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 ***Investigating "Firefly" and "Serenity": Science Fiction on the Frontier (review)***

Corey Dethier

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Discussing Malcolm Reynolds's foil, Saffron, in the first essay of *Investigating "Firefly" and "Serenity": Science Fiction on the Frontier*, Cynthia Masson states, "Mal finds her naked on his bed, but her body is not enough of a temptation. Saffron thus reverts to textual authority (via *oraculum*) to seduce him through sexual metaphor" (25). Could there be a better analogy for *Firefly* itself? *Firefly* debuted, ran out of the intended order, and was abruptly canceled in the span of a few months in 2002. Initially, it seemed a failure: whatever magic Joss Whedon had captured in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* had not survived the space Western format or the jump to network television. But then came cult success, massive DVD sales, a full-length movie, and now academic conferences, articles, and books. As *Investigating "Firefly" and "Serenity"* lovingly details, *Firefly* should in no way still be considered a failure today.

The nineteen essays collected by Rhonda Wilcox and Tanya Cochran do much more than detail the post-television success of the show. Moving **[End Page 218]** from Shakespeare to Agamben and techniques of rhetoric to the prevalence of *Firefly* fan creations on deviantART (a website devoted to amateur art), *Investigating "Firefly" and "Serenity"* tours through the creative, philosophical, and technical aspects of the show with an astounding completeness. The essays in the book touch on the obvious topics (can *Firefly* be discussed without mentioning the genre-cross-pollination of the space Western?) and make less obvious connections that reveal new facets of the show (the comparison of Inara's companion status with Athenian Hetaira in Andrew Aberdein's essay comes to mind).

Of course, *Investigating "Firefly" and "Serenity"* leaves out some aspects as well. Outside of Mal, the male characters receive scant critical attention, sometimes detailed only in their responses to, and relationship with, the female crewmembers. Jayne, Wash, and Book are labeled "complex" but are reduced to the tough one, the funny one, and

the religious one with little inquiry into their importance to the show's narratives and themes or—in the case of the latter two—their eventual deaths.

If *Investigating "Firefly" and "Serenity"* has a more thematic weakness, however, it is the sense of "fandom" imbued in the collection. This is not to say that the essays are "amateurish" but rather that the battlelines have already been drawn, and most of the contributors come down on the side of Whedon and the "browncoats," or those fans who spurred *Firefly's* post-television success. While some of the essays do touch on problematic moments in the show, Whedon's choices and characters are given a relatively free pass: the contributors could have gone much further than they did regarding legitimate concerns with tokenism and racial stereotypes. *Firefly's* cancellation, and the "undeserved" nature of it, hangs over multiple essays like "the Black" does over *Serenity*. Nevertheless, *Investigating "Firefly" and "Serenity"*'s problems are palliated by the care it takes with its subject matter; it serves adeptly as the textual authority that recalls the show's original temptation.

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a place for frontier tales in the cultural economy of American entertainment. Marill presents readers with a comprehensive elaboration of televised Westerns, interrelating material typically covered in volumes focused on individual anthologies or production companies.

However, the volume also offers Westerns scholars considerable frustration in its brief and sometimes superficial discussion of many of the topics covered. This uneven treatment works in the favor of well-known, long-running series and made-for-TV movies but shortchanges many less-central topics, such as cartoons and Western-themed episodes, with some chapters as brief as six or eight pages. As might be expected, the brevity of these treatments leads to numerous omissions and, in many cases, citation, rather than the discussion afforded entries in other areas. While these chapters suggest that much ground exists to be explored in their respective topics, those explorations are not carried out thoroughly here.

The information presented is, nonetheless, valuable to media scholars who approach the book with a careful eye toward making the most of the volume's strengths. The series and televised films covered are not only significant in their role as American entertainment—many of these are, as Marill points out, the cornerstones of popular culture—they are part of an ongoing web of intertextuality that includes adaptations, appropriations, visual and textual references, borrowings, and inspirations in literature, music, film, and, of course, television.

***Investigating "Firefly" and "Serenity":
Science Fiction on the Frontier.***

Edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran.
London, UK: I. B. Tauris, 2008. 304 pages, £14.99/\$22.50.

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Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier, it is worth noting that the word lateral takes into account the Decree.

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