

**More Unauthorized Essays on
Joss Whedon's *Firefly* Universe**

Serenity *found*

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WITH
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Introduction

Everyone has Moments of Serenity. Here are four of mine:

August 2002: I'm walking through an elaborately decorated back lot street at Universal Studios. Mal is there, and Kaylee and Wash and Zoe and Jayne, and even Badger and his fine hat. There are girls behind glass windows, one of them sweating in a pink layer-cake dress. The place is teeming with extras and strange-looking set dressing. Huge electric fans are blowing, and crew members release bits of brightly colored paper in front of them, decorating even the air. There might be chickens. It is the most exotic, most alien, most thoroughly imagined set I think I've ever been on. It is absolutely magical.

September 2004: I spend the day on the set of the movie *Serenity*. I get to walk through the ship once more, recreated here, bigger and better, on a different soundstage across town from its original home. It's easy to imagine it might have flown here. This is, I believe, the last day of principal photography. I know it is the day that River kicks Reaver ass. I get to watch multiple takes of the fight. Over and over she kicks and ducks and whirls. It is a blur of balletic violence.

September 2005: There is a red-carpet premiere for *Serenity* here in Los Angeles. The fans are here too, some inside the theater, others crowded just outside. Any of us fortunate enough to have been connected to the movie or to the series in some way are recognized as we walk into the event across an actual Hollywood red carpet. Joss-driven projects inspire a certain cult-of-the-writer, and we are hooted at and flash-bulbed at almost as vigorously as the stars.

February 2007: I am invited to WonderCon in San Francisco to speak on a panel about gender roles in science fiction, and to sign copies of whatever people want me to sign: *Firefly* scripts, artwork of Kaylee in that layer-cake dress, and lots of copies of *Finding Serenity*, the precursor to this book. People walk the convention floor dressed as Mal and Jayne. Almost five years after my one singular episode of *Firefly* was filmed, the world Joss created is still spinning.

So why is *Firefly* (note that I will use “*Firefly*” and “*Serenity*” interchangeably to refer to this particular Jossiverse as a whole) still inspiring this kind of interest and devotion so long after it began, so long after it ended? Why are there buyers for a book such as this one? Why are there contributors, for that matter? Other series, even ones with more viewers, even ones with much longer histories, don’t get this kind of treatment. There are, as far as I know, very few books filled with essays like this:

“Stabler Than What?” A look at Law and Order: SVU’s Detective Elliot Stabler; this essay suggests that the character symbolizes the International Monetary Fund in a way that should be read more as cautionary tale than Hero’s Journey.

No, you just don’t get much of that kind of thing.

Part of the reason, of course, is that science fiction is a genre that naturally invites analysis. Sci-fi tends to work through metaphor. Some Other-World is intended to represent our own world through some sort of mapping. The details of the correspondences are not stated explicitly; that work is left to the viewers. This encourages participation, which

leads viewers to feel proprietary. It also fosters debate: points of view, passionately contested. In other words, metaphor leads to books of essays. Go metaphor!

And *Firefly* isn't just sci-fi. It is also, in its own way, a Western. Westerns are the other major genre that tends to work through metaphor. Traditional movie Westerns used the wide-open other worldliness of the American frontier to stand for everything from the quest for personal freedom, to general continental expansion, to Vietnam.

But this is not the complete answer to the question. There's something else that made *Firefly* special.

Here is a Pre-*Serenity* moment: When I was fairly new to television writing, I attended the Writers' Guild Awards one year. Someone won a WGA award for writing an episode of *ER*. She got up on the stage, clutched the award, and thanked "The Creator." It was only a few sentences later that I realized she was referring to Michael Crichton. She hadn't intended to be humorous; the phrasing was totally ingenuous. It was also very apt.

When a creator is also a showrunner he or she really is the god of the show. Joss Whedon, the god of *Serenity*, is that missing element, the key to the lasting appeal, the lasting lure, of *Firefly*.

Joss had other brainchildren before *Firefly*. I was lucky enough to work with him for five years at *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and to write two freelance scripts under his direction at *Angel*. I was able to observe some of what makes Joss's storytelling so powerful.

Any new writer on a Joss Whedon show learns early on that the way *not* to sell Joss on an idea for an episode of television is to try to sell him on a cool monster, a cool visual, or a cool moment. There always has to be a real reason to tell the story. There has to be a truth exposed through the story. Either a truth about the world, or a truth about a character. Or, ideally, both. Joss's takes on gender, the nature of heroism, and the role of religion cannot be separated from the ways he writes his people. This insistence on having a reason to tell the story means that Joss's stories are striving in a very real way to communicate content beyond just a stream of well-imagined fictional events. They set out to do more than simply keep the audience tuned in through the commercial breaks.

Which brings us to the other secret ingredient: Joss's attitude toward

the viewers. I don't recall Joss ever talking about "the audience" as a separate identity with an agenda separate or lesser (or greater, for that matter) than his own. He writes what interests him, what he would want to see. This is why when Joss writes a surprise it genuinely surprises, why his shocking revelations shock us, why his jokes make us laugh. It's not just that he assumes that you, the viewers, are as smart as him. He assumes, in a way, that you *are* him. And that he is you.

Not every writer does this. They assume that there is a chance that the viewer is distracted, or very young, or unsophisticated. They try to accommodate. Joss doesn't give you an inch. He demands attention and intelligence and he rewards it.

So, after all that . . . what better way could there be, really, to invite analysis? Create a world that floats on a layer of metaphor, drench it in big ideas about the world, fill it with real people, and then absolutely demand intelligence of your viewers.

Welcome to Serenity.

Jane Espenson — Los Angeles, 2007

We've all assembled here today because of a shared interest in Firefly. (Unless your interest is actually fireflies. Sorry, you have purchased this book in error.) But how does Firefly fit into the pantheon of sci-fi greats? There can be no doubt that Orson Scott Card knows his sci-fi, and here he explains what it is that makes the Firefly universe special, literary, modern, and smart. He also makes the point that good writers are inspired by good writing. Indeed. Read this and be inspired.

Catching Up with the Future

ORSON SCOTT CARD

It was 25 May 1977. A work day, supposedly. But it was the opening day of *Star Wars*.

Jay Parry and Lane Johnson and I were editors at a magazine in Salt Lake City. We were conscientious employees. We worked hard. We often worked late. We gave an honest day's work for each day's paltry pay.

We were also novice science fiction writers. We would spend our lunch hours down in the miserable cafeteria in our building, drinking generic soda pop (you couldn't guess the flavor if someone hid the can), and talking about our ideas for sci-fi stories that we would sell, launching brilliant careers that would turn us into the Heinleins, Asimovs, Ellisons, Silverbergs, or Nivens of our generation.

So when Lane suggested that we take a "long lunch" and see *Star Wars*, it actually caused a moral quandary.

A brief one.

(I suspect that Jay told our boss what we were doing and got tacit permission. He's a better man than I am, and always was. But maybe not, in which case that was certainly the most wicked thing Jay ever did in his life, and his conscience is still bothering him about it, and it is so wrong of me to tell.)

When the time rolled around, we were out the door and walking down the street to one of those grand old theaters—the kind with only

one screen and a very large seating capacity. With an actual stage, where you could imagine someone actually performing a play. (I have to describe it, because the youthful readers of this book have probably never seen theaters like that. For that matter, most of the youthful readers have probably never walked to a theater, unless you count the trip from the parking lot to the box office.)

There had been a lot of hype about *Star Wars*. The screenings for the press had resulted in cover stories in magazines and full-page spreads in newspapers, with reviewers talking as if George Lucas had just invented the moving picture.

I had missed most of that, being such a conscientious, hard-working, and newly married guy. (Eight days by actual count, and no, it didn't cross my mind to take my wife to the movie—why would *she* want to see a sci-fi film? You have to understand that up to that moment, sci-fi films were generally—and more or less correctly—perceived as a branch of the horror film genre. *2001: A Space Odyssey* had been one of a kind.) Who had time to notice the newspapers and magazines?

So it was without any particular expectations that I sat down with Lane and Jay and watched those massive letters crawl up the screen. And crawl and crawl and crawl.

Then the massive ship came into view and I felt a tingle under my skin. This did not look like the standard rocket ships from old sci-fi films. Nor did it look like the realistic, utilitarian, minimalist spaceships of *2001* or the real space program.

This was a ship that was more like an old-time surface battleship, except that there was no hull—the bottom bristled with structures just like the top and sides. And, like an aircraft carrier surrounded by gnat-like planes, the big ship dwarfed the fighters swarming around it.

The tingling continued as I saw robots that looked like nothing I'd seen before—or, when they did, they at least didn't *talk* like they had before. When we met aliens, they were a potpourri of every alien ever imagined in science fiction. (We recognized many of them—the wookiee was an obvious borrowing from Larry Niven's Kzin, for instance.)

This was the science fiction of my earliest imagining. This was space adventure, a kind of storytelling that had been missing from the movies for a long time.

And at the end, when my friends and I walked out of the theater, we were floating. What a great experience.

But it took about three minutes for somebody to say to me, "Don't you wish you could write something like that?"

I'm afraid I laughed in the person's face; Lane and Jay laughed too. We all knew the same thing: No writer of science fiction stories in 1977 would aspire to write something as childish as *Star Wars*.

The movie experience was great. The story was fun. But in the world of print, that level of storytelling had "1935" written all over it. In print, science fiction had come a long, long way since then. It was still possible to write wonderful adventures—Larry Niven was proving that with every book—but they had to be *way* smarter than *Star Wars*.

In print science fiction, the science had to be at least remotely plausible; *Star Wars* had real howlers, like treating "parsec" as a measure of time rather than distance, and fighters that moved aerodynamically in space, complete with impossible whooshing sounds. And light sabers? What a hoot. No self-respecting science fiction writer would dare to use something so unnecessary and improbable—but it made a great *visual*.

Star Wars amounted to a swords-and-sorcery fantasy, except in space instead of in a medieval kingdom, and not a particularly clever or emotionally engaging one at that. And "the Force"—can you imagine something so silly? In *print* science fiction we would have recognized that instantly as either magic or religion; nothing to do with science fiction.

But that's how things were back then—and still are, mostly, today. Film science fiction was firmly rooted in the era of lurid adventure writing—which wasn't a bad thing, as long as you understood that print science fiction had long since grown up into a multi-faceted genre in which you could have writerly stories like Harlan Ellison's and Samuel R. Delany's, or thoughtful anthropological science fiction like Ursula K. LeGuin's and James Blish's, or gung-ho, hard-science competent-man stories in the tradition of Asimov and Heinlein, Clarke and Niven.

But sci-fi films were stuck at the level of *Lost in Space* and *Star Trek* on TV: aliens who all spoke English, ray guns, spaceships that looked like living rooms with odd furniture (because that was the kind of set that was cheap to build), with magic technology and stories that could always be resolved by courage and brawn and a thimbleful of brains.

I've remarked before that when some viewers see giant spaceships hover into view, they fear that giant ideas are right behind them. Over the years, science fiction has become linked with the idea of "message" in much the same way that rare ground beef has become linked with the idea of "E. coli." Burns makes a great case for characters—messy, human, relatable, and even sometimes female characters—as the remedy to this unfortunate situation.

Mars Needs Women **How a Dress, a Cake, and a Goofy Hat** **Will Save Science Fiction**

MAGGIE BURNS

Science fiction is broken. Like poetry and art music, science fiction threatens to spin itself into a self-referential genre so disconnected from everything else that only initiates can find value in it, a tiny irrelevant genre jealously guarded by hard-core fans. So much insider knowledge accrues about each created universe that it pushes away the newcomer. A genre that fired the imaginations of those who actually got humanity into space is reduced to teddy bear aliens, macho swagger, and jiggle. Those of us who love sci-fi are so hungry for it that we will devour nearly anything, which only serves to keep the standards low and the scenarios familiar.

What is the cure for sci-fi's problems? A goofy knitted hat. A frilly dress. A birthday cake. You and me, and people we know, in space: *Firefly*.

Sci-fi at its best has higher goals than any other genre. Its creators bring us hope, fear, and truth. Hope in sci-fi shows us what we can be, what we could be if we lived up to our potential. Fear plays out in warnings about our present and future. Of these three, fear appears most often, since it encompasses all of the dystopian fiction: extrapolations of society's flaws taken to their logical extremes, dark explorations of

human nature, terrifying insights into the ugly side of our societies. This type of sci-fi also brings us aliens, which have been standing in for our fears and our flaws in various forms since they first appeared in literature.

But the highest goal of science fiction is to tell us the truth about ourselves. We find it in every sci-fi work that ever tried to say: “This is how it is. Don’t pretend, don’t turn away, don’t lie. This is who you are. This is what we are.” Seeking truth is the strongest and the bravest course, the hardest fiction to write, the most difficult to fall in love with, because it holds an honest mirror to humanity. We never want to look that clearly at our own reflections. Is that a blemish coming on? Does this dress make me look like the privileged product of a globally exploitative oligarchy? Why, yes, actually, it does. Turn that mirror to face the wall.

Firefly sets out to tell larger truths through fiction, just as sci-fi tackles larger social and socio-economic issues than most other genres. *Firefly* is not merely telling entertaining stories, though it does that exceptionally well. It’s not simply creating a vivid and gorgeously textured universe, one that is completely believable. It’s not just a fun ride with space cowboys and excellent cussing in Mandarin.

Firefly is all those things, but like the finest print sci-fi, from *A Canticle for Leibowitz* to *The Martian Chronicles* to *The Dispossessed*—and unlike the vast majority of sci-fi on television—it also sets out to show us our world through a created one. Like the best sci-fi novels, *Firefly* does this by being honest in its depiction of the breadth of life, in its inclusions and exclusions, in its reflections of class and gender and economics. The only sci-fi television show that has ever dared to tell the truth like this was *Farscape*, which only got away with it because every character except the hero was an alien. *Farscape* showed us messy, gross, violent, crazy alien life in Technicolor: old women who make soup that you don’t want to look at too closely, young women with good hearts and damaged souls, insecure warrior men who need friends, alien warrior women who discover they can be more—people we know in our own lives, but never see represented in sci-fi TV. Sci-fi television only allows this much reality, this much painful insight, only hits this close to the bone, when the characters are aliens. Until *Firefly*, we never saw so much reality played out with people. No aliens in *Firefly*. And no easy

answers. There are plenty of monsters, but they all take human form, just like in our world.

Firefly reaches us in a way we can accept by giving us a world that draws us in, using touchstones that tell us: This is the real world. This is a recognizable 'verse, where we could live. The show does not use any of the easier sci-fi tropes: no aliens to embody our difficult or less palatable traits, no black-and-white hero, and most of all, no simple world consisting primarily of militaristic men. This world includes women of all kinds, rich and poor, strong and weak, brave and scared. This is so rare in science fiction that it's completely revolutionary. Who lives in a world with so few women? Who lives so far removed from the messy realities of life? Modern sci-fi television has its roots in a genre historically so sexist that women and the messy realities of life are identical, both eradicated from all those sparkling spaceship interiors, except for the occasional beautiful scientist's daughter who needs to be rescued.

One of the biggest weaknesses of sci-fi television is its insistence on framing so many narratives within that same sparkling, orderly, male-dominated militarized hegemony. From *Star Trek* to *Stargate SG-1*, the universe appears through this lens. Whether it's *Star Trek's* Federation, or *Stargate's* recognizable U.S. Air Force—right down to guest appearances by each Air Force Chief of Staff—this framework dominates television science fiction. The militaristic framework is off-putting, whether you have a military background or not. If you do, it's always inaccurate and irritating, especially when lives are thrown away without comment. If you don't have a military background, it's alienating, familiar only through all of its sci-fi forebears. The trope is self-referential and lacks any visceral link to a familiar reality. Ultimately the military framework is a narrative cheat, a shorthand, without depth of thought or character resonance at all.

Powerful and cruel but faceless bureaucracies fronted by militaries made up of marching automatons are the dullest cheap trick of sci-fi. *Firefly* mercifully kept these people in the distant background, where we like our governments to be. When we did see representatives, the soldiers were wearing absurd purple armor and the officers appeared to be jackbooted hotel staff. Even the scariest villains seemed to be taking time from their office jobs to scrub the bathroom, with their black suits

Haynes here gives *Firefly* its due as a feminist work. Along the way she exposes a truth about Joss's writing that is sometimes, astonishingly, missed. Joss writes people, not just women. (In fact, everyone gets to be people, even if they're not human.) Sometimes in all the emphasis on the new and exciting way he writes women as people, we forget that he writes men as people too. In a Joss story, everyone gets to be funny, real, human, damaged, good and bad, loving-or-not, and satisfyingly complex.

Girls, Guns, Gags

Why the Future Belongs to the Funny

NATALIE HAYNES

Earlier this year, I read an essay on *Firefly* which suggested that the show was a feminist step down from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, because it inhabited the more misogynistic world of gun-fights at the Last Chance Saloon—because women weren't physically as strong as men, so they could only really beat them by using feminine wiles, and occasionally, heaven forbid, their beauty and guile.

This simply goes to prove that no matter how much time, money, and effort you throw into an education system, stupidity, arrogance, and a total failure to grasp the basic tenets of feminism will nonetheless thrive like rats in a fetid storm drain. So, let me explain: the power structure in *Buffy* was pyramidal—at the bottom were innocent people, above them was a race of fewer but physically much stronger vampires, and above them was one (or were two) slayers, strongest and fewest of all. The power structure in *Firefly* was quite different, because everyone was human. No pointy ears, no stick-on proboscides, no extra arms. Some of the men were stronger than some of the women, but by no means all: as Wash told Saffron, Zoe could kill him with her little finger.

To even things up, though, most of the fighting wasn't hand-to-hand combat, as this was the future, not medieval times. It involved guns, and

sometimes spaceships, which seemed to show little interest in the chromosomal arrangement of the person handling them. We are left in no doubt that Zoe totes her weaponry exactly as well as Mal—she was, after all, the first person he chose to take on a job. And we saw exactly why in “War Stories” when she walked fearlessly into her enemy’s ship and didn’t blanch as he hacked off her captain’s left ear and handed it to her. A squeamish shriek would have been a perfectly reasonable reaction, but she merely thanked him, wrapped it in cloth, and as soon as she could, told Simon to pack it in ice. If someone were to feel the need to separate me from my left ear, or even my right, Zoe is precisely the person I’d want taking care of it. Sure, she called Mal “Sir” (and really, who wouldn’t?), but that wasn’t to do with gender, it was because he was her sergeant in the army and then became her boss. She still ignored his orders when she thought them ill-advised, and he acknowledged that he owed his life to her independence in “Out of Gas.”

And while Kaylee couldn’t shoot to kill, even in a crisis, nor could Simon, as Shepherd Book rather unchristianly pointed out. Mal would ride in to rescue the best little whorehouse in the ‘verse, but it was Inara who had to teach him to fence overnight so that he wasn’t killed in a duel. The power of the men in *Firefly* was matched exactly by that of the women—Simon may have been a brilliant doctor, but Kaylee had the same flair for mechanics as he had for anatomy. And though the crew got into plenty of scrapes where Simon’s medical help was invaluable, before they took him and River onboard they had been flying quite successfully without a doctor. They couldn’t even take off until Kaylee fixed up *Serenity*. Also, did I mention that River could kill you using just her brain?

It is undoubtedly the case that the women in *Firefly* were beautiful, and that you would have to be tied to a tree not to follow most of them home. But it’s worth bearing in mind that this is television, so the men were pretty cute too. You show me a woman who wouldn’t crawl across broken glass to kiss Nathan Fillion chastely on the mouth, and I’ll show you Helen Keller. Inara was a vision of loveliness, but she was also the only one who could out-smart Saffron, the anti-Inara. And River was the one who out-smarted Jubal Early—she was psychic, she was a genius, and she convinced the universe’s creepiest bounty-hunter that she’d

turned into a ship. That is, indisputably, a good day at the office.

But the real gender-leveler in *Firefly* wasn't guns, or even brains, it was jokes. The show was, just as *Buffy* was, a comedy and a drama, and it had girls in it, saying funny things. In case you were wondering, this happens almost never. Think about the celebrated comedies of the past few years, and then think about the roles women played in them. *There's Something About Mary* starred Cameron Diaz, but did she get to make jokes? Nope, she got to be a joke—she's beautiful and sweet, so she gets to put spunk in her hair unknowingly. Feel free to insert your own Hitchcockian misogynist subtext about despoiling perfect blondes—I don't have the energy. Diaz gets to do something less grimy but essentially similar in the *Charlie's Angels* movies—she's now a beautiful, sweet genius who can kick-box, but luckily she's still a klutz, and answers the door in her knickers, because she hasn't realized the postman is perverting over her. Sandra Bullock is always described as a comic actress, which she is in the action-movie *Speed* where she gets to say smart, funny things. But put her in a comedy, *Miss Congeniality* (yes, just a comedy for the purposes of this essay, I know, I know), and she immediately gets to say nothing funny at all. On the plus side, she does fall over a lot, and sometimes she gets to do it with gusto.

Girls do occasionally get to be both pretty and funny in all-girl films (Lindsey Lohan gets the odd joke in *Mean Girls* and *Freaky Friday*), but not too often. Hollywood tends to be happier when there is someone beautiful being pretty and ditzy, and someone less beautiful (in their rather asinine interpretation of beauty) to play funny. Case in point—*The Truth About Cats and Dogs*, a re-working of *Cyrano De Bergerac* where Uma Thurman is the dumb beauty and the funny is provided by Janeane Garofalo, beautiful by any sensible measure but here playing the smart-mouthed plain chick. (Having said that, of course, most people standing next to Uma Thurman would look like they were having a bad hair day.)

When *Buffy* first began, people were rightly blown away by how smart it was, how neatly the narratives played out, how high the emotional stakes were, how cool the fighting looked, how great the effects were. They were also witnessing something extraordinary—a heroine who was beautiful, smart, tough, and, above all, funny. Instead of standing in the

In this piece I believe that Marano correctly identifies a genuinely Jossian theme; nothing shows up this pervasively in one writer's work without it having a real significance. When you trace a character's arc, it's natural to look ahead to see where they end up. In this piece, Marano looks backward to see how some of Joss's most memorable women began their journeys. What he finds there is truly interesting.

River Tam and the Weaponized Women of the Whedonverse

MICHAEL MARANO

Joss Whedon shares a lot in common with the Greek god Hephaestus—and I don't mean that he's a hairy, ugly dude conceived by his mom through parthenogenesis in a fit of jealous pique and thrown off Olympus with such force that he fell for nine days.¹ Hephaestus was the armorer of the gods. He made Zeus's thunderbolts and scepter, Athena's shields, Eros's arrows, Achilles's armor, and Helios's chariot. But there's a certain blurring of Hephaestus's specialization, if you rummage through *The Iliad*. In Book Eighteen, Hephaestus is shown not only as a manufacturer of weapons, but of women, having created two artificial maidens made of gold as his workshop help who are as smart and skilled as any living girl.

I bring this up because the idea of a woman as created by a weapon-maker within Patriarchal contexts is a recurring motif in the worlds imagined by Joss Whedon, the so-called "Whedonverse."² It's a motif, perhaps

¹ I find no evidence in his biography to support such a background, even on Wikipedia.

² Disclosure time. Years back, I wrote a horror novel called *Dawn Song*. In it, the demon Belial crafts a succubus, whom he sends from Hell to our world as part of his eons-long war for supremacy of Hell with his enemy Leviathan. I created a story in which a woman is crafted to be a weapon. Just bringing this up, in case anyone thinks I'm pulling a "kettle calling the pot black" on Whedon.

better defined as “the woman as weapon,” that reaches its apotheosis with the developmental journey of River in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. I say it reaches its apotheosis, because as I write this, she’s the most recent example of this trend; there could be more in Whedon’s future work that are more apotheosis-y. But for now, let’s take a look at River’s creation and development as a weapon—as the creation of weapon-makers—by first taking a look at a few of her antecedents. The motif of the woman-as-weapon is a fairly complicated one, with a number of disparate elements, and by looking at Whedon’s other lethal women, we can see how these elements converge into the figure of River.³ While these characters have been developed by a number of writers, directors, and actors working with Whedon, it’s Whedon’s guiding vision that has shaped that development. These characters are reflective of his vision and thus can be thought of as existing within a single body of work.

ALIEN: RESURRECTION

Alien: Resurrection may not usually be considered part of the Whedonverse, but Whedon’s script for the 1997 sequel is rife with the woman-as-weapon theme as it would develop over the course of his future work. First, there’s the cloned Ripley (number eight in the series of clones), scraped together from DNA remnants of the original Ripley by a secret military cabal headed by General Perez. In the previous movies, the Alien itself was sought after by the evil Weylan Yutani company for development as a weapon. In *Alien: Resurrection*, part of that development is a manufactured Ripley, who is, to a certain extent, weaponized as a human/Alien hybrid, with enhanced abilities and mildly acidic blood. Ripley is a commodity (referred to in the movie as a “meat by-product”), existing in a twilight state between being an independent person and a lethal device. Part of her journey to humanity entails her confronting a lab full of proto-Ripleys, botched clones with too many Alien characteristics to be useful commodities, which she destroys (or, rather, euthanizes) with a flamethrower . . . an act which prompts Ron Perlman’s character Johner to mutter: “Must be a chick thing.”

³ Aren’t you glad I used “converge” into River, instead of “flow”?

And it is a “chick thing,” in that it is a *human* thing she does. Her euthanizing the botched clones is a crucial decision she makes on her journey throughout the film to be human, to define herself as her own person independent of her origins as she rejects her status as a weapon created by a Patriarchal authority. Part of that journey is subverting her potential as a weapon, reclaiming her artificially heightened abilities and her acidic blood to destroy the Alien threat to humanity.

To a lesser degree, the android Call, played by everyone’s favorite shoplifter Winona Ryder, is also a weapon. True, as an android manufactured on a planet of androids, she’s not created as a weapon. But she’s used by the crew of the *Betty* (and isn’t the *Betty*, old beat-up ship that she is with a crew full of scruffy misfits, a proto-*Serenity*?) in a tactical way. Her very body is used as an interface with the “Father” computer of the military ship *Auriga*, so that it can be crashed into Earth and end the Alien menace—though it’s done with her permission. Like Ripley, her humanity is defined by her human choices, including her stated mission as an android to save a dumb Xenomorph-cloning humanity from itself, even though said choices involve the use of her manufactured body in a tactical way.

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER AND ANGEL

Well, where to begin with Buffy and all her attendant mythology? How about with the very First Slayer?

The First Slayer was a girl who was weaponized by three shaman Shadow-Men in the distant past to fight demons and vampires, the implication being that, like the cloned Ripley, the girl was partly infused with the essence of the demonic agencies she would eventually fight on the Shadow-Men’s behalf. Again, the needs of Patriarchal authority are fulfilled by making a woman a lethal object. The First Slayer had no Watcher. She could not develop any further as a person beyond her function as a weapon, and was exiled from her community even as she served it.

Buffy, though she was born and not made with the potential to be lethal, was a continuation of this “woman as created weapon” legacy. The Patriarchal legacy of the Shadow-Men had been supplanted by the Watchers

Council, which saw to it that the Slayer, as a weapon, was used and developed in ways acceptable to the decrees of this new Patriarchal authority. (And yes, there were women on the Council, but the tweedy Eurocentric ambience of the organization reeked of an English Men's Club.)

As with Ripley and Call, Buffy asserted her primacy as a human being over her status as a lethal tool through her human choices, standing up to the Watchers Council, most dramatically so during her conflict with Glorificus.

But within the subset of the Whedonverse that is the *Buffyverse*, Buffy is by no means the only woman-as-weapon.

There's also Anya, everybody's favorite Vengeance Demon, alias Aud and Anyanka. Anya was "elevated" to the status of Vengeance Demon by her Patron, D'Hoffryn, who used her and her fellow female Vengeance Demons to further his ends. The Vengeance Demons were, essentially, D'Hoffryn's arsenal.⁴ Anya's choices defined her development as a human once she was stripped of her supernaturally lethal capacities, which led her back to being a demon for a while, before her ultimate death, as a human, fighting the minions of the First.

The Buffybot—unlike Call, the aforementioned machine in the shape of a girl—never achieved self-awareness, or the capacity for choice. She was created by murdering prick misogynist bastard Warren as a lovebot for Spike—a particularly noxious Patriarchal development of a woman as an exploitable commodity. Though not created as a weapon, she was re-appropriated as a weapon by the Scoobies (via Willow's re-programming) during and after Buffy's conflict with Glorificus. While there is no real intelligence or sentience to the Buffybot, and "her" existence as a woman is debatable, the fact that Buffy re-appropriated her image, her ersatz lovebot body, for her own purposes as a weapon is pretty significant.

If the Buffybot is a weapon to be used against Glory, the question follows: Was Dawn also a weapon? Yes, in that she was a strategically created commodity that was used to thwart an enemy. The mysterious Brethren of monks created Dawn, the person, as a camouflage for the Key that they wished to keep out of the hands of Glorificus, the Beast. She was human, full of "Summers blood," as Buffy herself pointed out, and capable of human choice. But the fact is, as a human, manufactured

⁴ It's sort of interesting that, given the vengeful legacies of female demons like the Furies, the male D'Hoffryn is head of this particular branch of infernal affairs.

Sometimes it's hard to separate an actor from the character he plays, if for no other reason than the fact that they have a tendency to look so much alike. Sometimes actors come to resent this association with a character, and they struggle to carve out a space for themselves separate from the character, but sometimes they feel about it exactly as we all hope they would. Listen here to Nathan's voice . . . the humor, the authority. Isn't it a little . . . I mean . . . isn't it a little Mal? And isn't that fantastic?

I, Malcolm

NATHAN FILLION

Somebody once asked me what it was like to be Malcolm Reynolds. Usually I get, “Why was *Firefly* canceled?” and “Is there going to be another season/sequel?” But what was it like? Specifically, to be Mal? I wasn't quite ready for it. I mean, sure, it was great. Boots. Coat. Gun. Ride horses. Shoot guns. Shoot guns at horses. Stinks like awesome. But what was it like? It was so long ago it pieces together like childhood memories, complete with those moments of clarity that suddenly strike you with, “Oh, yeah! I remember that!” and a lot more moments of, “Really? We did that? Was I drunk?” But like those childhood memories there are images and feelings that are indelible.

Getting the job was stressful. I'm convinced the process of auditioning is designed to weed out the weak. Yet somehow, I still got it. There was the other actor up for the role, of whom I'm a huge fan. There was the fact I had to do the audition four or five times. There was the huge stack of contracts in triplicate to sign, potentially spelling out how I was going to spend the next seven years—or eight months, whatever the case may be. The stakes continue to rise throughout the process. Actors get knocked out of the mix, narrowing the choices. More and more faces show up to watch you pretend to be a spaceman. The offices get bigger and there's a special

room for the audition. Meetings are held afterward while you wait outside. Trying to keep your cool during this traumatic affair is down to the individual, because there isn't anything that anybody can say to make it any easier. You are on your own. But I wanted this part badly. All the things we love about Mal were staring me in the face. The humour (spelled that way on purpose for Canadians), the questionable morality, the darkness, the anger, the almost imperceptible softness. It was all just out of reach like some toy in a window at Christmas, with Tiny Tim on the cold side, fogging up the glass. Or a brand new crutch or something. A gold crutch. No, a cure. Anyhow, it's safe to say the part was *all* I wanted.

So, there I was. Going to get a tour from Joss of the not-yet-finished ship. I met him at the *Firefly* production office (which weren't the offices we eventually wound up in) with the show logo on the door (which wasn't the logo we eventually used). The sound stages were huge, and we had three. The ship was enormous and incomplete. Strange, how it first struck me as so bizarre and unreal, and then later became a home. Know this: I had never been on an hour-long, single-camera show. The entire process, the scope alone was new to me and very impressive. They had built an entirely new world, made up of scraps from the past and future. There were a lot of people who put a lot of work into making the quality of that show what it was. As the show went on, I quickly understood how much I depended on those motivated, creative, hard-working ladies and bastards (typed with love, you bastards). Certainly, I was a small cog in a smooth-running (almost all the time) machine that produced product. Bottled sunshine? White lightning? Liquid gold? Red Kryptonite? Call it what you will, it was great, it had kick, and would probably take ten years off Superman's life.

The first scene we shot was up on the catwalks in the cargo bay. It was me and Sean. This was it. The ship was ready. The lights were moody and the camera was running. Nobody really knew anybody yet. I knew my lines, but I didn't have the handle on Mal that I have now. I was about to work with Joss. All the questions I had asked myself—"Will everyone get along? What will they be like to work with? Will I get along with Joss? Will people like it?"—were about to be answered. Then there are the questions you never think to ask that get answered. You learn these things as you go. It wasn't till "Our Mrs. Reynolds" that I knew Mal was a rancher. Yet it wasn't two days before I knew I could go to the little lunch camper out back

and build a sandwich that would embarrass Dagwood. These things come with time. Until you experience them, the best you can do is smooth the gaps between the transitions, or bring lunch from home.

Certainly, there are a lot of technical considerations when acting on camera versus on stage. Three years of working with talented, seasoned professionals on daytime taught me how to ignore, or work with, the distraction of the technical. (Thanks, all of you at *OLTL*.) Past that, I got to live a self-centered kind of fantasy. As the captain, I got to be the center of my own universe. I got to be closed off, angry, bitter, and enraged. I fought my demons in bars, punished myself in fights I couldn't win, trying to feel *something*. In my daily life, I don't get the opportunity to swing myself onto a horse and feed my murderous energy into the animal for a primal burst of speeding revenge. Yet how many countless hours of my life did I spend daydreaming of heroic exploits? I needed that in my real life. I think maybe we all do, and sadly, few get the chance. When I played Mal, I wasn't playing me, I was playing me if I had been through what Mal had been through. I don't think of myself as a hard man, or closed-off, but I know this: Mal and I have a very similar sense of justice. I think comic books gave that to me, along with an over-developed sense of vengeance. I felt Malcolm was crusty, yes, but on the right track. More important than believing Mal was right, was knowing that Mal believes he is right.

I remember feeling like I owned the ship. When I was in costume and could find a moment on one of her two sets (lunch was the best time), I'd walk *Serenity* and just be Mal. I'd take in all her details. Nothing would escape my attention. It was just like the feeling I had for my 1975 Cadillac Eldorado, if the Caddy had somehow saved my life. I remember *Serenity's* switches, lights, cables, and wires. I would try to fix things that were broken (*try*). I had a place at the head of the table. Either end, too. Other people could sit there, but it was understood that it was my place. 'Least in my mind. I had a rocker. I'd sit in it and space out in Mal's head. Very cathartic. The ship had a smell. Dusty garage and bitter metal, like a penny. As for what she tasted like, you'd have to ask Richard Brooks.

The cast . . . I can't say enough. The rest of the cast played a huge role in how I played Mal. By virtue of my role, I got to work with everyone. Sometimes all together, but mostly just one or a few at a time. What satisfied, and impressed, me most was the process of discovery. Putting a scene