

Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Road Trip by
Erin Giannini, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, 238pp., \$34 USD (h/c)

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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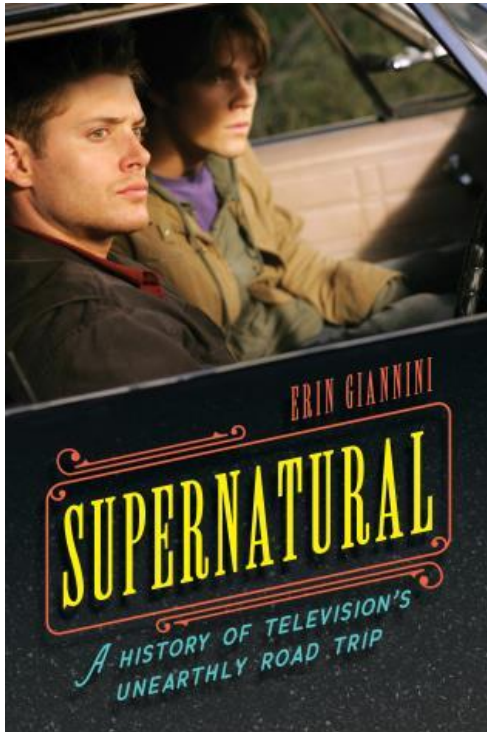
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BOOK REVIEW

Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Road Trip

By Erin Giannini
Rowman & Littlefield
2021

238pp., \$34 USD (h/c)

In 2005, *Supernatural* debuted on American television network the WB. The series, about the demon-hunting Winchester family, would ultimately last for 15 seasons (327 episodes), spinning off a web series (*The Ghostfacers*, 2010-11) and a prequel series (*The Winchesters*, 2022- present). As brothers Sam (Jared

Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) criss-crossed the country in the early years of the series, the narrative grew more complex, with monster-of-the-week adventures supporting an increasingly complex series narrative arc. In the fourth season, the brothers encountered a prophet named Chuck (Rob Benedict) who was writing a series of pulp novels foretold to become the Winchester Gospels. Chuck apologized for making the brothers live the bad writing in some of the early episodes and set the stage for what creator Eric Kripke envisioned as the fifth and final season of the series. Unsurprisingly, the CW network, which picked up the series after the dissolution of the WB, was keen to capitalize on their marquee property, and *Supernatural* carried on for another decade. Subsequent showrunners continued to expand the series mythology.

Supernatural has also become the subject of a growing body of scholarship. A sizable portion of that work to date has been in the realm of fan studies, but critical engagement with the series has appeared steadily in academic journals and edited volumes. Working with such a large body of broadcast material, home video extras, fan materials, and industry publications is a monumental task, one which Erin Giannini undertook to produce *Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Roadtrip* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). Giannini's book is a work of significant and sustained academic scholarship, but it is important to emphasize that it is accessible to a wide range of readers,

particularly readers who want to better understand the production history of the series and the television landscape during this tumultuous time in network history. In the spirit of *Supernatural's* unself-conscious reflexivity, I wish to make clear that the community of scholars who study the series is, to date, still relatively small. Giannini and I became acquainted after we each contributed to an edited collection, *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays* (2019). We've also participated in discussion panels together at scholarly conferences. For over a decade, I have argued vehemently that *Supernatural* broke the fourth wall only once—in a post-credits scene in “Yellow Fever” (4.6), in which actor Jensen Ackles lip-syncs to the song “Eye of the Tiger” in character as Dean Winchester as the crew can be heard laughing and applauding off-screen. I bring attention to this not to continue to grind this axe, but to bury it. Not in Giannini's neck, but in the ground, which I will then duly salt when I return to this topic later in this review.

Unlike previous volumes of criticism which have been collections of essays organized around themes such as Death or the Gothic, Giannini's book is a single-author monograph which examines the series in its historical and industrial contexts. Bringing her prodigious knowledge of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the larger Whedonverse and the complexities of cult television studies to bear on the subject of *Supernatural*, Giannini gives readers a nuanced understanding of what she describes as “a series that addresses class, masculinity, body and economic horror, and engages with God and the Devil, a corporatized hell and a bureaucratic heaven” (xv). In Part One, Giannini explores the development of the series, following series creator and original showrunner Eric Kripke's original conception of the plot and characters. Weaving together the evolution of television genres such as soap operas, detective shows, and anthology series, in addition to the more obvious horror and fantasy programs to which the show is most commonly compared, Giannini gives the reader a solid understanding of *Supernatural's* colorful and creative ancestors. She also breaks the series down into four eras based on the changes each showrunner brought to the table and the direction the overarching mythology subsequently took, before she moves into a more detailed exploration of *Supernatural* as both serial television and cultural phenomenon.

In Part Two, Giannini turns her attention from the longer arc of television history to *Supernatural's* more immediate predecessors, primarily the horror series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the class-conscious blue-collar sitcom *Roseanne* (1988-1997). From there, she examines *Supernatural's* engagement with folklore and religion. If there is a weakness to the book, it is here. A more critical stance toward Kripke's assertion that the series writers “have to be as authentic

as possible when it comes to the urban legends and myths that are presented,” (71) could have better surfaced problematic appropriation of figures such as La Llorona, the Wendigo, and Djinnns. That said, this is a complicated subject, and Giannini does a commendable job indicating that there are problematic representations and appropriations throughout the series, opening a door for future engagement while also directing readers to existing scholarly work. Likewise, there is simply not room in a volume covering such an extensive amount of material to critique Kripke’s reliance on the fraught and problematic term “Judeo-Christian,” a topic which religious historians such as Gene Zubovich (2016) have shown to be deeply entangled in modern language in ways that obscure the insidiously ideological work the term does in American culture. These examples illustrate what a sprawling and complicated subject *Supernatural* proves to be, and are not meant to undermine the overall value of this work or diminish the ease with which Giannini makes the complicated, contradictory theological storyline intelligible for readers who are not familiar with the series.

In the introduction, Giannini writes, “With nearly every season of the show featuring a fourth-wall-breaking episode...” (xvi) As I read that sentence, I broke out an extra-large packet of page flags and uncapped my favorite highlighter, ready for a(n) intellectual fight. Yet, by the time I read chapter 6, to which that introductory sentence refers, I felt as though my entire perspective on the series had been upended to a surprising degree. Using some key episodes and plot developments as case studies, Giannini demonstrates how the series uses, and sometimes subverts, metatextuality and fourth wall breaks in deceptively complex ways. Until reading Giannini’s take on the subject, I had not realized how limiting my appreciation was of the latitude the series takes regarding position and perspective within the layers of story-space. For example, regarding the episode “Changing Channels” (5.8), I had previously argued that Sam and Dean’s acknowledgement of the camera was not a traditional fourth wall break, because the audience they addressed was diegetic—that of the Trickster (Richard Speight) who had thrown them into an alternate reality in which they must play television roles in order to survive. Giannini’s analysis points to how many opportunities there are for viewers to, essentially, see themselves inside these layers of (un)reality the Trickster places between the characters of Sam and Dean and the roles he forces them to play.

Giannini’s discussion of the multi-layered worldbuilding and its narrative functions is a compelling case for re-evaluating the terms and technique we apply to analysis of non-traditional series. However, I believe the volume would be stronger overall had Giannini made explicit early in the text the larger context

of terminology such as *metatextuality* and operationalized the terms as she is using them, which would also strengthen her discussion of how the show challenges conventional usages and why it matters. Ultimately, how Giannini uses this terminology will become evident to readers who read the entire volume, but due to the interdisciplinary nature of media studies and for accessibility to new scholars, this could pose a minor challenge. The final chapter in this section takes on the sociopolitical landscape of the show. While Giannini addresses class and gender issues throughout the book, here she takes a closer look at themes such as militarism, corporate capitalism, and organized religion in American culture.

In Part Three, Giannini tackles a number of topics which not only further contextualize the series but also give readers a broader view of the media landscape over the fifteen years that the series was broadcast on network television. The first chapter explores network changes and the emergence of new technologies such as streaming platforms, both in relation to series production and distribution and in terms of how these shifts became part of the narrative itself. A chapter on fan activism is followed by a strong conclusion chapter and a brief overview of what the author describes as “a highly subjective list of 30 must-see episodes.” A comprehensive list of all 327 episodes would have filled too much space, and plot summaries of same are more suitable for an encyclopedia. What Giannini cheekily ends with is a roadmap not merely of the show, but, to a certain degree, to her perspective on the series itself.

Throughout the volume, Giannini demonstrates myriad ways in which *Supernatural* wears its horror tropes on its sleeve while also slyly engaging in narrative and stylistic experimentation with roots in soap operas, comedy, crime procedurals, and everything in between. This volume is, first and foremost, about the series, but it is in a larger sense about the series as phenomenon. Embedding that discussion into an overview of the history of television and the changing media landscape demonstrates what a vital and engaging topic *Supernatural* is, what it can help us to learn about TV production and genre history, and how much more there is to explore on the topic. *Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Roadtrip* is an important contribution to the literature on television fantasy and horror, as well as a window into the upheavals in the early 21st century television industry.

Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Roadtrip will be a valuable addition to college and university library collections and will be useful for undergraduate and graduate teaching and research. It has scholarly value in a wide range of areas, including, but not limited to, Media and Television Studies, Fan Studies, and in the areas of Philosophy and Religion. It will also, of course,

appeal to fans of *Supernatural* interested in a deeper understanding of the series itself and genre television more broadly.

— Rebecca Stone Gordon

Rebecca Stone Gordon is an artist and anthropologist in Washington, DC, who has published scholarly articles on topics such as *Supernatural*, eco-horror, mummy films, and Shirley Jackson. She is currently writing a book about the *Scooby-Doo* franchise.

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- 2023 -

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