

**Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery**

## **Introduction**

### **I. Fighting the Forces**

“In every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer.”

Opening voiceover on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

“The dead rose. We should’ve at least had an assembly.”

Xander Harris, “The Harvest,” 1002<sup>1</sup>

“I have often said, ‘There will never be a “Very Special Episode” of *Buffy*.’”

Joss Whedon, qtd. in Rochlin 19

For every television series, the original vision grows within a press of forces—both social and artistic expectations, conventions of the business and the art. Bad television—predictable, commercial, exploitative—simply yields to the forces. Good television, like the character of the Vampire Slayer Buffy, fights those forces—even while it partakes of them as part of its nature: again, like the Slayer, whose strength incorporates the Shadow.

Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)*, has often said that the original kernel of an idea for *BtVS* came with the reversal of an image from traditional horror: a fragile-looking young woman walks into a dark place, is attacked—and then turns and destroys her attacker. Thus the character of Buffy was born to fight the forces of darkness—vampires, demons, monsters of all varieties, as the first epigraph above declares. But in that same kernel, and in the naming of the character, Whedon implies other forces to be fought: social forces which restrict and constrain us (not the least dangerous of which is humorlessness). The name “Buffy” suggests the lightest of lightweight *girls* of stereotypical limitation—thoughtless, materialistic, superficial. Yet this is the name of the heroine who will, over the years

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<sup>1</sup> The episode numbering system we have used here and throughout indicates season and episode. Thus 1002 = first season, second episode.

of the series, repeatedly risk her life and (perhaps even more frightening) her social status to do what is right.

The series thus challenges the forces of gender stereotyping. The series thus challenges the forces of gender stereotyping. (There is, in fact, a website titled "Buffy the Patriarchy Slayer" [<http://daringivens.home.mindspring.com/btps.html>]). As article after article has noted, Buffy kicks butt—and viewers rejoice. At least, many do; many have also pointed out that Buffy often battles evil in skimpy attire (not to mention hair that has grown blonder and blonder)—admittedly good for the ratings, but does it undermine the attempt to present a strong female? Others ask if *BtVS* condones violence; or is it contextualized to emphasize the cost? And does the series' treatment of those who are different, monstrous, Other, suggest an element of racism or, in some cases, a repudiation of it? What of the choice to introduce a lesbian relationship? The list could go on. Clearly, *BtVS* engages the social forces, and it deserves careful analysis from that perspective.

The second epigraph, from one of the Scooby Gang (Buffy's friends and helpers), indicates one of the rules of engagement. Heroic characters in this series view the world "with healthy irony," in the words of Buffy's best friend Willow ("The Initiative," 4007). A full examination of the series demands not just structural analysis, but also a recognition of the play and power of language. In the third season opener, with Buffy missing, Willow points out, "The Slayer always says a pun or witty play on words, and I think it throws off the vampires," and Xander responds, "I've always been amazed with how Buffy fights, but in a way I feel like we took her punning for granted" ("Anne," 3001). Buffy is not alone in her facility with words: magazine articles and websites quote the witty sayings of *BtVS* characters. The grace and wit of the language embody one element of the heroism of the characters (Wilcox, "There"). The fact that the scripts for *BtVS* are now being published in book form in the popular press indicates the importance of language in the series. In fact, linguistic adeptness might be considered a prerequisite for heroic status in this series. It marks, for example, Forrest Gates, the African-American buddy of Buffy's second steady boyfriend, Riley Finn: When Riley demands agreement that Buffy is "cool," the exasperated Forrest replies, "She's cool; she's hot; she's tepid; she's all-temperature Buffy" ("Doomed," 4011). (One is thus the more shocked when Forrest, several episodes later, is killed.) These ironic, highly self-conscious and often culturally allusive comments not only validate the characters but also constantly spin the interpretation of the series, with lines like Buffy's "I need to go find something

slutty to wear tonight" ("The Initiative," 4007), or the brave but non-aggressive Xander's "I laugh in the face of danger—then I hide until it goes away" ("The Witch," 1003).

"Buffy, I believe the subtext here is rapidly becoming text," says Buffy's mentor, the Watcher Rupert Giles, in the cemetery one evening ("Ted," 2011). Never underestimate the power of the subtext; certainly, Joss Whedon does not, as the third epigraph above indicates. With that comment, Whedon takes aim at those television series that claim redeeming social value by focusing episodes on unmediated social topics such as AIDS or alcoholism. Whedon specifically mentions *Beverly Hills 90210*, but one could add the names of many series—*The Wonder Years*, *Party of Five*, *Seventh Heaven*—to those that, over the years, have advertised those "very special" episodes. In the world of *BtVS*, by contrast, the problems teenagers face become literal monsters. A mother really can take over her daughter's life ("The Witch," 1003); a strict stepfather-to-be is indeed a heartless machine ("Ted," 2011); a young lesbian fears that her nature is demonic ("Goodbye Iowa," 4014; "Family," 5006); a girl who has sex with even the nicest-seeming guy may discover that he afterwards becomes a monster ("Innocence," 2014). And there are even further levels of meaning beyond the endemic use of metaphor in the story lines *per se*. For instance, the striking differentiation of teen vs. adult language in *BtVS* has often been noted. This linguistic separateness emphasizes the lack of communication between the generations, as does the series' use of the symbolism of monsters to represent social problems. Parents' inability to deal with real-world horrors is suggested through Buffy's concerned but naïve mother, who throughout two seasons never sees the monsters or knows that her daughter is the Slayer. The symbolism recreates the need to bridge generational division, which is suggested by the language pattern: itself thus a larger symbol, a macro-symbol. Or one might note the visual elements—the semiotics of such a scene as the fight between Buffy and the rogue Slayer Faith, with the interplay of red and black in the clothing. The avenues to meaning in this series are many.

Of course, *BtVS*'s use of symbolism, while relatively uncommon in television, is hardly new in the world of narrative art. Whedon and company build on the traditions of many well-established patterns: the stories of vampires, the lore of witches, the phyla of fairy tales. In lesser hands the forces of these literary conventions would result in predictable, boring work. But Whedon and company

follow Ezra Pound's dictum (and some of his allusive, "sampling" methods) to "make it new," resurrecting dead forms and avoiding the half-life of literary vampirism.

Whedon and company's choice to use symbolism (of various sorts and levels) invites the viewer to join in the construction of meaning for the series. Some viewers do so while watching; others do so in fan relationships of varying intensity and form; more and more are doing so as do the scholars in this volume. In some ways, like *Buffy* herself, the viewer must struggle to reach meaning. With its complexity and careful continuity, the series encourages active viewing. Thus, in a sense, the mediation is the message. Activated viewers find themselves rooting for *BtVS*' protagonists as they fight the forces of darkness and rooting too for Joss Whedon and company as they fight the forces of media and culture in order to keep *Buffy* not only true to its original vision but capable of the sort of regenerative imagination necessary to the multi-season life of a television series.

## II. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as Quality TV

A quality series enlightens, enriches, challenges, involves, and confronts. It dares to take risks, it's honest and illuminating, it appeals to the intellect and touches the emotions. It requires concentration and attention and it provokes thought.

Dorothy Swanson, founder of Viewers for Quality Television  
(quoted in Thompson, 13)

In 2000 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* won the Viewers for Quality Television "Founders Award," given annually to a series which "has made a significant contribution to quality television without receiving due recognition." *Buffy* defenders, whether frustrated television critics,<sup>2</sup> high school advocates facing skeptics,<sup>3</sup> or college professors inviting ostracism, know all about the neglect the VQT award was meant to remedy. In "Demons, Aliens, Teens and Television," published in *Television Quarterly*, Richard Campbell (who wrote the essay with his daughter Caitlin) offers

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<sup>2</sup> Joyce Millman, Salon.com's television critic, has given up trying to convince doubters: "To those of you who've never seen *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*," she writes, "well, I'm sorry, but you are beyond my help."

<sup>3</sup> Both Hannah Tucker (daughter of *Entertainment Weekly* critic Ken Tucker) and Caitlin Campbell (daughter of media scholar Richard Campbell—see above) have addressed in print the perils of the high school defender of *BtVS*. In "High School Confidential," Tucker notes "I can never speak about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* so passionately as when confronted with a skeptic. There are about four *Buffy* fans at my high school, so far as I can tell. So, by 'skeptic' I mean a large percentage of my peers. Typical response from a boy, eyes rolling: 'C'mon, she's a blond chick in a Wonderbra who fights vampires.'"

the following account, instantly recognizable to most academics who have been won over by the series, of his own *Buffy* conversion:

I have my 16-year-old daughter, Caitlin, to blame for this. An honor student, soccer player, and avid reader, she introduced me to *Buffy* and the WB a couple of years ago. At the time, I just thought I would do my fatherly/media critic duty: watch a few episodes and point out the error of her TV ways. But something else happened. I got hooked. I liked *Buffy*. The improbable story of a teenage vampire slayer, set against the backdrop of life at Sunnydale High School (*Buffy's* now moved on to college), kept my interest with its sly humor, action adventure, and wide-ranging portraits of teens and teachers. To me, this was not only a skillfully written show but dead-on in capturing the conversational rhythms of teenagers and exploring issues that permeated their lives—friendship, jealousy, self-esteem, responsibility, rules, sex, good and evil. Watching *Buffy*, I got insights about the occasional clumsy ways of adults in turning responsibility over to teens so they can make decisions, learn the consequences, and grow up.

The case for *BtVS* as quality television—and concomitantly the rationale for why it is worthy of serious critical investigation—is, we would suggest, a no-brainer.

According to Robert J. Thompson, “quality television” exhibits a number of distinctive tendencies / characteristics, touchstones against which we may test *Buffy*.

**1) “Quality TV usually has a quality pedigree.”** Although Joss Whedon is not David Lynch, the co-creator of *Twin Peaks* and Thompson’s prime example, as a movie auteur, of a pedigree Quality TV figure, *BtVS's* creator does bring a certain cachet. A graduate of Wesleyan University with a degree in film studies, Joss Whedon admits that his original dream had long been to “head toward the movie world” (Interview with David Bianculli). Though it was in the movies that he made his first breakthrough, when Fran Rubel Kuzui directed his screenplay of *BtVS* in 1992,<sup>4</sup> though he has contributed, often as a highly paid—and sometimes uncredited—“script doctor” to a variety of films both before (*Speed* [1994], *Toy Story* [1995], *Waterworld* [1995], *Twister* [1996]) and after (*Alien Resurrection* [1997], *X-Men* [2000], *Titan A.E.* [2000]) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the television series came on the air in 1997; though Anthony Stewart Head has remarked that “It’s only a matter of time before we lose him to the cinema” (BBC Interview), Whedon himself confesses

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<sup>4</sup> For an insightful discussion of the transformation of *BtVS* from movie into television series, see Gabrielle Moss’ “From the Valley to the Hellmouth: *Buffy's* Transition from Film to Television.”

that “I have always felt my movie career was an abysmal failure” (quoted in Tracy 44).

Whedon can, however, claim a unique genealogy in the medium in which he has experienced his greatest success. A third generation contributor to television, both Whedon’s grandfather and father wrote for TV: after a career in radio (writing for such shows as *The Great Gildersleeve*), his grandfather went on to contribute to *Donna Reed*, *Mayberry RFD*, *Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Room 222*. Whedon’s father wrote for *Captain Kangaroo*, *The Dick Cavett Show*, *The Electric Company*, *Alice*, *Benson*, *Golden Girls*, and *It’s a Living*. Joss Whedon himself contributed to both *Roseanne* and *Parenthood* prior to the making of the original *BtVS* film. If Whedon does stay in TV, he could well become, along with the likes David E. Kelley (*Picket Fences*, *The Practice*, *Ally McBeal*, *Boston Public*) and Aaron Sorkin (*Sports Night*, *West Wing*), a significant creative force in network television.

**2) “Desirable demographics notwithstanding, quality shows must often undergo a noble struggle against profit-mongering networks and nonappreciative audiences.”** *BtVS*’s path to a secure home on the WB was, by all accounts, a long, strange trip. Born as a campy and largely unsuccessful feature film in 1992, written by Whedon but directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ended up on the WB as the result of the efforts of Gail Berman, the production executive of Sandollar. Whedon and company’s relationship with the network has been anything but adversarial, however. In an interview on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, Whedon tells David Bianculli that the WB never sought to make the show lighter and even encouraged exploration of “the dark side.” Still, the series has never garnered high Nielsen numbers (usually ranking in the bottom 25% among all TV series) and has been consistently overlooked for Emmy nominations.<sup>5</sup> With the very recent news that *BtVS* will move to UPN beginning with the sixth season, it remains to be seen if its demographics will change as its budget increases.

**3) “Quality TV tends to have a large ensemble cast.”** The core of *BtVS*’s excellent cast—Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy Summers, a high school and later college student in Sunnydale, California, with the after-school job of Vampire Slayer; Alyson Hannigan as Buffy’s best bud Willow Rosenberg, brilliant student, computer-genius, and aspiring witch; Nicholas Brendon as Xander Harris, class-clown, schlemiel, and loyal friend; and Anthony Stewart Head as Rupert Giles, school

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<sup>5</sup> As we write, Sarah Michelle Gellar has been nominated for a best actress in a dramatic series for the 2001 Emmy Awards.

librarian, quintessential Englishman, and Buffy's Watcher—has, of course, been with the show since its inception. But *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* ensemble has included many other important players as well, including Kristine Sutherland as Buffy's mother, Joyce; David Boreanaz as Angel, an over two-centuries old vampire, now cursed with a soul, who has come to Sunnydale to be Buffy's protector; Charisma Carpenter as Cordelia Chase, rich, bitchy Buffy adversary, who eventually becomes a Scooby; Seth Green as Oz, sardonic musician (guitar-player for Dingoes Ate My Baby), boyfriend of Willow, and werewolf; James Marsters as Spike, bleached-blond, punk British vampire, sired by Drusilla; Kendra, the short-lived second Vampire Slayer to be seen in the series; Eliza Dushku as Faith, another Vampire Slayer, who in Season Three goes over to the dark side; Emma Caulfield as Anya, a former vengeance demon (Anyanka) and Xander's lover; Marc Blucas as Riley Finn, UC Sunnydale graduate assistant who is secretly a leader of The Initiative (the university's secret paramilitary anti-demon force) and Buffy's post-Angel lover; and many occasional/recurring performers: Amber Benson as Tara, an aspiring witch and Willow's new love; Robia LaMorte as Jenny Calendar, techno-pagan, computer teacher, and Giles' love; Juliet Landau as Drusilla, mad, visionary British vampire sired by Angel; Harry Groener as Mayor Richard Wilkins III, century old demon who built Sunnydale and aspires to ascend to immortality; Alexis Denisof as Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, a second, more priggish Watcher who replaces Giles when he is relieved of his duties; Armin Shimerman as Principal Snyder, Sunnydale High School's chief administrator and nemesis of the Scooby Gang (eaten by Mayor Wilkins).

**4) "Quality TV has a memory."** In his "Fresh Air" interview Whedon has expressed his disappointment with the lack of memory exhibited by the characters on *The X-Files*, especially Scully's inability to accept the reality of the supernatural despite weekly proof. On *BtVS*, however, characters remember and we remember with them. In season four's all-dream-sequence finale "Restless," for example, Buffy strips Willow of her "costume," returning her to the same "softer side of Sears" unfashionable outfit she had worn seventy eight episodes before in *BtVS'* first episode, "Welcome to the Hellmouth." In season five's "Forever" (5017) we see Giles listening to Cream's "Tales of Brave Ulysses" after attending the funeral of Buffy's mother; attentive viewers recall that he had played the same song for Joyce Summers during their drug-induced reversion to teenageness in "Band Candy" (3006)—a night he and Joyce had sex together. As Ken Tucker observes, in *BtVS* "people *change*: They quake with fear in one episode and muster up demon-defying courage in the next.

They can begin as allies and end up as murderers [. . .] or begin as murderers and end up as noble heroes [. . .]” (Tucker 23). Such changes can happen because the series has a real, a palpable past.<sup>6</sup>

**5) “Quality TV creates a new genre by mixing old ones.”** Joss Whedon has said on several occasions that he sees *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as *My So Called Life* meets *The X-Files*, but *Buffy*, only the second multi-season vampire series ever to air on television,<sup>7</sup> would seem to be the result of the recombinant DNA of several other kinds of shows as well. As Joyce Millman has observed, *BtVS* is daring “because it defiantly and lovingly takes its tone and shape from oft-dismissed genres like daytime soaps, gothic romances, Grade-B horror flicks and supernatural fantasies, and it elevates—no, celebrates—these misunderstood and mistreated pop art forms.”

**6) “Quality TV tends to be literary and writer-based.”** Whedon has compared working on *Buffy* as a continuing story to the work of a novelist and evokes his own favorite writer, Charles Dickens, who published his novels in serialized form. Again and again, Whedon has spoken of writing as his constant first love<sup>8</sup> and praised writing for television over writing for the movies.<sup>9</sup> In five years of work on *BtVS*, he has assembled a group of writers—among them Marti Noxon, David Fury, Jane Espenson, Douglas Petrie—who are able to think very much like him.

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<sup>6</sup> In a wonderful essay on Salon.com, “Please Sir, May I Have a Mother?”, Sarah Vowell observes that

Series television, more than any other form, is perfect to explore family dynamics. Novels, even long ones, end. Movies are great moments—love at first sight, murder, that time Lassie came home. But family life unfolds over time. And the seeming monotony of TV is inherently equipped to deal with ongoing stories, not to mention ongoing quibbles—Frasier’s campaign against his father’s ugly chair, Lisa Simpson’s doomed attempted to enlighten her anarchic brood. To get the true story of a family, it has to be done over the long haul.

The extended family of *BtVS* is, admittedly a bit unorthodox, but Vowell’s observation rings true for it as well. It is truly a “long haul” show.

<sup>7</sup> The other, of course, was *Forever Knight* (1992-1994) on CBS and in first-run syndication.

<sup>8</sup> “It’s easier to write an episode than direct it,” Whedon has explained. “Well, not easier, but scheduling-wise, I usually direct an episode when there is something I desperately want to say—where there’s a moment that I want to capture, an idea I want to try out. To create something, that means actually writing it. I may actually direct a couple of episodes that I don’t write next year, just because of my time being as it is. By and large, the only time I’ve done it is when I’ve co-written with David Greenwalt. The bottom line is that I like to create. To me, the writing is the most important thing, and if I’m going to take the time to direct something and it really pulls a lot out of my schedule, usually I want it to be something of my own. At the same time, it would certainly be interesting to direct somebody else’s script. (<http://www.fanforum.com/buffy/news/786.shtml>)

<sup>9</sup> “Being a writer in Hollywood is not all it’s cracked up to be,” Whedon has admitted. “People blow their noses on you. When I went on the set of *Alien [Resurrection]*, people are nice enough but I am standing in a corner. On *Buffy*, I’m telling these stories. Not only am I telling them, I’m telling them every eight days. [. . .] The movies I write, if they ever get made, take several thousand years. But television is a writer’s medium so there’s a better chance things will come out the way you originally envisioned them” (quoted in Tracy 24).

**7) “Quality TV is self-conscious.”** Official *BtVS* publications like the two volumes of *Watcher’s Guides*, not to mention numerous websites (for example, *Buffyguide.com*) devote significant space both to series continuity and to popular culture references and allusion. As any newcomer to the series quickly realizes, *BtVS* constantly and pervasively draws upon its own past history, but it casts its nets widely beyond its own developing text. “Any text that has slept with another text,” Robert Stam has noted, extending a central insight of STD prevention into the realm of film theory, “has necessarily slept with all the texts the other text has slept with” (202). Whether it is Xander about to have sex for the first time with Faith (“The Zeppo,” 3013) admitting he’s “never been up with people . . . before,” Giles admitting to Olivia (“Hush,” 4010) that he “wasn’t actually one of the original members of Pink Floyd,” Willow’s questioning lament (in “Halloween” 2006) that Buffy “couldn’t have dressed up like Xena?” or Buffy twice mangling the name of the demon Acatlha as “Al Franken” and “Alfalfa” (“Becoming” Part I, 2021), the series offers us humor that only the textually promiscuous are likely to get.

**8) “The subject matter of quality TV tends toward the controversial.”** As Whedon concedes in his *Fresh Air* interview, drawing comparison to *Star Trek* three decades ago,<sup>10</sup> the genre of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, already marginalized, has probably enabled it to get away with things that would have seemed more controversial on mainstream shows. Willow’s turn toward lesbianism in Season 4, for example, caused very little buzz in the media. Nevertheless, three Season 3 episodes “Earshot” and “Graduation Day,” Parts One and Two (2021 and 2022) were not allowed to air as scheduled because their subject matter was seen as too controversial in the wake of the Columbine massacre.<sup>11</sup>

**9) “Quality TV aspires toward ‘realism.’”** David Bianculli has called *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* “a fantasy show that rings truer than most shows on TV,” and Ken Tucker has said “for all the show’s fantasy trappings, [Buffy’s] more realistically drawn than any other teenager on TV” (22). “Emotional realism” is what Joss Whedon is interested in. Everything is grounded in the audience’s identification with what they are going through. Whedon tells Bianculli about appearing in a chatroom after

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<sup>10</sup> It is nothing new for the science fiction and fantasy category of television series to symbolically represent teen difficulties: Harvey Greenberg’s essay “In Search of Spock” explains how in the 1960s *Star Trek* represented teens’ alienation in the famous half-Vulcan character. *Buffy* is especially successful at that symbolic representation.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent (and highly critical) consideration of the issues involved in the WB decision, see Charles Taylor’s “The WB’s Big Daddy Condescension” on *salon.com* ([http://www.salon.com/ent/log/1999/05/26/buffy\\_rant/index.html](http://www.salon.com/ent/log/1999/05/26/buffy_rant/index.html)).

“Innocence” (2014), an episode in which Angel breaks the curse which had given him a soul by having sex with Buffy, becoming again the fiendishly evil Angelus. When a young woman responded on line by confessing to Whedon that “this exact same thing happened to me,” Whedon explains, he knew he was accomplishing precisely what he had hoped for with the series.<sup>12</sup>

“The Body” (5016), a fifth season episode concerning the unexpected death of Buffy’s mother and its difficult aftermath, perhaps exemplifies best this commitment to emotional realism. Written and directed by *Buffy’s* creator, “The Body” is almost without monsters (only the token appearance of a single vampire in the morgue in its closing scene reminds us that we are watching a show about the battle against supernatural evil). In “The Body,” an almost certain Emmy nominee, the Scooby Gang must battle equally difficult enemies like grief, regret, loss, anger, and immaturity. **An article in *Entertainment Weekly* a few years back** made the argument that television at the end of the century may well be better than the movies. The proposition at first glance seems preposterous—how could a medium that had produced so many masterpieces, so many great auteurs, from Chaplin to Scorsese, be thought inferior to a rival household appliance? *EW’s* case was nevertheless compelling: the very best series TV—the prime examples of what has come to be called Quality TV—it insisted, takes more risks, tackles more relevant issues more provocatively, does more with character, gives women juicier roles, and goes deeper than the movies do, largely because of the generous amount of time available thanks to twenty two episodes a year and multi-year durations. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for example, a series now in its fifth year on the air, will have had (at season’s end) approximately 4,000 minutes/or 67 hours of narrative time in which to become itself, roughly equivalent to 33 feature films.

### III. About This Book

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<sup>12</sup> “I can’t write a character if I don’t at some level understand where they’re coming from and how they feel about the world.,” Whedon has explained.

That even includes Principal Snyder, who is probably one of our most cardboard cut out villainous characters. In *Band Candy* we got a glimpse into what he was like in high school, and it became very clear that he was the kid that everybody was constantly trying to ditch. He was the nerd who was eager to be friends with everybody and was constantly snubbed. And that made it clear how he became the child-hating martinet that we had so much fun with. So I feel that if you don’t love a character, then you have no business writing them. I hate stock villains, I hate people who are just there to be cannon fodder. And it’s not like that never happens on the shows—it’s not like I’m gonna go write the history of the second thug from the left—but when I read a script, I have to at least believe that the second thug from the left is acting as he sees fit, and as he would in the given situation. (Whedon, ET Online)

“I’ve been indexing the Watcher Diaries covering the last couple of centuries. You’d be amazed at how numbingly pompous and long-winded some of these Watchers were.”

Giles in “What’s My Line,” Part I (2009)

This book began in the Spring of 2000 when David Lavery, a newcomer to *BtVS*, introduced to the Buffyverse by his students at Middle Tennessee State University in the Fall of 1999, approached Rhonda Wilcox, author of one of the first scholarly studies of the show (“There Will Never Be A ‘Very Special’ *Buffy: Buffy and the Monsters of Teen Life.*” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27.2 [1999]: 16-23),<sup>13</sup> about collaborating on a collection of critical essays on the series. Many e-mails and an internationally-circulated call for papers resulted in almost a gross of proposals by scholars and fans from the United States, Canada, Scotland, England, and Australia hoping to contribute.

The wealth of material inspired the editors to launch an e-journal devoted to *BtVS* as well: *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* (<http://www.slayage.tv>) which, in addition to publishing many valuable essays proposed for the present book but unable to be included due to lack of space, will in the years ahead make available new critical essays on *BtVS*. *Slayage* will also provide a discussion forum for readers of this book to address questions to its editors and authors and an opportunity for each of the book’s contributors to post online, in light of recent developments in the series, updates/addenda to his or her essay. (The reader should bear in mind that the essays in *Fighting the Forces* were written at the end of the fourth season and reflect only in passing season five developments, which had not yet been completed as we went to press.)

The many meanings of *BtVS* are reflected in the various voices of the interpreters assembled in this volume. Scholars from English, communications, women's studies, sociology, religion, and other fields, all writing with at least the first four seasons of the series in mind, present their different perspectives, sometimes analyzing the same scenes and lines in radically different fashion, from cultural studies to Jungian analysis, from problematizing to praise. The editors have chosen such a various group with a purpose: their multiplicity reflects the polysemic variety of this rich text. We have divided it into two parts:

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<sup>13</sup> This essay is republished in *Slayage* (<http://www.middleenglish.org/slayage/essays/slayage2/wilcox.htm>).

**I. Forces of Society: Gender, Generations, Violence, Class, Race, Religion and**

**Culture:** Many of these essays consider more than one of these categories. Rhonda V. Wilcox argues that the underlying narrative structures of death in the series successfully confront issues of gender and violence. Elyce Rae Helford discusses the containment of girls' anger as an indicator of cultural oppression, and examines the implications of class and race in the representations of three Slayers: Buffy, Kendra, and Faith. Patricia Pender, surveying criticism of *BtVS*, contends that much of it takes an either/or view of the series' feminism, while instead *BtVS* avoids oversimplifying polarities and challenges viewers through feminist camp. Farah Mendlesohn suggests that a potential queer reading of the Buffy/Willow relationship is denied in erotic terms, but favored in political terms through the increasing strength of the quieter character, Willow. J. P. Williams analyzes the flawed mother-daughter relationships in the series and the problematic search for strong substitutes, from Gwendolyn Post to Maggie Walsh to Jenny Calendar. Karen Eileen Overbey and Lahney Preston-Matto celebrate the speech-act as the most positive weapon in *BtVS*, exploring its spoken and textual expressions through Buffy, Xander, Willow, and Giles. Lynne Edwards investigates the Black Slayer Kendra as a modern version of the tragic mulatto myth, whose failed quest for legitimacy suggests that assimilation equals death for Blacks. Mary Alice Money explores the metaphoric implications of the rehabilitation of characters (such as Spike) who represent cultural or racial Others—with *BtVS*'s own version of Huck Finn confronting the metaphoric racism. Denying the "otherness" of *BtVS* vampires, Gregory Erickson discusses the paradoxical epistemology of belief and disbelief in American culture in general and *BtVS* in particular: where is God, and how does *BtVS* inform our understanding of American spirituality? Catherine Siemann juxtaposes two archetypal California girls, pointing out the parallels between Gidget with the mid-Victorians and Buffy's darker world with the nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle, in particular three literary movements: the New Woman, Decadence, and the Gothic, all in the context of the increasing complexity of the teenager's moral universe. Several of these essays might also fit under the second part:

**II. Forces of Art and Imagination**, which is in turn divided into two separate sections:

**Emerging from the Past: Vampires, Magic, Monsters** begins with Buffy's version of Frankenstein. Anita Rose explains that, through its reimagining of Mary Shelley's work, *BtVS* employs Romantic ideology in contemporary contexts and terms, moving from the solitary Romantic hero to the community of the Scooby Gang. Diane DeKelb-Rittenhouse surveys the literary tradition of the vampire Lothario as it makes

its way from the *dhampire* of folklore to the Byronic Lord Ruthven to *BtVS*'s modern variants, Angel and Spike. Elisabeth Krimmer and Shilpa Raval consider the relationship of Angel and Buffy in the context of *liebestod* (love-death) stories such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Tristan and Isolde*, comparing the thematic impossibility of love's fulfillment with the structural deferral of serial television. Donald G. Keller examines the sometimes supernatural dreams of Buffy and her shadow-self Faith through the lens of Jung and Freud (with a side-view of imagery from Eliot's *The Waste Land*). Tanya Krzywinska investigates witchcraft, magic, and the Manichaeism in popular culture in general and *BtVS* in particular, arguing that a self-conscious mixture of sitcom, fantasy, and horror allows the series to negotiate between absolute categories of good and evil and a more relativistic approach (especially through the witchcraft of Willow)—all based on a foundational myth recalling H. P. Lovecraft. Sarah E. Skwire moves beyond Bettelheim to point out that *BtVS*, as it does with nearly every other convention, turns the didactic nature of the fairy tale on its head, so that the instructors become the instructed, and Buffy's own relationship to the category of "adult" or "child" can be gauged. In **Creating within the Present: Fan Relationships, Metaphoric and Real**, Kristina Busse discusses the Buffyverse fanfiction in terms of family dynamics and the contested role of women, as this fiction invokes the ambiguous emotional demands of motherhood, with its contradictory roles of mother/caregiver as well as partner/lover. S. Renee Dechert argues that *BtVS*'s music works to reinforce the communal identity between the program and its fans, because the musicians are often relative outsiders yet the fans must have "inside" knowledge (often internet-derived) to recognize them. Justine Larbalestier points out that some *BtVS* episodes acknowledge the fun that fans have playing with fanfiction by putting seemingly impossible scenarios ("What if Buffy and Spike were engaged?") on the screen while at the same time reasserting control by making those scenarios part of the official *BtVS* universe: one episode even serves as a metaphor for a fan-controlled alternate world. Finally, Amanda Zweerink and Sarah N. Gatson describe the fan world of The Bronze, named after the teen hangout on *BtVS*, as a changing internet community which in some ways replicates (although imperfectly) the idea of community so important to the series, with its Posting Board Party illustrating problems of class structure which the series confronts.

An Afterword examining Buffy's creator Joss Whedon, an episode guide, and a composite bibliography complete the volume.