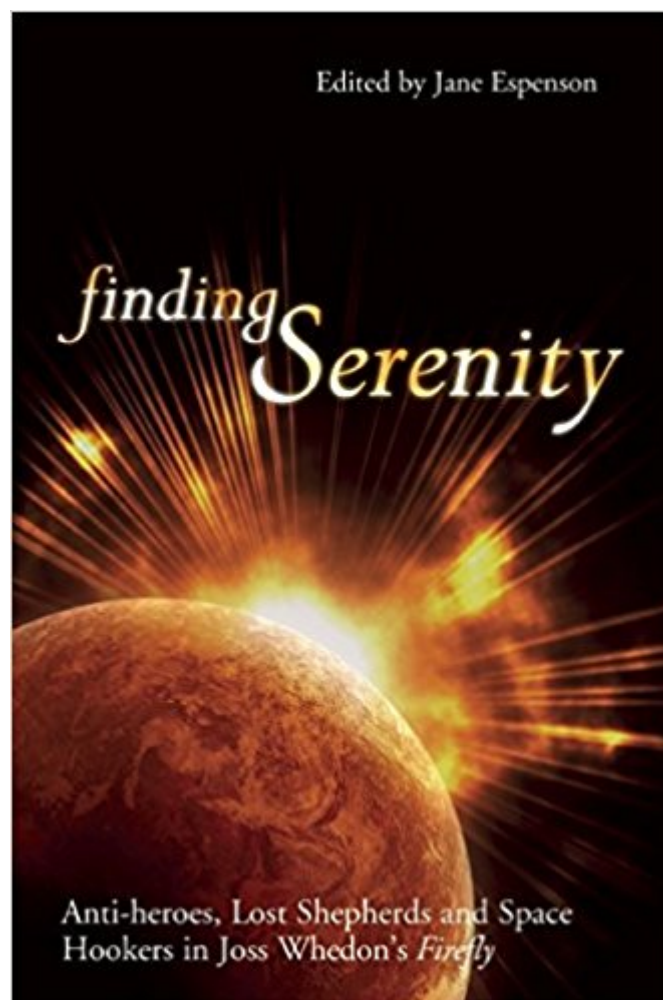




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Finding Serenity: Anti-heroes, Lost Shepherds And Space Hookers In Joss Whedon's Firefly (Smart Pop Series)



Synopsis

Firefly's early demise left fans with a deep sense of loss and plenty of unanswered questions. From what was wrong with the pilot to what was right with the Reavers, from the use of Chinese to how correspondence between Joss and network executives might have gone, from a philosopher's perspective on "Objects in Space" to a sex therapist's analysis of Inara, *Finding Serenity* is filled with writing as exciting, funny and enthralling as the show itself.

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Customer Reviews

Jane Espenson is a veteran *Mutant Enemy* script writer who was responsible for the *Firefly* episode "Shindig." She has also written for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Ellen*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Star Trek*. She lives in Los Angeles. Glenn Yeffeth is the editor of *Seven Seasons of Buffy* and *Taking the Red Pill*. He lives in Dallas, Texas.

this is an anthology of essays by sf writers, Jewel Staite (the actress who played Kaylee) and academics. Most of it is very enjoyable and gives you a much broader picture of the series and the exacting care taken to put that series onscreen. A couple of the essays were a little too dry-academese for my taste, and since the essays were written before the *Serenity* film was released, some of the speculation on the 'verse's backstory is just plain wrong. A couple times in Staite's piece you can almost hear her trying not to give any spoilers for the movie. But still well

worth reading if you're one of those fans who love the show and were bummed when it was cancelled so early.

Unlike "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Angel," Joss Whedon's television series "Firefly" only last fifteen episodes. Of those three were never shown and the two-part pilot aired as the eleventh and twelfth episodes. FOX had cancelled "Dark Angel" after two seasons to spend its limited special effects budget on "Firefly," and then decided halfway through the season to cancel the show. In retrospect it is clear that while "Firefly" had a small audience it was extremely loyal, which explains why Whedon was able to reunite his cast for the theatrical film "Serenity" and provide some sense of closure regarding the ship and its crew. Consequently, with only those fifteen episodes to consider it seems unlikely that "Firefly" will receive the same sort of critical attention that "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" has received, which is why "Finding Serenity: Anti-heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's 'Firefly'" may be one of the few to do so and why it is ultimately geared more towards fans than academics. In other words, the twenty-one pieces in this volume edited by Jane Espenson constitutes a mixed bag of deep thoughts and biting humor. The first essay, "The Reward, the Details, the Devils, the Due," in which artist Larry Dixon looks at how the "Firefly" universe was fleshed out in terms of set design, set dressing, and cinematography, gets the book off to a good start. Author Lawrence Watt-Evans critiques the Reavers from the perspective of an earth legend regarding cannibalism in "The Heirs of Sawney Beane." Leigh Adams Wright's "Asian Objects in Space" critiques the use of Asian culture with context in the series (i.e., what is the point of the curses in Chinese?). The title of "'Serenity' and Bobby McGee: Freedom and the Illusion of Freedom in Joss Whedon's 'Firefly'" gives away Mercedes Lackey's thesis in her look at the politics of the show. Philosophy professor Lyle Zynda explores the emotional truths of Whedon's show in "We're All Just Floating in Space," where Whedon gets treated on the same level as Camus, Nietzsche and Sartre. In the humor department Glenn Yeffeth makes up a series of memos from Early "Nutcrusher" Jubal, Vice President of FOX Programming to explain, "The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of 'Firefly' (the behind-the-scenes story)." Ginjer Buchanan's "Who Killed 'Firefly'?" provides a more reasoned explanation for what happened. But Keith R.A. DeCandido makes a compelling case for why skipping the pilot was a big mistake in "'The Train Job' Didn't Do the Job: Poor Opening Contributed to 'Firefly's' Doom." Don Debrandt offers an analog between "'Firefly' vs. 'The Tick'," a comparison few people would make. Michelle Sagara West explores the Zoe-Wash marriage as "More Than a Marriage of Convenience." Other pieces look at single characters, with fantasy author Tanya Huff's "'Thanks for the reenactment, sir.' Zoe: Updating the Woman Warrior,"

and therapist Joy Davidson's "Whores and Goddesses: The Archetypal Domain of Inara Serra." "The Captain May Wear the Tight Pants, but it's the Gals Who Make 'Serenity' Soar" by Robert B. Taylor explores gender roles on the series, while Nancy Holder talks about the hope that Whedon's fans brought to the show in "I Want Your Sex: Gender and Power in Joss Whedon's Dystopian Future World." Then there is retired attorney John C. Wright's "Just Shove Him in the Engine, or The Role of Chivalry in 'Firefly,'" which actually argues that Whedon does not have a feminist agenda and is merely being politically correct, included as proof that Espenson is a fair minded editor.

"Mirror/Mirror: A Parody" is Roxanne Longstreet Conrad's comedic comparison of the worlds of "Firefly" and "Enterprise," which argues that only Phlox could take their "Serenity" counterpart. Then "Star Trek" writer David Gerrold's "Star Truck" speculates on what might have happened down the road in the "Firefly" universe. Gerrold is able to question the feasibility of the terraforming the universe assumptions of the series with the need to tell stories on a science fiction television series, which I found quite interesting. At the end of the book the concern of the fans takes over, starting with "Kaylee Speaks: Jewel Staite on 'Firefly,'" in which the actress shares her five favorite moments from each episode of the series. For many readers it may well be that the best piece in the book appears last, which is where Kevin M. Sullivan provides the "Unofficial Glossary of 'Firefly' in Chinese." Being able to both pronounce and translate the phrase "Ta ma duh" (neutral tones apply) might be worth the cost of the book all by itself and it is why I decided to round up on the rating.. The curses are all arranged chronologically by episode, so keep this book handy as you watch the shows again on DVD so that you can finally find out what sort of obscenities Mal and his crew were getting away with on the show. So there is a little bit of everything here, which I do not think is a bad thing since "Finding 'Serenity'" is likely to be one of the few books that will end up publishing either the fan humor or the academic speculations (although the number of reviews here would, to my mind, suggest it should not be and there are plenty more topics to explore, such as the religion of Shepherd Book and the decentralization of the Alliance). Espenson mixes and matches the pieces well, so you are never reading all of the heavy analytical pieces or the hit-and-miss humor ones all in a row. I think that if you pay special attention to the pieces Espenson picks to begin and end the collection, since these simply emphasize the fact that a lot of viewers loved this series and that one of the reasons is that Joss Whedon always provides depth to his creative endeavors. Basically anybody who watched "Firefly" will find food for thought here worth consuming, even if there are some courses you only pick at to get to the deserts at the end.

There are, broadly speaking, three kinds of anthologies about television shows. There are those by

academics within the fields of media or cultural studies. There are those by philosophers, primarily the result of a couple of book series collection philosophical essays on a wide range of cultural phenomena from THE SIMPSONS to THE MATRIX to Harry Potter. Then there are collections by people with less academic qualifications, but are instead writers or artists. I've enjoyed all three types, though those by philosophers considerably less than the other two. This is not an anti-philosophy bias on my part; my academic background is philosophy, having studied philosophy at two of America's delightful institutions of higher learning. It is simply that while I find philosophers from Kant to Henry Sidgwick to Anthony Kwame Appiah helpful in understanding ethical dilemmas, I don't find them especially helpful in analyzing BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER or ALIAS. I do find many essays by those in media/cultural studies helpful, though those that get in the grips of theory (especially psychological theories or queer studies) seem to me more about the theory being espoused than the television series occasioning the essay. On the other hand, anthologies of essays by artists I frequently find instructive. This is certain true of this collection. Like all collections it has its weak essays and its stronger essays. There are also those that I was unequipped to enjoy or understand because I didn't have the requisite background. For instance, there was one essay that imagined switching the crews of FIREFLY and ENTERPRISE. Since I haven't seen ENTERPRISE, there was simply no point in reading it. I very much enjoyed articles detailing some of the aspects of the show from the standpoint of its music or its art design. In rewatching the series recently I found that I was paying attention to things on the show that I hadn't previously. There is one overall weakness in the book and that is that these essays were all written before the film SERENITY was released. So much of what various writers say is speculative and as usual speculation tends to be wrong. Still, it is interesting to have a snapshot of pre-SERENITY musings on what the show was about, even if they turned out to be incorrect. There were also some very bizarre essays. The most disappointing may have been Nancy Holder's, simply because I've read other things by her on the Whedonverse that were, I thought, insightful. Her essay finds FIREFLY disappointing because she believes it provides less than empowering images of women (a sentiment not shared by other essayists in the volume, and certainly one that I can't agree with). She believes that FIREFLY was doomed to this fate because she views it primarily as a Western. This all baffled me because even without the film SERENITY it was clear that River was being set up to be this show's Buffy. FIREFLY was a work in progress, but it was obvious (to me, at least) that the central story arcs were going to be driven by River and the resolution of the mystery of who and what she was, and why the Alliance was so intent on capturing her. But the article also bothered me because it didn't seem to understand the historic connection between American SF television and the Western. Whedon was

absolutely not the first person to mesh SF and the Western. In fact, almost all America SF series are indebted to the Western genre. This is what distinguishes American TV SF so sharply from British TV SF. If you line up all the major (and even minor) British and American series, you can easily contrast them. American TV SF series are concerned with the frontier, with exploration, of going -- in those famous words -- where no one has gone before. British SF is not nearly so focused on this. Even Dr. Who is more a tourist doing the Grand Tour than an explorer of the wilderness. Jan Johnson-Smith does a great job of documenting all this in her book AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION TV: STAR TREK, STARGATE AND BEYOND. Interestingly, one of the writers she cites in talking about the Western and American ideas of wilderness and Western expansion and exploration is Richard Slotkin. At Wesleyan he has often taught courses on the Western and integrated it with American culture at large. I bring this up because one of his best-known students was Joss Whedon. If one understands Whedon's academic lineage, it is not the slightest bit surprising that he conceived FIREFLY as a SF Western. He was merely making obvious something that had been a part of STAR TREK (with the Enterprise exploring the wilderness) and the original BATTLESTAR GALACTICA (essentially a wagon train in space -- an aspect that the vastly superior reimagining retained) and BABYLON 5 (basically a wide-open town of the Wild West, with Sheridan as Wyatt Earp). All in all, I definitely recommend this collection. Most of the essays -- even the ones that I want to get in an argument with (like Holder's) -- are at least interesting. And many will definitely enhance one's enjoyment of FIREFLY.

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