

## **Whedon Studies after Whedon: A Conversation with Sherryl Vint**

**Gerry Canavan:** We should begin with the elephant in the room: the unexpected news that *Buffy* is being rebooted/sequelized (in some fashion), with a black lead, and with Whedon attached as a producer. What was your reaction to this news? Are you excited or nervous about returning to the Buffyverse after all this time? What do you hope to see from this new series, and what would you prefer not to see?

**Sherryl Vint:** I struggle to answer this question because I have such mixed feelings about this topic. As I said when we met to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the original series, I love it that the series continues to be watched by young people today, that its story of female heroism and vision of collective rather than individual triumph continues to speak powerfully to viewers. So, on the one hand, I think it is great to see an adaptation in the works, and especially one with an African-American lead, since I do think issues of ethnicity are where the original series really failed. It was perhaps in line, in this regard, with other contemporary series—but since it was ahead of the curve in so many other respects, it is disappointing when watching the series now to

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see how little diversity it embraced, especially in contrast to more recent television of that kind. I do feel strongly that a new series needs to be some kind of expanded and more recently set storytelling in the same world, not a reboot telling the same story but differently—so I'll be very disappointed if it has a new protagonist also named Buffy, etc. There is definitely room for updating and improving what goes on in this world, but I wouldn't like to see the original series overwritten and hence eventually forgotten.

On the negative side, I fear that a new series could end up being formulaic and derivative, instead of a true update, and that worries me. There are so many updates in the works right now (*Charmed* and *Roswell* spring to mind) and I worry that a new *Buffy* could just be one of many, instead of something special that stands out as distinct from its contemporaries, which I believe to be an apt description of the original series. I also worry that a new series can somehow never really capture the power of the old one, simply because things have changed so much in television and in popular culture and gender—and I'd like to believe that *Buffy* had a lot to do with that change. So, at the time of the original series, the ideas that the pretty girl could be powerful and could kill the monster, that heroes didn't have to be lonely and isolated individuals due to their secret identities, that characters could change over several seasons and grow up rather than remain static, etc.—these things were all new and innovative at the time *Buffy* aired. And the story of resisting the Watchers' Council, women seizing power for themselves, breaking the rules and collectively sharing it, not being defined by one's relationship with a boyfriend... Again, all of these things were powerful, original, paradigm-shifting stories at the time that *Buffy* aired. Now powerful women are a staple of television (and here I'm thinking of things like *The 100* or *Sweet Vicious*). So a new *Buffy* that tries to tell this same story again will miss the mark, I think. The new series needs to start from where *Buffy* already changed the situation, from shared and collective Slayer power, and then find new stories to tell about things that we still need to work through. *Buffy* was already groundbreaking in its portrayal of a lesbian relationship, so perhaps now we need a *Buffy* with a trans character. It certainly needs to address ethnicity, and perhaps it might also think

about class issues: *Buffy* did go to a pretty solidly middle-class school, for example. Rebooting *Buffy* at this moment certainly requires that the show take on the #MeToo discourse. So, I'm excited and hope that they producers can make something new, but I worry that they will just make the same thing, now out of sync with its time, and hence the attempt to reboot will just diminish the otherwise continued power of the original.

**GC:** You talked about this a bit at your keynote address at the conference, but what are your thoughts about *Buffy* entering its twenties? What do you see as the primary legacy or legacies of the series?

**SV:** I guess I've already partly answered this question above, but let me reiterate (and then you can cut and edit as you see fit). I do think *Buffy* fundamentally changed how we think about strong women. I know there were other contemporary shows that also helped in this regard—*Xena* and *Alias* are the usual comparisons—but I think that *Buffy* was a lot more thoughtful about this. It didn't simply put a woman in a situation that typically would have been cast as a man and leave all else unchanged, which I think characterizes a lot of “kick-ass women,” but it gave equal time to Buffy's desire to still do “girly” things like go to ice-skating shows or cheerlead or talk about her boyfriend with her friends, etc. And while not all girls have to want these kinds of things, I think it is important that the show doesn't portray Buffy's power by distancing her from her femininity, thereby simultaneously reinforcing the idea that the feminine is weak (even if individual women may be strong by identifying with masculinity). As I said above, I'm thrilled that *Buffy* remains a text that young people watch twenty years on, although I guess there is a bit to be sad in that too, in the sense that such stories still need to be told, that things have changed but not that much—here I'm thinking of the end of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, where she addresses the book itself and tells it that it should celebrate if one day it finds it no longer has an audience, because that day will mean that female equality has been achieved, and thus stories of women's emancipation no longer make sense.

Along with its story of female empowerment, I think the most important legacy of *Buffy* is its vision of heroism as collective.

Traditionally heroes are isolated from their friends and have to face villains alone, that whole “with great power comes great responsibility” Spider-Man story, which means he can never have the teenage experience he longs for. But Buffy has both: she saves the prom and goes to prom (and on that topic, another great legacy of the series is its wit, the jokes that acknowledge the premise like the prom speech about the “lowest death rate among the graduating class”). And the most recent Spider-Man film, for example, also has him working with his best friend who doesn't have super powers, and so I'd like to see that as part of Buffy's legacy, for men as much as women.

**GC:** What do you see as the future of Whedon Studies going forward? Do you think *Buffy* remains the center, or anchor, of this academic subfield, and do you think that situation is sustainable going forward? Especially in light of Whedon's status as one of the major architects of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, even if he has since left that storyworld, how do we understand the changing field the term “Whedon Studies” tries to name?

**SV:** I am somewhat reluctant to say this, but I wonder if the scholarship and the organization needs to be something other than Whedon Studies. I don't say this simply because of the recent revelations but because I wonder if organizing an area of study focused on a single individual was really the best way to approach work in a medium that is necessarily extremely collaborative. Certainly, I don't mean to denigrate Whedon's contribution, and I would never deny that he does have a distinctive voice that can be traced across his projects, that it has focused on issues of female empowerment, and that he has also sought to connect the stories he tells to social issues in the real world, to donate to women's charities, etc. Still, calling it Whedon Studies does tend to underestimate the importance of other people who have contributed significantly to how some of these series evolved (such as Marti Noxon on *Buffy*, who has gone on to make some other interesting, women-centred projects such as *Sharp Objects*) or it can tend to bring things into the orbit of discussion where Whedon's role is less central than the collaborative work, like the MCU.

I'm afraid that I don't have a very good answer to the second part of your question, about the field that "Whedon Studies" tried to name. I think the evolution out of an original journal focused only on *Buffy* and into Whedon Studies made sense at that time, but that Whedon Studies no longer makes sense now—and again, I'll stress, I don't mean because of the allegations, but because the landscape of television has changed so much. Whedon Studies did attempt to name a showrunner/writer centric vision of media scholarship, and I think that is a good direction for the overall field of television studies to go, especially in light of developments in the last couple of years with streaming services, limited-run miniseries created and then written and/or directed by a single person. Television, or at least this kind of television, is moving in the direction of something that might be better described as “long-form” film, or something like that. But another thing that I think Whedon Studies sought to name was a particular kind of genre-bending approach to storytelling that is also associated with Whedon. It is feminist in response to horror tropes with *Buffy*, of course, but it also expands to other ways of being self-conscious about genre (and the ideologies embedded within it) in something like *Cabin in the Woods*, which certainly has feminist elements, but also takes on more. And perhaps it would be great to have a field that looks at this kind of meta-genre work, but then one would have to acknowledge that it extends beyond Whedon. Jordan Peele, for example, has made excellent use of the same kinds of techniques to address race in *Get Out*.

**GC:** So let's dive into it: how do you understand the relationship between Joss Whedon and contemporary feminism, not just in terms of whether or not *Buffy* has “aged well” but with respect to the recent #MeToo revelations coming from his ex-wife? It seems to James and me that Whedon has come under a certain amount of reevaluation in recent years, in no small amount due to his MCU work and his treatment of the Black Widow character in *Age of Ultron*. Do we need to rethink the way we read *Buffy* as feminists in 2018?

**SV:** Here I think I'd want to argue for separating out *Buffy* (and *Buffy*) from her/its creator. Certainly the revelations about Whedon are

distressing, and I think it is good that they have led to a broader conversation about ways men can be allies, and ways that women need to be empowered as the storytellers and directors for Hollywood to more thoroughly change. I think Patty Jenkins' work on *Wonder Woman*, and her role in now developing a new series for 'TNT', shows that the industry is taking on the question not only of incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace, but also a more fundamental question of whose voices get to decide what kinds of stories are told and how they are told. The allegations about Whedon himself certainly might push us toward evaluating how a certain kind of feminism can still be palatable to patriarchy, whereas other kinds of strong female characters remain pathologies. I said above that I think it is powerful that *Buffy* doesn't have to pathologize her femininity to be strong, and I would still stand by that, but I think we also run the risk of sort of reifying those qualities we call femininity, and assuming all strong women have to have them. I think a very interesting example is the character Elizabeth on the show *The Americans*, which just ended its run. She was completely non-sentimental and refused, always, to take on soft or nurturing roles, and I think the show successfully made her a likable character despite this, something women haven't generally been able to do. When I spoke a few years ago at the Whedon Studies conference, the general thesis of my talk was that *Buffy* gets neglected in the discourse of "Quality TV" that arose in the 2000s, almost always praising shows with male anti-hero leads (*The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *Mad Men*, etc.), whereas *Buffy* had already done many of the things narratively and aesthetically that such shows were celebrated for—but did it with a teenaged, female lead, and thus it didn't carry the same weight. I think that is more gender prejudice than genre prejudice, but of course both are in the mix.

And to be clear, this is not to denigrate these other shows, which I also like, but to suggest that we've learned to have sympathy for and love dark men, and perhaps now in the era of #MeToo we need to evaluate both the implications for women and gender in celebrating such shows (there are long-suffering wives in them all, and often a fan base that hates these wives for pointing out the real flaws of their heroes, in almost GamerGate kinds of discourse), and also whether we have room to celebrate some non-nurturing female leads as well. I know that *Big*

*Little Lies* gets a lot of praise here, for having complete female characters who have both sympathetic and flawed sides, and although I have mixed feelings about that show, I think this is a move in the right direction. I've already mentioned *Sharp Objects*, for which Marti Noxon was showrunner, and another show of hers, *Dietland*, also seems to be breaking new ground in female characterization, although I haven't seen it and so I can't comment further. But, to sum up, since to me this point is important, while I do think there are new and different questions to be asked now (and as I said above, I hope a new *Buffy* series will ask them), and although we may want to reevaluate how important we think Whedon's personal feminist (or not) commitments are to our evaluation. I think culture always exceeds the person who writes or makes it. *Buffy* was the product of many people, collaborations with other writers, with the actors, interactions with the fans (and here we need to remember that it was also an early pioneer in having its writing staff, including Whedon, interact with fans online, on a discussion board called "The Bronze"). So to me *Buffy* remains a central feminist text and its status as such is not changed by 2018, even if it does not speak directly to the issues of 2018. *The Female Man*, which I mentioned above, remains an important feminist text in the same way, although it too is clearly marked by its relevance to its context of production more than its relevance to our contemporary struggle.

**GC:** I'm really interested in this idea about de-Whedoning Whedon Studies and I'd really like to hear more about how scholars might be able to do that in their work; it reminds me a bit of the gesture Renée Coulombe makes in this issue of just pointing out that even Buffy herself was played by multiple actresses, most especially her stand-ins and stunt doubles. What directions would you see Whedon Studies scholarship moving to start to do this work? What would you recommend to scholars starting work on Buffy or other Whedon properties who want to follow in this line of thinking?

**SV:** This is challenging to answer, because even the framing of the question points to the extent of the difficulty here. De-Whedoned Whedon Studies would of course no longer be Whedon Studies, so... As

I suggested in my first answer, I think one answer might be to think about what the original framing intended to capture—feminist media studies? female heroes? genre-bending works that remake the possibilities of a formula? The challenge—but also the possibility—is that it is likely all of these things and more, so that it could become a center that does not hold, the dispersal of a tight community into the larger field of media studies. And this I think would be a real loss, since the Whedon Studies community, as I experienced briefly when speaking at their conference, is exactly that: a community. There are sustained discussions, real exchanges and dialogue, and I'd hate to see that kind of nexus lost if the field were to become too broadly framed.

I also feel as if I should someone underline that I don't think this idea of “de-Whedoning” is valuable only (or even mostly) in response to the recent allegations, or that it is really about this particular individual, instead of about organizing any kind of study around a specific person in this way. I do think at the time when he created *Buffy* especially that the “showrunner” as a guiding figure was not the same role in the industry that it has since become. *Buffy* is well ahead of the curve in having someone who is a showrunner and also “auteur” of the piece, instead of someone who is show running in the sense of managing the pragmatics, continuity, etc. But television as a medium has changed dramatically and excitingly in the past 20 years, and now this is more the norm than the exception: shows that are increasingly designed as closed narratives (the return of what we used to call mini-series, that is, one season stories; or anthologies series that continue but tell a new story each year), meant often to be binge-watched (Netflix actively promotes this model with dropping seasons instead of episodes), that have a single creator or author whose vision unites the disparate elements. So I don't think it was “wrong” to approach *Buffy* in this way, but as the issues with Marvel, etc., show, not all of Whedon's work fits into this paradigm—and, from another point of view, *Buffy*'s ongoing influence or place within popular culture means that this auteur approach isn't the only thing relevant about the series.

How to balance these changes with keeping the tight community that is Whedon Studies right now is something that I don't have an answer for, but it seems to me that likely the best way forward is for that



community to have a conversation about what they'd like to be, and then craft conference themes and CFPs that start to highlight whatever it is they still want to have at the core of their studies. And this may continue to be Whedon, although perhaps now as a figure whose role they complicate to consider things about the industry rather than approach as a sort of individual genius.

I remain strongly committed to studying television as the most interesting visual storytelling medium right now, but television has not been as “legitimized” as has film (although the process is ongoing). Thus, a final complication that comes up with his question is the term “auteur” which is imported from film studies (and there, was imported from fiction, not without controversy). As used in film, to refer to the director's vision, the emphasis is on visual elements of style, which persist from film to film, without regard to theme or genre or story. In television, continuity rests with the showrunner (usually also a scriptwriter) rather than with the director, and so perhaps auteur remains the right term, with an eye on its roots as just “author.” But it would have to be theorized quite differently from how the term has been used in film studies, and then differently again from just “author” since television remains a collaborative medium, too. And indeed this struggle with the place of Whedon within “Whedon Studies” might serve as a prompt to do some of this theorizing, which would be useful for television studies overall.

**GC:** I'm especially interested in this because of the cult of personality that has arisen around Whedon in many circles; just out of my own habits of fandom it is hard not to type “Joss” there! When we talk of the other creators involved in Whedon projects (often women, like Marti Noxon or Jane Espensen) it seems as though their contributions are denigrated or minimized, or even that they are “blamed” for the parts of the project that have not aged well (I'm thinking of Noxon here especially). With respect to a poorly received project like *Age of Ultron*, Marvel/Disney, too, is widely viewed as interfering with Whedon's genius, as if there exists some “Whedon cut” of *Ultron* that would be a masterpiece. (Weirdly, the opposite thing has happened to Whedon

himself with respect to *Justice League*.) How do we reconcile the habits of auteur criticism with the complex reality of media production today?

**SV:** I guess I've already started to answer this above, but based on these comments I have two further thoughts. One is that this kind of fan-based “celebration” or hagiography has always been a poor form of auteur theory. Certainly there is worth in considering someone's distinct contributions (as a writer, in terms of visual style, whatever) but if one decides in advance that everything good is because they are a genius and everything bad is because of others, then that is not really analysis. Additionally, to my way of thinking, any “good” version of auteur theory always has to think about the distinctive contributions within a recognition that film and television are collaborative industries; indeed, it seems to me that precisely figuring out how someone's contributions change depending on conditions (collaborators, or budget, or distribution venue, or whatever) is the heart of what auteur theory can offer, how to sort out this exchange between individual and industry.

The second thought is that, again, this might serve as a way to renew Whedon Studies within this “crisis” moment, to use the strong interest in his work as a way to pioneer methodologies that are sufficient for analysis in the complex reality of media production, transmedia storytelling, and all the rest. The new *Buffy* series could provide a really powerful case study of how to think through problems of Whedon's “advisor” (or whatever the title) status, versus the vision of the new showrunner, vs. how much television has changed between the conditions of production for the original series and now. It could lead to incredibly scholarship, not only about *Buffy* and the Whedonverse, but also of value to television studies methodology overall.

**GC:** I hate to ask another third-rail question, but your thoughts about the *Buffy* sequel/reboot brought to mind some of the conversations we had at the conference about *Buffy* and feminism, and about how some elements of the show that seemed radical or revolutionary in their moment now seem very unremarkable, while some other elements (the miniskirts, the politics of sex and rape, the racial politics, Tara) were problematic at the time and have aged quite poorly in the intervening

decades. This is almost the opposite of *The Female Man* problem, in a way; *Buffy* helped create a space in popular culture that has now surpassed it and which increasingly views the series as quaint or even old-fashioned, or even as a symptom of what the movement now opposes. How do we approach *Buffy* as a feminist text in 2018, without simply appealing to nostalgia or to a claim that “times were different then”?

**SV:** I have to confess that my initial response to this question was a bit resistant, but that was more emotional than analytical. *Buffy* as quaint or only nostalgic? I want to say no! Never! But of course it is more complicated than that. So of course, as you say, some elements were problematic in the beginning (if not out of tune with their moment) and now appear even worse (especially race) when *Buffy* is considered alongside an industry that has dramatically changed in this regard. I'm not sure that I think the miniskirts are even a problem, though. As I said, in its moment, it was important that Buffy was both pretty/petite and strong, that she didn't reinforce a view that women had to choose one or the other (and I don't think that attitude, that you can be pretty or strong, pretty or smart, etc. has gone away sufficiently for me to call *Buffy* quaint). And while she sometimes wore miniskirts (especially in Season One, but I'm sure that is political economy of the industry), she often wore less revealing clothes (my paradigmatic example is “Helpless,” where she slays without powers and while wearing pretty unattractive overalls). So I would still argue that it was important that she had range, in capacities as well as wardrobe.

The issue of diversity is the really telling problem, in my view, since—unlike on almost every other axis—*Buffy* was just like its contemporaries here, not ahead of the game, and so it now looks even worse that the show had so little diversity, when the industry has done quite a good job of changing this problem (although here I'd say only in the last five years or so). To restate in a way that I hope makes the point more clear, in terms of gender stuff, *Buffy* helped create a space (to use your words) for better representations, some of which now surpass it, while in terms of diversity *Buffy* was simply symptomatic of the problems of its time. So, in terms of the first issue, I think I'm perhaps more

optimistic about how the series has aged than you are, perhaps just because of my age, and thus my recognition that *Buffy* is one of the reasons *why* we can now have strong women, homosexual characters, etc. I suppose what this comes down to is that I respond to *Buffy* as both a fan and as a media studies scholar. So, I teach it on my courses, but I also contextualize it for students in terms of how gender has changed, how the place of genre television has changed, etc. If I think about how *Buffy* might read to someone who just encounters it in reruns, without giving much thought to these contexts, then perhaps it would seem old-fashioned (as sad as it makes me to say that). Still, based on how my students respond to other media texts from that time that remain popular to them (they love *Friends*, for example, and only noticed they had no friends of color when I pointed it out), I think what they'd find most baffling about *Buffy* is that none of the Scoobies keeps in touch via cell phones.

**GC:** What's your go-to *Buffy* episode? What's the one that stands out to you now as the essence of the series? Has that changed over time? Is this the same one(s) that you teach to students?

**SV:** I often teach "Helpless," and I do think that in many ways it is the essence of the series, but I also teach it because it is also so "teachable" in terms of getting them to read TV (the phallic crystals, the Little Red Riding Hood clock, the absent/present father, the costuming, as I said before). It is also one of a long sequence of episodes that involves *Buffy* breaking with the authority of the Watchers' Council, which I think is one of the important feminist themes woven throughout the series, and her ability to defeat the vampire without her powers points toward the eventual conclusion that seeks to more widely embrace many powerful women, instead of "The One." In some ways, I like this better than the actual conclusion, since the Potentials still do have special powers, not just themselves as persons able to be made powerful (as are all women). So this is my to-go teaching episode. I also sometimes teach "Hush" because of its innovative storytelling (television without sound), when I want to teach them something about the history of aesthetics of the medium, as much as about the narrative of *Buffy*. And I sometimes teach

“The Body” because I think it does important work in refusing to let the supernatural be an explanation, and so can open up great class conversations about the cultural function of genre, and also because I think the cast give some of their best performances in that episode. My go-to episode for me is “Becoming, Part 2.” It always makes me emotional, and since you know me you also know that I’m generally not really an emotional person. And I think there is also an argument to be made for it as a core to the series, with its themes about duty and sacrifice, without Buffy growing up and having to make a difficult choice without Watcher guidance, with the dramatic end to the love story and teen drama that structured the first couple of years. But my reasons for loving it are probably more personal: I find inspiration in that moment during the sword fight with Angelus when she is down on the ground and he taunts her. “No weapons, no friends, no hope. Take all that away, and what’s left?” And she responds “Me” and then kicks his ass. Of course, it then becomes all very sad and difficult rather than celebratory about the violence because Angel changes back, but in that moment when she rises and the camera rises with her, it’s pretty inspirational.

**GC:** Assuming the new series is a sequel and not a reboot, what’s the element of the old show that you most want them to follow up on? You’ve already hinted that it’s the new proliferation of Slayers, I suppose. Do you want to see any of the old characters, twenty years on?

**SV:** I would love to see Spike 20 years on, but of course that would require that James Marsters somehow magically didn’t age—or maybe a storyline in which having a soul makes you age? But I always liked his storyline better than Angel’s, and thought he was the better partner for Buffy. He didn’t need to minimize or deny her strength, and although there was some problematic writing in a few episodes, overall I thought he was willing to be a real partner for her, whereas Angel was always something of a tutor or something (and don’t even get me started with the Riley hating). And this answer probably leads into other things I’d like to see in the new series, which is that it starts with an adult Slayer as the lead. I did love (especially for its time) that Buffy grew up on the series rather than stayed perpetually in high school (or college), but I

think the proliferation of Slayers allows for a lot of different stories to be told, of the girl learning she is a Slayer, but also what it looks like to try to retire from slaying, or slay and have a career, or a child ... And of course I'd love it if Sarah Michelle Gellar was back as a regular, but it is hard to imagine what kind of storytelling would be possible if she is always there, since we are familiar with her as *\*the\** leader. But hopefully she'll do a guest spot or two. The announcement of the African-American lead already shows that there will be more diversity in casting (which was anticipated, a bit, in the Potentials in that last seasons, and the fact that they came from around the globe, not just the U.S.). And I hope that the series will find a way to keep telling highly relevant stories with the monster as metaphor (for example, although it is not a great episode, "Doublemeat Palace," where Buffy worked in fast food, did try to address issues such as economic stability as part of the "real world" struggles of a Slayer. Or "Go Fish" clearly symbolizes problems of sexual violence in schools). So I hope for more episodes that do that kind of weaving between the real world and the mythology.

Things I'd like the series to leave in the past:

1. Xander: the character is one of the things that hasn't aged well, I think, since he stands in for the male audience that comes to appreciate Buffy only through first being sexually attracted to her. And along with the challenges of the allegations against Whedon, plus the new #MeToo context of production, I think the problems of Nicholas Brendon's personal life mean that the new series should not make any space for him. I'm sad for his struggles with addiction, but he has also been convicted of assaulting women and so he just can't be given a platform.
2. Mean Girls. The 90s context of production made the place for a role like Cordelia's an obvious element of a show that was in some ways a teen drama, but I think we are past those stereotypes now, and such a character would only undermine the female solidarity themes of the show. Cordelia's character was redeemed, of course, but I also think the new attention to anti-bullying (*13 Reasons Why*, etc.) means that we can also tell better stories

about conflict in high school, if indeed high school remains a part of the show.

Something else has occurred to me. So, if it is not impertinent, I wonder if I could include in this interview exchange a question for you.

My question is, as someone with a daughter, what are your thoughts and responses on introducing her to *Buffy*? Is it something that you hope she'll come to be inspired by? Do you think it is now too out of touch with the contemporary moment to be an important text for someone her age? Do you have hopes for the sequel in relation to her?

My impetus for asking this comes from two things: first, our ongoing exchange about the place of *Buffy* in contemporary media feminism, whether it is still relevant, too dated, etc., and my watching of *The Handmaid's Tale*. I'm finding that series excellent, if harrowing, and I'm also finding that I find it far more concerning and plausible than I ever found the novel, when I read it back when it came out. At that time, I was a female teenager worried about pregnancy and starting to discover feminism. When I watch the series now, I realize that women who are the age now that I was then probably have fewer options for reproductive choice than I did back then, and this problem threatens to become worse if Supreme Court appointments undo *Roe vs. Wade*. And although I don't want to endorse simplistic narratives of linear "progress" it seems profoundly depressing to me that young women today might face greater sexual discrimination than I did at their age.

**GC:** This is such an interesting question that I find myself totally inclined to completely overthink! I definitely watch media with her in mind; I love *The Force Awakens*, for instance, despite its many flaws, because of the awesome scene where Rey Force-pulls the lightsaber to herself and ignites it. I watched that scene through her future-teenager eyes when she was just a baby and just started bawling. It still makes me a little bit weepy. I wrote about it on my blog at the time with a sort of over-the-top, rah-rah dad-feminism—but I really do love that moment.

Knowing her as a six-year-old, though, this all gets really complicated; that whole girl-power-with-no-costs-or-complications fantasy I felt watching *The Force Awakens* a few years ago was a whole lot

easier to wrap my head around than a living, breathing person who gets to choose who they want to be when they grow up.

**SV:** Thanks so much for responding, and I completely respect that you don't want to talk about your children in print! Your response made me realize that I could just as easily have asked about your son and watching *Buffy*, what attitudes toward women you hope he gets (or doesn't get) from popular culture, etc.

**GC:** Oh, God, I think about that all time.

**SV:** And yes, that scene with Rey is great. Despite not liking *Star Wars* very much, I did find her power in *The Force* exciting, offering so much more than Leia as an example for young women.

I've really enjoyed this exchange! It makes we realize how seldom we get to just have a real conversation about stuff in academe.

**GC:** Me too!