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Love/Hate: *Supernatural* THEN and NOW

Lorna Jowett

“I have my version, and you have yours.”

— Dean, “Fan Fiction” (10.5)

I love *Supernatural*. I hate *Supernatural*. The things I love about *Supernatural* are very close to the things I hate about it. When I started watching it, when it was first broadcast, it appealed because it was a mixture of genres I enjoyed (and still enjoy): horror, action, melodrama. I never imagined I would be watching it for 15 years, and 300+ episodes. Marking the 200th episode, a retrospective in *Variety* noted that “The show weathered the conversion from the WB to the CW, survived the 2007-08 writers' strike, and transitioned through several showrunners—and there's no end in sight” (Prudom 2014). “Since that first Apocalypse, the series has garnered a loyal fandom and, after thirteen seasons and four showrunners, shows no signs of wear,” Florent Favard comments, going on to explain its position in the US television landscape. “Along with *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), *Criminal Minds* (2005-) or *NCIS* (2003-), this is one of the few scripted primetime television series of the mid-2000s still on the air. It is a relic from another time, before the rise of SVoD content producers, when networks and cable channels alike aimed for niche markets and an increasing narrative complexity” (Favard 2018, 20). And this is what makes it so interesting. There are few drama series that have survived this long and from the 2000s to the 2020s has been a period of massive change for television, in the USA and elsewhere.

But this sheer longevity is why I can see how far TV has come, how well TV adapts (or doesn't) from the THEN to the NOW. In the age of VOD and SVOD, *Supernatural's* position as a network series with 20+ episodes per season (for a “normal” season) means that watching it just takes so long. These days only a loyal audience will watch 24 episodes per season for 15 seasons. Viewer loyalty has served *Supernatural* well. It is housed on a

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relatively new network that has had to struggle in competition with the traditional “big 3” US networks. Partly for this reason, *Supernatural* has relied on audience for survival, and has a long, if chequered, history of producer/creator and fan interaction. This sense of viewer engagement and the shifts in how a series’ relationship or ‘contract’ with the audience operates also shows me how far *I’ve* come: *Supernatural*’s final episodes will air within months of my 50th birthday and a fair amount has changed for me since I was 35. Unlike other long-running (though interrupted) franchises like *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* I did not start watching *Supernatural* as a child and, unlike those big name properties, its continuing niche status means it has not become part of culture at large. Yet *Supernatural*’s continuous, unbroken run and reluctance to change its fundamental structure means that its problems are magnified. Florent Favard writes, “Any series reaching more than ten seasons may begin to look like a Ship of Theseus, rebuilt over and over again to renew interest: *Supernatural* is particularly interesting in that the only original ‘nail and plank’ of the ship are the Winchester brothers, around whom the whole storyworld recombines itself season after season” (Favard 2018, 20).

The Winchester brothers. I feel conflicted admitting that I watch *Supernatural* for Dean. Dean is macho and brusque and hates emotions and feelings, he verges on sexist, racist, homophobic, he rejects social norms, is seen living almost entirely among men and is exceptionally violent ... but those things, that blue collar masculinity is always, obviously, performed. Over and over, Dean is shown to be needy, abject, full of despair and self-hate, believing he is not worth love and not worth saving (from sacrificing himself to save Sam in “No Rest for the Wicked” 3.16 to a series of deep depressions across subsequent seasons). As someone who has lived with social anxiety and clinical depression most of my life, how can I not identify with Dean?

Sometimes I feel conflicted admitting I watch *Supernatural* at all. It might seem inevitable that a show focused on masculinity, with two main characters (rather than an ensemble cast), would end up being both intermittently misogynist and queerbait-y. It is, after all, focused on the relationship between the Winchester brothers. As the series continued, reinventing itself in some ways, but not in others, always potentially at the end but never actually ending, actor Jared Padalecki (Sam Winchester) commented: “There were times I thought there were one too many dick jokes, every now and then I felt like we were straying off course, but the fans stuck with us” (quoted in Prudom 2014). The “dick jokes” and “jerk/bitch” language of the series can be wearing, as can its queerbaiting. Early seasons have the brothers continually taken for a gay couple as they travel the country together (since “Bugs” 1.8), and slash pairings abound (two of the most

famous being Wincest [Sam/ Dean] and Destiel [Dean/ Castiel]) in fan readings and fanfic. The series finds fans among women and gay men partly because it demonstrates that masculinity is a performance, and Darren Elliott-Smith argues that *Supernatural*'s early seasons engage in “comic yet homoerotic parodying of masculinity” (2011, 113). Despite the subtext, however, almost all male characters in *Supernatural* remain ostensibly, some stubbornly, heterosexual. Moreover, some of its actors are not comfortable answering questions about slash pairings in panels and at conventions. In an article titled “Jensen Ackles Is a Homophobic Douchebag,” Joseph Brennan tackles “Ackles” supposed homophobia, a debate that is itself framed by certain “politics”—of representation, visibility, and identity, for example (2017, 247). Queerbaiting debates have moved on, much as ideas about sexual and gender identity have moved on. Society THEN might necessitate queerbaiting but society NOW suggests that queer identities or queer relationships need not remain subtextual rather than being textual and canonical. Whether slash fiction is conceptualised as “romantopia” or “intimatopia” (see Tosenberger 2008, 5.10)—and male intimacy is certainly a continuing focus in *Supernatural*—Brennan registers caveats about the political value of slash: “While slash may posit an explicit critique of the heterosexual/ homosexual binary, in ‘playing with’ homosexualised bodies it is often conceived more as a form of ‘romance’ than as a ‘political’ gesture” (2017, 254). That is, depictions and valorisation of male intimacy in slash are often more about renegotiating masculinity for reader/ viewer pleasure than about making queerness visible.

The Winchester brothers, the wayward sons. There is no room in this series for female characters and female stories. I love how *Supernatural* negotiates and renegotiates masculinity (not queerbaiting). I hate how *Supernatural* repeatedly, emphatically, kills women. In the last 15 years I have become very intolerant of stories, films, TV series, books, comics whatever, that are all “white man pain,” and more recently “white man pain and cis-het bullshit.” I happily tell others that I don’t have time to waste on stories that mean nothing to me because they never acknowledge me. Yet I’m still watching *Supernatural*. “Female characters have been used to motivate and drive the plot of this show from its pilot,” notes Bronwen Calvert (2011, 90) and Agata Łuksza also points out, “we encounter a vast range of women in the series, but none of them survive for long or reach the position of a main character” (2016, 189). The *Variety* 200th episode article includes in a “By the Numbers” sidebar: “6: Number of women Sam has slept with who subsequently died” (Prudom 2014). Both Calvert and Łuksza debate how “Many female characters have been written out of the narrative due to poor fan reaction ... while those women who do not pose such a danger because of their age, sexual orientation or clear enemy status are usually warmly

received by fans” (Łuksza 2016, 189; see also Calvert 2011, 103). Female comic book fans have a term for the way “female characters have been used to motivate and drive the plot” of stories about male heroes: fridging.¹ In other words, the female characters are only in the story to affect the male characters (heroes and villains), and they do this by dying, thus being removed from the narrative as real presence but continuing to haunt it as mythical, idealised absence. From the death of Mary Winchester in the first episode, violently dispatched women form the motivation for the brothers to save people and hunt things. If they need reminding of their purpose, another female character dies horribly (and unnecessarily) as with the fridging of Charlie Bradbury (“Dark Dynasty” 10.21). “In this narrative a strong female character is often seen as taking up *too much* space,” explains Calvert (2011, 91).

Supernatural has some great female characters. It’s just most of them are dead. “I don’t know if they had a plan for Mary when resurrecting her,” one SPNatural Confession on Tumblr notes, “I was excited for her storyline ... but they don’t do anything with her unless it’s needed for the plot” (n.d.). And, note, bringing back women you’ve killed (Mary, Charlie) because there aren’t any female characters isn’t really that cool—especially when you kill them again, as with Mary. Witch Rowena McLeod had the longest tenure of a female character in the series yet, surprisingly, she ticks only some of boxes described above: working on the age of the actors she is less than two years older than Dean, though admittedly she is Crowley’s mother; she spends much of her time as an enemy or, at best, morally dubious. Once she is converted to the side of ‘good’, her time is up. In “The Rupture” (15.3) she uses a spell that requires her death to return escaped souls and demons to hell, with Sam actually delivering the fatal blow.² *Supernatural* does have some great female characters who have survived and deserve their own show but the backdoor pilot “Wayward Sisters” (13.10) featuring these characters did not get picked up. According to CW President Mark Pedowitz, “We did not feel creatively that the show is where we wanted it to be” (in Yahr 2018). The *Washington Post* article quoting Pedowitz notes that “the network also only has a finite amount of room on its schedule, and Pedowitz said they had more confidence in the new drama ‘Legacies,’ a spinoff of ‘The Originals’ and ‘The Vampire Diaries’” (Yahr 2018).

¹ See the website ‘Women in Refrigerators’ by Gail Simone for more detail.
<https://lby3.com/wir/>

² Like Mary Winchester, Rowena is later brought back as Queen of Hell (season 15). Like Mary, this does not mitigate her being used to motivate the ‘boys.’ I repeat, bringing back women you’ve killed because there aren’t any female characters is not cool.

JerK/ Bitch.

So why am I still watching *Supernatural*? It does, after all, (through episodes like “The Real Ghostbusters” 5.9 and “Fan Fiction” 10.5, for instance) acknowledge that its loyal audience consists of women and gay men—not entirely, of course, but these are the fans that invest in it, talk about, critique it and live with it. Arguably, it lends itself to slash fiction and/or reading queerly and it has tried to address its lack of diversity, if not always very successfully. So, I wallow in Dean’s beautiful pain and I feel his despair, even though I resist the series’ queerbaiting and will never really know whether Jensen Ackles is homophobic. Joseph Brennan points to how fans’ “assessment of Ackles’ conservatism, in particular as at odds with other members of the *Supernatural* main cast (Padalecki and Collins), resonates with the increasing interest within celebrity studies between stars and politics” (2017, 253). I write this piece as the Covid-19 pandemic locked down nations across the world, and the Black Lives Matter movement gained global traction. As a potentially apocalyptic event threatens humanity and causes us to question society’s unequal power relationships, *Star Wars* actor John Boyega spoke at a BLM protest in London, expressing doubts about how it might affect his future career but clearly feeling that the injustices being protested were too important for him to stay silent.³ *Harry Potter* author J. K. Rowling’s tweets about “biological sex” and gender identity, aka transphobia (which I will not repeat here), dismayed many of her fans and prompted several actors who starred in the film adaptations of her books to speak out. In a statement published on the website of The Trevor Project (a crisis intervention/ suicide prevention organisation for LGBTQ+ youth) Daniel Radcliffe told fans:

I really hope that you don’t entirely lose what was valuable in these stories to you. If these books taught you that love is the strongest force in the universe, capable of overcoming anything; if they taught you that strength is found in diversity, and that dogmatic ideas of pureness lead to the oppression of vulnerable groups; if you believe that a particular character is trans, nonbinary, or gender fluid, or that they are gay or bisexual; if you found anything in these stories that resonated with you and helped you at any time in your life—then that is between you and the book that you read, and it is sacred. And in my opinion nobody can touch that. It means to you what it means to

³ When the official *Star Wars* social media feed posted messages of support and praise for Boyega, some fans pointed out that they had remained silent when he was fighting racist comments and criticism about his role in the films.

you and I hope that these comments will not taint that too much.
(Radcliffe 2020)

While I respect what Radcliffe is trying to say to disappointed fans here, I am inclined to disagree. Personal meaning, or interpretation, may well be important, as queer reading has been historically to queer readers and viewers. Public meaning, clear unambiguous signalling and valuing of diverse identities, is, however, necessary in order to shift the dogmatic ideas that shore up oppressive systems. It's time, therefore, for *Supernatural*, its queerbaiting, its dead women and its cis-het white saviours, to be laid to rest. I, for one, will be relieved to put my love-hate relationship with it behind me and move on to series I find more valuable, series that value my identities more. That was THEN, this is NOW.

Dean: Can I give you a little advice? Let it go. The past is ... there's nothing you can do about it now so it's just baggage. Let it go. You'll feel a lot lighter. ("Nightmare Logic" 14.5)

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