

# IN THE HUNT

**Unauthorized Essays on *Supernatural***

**Edited by Supernatural.tv**

WITH LEAH WILSON



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## Foreword

KEITH R. A. DeCANDIDO

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### NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE (OR TWO)

Hello, my name is Keith, and I'm a heterosexual male who's also a *Supernatural* fan.

I realize that this may make me seem bizarre to some. If one wanders the Internet and peers at the audiences for *Supernatural* conventions, one observes a sea of female faces. Certainly most of the women I know who watch the show do so in part because they find Jensen Ackles and/or Jared Padalecki to be very easy on the eyes.

Only in part, though, and that's a critical aspect of *Supernatural*'s appeal: it's much, much better than it needs to be.

As a show on the CW, *Supernatural* could probably still be a successful fifth-network series if it just had two pretty men driving in a cool car, cracking wise and shooting demons in the head. And *Supernatural* does have all those things in abundance.

But it's got more besides. For starters, the show has a wonderful sense of family. And I don't mean so-called "family values," that rather nebu-

lous attempt to revert to the nonexistent nuclear family exemplified by *Leave It to Beaver*, but rather the importance family has to a person. Family doesn't necessarily mean blood relatives—look at the characters of Bobby and Ellen, for example—but the show has excelled at showing those connections and what they mean. There aren't very many fictional siblings on television who cover all the aspects of that relationship the way Sam and Dean do: not just the love and affection and dedication, but also the near-telepathic bond, the arguing, the pranking, the affectionate abuse.

The show has often trotted out the cliché wherein the bad guys say that the brothers' bond is a weakness, and the heroes insist that it's a strength. But what *Supernatural* does so well is show that it's *both*. Heck, brotherly love has managed to get *both* brothers killed.

That complexity of family relationships also holds true with both father figures in the show: the boys' biological father, John Winchester, and their surrogate father, Bobby Singer. The search for the former informed the entire first season, and the character's death at the top of the second season in "In My Time of Dying" (2-1) has continued to resonate in the boys' lives since. John's relationship to his children could charitably be called complex (and perhaps more accurately, seriously messed up), as his influence has saved their lives and provided them with a source of love and comfort, but also left significant psychological scars on both boys that will probably never heal. (His last words to Dean sent him into a tizzy that lasted half the second season.)

As for Bobby, he himself said in the third-season finale, "No Rest for the Wicked" (3-16), how family goes beyond blood. Both that episode and "Dream a Little Dream of Me" (3-10), in which we learned some of Bobby's background, made it clear that Bobby is as much a father to Sam and Dean as John was (some could argue more so).

There are other aspects of the show that are immensely appealing. While *Supernatural* isn't as heavily serialized as, say, *Heroes* or *Lost*, the show is aggressively aware of its own continuity. When something is established in one episode, it remains true thenceforth. A prominent example: the Key of Solomon, introduced at the end of the first season in "Devil's Trap" (1-22), has remained a useful method of trapping demons in the two seasons since. Mystical creatures like reapers and

demons and vampires have all remained consistent through multiple appearances.

The characters have grown and developed—not just Sam and Dean, but several of the supporting players as well. More importantly, the plots have moved forward. While the basic background of blowing into town and shooting demons in the head remains, the writers wisely didn't try to drag out the fight against Azazel, the demon who killed the boys' mother, longer than two seasons.

In addition, the show is hilariously funny. The best dramas are often the ones that make you laugh. I've probably chortled more at any random episode of *The West Wing* or *House* or *The Shield* or *Deadwood* or *Supernatural* than at any so-called comedy. From Dean's wiseass remarks and the brotherly banter to the general snottiness of the demons and "Don't play with my Jesus" ("Bad Day at Black Rock," 3-3), the show is always good for many a chuckle. Then again, the best horror always has you laughing just long enough for the laugh to catch in your throat when the icky stuff hits. And when the show does flat-out comedy, it's usually gold: the self-referential satire of "Hollywood Babylon" (2-18), the glorious slapstick of the bad-luck sufferers in "Bad Day at Black Rock," the tabloid-inspired goofiness of "Tall Tales" (2-15), the *Groundhog Day* riff in "Mystery Spot" (3-11), and the gleeful spoofs of supernatural reality shows and Web sites in "Hell House" (1-17) and "Ghostfacers" (3-13).

But perhaps what I personally find particularly appealing about *Supernatural* is their superlative use of music—compounded by the emphasis on classic rock, which is some of my favorite kind of music. But even if there wasn't a ton of overlap between Dean's tape collection and my iTunes library, I love how the show uses music to supplement and enhance what's happening on screen, mainly because it's something no other show on the air currently does (and too few have done in the past). The revelation that Sam and Dean were dealing with reapers in "Faith" (1-12) was made infinitely more satisfying by the use of Blue Öyster Cult's "(Don't Fear) The Reaper." The spellcasting in "Malleus Maleficarum" (3-9) was far cooler with the addition of Screamin' Jay Hawkins's "I Put a Spell on You." The tension of the "Hunted" (2-10) teaser was enhanced a thousandfold by the slow build of Jefferson

Airplane's "White Rabbit." The "Then"/"The Road So Far" scene selections in each of the season finales (as well as several late first-season and early second-season episodes) worked infinitely better with soundtracks ("Fight the Good Fight" by Triumph, "Time Has Come Today" by the Chambers Brothers, "Stranglehold" by Ted Nugent, "Wheel in the Sky" by Journey, and the incredibly apt "Carry on, Wayward Son" by Kansas). And rarely has a piece of music more perfectly suited a scene than "Renegade" by Styx at the conclusion of "Nightshifter" (2-12), especially with Dean uttering "We're so screwed" in the pause between the intro and when the main part of the song kicked in.

Plus, Sam and Dean singing "Wanted Dead or Alive" by Bon Jovi very, very, very badly in "No Rest for the Wicked" is perhaps one of the finest brother moments in the show's three seasons.

Finally, if *Supernatural* was just some show about two hot guys fighting demons, BenBella probably wouldn't have decided to do a Smart Pop book about it.

So bravo to Eric Kripke, Robert Singer, Ben Edlund, Sera Gamble, McG, and all the other folks involved in *Supernatural* for making it far more than just another CW show with good-looking young people in it.

KEITH R. A. DECANDIDO is the author of two of the three *Supernatural* novels published by HarperEntertainment to date: *Nevermore* (2007) and *Bone Key* (2008). Those are but two of the forty-odd (some very odd) novels he's written, in addition to a mess of short stories, comic books, novellas, eBooks, and nonfiction. He has contributed to six previous Smart Pop volumes: *Webslinger*, *Star Wars on Trial*, *The Man from Krypton*, *The Unauthorized X-Men*, *Finding Serenity*, and *King Kong Is Back!* Find out less at Keith's Web site at [DeCandido.net](http://DeCandido.net) or read his inane ramblings at [kradical.livejournal.com](http://kradical.livejournal.com).

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## INTRODUCTION

When *Supernatural* first burst onto our screens in September 2005, no one could have imagined what an impact it would have on viewers. It was one of many similar genre shows to air that fall, and given the smaller WB network it aired on, it seemed doomed never to achieve a large audience.

And yet, despite its uphill battle, *Supernatural* was the only new genre show to survive when the following year's network schedules were announced. It may not have huge ratings, but it has grown a loyal fanbase that will stop at nothing to protect it.

So what makes *Supernatural* so different?

What makes ordinary people like myself turn into obsessed, overly passionate fans who think nothing of rearranging vacations, work plans, and much more just to fit the show into our lives?

Some might say it's the irresistible looks of *Supernatural*'s two main stars—and I will agree, Jensen and Jared are very appealing to the eye.

But there's so much more to it than that, so much more that we can learn about within the covers of this book.

Join me for a preview of what I know you will find some fascinating insights into the CW's best kept secret.

*I think he wants us to pick up where he left off, you know, saving people, hunting things. The family business.*

—DEAN WINCHESTER, “Wendigo” (1-2)

To embrace *Supernatural*, you first have to understand that, while *Supernatural*'s a show about heroism, heroism isn't always about fighting evil and saving the damsel in distress. While we all love to see Dean and Sam rock-salting a spirit or exorcizing a demon, those moments really only scrape the surface. Sometimes our hunters need saving too, and it's this element that grips fans, often to the point where we actually *don't want* to draw a line between fantasy and reality. When Jensen Ackles jokingly pleaded with viewers to write to Eric Kripke, the show's creator, and ask to save Dean from his demonic deal, you just knew that the CW's mailbox was going to be full for a few weeks to come.

We love to see the brothers' inner turmoil play out.

We love to see Dean and Sam struggling with their “inner demons.” Why?

Because heroism on this show is all about what the Winchester family will sacrifice for each other. It's about the unshakable faith they have in one another—a faith that carries them through possessions, near-death experiences, and ultimately the threat of Hell itself. This is the kind of family bond most people can only ever dream of. Would your father or brother die for you? Would they go to Hell for you, facing unimaginable pain and suffering?

These are the kind of heroics that attract us fans, just as much as the Winchesters battling rabid Rakshasas or soul-hungry demons.

*When someone says a place is haunted, don't go in.*

—DEAN WINCHESTER, “Asylum” (1-10)

We *Supernatural* fans like our heroes to be angsty, but we do still like

them to be heroes. We like them to be fighting *external* demons, too. We still need our fix of all things freaky to get us through the night, after all.

And in this department, *Supernatural* excels, giving us a weekly mix of urban folklore and ancient legends played out in various backwater locations across the U.S. Usually, these myths have been tantalizingly reimagined for our viewing delight by such talented writers as Sera Gamble and Jeremy Carver, to name but two. While some of these legends are eerily familiar to us, it's easily apparent that a massive amount of research goes into bringing us the more unheard of stories—stories that give the audience a chance to not only sink into the macabre plots but actually have fun with folklore that otherwise would have remained sunken in obscurity.

Forget history 101 and anthropology. It's much more fun to tag along with the Winchesters in the back seat of the Impala!

*Hey, you better take care of that car, or I swear I'll haunt your ass.*

—DEAN WINCHESTER, “Faith” (1-12)

And of course, speaking of the raven metal behemoth, the boys riding in the Impala is something we love to see on *Supernatural*. For true fans, the classic Chevy has become more than just an aging motor. Over three seasons, she has become a character in her own right, one we can't bear to see harmed any more than we can the Winchesters themselves. There was a time when most TV shows had a cool car, and Dean's “baby” is right up there with the best of them. Forget KITT and the General Lee—the Impala is big, she's black, and it appears she's more indestructible than Superman . . . at least if “In My Time of Dying” (2-1) is to be believed.

The fans apparently aren't the only ones who see the car as something more. In “Dead Man's Blood” (1-20), John chided Dean for not taking care of the Impala, and every time Dean's life hangs in the balance, she is his first thought after Sam. And in “Fresh Blood” (3-7), Sam even succumbed to his brother's wishes and began to learn how to fix his four-wheeled sibling.

*Supernatural* is as much about family values as hunting the unknown,

and the Impala is 100 percent Winchester all the way!

*I choose to go down swinging.*

—DEAN WINCHESTER, “Jus in Bello” (3-12)

Whatever attracts each fan to *Supernatural*, one thing is a constant—we’ll fight to the bitter end to keep the Winchesters on our screens. We’re in love with each and every part of the show, from its production crew, writing staff, and stars, right on up to Master Kripke, who created all things Winchester. There’s so much more depth to the show than I could ever bring to light in this introduction, but as fans, you don’t need to take my word for it. If you’re like me, you already live, breathe, and sometimes sleep *Supernatural*.

As Webmaster of one of the larger, if not largest, fan sites for the show, I’ve come to know firsthand the kind of people who tune in every week. Indeed, the chances are, I may even know you!

I’ve been the boss of other Web sites, and known many other fandoms in my many years, but one thing I have never seen before is the kind of devotion otherwise ordinary people give this show—and indeed, one another. We’re not just fans, we’re a community, a worldwide group of viewers who have also become *friends* because of one man’s dream. The essays within these pages bear wonderful testament to our enthusiasm and zeal.

Eric Kripke once likened his vision to the epic *Star Wars*, and maybe he was right in more ways than even he knew. *Supernatural* may not be a journey to a galaxy far, far away, but it does explore the depths of the human mind, pushing its characters to the brink and beyond, and we the obsessed viewers are right there along with them.

I suspect that, long after its demise, *Supernatural* will still be seen in countless countries via countless reruns, and may one day reach the same level of cult “status” as the likes of *Star Trek* and the U.K.’s *Doctor Who*.

Until then, may *Supernatural* stay “in the hunt” for many years to come!

Dawn (Kittsbud)  
Webmaster, Supernatural.tv

*One of Supernatural's greatest enigmas—and most controversial discussion points—isn't a demon or a monster, an urban legend or a twisted folktale, but John Winchester, the patriarch of the show and, arguably, the catalyst behind the Winchester boys' story. Often described as controlling and strict, hard and obsessive, John is also repeatedly depicted as self-sacrificing and loving, devoted to his boys and desperate to protect them from the evil he knows is out there stalking his family—a “hero” in every sense of the word. It is this dichotomy that makes John Winchester so intriguing. Good father or bad father? Benevolent teacher or drill sergeant? Hero or villain? Success or failure? Tanya Huff investigates.*

TANYA HUFF

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## “WE’RE NOT EXACTLY THE BRADYS”

Just to get one thing out of the way up front—I do not have kids. What’s more, there’s no chance of my ever having kids. Therefore, my discussing John Winchester’s parenting choices and the results of same could be considered marital advice from yet another unmarried marriage counselor. On the other hand, I never had a wife be eviscerated by a demon and pinned to the ceiling to burn, nor have I ever owned a ’67 Impala. It’s unlikely that the lack of either will weigh against me during any evaluation of my scholarship on the topic, so perhaps we can ignore the lack of kids thing as well.

It is therefore my opinion that John Winchester, for all his flaws as a father—and they were legion—was not, as it happens, a bad father. He was not, by any means, a good father (“So, somewhere along the line, I stopped being your father. And I became your drill sergeant” [“Dead Man’s Blood,” 1-20]), but he had to have done something right. He must have because his sons, for all *their* flaws—and those flaws are also

legion—are good men.

Dean Winchester, tired of the fight and wanting nothing more than a chance to live happily ever after, is so much a good man that his subconscious refuses to let him rest. His mother was alive, Sam had Jess back, he had a beautiful woman who loved him, and yet he sacrificed happiness because strangers needed him, and there was a job that only he could do. He didn't want to and he trembled on the edge of screaming that it wasn't fair but he did it anyway—took the hard road because it was the right thing to do.

Sam Winchester, tainted by demon blood and intended to lead the armies of Hell, refused to hit his enemy when he was down. Refused to end it by killing a helpless man despite that man having done his best to kill him. It wasn't the smart thing to do when you consider the way things turned out, but it was the right thing to do.

Good men don't just happen, they're made—and to see how we have to go back to the beginning.

John Winchester, an ex-Marine who saw combat in Vietnam, married to Mary, a woman he loves desperately, settles down in Lawrence, Kansas. There's nothing in the evidence to suggest that the town was home to either of them—there's a definite lack of family around when the shit hits the fan—but maybe they're there because John had a chance to buy into a friend's garage. He's a good mechanic and this is the kind of chance a man can build a life on.

John and Mary buy a house and have two sons—Dean, and then when Dean is almost four and a half years old, Samuel. Sam. Sammy, although, later, only Dean gets to call him that. John's a hands-on father. Not only does he put his four-year-old to bed, Mary expects him to answer when Sam is heard crying over the baby monitor. This is worth noting because twenty-odd years ago this was even less the default behavior for fathers than it is now.

He has a little trouble sleeping sometimes, but hey, that happens. Given what he chooses to watch on this particular night, he's probably not suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because of his time in combat. Guys with combat-induced PTSD don't watch war movies—as a general rule, they can't handle the sound of gunfire. Among other things.

It's fairly safe then to say that on the night Mary is killed, John is about as happy and as emotionally stable as it's possible to get.

And then his wife starts screaming, jerking him out of sleep. There's a moment of calm when he reaches Sam's nursery and sees the baby safe. But then he sees blood drip from the ceiling. When he looks up, Mary, pinned to the ceiling, belly cut open, bursts into flame. John is horrified and no one would blame him if he froze, unable to cope with what he sees. But he doesn't freeze—his wife may be dying in a horrible and bizarre way but she's not his only responsibility and before he attempts to save her, he grabs his younger son and runs from the room. Had Dean not met him in the hall, his next stop would probably have been Dean's room, but the boy is right there. He places the baby in Dean's arms and says, "Take your brother outside as fast as you can. Don't look back. Now, Dean, go!" ("Pilot," 1-1).

He trusts a four-year-old with a baby. He knows Dean will do exactly as he said. Why? Because his father asked him to. Four-year-olds who obey instantly, who have their entirely justifiable fears calmed by their father giving them a job and trusting them to do it, are rare. This indicates a level of trust already in place because that sort of thing doesn't spontaneously appear in emergencies. John had to have already been giving Dean tasks, trusting him to complete them and making it worth his while to do so—children being selfish little beasts—and given what we've seen of them together so far, it's a fair guess to say that John's reward for this behavior was nothing more than his love and approval.

Only when the boys are on the way out of the house does John go back to help Mary, only to find that she's beyond help. Even in his shock and terror and grief, he doesn't stay, futilely (metaphorically) throwing himself onto the pyre with his wife—he races outside and grabs up both boys, carrying them to further safety as the house blows. Inarguably, John Winchester loved his wife but he lived for his sons.

The official explanation is that it was an electrical fire. In the first flush of grief, John's allowed to be a little crazy, so probably no one takes his raving about what actually happened very seriously. But John knows what he saw. It would be so much easier to deny his memory, to believe the sight of Mary dying on the ceiling was a construct of his grief, but he's not that kind of a man and he goes looking for answers.

In the unincorporated area of Stull, Kansas, which lies just west of Lawrence across Clinton Lake, there's a cemetery that a popular local urban legend claims is a "gateway to hell."<sup>1</sup> So it's not entirely surprising that Missouri Mosely, the psychic John consults, is actually, well, psychic, and as she tells Sam and Dean later, "I just told him what was really out there in the dark. I guess you could say . . . I drew back the curtains for him" ("Home," 1-9). She didn't know exactly what had killed Mary but she knew it was something evil.

Now as much as he may have wanted to, it seems John didn't go off hunting this evil right away. Even if we assume the "friend" who'd owned the garage with him is a little dicey on dates ("Matter of fact, it must be, uh . . . twenty years since John disappeared" ["Home"]), later evidence makes it clear John isn't the kind of man who just charges in. He researches first. Not only that but he has a six-month-old baby he has to learn to be the sole parent of—and if Sam was nursing, that's going to be a steep learning curve—and a traumatized four-year-old. ("See, when I was your age, I saw something real bad happen to my mom, and I was scared, too. I didn't feel like talking, just like you" [Dean to Lucas in "Dead in the Water" (1-3)]).

They clearly have some kind of a support system in place—Missouri knew the boys as children and she didn't meet John until after the fire. So how do John and Sam and Dean end up on the road?

It happens when John sells his interest in the garage and buys guns—and his garage-owning "friend" calls Children's Aid (deleted scene from "Home").

John packs his whole life into a '67 Impala rather than lose his sons. He's not going to stop hunting for whatever it was that killed Mary and he's not going to give up his boys—he's not left with much of a choice.

And here's where we need to pause for a moment because, seriously, what kind of a father thinks life on the road is a good choice? If he gave the boys up, he could keep hunting and they could have a life worth living—without him, granted, but safe and normal. Bit of a selfish bastard, wasn't he? His need to keep his sons with him is more important than

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<sup>1</sup> "Lawrence, Kansas." Wikipedia. 21 July 2008. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence,\\_Kansas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence,_Kansas)>

their well-being.

Except . . .

He knows his family has been touched by evil, knows it because he saw it with his own eyes. If he leaves his sons behind, how will people who don't believe in this evil protect them? He has to take them with him; it's the only way to keep them safe ("After your mother passed, all I saw was evil, everywhere. And all I cared about was keeping you boys alive" ["Dead Man's Blood" 1-20]). Well, Missouri believes in the evil but, if asked, she'd probably say—given that she doesn't seem willing to lie to him—that she couldn't stop it.

He wants a normal, safe life for his boys but they can't have that until this thing is dead. He couldn't possibly have expected the hunt to last as long as it did.

The odds are good that during those first few years before he considered Dean old enough to leave in charge of Sam—and we know they were only a *few* years—John had to have wished he could go after this evil without the boys. Anyone who's ever travelled for any distance with two young kids in the car has thought about leaving them with Child Protective Services. Or by the side of the road. Or in one of those charity drop boxes. Car companies put those DVD players in there for a reason. John couldn't give up the hunt and he wouldn't give up his boys, so he found a way to make it work.

What kind of life did they have? Evidence suggests they didn't live in motels. To begin with, the boys were in school (Sam could actually be a genius, and given the number of times it seemed they moved he probably is, but you don't get a full ride to Stanford being home-schooled by John Winchester), and schools require a home address. Living in a motel with kids is one of the fastest ways to have questions asked about how things are at home. Granted, most child welfare services are overworked but John wouldn't risk that. They likely stayed in motels for specific hunts on weekends ("It was the third night in this crap room. . . ." ["Something Wicked," 1-18]) and over holidays ("A Very Supernatural Christmas," 3-8) and in the cheapest housing John could find otherwise. John and Dean seem to have kept what John was actually doing from Sam until Sam was nine, and that would have required at least a certain level of normal.

*While upbringing, shared experiences, and a common goal ensure the characters of Dean and Sam Winchester are similar in many ways, much of Supernatural's drama stems from the brothers' essential differences: the non-conformist and the conformist, the hunter and the would-be student; one embracing the fantastical while the other clings to the everyday.*

*But that's not the only dichotomy the boys represent. Dodger Winslow examines how Supernatural's chalk and cheese brothers can be seen to symbolize these two extremes of perception: the fantasy of how we'd like others to see us versus the reality of how we're actually seen; the fantasy of who we'd like to be versus the reality of who we actually are. Do we think it's all about Dean when really it's all about Sam? Is Dean the fantasy and Sam the reality?*

DODGER WINSLOW

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## THE BURDEN OF BEING SAMMY

(A Parenthetical Discussion of Self-Perception Versus Reality)

He's kind of like the cute chick on *The Munsters*, only taller and with better hair. Or in Kripke world, he's Luke Skywalker to Dean's Han Solo in the far, far away of rural America as the two of them tool down Route 66 through infamous hives of scum and villainy in the coolest landspeeder ever.

He's the Holy Grail, the vessel, the hero, the point. He's clearly John's favorite. He's an emo bitch and a spoiled brat who throws selfish tantrums and stomps away in guy-like hissy fits. He's the prodigal son, the rebel without a cause, the journey that matters, the poster child of him and all the children like him. He's Captain Obvious and Geek Boy. He likes anemic pop crap and won't shut his cake hole; he's a pain-in-the-ass kid brother who's too smart, always cautious, usually right, and still manages to need saving on a regular basis. He's a pudgy twelve-year-old, the teen who left home in a stomp, the guy who fights with his dad because they're too much alike to ever get along, and the man who

grieves the murder of his lover by developing a bit of an unholy thirst for vengeance. He's the one with plans, dreams, hopes for the future. He's the one looking for love, willing to show love, striving to be normal, wanting to fit in, bonded to his family, but also independent of his family.

He is Sammy; and he is Us.

Oh come on. Admit it. We all *want* to be Dean. But the truth of the matter is, we're all much closer to being Sammy, aren't we?

Yes, we'd love to say we'd fall on our swords for the sake of family. But if they told us we couldn't move out of the house when we hit age, we'd still go, wouldn't we? Yes, we'd all love to be preternaturally smooth and successful with the opposite sex. But really, aren't most of us just a little insecure and more looking to bunk up with someone we like, rather than just someone with qualifying equipment?

And yes, absolutely, every one of us would want to be Dean cool, wouldn't we? Look Dean good in a leather jacket? Have a Dean swagger vibe that owns any room into which we walk? Be Dean bold and Dean rebellious in the face of all authority figures? Be Dean tortured to the roots of our very souls . . . something we'd hide with Dean wit and Dean stoic forbearance and just enough Dean attitude so everyone loves us Deanly because they can't ever really touch us, we're just that Dean special and that Dean aloof and that oh-so-Deanishly Dean?

But the truth of the world we live in is never quite the way we'd write it if we were Kripke and in charge of creating our own state of being.

The truth of who we are is Sammy. It's Sammy sorta-smooth and kinda-smart but just a bit geeky for it. It's Sammy in baggy clothes with an occasional opportunity to look really hot in nothing but a towel . . . if we stand just the right way, in just the right light, and if whoever is looking isn't so singularly Dean-struck they don't even freaking notice us. It's Sammy normally abnormal, Sammy I-can-fit-in-but-I-have-to-be-nice-and-polite-and-work-at-it-a-bit. It's Sammy "yes, sir" to the cops, and Sammy "are you sure we should be doing this?" to any overt breaking of the rules that holds the potential to get us busted big time.

And most of all, it's Sammy hurt-us-and-we-cry, Sammy cut-us-and-we-bleed, Sammy feel-the-love-and-we-hug.

Give it up, girlfriends. We're all Sammys, we just want to see our-

selves as Deans.

And oh, the burden of being Sammy. The burden of being the center of the universe upon which every story ever told turns. The burden of being the fulcrum of your family, to whom the others must connect in order to make you a family. The burden of being the one who is always, at the very foundation of it, to blame for every tragedy that has ever befallen those you love.

Oh, wait . . . isn't that *Dean*?

And herein lies the gold of self-perception. And equally, the gold of a storyteller who tells his story not only in terms of how we perceive ourselves to be, but also in terms of who we actually are.

Perception first. From our perspective (the viewer perspective), we perceive these to all be things more truly said of Dean than of Sam. Why? Because they are all things said of self in the worldview of self-perception, and because we want to see ourselves as Dean instead of Sammy.

In this way, we see it oh so clearly: Every story is about Dean, no matter who it is really about (because our lives are about us, no matter who else might star in them on occasion). Sam and John can only connect through the midpoint of Dean. for he is the glue who holds the family together (because we are all the most important cog in our own family dynamics, whether the rest of those yahoo relatives realize it or not). And Dean, in failing to save those he loves from inevitable tragedy, will always wrongfully blame himself for the pain they feel, even if he was only four years old and couldn't possibly have saved his mother (because we all blame ourselves for the things that happen to those we love—for our failure to see it coming, or our failure to be hero enough to stand in front of it when it arrives—even when we can see how wrongful that blame is in the logic of what actually happened).

But from the storyteller's (external) perspective, is that person Dean or is it Sam?

Ah, now *there's* the rub. The storyteller is telling the hero's (your) story. He's just telling it in such a way as to allow you (the viewer) to experience yourself both as you are perceived by others (Sammy) and as you aspire to be perceived by others (Dean). Or, perhaps more germanely, how you actually are (Sammy) and how you think you are (Dean) or

wish you were (again, Dean).

So to adjust an aspirational self-perception to a more accurate external perspective, every story is about Sammy (you) even though it really *should* be about Dean (not really you) because he's way more cool and interesting and good-looking than Sammy (the real you), mostly because he is too Dean to be anyone other than Dean (not really you).

Likewise, Dean (the way you want to be seen) and John (your family who knows you too well to fall for that crap; and who is, by the way, just like you even though neither one of you will admit it, because you both want to think you're much more like Dean than that selfish, emo bitch Sammy) can only really connect through the midpoint of Sammy (the you they know, emo bitch that you've always been since the day you were born) for Sammy (you) is the glue who holds the family together (because you are the most important cog in your own family dynamic, whether the rest of those yahoo relatives realize it or not; all of them wanting to come off like a bunch of Deans, even though they are really just a bunch of Johns, which is nothing but another way of saying they're just a bunch of Sammys).

And lastly, in failing to save those he (you) loves (John the family, Jess the love) from inevitable evisceration and ceiling pyrotechnics (loss, either of life or love, and the subsequent pain of that loss) by a Demon (events outside your control) either known (should have seen it coming) or unknown (should have been able to stop it when it arrived even if you didn't see it coming), Sammy (you, again) will always rightfully (because the world turns around you, thus the *self* aspect of the concept *selfish*) blame himself (yourself) for the pain they (those you love, including yourself) feel, even if it wasn't him (you) who actually caused the tragedy (because, hello? event outside your control) so much as simply Sammy (you) being the reason the Demon (tragic events outside your control) came after his (your) family in the first place (because the world turns around you, and every story told in the context of your life is about you, no matter who else might star in them on occasion).

So self-perception and external perspective: Who is the hero and who is the star? Logical assumption to the contrary, in *Supernatural*, they are not one and the same. The hero is who the story is about. In the case of *Supernatural*, that would be Sammy (you). But the star . . . ah, the star.

The star is whom the viewer *perceives* the story to be about. And in the case of *Supernatural*, that is almost universally Dean (not really you).

As Kripke says: Luke Skywalker to Han Solo.

So how can the hero not be the star? It's not that hard when self-perception and external perspective share the stage in individualist form to put to flesh the storyteller's agenda of making a statement on the difference between the way we want to see ourselves and the way we actually are.

*Huh?* you ask. In answer, I give you Sam and Dean. I give you Luke and Han. I give you yourself and who you would like to be. One is life; one is larger than life; but both are storyteller turns on the subject of self-perception versus external perspective. With this as the context for discussion, let's look at season one in terms of Sammy, love, and family . . . and how the burden of being Sammy is very much the burden of not being Dean.

On the subject of Sammy and love, let's talk Jess.

By talking Dean. (Because you can't talk Sammy without talking Dean.)

You realize Dean (not really you) would have been *way* cooler than to actually fall for Jess (love, as in romantic love, as in the love of your life, not just a one-night stand) in such a way that her loss could cripple him, right? That's one of the whole points of Dean (not really you). He's wounded by life. He's emotionally distant because that's the heroic way he deals with his pain. He lives the emo life inside, where it belongs, rather than outside, where it can embarrass him or make him vulnerable. And he does it because he is just that strong and just that stoic and just that much the hero (and just that much Not Really You).

Not to put too fine a point on it, but Dean (not really you) is the antithesis of Sammy (you) when it comes to the subject of love. Why? Because on no subject are our own self-perceptions more reflective of our desire to be stronger (better, faster) than we actually are than when the subject of love is put on the table.

As an aspirational reflection of our desire to be strong, in control, and above the emo bitchness that defines the very essence of our human nature, Dean (not really you) doesn't really fall in love so much as drift in and out of lust (emotionally distant). Such is the life of the mythic

*Few of us out in the “real world” are likely to begin a conversation, “So this killer truck . . .” as Dean does in the season one episode “Route 666.” Even Sam comments, “Our lives are weird, man,” in season two’s “Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things.” But while killer trucks, demons, werewolves, reapers, and death omens are just another day at the office for our heroes, Sam and Dean’s lives are full of things we ordinary folk would term “supernatural.”*

*Randall M. Jensen takes a look at horror and the supernatural in *Supernatural* and how the Winchesters’ perceptions differ from those of us who remain blissfully unaware of what’s really out there in the dark.*

RANDALL M. JENSEN

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## WHAT’S SUPERNATURAL ABOUT *SUPERNATURAL*?

**S***upernatural* begins like any number of horror stories. Once upon a time, not too long ago, an ordinary family lived in an ordinary house on an ordinary street somewhere in Kansas. John and Mary and their two boys, Dean and Sam. Very ordinary names. But then, one night, something extraordinary happens. In the dark, with the lights flickering, and with building tension and slightly spooky music playing in the background, we glimpse a shadowy figure, we hear a bloodcurdling scream, and then, as we watch with John, we see something impossible: Mary sprawls on the ceiling, bleeding, and she spontaneously bursts into flames. The ordinary is gone forever and life for the Winchesters will never be the same.

Although it would be difficult (and pointless) to try to give a precise and universal definition of horror, it’s worth recalling Freud’s observation in his essay “The Uncanny” that “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”

If we make the plausible assumption that Freud's notion of the uncanny lies somewhere near the heart of horror fiction, we may think of horror as *what happens when the familiar meets or becomes the unfamiliar*. Horror stories involve something strange, out of place, unseen or unknown, something that makes our skin crawl and our spines tingle. We all know the delicious dread good horror can provoke in us. But it's also significant that this thing, this disturbing anomaly, is an unexpected intrusion into our everyday world. Horror *needs* the familiar as well as the unfamiliar. Now, the horrific element doesn't have to be something supernatural, since even something perfectly natural can be uncanny. Think of what a good storyteller or filmmaker can do with something as simple as the dark. However, perhaps unfairly, the books and movies most of us call to mind if we're asked to list well-known horror stories probably do involve the supernatural. And since our show's very title is *Supernatural*, we're especially interested in horror that contains a healthy dose of the supernatural. So let's spend some time thinking about the way the supernatural functions in our favorite show and perhaps we'll learn something about the distinctive nature of the show's stories as horror.

### **SUPERNATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL**

*Supernatural* depicts a world that's very different from the real one. The most glaring difference is the world's *population*: demons, ghosts, vampires, werewolves, shapeshifters, reapers, and other strange creatures roam the planet with us. But there's an even deeper difference, because the Winchesters' world runs by a different set of *rules*, too. Dead isn't dead, not really: you can bring the dead back to life, if you know how. And corpses can move around by themselves, even when they're so decrepit they've got no earthly right to do so. Magic works. Lines of chalk on the floor have incredible causal influence over unimaginably powerful beings. Salt isn't just something you put in your soup. And so on. The world of *Supernatural* is, well, supernatural. But what exactly do Sam and Dean *mean* when they call something supernatural? How do they *know* whether or not they're dealing with something supernatural? Let's hunt down the answers to these questions.

Nearly every episode of *Supernatural* is jam-packed full of supernatu-

ral entities and events, whether they're puzzling, frightening, gruesome, thrilling, humorous, friendly, or just downright weird. The one exception seems to be the first season's "The Benders" (1-15), in which Sam and Dean come up against a sadistic backwoods family who are, in Sam's words, "just people." There's nothing supernatural—in a certain sense—about them, but no doubt we'd agree with Sam that there's something decidedly *unnatural* about human beings that live as they do. Other than this standout episode, it's wall-to-wall demons, monsters, and spirits. Of course, this is because Sam and Dean are constantly on the lookout for their kind of prey, whether by scanning the papers for bizarre stories, talking to Bobby or Ellen or Ash or the other hunters at the Roadhouse, or trying to decipher their dad's journal. What exactly are they looking for? To begin with, something that's odd, unusual, apparently inexplicable. Someone has seen something that's literally unbelievable. Or somebody winds up dead and it just isn't clear how. This might be a job for the Winchesters! But then again, it might not be.

What counts as supernatural in our show's world? The answer to this question turns out to be surprisingly interesting. When Sam and Dean are searching for a potential hunt, they often use the label "supernatural" to characterize what they're after. They don't want to cross state lines only to find out that a story is based on some really bizarre coincidence and there's no quarry for them to hunt down. They're after something that's genuinely supernatural, not just something strange or freaky. Yet vampire nests and demon possessions are very much a part of the world they inhabit. They're not unusual at all in their lives, and in that sense, they're perfectly natural—at least for the Winchester family. But in this sense, what's natural to you and me and what's natural to Sam and Dean aren't the same thing, not by a long shot.

For example, is a haunting a natural or supernatural phenomenon? To us, the answer's clear: What could be more supernatural than that? (I'll assume that, like me, you haven't had an encounter with Casper.) However, what if we were to experience hauntings on a regular basis as Sam and Dean do? At some point, wouldn't we come to regard hauntings as *natural* in some important respect? And maybe we would come to think that formerly we were mistaken to see them as supernatural. If so, we'd be guided by the thought that what's supernatural is simply *what*

doesn't or can't happen in nature. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the philosopher David Hume defines a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature," and this seems to be close to the idea we're after in defining the supernatural. Now, maybe a miracle is a *good* supernatural event. Not too many people would cry miracle upon seeing a scary, fugly, god-animated scarecrow, but they would definitely think that something supernatural was going on. In our world, creatures such as pagan gods are the stuff of imagination rather than creatures that are found out there in the biosphere. That's why, by our account, they're supernatural beings. But in *Supernatural*, they are presented as if they're normal residents of the world, even if such beings tend to keep it on the down-low, sometimes pretending to be just another particularly annoying suburban couple who are just a bit too happy about the holidays. In the world Eric Kripke has created, there just *are* demons, ghosts, and so on, even if most folks aren't in the know about this. Such creatures are rather like the bizarre species that live deep in caves, on the ocean floor, or in some forgotten jungle: they're unknown to most of us, but they're out there and we can learn about their characteristic traits. What we regard as the supernatural realm is for Sam and Dean a part of nature. The supernatural has thus been "naturalized."

After all, Sam and Dean enter many haunted houses and meet and dispose of many spooky "supernatural" creatures. It's precisely this piling up of experiences of the (formerly) supernatural realm that leads them to alter their picture of the world. Whereas a single monster is a horrifying and seemingly impossible interruption of our reality, thousands of monsters belonging to dozens of species show that we're dealing with a new reality. Not only do Sam and Dean see the world differently than most everyone around them, but in an important way, they even live in a different world, a world with a different nature. If they were to think and act as they do without having had such ample experience of ghosts, demons, and the like, they'd simply be screwballs, out of touch with the real world, rather like the two guys who eventually become the "Ghostfacers." At first, those losers believed in ghosts without any experience at all to confirm their beliefs. But since even idiots can get lucky, they just happened to be right! Sam and Dean are different. For them, the appearance of a ghost is not at all something that goes against every-

thing they've experienced in their lives. Quite the opposite, really. Again, the supernatural has become the natural.

Why then do Sam and Dean use the label "supernatural" in the way they do? What's going on here, I think, is that Sam and Dean are using "supernatural" in our sense, or more precisely, in the sense assumed by most people in the alternate universe that is the world of *Supernatural*. It means "something the uninitiated think isn't 'real,' i.e., isn't part of nature." We (and most of the folks in Sam and Dean's world) don't believe in ghosts. And so we regard them as supernatural. Sam and Dean simply agree to talk as most people do because it's easier to talk that way. As the eighteenth-century British philosopher George Berkeley once said in a different context (in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*), we can "speak with the vulgar, but think with the learned." We do still talk about the sun rising and setting, after all, even though we realize that isn't what is actually happening. And even the most reductionistic neuroscientist might ask you what's on your mind or talk about finding a kindred spirit, even though she doesn't for a second believe in immaterial minds or spirits. In much that way, Sam and Dean call a lot of what they encounter supernatural even though it plainly isn't, not in their world. Such ambiguities are fairly common in language; sometimes it avoids confusion to sort them out.

On a few occasions, however, the Winchester brothers run into something that seems to be supernatural *from their own point of view*. Here I'm thinking of two episodes in particular, "Faith" (1-12) and "Houses of the Holy" (2-13). In these storylines, Sam and Dean find themselves faced with something that simply doesn't fit into their view of things, wondering whether to believe in something they haven't ever seen before. A mere man who has the power to heal? Or, even more dramatically, an angel? As far as Sam and Dean know, in spite of all they've seen, things like this just don't happen, and thus they don't fit into their view of the world. From all the time they've spent hunting, from all the knowledge they've gained from their dad's journal and from other hunters, Sam and Dean have put together a kind of "science" of hunting, a kind of expanded "biology," I suppose, with demonology and the like in addition to entomology, zoology, botany, etc. It's sketchy, to be sure, and focused pretty intently on figuring out how to *kill* the species they study. But this

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