Women in Doctor Who and The Women of Orphan Black

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A quick Google search of Valerie Estelle Frankel paints a clear portrait of a prolific, detail-oriented independent scholar who has found her niche: pop-feminist analyses of pulp genres and cult science fiction and fantasy favorites—Doctor Who and Orphan Black, but also Outlander, Game of Thrones, Harry Potter, Hunger Games, True Blood, Wonder Woman. The list goes on. It’s clear that Frankel is a pop culture super-fan, which equips her with the enthusiasm, if not the academic bandwidth, to produce the meticulous compendia of observations that comprise the two volumes reviewed here.

The Women of Doctor Who is a timely addition to critical work on the long-running series given that the 2018 season brings viewers a female doctor for the first time, played by actor Jodie Whittaker. Frankel’s review of human and non-human female characters in the series and its spin-offs (The Sarah Jane Adventures, Torchwood, Class, K9) is exhaustive, arranging Doctor Who’s treatment of women into broad categories: sweet girls, experts, bad ladies, tough girls, and outsiders. From there, Frankel further identifies female characters in the series by their established archetypes: sexy damsel, evil ice queen, trickster-seductress, and so on. While this convenient conceptual schema works well for a quick reference guide, it is less conducive to a deeper exploration of the critical issues surrounding gender, race, species or their intersections, including analysis of the recent trend to gender- and race-flip established characters and the implications, good or bad, of this particular cultural zeitgeist.

Frankel’s encyclopedic approach works well to highlight the ways that, despite attempts to explore future and alternative worlds, female characters in the series remain firmly fixed as products of twentieth and twenty-first century attitudes that
limit the depth and range of the roles women are expected to inhabit. Frankel offers an account of the evolution of women’s roles, from pubescent damsels like Susan in the first seasons, to more “competent” (read: contrary) women in the series’ reboot—e.g. Donna Noble and River Song. This trajectory is both fascinating as it charts the shifting history of feminism’s impact on popular culture, and distressing as you come to realize how little has changed in the past six decades, and how, as Frankel observes, these women remain “trapped within the patterns of their archetypes” (3).

One consistently defining characteristic of the Doctor’s companions, Frankel points out, is their collective obligation to serve as his moral compass, to provide, in today’s parlance, invisible emotional labor. While his companions exist to nurture privately the Doctor’s better angel and steer him away from more destructive impulses, he remains free to play the public hero. This narrative through line is brought into starkest relief during the “War Doctor” arc when Billie Piper returns as both the specter of Rose Tyler and as “Bad Wolf,” a sentient weapon of mass destruction that, nonetheless, has a heart (Frankel, *Doctor Who* 167-168).

In *The Women of Orphan Black*, Frankel organizes her analysis of the show around two intersecting histories: the evolution of feminism from first to fourth wave and how this history has been shaped by emerging bioethical issues, especially as they relate to the biopolitical battle over control of women's bodies. Rich with excerpts and insights from the show’s creators, actors, and consultants, including the fascinating science advisor, Cosima Herter, on whom Cosima the clone is based, Frankel explores how the series deliberately engages in contemporary debates over reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, tensions between science and religion, gender, and globalization. Cleverly, Frankel shows how each female character in the series embodies various feminist waves, from the radical seventies feminism of Mrs. S, to Cosima as second wave feminist-lesbian, to Sarah as radical, “punk” feminist, to Mika/M.K., the elusive cyber-feminist whose hacktivism brings viewers’ attention to issues of disability, virtuality, and neurodiversity (M.K. is portrayed as being on the autism spectrum). Perhaps the most useful part of Frankel’s close look at *Orphan Black* is her exhaustive catalog of the series’ numerous “easter eggs,” from the literary references in each episode’s title to the allusions embedded in the show’s narrative. Frankel carefully teases to the surface allusions to Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, William Wordsworth, Aldous Huxley, Arthur Conan Doyle, Richard Dawkins, and Donna Haraway, among others, demonstrating how the show’s fast-
paced adventure narrative is smartly informed by philosophical, scientific, and literary histories.

The strength of Frankel’s contributions to discussions of *Doctor Who* and *Orphan Black* is more curatorial or archival, and one can imagine that this kind of work would make for good starting points to stoke the interests of high school students, undergraduates, or science fiction fans looking to enter mainstream conversations about representations of women and bioethics.