

***Supernatural* – The End of the Road. A Reflection**

Part Two. NOW: Introduction

Stacey Abbott et Simon Brown

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***Supernatural*: The End of the Road: A Reflection**

Part Two: NOW

Introduction

Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown

Endings are Hard...endings are impossible. You try to tie up every loose end, but you never can...There's always gonna be holes. And since it's the ending, it's all supposed to add up to something.

— Chuck (“Swan Song” 5:22)

Supernatural is over. After delays to filming due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the last episode of *Supernatural* aired in the USA, with some degree of fanfare and hullabaloo, on the CW on November 19, 2020. In the UK, the last three episodes shuffled quietly off the screen on December 18, 2020, buried on the 4Music channel. There were tears and there was anger, not least from UK *Supernatural* fans who missed episode 19 because 4Music mis-identified it as episode 9. However, now that the dust has settled and Jared Padelecki is already gracing TV screens (with a far less appealing haircut) as *Walker: Texas Ranger* (2021-), what has it all added up to? What can we say by way of introduction to this reflection on the series finale? As Chuck quite rightly says; endings are hard.

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Dr. Simon Brown is Associate Professor of Film and Television at Kingston University. He has published articles on numerous TV series, including *Alias*, *Dexter*, *Under the Dome*, *The X-Files* and, of course, *Supernatural*. He is the author of *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television* (University of Texas Press, 2018) and *Creepshow* (Auteur Press, 2019). He is currently writing a monograph on British horror author James Herbert. His patronus is a Chevy Impala.

This is particularly true for a series that has run for fifteen years, has a loyal and very vocal fan base, and has been, as Erin Giannini discussed in her article in part one of this issue, a tentpole show for the CW. This puts significant pressure on a series that elected to end on its own terms, to which can be added the fact that over the years individual *Supernatural* seasons have ended so many different ways that it would be hard to imagine something fresh. Sam and Dean ended season 1 seemingly dead in a car wreck; both Dean and Sam have actually died, and gone to hell (Dean at the end of season 3, Sam at the end of season 5); the gates of hell have opened (season 2, season 14); Lucifer has risen (season 4); Dean has headed off to live a normal life (season 5); Dean has gone to purgatory (season 7); the angels have been expelled from heaven (season 8); Dean has been possessed by a demon (season 9) and by an angel (season 13). Having had Sam and Dean overcome demons, angels, archangels, Leviathon, Lucifer, the King of Hell, God's sister and Death, and now facing a showdown with God himself, how then do you end the Winchester's journey? With defeat, or with victory? With life or death? What can emphatically end the show and satisfy the fans who have kept it on the air all these years?

In the end the *Supernatural* finale comprised two episodes ("Inherit the Earth" 15.19 and "Carry On" 15.20) plus an hour-long retrospective with cast and crew interviews ("The Long Road Home"), and over the course of those three hours the showrunners elected to deliver a variety of endings to suit all tastes. The penultimate episode, "Inherit the Earth," brought together and entwined the show's religious and philosophical themes, as examined by Regina Hansen and Galen Foresman in this special issue, by resolving the decade-long subtextual arc which explored the Winchesters' place in the universe created by Chuck/God and their fight for free will. By allowing themselves to be savagely pummelled by Chuck, distracting him through refusing, as ever, to stand down while Jack absorbed Chuck's power, Sam and Dean finally defeated their ultimate nemesis and freed themselves from Chuck's narrative. In doing so they provided the audience the satisfaction of seeing Sam and Dean as masters of their own fate. Free to choose their own path, they elect to do what they've always done; hit the road, together, in the Impala, saving people, hunting things. The family business. It is a fitting ending to their screen journey.

And then.

Along comes "Carry On." Having offered a happy ending for the show, the last episode presents the alternative, one that circles back to the pilot and sees Dean dying while on a standard case, impaled on a rebar as he and Sam clear out a vampire nest. Because they have been freed from their previous life of being controlled and directed by Chuck, this time Dean's death is for keeps. After an emotional farewell with Sam, Dean finally gets

the hunter's funeral that he has always said awaited him, and Sam gets the 'normal' life that he gave up fifteen years and 300-plus episodes earlier. This is the ending in which Sam and Dean are separated. Together their fate – their choice – is to ride off into the sunset in the Impala, chasing another case around the backroads of America. As individuals, however, these too are appropriate ends – Dean dies in battle while Sam lives peacefully to a ripe old age with a family of his own. This was precisely where their paths were leading when we met them for the first time.

And then.

Having offered two opposite but equally viable, if heart-wrenching, endings, the final episode then presents us with a third; a vision of a new and improved heaven (courtesy of Jack) in which there are no monsters and eternity can be spent driving by day and drinking beer by night with old friends including Bobby, Castiel, John and Mary and, one would assume, anyone and everyone met and lost along the way. This utopian vision presents a heaven in which all the good things prevail (family, friendship, the open road, beer, food, music) and all the bad things (monsters, danger, threat) have been washed away. Reunited in heaven after Sam's eventual death from old age, Sam and Dean end their journey together, on a bridge, in the wilderness, looking out over a peaceful heaven. This is an alternative version of the first ending in which Sam and Dean end up together, but this time there are no monsters, no need to hunt, and all the good they've done, all the sacrifices they have made, are finally visible.

Each version of the Sam and Dean relationship therefore gets an ending. There's an ending for the hunters; the righteous brothers of vengeance for whom facing and killing monsters is their only way of life, a moral duty to perform until the end. There's an ending for the two brothers who throughout the series have remained entirely committed to each other, but who were also aware of the sacrifices that commitment required. For Dean, the tortured soul, who knows precisely where his path leads but who cannot turn from it no matter what, he finally dies on the job and leaves Sam. Sam then gets his own ending, finally escaping the life bestowed upon him by the bond between he and Dean, but finding emptiness alongside the peace of family life. The brothers get what they both feared and wanted at various times throughout the show, a hunter's death for Dean, a normal life for Sam. And there's the ending where they get their reward. They stay together as brothers, but in a world of peace, devoid of monsters.

And then.

In the very last moments, on that same bridge, Jared and Jensen break character and thank the fans, and are joined by the crew for a final farewell wave. This acknowledges that beyond the Winchester family, beyond the wider diegetic *Supernatural* family who will be drinking beers on the porch

into the night for all eternity in heaven, there is a wider, equally special family of behind-the-scenes workers and fans who all deserve their own ending, an opportunity to reflect upon a symbiotic relationship which has granted so much to both. This theme is picked up in the special episode “The Long Road Home,” in which the stars and creatives on the show discussed what it, and the fans, have meant to them.

How then do you end the seemingly un-endable show? Every possible way it turns out. Sam and Dean ride off into the sunset to fight monsters, and then they both die, and then ride off into the sunset again, this time in heaven where they finally have peace. Finally, the show reminds us that while they may die and their journey must end, it will nevertheless continue in the memories of those who took the long road together. As we pointed out in the introduction to Part one of this two-part special issue, our aim with this reflection on *Supernatural* was to acknowledge that the response would be both professional and personal. Not only is this evident in the essays that are included, it also formed an essential part of the finale itself.

Because of the passion of the fans and the carefully fostered sense of ownership they had over the series, a connection with the creative personnel behind it, the ending not surprisingly divided opinion and was not without controversy, as Lynn Zubernis discusses in her essay for this issue. Particularly problematic was the fact that the romantic relationship between Castiel and Dean, very popular within *Supernatural* fandom, was ultimately teased rather than made explicitly canon (“Despair” 15.18). This proved highly divisive, as did Dean’s untimely and meaningless death, followed by Sam’s rather pedestrian-seeming post Dean life. Yet as Melissa Edmundson argues in her essay, for all that the final episodes were divisive, they were not out of character for the series, openly referring back to the very first episodes of the first season and bringing the narrative full circle. Another element that dissatisfied fans was the relatively small number of cast members who made guest appearances in the finale. Nice as it was to see Jim Beaver back as Bobby, his tantalising suggestion that Castiel, Mary and John were nearby remained merely a suggestion, while stalwarts such as Jodie, Donna and others were entirely absent from the finale(s).

Of course, there were legitimate logistical reasons for this, because Season 15 of *Supernatural* was brought to you by the covid apocalypse. In our introduction to Part 1, we not surprisingly reflected on how the show was impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic and along with it our special issue of *Monstrum*. We concluded writing the introduction just as the cast were returning to Vancouver to begin shooting the final two episodes. At that point, the world was starting to feel a little normal again. Of course, since then we have experienced the second and third waves of the pandemic,

and, while there is a vaccine there are also new variants, so the road ahead still feels long. With this in mind “Inherit the Earth” seemed strangely resonant, poignant and hopeful. In terms of the show’s serial narrative, Chuck ‘Thanos-ing’ the global population into oblivion with a snap of his fingers and leaving Sam, Dean, and Jack alone – with no-one left to save – was an apt end and a seemingly appropriate final hurdle for the brothers to face. The apocalypse finally happened and they had to live with the repercussions – positioning them for a brief time alongside Robert Neville from *I Am Legend* as the last men on earth. Dean, like Neville, even had the fleeting comfort of finding a dog still alive only to have it taken away by Chuck in a knowing nod to Richard Matheson’s novel. The epicness of this apocalypse (even Thanos only vanished half-the population) was profound and forced Sam, Dean and Jack to delve deep in order to not give up but keep fighting the good fight. This ending was also quite practical given the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on television production. They were able to shoot safely on empty streets with minimal cast and crew. That they didn’t give up despite the despair and loneliness is classic Sam and Dean.

Significantly, however, this episode also seemed to step outside of its own narrative arc, offering a timely reflection on the global events of 2020. This may or may not have been intended in August and September 2020 as they were filming in Vancouver but it was felt as we watched the episode in November 2020, once again in lockdown. Once Jack became the new God, with a snap of his fingers he restored the world’s population. Sam, Dean and Jack walk through the streets that once were empty, abandoned and desolate, now bustling with activity, community, life. It seems fitting that a horror television show that began its journey with the heroes fighting mythical monsters should conclude with an apocalyptic vision of the diegetic world that was both impacted by, and reflected, the very real horrors of the non-diegetic world. The image of streets filled with people, now restored and returned to their friends and families felt strangely timely, poignant and reassuring, a reminder that the apocalyptic journey we have been on this past year will one day end. We just need to stay strong like Sam and Dean – and keep fighting.

So *Supernatural*’s ending, offered many things: hope, grief, pain and loss. As ever, the show began and ended with family, born and chosen, and this seems like the best place for the series to end...for Sam and Dean....for us all. *Supernatural* was born in a different era of genre television, an era of 22(-ish) episode seasons, an era in which TV horror was masked by genre hybridity, an era where “bullcrap” was the outer edges of acceptable swearing. Over 15 years *Supernatural* remained steadfast and true to itself as American genre TV, and TV horror, changed around it. It is one of a kind. It is the the last of its kind, and it is possible, even probable, that we shall

never see its like again. But like Sam and Dean, *Supernatural* will go on. Its place in TV history is assured and its fans and fan-scholars will continue to explore its rich history. Over beers on the porch, with a bit of luck.

Annnnnnd....CUT!.

Acknowledgments

Once again we would like to extend our thanks, both to the editors of *Monstrum* for allowing us to split this issue into two parts, and to our contributors for responding so quickly and so expertly to the end of the show. In our introduction to part one, discussing the longevity of the series and its marking of the passage of time, we wrote about our dog, Max, who was just a puppy when the show first aired in 2005. He passed away on November 11, 2020, one week before the finale aired. The personal and the professional merged again, and for us this was the end of an era in more ways than one. For this reason, we dedicate our contribution to this issue to Max. Carry on our wayward son.

- 2021 -

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