

Review: *Being a Girl with the Doctor: Essays on the Feminine in Doctor Who*. Edited by Gillian I. Leitch and Sherry Ginn. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2024. 183p. ISBN 9781476689531. \$49.95.

Leaving aside the debatable question of whether *Doctor Who* belongs in the Buffy+ “fuzzy set,” it is probably safe to assume a large overlap between Buffy fandom and Who fandom. As evidence, co-editor Ginn and at least one of the other contributors have written elsewhere on topics related to the Buffyverse. Thus, a collection of essays on women characters in *Doctor Who* will probably be of interest to *Slayage* readers.

As with any edited collection, this volume does not purport to be definitive, but it does offer a fairly wide range of perspectives on gender issues connected with the BBC show, both on-screen and behind the scenes. Most of the essays focus on the Doctor’s companions, with one focusing on the 13th Doctor (played by Jodie Whittaker), one on a historical development in the treatment of companions, and one examining the whole concept of gender in the show.

It is worth noting that of all the companions discussed, some of the most popular Sarah Jane Smith, Amy Pond, Donna Noble, Rose Tyler are not primary subjects of these essays, although most are mentioned as examples in other chapters. Instead, there are articles about Leela, Ace (two, in fact), Martha Jones, Clara Oswald, and Bill Potts, plus non-companion characters Madame Vastra and her wife Jenny.

It is interesting to observe that while some essays compare *Who* to *Star Trek*, in terms of content (especially treatment of women characters), external history (debuting at similar times and dealing with cancellation), and cultural impact, none of the authors ever mention Buffy. Although *Who* both pre-dated

(classic series) and followed (rebooted series) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, there is no discussion of influence in either direction. One would think that the precedent of strong characters like the assertive Sarah Jane, the warrior Leela, and often-violent Ace would have laid the groundwork for a high school girl fighting vampires and demons; and that the inclusion of emotional bonds amongst the Scooby Gang and their families and friends would have set up cultural expectations of the new *Who* showing the companions having relationships both outside and inside the Tardis.

However, there are plenty of interesting insights among these essays nevertheless. The lead-off article by Carolne-Isabelle Caron is titled “Who Says the Doctor Ever Had a Penis?” and raises the point that the Doctor is not (despite appearances) human, and in-universe canon has never addressed the reproductive processes of Gallifreyans but has definitely established that their gender assignments can be fluid, at least at regeneration time. Placing this essay at the front is a wise move by the editors, as it subtly precludes any objections to discussions of gender and provides a platform for the subsequent chapters.

Michael G. Robinson and Lynne M. Thomas both discuss the 7th Doctor’s companion Ace, with Robinson examining the external history of Ace’s introduction, and Thomas analyzing the in-show character herself. Robinson describes how the show producers, at the departure of 6th Doctor Colin Baker and subsequent precarious existence of the show itself, used the introduction of Ace as a device to move the show into a new direction, tying this moment to the new influence of script editor Andrew Cartmel, who wanted “to return the Doctor to a sense of being ‘darker, more powerful, more mysterious’” (29-30). Thomas, on the other hand, looks at how the character of

Ace was portrayed, and describes her as an anarchist, comparing her to comics writer Alan Moore's characters in his series *V for Vendetta* and *The Ballad of Halo Jones*, two works specifically cited by Andrew Cartmel as influences.

Gillian I. Leitch turns to the 4th Doctor's companion Leela, who was created to be diametrically opposite from her immediate predecessor Sarah Jane Smith. Although Sarah Jane had been competent, independent, and assertive, she was still a middle-class British woman. Leela, on the other hand was a warrior from a "savage" tribe on a distant planet, quite accustomed to the use of violence when necessary. Leitch looks at the aspect of Leela being coded as indigenous (even though it is eventually discovered that her tribe was the remnant of a human exploration mission) through costuming and makeup as well as the content of the scripts. The interesting point of this view is the intersection of Leela's indigeneity and her femininity, giving rise to cultural clashes that enhanced several of the story lines.

Leitch's co-editor Sherry Ginn turns her attention to Dr. Martha Jones, thus shifting our awareness from the classic series to the reboot. Ginn discusses the unrequited crush Martha had on the Doctor, and brings in theories about love from psychologists Erik Erikson and Daniel Levinson to elucidate her observations. She also delves into possibly non-canonical novels and other non-TV *Who*-related works to shed more light on Martha's life and back story.

Heather M. McHale writes about Clara Oswald, comparing how that character is treated in the final season of the 11th Doctor and in the first two seasons of the 12th. McHale demonstrates Clara's growth and development, saying that her character emerges "not only as a more equal partner to the Doctor, but as *similar* to the Doctor for better and for worse" (102).

Lynnette Porter's title, "The 'Other' Women in the Whoniverse," has at least a double meaning. On one hand, her inclusion of Madame Vastra and Jenny Flint breaks the sequence of essays about companions, since Vastra and Jenny (of the Paternoster Gang, along with the Sontaran Strax) are characters who appear in several *Doctor Who* episodes but never travel with the Doctor. On the other hand, the term "other" also refers to the non-mainstream position of characters who are not cis/straight/male (or, in Vastra's case, human). To that end Porter also discusses 12th-Doctor companion Bill Potts (lesbian) and recurring character Jack Harkness (pansexual). This essay focuses on the LGBTQIA+ characters in the show, and in the spinoff *Torchwood*. Porter acknowledges the problematic nature of lesbian relationships also being portrayed as human-nonhuman (Vastra is Silurian, and Bill's girlfriend is turned into an oil monster), but also sees that same-sex relations being more or less normalized is ultimately a good thing. Like Sherry Ginn, Porter also uses novels and other media in addition to the canonical TV episodes.

No discussion of women in *Doctor Who* would be complete without the actual woman Doctor, so Pamela Achenbach writes about the 13th Doctor, the first time in the show's entire run that the Doctor is played by a woman. Achenbach traces the evolution of all the Doctors, including the original series, to lay the groundwork for the 13th. She maintains, "[t]he Doctors of the reboot are lacking the one thing that is required to heal: hope" (139), and then goes on to show how 13 embodies that concept and message of hope, where previous Doctors generally relied on their companions to provide that function.

Finally, Zara T. Wilkinson uses examples of many of the female companions and supporting characters to examine how

the concept of motherhood is presented in *Doctor Who*. Her scope encompasses the 9th, 10th, and 11th Doctors, Donna Noble, River Song, Madge from “The Doctor, the Widow, and the Wardrobe,” Amy Pond, Clara Oswald (a pseudo-mother in her roles as governess, nanny, and schoolteacher), and Sarah Jane Smith in *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. She also looks at the villains in some stories who are explicitly or metaphorically coded as “monstrous” mothers. Wilkinson’s overview of so many characters serves as a fitting caper to this volume.

Being a Girl with the Doctor may not be *Being a Girl with the Slayer* or *Being a Girl in Serenity*, but it’s an interesting and wide-ranging look at gender issues in a contemporary SF television series.

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