Jessica Jones,
Scarred Superhero

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Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero

Essays on Gender, Trauma and Addiction in the Netflix Series

Edited by Tim Rayborn *and* Abigail Keyes

Foreword by Robert G. Weiner

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Foreword

The Not Quite Super Jessica Jones

Robert G. Weiner

When writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Michael Gaydos debuted Jessica Jones in 2001's *Alias* #1, it was clear that she was not an ordinary costumed Marvel superhero character. Yes, she had super powers. Yes, Bendis gave her a back story that included a costume and a code name: Jewel. Her back story included hanging out with the Avengers and being friends with Captain/Ms. Marvel (Carol Danvers). She was present when Peter Parker was bitten by that radioactive spider.

Yet, when Jones was first introduced in *Alias* #1, it was not as a costumed superhero, but rather as a private investigator (the origin came later). She was doing the typical job of a PI by investigating the cheating wife of a client (who then proceeds to take out his anger on Jones, much to his detriment). There were other things, too: Jones had a drinking problem, loved to have sex, was street smart, and talked with the crudeness of a sailor. As Jeph Loeb points out in the afterword to the *Alias Omnibus*, Marvel had published adult oriented comics before, but this was the first time the F-bomb was used repeatedly in one. Bendis did not pull any punches with this character. *Alias* was a series for adults; it was written as such and was part of Marvel's new MAX imprint for mature readers.

When I first read *Alias*, I thought that this was a Marvel character that was less than super. There was something more human, more relatable, and more honest about her than previous Marvel heroes. It wasn't that she was a flawed superhero; rather, she was a deeply flawed human being. Therein lies the dichotomy. All of us have struggles and have probably been in some of the situations Jones found herself in or at least know someone like Jones (albeit without the powers). She is relatable precisely because she is flawed (the Netflix series kept this aspect of her). Bendis was honestly taking Marvel

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comics further than they had been before, despite the fact that nearly all Marvel characters have some kind of flaw. Jones had lived a life filled with so many difficulties (including being abused by the villain known as the Purple Man/Killgrave) that she did not suffer fools. Her career as the superhero Jewel was less than stellar. Jones' relationships with others were often fraught with complications and her clients were sometimes difficult to deal with. At her core, though, she was a good person who, despite her problematic past, still wanted to do the right thing and make a life for herself.

To make Jessica Jones a private investigator was not much of stretch for Bendis. He had been writing crime related comics for years with *Fire* (1993), *Goldfish* (1994), *Jinx* (1996), *Torso* (1998, about true crime hero Elliot Ness) and *Powers* (2000). It is worth noting that Bendis' character Jinx is a female bounty hunter, and *Powers* features two police detectives who investigate murders related to those who have superpowers. *Powers* was first published by Image Comics and then by Marvel Comics' Icons imprint. Jessica Jones fit right into Bendis' tendency for gritty crime stories. The difference is that Jones would become a part of the Marvel Universe proper.

At first glance, that Marvel Studios and Netflix would produce *Jessica Jones* as a 13-part series seemed odd. Jones as a character was still minor and mostly unknown, but Netflix had seen tremendous success with their other original content, including *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black*. Marvel's first Netflix series *Daredevil* was a bona fide hit and *Jessica Jones* followed suit. The series kept all of the angst of Bendis and Gaydos' original *Alias* run along with all of the adult content. Here was a Marvel series that was NC-16, a show that was definitely not typical children's Saturday morning cartoon fare. With Netflix, Marvel (and by extension Disney) did not have to worry about making the series palatable to the general public, unlike their movies, animated series, and other network television programs. This worked to the advantage of the series. Jones could be played just like she was in the original *Alias* comics, having the same problems and desires. Krysten Ritter's excellent performance was one of deadpan honesty. She, too, ultimately cared about the people around her as she learned what it meant to have superpowers, but not be "super" in the traditional sense. In the series, Jones has to make some hard choices that, for example, Spider-Man or Captain America or even Daredevil cannot or would not make.

Unlike the *Alias* comics, the 13 episodes of the Netflix series mostly revolve around the abusive dynamic between Jones and Kilgrave (renamed from Killgrave and played with a total lack of empathy by the exquisite David Tennant). Kilgrave is originally a Daredevil villain, and his back story with Jones is only given a couple of issues in the original *Alias* comic series. In the show, Kilgrave is the ultimate narcissistic villain. Jones even tries to teach him to do something selfless for its own sake, but this does not work. His

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obsession with her is painful to watch, and the abuse and continued rape that she endures at his hand does make for uncomfortable viewing. The dynamic between her and Luke Cage (played with terrific believability by Mike Colter) keeps the tension high and makes for a compelling romance. Time will tell how this plays out in future series; in the comics, Jones and Cage get married and they have a daughter.

Tim Rayborn and Abigail Keyes have assembled a finely crafted collection of essays on the *Jessica Jones* television series. The offerings are unique and provide scholars and fans with a useful and relevant collection. So kick back, read an essay, re-watch an episode of *Jessica Jones*, then repeat as needed. Find the humanity within yourself from this collection in conjunction with the Netflix series.

Bibliography

Loeb, Jeph. "Jeph Loeb's Introduction from Alias Volume I Hard Cover," in Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos, *Alias Omnibus*. New York: Marvel, 2006. (The original introduction is reprinted as an afterword in the omnibus edition with no page numbers.)

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Robert G. Weiner, the popular culture/humanities librarian at Texas Tech University, is the author of *Marvel Graphic Novels and Related Publications* (2008), editor of *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero* (2009) and coeditor of *Web-Spinning Heroics* (with Robert Moses Peaslee, 2012) and *Marvel Comics into Film* (with Matthew J. McEniry and Robert Moses Peaslee, 2016), all from McFarland.

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Introduction

Tim Rayborn *and* Abigail Keyes

> "They say everyone's born a hero. But if you let it, life will push you over the line until you're the villain. Problem is, you don't always know that you've crossed that line."[1]

Marvel's Jessica Jones barged onto our TV screens and laptops in November 2015, courtesy of Netflix, presenting a hard-drinking female protagonist who was sick of everyone's crap and wrestled with her own inner (and outer) demons. The show is the second of four overlapping series (the others being *Daredevil*, *Luke Cage*, and *Iron Fist*) culminating in a team-up series (*The Defenders*) focusing on "street level" heroes and their adventures. Though set in the same universe (the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which will also be referred to as the MCU throughout this book) as the mega-powered Avengers and other big-screen Marvel heroes, these television series bring a new level of grittiness and realism, as well a hefty dose of violence, to that shared universe, themes that are less prominent in the larger tent pole cinematic outings. Set in New York City, each of the four "defenders" grapples with different kinds of threats that at times seem miles away from the cosmic dangers of the films, but are no less evil in their villainy and their capacity to ruin and destroy lives.

Jessica is a hard-drinking, cynical woman who as a teenager gained unnatural abilities in an accident, giving her enhanced strength, jumping ability, and improved healing. But rather than don a costume and become a stereotypical crime fighter, she instead works as a private investigator, uncovering infidelities, serving court summons, and engaging in other such covert activities for the right price. It may not be noble, but it's a living. There is a distinct film noir feel to the show, but it overturns the stereotypes of that genre by making its tough-as-nails detective a woman. As the series opens, Jessica is dealing with difficult clients (by throwing them through her front

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door), and spying on a potentially adulterous couple, not realizing that her world is about to be torn apart once again.

While Daredevil struggled against a corrupt crime lord, Wilson Fisk, determined to make over the neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen in his own image by destroying anything and anyone that got in his way, Jessica's villain is in many ways far more insidious, because of the very intimate nature of the character. The reclusive but dapper and charming Englishman Kilgrave presents viewers with an adversary unlike any seen in the MCU to date: someone who does not want to rule the world, but instead enjoys his ability to make people do whatever he wants them to, simply by speaking to them and commanding them to comply; they cannot refuse. He has always had everything that he wanted, and so has no empathy or compassion, and cannot form any kind of realistic view of the world.

We learn that Jessica had in the past fallen under his mind control, and was kept as a virtual slave for some period of time, doing whatever he wished. She was eventually able to break free from him, but is now haunted by memories of this abuse, taking only some comfort in believing that he is dead. Of course, this soon proves not to be true, and Kilgrave once again returns to menace her, her friends, and potentially all of New York.

The series uses this premise to examine several important themes, including abuse (physical, sexual and emotional), trauma, PTSD, rape culture, issues of consent, alcoholism, drug addiction, the plight of victims, and the importance of family. These are heavy topics, far removed from the usual fare that we have come to expect in comic book films and television. Indeed, this dark and mature tone sets the show apart from many of its counterparts. It immediately earned praise from a wide variety of sources, not only within comic fandom, but also from counselors, therapists, women's rights advocates, scholars of women's studies, and other related disciplines. Stars Krysten Ritter and David Tennant received much acclaim for their emotional and gut-wrenching performances, becoming icons within fandom. Indeed, viewers watched the show in large numbers (though Netflix does not normally release ratings information), and this popularity was enough for the show to receive a second season, airing on Netflix in 2018. Before that, Ritter reprised her role as Jessica in *The Defenders* series in 2017.

A richly-conceived and complex show such as this deserves deeper study and analysis, and this book helps to fill that need. This collection of essays by noted scholars examines different topics and aspects of *Jessica Jones* in considerable detail.

We begin with "'Even you can break': Jessica Jones as Femme Fatale," by Daniel Binns, which examines the themes of film noir in classic films, analyzing how the character of Jessica Jones is figured against the traditional noir archetype of the *femme fatale*. Rather than being a lure for the hapless

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"fall guy," Jessica switches between hardboiled antihero, struggling victim, and a "normal" thirty-something, embodying each role as the narrative dictates.

In "Elite and Famous: Subverting Gender in the Marvel Universe with *Jessica Jones*," Nicholas William Moll argues that Jessica Jones presents a form of superhero literature that subverts hierarchies of gender, class, and ideology frequently enshrined in costumed adventure narratives. In doing so, the essay explores the contrasts between *Jessica Jones* the television show and *Alias*, the comic it is based on, focusing on each incarnation's respective use of a wider Marvel Universe. Herein the limited scope of *Jessica Jones* is central. Where *Jessica Jones* focuses on antagonism measured in terms of the protagonist as an individual victim of sexual assault and domestic abuse, the contrasts offered by *Alias* invoke a global drama of aliens, costumed vigilantism, and mutants.

In "'AKA Occasionally I give a damn': Mirrored Archetypes and Gender Power in *Jessica Jones*," Aleah Kiley and Zak Roman argue that *Jessica Jones* subverts not only genre expectations, but also expectations about race, class, and gender. They conduct a review of the industry dynamics underpinning the creation of the series, promotional materials, and textual analysis of the first season of the show. With a specific focus on Jessica and her friend Trish Walker's relationship, as well as the interplay between diverse allies, this essay argues that *Jessica Jones* negotiates normative gender expectations and subverts power dynamics, while ultimately remaining ambiguous toward the anti-heroine.

In "*Jessica Jones*: Gender and the Marvel Phenomenon," Lillian Céspedes González looks at public reception of the show and the reasons behind its success. This essay focuses on the adaptation of the comic into a television series, and the popularity of the show within the wider context of the wave of new releases set in the Marvel Universe. The methodology includes reception and audience studies, cultural theory, and social analysis, as well as a case study using quantitative data gathered through a focus group/survey to obtain audience feedback on the show. Moreover, this essay looks at Jessica as a woman of the twenty-first century in superhero culture and how this reflects the deeper and wider changes within cultural dynamics.

"AKA Marvel Does Darkness: Jessica Jones, Rape Allegories and the Netflix Approach to Superheroes," by CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, considers how the Netflix direct-to-streaming model influences how producers can portray a superhero, particularly when compared to those produced within the confines of the traditional television model. It also considers how Netflix's political, economic, and technological construction allows for a more in-depth exploration of a very complex story, i.e., using

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superpowers as an analogy for rape and sexual assault. The essay also looks at how the mega-series is tailor-made for a specific niche audience, one more likely to accept the analogy depicted in the series. This tailoring results in a darker, more nuanced portrayal of Jessica Jones, but one that still fits within the overall shared cinematic universe that Marvel has constructed, while also depicting a unique and potentially more human expression of life in the MCU.

In "Sobriety Blows: Whiskey, Trauma and Coping in Netflix's *Jessica Jones*," Janis Breckenridge observes that Jessica's alcohol binges signify far more than a mere penchant for drinking to excess. In addition to a connection to post-traumatic stress disorder, Jessica's specific drinking habits (her frequent benders) underscore the numerous subverted gender roles, or recurring gender benders, at play throughout all thirteen episodes. This essay explores the intricate dynamics of traumatic memory, substance abuse and powerlessness—connecting the sense of victimization that results from mind control with the analogous feelings of powerlessness, both psychological and physiological, that come with chemical dependency—through the lens of trauma and addiction studies. Special attention is paid to narrative and visual strategies employed in the representation of alcohol and alcoholism on the television screen, particularly the recurring use of flashbacks, intertextual references, and specific filmic devices including strategic manipulation of lighting, focus, framing and composition.

Sharon Packer, in "Jessica Jones, Women and Alcohol Use Disorders," observes that, in spite of the obvious allusions to alcohol in the show and the online homages to Jessica Jones, there is no mention of the potential medical consequences of excessive alcohol consumption in women. Women who watch this series and who see the risk-taking, wise-cracking Jessica as a role model may emulate this alcohol-related behavior, without awareness of the grave consequences of excessive alcohol use. We can contrast the *Jessica Jones* series to the *Iron Man* comic book, where Tony Stark's character acknowledges his struggles with alcohol. Stark's AA allegiance becomes part of his persona. We can also compare *Jessica Jones* to another television series, *Arrow*, where the female lead, Laurel Lance, nearly ruins her legal career and estranges family and friends because of more slowly-evolving alcohol and pill problems. Laurel begrudgingly seeks treatment, attends meetings, and eventually accepts the aid of her recovering alcoholic, police officer father. In *Arrow*, the female lead's fall and redemption occur within a single season—the second. It remains unknown what lies ahead for the second season of the already successful *Jessica Jones*.

In "*Jessica Jones*'s Feminism: AKA *Alias* Gets a Fixed-It," Melissa C. Johnson compares the comic book and the television show, noting the influence of and revisions to the origin story as depicted in the Alias comics, particu-

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