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THE NEW WITCHES: CRITICAL ESSAYS ON 21ST CENTURY TELEVISION PORTRAYALS (2021) EDITED BY AARON K. H. HO

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Ho, Aaron K. H., editor. *The New Witches: Critical Essays on 21st Century Television Portrayals*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2021. 208 pp.

The figure of the witch continues to fascinate audiences and scholars. As *The New Witches: Critical Essays on 21st Century Television Portrayals* (2021), edited by Aaron K. H. Ho, demonstrates, witch characters and narratives of witchcraft exist in abundance in popular culture, with many notable texts emerging in the 2010s. This edited collection attends to the popularity of the witch in twenty-first-century popular culture by considering a number of serialised narratives. The thirteen essays in the collection explore witches in television and streaming series such as *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013-2014), *The Secret Circle* (2011-2012), *The Magicians* (2015-2020), *Emerald City* (2017), *Charmed* (2018- 2022), and *Salem* (2014-2017). The contributing authors analyse these various popular televisual narratives of witches and witchcraft by exploring how the texts engage with feminism and feminist thought, heteronormativity and LGBTQIA+ representation, ecological and environmental concerns, sexual violence and trauma, representations of disabilities, generational relationships and familial structures, and political activism. Witches have been a popular subject for television series since *Bewitched* (1964-1972) introduced American audiences to the magical suburban housewife Samantha Stephens in the mid-1960s. Since then, witches have remained popular characters in film and television but, as the collection illustrates, their popularity increased notably between 2013 and 2019 (3). The edited collection's appendix details no fewer than sixty-five television and streaming programs, most of which are produced in the United States or the United Kingdom, which graced television screens between the years 2001 and 2020, attesting to the undeniable popularity of on-screen witches in this century (203-205). Though the geographical scope is not addressed in the Introduction, the collection evidently attends solely to the witch in twenty-first-century American television. In the Introduction Ho details that, following their popularity in the 1990s, the witch was cast aside for a time in the early 2000s appearing mostly as a secondary character in vampire or supernatural shows (3). This volume expertly situates the resurgent popularity of the witch in western culture within the socio-political contexts of the #MeToo movement and the Donald Trump presidency, offering readers and audiences an insight into how the supernatural, fantasy-adjacent figure of the witch corresponds with reality.

The Introduction, titled "'That's how I like my witches': The New Witches on 21st-Century Television," adeptly attends to the project of justifying such a study of the post-millennial on-screen witch. The chapter commences with a reminder that Sabrina Spellman, protagonist of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), seeks an avenue to both "freedom and power" (1). In drawing readers' attention to Sabrina's self-articulated desire, Ho succinctly establishes the dual concerns of many twenty-first century witch characters suggesting how this contributes to the respective texts' engagement with feminism. However, Ho is clear that this volume of essays does not presume that contemporary representations of witches are inherently progressive or feminist just because they include supernaturally empowered female and non-binary characters, and many of the essays do demonstrate how contemporary witch characters are continually managed and controlled by patriarchal characters much like their predecessors. The Introduction does not presume pre-established knowledge ensuring that the collection is accessible for readers who may not have an in-depth knowledge of, or first-hand experience watching, television and film representations of witches and their socio-political context(s). Ho acquaints readers with the on-screen witches of the twentieth century, from *Bewitched* to the original series of *Charmed*, and proceeds to explore their prevalence and immense popularity from 2013 to 2020. Considering that this collection is the first to explicitly study witches on television in this period, this introduction situates and contextualises its particular focus. Each of the thirteen essays in *The New Witches* enhances understandings of the ways in which televisual representations of witches and witchcraft engage with feminism, patriarchy, and radical female power.

The collection's first section "Intersectional Politics and History: Race, the #MeToo Movement and the Witch" includes three essays. The first is by Katherine J. Lehman, titled "'This is a reckoning': Intersectional Feminism and the #MeToo Movement in *Charmed*." Lehman's chapter contrasts the feminist sentiment present in both the original *Charmed* (1996-2006) series and the 2018 reboot, with most of the analysis focusing on the latter. The analysis is compelling in its exploration of politics and patriarchy which is grounded contextually by explorations of magical activism, revealing how real-life politics influenced the series, by exploring how the text engages with sexual assault and violence, injustice and the criminal justice system, and topical commentary on the American presidency. The following essay, Johanna Braun's "From Witchcraft Activism to Witch-Hunt Sentiments: The Changing Political Landscape in *American Horror Story*," adroitly establishes the two witch-centric seasons of *American Horror Story* as corresponding sites that are ideally poised for political interpretation. By analysing contemporaneous political rhetoric alongside those expressed by different antagonists in the different seasons, Braun demonstrates how the four-year presidential term of Trump impacted the series' representation of the witches and their respective adversaries. Brydie Kosmina's chapter "Re-Remembering the Past: Hauntological Feminist Memories of Salem in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*" identifies the presence of the 1692-1693 Salem witch trials in the series. Using Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology, Kosmina conducts an engrossing reading of the series and analyses how it employs potent imagery of historical persecution to consider trauma, identity, vengeance, and the potential for "imagined feminist futures" (52).

The collection's second section, titled "Good Witch, Bad Witch: Identities and Ethics," develops by considering individual characters and their actions more closely. Charity A. Fowler's

chapter "Declawing the Jungle Cat: Caging feminine Power on the CW's *The Secret Circle*" evidences how the CW Television Network's adaptation of L. J. Smith's *The Secret Circle* book series relegates the second-wave feminism that is central to the original material, erasing the narrative's subversive and queer elements to instead focus more on hegemonic postfeminist concerns. The following essay, "The Witches of the West and the Boundaries of Goodness" by Lindsey Mantoan, considers a number of texts that draw from Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). In doing so, Mantoan charts the various cultural attempts that have been made to rehabilitate and redeem the antagonistic Wicked Witch of the West, offering analysis of underexplored series such as *Emerald City* (2016-2017). The section concludes with Emily Brick's "'When witches don't fight, we burn!' Monstrosity and Violence in *American Horror Story: Coven*." This essay employs Barbara Creed's theory of The Monstrous-Feminine, and Brick explores how the popular series utilises witchcraft to consider gender and monstrosity from multiple perspectives. Brick's precise analysis is multi-faceted and attentive to how the narrative subverts notions of femininity and masculinity by evaluating how the witch characters engage in sadistic and fetishist behaviours.

The collection's third section, "The Witchy Body: Sexualities and Disabilities," directs attention to interpersonal relationships, sexual and gendered violence, and the embodied experience of witches on screen. In "Condensing the Palate: Queer Representation and Heteronormativity in *Charmed*," Samuel Naimi determines the ways that *Charmed* (2018-2022) obscures and eradicates crucial elements of the series' primary lesbian relationship by adopting an assimilative approach that seems primarily concerned with heteronormative relationship models. Additionally, Naimi indicates how these strategies damage queer representation in twenty-first century television. In perhaps the most unexpected essay in the collection, Tanner Alan Sebastian reconciles sadomasochism with accounts of violence in the Salem witch trials and how this relates to the violence represented in *Salem* (2014-2017). Such an unconventional and prodigious reading of both the trial testimony and the television narrative leads readers to appreciate how these accounts observe and perpetuate the eroticisation of power dynamics between women. Through close reading, Sebastian emphasises the dual roles that marginalisation and sadism play in the witch trial-centric narratives. Continuing the theme of witches and gendered violence, in "Teenage Furies: The Rape-Revenge Genre in *American Horror Story: Coven*" Christine R. Payson astutely discusses how the young witches in the series both confront and engage in rape and sexual violence. Payson positions *Coven* in conversation with rape-revenge films such as *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), which results in fascinating parallels and promotes consideration into the potential for witches (as women with radical and extraordinary abilities) to avenge themselves and protect others. Ho's chapter, "Witches with Disabilities on 21st-Century Television Programs," poses a series of important questions prompting the reader to reflect on how disability is portrayed in a number of Fantasy and witch-centric narratives. Ho's suggestions to showrunners on how to navigate issues of representation ensure that this chapter is valuable reading and his commentary on how apocalypse narratives often allow for, or create, spectacles of disabled bodies is especially thought-provoking. The chapter analyses how certain popular witch characters correspond with stereotypes of the wise disabled, while exploring how witches with disabilities provide their communities with valuable power and insight.

The collection's final section, "Disembodiment of the Witch: Ecofeminism, Digital Humanities and Beyond Blood," considers the witch, their community, and sphere of influence. In "The Literal and the Metaphorical: Othered Voices in *Salem*," Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns focuses on how the series associates femininity with wilderness in this ecofeminist reading of how the witch is imagined as antithetical to patriarchy and civilised culture. The democratisation of both knowledge and magic is explored in Natalie R. Sheppard's chapter "'The world never did help a smart girl': Disembodies Digitalization, the Open Access Library and BuzzFeed in *The Magicians*." In Sheppard's reading of the series, the witch characters challenge patriarchal structures and revolutionise access to magical knowledge, effectively demonstrating how magical women figures harness, and act upon, their extraordinary potential to challenge elitist, discriminatory institutions and ideologies. The collection's final essay is Alissa Burger's "Beyond Blood: The Negotiation of Biological and Chosen Families in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*." Burger diligently addresses each family unit in the series to illustrate how they confront the patriarchal order and invalidate traditional notions of the American nuclear family. Such an exercise highlights the subversive potential that diverse families can employ in Fantasy-adjacent narratives.

One limitation of *The New Witches* is that the thirteen essays collectively consider six primary texts, with most of the essays weighted towards *Sabrina* and *American Horror Story*. Though this attests to the popularity of those two series, other essays could have explored popular witch series such as *A Discovery of Witches* (2018-2022), *Good Witch* (2015-2021), *Witches of East End* (2013-2014), *Britannia* (2018-2021), and *Luna Nera* (2020). The strengths of the collection far outweigh any limitations of scope. The four sections of the volume persuasively unite and contrast the various analyses, providing readers with larger overarching frameworks in which to consider the individual chapters. Fowler's chapter provides a fascinating insight into *The Secret Circle*, a text that had not previously received significant scholarly attention. Similarly, Brick's engagement with "The Monstrous-Masculine" will interest scholars concerned with gender and monstrosity, while Sebastian's chapter offers an innovative approach in interpreting the witch in culture.

Readers of Owen Davies' *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft & Magic* (2017), Pam Grossman's *Waking the Witch: Reflections on Women, Magic, and Power* (2019), and Heather Greene's encyclopaedic *Lights, Camera, Witchcraft: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television* (2021) will enjoy this volume of essays about the contemporary on-screen witch. The collection is accessible enough for undergraduate and postgraduate students and it is suitably attentive for scholars who are interested in representations of witches and supernatural characters. *The New Witches* is an essential read for those who are interested in the figure of the witch and those who are curious as to how the witch continues to influence narratives and captivate audiences.

BIONOTE

Chloe Campbell is a Commissioning Editor working in academic publishing and she is based in the North West of England, UK. Chloe is also a PhD student at Lancaster University, researching cultural portrayals of witches. Chloe's research is especially concerned with the figure of the suburban, domesticated witch in twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture. She tweets from [@readingwitches](https://twitter.com/readingwitches)