

Ask any writer, and they'll tell you how important it is — and how challenging it is — to hook the reader early in the story. Beginnings can be the hardest part to write, since the stakes are so high: You need to motivate the reader to stick around until the very end.

But when it comes to TV, it seems that writers struggle more with the other end of their stories. Once a screenwriter has the green light to see their story idea make it onto the screen, they're met with a whole different challenge: how to satisfyingly wrap up a story when they don't actually know *when* it will end. Since television shows are usually greenlit season by season, that means the writers have to write the ending for one season without knowing if they'll be picked up again for another.

Unless you're an incredibly popular show, the sword of damocles always hangs above your head. And even then, a new network CEO or changing economic winds can still scrap your best laid plans.

But every storyteller wants to nail the ending. They want to leave their audience feeling like the journey was worth it. That the hours invested paid off and leave them feeling satisfied.

That's a hard goal to meet, and the stakes get higher the longer a show runs.

When I think of TV endings, I can easily recall the ones that made me bawl my eyes out, like *The Good Place*. Or ones that made me really think about the grand arc of the show and how we decide if someone deserves redemption, like in *BoJack Horseman*. Or even the endings that sent me straight to writing fix-it fan fiction, like the original ending of *FullMetal Alchemist*.

Endings are a writer's or actor's last chance to leave an impression on their audience. They can spell the difference between a show being fondly remembered and rewatched or erased for the cultural zeitgeist's memory. Sorry, *Game of Thrones*.

And from a fan's perspective, endings can represent the ending of a relationship of sorts. Especially if the show is particularly long-running.

### **Lynn Zubernis**

One of the reasons that losing a television show whether it ends, it's canceled, there's some reason you can't watch it anymore at any kind of loss is really difficult for people is a) because when you are a passionate fan of something, that thing, and the community that comes up around it is very important to you. So it's tied to your identity, we establish our identity within a group, we take inspiration from our favorite characters. So

losing that feels like an identity threat, a threat to our very identity and sense of self. We also form communities around the television shows that we fan. So it's a loss of that sense of belongingness that we get from being immersed in that community that's also really good for our self esteem, it makes us less lonely, it leads to less depression. So on the one hand, losing a television show is very, very important to fans.

Lynn Zubernis is a psychologist and educator, but is perhaps better known by her online handle - Fangasm.

She's spent a lot of time thinking about the psychological effects of tv endings and why it can feel like the death of a friend, even if non-fan friends are giving you the side-eye over your "dramatic reaction."

### **Lynn Zubernis**

Unfortunately, in the eyes of the rest of the world, they don't really understand that importance and don't feel like it could possibly be that important. So the loss of a television show becomes what we call a stigmatized loss, a loss that's perceived as not valid in some way, maybe even something that it's shameful to feel so strongly about that goes against what society's norms are for the things that we should be grieving. And because it's a stigmatized loss, that means it can lead to what we call disenfranchised grief. When a loss isn't openly acknowledged and isn't able to be publicly mourned. Then people don't get the social support around that loss that they need.

Now, having personally lost friends and family to disease and tragedy, I can tell you that grief is so much more all-consuming than my favorite show getting canceled. This is not to make light of the very real losses we suffer in our lives.

But there is something to be said for the way that a loss that isn't fully understood by others can be an isolating experience.

### **Lynn Zubernis**

If you're feeling really sad about supernatural ending, and you mentioned that to a family member and they respond with that. That's so silly. It's just a stupid TV show. There's no support there. There's no recognition. It's not recognized as a legitimate loss and that can really get in the way of the way we are able to process our grief and go through the mourning process and feel validated in our feelings. So that can be actually really, really difficult for people.

Ok, this is where I can hear Daniel, my husband, rolling his eyes so hard they pop out of his skull. But that's exactly the kind of reaction that Lynn is talking about!

It's valid to have feelings! We aren't robots! A good television show is heavily invested in making its audience feel something, so why are we surprised when we feel grief at the end of that journey?

And if the fans feel sad when the story has reached its conclusion, I think that should be understood as a sign that they did a good job making us care.

We don't get emotional about things that never impacted us to begin with.

[music]

Let me just go ahead and make this very personal.

Picture this: It's October 2021. I'm on my way to work, which at the time was a 90 minute commute by train and bus through the city of Chicago. 2 hours if I was unlucky with traffic.

I'm on the bus, scrolling through youtube's video recommendations when I spot one titled, "The Supernatural Finale Aired, and Tumblr Exploded." And, I want to stress, I didn't really know much about the show at the time. I had a vague sense of friends in high school being into it and me being too chicken to watch what I thought would be too scary.

[murmured aside] hilarious, considering it was still, at the end of the day, a CW show.

Anyways, I had liked other videos by this creator, Sarah Z, and decided to give it a shot. Sitting on that bus on a fall day, thinking about the upcoming Halloween festivities, I decided that Supernatural wasn't actually too scary for me, and that I'd give it a watch. Hence, my journey down the rabbit hole began.

But what's so funny to me... Is that I started the show FULLY AWARE OF THE ENDING.

Ok maybe that's not fair. I was fully aware of Season 15 episode 18's content and the....unresolved plot threads that happened afterwards. That's what the dang hour and a half of a youtube video was about! Well, that and the ensuing fan reactions of the time.

I've been mulling it over and I can't think of another single example of a show I started watching because I'd had the ending spoiled like that. It's utterly bizarre!

But the funny thing is, it didn't spoil the experience of the show at all. There were plenty of plot points and character development that I got to discover all on my own. But to start a 15 season series based on a video that focused on how it all ends? Even I know that sounds kinda crazy.

So I should have seen it coming, that season 2 of this podcast would be all about endings: the good, the bad, the ugly.

[music break]

When I first started my deep dive into show endings, I thought our conversations would be straightforward. There are good endings. And there are bad endings.

My questions were simple:

- What makes a good ending good?
- Why do some shows refuse to relinquish their grips on our imagination?
- What if a show is cut short? Can fans actually impact the chances of it getting renewed?
  - And most importantly, will we ever get more supernatural?

I should have known the truth would be messy, if not impossible, to find...

As I originally pitched it, I planned to focus on how tv series end and what that does to their fandom. Whether the ending is good (*The Good Place*, *Succession*), terrible (*Game of Thrones*), or divisive (*Lost*, *Supernatural*). Whether it matters if the show is canceled (*Firefly*, *Our Flag Means Death*) or goes out on its own terms (*The Good Place*, *Supernatural*). Whether there was an attempt at a revival (*X files*, *Gossip Girl*) or at building out the universe (*Star Trek* movies, *The Winchesters*)."

### **Richard Speight Jr**

But also don't you think the very idea that good ending, a bad ending? That's also debatable.

Turns out, many of my guests didn't even agree with my initial framing!

### **Richard Speight Jr**

So like, there's a little bit like it kinda like when vacation is over. Is there any great way to end to vacation, like, get back in traffic, get to the airport and fly home, get dropped off by a helicopter, have grandma pick you up at the bus station, like, whatever it's over. And so all you're gonna do is reflect back to your time in the sand and go, Man, I dig the beach. And it's over. Like, I always feel like if you if you enjoyed something enough, then there's no satisfactory ending.

Richard Speight Jr, who casual Supernatural fans will recognize as The Trickster-slash-Gabriel, and more intense fans will recall as the director for 11 episodes of Supernatural, just didn't buy that there's ever a quote-unquote good ending that satisfies everyone.

### **Richard Speight Jr**

What would have made people happy? Nothing, because nobody wants to go away. Some people would have been more satisfied by something maybe, but not everybody. You know, whoever was satisfied by something would have left other people feeling cheated. So, you know, it's an unsolvable crime and unwinnable war. It's a, you know, fool's errand to blah, blah, blah. All the cliches I can think of it's it's impossible to get it right. And that, in itself, is what makes it interesting.

And trust me, I tried to give him what I thought were the standard examples of a Bad Television Ending.

### **Richard Speight Jr**

I just don't know if there's anything is a good ending? Like, what would you consider to be a good one? Like, you didn't like Game of Thrones? What? What is classified in your research or life as a good one?

But we'll come back to Rich's question, and my response, in the next episode.

At the time, I thought maybe as someone on the other side of the screen, Rich was an anomaly.

### **Paul Booth**

there's no magic formula that gives us like, this is a good ending.

Turns out, even fandom researchers were more inclined to agree with Rich than me!

### **Paul Booth**

My name is Paul Booth. I'm a professor in the College of Communication at DePaul University, where I teach in the media and popular culture area of our college. And my area of interest and research and what I have been researching for God, like 20 years now, which is scary when I look in the mirror, is fans and fan, fan behavior and fan communities.

Paul and I got much more into the philosophy of endings in all sorts of media and how narrative arcs differ across those mediums.

### **Paul Booth**

Figuring out what a good ending is, I mean, people have been writing about endings and narratives for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Just looking at this sample size of two, from the MANY people I spoke to on the topic of tv endings, I think you'll find very quickly in this conversation that my tidy little categories and examples of good and bad endings didn't last very long...

That's why, this season I'm pulling from a vast array of folks from all sorts of different fields, including: journalists, researchers, the fans themselves, and the creators who made the shows.

I'm hoping that each of these different perspectives make you think differently about how endings are structured. Or whether endings even matter anymore in the modern age of streaming.

Journalist and co-host of the podcast Fansplaining certainly doesn't think so.

### **Elizabeth Minkel**

I think that it's rare to even think about a television show ending in the way I grew up in fandom with TV shows ending now. Because of streaming, because it's so totally obliterated the the traditional, I mean, we're talking about American media, because the streamers and then the network's in turn, kind of following their lead have obliterated the calendar.

Elizabeth Minkel has been in fan spaces much longer than I, and her podcast on all things fandom, with co-host Flourish Klink, has been going strong since 2016.

In our conversation about the difference between old network tv series endings versus those in the new world of streaming, I had to ask:

**Sadie Witkowski**

Do you think you've seen people deal with endings of television shows differently between like before the old times, and now the like streaming times?

**Elizabeth Minkel**

Yeah, absolutely. Um, I think that it's rare to even think about a television show ending in the way I grew up in fandom.

For clarity's sake, I should mention that both Elizabeth and I fall solidly into the Millennial generation. We weren't a part of the generation who watched live as shows like M.A.S.H. came to an end. The final episode of M.A.S.H. in 1983 remains the most watched series finale in U.S. television history, at least live, with 105 million viewers.

I guess the biggest mass culture event I remember, in terms of TV shows ending, would have to be Friends in 2004? But that was still only a vague awareness in the periphery of my life. I was only 12 years old, and my parents wouldn't allow me to watch it anyways!

**Elizabeth Minkel**

I think that the culture has started to fracture in this century, long before streaming came, right. Before the succession finale on Tumblr, someone reblogged a doctored photo. I don't even know if there's a photo. I think they just described it. But there's a famous photo of people watching the Seinfeld finale in Times Square.-And they were like imagine that with a succession finale. And I was just like, Do you know how few people in the grand scheme of things watch succession? The idea that, Gen Z folks who were like, maybe one year old when the Seinfeld finale, but this idea of that huge mass culture.

Everything about our viewing experience has slowly started to move away from these big finales that literally everyone is watching.

And not just because streaming services have smaller audiences than network television.

**Elizabeth Minkel**

I don't think endings matter anymore. Right? I mean, I honestly, I don't know if they mattered. I don't think this is just streaming.

**Elizabeth Minkel**

the audiences are so fractured. And then I think that the cancellations are so unceremonious.

For Supernatural fans who listened to last season, you probably know that at least that show got to plan how and when they wanted to close the story.

It was a rare luxury then, to know you could plan how to leave your audience. And shows on streaming services aren't even given the grace to know if or when they will get another season.

### **Elizabeth Minkel**

this kind of idea of, oh, maybe my show is gonna get renewed? I hope it does. Oh, when's it gonna come back? Oh, I don't know. And so this kind of idea of when your show used to end or get canceled, it happened in a very regimented way. You're like, we're not coming back in the fall. Right, you know, this is a right, like unceremonious, or this will be the last season, oh, we have this kind of, you know, nine months to sit with last season or whatever. Whereas now, even without the crazy cancellations, just, you know, rug pulling that's happening all over the place, even when shows do get renewed. It just feels so arbitrary.

[music cue]

Already things are getting interesting.

In episode two, we'll explore my initial thesis of how quote-unquote good or bad endings impact their fandoms, using the end of Supernatural, plus lots of other television series, as case studies.

From there, we'll expand across genres and into corollary arguments. Does it matter if a show is more narrative vs episodic in terms of how it ends? How much control do showrunners have in how their story ends? And what about revivals and reboots?

We'll talk about comedies, dramas, genre television shows, limited run series, and even a few shows that just... don't seem to end.

But with all this talk of endings, it's inevitable that we need to talk about spoilers.

[fun montage of my guests saying "spoilers" with music playing under it]

### **Richard Speight Jr**



spoiler alert for anybody who doesn't want to hear this

**Casey Mendoza**

I feel like I can't talk about it without spoiling it

**Destination Toast**

sorry, spoilers for banana fish?

**Paul Booth**

I guess spoilers

**Richard Speight Jr**

Can we talk spoilers on the show?

**Rob Benedict**

You know, spoiler alert

Just because I got into Supernatural after the ending was spoiled for me, doesn't mean that that's what everyone else wants. When it comes to endings, it's basically impossible to disentangle these conversations from, frankly massive spoilers for these shows.

Still, I know you might not want a show that we discuss on the pod to be spoiled for you, even if it's been off the air for months or years. So, before you start yelling at me about spoilers and turn off the show, I'm going to offer this solution.

At the beginning of each episode, I'll let you know what shows we'll be discussing and whether there are any plot points that get revealed in the course of the episode.

So you'll hear, [alert sound here] "in this episode, I spoke with experts and fans about the shows Game of Thrones, How I met your mother, and Avatar: the last airbender. We only discussed plot points for avatar and game of thrones - check the podcast description for time stamps of where you might want to skip ahead if you don't want those shows spoiled for you."

And if it makes you feel any better, I do plan on only talking about shows that ended at least a year ago. So hopefully, this is your impetus to finally finish that dang show so that you can listen to the podcast! I know my editor is frantically trying to finish Supernatural as we speak.

One last note before we depart:

This season we're looking at what can be a fraught issue. As I said at the top of this episode, endings can lead to very real grief. Especially in shows that have run for so long like *Supernatural*, it can feel like when your group of close friends all go their separate ways for college or careers.

But unlike transitioning to that next stage of life, nobody in your friend group will argue with you about a decision to go to a state school versus an Ivy League. That's not the case with TV endings.

Whether character arcs feel satisfying to fans, plot lines feel resolved, or even your favorite ship does or doesn't end up together...it's unlikely that everyone will agree on all points.

My goal in putting together this podcast isn't to upset anyone. Though lord knows it will probably happen with the contentious endings that we'll be discussing...

But if you think I got something wrong, or you wish I'd explored a certain aspect with more depth, I would love to hear from you! I'll include my twitter (or I guess, X) handle in each episode description and my DMs are always open. I'll also link to a short survey that I put together to hear from you, the fans.

If you send me your feedback on earlier episodes before the later episodes are out, your ideas might even shape our discussions later on the show. This podcast is an exploration of fandom, not just my individual experiences as a fan.

So, yeah. Send me your thoughts!

[music]

Next time on *In Defense of Fandom*, we dig into whether endings are truly as universally beloved or reviled as we think.

Are *all* tv endings debated among fans?

*Why* is there so much debate around some endings? Didn't we all watch the same show?

We'll hear from actors, showrunners, fandom researchers, journalists and more!

And, best of all, we'll get to take a look at some cold hard data that shows which tv endings are the truly most debated within fandom. Or more specifically, within fan fiction writers.

See you in two weeks!

[music continues]

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*In Defense of Fandom* was made possible through an unhealthy obsession, and your support via ko-fi. If you're not already supporting the show and you'd like to, you can find a link in the show notes to our ko-fi.

A one-time donation of any amount will get you access to behind-the-scenes content, including the audio of my full conversation with Richard Speight Jr and other guests you'll be hearing from across the season.

Your support is deeply appreciated.