The Myth Awakens: Canon, Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars

Jessica Stanley


THE Myth Awakens: Canon, Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars collects chapters that explore fan receptions of the Star Wars saga, focusing primarily on Episode VII: The Force Awakens (2015). While the title suggests discussions of conservatism, most chapters focus on close readings and fan reception of Star Wars in a concise, easy-to-digest manner. The result is a diverse and engaging collection that would be of interest to both scholars and students interested in science fiction or fandom.

The introduction, written by editor Ken Derry, positions Star Wars within the context of religious studies and myth, and makes a case for why scholars may want to consider the franchise as a means of “lowering the stakes” when discussing controversial issues like violence, good/evil, and morality (9).

The first two chapters of the book both make use of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth. In Chapter 1, “The More Things Change: Historical and Political Context and The Force Awakens,” John C. Lyden argues that while A New Hope (1977) and The Force Awakens are, at their core, very similar films, the way fans receive them is vastly different due to changes in society and politics. Lyden explains that both liberals and conservatives read their own politics and current events into A New Hope, and that while the same may be true of The Force Awakens, its moral ambiguity points to a larger shift in political climate.

Chapter 2, “The Brightest Shadow: From Fighting Darkness to Seeking It,” by Lindsey Macumber, explores Darth Vader and Kylo Ren in terms of their relationship to Campbell’s shadow archetype. In one of the clearest and most concise chapters, Macumber provides a definition of the shadow archetype and its function in myth, arguing that confronting the shadow is a necessary part of growth for characters and viewers. The author explains that Darth Vader once served this purpose, but that in
The Force Awakens, Kylo Ren fails to fit the archetype. Macumber ends the chapter by connecting Ren to current culture, noting that his arc provides an opportunity for audiences to navigate contemporary situations “where the evil of […] real life villains is not the result of principle or conviction, but of reactionary impulsivity” (45).

The next two chapters both address gender and female representation in Star Wars. One of the standout chapters, “‘Leia the Hutt Slayer’ and ‘Rey the Next Generation Badass Boss Bitch’: Heroism, Gender, and Fan Appreciation,” argues that calling Rey the first female hero in Star Wars discounts Leia’s contributions to the saga. Chris Klassen uses Campbell’s definition of heroism and Valerie Estelle Frankel’s “heroine’s journey” as the framework to analyze Rey and Leia’s contributions to the Star Wars narrative. He argues that Rey and Leia are both heroes in different ways, with Rey representing Campbell’s hero and Leia representing Frankel’s. Rey follows a journey similar to Luke’s, positioning her both as a role-model and a target for derision from fans who believe she should not be placed in the same role as male characters. Leia wields a different kind of power through her leadership and political acumen, positioning her closer to Frankel’s Great Mother figure. Both characters, Klassen argues, serve to broaden the definition of heroism. Chapter 4, “I’ve Heard That Somewhere Before: The Myth-Making Implications of Han and Leia’s Theme,” by Kutter Callaway, analyzes the use of music in The Force Awakens, focusing on the leitmotif of “Han and Leia’s Theme.” The chapter addresses the complicated function of gender in Star Wars, and Callaway asserts that the franchise has always been as much, if not more, about the women characters than the men. Callaway argues that the use of the “Han and Leia Theme” in the controversial The Force Awakens hug scene between Leia and Rey helps to shift the franchise in that direction.

The fifth and sixth chapters focus on race in the Star Wars saga and the Expanded Universe. Chapter 5, “The Racism Awakens,” attempts to spark a dialogue about racism in Star Wars. Daniel White Hodge and Joseph Boston begin the chapter by summarizing the complicated relationship between Hollywood and race, defining the Black character tropes most common in films, and then applying them to Finn in The Force Awakens. According to Hodge and Boston, on the surface, Finn’s character represents a positive change in the Star Wars franchise, but upon examination, Finn and other Black characters fall into several of the Black character tropes and are products of hyper-tokenization. The authors contend that the lack of representation
in Star Wars, paired with the racially charged fan response to characters like Finn, reveal deep issues within the franchise. Chapter 6, “Do or Do Not: There is No Try: Race, Rhetoric, and Diversity in the Star Wars Universe,” compares identity and representation of race in The Force Awakens and the Star Wars Expanded Universe. Joshua Call explores Finn’s portrayal, noting similar issues of agency and tokenization as the previous chapter. He juxtaposes these issues with the “normalization of diversity” in the game Knights of the Old Republic, arguing that the games provide a space for fans to see themselves in the Star Wars universe (102).

The final three chapters center on canon and fan communities. Chapter 7, “Ritual, Repetition, and the Responsibility of Relaying the Myth,” focuses on George Lucas’s complicated relationship with his films and their fans. Justin Mullis defines fans as “those who consume media and who are actively and willingly consumed by it,” and explains that the Star Wars fandom is not the first to conflict with the creators (109). He charts Lucas’s many revisions of the films which led to his rejection by fans and asserts that part of the success of The Force Awakens was due to the sense of comfort and familiarity created by its similarities to the original film.

Chapter 8, “Memory, History, and Forgetting in Star Wars Fandom,” focuses on the collapse of the Expanded Universe after Disney’s purchase of the Star Wars franchise and George Lucas’s multiple film revisions. Using theories from the “first generation of fan studies,” Syed Adnan Hussain argues that when Lucas or Disney imposed new rules on the canon, rather than erasing part of the fandom’s collective memory, the moves created splinter factions, not unlike those that arise in major religions (136). Hussain asserts that understanding these various traditions of fandom is essential to truly understanding Star Wars fandom.

In Chapter 9, “The Ion Canon Will Fire Several Shots to Make Sure Any Enemy Ships Will Be Out of Your Flight Path: Canonization, Tribal Theologians, and Imaginary World Building,” Kenneth Mackendrick argues that Star Wars provides a means of understanding canonization in a religious context. He argues that canonization relies on the interpretation of an authoritative interpreter and then allows for world building through cooperation by fans.

As an edited collection, The Myth Awakens flows together seamlessly thanks to the chapter organization, overlap in critical approaches, and overall tone. The approaches to gender, race, and fandom can easily be applied to topics outside of Star Wars, making this an excellent collection for emerging scholars and university libraries.