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Lynn S. Zubernis

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The SPNFamily: Supernatural and the Fandom Like No Other

Lynn S. Zubernis

When *Supernatural* (2005-2020) ended its fifteen-season run on November 19, 2020, the show had managed to accomplish some unlikely things, not the least of which was staying on the air for fifteen years. There were significant changes in technology, social communication patterns, and the world itself from the show's beginning in 2005 to its conclusion in 2020, which allowed the show's vibrant fan community to develop and evolve in a way that has not been seen in any other fandom. In this essay, I trace the factors that contributed to *Supernatural's* unique journey and how its fans were not only along for the ride, but integral to navigating the route to the show's final destination. Those factors include the impact of its beginnings aligning with technological change, the development of a uniquely reciprocal relationship between fans and cast, the diverse ways in which fans encountered the show that resulted in rival fan communities, and the series' controversial ending. Like the Winchester brothers' (Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles) long road home, the journey has been characterized by unanticipated twists and turns, and remained fraught until the very last moments.

Timing Is Everything

Fans who began watching *Supernatural* in its early seasons were hooked on the show for many reasons, and their support kept the show on the air through the writers' strike in Season 3 and constant timeslot switches, even the dreaded Friday Night Death Slot. According to TV Guide's retrospective of the series, those early seasons were a "near perfect blend of absurdist comedy, compelling mythology, complicated family angst, and daring contemplations of free will," with many episodes that became instant classics (Thomas, 2020).

Dr. Lynn Zubernis is a Professor at West Chester University and a licensed clinical psychologist. She has written and edited numerous books on fandom and *Supernatural*, including two books with chapters by the show's actors, *Family Don't End With Blood: Cast and Fans on How Supernatural Has Changed Lives* and *There'll Be Peace When You Are Done: Actors and Fans Celebrate the Legacy of Supernatural*. Lynn has also written for MovieTVTechGeeks, Frolic, Psychology Today, The Conversation and Slate, and has contributed to podcasts and articles on fandom for NPR,

Creator Eric Kripke and producer/directors Bob Singer and Kim Manners were deeply invested in the horror genre (many of the crew were alumni of other Vancouver-produced shows like *The X Files* [1993-2002]), and the show's first few years were dark, disturbing and definitely scary. When fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins was encouraged to watch *Supernatural* in early 2007, he described it as a "cultural attractor" that tapped into the zeitgeist of the moment in the midst of a world that was constantly concerned with the invisible threat of terrorism. *Supernatural* drew Jenkins and others in with the appeal of fighting unseen evil as well as the more psychological monsters, which are the brothers' emotional scars and psychic wounds (Jenkins, 2007). Viewers found inspiration in the Winchester brothers' essential humanity as they nevertheless confronted monsters both real and metaphorical and prevailed. The show's underlying theme of "always keep fighting" would eventually become an overt mantra, with Jared Padalecki extending the meaning to mental health challenges in real life as well with charitable campaigns to raise awareness.¹

The other reason fans were drawn into *Supernatural* in the early seasons was the show's examination of the theme of family and the unique, complex, realistic relationship between the brothers. The natural chemistry between lead actors Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles was a contributing factor; Kripke was also interested in exploring their sibling relationship, having dealt with his own family issues as most of us do. The combination of writing that took us deep into the emotional journey of Sam and Dean as well as Padalecki and Ackles' ability to let themselves be vulnerable and show those emotions, was something rare in television. *Supernatural's* emphasis on and celebration of a platonic relationship, centring that relationship for fifteen years, is a unique aspect of the show and can be seen as subversive in the midst of the preponderance of romance-centred media.²

Supernatural had its beginnings in an unusual time. In many ways, *Supernatural* and its fandom grew up with the internet. When the show premiered in September 2005, fans had only recently begun to utilize online platforms to connect and form communities with other fans with fan favourite shows such as *The X Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) (in fact, in the first season of the show the boys have flip phones and Dean's still listening to cassette tapes and wondering what "My Space" is, though Sam rightly calls him on the already-

¹ For more on Padalecki's AKF campaigns and its connection to the fandom, see the chapter he wrote in *Family Don't End With Blood: Cast and Fans on How Supernatural Has Changed Lives* titled 'What the Fandom Means To Me.'

² See Kylie Hemmert (2006) on how *Supernatural* prioritized platonic and familial relationships.

obsolete cassette tapes). *Supernatural* found its audience organically through word of mouth recommendations and postcard campaigns to keep it on the air. Television was still a once-a-week story, which contributed to a coherence in the fans who talked about the show for six days until it was time to watch it – all together – again. *Supernatural* exploded onto the fandom scene just as fans were discovering that platforms such as the blogging site LiveJournal could be utilized to not only upload individual musings about the show but also share photos, news and videos with other fans in real time. Even more important, “LJ” allowed fans to create communities, so that fans could find other like-minded fans and come together to celebrate whatever it was they loved about *Supernatural*. There were communities devoted to fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, meta, critique, and even communities in which to ridicule other fans with a modicum of privacy – and of course with anonymity. The early LiveJournal communities were joined by other similar sites such as DreamWidth, and the *Supernatural* fandom became a more tight-knit community than fandoms had been able to accomplish in the days of message boards, mailing lists and Usenet as forms of community.³

The timing of *Supernatural*'s premiere coincided with these major changes in how fan communities developed, and the result was a fandom that was cohesive and aware of its own size and impact. Time continued to be on the show's side as online platforms proliferated and fans spread out to multiple ways of interacting, posting fanfiction on the archive fan-run website Archive Of Our Own as well as Wattpad and Tumblr, and interacting with each other on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The influx of fans to those platforms allowed *Supernatural* to be one of the first shows whose fans and actors began interacting online. Several of the show's cast members, including Misha Collins (Castiel) and Chad Lindberg (Ash), were early adopters of Twitter, which provided a quick and easy (and very visible) way for them to interact directly with fans. Both were savvy as to how this interaction could be leveraged, both to the benefit of the show and the individual actors, but also to mobilize fans to harness the charitable projects that had always been a part of fandom.

³ For more on fan communities in the early 2000s, see Hellekson and Busse (Eds.) *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*.

The Reciprocal Relationship

The early and eventually widespread use of platforms like Twitter by the *Supernatural* cast, writers and producers changed their relationship with the show's fans. Much research on fans and celebrities, especially the earliest studies on fans, emphasizes the "parasocial relationship", which is by definition one-sided, with the fan feeling like they know everything about the celebrity, but the celebrity knowing nothing about them (Horton & Wohl 1956, 215). The implication is that there's something pathological about that sort of relationship, but that isn't always the case. With *Supernatural*'s actors interacting directly with fans, the relationship became a little less one-sided. The cast wasn't making friends with fans (in most cases), but they were getting to know them a little – and fans were getting some acknowledgement from the people who played the fictional characters they loved.

Despite that little bit of reciprocity, the relationship would have remained mostly one-sided had it not been for another platform that brought *Supernatural* fans and actors together. That platform was not online, but a venue that brought them together in 'real life' – the advent of *Supernatural* conventions. The first few conventions that Padalecki and Ackles attended in the show's second season were multi-fandom cons, but the convention organizers quickly realized they had discovered a gold mine in *Supernatural* fans. Creation Entertainment in the US and Asylum in the UK held some of the first conventions devoted entirely to *Supernatural* by 2008. Fans sold out the conventions and slept in hotel hallways to be at the front of the room for special breakfast panels with "the boys" and eagerly lined up for photo ops.

These conventions were initially similar to all the other fan conventions out there, including the much larger Comic Cons and Wizard Worlds, with both physical and psychological barriers between fans and celebrities strongly enforced, thus keeping the relationships mostly one-sided. The actors sat stiffly on chairs while fans crowded in as close as they dared for a photo op, perhaps bumping shoulders with the celebrity if they were lucky. Autographs were a hello, sign, goodbye occasion. As time went on, however, *Supernatural* conventions began to diverge from the others. As Creation realized that the *Supernatural* conventions were more successful than any others, they scheduled more and more, eventually holding a convention for the show at least once a month and sometimes twice a month. This was an unprecedented occurrence – even in the glory days of *Star Trek* cons, there had never been such frequent conventions for a single show. In spite of both fans and actors' awareness that

the actors are paid for their appearances, that frequency was instrumental in making the parasocial relationships less one-sided and more reciprocal.⁴

Perhaps the *Supernatural* actors initially had reservations about interacting with fans; perhaps they held negative stereotypes and expectations. Research shows that the most effective way of breaking down stereotypes and reducing stigma is through seeing people as individuals, which happens with actual face to face interaction (Barden, et al, 2004; Wheeler & Fiske, 2005). That’s what happened at the *Supernatural* conventions. Jared, Jensen, Misha and the other actors began to see fans every few weeks, many of whom were what they began to call “familiar faces”. Their initial anxiety fell away as they began to get to know fans, who were doctors and lawyers and accountants and teachers and servers and construction workers and everything in between. In the face of discovering fans as real people, the carefully curated psychological distance (and to some extent the physical distance too) began to break down, and the interactions became more genuine. Photo ops were no longer actors on chairs barely touching fans – now they were re-enactments of favourite scenes complete with props, hugs that took fans’ breath away (literally), and photos where neither fan nor actor is looking at the camera, but rather at each other. Thanks to the frequent conventions as well as the constant online interaction, the relationship between *Supernatural* fans and cast became less parasocial and more reciprocal.⁵

The *Supernatural* fandom, which calls itself the SPNFamily, extends the reciprocity into charitable projects that are often partnerships between the show’s actors and its fans. Misha Collins realized soon after joining the show that there was a tremendous amount of creativity and passion in its fans, and that perhaps this could be harnessed as a force for good. He created Random Acts ten years ago, and the fan-volunteer-driven organization has since built schools in Nicaragua, fought childhood hunger, provided pandemic relief and funded LGBTQA supportive programs. Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, as well as many other cast members, have organized charity benefits as well, raising money for a variety of programs.⁶

⁴ Zubernis and Larsen argue in *Fandom at the Crossroads* that the relationship between *Supernatural* fans and actors has been uniquely reciprocal and less pathological.

⁵ For more on how personal interaction impacts stereotypes, see Zaid’s 2019 essay on “How to beat stereotypes by seeing people as individuals”.

⁶ Tanya Cook and Kaela Joseph provide a comprehensive history of the *Supernatural* fandom’s history of activism in their chapter in *Family Don’t End With Blood*.

Another unique facet of the relationship between the show and its fans is the incorporation of *Supernatural* fandom into the series' text. The so-called meta episodes are both controversial and some of the show's most popular. Beginning in Season 4 with the introduction of the *Supernatural* novels in 'The Monster At The End Of This Book' (4.18), *Supernatural* incorporated fans of the books into the canon. The writers used the episode to 'speak back' to fans of the real series, including fan criticisms on the message boards of the day. In the next season's 'Sympathy For The Devil' (5.01) fangirl Becky Rosen is introduced, and reappears several times throughout the show's run, at times embodying some of the more negative stereotypes of fans (from naïve and less than fashionable to kidnapping and drugging poor Sam in an attempt to get him to marry her).⁷ *Supernatural* also went meta for its 200th episode with 'Fan Fiction' (10.05), written by Robbie Thompson as a "love letter to fans" which recognized and even applauded how fandom subverts and interprets the text for its own purposes in fanfiction (Kelly, 2016). Thompson is also responsible for the creation of Charlie, a queer tech-savvy gamer fangirl who was immediately beloved by fans. The show angered its fans by killing Charlie off (and then brought back an Alternate Universe version to try to make up for it), but the character was also Thompson's attempt at normalizing comments on fan practices such as fanfiction, cosplay and collecting.⁸ By Season 15, *Supernatural*'s understanding of and portrayal of its fans had evolved. Becky Rosen returns in the final season as a successful, well-adjusted woman who loves the show while she holds down a job and raises a family, presenting a more positive view of fans and an appreciation for the value of fan creativity. By that episode, the show was no longer depicting fans as delusional, but instead able to express their passion in a way that enriches their lives.

The Ship Wars

The reciprocal relationships that developed with fans contributed significantly to the show's longevity. Fans who felt seen and understood by the

⁷ See Brigid Cherry's essay on Becky Rosen in *TV Goes to Hell* for an exploration of Becky's introduction and symbolism in the show

⁸ For more on how *Supernatural* has represented its fans see Larsen & Zubernis "We See You (Sort Of): Representations of Fans in Supernatural." In Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth, Eds. *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*.

cast were more committed than ever; the show fed the convention circuit and the conventions fed the viewership of the show. Time was on *Supernatural's* side once again, in addition, as the way in which television aired began to change. In the USA two major changes contributed to an entirely new wave of viewers discovering *Supernatural* when it was already years into its run: the show was syndicated and began airing on TNT almost daily, and *Supernatural* arrived on Netflix. Those new platforms allowed a new generation to discover the show, some of whom had been way too young to watch it when it first aired. Those new fans then flooded into the online communities and to the in-person conventions, enriching those spaces further and generating social media buzz that in turn helped keep the show going. The *Supernatural* fandom is thus a diverse community in terms of age, and also in terms of gender, sexuality, favourite characters and even what's most important about the show itself.

Unlike fans who began watching the show as it aired from week to week in its early seasons, fans who discovered the show in its later seasons often arrived at it through other means – sometimes not even through watching the show itself. Because the *Supernatural* fandom was so vibrant and active, there were constantly memes and graphics and videos on every social media platform, from Tumblr to Reddit to Wattpad to TikTok. Fans who discovered *Supernatural* through one of those platforms sometimes had a very different perception of the show, especially through a 'shipping' lens. Shipping, short for imagining or wanting two character to have a romantic relationship, has been a part of fandom for a very long time, but has evolved in recent years to become, as journalist Aja Romano puts it, “an ideology – and like all ideologies, it breeds both crusaders and conspiracists” (Romano, 2016). That is to say, shipping is no longer 'just for fun' – fans take their shipping seriously, including demands that the ship “go canon” and be depicted onscreen and not just in fanfiction.

Supernatural is unique as a show that centres on a platonic relationship instead of a romantic one, though that didn't stop some fans from shipping fictional brothers Sam and Dean (known as Wincest) anyway in fanfiction. Writer and showrunner Sera Gamble famously referred to *Supernatural* as “the epic love story of Sam and Dean” (Borsellino, 2006) and researcher Catherine Tosenberger argued way back in 2008 that Wincest wasn't so much an oppositional resistance to the show, but an expression of readings that are suggested and supported by the text itself. (She also presciently noted that the most resistive aspect of Wincest was to give Sam and Dean a lasting happiness that the series itself “eternally defers.”) (Tosenberger, 2008)

When the angel Castiel (Misha Collins) was introduced in Season 4, some fans quickly began shipping him with Dean (with the portmanteau Destiel) and

that ship became immensely popular on social media platforms like Tumblr. Many fans found out about the series through Destiel posts instead of by watching the actual show, and to those fans, *Supernatural* was all about the romance of Dean and Cas. (Meanwhile, the larger general audience continued to watch for neither of the ships, enjoying a show about two brothers fighting monsters with the help of friends and found family.)

Ship wars, with factions of a fandom breaking off into camps supporting rival ships, are common in fandom and not unique to *Supernatural*.⁹ However, because *Supernatural* has been airing for such a long time, the animosity between the two major factions had a long time to increase in intensity. In the first seasons after Misha Collins joined the show as Castiel, the show teased a romantic relationship or at least an infatuation between the angel and Dean, following the template that it had successfully used to joke about Sam and Dean being repeatedly mistaken for a couple. Wincest fans had never expected or wanted their ship to be actually reflected on the show, since the CW was unlikely to go full on *Flowers in the Attic*, so the teasing had not created any expectation of follow-through. Castiel and Dean, however, were not related, so there was no barrier to the romance being eventually enacted on screen; fans who supported that ship began to expect that Destiel would eventually “go canon.” Some cast, writers and journalists encouraged that expectation, perhaps not realizing how serious that expectation was for some fans. There were periodic outbreaks of in-fighting in the fandom over shipping and accusations against the show for queerbaiting (when media teases queer relationships but doesn’t follow through) for many years, so by the time the show came to its final season, the roller coaster of yes-it-will-happen-no-it-won’t-happen had ramped up both anxiety and hope for Destiel as a romantic endgame.¹⁰

Perhaps partly in an attempt to mollify that faction of fandom, the 18th episode of the final season, at first titled “Truth” and then revised to “Despair” (15.18), included Castiel’s emotional declaration of love to Dean, a moment of true happiness that then saw him sucked into The Empty and out of our world as Dean stood there in shock. Both the writer (Robert Berens) and Misha Collins have said that they intended Castiel’s words to be viewed as romantic, although

⁹ Psychological origins of ship wars are explored further in the article “Intergroup norms and intergroup discrimination” by Jetten, Spears and Manstead (1996) and in the chapter “Only love can break your heart: Fandom wank and policing the safe space” in Zubernis and Larsen’s *Fandom At The Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships*.

¹⁰ See Fansplaining’s December 2, 2020 podcast for a discussion of queerbaiting and *Supernatural* - <https://www.fansplaining.com/episodes/139-the-q-is-for-queerbaiting>.

the scene seemed carefully written as ambiguous. (Collins himself tweeted about the controversial scene, saying that the show wasn't perfect and Castiel's departure could have had more resonance, but that "I'm confident you guys can sort that part out as your writing, art and imaginations play the story out past the last frames we filmed.") (Collins, 2020) Collins threw himself into the scene, his tears and emotion so raw that many fans sobbed right along with him. Most of the general audience viewed it as the last words of a very good friend, but shippers viewed it as a clear, if one-sided, declaration of romantic love for their ship.

For *Supernatural's* queer fans, representation on the show in the form of many fans' favourite character was powerful and welcome. Reaction ranged from euphoric posts of "Destiel Is Canon!" to accusations of *Supernatural* following the trope of "bury your gays" by killing Cas off as soon as he came out as queer (complicated even more by angels being non-binary and Castiel arguably providing representation for fans who are asexual or aromantic and being a queer character even before that declaration). Dean's lack of reciprocation became a flash point for fans who interpret the character as bisexual and those who don't, with arguments between fans growing ugly and incorporating he said/she said evidence from cast as well. The social media frenzy was intense, with both biting and hilarious memes taking over Tumblr and passed around every other platform online; the frenzy was intensified because this episode aired as the United States was waiting impatiently online to find out the results of the presidential election (Romano, 2020). Episode 18 also led Destiel shippers to feel vindicated in the expectations they had held all along, and perhaps understandably, they were even more certain that the show would end with Dean and Castiel's fully reciprocated romance front and centre. Misha Collins repeatedly insisted that he was not actually in the final two episodes, but fans by now too invested in their own expectations concluded he was being told to say that by The Powers That Be, and didn't believe him.

The End

The final two episodes of *Supernatural* were, as a result, extremely controversial. The penultimate episode, "Inherit The Earth" (15.19), which was the season finale for Season 15, saw Sam and Dean and Jack finally defeat Chuck in a satisfying victory for mere humans over an actual God, but without the help of Castiel (though his sacrifice had made that final showdown possible). Jack became the new deity and the Winchesters finally won that elusive free will

they'd been chasing all their lives. That episode ended with the “happy ending” that many fans had envisioned for *Supernatural*, Sam and Dean in Baby driving off into the sunset, and while some fans were disappointed that Castiel hadn't returned, most were happy with this episode – and after all, there was still one more.

The series finale of *Supernatural*, “Carry On” (15.20), aired on Thursday, November 19 after a one hour retrospective in which many of the show's cast said their goodbyes and expressed their appreciation for the long journey. The final episode, like much of the show, divided fans – with an intensity that had not been seen even in the ship wars so far. Fans on a high from Sam and Dean's victory the week before got to see a montage of the brothers enjoying their freedom for an unknown amount of time, cooking breakfasts, going to pie festivals, enjoying their dog Miracle, and even those mundane moments we don't often get to see like doing laundry in the Men of Letters bunker that is their home. It was wonderful seeing them smile – but of course, these are the Winchesters. They're not just kicking back – they're hunting. Halfway through the episode, Dean is impaled on a giant piece of rebar in a barn on a random vampire hunt, which was shocking and horrifying and not something most fans (or Sam and Dean) expected. As Collins had done in episode 18, Jared and Jensen put on a master class in acting as Dean asks Sam to stay with him as he dies, giving Dean the chance to tell his little brother how he feels about him and express his pride and love. Both characters have a chance to demonstrate their evolution, Dean able to express his feelings openly and Sam able to do what Dean asks of him successfully this time – carry on. He lives for decades more, missing his brother but going on with his life, raising a son who he names Dean.

The brilliance of the episode lies in its incredibly realistic depiction of grief, from Sam's tearful permission to his brother that “It's okay Dean, you can go now” to the depiction of all the small moments in the montage of Sam having to live without his brother that are familiar to anyone who has grieved. We see Sam sitting in Dean's room on his bed, overcome by memories and holding Dean's dog, Miracle, close in comfort. We see him cooking breakfast in the bunker's kitchen and startling for a second when the toast pops, expecting Dean to be right there behind him grabbing the hot slices as he did so many times.. Many fans saw the finale as an appropriate ending for a show that, quite subversively, always foregrounded platonic and familial love and how powerful such relationships can be. The episode also works on a meta level, a master class in grief and loss for a fandom that was about to endure the loss of the show itself. Dean's words to Sam are also a goodbye from Jensen to Jared, and from the writers and actors to the fans, with an explicit message to “always keep

fighting” and to “carry on.” The final shot of the entire series, in keeping with the show’s meta shout outs to its fans, incorporates the fandom right into the canon of the show, as Jared and Jensen are joined by director Bob Singer, their fellow cast and the entire crew to thank the fans and wave goodbye. The final lines are Singer’s “annnnnd cut”, and we all hear it, because we are all, more than perhaps for any other show, part of *Supernatural*.

For many fans, it was a beautiful ending. *Supernatural*’s legacy, however, has never been without conflict and controversy. While many fans loved the finale, others did not. Some were crushed that one Winchester died and the other lived, especially not knowing how long Dean got to experience happiness and freedom. The fans who had been convinced that Castiel would return and the Destiel romance would happen were bitterly disappointed and angry that their expectations had in some way been encouraged, only to be crushed in the final episode. Covid restrictions during the filming of the last two episodes meant that very few people could be on set, so there was disappointment too that some other beloved characters had not returned. The day after the episode aired, mainstream media picked up the furor, an article in Vox proclaiming “*Supernatural*’s bonkers series finale marked the end of an era of fandom: After 15 seasons, the show’s attempt at a happy ending raised more questions than answers” (Romano, 2020). As Romano also pointed out, emotions ran high around the series ending simply because it had been on the air for so long that many of its fans had quite literally grown up with it.

The actors were all tremendously proud of both the show’s long journey and their own performances in their final episodes. Fans who were angry and disappointed, however, lashed out against the show and the cast and the writers – and their fellow fans. They organized to trend hashtags that expressed their feeling that marginalized characters (and the fans themselves) had been silenced, tanked the episode’s ratings on IMDb and spammed the comments, and spread conspiracy theories about alternate versions of Castiel’s declaration of love and its outcome, fuelled by a Spanish translation that temporarily suggested a different reading. The hopeful message intended by the series finale was negated for some fans by the story not going the way they had hoped, and hurts and frustrations about the marginalization and silencing that some fans have actually experienced in real life made that outcome even harder. Many fans were drawn to the fandom community in general and *Supernatural* fandom in particular because of its different norms as a place where fans would not feel disenfranchised or stigmatized.

Perhaps this is what we should have expected from this little show that has never been ordinary. *Supernatural* came along at a pivotal time in popular

culture, helping to usher in a new age of geek culture and a more reciprocal relationship between fans and creators. *Supernatural* has defied the odds and countered expectations in multiple ways over the past fifteen years, and its ending has been no exception. There is, however, one thing that the show's diverse fandom can agree on: we all hope this isn't really the end. As Jensen Ackles wrote in his chapter in *There'll Be Peace When You Are Done*, "This will never end. Besides, nothing ever stays dead on *Supernatural*" (Ackles, 2020).

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