothers experiencing the fallout. So, while being brothers was not their choice and has determined a great deal of their lives, Dean never considered the relationship a yolk to his freedom or identity. To the contrary, in fact, because when Dean reclaims his role as Sam's brother, they are freed to do the impossible.

## Don't You Cry No More

CHUCK *This... This... This is why you're my favourites. You know, for the first time I have no idea what happens next. Is this where you kill me? I mean I could never think of an ending where I lose. But this, after everything that I've done to you... to die at the hands of Sam Winchester... of Dean Winchester, the ultimate killer... It's kind of glorious.*

DEAN: *Sorry, Chuck.*

CHUCK: *What? What?*

DEAN: *See, that's not who I am. That's not who we are.*

(“Inherit the Earth” 15.19)

Poignancy is not something I would ever expect to attribute to Dean’s words, but I believe it is fair to say he has grown throughout this final apocalypse. His exchange with Chuck reveals the fatal flaw and great difficulty of a god that wants a relationship with its creation. Limitless power and virtual omniscience mean there are no surprises, no challenges, and no room for change and growth. If not for Chuck’s creations and the stories he’s told through them, there would be nothing at all, an Emptiness—who we know does not make for a good companion. Everything that makes Chuck God also makes his existence incredibly boring and lonely. His desire to create and interact with that creation is inherently limited by his own wants and desires, and what he clearly wants is to write the story and be a part of it at the same time. Unfortunately, he can’t do both without giving up part of his identity in the process, either as creator of the world or participant in that world.

As God, creator of everything, Chuck can author the story, create the characters, set the plot in motion, and watch the action unfold exactly as he planned it. As author, if Chuck appears in the story—as he does—then he is a character with a defined part that he wrote and is acting out, but play acting is not the same sort of experience had by Sam, Dean, and the rest of the world. Chuck would simply be acting as a non-player character (NPC) in a massive live action role play (LARP) that is our lives. If Chuck decides to do anything other than act out his NPC role, then his actions will change the story and he will become a participant in the world he created.

Why can’t Chuck be both author and participant? Unsurprisingly, it comes down to responsibility. As author, Chuck is fully responsible for every event that occurs in the story. As demonstrated in the dismantling of PAP, a participant is responsible for doing the things they want to do. To avoid continuity issues or maintain consistent personalities for characters, an author may decide that behaving in certain ways rather than others is suitable or fits the personality of the character, but again, such choices are entirely up to the author, not the character. Sam didn’t decide to love Celine Dion. From Sam’s perspective, he just does (“Moriah” 14.20). Castiel didn’t decide to love Dean. He just does (“Despair” 15.18). The participant is responsible for acting on their wants and desires, but an author is responsible for creating those wants and desires. As a participant, Chuck has no control over his own wants and desires, only whether he acts on them. If, on the other hand, Chuck did have

control over his own wants and desires as an author does, how would he go about deciding what his own wants and desires should be without relying on his pre-existing wants and desires? And was Chuck responsible for those pre-existing desires too? And if so, did he decide on them based on other previous wants and desires? The result of authoring and then fully participating in the world (not as an NPC) creates an infinite regress for Chuck's motivation to do anything. Much like the classic chicken and egg problem, it is unclear how Chuck the author of everything would compose a part for himself in creation that wasn't simply a role he plays when he pseudo-participates in the world.

In the end, stripped of his powers Chuck is stripped of his identity as the author, which makes him a full participant, and is revealed when he points out that he doesn't know what will happen next. Participants don't know their role. They don't know what happens next. He assumes Sam and Dean are who he authored them to be, but Sam and Dean are participants who have broken those rules, which is why they were able to surprise and defeat Chuck at all. They aren't in control of many things, especially what they want and desire—that's on Chuck. They are, however, entirely responsible for giving life to those wants and desires through their actions. And because they do so, we infer their motivation through a form of inductive reasoning, like an inference to the best explanation. So, when we wonder why Sam and Dean saved the world once again, it's entirely reasonable to conclude that they did so because they are awesome people. And why did Chuck want to destroy his favourite Winchesters? Turns out, because Chuck was the author of everything except his own wants and desires, which are the arbitrary result of an infinite regress, and so there was absolutely no good reason.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Special thanks to the *Supernatural Wiki: A Supernatural Canon & Fandom Resource*. One of the finest fan-supported sites, and an irreplaceable resource for episode transcripts. [http://supernaturalwiki.com/Supernatural\\_Wiki](http://supernaturalwiki.com/Supernatural_Wiki)

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“That’s a page-turner!”:

*Supernatural*, God and Narrative Agency

Regina Hansen

Sacred across many cultures, the myth of the creator who speaks the world into being is central to the *Supernatural* universe, as different showrunners have shaped the series’ mythology with their own words, their own stories. Through 15 seasons, the show’s writers have constructed a supernatural world inspired by global folklore and religious scripture (especially from the Abrahamic tradition). They have worked to make that world feel concrete and real – as if it actually exists – while at the same time attempting to subvert and deconstruct the foundational religious texts from which the series’ episodes and overarching narrative are derived. Woven through the entire run of the series has been a conversation, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, about the role of human agency within the narratives created by the series’ God-like writers/storytellers and by Chuck, the storytelling God who sets the rules of *Supernatural*’s world and directs the Winchesters’ lives even as they continually attempt to exert free will. In this way, Sam and Dean become humanist heroes who struggle for narrative agency in a story world filled with literalized embodiments of the religious and mythological “Lore” they consult each week. This conflict between human will and writerly/scriptural authority comes to a sort of resolution in the final episodes of Season 15, which also offers the series’ final conceptualization of humanity’s relationship to the infinite, the mystical, and all that is encompassed within the series’ title.

To do their work of “saving people, hunting things,” the Winchesters depend on stories, the Lore, which early in the series centered on non-religious supernatural beings, such as fairies, vampires, werewolves, wendigos and

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vengeful ghosts. *Supernatural* later introduced material from the Bible as well as allusions to other Jewish and Christian texts, such as the Talmud, the Book of Enoch, and (briefly) the work of Albertus Magnus and Medieval angelologists such as Pseudo-Dionysius. Spanning seasons 4 and 5, the series' first of many apocalyptic story lines casts Sam and Dean as the unwilling vessels of Lucifer and the Archangel Michael in then showrunner Eric Kripke's retelling of the Biblical Book of Revelation and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the series, the writers depart from scriptural or theological authority in their depiction of Biblical figures and concepts, picking and choosing which aspects of the Lore will inform their stories. *Supernatural*'s scripture-based storylines at first seem to reflect fundamentalist readings of the Bible. In "Are you there God? It's me, Dean Winchester," (4.2) the newly introduced angel Castiel calls on Biblical authority to argue for both the existence of angels and for the fact that they are, in Dean's words, 'dicks,' saying "Read the Bible. Angels are warriors of God. I'm a soldier." At the same time, as I have argued elsewhere, Jewish and Christian scripture as well as theological texts, portray angels not only as "soldiers"/ "dicks" but also as guardians and guides (Hansen 2014, 20), an interpretation that does not serve the writers' narrative purpose.

Biblical characters and events exist within the *Supernatural* universe as literal and factual, even those that many religious people experience as metaphorical. In "The Song Remains the Same" (5.13) the Archangel Michael insists the apocalyptic narrative must play out because Sam and Dean are in a "blood line stretching back to Cain and Abel." While, again, this representation appears fundamentalist, the series actually introduces characters and concepts from scripture and theology – eventually including Cain – in novel and subversive ways. Not only are Sam and Dean in Cain's family line, but Cain himself is portrayed in Seasons 9 and 10 as a Demon, once lord of the Knights of Hell (created for the series), who eventually transfers his mark (Gen 4:15) to Dean, so that he can kill Abaddon, known in The Book of Revelation, 9:11, as the "angel of the abyss" (NABRE) or the "angel of the bottomless pit." (KJV) Abaddon, in turn, is portrayed as a Knight of Hell and the main villain of season 9. In Season 6, viewers are introduced to Purgatory, a Catholic concept

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<sup>1</sup> I have discussed Seasons 4 and 5 in an early essay, with which parts of this current work are in conversation. For the full analysis see Hansen, Regina, "Deconstructing the Apocalypse? *Supernatural*'s Postmodern Appropriation of Angelic Hierarchies." In *Supernatural Humanity, and the Soul: On the Highway to Hell and Back*, edited by Susan A. George and Regina M. Hansen, 13-26. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

describing a state of being in which souls awaiting Heaven are first purged of sin, but which *Supernatural* presents as a place, a prison for the Leviathans. These are inspired by the Biblical monster Leviathan who in the Bible is sometimes a serpent (Rev 20:2), sometimes many headed (Ps 74:14), and sometimes breathes fire. (Ps 18:8). Rather than engage with the Biblical origins of Leviathan, Season 7 portrays it/them as a metaphor for corporate greed, an evil corporate entity that Erin Giannini notes, wreaks “far more damage on the Winchesters, on both a practical and emotional level, by separating them from home [...], their identities [...], their remaining friends and associates, and finally, one another.” (2014, 83) Finally, even the Darkness that the Bible says existed before Creation is literalized and personified as Amara, God’s sister. All these characters are real within the world of the show while also transcending fundamentalist interpretations. In a sense, as is appropriate to a series which has been rewritten and reimagined over and over by fans, the writers create their own Biblical fanfiction universe in which they manipulate texts that are understood by many to be authoritative and unchangeable.

*Supernatural*’s most overt subversion of scripture is to put the Winchesters at the center of their own Gospel. This deconstruction of scriptural narratives was born in Season 4 of then showrunner Eric Kripke’s desire to create an “intensely humanistic” (Ryan 2009) story that privileges love and family and humanity over religious doctrine. Seasons 4 and 5 transform Sam and Dean into scriptural figures. In “The Monster at the End of this Book” (4.18), the boys discover that their lives have been chronicled in series of novels, whose author, Chuck Shurley (Rob Benedict), is at first understood to be a prophet and evangelist with the power to foresee the destinies of his fictional creations, though as the series progresses he is revealed to be God. The angel Castiel calls these books “The Winchester Gospels” (4.18), and the connection to the actual Gospels is made clear in “In the Beginning” (4.3), when Mary Campbell’s deal with the demon Azazel both begins the Winchester family as we know it and sets in motion the apocalypse. The episode title is a reference to the Gospel of John – perhaps not coincidentally the name of the Winchester patriarch: “In the beginning was the word and the Word was God.” (John 1:1).

The verse’s allusion to Jesus, “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14), calls attention to his absence as a protagonist within *Supernatural*’s Gospel, centering Sam and Dean as the heroes of the series’ scriptural narrative. While they die and are reborn multiple times and their mother’s name is Mary, the Winchesters are not Christ figures *per se*. In fact, though he never appears in the series as a character – nor is he part of a Trinity with Chuck and the Holy Spirit – Jesus is

mentioned by name.<sup>2</sup> His importance to Christian believers is also often acknowledged with images and sacramentals such as crucifixes, including the one in the Church where the Archangel Michael takes refuge in “Inherit the Earth” (15.19). Still, despite Jesus’s existence within the *Supernatural* universe, his story is at most tangential to the series’ overarching narrative. The Winchester Gospels have replaced the story of Jesus. And unlike Jesus, who as the “Word”, both embodies and acquiesces to the New Testament narrative of death and resurrection (“...yet not as I will, but as you will”, Matthew 26:39), the Winchesters’ experience is one of continued resistance to the words that shape their destiny, spoken and written by God-like writers and writerly Gods.

At the end of Season 5, the Winchesters’ resistance to a fate based on scriptural precedents – and their overturning of that fate – secures their place as champions of human will over received wisdom. Still, while this short-lived triumph deconstructs a foundational Christian narrative, it does not restore the brothers’ agency. While Chuck is viewed positively at the end of Season 5 – for creating a story that allows the Winchesters to exercise free will, and for not seeming to force them to play out prescribed roles – the season’s outcome recalls a well-known religious conundrum: If God is all knowing, how can Free Will exist? After all, God always knows what we’ll do. Sam and Dean Winchester’s attempt to kill God/Chuck in season 15 is an acknowledgment of this conundrum and an attempt to overcome it, while the increasingly tyrannical characterization of Chuck reinforces the boys’ position as humanist heroes acting within in a metaphysical world.

The Winchesters’ struggle to exert free will and narrative agency persists no matter how many times they save the world from a supposedly inevitable Armageddon. In fact, “Swan Song’s” (R)evelation that Sam and Dean’s act of free will is actually foreseen/orchestrated by Chuck (5.22) will bear poisoned fruit in Season 15, even as Chuck spends most of the series as an absent father. Viewing the final season in the context of Kripke’s earlier story arc, we see an unfinished rebellion against narrative authority, whether God’s, the writers’ or some combination of writer/God. The final season sees the boys fighting to destroy God/Chuck before he destroys their world (one of many he has created for personal entertainment) and to finally free themselves from his story. Throughout the season, Chuck makes things worse and worse for Sam and Dean, and – with the-sometimes-willing help of Billie/Death, the Archangel Michael and others – undoes much of the good the boys have done throughout the series. As befits a character who was introduced as an introverted,

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<sup>2</sup> See “A Very Supernatural Christmas” (3.8) and “... And Then There Were None” (6.16).

disheveled pulp writer, Chuck's compulsion to literally 'control the narrative' reveals a sense of personal failure masquerading as disdain. He says as much when confronted by Amara in "Unity" (15.17):

- AMARA: You want to evaporate every kernel of existence because the Winchesters won't do what you say.
- CHUCK: It's not about that. It's about everywhere I look, I'm reminded of my failures. Like why did I go with carbon-based life? Why not silicon? Or atrium? Zeroing out, starting fresh. That's what I need.
- AMARA: None of this was a failure. Not a tree, not a human.
- CHUCK: Humans! Aah. Humans are the worst! Lame, disappointing. They ruin everything they touch! And they're just so boring. I'm over them.

Chuck's frustration with human beings (he disingenuously calls it boredom) accounts for the progressively preposterous machinations he goes through to get the Winchesters – as representatives and champions of humanity - to surrender to his will, and to fulfill his narrative by killing each other.

Even when they do surrender, after Chuck has disintegrated everyone on Earth except the Winchesters and their ward Jack ("Inherit the Earth," 15.19), Chuck changes the story again, sentencing them to live out their lives in an empty world. He says, "I'm kind of enjoying this story now", calling it a "page turner." (15.19) This plot twist suggests that Chuck sees himself as both author and reader of their story and reflects a not-so-hidden admiration for the Winchesters, whom he calls his "favorites." (15.19) The boys' insistence that, in Sam's words, "We always have a choice" ("Drag Me Away (From You)" 15.16), allows them to continue their resistance. In the penultimate episode, Sam and Dean – with Jack's help – revise Chuck's ending of the Winchester Gospels, by exploiting his narcissism and related weakness as a writer, the fact that as he himself says, "I can never think of an ending where I don't win." (15.19) Still, they end up not killing God after all, but rather manipulate the narrative so that his powers are absorbed by Jack. Dean's final words to Chuck, who expects to die at the hands of "Dean Winchester, the ultimate killer," (15.19) make clear that the boys now control their own story: "That's not who I am", Dean says. "That's not who we are." The title of the episode, "Inherit the Earth", is a reference to the Beatitudes spoken by Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:5), and reinforces the idea of the Winchesters as Gospel protagonists, whose role in scripture is coming to a conclusion.

The sense of *Supernatural* as a revised Gospel is further embodied in Jack, the son of the Archangel Lucifer and the human woman Kelly, who transforms himself from would-be Antichrist to savior and re-Creator of the world. Jack never outright calls himself God, but when asked, his answer, “I’m me” (15.19) recalls the way God refers to himself in Exodus 3:14: “I AM.” Unlike his predecessor deity, Jack chooses to let the Winchesters – and all humans – create their own narratives, recognizing that Chuck’s error was to “put himself in the story.” (15.19) Jack’s decision not to be “hands on” (15.19) also suggests a fascinating possibility, that in resisting Chuck’s authorial control, the Winchesters – along with their allies – not only regained narrative agency but helped to write a new God into the story. Jack himself suggests as much: “I learned from you and my mother and Cas that when people have to be their best, they can be.” (15.19)

While the Winchester Gospels end with the series’ penultimate episode, the finale “Carry On” (15.20) provides a coda in which we witness the brothers’ living their lives as people rather than protagonists. While the boys living “normal” lives was prefigured in “The Heroes Journey” (15.10), in which they experience toothache, car trouble and the consequences of Dean’s terrible diet, that experience was all part of Chuck’s narrative plan, an attempt to weaken them into submitting to his will. In “Carry On”, the boys’ lives are of their own making, not imposed from without. The viewer glimpses the Winchesters’ day-to-day life in the bunker, then moves to a “monster of the week” vampire episode followed by Dean’s basically accidental death, and arrival in Heaven, while paralleled by Sam’s life without him, through grief, raising a son, old age and natural death. The less defined, somewhat choppy pace of the episode gives the effect of a series of events just happening one after the other, instead of a narrative that has been written and imposed upon the brothers. Although, the manner of Dean’s death was a disappointment to many fans, it also reflects the fact that the brothers’ lives and wills really are no longer subject to a deity’s narrative machinations, or even the desires of the fans – and even the writers – who have loved these characters and never wanted them to die.

Free of their Gospel and its imposed narrative, the brothers still receive the scriptures’ promised reward, Heaven. Dean is greeted on his arrival by Bobby Singer who notes that Jack and Castiel have helped fashion an afterlife filled “with everything you could ever want, or need, or dream” (15.20) Moreover, it is a Heaven of shared story, inhabited by Bobby, Rufus, John and Mary Winchester and (we are to imagine) any loved ones who have gone before: “Everyone happy. Everyone together.” (15.20) He also notes that “Time here ... it’s different,” suggesting a lack of linearity that, like the irregular arc of the

episode – whether purposeful or not – exemplifies a world in which narrative is not imposed from above.

As with the continued existence of a Creator – and of angels and vampires for that matter – the episode’s vision of Heaven is an attempt to reconcile the series’ title and subject matter, *Supernatural*, with its humanist sensibility. An afterlife exists, Heaven “up here” (as Bobby calls it) and Jack and Cas (a benevolent God and an angel) have had a hand in crafting it, but *Supernatural*’s Heaven, though created by metaphysical beings, seems to be inhabited only by people. Like the human writer/gods who created and sustained the series, *Supernatural* resolves the relationship between the Winchesters and the strange world they inhabit by allowing them to pick and choose. They choose each other.

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## The SPNFamily: Supernatural and the Fandom Like No Other

Lynn S. Zubernis

When *Supernatural* (2005-2020) ended its fifteen-season run on November 19, 2020, the show had managed to accomplish some unlikely things, not the least of which was staying on the air for fifteen years. There were significant changes in technology, social communication patterns, and the world itself from the show's beginning in 2005 to its conclusion in 2020, which allowed the show's vibrant fan community to develop and evolve in a way that has not been seen in any other fandom. In this essay, I trace the factors that contributed to *Supernatural's* unique journey and how its fans were not only along for the ride, but integral to navigating the route to the show's final destination. Those factors include the impact of its beginnings aligning with technological change, the development of a uniquely reciprocal relationship between fans and cast, the diverse ways in which fans encountered the show that resulted in rival fan communities, and the series' controversial ending. Like the Winchester brothers' (Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles) long road home, the journey has been characterized by unanticipated twists and turns, and remained fraught until the very last moments.

### Timing Is Everything

Fans who began watching *Supernatural* in its early seasons were hooked on the show for many reasons, and their support kept the show on the air through the writers' strike in Season 3 and constant timeslot switches, even the dreaded Friday Night Death Slot. According to TV Guide's retrospective of the series, those early seasons were a "near perfect blend of absurdist comedy, compelling mythology, complicated family angst, and daring contemplations of free will," with many episodes that became instant classics (Thomas, 2020).

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Creator Eric Kripke and producer/directors Bob Singer and Kim Manners were deeply invested in the horror genre (many of the crew were alumni of other Vancouver-produced shows like *The X Files* [1993-2002]), and the show's first few years were dark, disturbing and definitely scary. When fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins was encouraged to watch *Supernatural* in early 2007, he described it as a "cultural attractor" that tapped into the zeitgeist of the moment in the midst of a world that was constantly concerned with the invisible threat of terrorism. *Supernatural* drew Jenkins and others in with the appeal of fighting unseen evil as well as the more psychological monsters, which are the brothers' emotional scars and psychic wounds (Jenkins, 2007). Viewers found inspiration in the Winchester brothers' essential humanity as they nevertheless confronted monsters both real and metaphorical and prevailed. The show's underlying theme of "always keep fighting" would eventually become an overt mantra, with Jared Padalecki extending the meaning to mental health challenges in real life as well with charitable campaigns to raise awareness.<sup>1</sup>

The other reason fans were drawn into *Supernatural* in the early seasons was the show's examination of the theme of family and the unique, complex, realistic relationship between the brothers. The natural chemistry between lead actors Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles was a contributing factor; Kripke was also interested in exploring their sibling relationship, having dealt with his own family issues as most of us do. The combination of writing that took us deep into the emotional journey of Sam and Dean as well as Padalecki and Ackles' ability to let themselves be vulnerable and show those emotions, was something rare in television. *Supernatural's* emphasis on and celebration of a platonic relationship, centring that relationship for fifteen years, is a unique aspect of the show and can be seen as subversive in the midst of the preponderance of romance-centred media.<sup>2</sup>

*Supernatural* had its beginnings in an unusual time. In many ways, *Supernatural* and its fandom grew up with the internet. When the show premiered in September 2005, fans had only recently begun to utilize online platforms to connect and form communities with other fans with fan favourite shows such as *The X Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) (in fact, in the first season of the show the boys have flip phones and Dean's still listening to cassette tapes and wondering what "My Space" is, though Sam rightly calls him on the already-

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Padalecki's AKF campaigns and its connection to the fandom, see the chapter he wrote in *Family Don't End With Blood: Cast and Fans on How Supernatural Has Changed Lives* titled 'What the Fandom Means To Me.'

<sup>2</sup> See Kylie Hemmert (2006) on how *Supernatural* prioritized platonic and familial relationships.

obsolete cassette tapes). *Supernatural* found its audience organically through word of mouth recommendations and postcard campaigns to keep it on the air. Television was still a once-a-week story, which contributed to a coherence in the fans who talked about the show for six days until it was time to watch it – all together – again. *Supernatural* exploded onto the fandom scene just as fans were discovering that platforms such as the blogging site LiveJournal could be utilized to not only upload individual musings about the show but also share photos, news and videos with other fans in real time. Even more important, “LJ” allowed fans to create communities, so that fans could find other like-minded fans and come together to celebrate whatever it was they loved about *Supernatural*. There were communities devoted to fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, meta, critique, and even communities in which to ridicule other fans with a modicum of privacy – and of course with anonymity. The early LiveJournal communities were joined by other similar sites such as DreamWidth, and the *Supernatural* fandom became a more tight-knit community than fandoms had been able to accomplish in the days of message boards, mailing lists and Usenet as forms of community.<sup>3</sup>

The timing of *Supernatural*'s premiere coincided with these major changes in how fan communities developed, and the result was a fandom that was cohesive and aware of its own size and impact. Time continued to be on the show's side as online platforms proliferated and fans spread out to multiple ways of interacting, posting fanfiction on the archive fan-run website Archive Of Our Own as well as Wattpad and Tumblr, and interacting with each other on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The influx of fans to those platforms allowed *Supernatural* to be one of the first shows whose fans and actors began interacting online. Several of the show's cast members, including Misha Collins (Castiel) and Chad Lindberg (Ash), were early adopters of Twitter, which provided a quick and easy (and very visible) way for them to interact directly with fans. Both were savvy as to how this interaction could be leveraged, both to the benefit of the show and the individual actors, but also to mobilize fans to harness the charitable projects that had always been a part of fandom.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on fan communities in the early 2000s, see Hellekson and Busse (Eds.) *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*.

## The Reciprocal Relationship

The early and eventually widespread use of platforms like Twitter by the *Supernatural* cast, writers and producers changed their relationship with the show's fans. Much research on fans and celebrities, especially the earliest studies on fans, emphasizes the "parasocial relationship", which is by definition one-sided, with the fan feeling like they know everything about the celebrity, but the celebrity knowing nothing about them (Horton & Wohl 1956, 215). The implication is that there's something pathological about that sort of relationship, but that isn't always the case. With *Supernatural*'s actors interacting directly with fans, the relationship became a little less one-sided. The cast wasn't making friends with fans (in most cases), but they were getting to know them a little – and fans were getting some acknowledgement from the people who played the fictional characters they loved.

Despite that little bit of reciprocity, the relationship would have remained mostly one-sided had it not been for another platform that brought *Supernatural* fans and actors together. That platform was not online, but a venue that brought them together in 'real life' – the advent of *Supernatural* conventions. The first few conventions that Padalecki and Ackles attended in the show's second season were multi-fandom cons, but the convention organizers quickly realized they had discovered a gold mine in *Supernatural* fans. Creation Entertainment in the US and Asylum in the UK held some of the first conventions devoted entirely to *Supernatural* by 2008. Fans sold out the conventions and slept in hotel hallways to be at the front of the room for special breakfast panels with "the boys" and eagerly lined up for photo ops.

These conventions were initially similar to all the other fan conventions out there, including the much larger Comic Cons and Wizard Worlds, with both physical and psychological barriers between fans and celebrities strongly enforced, thus keeping the relationships mostly one-sided. The actors sat stiffly on chairs while fans crowded in as close as they dared for a photo op, perhaps bumping shoulders with the celebrity if they were lucky. Autographs were a hello, sign, goodbye occasion. As time went on, however, *Supernatural* conventions began to diverge from the others. As Creation realized that the *Supernatural* conventions were more successful than any others, they scheduled more and more, eventually holding a convention for the show at least once a month and sometimes twice a month. This was an unprecedented occurrence – even in the glory days of *Star Trek* cons, there had never been such frequent conventions for a single show. In spite of both fans and actors' awareness that

the actors are paid for their appearances, that frequency was instrumental in making the parasocial relationships less one-sided and more reciprocal.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the *Supernatural* actors initially had reservations about interacting with fans; perhaps they held negative stereotypes and expectations. Research shows that the most effective way of breaking down stereotypes and reducing stigma is through seeing people as individuals, which happens with actual face to face interaction (Barden, et al, 2004; Wheeler & Fiske, 2005). That’s what happened at the *Supernatural* conventions. Jared, Jensen, Misha and the other actors began to see fans every few weeks, many of whom were what they began to call “familiar faces”. Their initial anxiety fell away as they began to get to know fans, who were doctors and lawyers and accountants and teachers and servers and construction workers and everything in between. In the face of discovering fans as real people, the carefully curated psychological distance (and to some extent the physical distance too) began to break down, and the interactions became more genuine. Photo ops were no longer actors on chairs barely touching fans – now they were re-enactments of favourite scenes complete with props, hugs that took fans’ breath away (literally), and photos where neither fan nor actor is looking at the camera, but rather at each other. Thanks to the frequent conventions as well as the constant online interaction, the relationship between *Supernatural* fans and cast became less parasocial and more reciprocal.<sup>5</sup>

The *Supernatural* fandom, which calls itself the SPNFamily, extends the reciprocity into charitable projects that are often partnerships between the show’s actors and its fans. Misha Collins realized soon after joining the show that there was a tremendous amount of creativity and passion in its fans, and that perhaps this could be harnessed as a force for good. He created Random Acts ten years ago, and the fan-volunteer-driven organization has since built schools in Nicaragua, fought childhood hunger, provided pandemic relief and funded LGBTQA supportive programs. Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, as well as many other cast members, have organized charity benefits as well, raising money for a variety of programs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Zubernis and Larsen argue in *Fandom at the Crossroads* that the relationship between *Supernatural* fans and actors has been uniquely reciprocal and less pathological.

<sup>5</sup> For more on how personal interaction impacts stereotypes, see Zaid’s 2019 essay on “How to beat stereotypes by seeing people as individuals”.

<sup>6</sup> Tanya Cook and Kaela Joseph provide a comprehensive history of the *Supernatural* fandom’s history of activism in their chapter in *Family Don’t End With Blood*.

Another unique facet of the relationship between the show and its fans is the incorporation of *Supernatural* fandom into the series' text. The so-called meta episodes are both controversial and some of the show's most popular. Beginning in Season 4 with the introduction of the *Supernatural* novels in 'The Monster At The End Of This Book' (4.18), *Supernatural* incorporated fans of the books into the canon. The writers used the episode to 'speak back' to fans of the real series, including fan criticisms on the message boards of the day. In the next season's 'Sympathy For The Devil' (5.01) fangirl Becky Rosen is introduced, and reappears several times throughout the show's run, at times embodying some of the more negative stereotypes of fans (from naïve and less than fashionable to kidnapping and drugging poor Sam in an attempt to get him to marry her).<sup>7</sup> *Supernatural* also went meta for its 200<sup>th</sup> episode with 'Fan Fiction' (10.05), written by Robbie Thompson as a "love letter to fans" which recognized and even applauded how fandom subverts and interprets the text for its own purposes in fanfiction (Kelly, 2016). Thompson is also responsible for the creation of Charlie, a queer tech-savvy gamer fangirl who was immediately beloved by fans. The show angered its fans by killing Charlie off (and then brought back an Alternate Universe version to try to make up for it), but the character was also Thompson's attempt at normalizing comments on fan practices such as fanfiction, cosplay and collecting.<sup>8</sup> By Season 15, *Supernatural*'s understanding of and portrayal of its fans had evolved. Becky Rosen returns in the final season as a successful, well-adjusted woman who loves the show while she holds down a job and raises a family, presenting a more positive view of fans and an appreciation for the value of fan creativity. By that episode, the show was no longer depicting fans as delusional, but instead able to express their passion in a way that enriches their lives.

## The Ship Wars

The reciprocal relationships that developed with fans contributed significantly to the show's longevity. Fans who felt seen and understood by the

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<sup>7</sup> See Brigid Cherry's essay on Becky Rosen in *TV Goes to Hell* for an exploration of Becky's introduction and symbolism in the show

<sup>8</sup> For more on how *Supernatural* has represented its fans see Larsen & Zubernis "We See You (Sort Of): Representations of Fans in Supernatural." In Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth, Eds. *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*.

cast were more committed than ever; the show fed the convention circuit and the conventions fed the viewership of the show. Time was on *Supernatural's* side once again, in addition, as the way in which television aired began to change. In the USA two major changes contributed to an entirely new wave of viewers discovering *Supernatural* when it was already years into its run: the show was syndicated and began airing on TNT almost daily, and *Supernatural* arrived on Netflix. Those new platforms allowed a new generation to discover the show, some of whom had been way too young to watch it when it first aired. Those new fans then flooded into the online communities and to the in-person conventions, enriching those spaces further and generating social media buzz that in turn helped keep the show going. The *Supernatural* fandom is thus a diverse community in terms of age, and also in terms of gender, sexuality, favourite characters and even what's most important about the show itself.

Unlike fans who began watching the show as it aired from week to week in its early seasons, fans who discovered the show in its later seasons often arrived at it through other means – sometimes not even through watching the show itself. Because the *Supernatural* fandom was so vibrant and active, there were constantly memes and graphics and videos on every social media platform, from Tumblr to Reddit to Wattpad to TikTok. Fans who discovered *Supernatural* through one of those platforms sometimes had a very different perception of the show, especially through a 'shipping' lens. Shipping, short for imagining or wanting two character to have a romantic relationship, has been a part of fandom for a very long time, but has evolved in recent years to become, as journalist Aja Romano puts it, “an ideology – and like all ideologies, it breeds both crusaders and conspiracists” (Romano, 2016). That is to say, shipping is no longer 'just for fun' – fans take their shipping seriously, including demands that the ship “go canon” and be depicted onscreen and not just in fanfiction.

*Supernatural* is unique as a show that centres on a platonic relationship instead of a romantic one, though that didn't stop some fans from shipping fictional brothers Sam and Dean (known as Wincest) anyway in fanfiction. Writer and showrunner Sera Gamble famously referred to *Supernatural* as “the epic love story of Sam and Dean” (Borsellino, 2006) and researcher Catherine Tosenberger argued way back in 2008 that Wincest wasn't so much an oppositional resistance to the show, but an expression of readings that are suggested and supported by the text itself. (She also presciently noted that the most resistive aspect of Wincest was to give Sam and Dean a lasting happiness that the series itself “eternally defers.”) (Tosenberger, 2008)

When the angel Castiel (Misha Collins) was introduced in Season 4, some fans quickly began shipping him with Dean (with the portmanteau Destiel) and

that ship became immensely popular on social media platforms like Tumblr. Many fans found out about the series through Destiel posts instead of by watching the actual show, and to those fans, *Supernatural* was all about the romance of Dean and Cas. (Meanwhile, the larger general audience continued to watch for neither of the ships, enjoying a show about two brothers fighting monsters with the help of friends and found family.)

Ship wars, with factions of a fandom breaking off into camps supporting rival ships, are common in fandom and not unique to *Supernatural*.<sup>9</sup> However, because *Supernatural* has been airing for such a long time, the animosity between the two major factions had a long time to increase in intensity. In the first seasons after Misha Collins joined the show as Castiel, the show teased a romantic relationship or at least an infatuation between the angel and Dean, following the template that it had successfully used to joke about Sam and Dean being repeatedly mistaken for a couple. Wincest fans had never expected or wanted their ship to be actually reflected on the show, since the CW was unlikely to go full on *Flowers in the Attic*, so the teasing had not created any expectation of follow-through. Castiel and Dean, however, were not related, so there was no barrier to the romance being eventually enacted on screen; fans who supported that ship began to expect that Destiel would eventually “go canon.” Some cast, writers and journalists encouraged that expectation, perhaps not realizing how serious that expectation was for some fans. There were periodic outbreaks of in-fighting in the fandom over shipping and accusations against the show for queerbaiting (when media teases queer relationships but doesn’t follow through) for many years, so by the time the show came to its final season, the roller coaster of yes-it-will-happen-no-it-won’t-happen had ramped up both anxiety and hope for Destiel as a romantic endgame.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps partly in an attempt to mollify that faction of fandom, the 18<sup>th</sup> episode of the final season, at first titled “Truth” and then revised to “Despair” (15.18), included Castiel’s emotional declaration of love to Dean, a moment of true happiness that then saw him sucked into The Empty and out of our world as Dean stood there in shock. Both the writer (Robert Berens) and Misha Collins have said that they intended Castiel’s words to be viewed as romantic, although

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<sup>9</sup> Psychological origins of ship wars are explored further in the article “Intergroup norms and intergroup discrimination” by Jetten, Spears and Manstead (1996) and in the chapter “Only love can break your heart: Fandom wank and policing the safe space” in Zubernis and Larsen’s *Fandom At The Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships*.

<sup>10</sup> See Fansplaining’s December 2, 2020 podcast for a discussion of queerbaiting and *Supernatural* - <https://www.fansplaining.com/episodes/139-the-q-is-for-queerbaiting>.

the scene seemed carefully written as ambiguous. (Collins himself tweeted about the controversial scene, saying that the show wasn't perfect and Castiel's departure could have had more resonance, but that "I'm confident you guys can sort that part out as your writing, art and imaginations play the story out past the last frames we filmed.") (Collins, 2020) Collins threw himself into the scene, his tears and emotion so raw that many fans sobbed right along with him. Most of the general audience viewed it as the last words of a very good friend, but shippers viewed it as a clear, if one-sided, declaration of romantic love for their ship.

For *Supernatural's* queer fans, representation on the show in the form of many fans' favourite character was powerful and welcome. Reaction ranged from euphoric posts of "Destiel Is Canon!" to accusations of *Supernatural* following the trope of "bury your gays" by killing Cas off as soon as he came out as queer (complicated even more by angels being non-binary and Castiel arguably providing representation for fans who are asexual or aromantic and being a queer character even before that declaration). Dean's lack of reciprocation became a flash point for fans who interpret the character as bisexual and those who don't, with arguments between fans growing ugly and incorporating he said/she said evidence from cast as well. The social media frenzy was intense, with both biting and hilarious memes taking over Tumblr and passed around every other platform online; the frenzy was intensified because this episode aired as the United States was waiting impatiently online to find out the results of the presidential election (Romano, 2020). Episode 18 also led Destiel shippers to feel vindicated in the expectations they had held all along, and perhaps understandably, they were even more certain that the show would end with Dean and Castiel's fully reciprocated romance front and centre. Misha Collins repeatedly insisted that he was not actually in the final two episodes, but fans by now too invested in their own expectations concluded he was being told to say that by The Powers That Be, and didn't believe him.

## **The End**

The final two episodes of *Supernatural* were, as a result, extremely controversial. The penultimate episode, "Inherit The Earth" (15.19), which was the season finale for Season 15, saw Sam and Dean and Jack finally defeat Chuck in a satisfying victory for mere humans over an actual God, but without the help of Castiel (though his sacrifice had made that final showdown possible). Jack became the new deity and the Winchesters finally won that elusive free will

they'd been chasing all their lives. That episode ended with the “happy ending” that many fans had envisioned for *Supernatural*, Sam and Dean in Baby driving off into the sunset, and while some fans were disappointed that Castiel hadn't returned, most were happy with this episode – and after all, there was still one more.

The series finale of *Supernatural*, “Carry On” (15.20), aired on Thursday, November 19 after a one hour retrospective in which many of the show's cast said their goodbyes and expressed their appreciation for the long journey. The final episode, like much of the show, divided fans – with an intensity that had not been seen even in the ship wars so far. Fans on a high from Sam and Dean's victory the week before got to see a montage of the brothers enjoying their freedom for an unknown amount of time, cooking breakfasts, going to pie festivals, enjoying their dog Miracle, and even those mundane moments we don't often get to see like doing laundry in the Men of Letters bunker that is their home. It was wonderful seeing them smile – but of course, these are the Winchesters. They're not just kicking back – they're hunting. Halfway through the episode, Dean is impaled on a giant piece of rebar in a barn on a random vampire hunt, which was shocking and horrifying and not something most fans (or Sam and Dean) expected. As Collins had done in episode 18, Jared and Jensen put on a master class in acting as Dean asks Sam to stay with him as he dies, giving Dean the chance to tell his little brother how he feels about him and express his pride and love. Both characters have a chance to demonstrate their evolution, Dean able to express his feelings openly and Sam able to do what Dean asks of him successfully this time – carry on. He lives for decades more, missing his brother but going on with his life, raising a son who he names Dean.

The brilliance of the episode lies in its incredibly realistic depiction of grief, from Sam's tearful permission to his brother that “It's okay Dean, you can go now” to the depiction of all the small moments in the montage of Sam having to live without his brother that are familiar to anyone who has grieved. We see Sam sitting in Dean's room on his bed, overcome by memories and holding Dean's dog, Miracle, close in comfort. We see him cooking breakfast in the bunker's kitchen and startling for a second when the toast pops, expecting Dean to be right there behind him grabbing the hot slices as he did so many times.. Many fans saw the finale as an appropriate ending for a show that, quite subversively, always foregrounded platonic and familial love and how powerful such relationships can be. The episode also works on a meta level, a master class in grief and loss for a fandom that was about to endure the loss of the show itself. Dean's words to Sam are also a goodbye from Jensen to Jared, and from the writers and actors to the fans, with an explicit message to “always keep

fighting” and to “carry on.” The final shot of the entire series, in keeping with the show’s meta shout outs to its fans, incorporates the fandom right into the canon of the show, as Jared and Jensen are joined by director Bob Singer, their fellow cast and the entire crew to thank the fans and wave goodbye. The final lines are Singer’s “annnnnd cut”, and we all hear it, because we are all, more than perhaps for any other show, part of *Supernatural*.

For many fans, it was a beautiful ending. *Supernatural*’s legacy, however, has never been without conflict and controversy. While many fans loved the finale, others did not. Some were crushed that one Winchester died and the other lived, especially not knowing how long Dean got to experience happiness and freedom. The fans who had been convinced that Castiel would return and the Destiel romance would happen were bitterly disappointed and angry that their expectations had in some way been encouraged, only to be crushed in the final episode. Covid restrictions during the filming of the last two episodes meant that very few people could be on set, so there was disappointment too that some other beloved characters had not returned. The day after the episode aired, mainstream media picked up the furor, an article in Vox proclaiming “*Supernatural*’s bonkers series finale marked the end of an era of fandom: After 15 seasons, the show’s attempt at a happy ending raised more questions than answers” (Romano, 2020). As Romano also pointed out, emotions ran high around the series ending simply because it had been on the air for so long that many of its fans had quite literally grown up with it.

The actors were all tremendously proud of both the show’s long journey and their own performances in their final episodes. Fans who were angry and disappointed, however, lashed out against the show and the cast and the writers – and their fellow fans. They organized to trend hashtags that expressed their feeling that marginalized characters (and the fans themselves) had been silenced, tanked the episode’s ratings on IMDb and spammed the comments, and spread conspiracy theories about alternate versions of Castiel’s declaration of love and its outcome, fuelled by a Spanish translation that temporarily suggested a different reading. The hopeful message intended by the series finale was negated for some fans by the story not going the way they had hoped, and hurts and frustrations about the marginalization and silencing that some fans have actually experienced in real life made that outcome even harder. Many fans were drawn to the fandom community in general and *Supernatural* fandom in particular because of its different norms as a place where fans would not feel disenfranchised or stigmatized.

Perhaps this is what we should have expected from this little show that has never been ordinary. *Supernatural* came along at a pivotal time in popular

culture, helping to usher in a new age of geek culture and a more reciprocal relationship between fans and creators. *Supernatural* has defied the odds and countered expectations in multiple ways over the past fifteen years, and its ending has been no exception. There is, however, one thing that the show's diverse fandom can agree on: we all hope this isn't really the end. As Jensen Ackles wrote in his chapter in *There'll Be Peace When You Are Done*, "This will never end. Besides, nothing ever stays dead on *Supernatural*" (Ackles, 2020).

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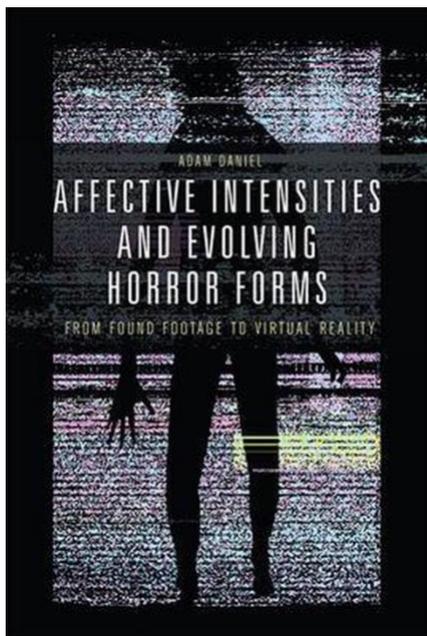
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## Book Review

### *Affective Intensities and Evolving Horror Forms: From Found Footage to Virtual Reality*

By Adam Daniel  
Edinburgh University Press, 2020

232pp.

*Affective Intensities and Evolving Horror Forms: From Found Footage to Virtual Reality* is an expansive and lively exploration into affective intensities and embodied experience in relation to emergent horror media forms. A central issue that Adam

Daniel addresses is how theories of affect seem to spark conjecture of a brain/body binary, which lends Daniel a way of opening up discourse on embodiment theory, neuroscience, and Deleuzian film-philosophy. Daniel productively invokes Brian Massumi on affect. Affect and its qualification as emotion in Massumi's sense are separated by the codification of the intensities of affect (Massumi 2002, 28). However, the misconception is thus that cognition, and therefore language, occurs secondarily to affect. More specifically, this is in how we understand the relationship between intensities and language. A difficulty, I think, in conceptualizing the encounter with intensities of affect, is working out where cognition fits in the spectatorial experience. For Daniel, the affective spectator experience cannot be fully explained by a cognitive understanding of the film text (Daniel 2020, 2). In Chapter 1, Daniel reviews the cognitivist film theory of Noël Carroll, Murray Smith, Torben Grodal, David Bordwell, Greg Currie, and Carl Plantinga to argue how, when considering horror spectatorship, the formulation of the hierarchy between affect and cognition should be replaced by an understanding of the somatic interaction between film and viewer. Horror spectatorship, in this way, can be understood phenomenologically as a "dynamic entwinement of film-as-aesthetic-object and viewer-as-experiencing-subject" (Daniel 2020, 23). The behavior of horror's affective intensities is most aptly found in Chapter 6 in Daniel's reference to Steven Shaviro's "articulation and composition of forces" (Shaviro 2010, 17); however, it is also interesting to note that the question of cognitive processes returns in Daniel's book in his neuroscience studies of found footage horror

and when referring to the “apocryphal origins” and thus, authenticity, of Parker Wright’s YouTube video *11bx1371* (Daniel 2020, 120).

The “dynamic entwinement” to which Daniel refers is conceptualised through the “machinic assemblage” as an “interaction between the brain/mind/body assemblage and the cinematic image” (Daniel 2020, 8). However, via the “machinic assemblage,” Daniel’s book also brings focus to medium (that is, the body’s relationship with machines for which medium is product). This focus on medium is seen in emergent horror forms: found footage horror, such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Willow Creek* (2013), *Creep* (2014), and *The Visit* (2015); YouTube videos, such as *Suicidemouse* (2009), *11bx1371* (2015), and *Marble Hornets* (2009–2014); horror video games, such as *Alien: Isolation* (2014), *Anatomy* (2016), and *Marginalia* (2017); and virtual reality experiences, such as *11:57* (2014), *Catatonic* (2015), and *Escape the Living Dead* (2016). In the “machinic assemblage,” the medium directs attention to how affect arises in the interaction. For found footage horror, such as *The Visit*, this is how empathy is generated via embodied simulation theory’s (EST) “feeling of movement” with the moving camera (Daniel 2020, 105); how a sense of anxiety is induced by the panning camera strapped to a cooling fan in *Paranormal Activity 3* such that the threat is of the “out-of-frame” (Daniel 2020, 64); and how elements such as “jump cuts, digital noise, glitches and overlays” in *Suicidemouse* and *11bx1371* disrupt and unsettle the viewer (Daniel 2020, 120). What is interesting is that while puzzle horror videos, such as *11bx1371*, seem to lend themselves to a cognitive spectatorial experience, for Daniel, the “distortion or breakdown of the audio-video image” via these elements generates an experience for the spectator of “discorrelation” (Daniel 2020, 117; Denson 2020). Such examples speak to the way the technological capabilities of these media forms produce a particular embodied and affective response. For horror media forms, affects such as fear, anxiety and dread are also redoubled in our relationship to media forms. As Daniel writes: “Denson observes that post-cinematic horror ‘trades centrally on a slippage between diegesis and medium; the fear that is channelled *through* moving image media is in part also a fear *of* (or evoked *by*) these media” (Daniel 2020, 3).

Accordingly, the “machinic assemblage,” as Daniel theorizes it (specifically in Chapter 4), is a material relationship between the medium and the body as opposed to a *dispositif* as an energetic arrangement or assemblage. Such a focus on material subjects and objects as they make up the assemblage means that affects are concentrated in embodied subjectivities and media forms, rather than cinema necessarily comprising the force of affective intensities and their relations in the concatenation. That is, the focus is on the subject’s embodied relation with the medium as an interactive and immersive experience. Daniel does make some concession to an

energetic arrangement wherein the boundaries of subject and object are “dissolved” in the process of intensities, however, when he writes: “The move towards interactivity and immersion has to some degree dissolved the boundaries that may have been conceived between a viewer-subject and media products as objects of experience” (Daniel 2020, 6).

What Daniel makes clear is that the focus on affect in the “machinic assemblage” “raises particular questions about the insufficiencies of theories which prioritise identification, alignment or mimetic communication with on-screen bodies as central to affective exchange” (Daniel 2020, 6). Throughout the book, Daniel challenges these traditionally understood terms of film theory; for instance, in Chapter 2 identification is considered “ocularcentric” such that Daniel calls for “the integration of the range of perceptual, cognitive and bodily ways in which we are drawn into the image” (Daniel 2020, 31–2); alignment is eschewed for “empathic engagement” and “entwinement” in Chapter 5 (Daniel 2020, 99–100); and mimetic experience in Chapter 3 describes a “contact” between the viewer and the image that takes the form of “a unique, sensuous and tactile exchange” (Daniel 2020, 61–2). Daniel’s treatment of “mimetic innervation” in Chapter 5 develops such contact “as a dynamic exchange between the film object and viewing subject” whereby elements of the *mise-en-scène* produce a “porous interface” (Daniel 2020, 106–7; Rutherford 2011, 61–3), and Daniel’s work on neuroscientific research into embodied simulation theory suggests how the movement of the camera also allows for “mimetic engagement” (Daniel 2020, 105–7).

In Chapter 4, the focus on subject–object becomes a question of perception, whereby Daniel employs Gilles Deleuze’s perception-image to understand the interaction in found footage horror between spectator-subject and camera point-of-view (Daniel 2020, 82). For Daniel, the perception-image allows for the “being-with” (Deleuze 1986, 74) of spectator and camera that we find in found footage horror. Thus, for Daniel, the perception-image is centered on how new media forms provide the capacity for an affective extension of a spectator-subject (most significantly when the subject is “out-of-frame”). Nonetheless, one wonders why Deleuze’s perception-image makes its appearance as the central theory of Chapter 4, while his affection-image only emerges as an adage to neuroscientific theories of “empathic engagement” via the close-up of the face (Daniel 2020, 106) given that this is a book about affective intensities. Perhaps in Daniel’s focus upon neuroscience, concern must be shown for neuroscience’s brain/body relations in which perception and subjective responses are the attraction? Perhaps Daniel is indirectly expanding upon what Deleuze says about Pier Paolo Pasolini’s mimesis—defined by Deleuze as a “correlation between two asymmetrical proceedings [...] It is like

communicating vessels” (Deleuze 1986, 73)—as a way of approaching the interaction between spectator-subject and media form? Or perhaps it is rather a question of the subject of spectatorship in the way that Daniel outlines his argument: “how previous scholars, drawing on Deleuze, have used the perception-image as a pathway to consider alternative answers to the question of who or what encounters the film in the act of spectatorship” (Daniel 2020, 82)? While Daniel’s book only develops a theory of affect through its collation of theories, the breadth of research makes this book a significant contribution to the field. For scholars working in the fields of film/media/screen studies, affect studies, neuroscience, and Deleuzian film-philosophy, *Affective Intensities and Evolving Horror Forms* serves as a substantial resource for contemporary theories on emergent horror media forms.

— Sharon Mee

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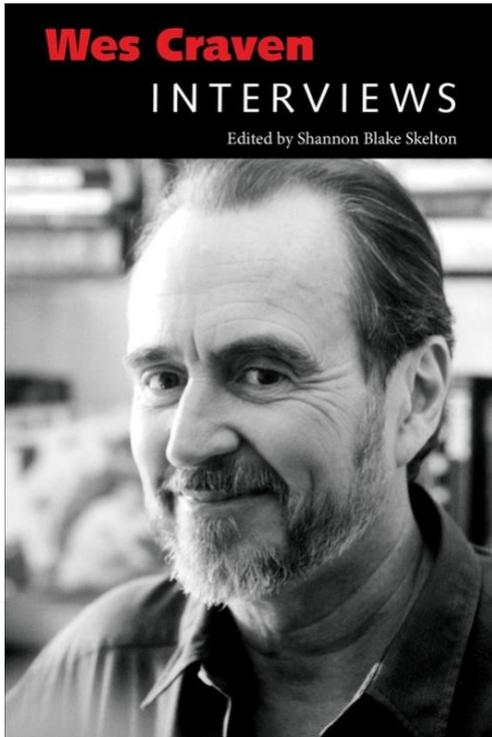
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## Book Review

### *Wes Craven: Interviews*

Edited by Shannon Blake Skelton  
University Press of Mississippi, 2019

246pp.

It is sadly ironic that Wes Craven, best known for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), in which an evil entity kills people in their dreams, died of brain cancer in 2015. Perhaps there's a dark humor in that irony which Craven himself might have appreciated. It was, among other things, Craven's often incongruous humor that distinguished his horror. The

bungling Keystone Kops of *The Last House on the Left* (1972), the corny wisecracks of *Nightmare's* Freddy Krueger, the deadpan jokes of the *Scream* films (1996-2011), each amplified the horror in which Craven's characters found themselves. To paraphrase a point Craven made in several variations over the years, we are sacks of guts held in by about a quarter of an inch of skin, and the slightest prick spills all our hopes and dreams to the ground.<sup>1</sup> That simple notion, the precariousness of being a living, squishy body, is arguably the fundamental source of both horror and comedy. Craven's existential angst about society, the family, selfhood, and one's own dreams resulted in some of the most compelling horror films of the last half century. In nearly every film, horror and humor are intertwined and integral to one another—Craven's bemused, dry chuckling at the absurdity of it all.

Making some sense of the absurdity, Shannon Blake Skelton's *Wes Craven: Interviews* (University of Mississippi Press, 2019) collects a substantive and comprehensive range of interviews that covers 35 years, from 1980-2015. The collection deftly arranges a mix of scholars, film journalists, and fansite writers ranging from Tony Williams to Tony Timpone. The portrait that

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<sup>1</sup> Craven makes a version of this comment in an interview with Andrea Chase included in this volume.

emerges supports Craven's reputation as thoughtful, candid, funny, and generous in conversation and collaborative on the set. Casual fans or film scholars looking for new insights into Craven alike would do well with this book.

Skelton's introductory essay is breezy and engaging, while also exacting in the details. The essay touches on nearly every point in Craven's career, sketching connections and continuities among the interviews over the decades. Skelton gives readers a full accounting of Craven's body of work, including feature films, television, a novel, a comic book series, and his executive producer imprimatur that fostered the careers of directors like Patrick Lussier<sup>2</sup> and Alexandre Aja. Skelton identifies several of the most consistent themes in Craven's work—dreams, family, trauma—as signposts for the reader to take note of Craven's evolving perspectives as the interviews move through the years. The egalitarianism in Skelton's selection is one of the book's real strengths. Lee Goldberg and David McDonnell of *Fangoria* ask in a 1986 interview if Craven longs for interviewers from more “serious” outlets, to which Craven replies bluntly that he would like more attention from the mainstream critics, without losing touch with the “genre press” (31). It's fitting then that Skelton also includes two previously unpublished long interviews with the American Film Institute and *Fangoria*, which situates Craven in both ends of the film media industry. Skelton's balance of outlets ranging from academic journals to aintitcoolnews.com illustrates a director willing to give deep and engaging answers to any and all questions, and who appreciated his fans even as he pursued his ambitions for mainstream status and acceptance.

Craven was never reticent about giving interviews, and culling for a single volume must have been a massive challenge. Skelton's selections and arrangement allow Craven to give his own accounting of his artistic and professional intentions and ambitions, juxtaposed with contemporaneous evaluations of his work. The collection in sum packs an emotional punch. In the first interview, with Tony Williams in 1980, Craven tells his origin story as a first-time filmmaker reckoning with the impact of *Last House*. In the last, in 2015 with Jennifer Juniper Stratford, Craven tells his origin story again, this time reflecting on *Last House* from the vantage point of his long career, and his terminal cancer diagnosis (which he did not reveal at the time).

As with any good compilation of interviews, readers enjoy the benefit of hindsight. This collection is as interesting and useful for those unfamiliar with

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<sup>2</sup> Lussier was Craven's editor on eight films beginning with *New Nightmare* (1994) and ending with *Red Eye* (2005).

Craven's work outside of his notorious early films *The Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and the franchises of *Elm Street* and *Scream*, as it is for those (like me) obsessed with his complete corpus. The largest portion of interviews discuss *Last House*, *Hills*, *Nightmare*, and *Scream* from various vantage points during Craven's career. But Craven's underappreciated and less well-regarded films get ample attention. Several interviews discuss his television work, from movies-of-the-week like *Stranger in Our House* (1978) to episodic programs like *The Twilight Zone* revival (1985-1987) and *Nightmare Cafe* (1991). Others go in depth about such critical and commercial failures as *Deadly Friend* (1986) and *Cursed* (2004). In the case of the former, we see Craven assessing his work at the time, not knowing what will be the result. Reflecting on *Cursed* with Marc Shapiro after its disastrous post-production and release, Craven is brutally honest, and pained. Of the endless rewrites and reshoots, he said, "There's so much I could have done with my time...I just felt that the film was eating up my life" (108). It is instructive for analyzing Craven's films to read his optimistic pre- and rueful post-assessments, the intended treatment versus the what-might-have-beens.

The ample biographical details and discussions of Craven's key themes offers new opportunities to think and rethink about his filmography. It seems perversely fitting that Craven, who grew up in a repressive religious household that forbade all movies except for Disney, and who would later immerse himself in international arthouse cinema, would marry the two scenes with his interest in folk tales. Many of Craven's early films have folk tales at their foundation, from the Per Töre fable that inspired Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960), which Craven reimagined as *Last House*, to the Sawney Bean legend that inspired *The Hills Have Eyes*, and even to the "Beauty & the Beast" themes added to *Swamp Thing* (1982). It's fitting, then, that Freddy Krueger became Craven's indelible original contribution to modern folk tales. Even more fitting, cinema itself, the "dreams we created to help allay our fears"<sup>3</sup> forms the mythology of the *Scream* franchise, a narrative layered from the "real-life" Woodsboro murders, dramatized in the character Gail Weathers's tabloid book, and then diffused in media through the films-within-films *Stab* franchise.

There are several interesting bits of trivia for aficionados looking for deep cuts. For example, Craven tells Alan Jones in a 1982 interview that he requested and fought for \$200,000 to shoot a supernatural-themed stinger ending for *Deadly Blessing* (1981). That ending, which rather definitively

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<sup>3</sup> Craven expresses this sentiment in various forms in interviews throughout the collection. Skelton and the University Press of Mississippi wisely include it as a pull quote on the back cover of the book.

eliminates the ambiguity over whether the murders of *Deadly Blessing* are in fact supernatural, has been lambasted over the years as supremely goofy by fans and critics alike. In a commentary track for *Deadly Blessing*, recorded in 2007 for an Australian DVD release,<sup>4</sup> Craven claims the ending was imposed by the studio, who couldn't bear the aforementioned ambiguity in the original ending. Which version is true? Was 1982 Craven high on his flashy new ending, or politicking with the interviewer to avoid criticizing the studio? Was 2007 Craven being blunt about hating an ending that was forced on him, or was he passing the buck?

For another, potentially significant example, Skelton includes one of Craven's final interviews, a short exchange with the rapper, actor, and producer R.A. the Rugged Man.<sup>5</sup> The chat veers toward the unsubstantial, until R.A. casually asks Craven if Freddy Krueger was inspired in part by the child killer killed by a mob in *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931). Craven seems interested, and says no one has ever asked him that question before, but that there would likely be some unconscious connection, as he'd seen *M* by the time he started writing *Nightmare*. This is an interesting thought, one that offers new contexts in which to analyze Craven's thematic focus on the family and the community as a source of horror. Moving further, several of his films feature brother-sister pairings in which the sister is the stronger of the two, such as Brenda and Bobby (and Juno and Mars) in *The Hills Have Eyes*, Ellie and Jimmy in *Cursed*, and Sidney and Dewey in *Scream*.<sup>6</sup> Craven had two siblings whom I have never seen mentioned in an interview. He was upfront about the impact of his upbringing on his artistic preoccupation with family and trauma. One could wonder if more of his biography influenced the particular family dynamics he explored.

These examples and others abound in Skelton's collection, which illuminates Craven's filmography on its own and in concert with other publications and DVD commentaries. It is a welcome and significant addition to a small but sure to be growing body of critical work. As the generation of great American horror directors rapidly passes—Craven's death preceded George A. Romero, Tobe Hooper, and Larry Cohen in quick succession—this book will be a crucial resource to horror and auteur studies, as well as an engaging introduction to fans and students.

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<sup>4</sup> The commentary was included in the 2012 Blu-ray release by Shout! Factory.

<sup>5</sup> Exploitation film fans with tastes similar to my own will be familiar with Mr. Rugged Man's work as co-producer, co-writer, and actor in Frank Henenlotter's underappreciated *Bad Biology* (2008).

<sup>6</sup> I suppose one might also include Angela and Peter, the incestuous siblings of Craven's pornographic film, *Angela, The Fireworks Woman* (1975).

— Will Dodson

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