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Fighting for the Future: Essays on Star Trek: Discovery ed.

by Sabrina Mittermeier and Mareike Spsychala (review)

Justice Hagan

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empowerment. By grounding her analyses in the specifics of cinematography and allowing medium-specificity to influence her use of theory, Kent provides concepts that are strong enough to translate into other genres and forms.

Inevitably, despite its length, the book has a few shortcomings. Chapter 5, which purports to be about young girl characters, is mostly interested in the adult superheroes – only one of whom is a woman – in whose film they appear: Elektra and Wolverine. While the analyses are salient and the conclusions useful to Kent’s argument, the role of the girl in the genre could be theorized further. Additionally, while Kent makes some relevant points regarding the conflation of the superhero genre and action movies, further discussion of this distinction and the work of genre could further elaborate the points being made. None of these detract from the success of the book, however, but present opportunities for other scholars to build on Kent’s work. Similarly, as Kent herself notes, the book only briefly mentions the television adaptations which exist alongside and are entangled with these films. One imagines that a *Women in Marvel Television* would benefit greatly from engaging with Kent’s findings, particularly since the Marvel movies now find their home alongside streaming television on the Disney+ platform, bringing the two forms even closer together.

Overall, *Women in Marvel Films* is an important contribution to the study of superhero media as well as to feminist media studies. The overall claim that “Postfeminist culture shapes understandings of women’s empowerment through the women portrayed in Marvel superhero films and their surrounding popular discourses” (260) is persuasively argued and provides many opportunities for engagement by other scholars, as well as use in the college classroom.



Sabrina Mittermeier and Mareike Spychala, eds, *Fighting for the Future: Essays on Star Trek: Discovery*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. 352pp. US\$120 (hbk).

Justice Hagan

Debuting more than a decade after the end of *Star Trek: Enterprise* in 2005, *Discovery*’s premiere was highly anticipated. In keeping with *Enterprise*, *Discovery* was – until the events of season 3 – a prequel series, set before the original series with Captain Kirk (William Shatner) in the 1960s. Though its focus on those times of relative comfort with a set trajectory for Federation history was seen by many as an act of avoiding the difficult questions that a

post-*Voyager* series would face, *Discovery* made significant strides in portraying the progressive, inclusive social and political realities that the franchise always claimed but which remained conveniently off-screen for the most part in the late 80s, 90s, and early 2000s era of *Star Trek*. While early claims and indications suggested that the captain-and-senior-officer-focus of past series was not what would be seen in *Discovery*, the unprecedented opening narrative of a mutineer who was also a woman of color was quickly subsumed into the typical captain-and-senior-officer-focus after the first episodes of the first season. Despite this return to franchise routine, however, the series has contributed to and innovated the franchise in numerous ways, often with a greater degree of honesty than its predecessors.

Fighting for the Future: Essays on Star Trek: Discovery comes only a few years after the debut of the series. Since the time of this collection's publication, there have been two additional seasons of the series, which have taken it in significantly new directions. As is the case with writing about any series prior to its conclusion, some of the analysis of the essays of the collection is couched in language that acknowledges that things might change in the lives of the characters. Indeed, the third season addresses some of what the collection notes the series fails to tackle in the first two seasons, especially with the inclusion of Adira (Blu del Barrio) and Gray (Ian Alexander), non-binary and transgender characters whose identities are explored through multiple episodes in season 3 (though, it should be noted, both characters see significantly less attention in season 4, with Gray being written off the show entirely). As the series moves into subsequent seasons, no doubt more of the issues that this collection addresses will also be explored. Unlike the completed series *The Next Generation* (1987–94) and *Voyager* (1995–2001), which can be comfortably critiqued from a position of finality – though the first season of *Star Trek: Picard* (2020–) has added to those in a way as well – *Discovery* will continue to go in directions unanticipated by the scholarship until it reaches its own conclusion.

The introduction by Mittermeier and Spsychala does a great job of setting up the terms of *Discovery* and acknowledging the controversy that its announcement created, and the unprecedented resistance to the political engagement that the series sparked, including the #NotMyTrek protests against the series. Perhaps the most significant achievement of the introduction is how the editors address *Discovery's* status as yet-another-prequel-series following *Star Trek: Enterprise*. Seen by many audiences as an abandonment of a serious critique of neoliberalism and empire that could have followed *Star Trek: Voyager*, the franchise's turn to prequels has allowed it to remain in a comfortable space. With a

positive, promising future guaranteed in the *The Next Generation* (TNG) era, we could watch the antics of Captain Archer (Scott Bakula) and crew with a significantly decreased sense of risk. After all, centuries later, Captain Picard (Patrick Stewart) would be leading the *Enterprise* crew on its way as a beacon of progress and diplomacy. Working against this critical trajectory, Mittermeier and Sychala's introduction creates a new space for *Discovery* as a prequel: with its focus on the Klingon-Federation war in the years before the original series, *Discovery* shows us a Federation still struggling with its own sense of identity. Rather than a return to the established utopia of the TNG era, *Discovery* walks the path to that utopia, and illustrates the many pitfalls that we had not known prior to this new story.

Divided into three sections, with the third section containing three subsections, the collection begins with four essays in "Boldly Going Where No Series Has Gone Before?" These essays effectively tackle how *Discovery* confronts and works both with and against established Star Trek canon. This is especially important because, unlike *Star Trek: Enterprise*, which was a pre-Federation series taking place centuries before the TNG era, *Discovery* only predates the original series by a decade and thus has to contend with much more immediate canonical concerns. Equally interesting is the section's other focus on the more explicit depictions of profanity and sex in the new series, which were a major departure from the tone that the franchise had established in the TNG era. The information and analysis in these essays is not limited to *Discovery*, and in fact provide numerous insights on the production of other series in the franchise.

In "Just as Repetition Reinforces Repetition, Change Begets Change," the second section of the collection, the essays focus on how storytelling in Star Trek has shifted in *Discovery* from how it was presented in earlier series in the franchise. Fan fiction and experimental narrative forms are explored in these essays, with two of them appropriately paying close attention to "Magic to Make the Sanest Man Go Mad" (Oct. 29, 2017), an episode from the first season that serves as the series' *Groundhog Day* time-loop episode. The serialization of Star Trek in *Discovery* – an unprecedented narrative form for the franchise if you don't count the final season of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1998–99) or the third season of *Enterprise* (2003–04) as fully realized serializations – is also a subject of importance in this section. The first essay combines this focus on serialized storytelling with the series' focus on the Mirror Universe in the first season, which was a significant change from past series in the franchise, which only touched on Mirror Universe storylines for an episode or two at a time, or not at all.

The third section of essays “Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations” contains three subsections: “Afrofuturism, Imperialism, and Intersectionality,” “Interrogating Gender,” and “Queering Star Trek.” In many ways, the diverse array of subjects of this third section demonstrates a depth to the series that merits a second collection of essays. Mittermeier and Spsychala’s decision to include this third collection – clearly the book’s central scholarship not just because of its larger share of the total pages but also because of its focus on *Discovery*’s unprecedented forays into social and political topics only given token attention in past series – is appropriate because, as noted earlier, *Discovery* as a series has only just begun, and this third section of the text does a fantastic job of highlighting the series’ achievements in these new areas of storytelling so far.

In the first subsection of the final section of the collection, “Afrofuturism, Imperialism, and Intersectionality,” the essays do great service to *Discovery*’s work in establishing black women as heroes and closely analyze the series’ adherence to the progressive reputation of the franchise. The second subsection, “Interrogating Gender,” looks at the series’ portrayal of and engagement with gender and gender identity. While these three essays provide a thorough exploration of their shared field in the series’ first two seasons, the third season of the show opens up gender and transgender discussions for the franchise in significant ways that this subsection was not able to address, an unavoidable consequence of analyzing a series still in production. The final subsection, “Queering Star Trek,” looks at the inclusion of openly gay main characters in *Discovery* and the historical absence of transgender characters in *Star Trek* – an especially effective addition to the subsection, especially considering the developments of the third season, as mentioned already.

The editors achieve a remarkable feat in this collection by providing a comprehensive look at a series still in development. A feature that helps to solidify the text’s standing as a significant scholarly contribution to the field is the coda that follows the final section of essays. In this brief two-page finale to the book, the editors look to the future of the series and the ideas that it might explore beyond the narrative tropes in which fans of *Star Trek* have found decades of comfort and familiarity. Mittermeier and Spsychala end their text confident that the series has left the past in the past, while holding on to the franchise’s belief in a positive future.