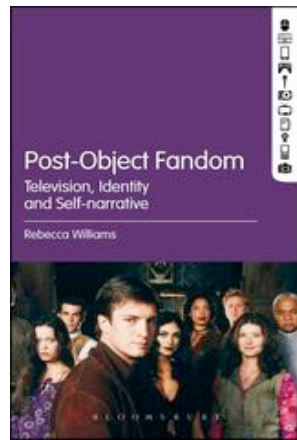


## Understanding the end: *Post-object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-Narrative* by Rebecca Williams

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The final scenes of a series or movie can leave quite an impression. Often it goes beyond simply just hating or loving them. Sometimes those scenes keep one awake for days: why did that character have to leave, die or marry? Do you remember how *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990–1) ended so hastily? How did you feel after you saw the final episode of *Lost* (ABC 2004–10) or *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005–14)? What about *Friends* (NBC 1994–2004), *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008–13) or the ‘Red Wedding’ episode of *Game of Thrones* (‘The Rains of Castamere’ 2013)? Some series might leave the viewer with an unfinished storyline, a nagging feeling of curiosity to find out what could have happened next; or maybe that happy ending was just what the story needed.

In the engaging monograph *Post-object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-narrative* (2015), Rebecca Williams illuminates how fans of TV shows such as *The West Wing* (NBC 1999–2006), *Lost*, and *Doctor Who* (BBC One 1963–89, 2005–) cope with the endings of the series. Whereas many works on fandom or fan cultures highlight fans’ ‘becoming-a-fan’-narratives or fans’ involvement with media

texts, Williams’ monograph fits in the extending fan scholarship on growing older in and with a fandom (cf. Bielby, Harrington & Bardo 2014; Bennett 2013; Hodkinson & Bennett 2013). Yet, as this scholarship often seeks to provide an insight how fandom changes over time, or how one stays involved in (bodily) fan practices at a later age, *Post-object Fandom* contributes to the field of fan studies by reviewing how the phase without the fan object is given meaning. Williams discusses the moment that series go from on-going to dormant, to creating no new episodes, to the period of ‘post-object fandom’ that follows. She argues that this focus helps us to consider how endings influence fans’ self-identity and their sense of ontological security (drawing on Giddens 1991). The latter enables her to unfold how the established ‘fan pure relationship’—fan attachment to fan object and fan attachment to fellow fans (Williams 2015: 21)—changes at times of transitions or endings.

Drawing on data analyses from forums, online message boards and 66 online survey respondents, Williams offers an in-depth and lively discussion of several case studies. These explorations help

the author to construct a strong conceptual framework to talk about the different ways that fans engage with endings and transitions. According to Williams, most responses to characters leaving a series, coping with the ending of a series, or the transition of a show and its characters, can be categorised in three different discourses: the reiteration discourse, the renegotiation discourse, and the rejection discourse. For Williams, these discourses illustrate that 'Fan responses are far from uniform' (2015: 197).

While some fans react in grief, others – as the discourses elucidate – take time to revalue and reshape their fandom. The reiteration discourse suggests that fans reiterate their attachment to a show, and express a wish to continue their fandom; for instance, by re-watching episodes via streaming or televised reruns. Reiteration is thought to enable fans to safeguard the ontological security that the series offers. In contrast, the rejection discourse opposes these feelings, which results in almost anti-fan-like behaviour and responses. Williams argues that for many fans of *Lost* and *The West Wing*, the endings to the show were not what they had expected or wished for, which they demonstrated in outing their dislike for the shows online. These examples not only contribute to a better understanding of fan reactions to endings, but also how anti-fans perform their fandom.

The renegotiation discourse explores a middle ground between reiteration and rejection: these viewers are not specifically attached to a particular show, but have more or less built up a feeling of ontological security with television in general. After viewing *The West Wing* these fans move on to *House of Cards* (Netflix 2013–), or move from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB 1997–2001; UPN 2001–2003) to *True Blood* (HBO 2008–2014). Discussing this middle-ground approach is of particular value, working to revitalise the discourses surrounding 'dislike' or 'like' as common fan reactions; particularly as not all fans demonstrate such strong expressions.

*Post-object Fandom* also 'examines what happens in the years after a series ceases production' (Williams 2015: 142). In a time when media industries and technologies are undergoing rapid change, Williams acknowledges that her research on the topic of streaming, with new services such as Netflix, is not

yet complete. Yet by discussing DVD and BluRay, which offer on-demand viewing as soon as one has the disks at home, Williams takes a first step towards exploring this field. Williams provides an outlook on how fans (re-)engage with series via DVD, BluRay, streaming and screened revivals, which is particularly interesting in terms of illuminating what fans find important in such continued engagement. Some of the fans in Williams' sample indicate that they wish to recreate the feeling of 'the first watch', but others attribute more value to the idea that they are watching with (and are part of) an 'imagined community'. These case studies help to understand the importance of the revivals or reruns of shows that have ended, and offer valuable insight into how these reruns are experienced by the fans. The ontological security offered by the series under examination can be seen to go beyond them; it is also about becoming part of, sharing memories with, and creating relationships with other fans or viewers.

One of the conclusions that Williams draws is that 'Post-object fandom is a broad and varied period which cannot be easily categorized' (Williams 2015: 198). Nevertheless, the book works towards an understanding of how fans react to and engage with a series that has ceased, or has gone through periods of change or transition. Although *Post-object Fandom* only discusses examples from television, it also opens up possible lines of enquiry relating to other domains such as music, movies or literature. In *Post-object Fandom*, Williams has created a beginning to study an end.

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