Heroic Mediocrity: Xander Harris and the Civil Heroism of the Ordinary in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Katarina O'Dette

[1] Fantasy loves heroes, but it tends to love a specific type of hero. As Diana Wynne Jones describes them, heroes are "mythical beings, often selected at birth, who perform amazing deeds of courage, strength, and magical mayhem, usually against huge odds" (88). The fantasy genre enjoys portraying a powerful individual, often a Chosen One, standing defiantly against supernatural incarnations of evil and inspiring readers and viewers with strength and courage in the face of the world's darkness. Literary theorists and folklorists like Joseph Campbell and Vladimir Propp have built upon this idea by constructing frameworks for examining how heroism is portrayed in literature. However, these frameworks limit the public perception of what it means to be a hero, and more specifically, of who can be a hero. This limitation leads to what Zeno Franco and Phil Zimbardo refer to as the heroic elect, the myth that heroes are rare, practically superhuman, and beyond comparison to ordinary people (31). Characters like Buffy Summers, regardless of how complexly depicted, can contribute to the notion that true heroes have powers and abilities that render them fundamentally different from ordinary human beings. But what do the characters standing behind the hero convey about what it means to be a hero? Xander Harris is marked by how ordinary he is in contrast to the magical world and characters around him, but when he is evaluated against psychological definitions of heroism, his very ordinariness elevates him to the status of hero.

Katarina O'Dette is a writer and scholar based in the United Kingdom whose research interests include worldbuilding, narratology, and fantasy literature and television. She received a B.F.A. in Writing for Screen and Television from the University of Southern California, and an M.Litt. in Fantasy from the University of Glasgow. She led a research station on Harry Potter at the Hunterian's "Fantasy Night at the Museum," co-led a seminar on fantasy television at the University of Glasgow, and served on the executive committee of the Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations 2018. She has forthcoming publications in *From Glasgow to Saturn* and *Fantastika Journal*.

[2] While Xander's heroism has been discussed in *Buffy* scholarship, it is usually focused through the lens of gender. Scholars like Marc Camron, Stevie Simkin, Lorna Jowett, and David Kociemba have presented compelling analyses of how Xander's lack of supernatural ability ties into his performance of gender and his fears about what his lack of ability says about his masculinity. Xander's heroism is often discussed in contrast to Buffy's heroism, with particular attention paid to their respective genders and how societal and personal expectations of gendered heroism influence them. While informative from the perspective of gender, this focus has left the discussion of how Xander's lack of supernatural ability interacts with his heroism underdeveloped. Katherine Whaley has offered a persuasive analysis of Xander's lack of supernatural ability as an analogy for the disabled body, but her focus is on how this lack of ability interacts with the definition of capability, rather than with the definition of heroism. When the term "hero" is applied to Xander in scholarship, it remains vague and undefined, tied to literary notions of heroism as a supernatural destiny that, while suitable for discussing a character like Buffy, can prove ill-fitting and imprecise for a character like Xander. While Buffy can be compared to Beowulf, Greek heroes, and female warriors heroes, [1] Xander's heroic mediocrity has historically lacked an obvious framework for analysis.

[3] When compared to psychological definitions of heroism used more commonly by members of the public, Xander's heroism becomes more specific and nuanced. While scholars of literature and philosophy have long worked to define heroism, sociologists and psychologists have only recently begun to investigate the criteria that societies and individuals use to distinguish heroes (Franco et al. 100; Keczer et al. 1; Klapp 57). These definitions are often based on implicit theories that seek to descriptively articulate the ways in which a society thinks about heroes, rather than prescriptively imposing a definition of heroism on that society (Rate et al. 81). Though no single definition has emerged as definitive, this paper will be focusing on the definition of heroism determined by a 2011 study by Zeno E. Franco, Kathy Blau, and Philip G. Zimbardo (referred to collectively hereafter as Franco et al.), since the components of heroism it highlights are echoed in multiple other studies on heroism and courage. [2] In addition, two of the paper's authors, Franco and Zimbardo, have focused their careers on studying what they refer to

as the "banality of heroism," the capacity of ordinary people for acts of heroism (Franco and Zimbardo 31). Zimbardo, in particular, is known both in the field of psychology and outside of it for his infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, which explored the banality of evil (30). Therefore, because the Franco et al. definition incorporates many of the current conclusions of the field and is authored by well-regarded experts on the subject of how ordinary people are affected by extreme situations, their definition will provide the framework for this paper.

[4] The Franco et al. definition determined five core components of a heroic act: it is (1) undertaken voluntarily (2) in the service of those in need (3) with acknowledgment of the potential risks (4) and willingness to accept those risks (5) without expecting external gain during or after the act (101). It is worth highlighting that Franco's definition refers to heroic actions rather than heroic actors. As both philosophers and psychologists caution, committing a so-called virtuous action does not immediately mean its actor embodies that particular virtue: a person who commits a heroic action is not automatically a hero (Rorty 154; Rate et al. 84). However, as Amélie Oksenberg Rorty notes, one of the differences between virtuous actors and people who commit virtuous actions is that virtuous actors "are rarely content to wait for occasions to produce the situations that elicit their virtues. They form a life that sustains and enlarges their particular excellences, creating situations in which their virtues can be given the fullest play" (153). Because Xander forms his life around consistently creating opportunities for his heroism over the seven seasons of the television series,[3] this paper will argue that he qualifies as a hero, rather than simply someone who engages in heroic acts. In judging Xander's heroic actions throughout *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) against the components of the Franco et al. definition, his heroism becomes apparent as a consistent behavior that is elevated by his ordinariness, rather than diminished by it.

[5] Two of Franco et al.'s components do not substantially differentiate Xander's heroism from his peers'. The second component specifies that a heroic act must be done in the service of a person, a group, or a community in need, rather than in service of self (101). Xander and the other members of the Scooby Gang are usually motivated to defeat a supernatural threat posed to a person, a group, or the Sunnydale community. The only time the Scoobies technically

act to save themselves is in the case of an apocalypse, and even then they do so to protect the world, rather than themselves or their own interests. The fact that saving the world saves them is incidental, rather than motivational. This distinction is particularly highlighted in "Becoming: Part Two" (2.22) when Spike offers his help in the fight against Angelus, not because he wants to protect human beings and save the world, but because he wants to protect his "Happy Meals with legs" and save his relationship with Drusilla (00:09:08-09). As Buffy disparagingly summarizes, "The whole earth may be sucked into Hell, and you want my help 'cause your girlfriend's a big ho?" (00:09:54-58). The Scoobies' motivations for fighting apocalypses are emphasized by their horror and disdain when they encounter characters like Spike who act to save people purely out of their own self-interest. The Scoobies also do not engage in heroic actions for the pleasure of what Joan Harvey et al. refer to as "sensation-seeking" behavior (315); they do not take risks simply because they enjoy taking risks. Buffy breaks up with Owen after she discovers his enthusiasm for life-threatening activities ("Never Kill" 1.5). He stands in stark contrast to the Scoobies; as Buffy explains to Giles, "You, Xander, Willow, you guys know the score. You're careful" (00:40:56-41:00). Not only do the Scoobies avoid behaving recklessly for recklessness's sake, they do not value sensation-seeking behavior, and they view with caution and suspicion characters like Owen, Faith, and Riley ("Doomed" 4.11), who enthuse over the fun of fighting demons. For the Scoobies, as for all heroes, actions are undertaken for the benefit of others, not for any personal gratification.

[6] This attitude ties into the fifth component of Franco et al.'s definition of heroism, that the heroic actor not expect external gain. After a thwarted apocalypse, Willow comments, "No one will ever know how close [the world] came to stopping. Never know what we did" ("The Zeppo" 3.13, 00:40:54-41:01). The Scoobies do not expect or actively seek acclaim or reward. Though Buffy is visibly moved when she receives recognition from her high school classmates in the form of the Class Protector Award, her motivation for three years of protecting her class was never the vague possibility that she might receive a trophy ("The Prom" 3.20). The Scoobies may appreciate being recognized for their difficult and dangerous work, but they do not fight the forces of darkness for recognition or seek it after the fact. This is highlighted perhaps nowhere as much as it is by Xander

in "The Zeppo." He spends the entire episode struggling with his anxiety over his perception of his uselessness and his belief that his friends think he is useless, but after he finally has his big moment stopping the school bombing, he does not even tell his fellow Scoobies what he did. He does not use it to gain their respect and validation or seek any external recognition: he merely smiles. All the Scoobies enter into dangerous situations in the service of others without the expectation of personal gain. It is in examining Franco et al.'s other three components that Xander's ordinariness begins to differentiate his heroism from his friends'.

[7] The first component requires that the action be engaged in voluntarily. The form that "voluntarily" takes depends on the kind of heroism under consideration. Franco et al. distinguish two types of heroes who face physical risk: military and civil (100). Military heroes are duty-bound to service and trained to perform that service (100). In *Buffy*, the main military heroes are Buffy and Giles.[4] Both receive training to fight the supernatural forces of darkness, and both are duty-bound to fill specific roles in the service of the Watchers' Council. For a military hero, a heroic act is a voluntary action beyond his or her prescribed duty (101). Buffy going to her death in "Prophecy Girl" (1.12) and Giles helping Buffy in the fight against Zachary Kralik in "Helpless" (3.12) are examples: though fighting the forces of darkness is in their job descriptions, Slayers are not required to obey deadly prophecies, and Watchers are not expected to fight in the battlefield. As military heroes, Buffy and Giles engage in heroic actions only when they volunteer to, rather than when they are following orders. The rest of the Scoobies are civil heroes. Civil heroes act heroically even though they may not be trained to handle the situation in question, and lack a clear, formal role in an organization to guide their actions (Franco et al. 100). The original two Scoobies, Xander and Willow, do not join Buffy and Giles in their fight because the Council recruits them, but because they want to help their new friend Buffy rescue their old friend Jesse and stop an apocalypse (1.2). Because civil heroes have no prescribed duties, their definition of voluntary action is their decision to act at all. In fact, *because* they act without being duty-bound or trained, multiple studies reveal that civil heroes are perceived by the general public to be more heroic than military heroes (Franco et al.105; Harvey et al. 323).

[8] This lack of prescribed duties is emphasized in Xander because of his status as an ordinary person without superpowers or special skills. Over the course of the series, his fellow civil hero Willow learns and masters magic, eventually becoming a fiercely powerful witch. Even before she begins studying magic, she makes use of her computer skills as early as the very first apocalypse the Scoobies face together ("The Harvest"). Willow always has a role, and varying degrees of training in those roles, that she can draw on in order to help the fight and defend herself. Xander lacks such technical abilities, and never acquires supernatural powers. As Cordelia very kindly emphasizes for him: "It must be really hard when all your friends have, like, superpowers—Slayer, werewolf, witches, vampires—and you're like this little nothing. . . . Xander, you're the useless part of the group" (3.13, 00:05:49-06:16). His insecurity that he has nothing to offer the Scoobies is literalized by his lack of superpowers. As Katherine E. Whaley describes it, "the 'average' human becomes a lesser entity in the realm of the supernatural. Measuring ability on a supernatural scale puts biologically 'average' or 'normal' humans at a severe disadvantage" (par. 7). Xander's ordinariness in a magical world makes him appear to be incompetent when compared to his magic-empowered friends. The few times he tries spells, they backfire, causing demons to take over the city ("Once More" 6.7) or a horde of murderous girls to chase him ("Bewitched" 2.16). Because Xander does not have a superpower, he lacks a clear path to heroism and has to constantly improvise in order to create a role for himself. He rarely has luck wielding weapons; he is noticeably most effective in battle with non-supernatural items, such as when he hits a god with a wrecking ball ("The Gift" 5.22) or crushes a zombie with a vending machine ("The Zeppo"). As Rhonda Wilcox notes (144), his most iconic heroic moments in the series occur when he fights, not with spells or fists, but with words, such as when he talks the zombie Jack O'Toole into disabling a bomb in "The Zeppo" and a homicidal Willow out of causing the apocalypse in "Grave" (6.22).His words prove more powerful than magic or weapons, but not purely because he is "speaking English good" ("I Robot, You Jane" 1.9, 00:17:30-31). Dawn points out in "Potential" (7.12) that his power is seeing and knowing: it is Xander's perceptiveness, supportiveness, and empathy, traits that make him special as a person, that allow him to recognize

Jack's fear and Willow's humanity, and make him a hero. It is his role as an ordinary human construction worker that allows him to come up with the idea of hitting an immortal god with a wrecking ball instead of with supernatural fists. As a civil hero without obvious battle skills, Xander turns his very humanity into both his power and his path to heroism.

[9] Further examination of the nature of voluntary heroism emphasizes the role that Xander's humanity plays in his heroic actions. Franco et al. describe voluntary action as "undertaken in the *presence of clear paths to exit* the situation and despite the factors that are typically associated with the *diffusion of responsibility* ... heroes are willing to step into the fray and deliberately approach dangerous situations despite the fact that *barriers to entering* these situations are steep" (104, emphasis mine). For heroic action to be truly voluntary, the actor has to have clear paths to exit, the ability to diffuse responsibility by passing it to others, and barriers to entering the situation. Heroes must choose to act in spite of the fact that they are not required to. The first trait of this voluntary action to be considered is that it occurs in spite of the potential to diffuse responsibility. Xander volunteers even though he is surrounded by supernaturally powerful friends who are more suited to fight and, in the case of military heroes, duty-bound to. Throughout the series, Xander's first reaction when a threat appears is "what's the plan?" ("The Harvest," 00:08:23-24) or "Just tell me what I can do" ("The Zeppo," 00:10:38-40). He is always ready to participate, something that even the supernatural characters falter on at times. Upon hearing the prophecy predicting her death in "Prophecy Girl," Buffy temporarily quits being the Slayer, insisting that Giles "can find someone else" (00:15:54-55). Even Angel does not try to stop the Harvest because "I'm afraid" ("The Harvest," 00:13:30-31). Although they are more qualified, less vulnerable to damage, and, in Buffy's case, duty-bound to fight,[5] fear sometimes prompts the supernatural characters to try to pass the responsibility to someone else. Xander never demonstrates this reluctance, however justified it would be in his case. When the Watchers' Council questions his value, Buffy defends him: "The 'boy' has clocked more field time than all of you combined" ("Checkpoint" 5.12, 00:40:18-20). Even the Council, which is made up of military heroes duty-bound to battle evil, does not participate as much as Xander does. Part of Xander's heroism is that he always "clocks field

time," showing up even when others more suited and/or responsible for doing so would not.

[10] The second trait of voluntary heroic action is that it occurs in spite of the presence of clear paths to exit. In dangerous situations, Xander's ordinariness often makes it easy for him to leave. The other Scoobies frequently tell him not to get involved because they do not want him getting injured or killed. He is not only not expected to participate in battles; he is invited to leave them. By choosing to stay when he has a clear exit, Xander heightens the perceived heroism of his resulting actions. This is particularly noticeable when Buffy herself is absent. The Scoobies initially volunteered to fight the forces of darkness because of their connection to Buffy, but the first episodes of both Season Three and Season Six open with scenes of the Scoobies struggling to slay vampires in order to compensate for the missing Slayer ("Anne" 2.1; "Bargaining Part 1" 6.1). With Buffy's temporary absences, the path to exit demon-hunting is even more clear, but the Scoobies continue to volunteer to keep their city safe. By Season Six, this particularly emphasizes Xander's heroism because the Scooby Gang has swelled to include many supernaturally gifted members: a Watcher, a vampire, two witches, and a Slayerbot ("Bargaining"). Xander could abstain from nightly battle with the justification that there are more than enough fighters who are better qualified than he is. However, even though his humanity provides him with clear paths to exit the dangerous ongoing war against supernatural evil, he stays, thereby elevating his actions to heroism.

[11] In some episodes, Xander's path to exit becomes the third trait of voluntary action: overcoming a barrier to entering the situation. Arguably most notably in the episode "The Zeppo," the invitations for Xander to exit become a plot point when the group's concern for his safety causes them to exclude him from the fight against the most recent apocalypse attempt. As Buffy explains to Willow and Giles, "No, Xander's out of this. He nearly got killed last time we fought. This whole thing will be easier if we know he's safe" ("The Zeppo," 00:14:50-55). He is not only allowed to leave the battlefield; he is barred from it because no one will tell him what is going on. Unbeknownst to them, Xander spends the night decidedly unsafe. He discovers that a group of zombies have built a bomb and, with the other Scoobies busy stopping the apocalypse, has to figure out where the bomb is, fight his way through the zombies, and

convince their leader to disconnect the bomb all on his own. To engage in heroic action, Xander must go out of his way to find and get to the dangerous situation first: his barrier to entrance is often that he is not told where the fight is. The two times Buffy tries to enter the Master's lair alone in the first season, she is joined and aided by Xander despite having left him behind. The first time, he has to secretly track her ("The Harvest"); the second time, he recruits another character to guide him ("Prophecy Girl"). His heroism is not the result of being trapped in situations where he has to act. He voluntarily forces himself into situations so he *can* act. As David Kociemba highlights, "the task of the ordinary character in heroic narrative is harder than that of the empowered. . . . Their decision to do what they can in spite of the odds and without recognition is their triumph" (96). Xander's heroism occurs in spite of the odds—both the odds of the limitations imposed on him by his ordinariness, and the odds of the potential diffusion of responsibility, the clear paths to exit, and the barriers to entrance. His heroism is augmented because he overcomes these odds; he becomes more heroic because of how ordinary he is.

[12] Xander's awareness of how these odds are stacked against him highlights his heroism in Franco et al.'s remaining two components: the recognition of possible risks and the willingness to accept them. None of the Scoobies are ignorant of the danger they put themselves in, nor is Xander the only one to suffer from these dangers. However, Xander is aware of the risks in a way that the others are not; he is more vulnerable in a fight due to his lack of supernatural battle skills, easier to injure due to his non-supernatural body, and, when injured, slower to heal. The only Scooby to suffer permanent physical injury is Xander, whose left eye is gouged out in "Dirty Girls" (7.18). Even this does not keep him from the battlefield. In contrast, when Buffy temporarily loses her Slayer powers in "Helpless," she worries that she has "seen too much. I know what goes bump in the night. Not being able to fight it—what if I just hide under my bed all scared and helpless?" (00:18:12-22). Existing in the supernatural world without her powers (rightly) terrifies her. The idea of fighting long-term without magical abilities does not occur to her: she is scared that she will not even be able to function in the world. The thought of doing what Xander has been doing for three seasons is abhorrent to her: "I can't be just a person. I can't be helpless like

that" (3.12, 00:24:59-25:04). In contrast, when Xander first finds out about the existence of supernatural opponents that he is not qualified to fight, his reaction is, "So, what's the plan? We saddle up, right?" ("The Harvest," 00:08:23-25).[6] This does not diminish Buffy's heroism, as it is perfectly reasonable that she would struggle to adjust to not having powers, and the viewers never see what she would actually have done had she been powerless long-term. However, it does accentuate Xander's heroism because he never views his lack of powers as a reason to not fight. As Marc Camron emphasizes, "Xander has no power but willingly runs into the fray, continually risking death because his friends need him" (par. 15). Because he is aware of the risks to him as a person without power, his willingness to always march into battle regardless is portrayed as more heroic.

[13] Because Xander is an ordinary human being, his consistent voluntary heroic actions and his acceptance of the risks involved elevate him to the status of a civil hero. This is not to suggest that Xander does not have flaws, or that his heroism eclipses that of any other character's. "Hero" is, after all, not synonymous with "perfect," and all of the Scoobies would qualify as heroes under Franco et al.'s definition. This is also not to suggest that Xander's heroism is more effective than anyone else's. As Tanya Cochran and Jason A. Edwards note, "On *Buffy*, heroic acts are not restricted to one character; rather, they are shared among all characters" (150). Episodes like "When She Was Bad" (2.1), "Primeval" (4.21), and "Chosen" (7.22) argue that solitary heroism is ineffective, showing the Scoobies at their best when they work together and share their power, and at their weakest when they try to go it alone (Cochran and Edwards 160). Even Xander's yellow crayon monologue is only effective because Giles first "dosed" Willow with the magic of The Coven to make her vulnerable to her own humanity: what appears to be a solitary heroic moment is actually a group effort ("Grave"). *Buffy* presents heroism as something that is collective and interdependent, and this is precisely what allows Xander to be a hero. When comparing Xander to the Franco et al. definition, the actions that elevate him to the status of hero are rarely big moments where he wins an epic battle, but the fact that he always shows up to contribute to the epic battle. He hits a god with a wrecking ball, not defeating her, but helping to defeat her ("The Gift" 5.22). He lends his heart to the super-Buffy, thereby enabling super-Buffy to defeat Adam ("Primeval" 4.21). He

helps defeat the Master, not by fighting the Master, but by following Buffy into a vampire lair and saving her life with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation ("Prophecy Girl" 1.12). Xander is a hero, not because his actions alone save the world, but because he shows up in spite of his lack of powers and contributes to saving the world.

[14] This designation of 'hero' is not merely important for Xander. Non-supernatural civil heroes like Xander, Samwise Gamgee, and Ron Weasley[7], a group which David Kociemba refers to as the extraordinary ordinary archetype, inspire and keep alive a more egalitarian notion of heroism (81). Franco and Zimbardo refer to this as the heroic imagination, the "capacity to imagine facing physically or socially risky situations, to struggle with the hypothetical problems these situations generate, and to consider one's actions and the consequences" (34). The heroic imagination is the possibility for all members of society to imagine themselves as heroes, rather than believing in the myth of a heroic elect. The heroic elect creates an excuse for passivity: if Buffy were the only heroic character in *Buffy*, it would become easier for viewers to justify remaining passive in situations that may call for heroism. The average person cannot be a hero in the same way that a Chosen One can, making it easy to dismiss his or her responsibility to try to affect change. Elaine L. Kinsella, Timothy D. Ritchie, and Eric R. Igou note that "a hero's stories may be meaningful only to the degree that individuals can identify with the hero's struggles and anxieties" (124). Extraordinary ordinary characters empower ordinary people by showing them that they are capable of extraordinary actions if those actions are undertaken voluntarily in the service of those in need with acknowledgment and acceptance of the potential risks without expecting personal gain. As J. Michael Richardson and J. Douglas Rabb sum it up, "[i]f Xander is Everyman, then we are all quite capable of saving the world" (89).

[15] However, heroism does not always have the high stakes of the apocalypse. The heroic imagination can counter phenomena like the bystander effect, where bystanders witnessing an emergency do nothing under the assumption that someone else will help (Franco and Zimbardo 31). Xander illustrates for viewers the power of choosing to actively try to do the right thing even when there are barriers. Perhaps even more crucially, Xander illustrates that a person can be a hero, not just in spite of being ordinary, but because of being

ordinary. Xander helps save the world with a vending machine, a wrecking ball, mouth-to-mouth-resuscitation, and his words. Ordinary humanity is just as effective as a superpower. As Franco and Zimbardo put it, "this vital internal conduit between the modern work-a-day world and the mythic world . . . can prepare an ordinary person to be an everyday hero" (35). Or, as Xander summarizes, "I don't have any powers, but I do help" ("Checkpoint," 00:23:07-09). What *Buffy* shows its viewers through Xander is that they do not need superpowers, an epic destiny, or a solitary journey to be a hero. Sometimes it is enough just to clock field time.

Notes

[1] See Bowman, Fritts, and Nel.

[2] For more such studies on courage and heroism, see Rate et al., Kilmann et al., Shelp, Keczer et al., Harvey et al., and Kinsella et al.

[3] This paper will focus on Xander's heroism in the television series rather than the comics because many of the issues that impact his heroism, such as his struggle to find a role for himself in the Scooby gang, change in the comics. Xander's character arc of discovering a use for his ordinariness is largely concluded in the television series.

[4] It is worth acknowledging that, based on their experience with groups like the Initiative and Watchers' Council, Buffy and Giles would likely be horrified at being referred to as military heroes, but this is the category that most accurately depicts their type of heroism.

[5] This is not meant to suggest that Buffy's reaction is unreasonable or that she is any less of a hero for occasionally not wanting to perform her duty. A key component of Buffy's heroism is that her role as a Slayer was (at least initially) imposed on her without her consent, whereas Xander has always had the privilege of choosing to act heroically.

[6] It is important to note that the difference between an action being deemed heroic and being deemed reckless can be whether it succeeds or whether the actor survives, even if the outcome is ultimately due to luck (Franco et al. 101). Had Xander been killed or gravely injured early in the series, his willingness to accept risk would likely have categorized him as reckless instead of heroic.

[7] Ron has supernatural abilities, but in the context of the Harry Potter series (1997-2007), he is weaker than many of the characters surrounding him, such as Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. For further comparison of Ron and Xander, see Wilcox Ch. 4, "When Harry Met Buffy: Buffy Summers, Harry Potter, and Heroism."

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