



BOOK REVIEW

I'm Buffy and You're History: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Contemporary Feminism

By Patricia Pender
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In the wake of the claims made on 20 August, 2017, by Joss Whedon's ex-wife Kai Cole that years of infidelity should shake the foundations of Whedon's claim to feminist status,¹ any study investigating the place of the work of Whedon and his collaborators within a feminist discourse might at least require a caveat. The strength of Patricia Pender's study, *I'm Buffy and You're History: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Contemporary Feminism*, published a year before the release of Cole's public letter, is that it is less a blinkered celebration than it is a sustained *interrogation* of Whedon's flagship series (1997-2003) in relation to its place (if not as much that of its creator) within feminist traditions. Pender's contention that "*Buffy* is manifestly a feminist text" (2), is supported by careful and broad analysis that contextualizes this claim—historically, theoretically—with humour, care and rigour.

The book's eight chapters are constructed as case studies. The earlier chapters place the series in a wider context of, as Pender puts it, "feminisms pro and faux, post and most," and subsequent chapters take on issues of race (Ch. 4), masculinity (Ch. 5), queerness (Ch. 6), and the "erotics and politics of *Buffy* fandom" (Ch. 7). The book's final chapter serves as a conclusion, a survey of trends in *Buffy* scholarship, and a call

¹ Kai Cole, "Joss Whedon is a 'Hypocrite Preaching Feminist Ideals,' Ex-Wife Kai Cole Says" (Guest Blog), *The Wrap*, (20 August, 2017), Online. <http://www.thewrap.com/joss-whedon-feminist-hypocrite-infidelity-affairs-ex-wife-kai-cole-says/>. Accessed 25 August, 2017.

for future “trajectories” in studies of the series, particularly around its sometimes troubled racial and postcolonial themes.

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for the study with its contention that the series’ textual ambivalence regarding gender dynamics, “gender parody” (14), reflexivity, and postmodern allusiveness all serve to break down the binaristic “rhetorics of transgression and containment” (10) in scholarship regarding the extent of the show’s political potential. The show, for Pender, continually reduces such binaries through its reading of “the world as text, of reality as fiction” (17). There may be no better assessment of the series’ consistently metaphorical nature than in Pender’s reading of Giles’s humorous observation to Buffy in the hilarious and disturbing episode, “Ted” (2.11), that “the subtext here is rapidly becoming text” (17)—a line that Pender sees as potentially “the overarching textual strategy for the series as a whole” (17). Focusing particularly on the show’s postmodern allusiveness, Pender argues that “Buffy is strong, sexy and subversive, not despite her immersion in popular culture but because of it. Alternatively vacuous and vengeful, she is a composite character; her politics cannot be extruded from her post-modernity” (19). While this framing may suit the character as she appears in the series’ first two seasons more than any other, it nails down the key strategy in the series as a whole of laying waste to cultural constructs by continually trotting them out.

Instructive and decidedly accessible to a broad readership, the book would serve well as a primer for students of Whedon’s most enduring series, and students of feminist, gender and queer studies more generally. Chapters 2 and 3, for example, not only read *Buffy* through trends in feminism, but read trends in feminism through *Buffy*; in doing so, they offer for students an indispensable review of the show’s critical landscape, and for scholars a helpful historical survey of trends in feminist thought. The careful distinctions Pender makes between feminist camps (second-wave, third-wave, post-) avoid what Pender calls unproductive “flattening, misrepresentation and simplification” (27) that attends feminist studies, and the extensive film and television context she lays out according to these terms is revelatory, as is Pender’s case in Chapter 3 for Buffy as a third-wave feminist icon, particularly in its seventh season. Pender writes,

I suggest that if one of the primary goals of third-wave feminism is to question our inherited models of feminist agency and political efficacy, without acceding to the defeatism implicit in the notion of ‘post-feminism’, then *Buffy* provides us with modes of oppositional praxis, of resistant femininity and, in its final season, of collective feminist activism that are unparalleled in mainstream television” (46).

One of the highlights of Pender’s work here comes in Chapter 6’s focus on an under-studied queer character, Andrew, and the “homoerotics of evil.” First acknowledging the show’s more obvious politicking around lesbianism in the Willow-Tara relationship, Pender turns to one of the show’s more subtle, though humorous, treatments of the theme in season six’s former member of the villainous “Trio.” Pender argues that *Buffy* may be “most queer when it is not directly addressing explicitly homosexual content,” and that it finds this vessel in Andrew’s shifting roles as a closeted queer, a homophobe, and a misogynist. Her analysis of the season seven episode “Storyteller” (7.16), which sees Andrew making a highly slanted first-person “documentary” of his experience living/imprisoned in Buffy’s home, situates Andrew “simultaneously as a figure of the fan and of the author, opening possibilities for queer readings of spectatorship and cultural production that retrospectively reverberate across the series” (122). The atonement that Andrew undergoes in season 7, from so-called “supervillain” to Scooby-gang adjunct, comes, for Pender, with a number of important revelations regarding the series’ queering and presentation of queerness. As a stand-in for the *Buffy* fan in his refashioning the series around his own “dark past,” Andrew, for Pender, “functions as a figure for the audience; his desires therefore queer[ing] serial spectatorship” (130). In shifting her analysis to a character who remains a bit of a cipher in terms of his sexuality (and arguably his loyalties), Pender opens up an important element of *Buffy*’s underlying Gothic thrust. In “Storyteller,” Andrew assumes the position (so to speak) of the Gothic heroine, reclaiming the narrative for herself in the (re)telling and/or (re)writing of a story, and thereby queering the world around her. While it may be debatable that our laughter focused on Andrew rests more on his

homosexuality than on his closetedness itself, Pender’s analysis highlights the extent to which “Storyteller,” for all its humour, is the extended effort of a character to come into a sense of self by taking control of the meaning of what he sees around him. That this effort is humorously totalizing and unsuccessful Pender reads not as “failure” but as a kind of metanarrative conundrum that further queers the text.

With its combination of exploring brave new ground—particularly in critiquing *Buffy*’s racial politics—and indispensable historical and theoretical contextualization for the series’ feminist leanings, Pender’s *I’m Buffy and You’re History* joins other significant work such as Lorna Jowett’s *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan* (Wesleyan, 2005). Its ambitious theoretical scope and rigor should make it both a staple text for Whedon Studies, and for those studying feminism and popular culture more broadly.

— Kristopher Woofter

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