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Battlestar Galactica: Investigating Flesh, Spirit, and Steel. A Comprehensive Critical Review of the 2010 Edited Collection. Roz Kaveney & Jennifer Stoy (Editors) | I.B. Tauris · 2010

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Abstract

Battlestar Galactica: Investigating Flesh, Spirit, and Steel (edited by Roz Kaveney and Jennifer Stoy) stands as one of the most rigorous and unflinching academic engagements with Ronald D. Moore's reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009). Published by I.B. Tauris as part of its "Investigating Cult TV" series, this collection assembles ten original essays plus an interview with writer-producer Jane Espenson. The contributors examine the series' treatment of politics, gender, militarism, religion, queer representation, racial ideology, post-9/11 realism, and the aesthetics of science fiction television. Unlike fan-based appreciations, this volume delivers a balanced, often searing critique — applauding the show's peak achievements while meticulously documenting narrative inconsistencies, regressive representation, and the theological collapse of the finale. This extended review offers a chapter-by-chapter analysis, identifies major themes, assesses strengths and weaknesses, and evaluates the collection's place within *BSG* scholarship.

Key Words: Battlestar Galactica; cult television; post-9/11 allegory; gender studies; queer representation; theology; militarism; science fiction; race and creation myth; television finale critique; Ronald D. Moore.

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I. Introduction: A Landmark Collection for a Landmark Series

When Ronald D. Moore's reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* premiered as a miniseries in December 2003 and began its regular run in 2004, few could have predicted the critical and cultural impact it would achieve. By its conclusion in 2009, the series had won a Peabody Award, been invited to discuss its themes at the United Nations, and been hailed by *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New Yorker* as one of the best television

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dramas of its era — remarkable accolades for a science fiction property based on a kitschy 1978–79 space opera. Moore and executive producer David Eick had accomplished something unprecedented: they had transformed a "Star Wars clone" into a serious meditation on post-9/11 politics, religious fundamentalism, torture, occupation, democracy, and the very meaning of humanity.

Yet for all its acclaim, *BSG* was also a deeply contested text. Its final season divided fans and critics. Its treatment of women, queer characters, and people of color drew sharp criticism. Its theological resolution — that the Cylon monotheistic God was literally real and orchestrating events — seemed to betray the series' earlier agnostic complexity. And its much-praised "realism" masked a host of narrative inconsistencies, retroactive continuity patches, and what some saw as lazy writing.

It is precisely into this contested terrain that *Battlestar Galactica: Investigating Flesh, Spirit, and Steel* intervenes. Edited by Roz Kaveney — a well-known writer, critic, and activist whose previous work includes *Reading the Vampire Slayer* and *Superheroes!* — and Jennifer Stoy — an independent scholar who has written extensively on cult television — this collection represents one of the first serious academic engagements with the complete arc of the reimagined series. Published in 2010, shortly after the finale aired, the volume captures a moment of critical reckoning. It is neither a hagiographic fan tribute nor a dismissive academic takedown. Rather, it is a sustained, often brilliant, and occasionally frustrating attempt to grapple with a text that was simultaneously groundbreaking and deeply flawed.

II. Structure and Organization

The volume is divided into three implicit sections. The first (Chapters 1–3) provides an overview and contextual framework. The second (Chapters 4–8) offers focused thematic analyses of politics, militarism, terror, gender, and aesthetics. The third (Chapters 9–10, plus the Espenson interview) addresses the series' endings, its relationship to fandom, and its place in television history. A comprehensive episode guide and an index round out the volume. The guide catalogues the miniseries, all four seasons, the *Razor* television film, and the webisodes — an invaluable resource for scholars.

List of Contributors: Sérgio Dias Branco (aesthetics), Karen K. Burrows (queer representation), Benjamin Halligan (disco culture), Matthew Jones (gender), Lorna Jowett (reproduction), Roz Kaveney (militarism, finale), Steven Rawle (post-9/11 realism), Geoff Ryman (science, race), Jennifer Stoy (introduction), Jane Espenson (interview).

III. Detailed Chapter Analysis

Jennifer Stoy: "By the Great Zeitgeist and Bad Faith" — Introduction

Stoy's introduction is a tour de force — part critical manifesto, part confession, part elegy. She celebrates the first two seasons of *BSG* as among the most powerful in television history, praising its allegorical engagement with the Bush administration's wars, its complex female characters, and its willingness to stage moral dilemmas without easy resolutions. Yet she is equally unsparing in her criticism, cataloging the series' fatalism toward women (not a single female credited character survives without dying at least once), its erasure of queer characters (Cain, Gina, Gaeta) with violent deaths, its retroactive plotting (the Nicky Tyrol retcon), and its theological incoherence. Stoy also offers a meta-critical argument: mainstream critics who praised *BSG* for being "not like other science fiction" inadvertently enabled its decline by allowing creators to ignore genre conventions. The introduction is both a love letter and a breakup note.

Geoff Ryman: "Adama and (Mitochondrial) Eve" — Science, Race & Creation Myth

Ryman's chapter is the volume's most provocative intervention. He argues that *BSG* is not science fiction but "historical and religious fantasy": FTL travel and AI are mere conveniences; real physics, evolution, and cosmology are absent. More damningly, he reads the series as a "creation myth for white people." The Colonial fleet is overwhelmingly white; non-white characters are either assimilated, killed, or revealed as Cylons. The "pre-linguistic" brown-skinned hominids on Earth II receive civilization from white Colonials, and Hera — the mitochondrial Eve — is born to a white-coded man (Helo) and an Asian-passing Cylon, erasing Africa's actual human origin. Ryman forces a necessary reckoning with the show's racial unconscious.

Lorna Jowett: "Reproduction" — Feminized Machines & Heteronormativity

Jowett examines pregnancy, birth, and Cylon-human hybridity. The Cylon attack reduces the human population to fewer than 50,000; every birth matters. The Cylon "farm" uses captured human women as involuntary surrogates. Jowett shows that the series consistently feminizes reproduction, even when it involves male bodies or technologies. The resurrection ship is a womb-like space; the Hybrids float in amniotic fluid. Female Cylons are more sexualized than male ones. The emphasis on love as a redemptive force reinforces heteronormative structures: "good" Cylons pair off into monogamous, cross-species couples, while "bad" Cylons reject love as weakness. Hera's destiny is defined entirely by her reproductive capacity.

Benjamin Halligan: "Disco Galactica" — 1970s Hedonism vs. 2000s Austerity

Halligan contrasts the 1978 original (suffused with disco culture, hedonism, communal pleasure) with the reboot's post-9/11 austerity. The handheld camera, desaturated palette, and cramped corridors reflect a permanent state of war — what Halligan calls "the micro-politics of catastrophe." The body is no longer an instrument of joy but of survival. Halligan connects this shift to the rise of neoliberal militarism and the "state of exception" theorized by Agamben. This comparative lens illuminates how cultural context shapes the political unconscious of SF television.

Roz Kaveney: "The Military Organism" — Rank, Family & Obedience

Kaveney analyzes Admiral Adama's command style as a blend of paternal benevolence and authoritarian instinct. Through close readings of the Pegasus arc and the Gaeta mutiny, she demonstrates that *BSG* ultimately endorses a "benevolent militarism" — war is terrible but necessary, and the best commanders lead through moral example. Yet she questions the finale's anti-technology, pro-agrarian turn, noting that Lee's decision to abandon the fleet is itself an authoritarian imposition.

Steven Rawle: "Real Imaginary Terror" — Realism, Fantasy & Post-9/11 Allegory

Rawle explores how documentary-style realism (shaky cameras, night-vision sequences) makes fantastical elements feel urgent. He argues that *BSG* presents torture as traumatic and unreliable — unlike *24* — showing that it corrodes the torturer's humanity. Through readings of "Occupation/Precipice" and the mutiny arc, Rawle shows how aesthetic realism and fantasy coexist, generating the series' political power.

Matthew Jones: "Butch Girls, Fragile Men" — Gender Performativity

Jones draws on Butler and Sedgwick to argue that *BSG* ultimately punishes gender deviance. Baltar is feminized (passive, intellectual) and redeems himself only when he picks up a weapon. Starbuck's butch performance is heroic yet self-destructive, and she dies rather than finding peace. Queer desire (Cain/Gina, Gaeta/Hoshi) ends in violence and death, reinforcing normative masculinity.

Sérgio Dias Branco: "Science Fiction Ghettos" — Production Design & Cinematography

Branco's formalist analysis reveals that despite Ron Moore's desire to "escape the SF ghetto," the series remains deeply rooted in genre visual traditions. The anachronistic tech (1940s telephones on CIC), the contrast between *Galactica*'s grimy corridors and the organic Cylon basestars, and the "observational" handheld camera all encode

ideological contrasts. Politics operate through images as much as dialogue.

Karen K. Burrows: "The Luxury of Being Human" — Queer Representation & Admiral Cain

Burrows delivers a scathing, essential analysis. The only explicit queer relationship — Admiral Cain and Gina — is presented as monstrous, intimately linked with torture and gang-rape. Cain's queerness is retroactively revealed in *Razor* after her death, allowing the series to hint at representation while punishing it. Gaeta's queerness appears only in webisodes; his execution reads as a punishment for deviance. Burrows concludes that *BSG* offers no positive queer models, a failure that undermines its progressive reputation.

Jane Espenson Interview (Stoy & Kaveney)

The five-page interview offers glimpses of the writers' room, the 2007–08 WGA strike's impact, and defensive remarks about representation. Espenson claims surprise that anyone would label the series misogynistic and insists Geminese religious fanaticism had no racial coding. While valuable as a primary source, the interview is too short to develop substantive reflection.

Roz Kaveney: "The Ends of Television Shows" — Finale Critique

Kaveney's concluding chapter is a fierce indictment of "Daybreak." The theological resolution (Cylon monotheism is literally true, Head angels are real) betrays the series' earlier moral agnosticism. The anti-technology, pro-agrarian ending is intellectually incoherent (the Colonials would die within a generation) and politically reactionary, romanticizing pre-modern purity. Kaveney mourns the waste of characters like Roslin, who becomes a passive sentimental object. Her anger is earned, and the critique remains foundational.

IV. Major Themes Across the Volume

1. The Failure of Theology: Stoy, Kaveney, and Ryman argue that the finale's embrace of Cylon monotheism retroactively justifies genocide and suffering as part of "God's plan" — a damning indictment of a series that prided itself on moral complexity.

2. Regressive Representation: Burrows, Jones, Ryman, and Stoy document the series' failures in representing women, queer people, and people of color. Strong female characters are systematically killed; queer characters are monsters or ghosts; non-white characters are assimilated, killed, or revealed as Cylons.

3. The Politics of Realism: Rawle, Halligan, and Branco engage with visual aesthetics and their political implications, disagreeing on whether the series' realism is progressive or reactionary but agreeing that aesthetic choices are politically charged.

4. The Weight of Genre: Several contributors reject Ron Moore's claim that the series "escaped the SF ghetto," arguing instead that its power comes from engagement with genre conventions.

5. The Decline Narrative: Stoy and Kaveney explicitly argue that the series declined after season two — a controversial but well-supported claim.

Key Insights from the Article

1. The series finale's revelation that Cylon monotheism is literally true undermines the show's earlier agnosticism and its complex treatment of religious violence. (Kaveney, Stoy)

2. *BSG* functions as a "creation myth for white people," erasing non-white origins and naturalizing Eurocentric civilizational narratives. (Ryman)

3. Despite surface-level progressivism, the series systematically punishes queer characters: Cain, Gina, and Gaeta meet violent ends with no positive queer alternatives. (Burrows)

4. Reproduction in *BSG* is persistently feminized, and Cylon-human hybridity ultimately reinforces heteronormative, nuclear-family structures. (Jowett)

5. The reboot replaces the 1978 series' disco hedonism with post-9/11 austerity, embodying a permanent state of emergency and neoliberal militarism. (Halligan)

6. The series' militarism remains ambivalent: Adama's "benevolent" command is celebrated, yet the finale's Luddite turn imposes authoritarian agrarian fantasy. (Kaveney)

7. Stoy's introduction catalogs a fatal pattern: not a single female credited character survives without dying at least once; women and queers are expendable in the narrative economy.

8. Rawle demonstrates that *BSG* uses documentary realism to allegorize 9/11, but its representation of torture differs from *24* — torture is shown as traumatic and epistemically unreliable.

9. The collection exposes retroactive plotting (Nicky Tyrol retcon, Ellen Tigh as Cylon creator) as signs of a writer's room lacking a coherent mythological blueprint.

10. Kaveney's finale critique rejects theological closure: making God a sadistic puppet-master betrays the series' commitment to rational, secular moral struggle.

V. Strengths of the Collection

Critical Integrity

The editors and contributors are not fan apologists. They praise what deserves praise and criticize what deserves criticism — rare in

academic writing on popular culture.

Interdisciplinary Range

Film studies, television studies, gender studies, queer theory, political theory, and aesthetics — this range prevents the collection from becoming narrow or repetitive.

Close Attention to Later Seasons

Many early works focused on the first two seasons; this volume gives substantial space to seasons three and four, including the much-discussed finale.

Essential Chapters

Ryman's argument about race and creation myth and Burrows's analysis of queer representation are standout contributions.

VI. Weaknesses of the Collection

Uneven Quality

Jones's psychoanalytic reading is occasionally reductive; Branco's formalist analysis feels disconnected from the volume's political concerns; the Espenson interview is too short.

Limited Discussion of Performance and Music

Given the extraordinary acting (Olmos, McDonnell, Callis, Helfer, Park) and Bear McCreary's groundbreaking score, their relative absence is felt.

The Decline Narrative May Be Overstated

Some viewers find much to admire in seasons three and four. The volume would have benefited from a dissenting voice.

Datedness

Published in 2010, the volume cannot address subsequent franchise developments (*Caprica*, *The Plan*, *Blood & Chrome*, or the 2024 revival). This is unavoidable but limits currency.

VII. The Volume in Context

Investigating Flesh, Spirit, and Steel joins *Cylons in America* (Potter & Marshall, 2008), *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy* (Eberl, 2008), and *So Say We All* (Hatch, 2006). What distinguishes Kaveney and Stoy's volume is its critical edge. The Potter & Marshall collection is more celebratory; the Eberl volume is more focused on philosophical questions; the Hatch volume is more fannish. Kaveney and Stoy have assembled a collection that is genuinely critical of the series, willing to call out its failures and inconsistencies — indispensable for scholars who want a balanced view.

VIII. Conclusion: Who Should Read This Book?

Essential reading for: Scholars of television studies, gender and queer studies, political theorists, and serious fans who want to engage critically with *BSG*. **Not recommended for:** Casual viewers who have not seen the entire series, fans who prefer uncritical celebration, or undergraduates without background in critical theory.

Final Verdict

Battlestar Galactica: Investigating Flesh, Spirit, and Steel is a major contribution to the critical literature on one of the most important television dramas of the twenty-first century. Its contributors are uniformly intelligent, its arguments are well-supported, and its willingness to criticize the series is both refreshing and necessary. The volume has flaws — uneven chapters, a somewhat overconfident "decline narrative," the absence of attention to performance and music — but these do not undermine its overall achievement. At its best (Ryman, Burrows, Stoy, Kaveney), the collection is as powerful and provocative as its subject.

Rating: ★★★★½ (4.5/5)

Essential for scholars, strongly recommended for serious fans, and a valuable corrective to uncritical celebrations of a deeply flawed masterpiece.

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