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Review by Anne C. Petty, author of *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes, Dragons of Fantasy, and One Ring to Bind Them All: Tolkien's Mythology*.

Tarnished Heroes, Charming Villains and Modern Monsters

By Lynnette Porter

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Dr. Lynnette Porter, the author of *Tarnished Heroes, Charming Villains and Modern Monsters*, is fast becoming the go-to scholar for thoughtful pop culture analysis, a reputation built on her earlier “Guides” to sci-fi series such as *LOST*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Heroes* and her insightful blog (on popmatters.com) that had *LOST* fans clinging to her posts for enlightenment as the series drew its final breath.

Of equal importance is her work in *Unsung Heroes of The Lord of the Rings: From the Page to the Screen* (2007), an analysis of the secondary heroes in J.R.R. Tolkien’s magnum opus. *Unsung Heroes* not only gained respect from the Tolkien community by turning the spotlight on the heroic nature of characters other than Aragorn, Gandalf, and Frodo – it set the stage for the in-depth study presented in *Tarnished Heroes*. Both *Unsung Heroes* and the current volume are of particular interest to me, to see how far the traditional notion of the hero’s quest delineated by Campbell and others has mutated to accommodate the “hero literature” of today.

Some years ago, I had occasion to review a book titled *The Myth of the American Superhero*, by John Lawrence and Robert Jewett. In it, the authors explored the mythic patterns behind many pop culture icons such as Superman, Batman, and others with the unsettling conclusion that the hero’s quest has been stretched and warped into an American pop culture monomyth of the invincible solitary hero who uses extreme violence in the name of retribution and the righting of wrongs. Lawrence and Jewett exposed the relentless themes in our pop culture media of demonizing the “Other” who must be cleaned up by a righteous hero with enough weaponry or superhuman powers to annihilate several universes. It’s fascinating to me to see how this superhero model has morphed into Porter’s “gray” heroes who often work as part of a shadowy ensemble and may share more DNA with the villains and monsters they hunt than the unwavering goodness of their forbears found in *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

The approach of *Tarnished Heroes* promises wide appeal, from scholars looking for rigorous analysis to the general reader hoping for some insight into their favorite sci-fi series. Porter’s background in technical writing shows in her clear, logical organization of

Tarnished Heroes. The book is divided into two sections, the first establishing her baseline parameters and defining her talking points for heroes, villains, and monsters in current scifi media, and the second section applying these theories to signature series: *the worlds of Joss Whedon, Lost, Battlestar Galactica, Doctor Who, and Torchwood*. For the detail-oriented reader, the book also contains extensive appendix material, including production information on the series discussed, a list of pivotal episodes within these series, and extensive chapter notes.

Porter pulls out all the stops in analyzing what she terms “gray” scifi series, covering all the many ways current TV tells its stories and develops its characters. Iconic heroes, villains, and monsters are established not only through dialogue and action, but also through the look and sound of the series, through musical leitmotifs, color palettes, weapons, vehicles, and much more. Thematic concepts such as “*home, immortality, religion, technology, and ‘humanness’*” are increasingly important” from series of the early 2000’s onward. It’s clear Porter knows these series inside and out, with a strong understanding of what drives the creative minds behind them...stellar showrunners like Russell T. Davies and Joss Whedon who are willing to let their heroes walk a dark path toward uncertain futures.

Porter spends considerable time discussing the emergence of the heroic ensemble and the way in which today’s gray heroes are more likely to depend on a hand-picked cadre of equally shady supporters than earlier heroes who were clearly King of the Hill and recognized by their colleagues as the reliably virtuous leader. Especially intriguing in this context is her discussion of the evolution of the sidekick. In place of loyal, often two-dimensional helpers like Batman’s Robin, who provided the hero with logistical aid, motivational encouragement, and occasional comic relief, we have the new breed of sidekick who often darkens the plot, brings out hidden traits of the hero, and may even ascend to murky hero status of his or her own. Porter’s lengthy chapter on sidekicks, especially her treatment of those from *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood*, is one of the book’s highlights.

Section two of the book is where Porter gets to put her considerable arsenal of analytical tools to work, and this is where the real meat of the book resides. The carefully researched post-Campbellian definitions of hero, villain, and monster are now applied to a handful of benchmark scifi series: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, Firefly, Heroes, LOST, Battlestar Galactica, Caprica, Doctor Who, and Torchwood*. For fans of any of these particular series, this section is a must-read.

The character traits and flaws of gray heroes such as Jack Harkness, Doctors Nine and Ten, and Angelus/Angel as exposed in these chapters go a long way toward explaining their often questionable motives and decisions as they struggle to balance the desires of the few against the needs of the many. Particularly impressive is Porter’s insightful analysis of *LOST*’s Man of Science vs. Man of Faith dichotomy. And clearly her heart resides in *Torchwood*, as does this reviewer’s. Her analysis of the Ianto Jones/Captain Jack dynamic alone is worth the price of the book.

In the chapter on how to analyze gray SF TV series, Porter neatly sums up the core of the book: “Ultimately, all these issues lead to one key question at the heart of all SF TV hero stories: What makes us human?” In our uncertain society, heroes have changed to accommodate questionable paradigms that reflect the angst of the time. “The rules have changed,” says Porter, “and heroes have to be willing to do whatever villains or monsters/aliens do if humanity is going to survive.” But as Porter warns more than once, the model may be shifting again. At the time of this review, ensemble series like *FastForward* and *Caprica* are being cancelled while a new yet very old flawed superhero with a single bemused sidekick bounds out of the shadows and into ratings gold. His name? Sherlock. Unfortunately, this series had not been released at the time *Tarnished Heroes* was written. Porter’s thoughts on this new/old hero would be welcome ... but perhaps that’s another book.