



## ***Book Reviews***

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Andrae, Thomas. *Carl Barks and the Disney Comic Book: Unmasking the Myth of Modernity*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. xi + 306 pages; bibliography, index.

In the world of comics studies, ducks have tended to get short shrift, according to Thomas Andrae. Overshadowed by superheroes, “Funny Animals” are viewed as “kids’ stuff” and thus unworthy of serious analysis. Even on those rare occasions when these comics are taken on their own terms, they are derided as sinister tools of imperialism hiding behind a childish façade. Either way, Andrae argues, they have yet to receive the depth of study that their subtleties and nuances demand. As Andrae’s discussion of Disney artist Carl Barks reveals, the assumption that these cartoons are more one-dimensional than other forms is unfounded. Barks, the artist responsible for Donald Duck and the city of Duckburg, produced relevance and social commentary that far outstripped that of superhero artists, and a penetrating antimodernist critique that recognized and took on the contradictions of the “American century.” Andrae’s study reflects this relevance. More than a look at comics and their context, the book is a valuable contribution to the history of American antimodernism in general.

Andrae’s work effectively highlights the context out of which Barks’ ducks emerged, and the social pressures that influenced his cartoons. Barks’ upbringing on a hardscrabble ranch left him with a complicated view of modernity. Conservative and enamored with traditional mores, he nevertheless recognized the harsh realities of life before industrial progress. These contradictory stances would color his work for decades. Taking a job at Walt Disney’s studio in 1936, Barks’ potential as a gag writer caught Disney’s eye, and he soon found himself collaborating on the production of Donald Duck films. The underlying conservatism of these shorts reflected Barks’ discomfort with modern American society. Confronting the crisis in masculinity that began in the late-nineteenth century, spawned flappers in the 1920s, and reached a climax during the Depression, Donald is repeatedly bullied by women and his own nephews. While fears of sexualized women, juvenile delinquents, and male powerlessness were nothing new in that era, Barks also managed to skirt Disney’s prohibitions on topical humor by criticizing industrial progress and even the military during World War II. Moving to

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comic books after the war, Barks continued to develop his sense of nuance and irony. Plots became darker, Donald and his counterparts became alternately heroic and greedy, and a simplistic antimodernism was shunned in favor of a more complex discussion of virtues and vices that Andrae refers to as “reflexive modernity, an awareness of the costs and dangers as well as the advantages” of modern life (276). For example, Barks argues that modern society had cursed humanity with the atomic bomb, yet he portrays those who would forcefully impose older, more conservative mores on society as tyrants. Clearly taken with the idea of “lost” premodern civilizations and the promise of unspoiled agricultural utopias, moreover, Barks nevertheless often cast them as paranoid and reactionary. Finally, Scrooge McDuck may be an industrialist, Andrae points out, but he is simultaneously the embodiment of the self-made man (a trope that Barks championed throughout his career), highlighting Barks’ ambivalence toward capitalism.

Aside from ushering Barks into the realm of academic study, the discussion of these contradictions is Andrae’s most valuable contribution to the scholarship. Other scholars have pointed to Disney cartoons as agents of modern oppression, and a lesser study thus might have succumbed to the temptation to highlight only Barks’ resistance to hegemony and modern life. Though there are occasional questions about Andrae’s chronology (his main illustration of Barks’ response to the “Postmodernism Crack-Up” of the 1960s and 70s, for example, appeared in 1950), the work does an excellent job of closely interrogating America’s response to modernity.

**Richard Moss**  
**Purdue University**

Byers, Michele and David Lavery, eds. *Dear Angela: Remembering My So-Called Life*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. x + 246 pages; bibliography, index.

*Dear Angela: Remembering My So-Called Life* seems like a continuation of “Operation Life Support,” the famous 1994 online fan movement to convince ABC to revive *My So-Called Life*. While that movement’s ad in *Daily Variety* unsurprisingly failed to sway many people at ABC headquarters, it did provide visible proof how passionate the fan base could be and perhaps played some small role in convincing MTV to rebroadcast the existing episodes. Like those fans, these academics aim for the series to

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have a second life—as a rich text in the canon of television studies, rather than as a popular one in broadcast. This book makes a convincing case that teaching *My So-Called Life* to the next generation of television producers and viewers is a worthy pursuit.

As the first book devoted exclusively to the series, *Dear Angela* emphasizes a variety of perspectives. It includes articles examining the role of fandom, genre and narrative strategies, television industry history, gender and sexuality, and music in informing the production and reception of *My So-Called Life*. In addition, it collects three early pieces on the series, which helps the book model the evolution in the critical appraisal of Winnie Holzman's star-crossed masterpiece. Its breadth, general insightfulness, and the need for an entire book devoted to *My So-Called Life* are this project's greatest strengths.

There are a few gaps in the book's discussion of the series. Most notably, there is no close analysis of the performances. Just 15 years old at the time, Clare Danes played as important a role as Holzman in creating one of the few authentic teenage girls on television to that point. This book needs to analyze how Danes translates the scripted lines into the ambivalent, flawed, witty and introverted character we know as Angela. In addition, there could be more on how genres like melodrama, bildungsroman and romance inform the production, marketing and reception of the series. The former omission is notable because of how important Danes was in the series; the latter one is problematic as such a chapter would be an invaluable aid in helping students get past their preconceptions about such "low" forms.

Still, a single book can't be all things to all people and *Dear Angela* is very informative and, at times, innovative.

The three articles that pre-dated the book all deal with central issues. Barbara Bell's superb chapter uses detailed examples to compare Holden Caulfield to Angela in terms of their use of language, sentence structure, and their unreliability as narrators. Michele Byers uncovers the sometimes-infuriating middle class bias of the series, especially as it relates to female sexuality and the home. Her arguments are sometimes undermined by a lack of precise narrative detail, having been published before the release of the DVD boxed set. Susan Murray's chapter on Angela's fangirls contains some fine insight into the varying nature of identification and in-

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valuable quotes from AOL's message boards at the time of the series' broadcast.

The book solidly connects the series to 1990s culture and to television industry's history. Caryn Murphy's chapter does a splendid job detailing how network production and marketing strategies, changes to ownership and financial syndication rules and the state of the internet in 1994-5 influenced the creators and made a show with 10 million viewers a failure rather than the hit it would be today. This chapter is the article teachers will probably assign most. Kelli Malloy's chapter makes astute connections not only between the music and the narrative, but also between what music itself meant to producers influenced by The Grateful Dead and viewers influenced by Kurt Cobain. And David Lavery muses on why Joss Whedon literally bowed down to Holzman.

Three articles demonstrate the variety that can be found in academic writing, an invaluable lesson for students to learn. Bill Kte'pi remarkably suggests that *My So-Called Life* can be read as the daydreams, fears and projections of Angela's mother, Patty. Since Holzman said that writing Rickie perhaps prepared her for her own son's homosexuality, Patty's ambivalence towards Rickie is more evidence for Kte'pi's against-the-grain reading. Jes Battis investigates whether his own identification with Rickie in his youth was problematic due to his other entitlements in a way that asks whether a simple emotional connection is ever simple. David Scott Diffrient ruminates on the meaning of mortality in a series made under the specter of cancellation.

In short, mission accomplished. *Dear Angela* convinced me that this one-season wonder deserves a second life in the classroom.

**David Kociemba**  
**Emerson College**

Thompson, Graham. *American Culture in the 1980s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007.

Writing a concise history of a decade's worth of a nation's culture, as author Graham Thompson well knows, is a dicey business. Even the key terms in such an undertaking—*culture*, *nation*, and *decade*—are fraught with rhetorical peril. In addition to that always slippery term *culture*, the

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idea of a single, solitary, and sovereign *nation* in the postmodern world is beginning to appear outdated. As for *decade*? Well, as Thompson notes, that unit of measurement is arguably too short to look at cultural products and too long to examine cultural forms. If that weren't tricky enough, Thompson, to his credit, steadfastly refuses to fit the square peg of America's 1980s into the round hole of a one-size-fits-all designation. For Thompson, convenient labels such as "Ronald Reagan's 1980s" or "The Yuppie Years" are unacceptably reductive. Indeed, as Thompson sagely observes, there was no shortage of cultural output in America from 1980 to 1989 and much of it had *nothing* to do with upwardly mobile professionals or Reaganomics. So, how does one account for it all?

Rather than developing an all-encompassing thesis and attempting to fit every piece of cultural output into it, Thompson begins with a look at intellectual trends in 1980s America (most notably supply-side economics and the country's significant shift to the right). Then, working outward from this "intellectual context"—much like a spider's web—Thompson looks at 1980s American culture in a wide range of modes. Since he is relieved from the dictatorship of the thesis, whether or not everything "adds up" doesn't matter all that much. Postmodern culture, Thompson seems to know, is a messy beast and any compendium of culture will have its share of loose ends. Individual (and independent) chapters include looks at the decade's cultural production in literature, visual arts, TV and film, music, and theatrical performance. These chapters intersperse overviews of cultural activities with observations from some of cultural studies' sharpest minds and with individual case studies of specific examples of cultural products: *Madonna*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *Top Gun* are just a few of the cultural products that receive this special treatment. The book navigates a fine line: overly theoretical and this ostensibly accessible endeavor becomes useless in the undergraduate classroom; too accessible and it degrades into a seemingly unending litany of "remember when's?"—an academic version of VH1's "I Love the 80s."

When Thompson's approach works, it works very well. The book's "spider webs" uncover provocative commonalities across modes of culture: a link between Bruce Springsteen's music and the literature of the "Dirty Realist" school is sharp and enlightening as is the connection between globalization and William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. One observa-

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tion deserving of further inquiry is Thompson's contention that the *processes* (or *forms*) of cultural production (via innovations like the VCR or the Sony Walkman or via business shifts like the reorganization of the film industry) became almost as important as the cultural products themselves in the 1980s.

Yet these observations are mired in a work that is decidedly inconsistent. Ironically (to mention that great 1980s über-trope), for a work that makes so much of process, *American Culture in the 1980s*' process seems decidedly sloppy at points. This sloppiness infects both form and content and unfortunately, Thompson's prose sometimes leaves something to be desired. For example, writing of pop icon Madonna, Thompson asserts,

She received a dance scholarship to attend the University of Michigan, but left before completing her course and moved to New York in 1977 to pursue a dance career, working with dance companies and touring as a dancer with bands while supplementing this work with various temporary and part time jobs (129-30).

And, although many readers can forgive him the occasional fused sentence, or for leaving the first two words out of the film title *This Is Spinal Tap*, or even for providing two differing dates for the publication of Brett Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*, even the most casual observer of 1980s culture knows that the gangsta rap group NWA was founded by Ice *Cube*, not by Ice *T*, as Thompson implies.

Still, for all its faults, *American Culture in the 1980s* is an edifying work containing useful observations for both the graying cultural studies scholar with a secret stash of parachute pants in his or her closet and the undergraduate for whom the 1980s are only slightly more accessible than the 1780s.

**Mark King**  
**Gordon College**

Wilcox, Rhonda V., and Tanya R. Cochran, eds. *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008. xii + 290 pp.; bibliography, index.

*Investigating Firefly and Serenity* offers twenty original essays examining Joss Whedon's short-lived "sf Western" television series (2002)

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and its feature-film reincarnation (2005). The essays range the Whedon universe, linking the two productions to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* and analyzing their particular contributions to Whedon's on-going consideration of the contemporary scene. The book contains a contextualizing introduction and eight sections of two to three essays each. These are: "Language and Rhetoric," "Gender," "Genre," "Social and Cultural Themes," "Religion and Morality," "Music," "Visuals," and "Fans, Transition, and the World Outside." A substantial bibliography of criticism, including both print and Web material, concludes the collection. The work is a generally thought-provoking volume, but prudent readers will keep Occam's Razor fresh in mind as the contributors' uncritical adulation of Whedon as *auteur* quickly cloys.

There is merit throughout the work. Issues of gender inform two particularly persuasive essays. Laura L. Beadling's "Feminism, Postfeminism, and Third-Wave Feminism in *Firefly*" uses Zoe, the con artist Saffron, and Kaylee to illustrate the stages of contemporary feminism's evolution. Maleness gets its due in David Magill's "Masculinities in the 'Verse." Using the characters of Mal, Jayne, Wash, Simon, and Shepherd Book to suggest a range of masculine types, Magill goes on to consider how these types illustrate various masculine ethical stances available in an inescapably violent universe.

Two other essays take up the ties of the *Firefly/Serenity* world to that of the traditional Western. Lorna Jowett, in "Retrofuturism, Cyberpunk, and Humanity in *Firefly* and *Serenity*," uses the Western's crucial tension between wilderness and civilization to illuminate the Whedonverse's blending of past (which is, of course, *our* present) and future. As in the Western, the physical and technological elements of both milieus reflect upon the alternatives available to both real-life reader and the fictional characters. J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson's "Reavers and Redskins: Creating the Frontier Savage" reminds us that savagery is a cultural rather than biological construct. Thus, the Western's implicit cultural assumptions establish *Stagecoach*'s Apaches as savage. Although the Apache are an indigenous people with a well-defined culture of their own, *Anglo* culture classifies them as savages. The Whedonverse's culture, in contrast, has in the course of its program of conscious social manipulation inadvertently *created* the implacably ruthless Reavers, and *their* savage traits are an

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artifact of the originating society. The issue, then, becomes one of *what* and *who* determines the true meaning of savagery, and what socio-cultural qualities influence the definition. All four of these essays, like the best of the remaining offerings, stick close to their subjects and offer well-substantiated readings.

Other contributions, however, make one appreciate the Law of Parsimony. Alyson R. Buckman's "*Firefly's* 'Big Damn Heroes' and Little Witches" offers River's *persona* and language as establishing feminine subjectivity in a world of heroic monomyth, backing its arguments with unverifiable theory and ideology rather than empirical evidence. Andrew Aberdein, in "The Companions and Socrates: Is Inara a Hetaera?," exhaustively links the *Firefly* universe's Companions with classical Greece's elite *hetaeras*, openly acknowledged, elite prostitutes. In so doing, he conveniently discounts the Western's long-standing tradition of good-hearted hookers and offers no evidence that Whedon and his writers had *hetaeras* in mind as they developed Inara's character. There are genuine possibilities in these and similar essays, but one wants to say to the authors, as the *New Yorker* used to remark after a particularly portentous newsbreak, "Exhale!"

Finally, there's the issue of Joss Whedon himself, who is unfailingly spoken of in saccharinely awe-struck fashion as authors report his creating, shaping, and defending of *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Whedon is, without question, a talented, even gifted, writer-director, and deserves acclaim for his achievements. He is not, however, one who (in the words of one of Spider Robinson's characters) "freed the slaves, built the Pyramids, and cured yaws." Let's admire him, by all means, but let's not forget that the virtues of *Firefly* and its predecessors were enhanced by the talents of other directors and writers. Whedon's vision of his characters and their worlds has indeed shaped three television series and a film in notable ways, but he's not the sole contributor to the works' *corpus*. His collaborators deserve their due. In short, over-extended analyses and overblown admiration notwithstanding, *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* contributes to the growing pool of Whedon studies; however, approaching it with healthy skepticism will broaden its usefulness.

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(University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). Her publications have focused on critical cultural analysis of gender and body image representations in popular culture, including women in professional wrestling, romance novels, and fan fiction.

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**Richard Moss** is a Ph.D. candidate in American history at Purdue University. He has published work on ethnic comics and Jewish history in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Connecticut History*, and other journals. His dissertation project examines the "ethnic revival" of the 1970s.

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