

Fan Phenomena: Buffy The Vampire Slayer

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Fan Phenomena: Buffy The Vampire Slayer is, at its core, an edited collection about fandom. As lots of work on fan cultures do, *Fan Phenomena* references Henry Jenkins, and like *Textual Poachers* (1992), the celebratory tone of fandom is heavy throughout the whole collection: ‘Why, when *Buffy* bowed over ten years ago, is it still so important to fans? And what are the ways in which they express their continued devotion to, and deep relationship with, the Buffyverse?’ (5). Editor Jennifer K. Stuller and contributors aim to explore and explain such a long connection, the *phenomena* to the fans, in a new and contemporary context. It is not only a book by fans for fans, of course, but a book by fans and scholars *for* fans and scholars. More widely, this collection is valuable to any scholar for its insights into community, the digital age, and the changing relationship between fans and creators.

To start, Stuller gives us a rundown of all the influences on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), from *The Lost Boys* (1987) to *The X Files* (1993-2018), to comics and female superheroes, showing how creator Joss Whedon ‘shares his influences’ (20) and utilizes his own sense of being a fan to recreate similar experiences in *Buffy*’s audience. Tanya R. Cochran relates the events in *Buffy* to Whedon’s activism online, and the personal (and political!) impact of the show on bringing fans together for a range of causes, the most impactful around feminism and domestic violence. Mary Kirby-Diaz explains the results of a sociological study on *Buffy*’s fans who write fanfiction for the Buffyverse, detailing different ‘types’ of fans, ‘story-oriented’ and ‘series oriented’ (39), which pairings of characters they write for and why. An interview with Nikki Stafford follows, author and editor, who organises *Buffy* meet-ups and rewatches, as well as previously publishing on *Buffy* and fellow cult shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). Liz Medendorp’s subsequent

chapter explores the linguistic impact of ‘*Buffyspeak*’ internally and outside the show (65). Following on from discussions of *Buffy*’s impact outside of television studies, Amy Peloff and David Boarder Giles’ joint chapter explains how the show can be used in the classroom in all sorts of subjects besides media, including ‘feminism, post-structuralism, critical race theory, postcolonialism and other bodies of cultural theory’ (81). The following interview of Rhonda Wilcox discusses the nature of *Buffy* studies and her success as an author on and teacher of the show, as she perceives Whedon studies will have ‘an ebb and flow’ (87). Wilcox argues this because Whedon works in a multitude of disciplines, from comics to TV and film. As transmedia and multiplatform play is a ‘modern phenomenon’ (88) – a phrase that nicely summarises this collection – his work will continue to find growing interest for scholars and fans alike.

The second half of the book begins with Lorna Jowett’s chapter exploring *Buffy*’s roots in dark romance, the gothic, and the female consumer, concluding ‘while (these stories are) superficially fantasies of romance, (they) consistently explore its dark side, “how hard it is to be a woman” for an appreciative female audience’ (97). While Kristen Julia Anderson discusses the impact of Willow’s sexuality – LGBTQ+ fans had ‘profound and personally meaningful conversations’ as a result of a rare beloved gay television character – Nikki Faith Fuller puts crafters and creators into the spotlight, highlighting ‘The culture of Etsy and art itself on the site are akin to some of the strongest themes emblazoned throughout the Whedonverse: independence, sub-culture and creativity’ (116). Clinton McClung’s subsequent interview discusses his fan-led *Buffy* sing-along: ‘once a month we would take over the theatre Friday and Saturday nights’ (124), which was ‘almost transformative’ for ‘casual lovers’ as well as more dedicated fans because of the shared sense of community (132). Anthony R. Mills looks at the fandom of the *Buffyverse* functioning ‘*as* religion’ as opposed to earlier notions of fandom ‘*like* religion’ (135), and the chapter illustrates how the series (and the wider Whedon-verse) inspires the same importance of community in the show and in fans themselves, as well as the unique language spoken in the show, the ritual of repeat and communal viewings, and fan-made creations like writing, art, crafts, comics, etc. Continuing on is an interview with Scott Allie, Senior Managing Editor at Dark Horse Comics, who expresses that ‘the most gratifying sort of response you can get is when someone writes in and explains exactly what they got out of a comic, and how it touched them’ in his time on working on *Buffy*’s season 8 continuation (148). Arthur Smith and David Bushman’s final chapter, tying up the thread opened at the beginning of the collection,

discusses *Buffy*'s impact on popular culture going forward, 'the influence of Buffy as icon, on the subsequent creators and characters who have gone on to explore, refine, subvert and exalt this enduringly vital interpretation of girl power' (151).

Generally, work has been done on *Buffy* fans before – the difference in this collection is that it either presents new information, or readjusts old data in a new light; Kirby Diaz's chapter is illuminating as they specifically state that subsequent 'observations' indicate 'little change has taken place' (46). If, at the time and currently, this is true, it implies the constancy of fandom throughout such radical technological change, and how culturally fans adapt *around* form rather than changing *for* it – the reverse of Marshall McLuhan's famous 'the medium is the message'. The conclusions of such a chapter can be infinitely explored. The majority of research on *Buffy*'s fans discuss forums and out-dated websites. While these are of no less value, it is important to have a contemporary perspective, especially when the theories on fandom and the internet have rapidly changed in the ten years since the show's initial run and scholarly responses. Fuller's chapter on Etsy and the culture of fan-made merchandise is particularly contemporary. In her interview, Wilcox notes the use of 'multiple platforms is a modern phenomenon' (88), and this aptly summarises the collection's contribution to our knowledge of fandom. The book also shines with the added interviews, conflating so explicitly the relationship between scholars and fans, particularly in Nikki Stafford and Rhonda Wilcox.

To see this collection purely through an academic eye is to disregard its main point: scholars can be fans, and fans can be scholars. At its core, this collection is a celebration of both academic and creative endeavours – chapters on teaching, rewatching and writing fanfiction on *Buffy* are all melded together and intermingle, which some might find too subjective to be academic. But the nature of the show and the feelings it entices in scholars and fans alike means the two will always be intertwined. It is also incredibly uplifting that such a vibrant fandom community was still thriving when the book was published in 2013 – and continues to thrive to this day. Perhaps it is fitting that they leave space for other voices to be heard on the inner workings of such a huge community, as the entire thesis of *Fan Phenomena* is about compiling a variety of new perspectives within an ever-deepening sub-culture.