Fascination with heroes and villains seems a constant, as much in real life as in fantasy or science fiction (SF). In the past few years, however, public and academic interest in these characters has taken on greater importance in light of global sociopolitical events and changes. What makes us human, what separates “us” from “them,” and how we might be saved from destruction are hot topics not only on television or in films but in the news.

Films are a good starting place for any discussion of villains or monsters. Not only do films unite Western societies culturally, but they show “evil” up close on larger-than-life screens in a way that TV series can’t. They also provide TV series with plenty of ideas for re-imagined characters. Television often follows where blockbuster films have led. In 2008 the Dark Knight became even darker, and the charismatic if sociopathic Joker (aided by an Academy Award-winning performance by the late Heath Ledger) stole the screen. When the U.K.–based science fiction magazine SFX cited their Top 10 SF films and TV series of the decade in their December 2009 publication, not surprisingly, The Dark Knight made their film list (as did The Lord of the Rings cinematic trilogy, despite being more fantasy than science fiction, and director J.J. Abrams’ re-imagined view of Star Trek). These films and their iconic “good” and “bad” characters are discussed in greater depth in Part One of this book because they have influenced or led to the development of recent SF TV series. The characters and their different perspectives on morality, the roles of heroes or villains within society, and “predictions” of where civilization is headed not only illustrate a likely paradigm shift in the hero story but also provide cultural touchstones with which most audiences are familiar.

The SFX list of Top 10 television series included Angel, Lost, Firefly (whose later film adventure, Serenity, also made their Top 10 film list), Battlestar Galactica, and Doctor Who. Other notable achievements in their “review of the decade” were noted in their TV Awards of the Decade: Most Improved Show—Torchwood, Best Character—the Doctor (Doctor Who, which also was cited for Best TV Episode—“Blink”), Best U.S. TV Show—Battlestar Galactica, Sexiest Characters—Caprica Six (Battlestar Galactica) and Spike (Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel), Most Huggable Persons—Wilfrid Mott (Doctor Who) and Hiro
Nakamura (Heroes), and Most Welcome Casting—John Simm (the Master, Doctor Who). Although these “awards” are unofficial, SFX, one of the leading fan-oriented SF magazines in the U.K. and U.S., is well aware of audience favorites and high-quality SF films and series. Their list, released long after my selection of series to be included in this book, indicates the impact on popular culture that these post–2000 series have had and will continue to have.

Other well-known television and film publications polled audiences about their favorite heroes and villains, not just from science fiction or fantasy. In early 2009, Entertainment Weekly featured a special section on all-time heroes and villains from movies and TV. Fans as well as critics chose the top 20 in each category. The number 1 villain was The Wizard of Oz’s Wicked Witch of the West. Not surprisingly, The Wizard of Oz has influenced many fantasy or SF TV series, including Lost. The number 2 villain was Darth Vader, again not much of a shock. Star Wars remains an iconic part of popular culture, its clearly defined heroes neatly separated from villains. It, too, is an ancestor text for many series such as Lost.

Although Entertainment Weekly’s heroes list highlighted a wide variety of films and TV series, many of them SF, the ones to note in light of this book are everyone’s favorite vampire slayer, Buffy (number 8), and Star Trek’s inimitable Captain James T. Kirk (number 12). Although not an SF character, 24’s Jack Bauer came in at number 16. The fact that such a controversial “hero,” what I term in this book a “gray hero,” made the Top 20 all-time film and television heroes list is significant. For all his good intentions and ability to save the world within 24 hours (not once, but several times), Jack Bauer does some terrible things as part of his “job.”

Instead of being perfect heroes, the cinematic or televisionary heroes who are best “loved,” or at least most memorable, are increasingly becoming those far removed from the traditional, idealized, highly moral heroes of the past. The public can’t seem to get enough of heroes, even if they aren’t always clearly the “good guys.”

As Lost co-creator Damon Lindelof explained in a 2009 interview, audiences “want heroes to know the difference between good and bad, and ... to be strong.... However, it’s hard for such [heroes] to be accessible unless they’re also extremely effed up, because only a seriously disturbed individual would want to be a hero.” Western societies are looking for heroes to help get us out of what seem to be insurmountable global problems, but one hero, or even a group, seems unlikely to be able to do the job. Those TV characters who do get involved or regularly try to save the world usually have their own flaws and dark pasts to deal with, yet they persevere, often because they feel they have no other choice. Television seems to be a good starting place to “discuss” the type of heroes needed today, especially when real-life heroes haven’t provided all the solutions to our problems. The types of heroes emerging on SF TV, however, may not have all the answers, even if they consistently try to provide pragmatic solutions under tight deadlines.
In the early 2000s, television, still the most accessible of popular culture media, is at the peak of its SF storytelling power. Lindelof knows well the ins and outs of good storytelling and the ways that audiences like their heroes, villains, and even monsters. Peabody winner *Lost* continues to skew the definitions of hero and villain, and with a mysterious island as a story playground, even the occasional smoke monster shows up. For six seasons (2004–2010) *Lost* changed the way that serialized TV dramas were told. Perhaps by sneaking in a mainstream network’s back door as a “plane crash drama” in Season One, *Lost* gave the audience a mysterious character drama that, once embraced, could lead to more obviously SF story lines in later seasons.

Another highly significant, critically acclaimed series, *Battlestar Galactica*, also deals with human drama during times of crisis—this time an apocalypse that forces a small percentage of human survivors to strike out for a new homeland. The series takes on such issues as struggles between “them” and “us” but also deals with humanity’s reliance on technology, the place of religion within a society, and the appropriate roles of government and the military in the lives of ordinary citizens. In March 2009, *Battlestar Galactica* concluded with a critically acclaimed finale proclaiming that humanity’s mortal enemy, the Cylons, is indeed crucial to human survival. Future *Battlestar Galactica* projects promise further glimpses into prewar Caprica, and the DVD pilot movie, released in April 2009, generated plenty of interest in the Sci-Fi (later SyFy) Channel’s original *Caprica* series beginning in January 2010.

*Heroes* took the increased interest in film superheroes and provided some intriguing, if flawed, characters just discovering their superpowers. Although the series’ brilliant first season has been difficult to replicate, its notion that “gray areas” are the only viable places in which either heroes or villains can effect change still makes *Heroes* a significant series. As well, the series often revolves around two important characters, the devious Sylar and virtuous Hiro, as well as making the modern hero story accessible to a much wider audience.

The longest-running SF television program, *Doctor Who*, won new fans across generations when Russell T. Davies reinvented the series in 2005. David Tennant’s popular Tenth Doctor, in particular, turned the children’s program into an award-winning drama that intrigues adults as much as (if not more than) kids. By the Tenth Doctor’s regeneration on January 1, 2010, he had faced classic monsters from the original series and, more importantly, faced his own weaknesses, losses, and fears as humanity’s sometimes-savior.

The U.K. cult series and *Doctor Who* spinoff *Torchwood* moved to BBC1 from lesser watched BBC3 for Season Three, “Children of Earth,” a devastating look at no-win scenarios when humanity is faced with a threat greater than it can defeat and requires high costs in personal sacrifice. The miniseries also illustrates, yet again, a familiar SF horror—manipulative, callous governments only out to protect themselves. With the success of “Children of Earth,” *Torchwood* has become BBC America’s highest rated show, and its popularity continues to
grow on both sides of the pond. In 2010 U.S. cable network Starz created a unique partnership with the BBC to develop episodes for 2011.

In response to increased public pessimism about the future of humanity, SF television series have veered away from traditional hero stories. Instead, the trend is toward a grayer middle ground in which some characters may become heroic, or villainous, for a time, and villains or monsters stand just as good a (if not a better) chance of being victorious. Human survival, much less success, isn’t guaranteed, and no savior with humanity’s best interests at heart seems to be heading our way.

Late 2009 entries vying for primetime ratings included V (lizard aliens/monters poised to take over Earth after offering to heal and save humanity), FlashForward (almost everyone on the planet blacks out for more than two minutes, most seeing their future; the blackout causes mass chaos), and The Prisoner (one man awakens in a “village” that seems more like a futuristic POW camp, leading to questions about free will). These continuing and mini-series join other late 2000–era SF such as Joss Whedon’s (soon canceled) Dollhouse and J.J. Abrams’ (increasingly popular alternate universed) Fringe, and follow in the illustrious SF footsteps of earlier 2000s series like Battlestar Galactica and the limited but cult favorite Firefly. Although several recently popular series are remakes (e.g., Battlestar Galactica, V, The Prisoner) of camp or creepy SF from the 1960s through the 1980s, the current sociopolitical climate encourages the development of more darkly re-imagined versions of series dealing with apocalyptic plots.

The first decade of the 21st century has been a good time for science fiction series internationally, and SF, as it so often can do better than other genres, provides a safe place in which possible solutions or consequences to important problems can be played out. Unlike previous iterations of these and other series, however, the future portrayed in recent SF series is bleak. The gray heroes and villains now populating TV screens seem just as helpless as the rest of us, even if they become the characters to step forward and act heroically in an attempt to help others or to save the planet.

Whether audiences watch first-run episodes on cable (e.g., Sci-Fi/SyFy, BBCAmerica) or mainstream networks (e.g., ABC, NBC, Fox, BBC, CTV, Australia’s Network 10 or the U.K.’s Five), or prefer to watch these stories on DVD or online, well-written, fan-loved SF most clearly illustrates the schism between traditional “good guys” and “bad guys,” and the more modern shades of gray clouding definitions of hero, villain, and monster.

Of course, in SF, “villain” often equals “alien” or “monster,” so a discussion of what makes a classic or a modern villain must include an analysis of non-human life forms or hybrids. Recent series’ “heroes” may have an alien or monstrous past, or the monsters the heroes are so intent upon destroying may not be as bad as initially portrayed. At this pivotal time in world history, audiences are coming to understand current sociopolitical issues and their possible con-
sequences by watching intriguing, multiple-layered SF stories that reflect cultural ambiguity about the nature of “heroes” and “villains.”

In the following chapters I discuss characters from cult or mainstream popular science fiction television (SF TV) series originating in the U.S. or U.K. but available on DVD or via downloads worldwide. As a special feature, I include a separate list of episodes discussed within chapters so that readers can turn to specific episodes and see complete stories that illustrate the points being made about villains, monsters, or heroes within chapters. In addition, several series have officially sanctioned (not to mention unofficial) novels, magazines, comics or graphic novels, soundtracks, radio plays/CDs, and other “texts” that may be useful for further exploring characters and themes initially presented during TV episodes. Several of these additional texts are discussed in the following chapters, most notably regarding Torchwood.

The book is arranged as follows:

Part One includes all background material and discussion of multiple examples from all series highlighted in later chapters. Shifts from traditional heroes and villains to gray ones, the rise of the “sidekick” character, analyses of the roles of monsters in SF stories, themes inherent in modern SF TV series, and ways to approach a study of gray series and characters are emphasized in the first five chapters.

Part Two provides an in-depth look at the characters, episodes, and themes most important to an understanding of key science fiction television series. The following chapters of Part Two emphasize series and main characters.

About Chapter 6: The World of Joss Whedon

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, and Firefly illustrate characters and themes important to SF shortly after 2000. Buffy Summers and Captain Mal Reynolds help illustrate the shift to ever-grayer heroes, but vampires Angel and even Spike show some surprising characteristics that can turn them into either heroes or villains, as well as “monsters” because of their vampire nature. The Reavers, of course, are important to the discussion of Firefly, as is the Alliance that rules a post–Unification War universe.

Whedon’s long-time series, spanning the 1990s into the early 2000s, help track a shift in hero “literature” from the more traditional coming-of-age Buffy stories to the far-less-hopeful world of Angel to an often-oppressive future. The short webisodes making up 2008’s Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog parody the hero-villain-monster themes Whedon presented in the fantastic worlds of Buffy, Angel, and Firefly and illustrate how acceptably gray the lead villain and hero have become. This parody, moreso than Whedon’s series Dollhouse, illustrates the shift from perky, wide-eyed young heroes to disillusioned veterans to tarnished “heroes” and up-and-coming “villains.”
About Chapter 7: Heroes

*Heroes* is in a category all its own. Although superheroes are their own subgenre of SF or fantasy, *Heroes* represents an alternate (i.e., comic book) reality reflecting viewers’ real-world crises. The politicians, corporate executives, university students, cube nerds, and middle managers depicted as heroes and villains mirror roles and assumptions about them shared by many viewers. Much of the time *Heroes* may seem more fantasy than science fiction, but superhero literature traditionally is considered part of SF hero literature. As well, a discussion of television series about heroes and villains simply must include examples from a series called *Heroes*.

This series presents a traditional hero in Hiro Nakamura, whose early character development parallels the hero’s journey established by Joseph Campbell. As well, “good girl” Claire Bennet becomes a latter day Buffy in her coming-of-age story as a teenaged superhero struggling to find her place in the world. The heroes’ nemesis, Sylar, becomes one of the most charismatic characters on the series, and a study of *Heroes* must include the important rise of the all-powerful villain as well as the fall (or at least the stumble) of the traditional hero.

About Chapter 8: Lost

Because *Lost* changes its story emphasis and, frequently, its cast of characters during each of its six seasons, only a few of the many heroes, villains, or monsters are discussed. Jack Shephard, the character put forth most forcefully and continuously as the series’ hero, is the primary focus of this chapter. Ben Linus, whether perceived as villain or self-proclaimed “good guy,” is another intriguing character who well illustrates the level of grayness/darkness of SF television characters. However, the series’ ongoing tug of war between “men of faith” and “men of science” provides interesting social commentary about whether science/technology or religion/spirituality should be the primary force guiding humanity. This theme, well represented by heroes, villains, and monsters who populate a mysterious island, helps illustrate how *Lost* Western societies have become.

About Chapter 9: Battlestar Galactica and Caprica

Although humans and Cylons represent both “faith” and “science” in this politically volatile series, the more important theme is “what makes us human.” The Cylons are one of SF’s best-developed “monster” races, and their origins on a Caprica that mirrors 21st century Earth hint at the direction West-
ern societies might be taking. Religion, terrorism, scientific superiority, and cultural conflicts provide the dramatic tension in the re-imagined Battlestar Galactica and its spinoff prequel, Caprica. Although humanity is analyzed in this chapter, the most interesting characters are a fallen human scientist (Gaius Baltar) and his muse/paramour/advisor/critic, the Cylon Caprica Six and the many “model Six” incarnations throughout the series. By seeing “monsters” from a different perspective, audiences can learn what it means to be “human.”

The pilot and early episodes of Caprica present an in-depth look at a civilization soon to explode, both because of the frustratingly different philosophies of colliding cultures and the rise of technology. More than any other SF series, even its parent Battlestar Galactica, Caprica directly confronts and confounds definitions of human. Although the series and its conflicting families, the Graystones and the Adamas, provide plenty of drama, the larger issue of how much a technologically advanced society can or should “play god” is emphasized in this chapter.

About Chapter 10: Doctor Who

This children’s television series also may be fantasy as much as science fiction, despite its time travel premise, but its stature as the longest running SF program also puts Doctor Who in a category of its own. The Doctor is a perennial hero whose adventures have been enjoyed by several generations internationally.

What makes the series important to a post–2000 analysis of gray heroes is the direction in which Russell T. Davies and Julie Gardner steered the good Doctor beginning in 2005. The re-imagined series involving the Ninth and Tenth Doctors still can be considered a children’s program, if one that becomes increasingly dark during the latter episodes of Tennant’s tenure as the Doctor. Stories involving aliens, the possible annihilation of humanity, less than scrupulous world leaders, and a main character (the Ninth Doctor) quite frankly suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and then from the continued sacrifice/loss of loved ones (the Tenth Doctor) make the 2005–2009 Davies era important to adults.

The new Who, as written and guided by Davies, re-invented this venerable SF series for a new world and new audiences worldwide. In doing so, Davies also faced questions about how much “darkness” is appropriate for children’s programming and what type of Doctor is suitable for 21st century audiences. That such an established hero may not be as good as audiences previously believed, or regenerates into ever grayer Doctors, made the Tenth Doctor increasingly controversial (and internationally popular).
About Chapter 11: Torchwood

This “adult” spinoff of Doctor Who, also guided by co-creators Davies and Gardner, perhaps is the darkest science fiction series to date. Its immortal hero, Captain Jack Harkness, sometimes may seem villainous or downright monstrous to audiences, depending upon the episode (such as the highly acclaimed but controversial “Children of Earth” miniseries). Torchwood presents a bleak view of the present and seems to offer little hope for a less challenging future. Its opening narration informs audiences that humanity must be armed against the future because “the 21st century is when everything changes.” Nevertheless, Torchwood’s heroes willfully take on the villains and monsters that attempt to destroy civilization, whether coming from another time or intergalactic location or just down the street.

In particular, “Children of Earth” is highlighted as a benchmark for gray heroes and series, and Captain Jack Harkness is analyzed as a pivotal SF television character. Torchwood is also notable for its intertextuality, which presents different versions of Captain Jack for different audiences, further emphasizing this character’s importance in the development and change of SF TV heroes. Examples from novels, BBC Radio plays, soundtrack CDs, and comics supplement Jack’s TV-episode development and illustrate the many shades of gray inherent within Torchwood.

The book concludes with materials designed to help science fiction television scholars and fans continue their exploration of these characters as gray heroes, villains, or monsters and to return to episodes and other texts that further discuss themes presented in these recent series. The aforementioned episode guide is a good place to start further exploration of gray TV series. As well, the complete bibliography of sources used in this book offers a reading list of online and in-print materials.

The characters and themes described in this book indicate the prevalence of gray characters and, more important, a paradigm shift in the definition of cultural heroes and villains, as well as expectations for these roles. As these series so aptly portray, the actions we take now, in good faith and with the best intentions, may be leading to tomorrow’s destruction. By relying on technology as our savior, by welcoming a brave new world that can help millions lead longer, healthier, more productive lives, we may also be destroying what is “human” about us. Actions and their consequences—such as whether individuals can even make a difference—are the stuff of excellent SF TV drama and character development, and the series discussed in this book provide characters struggling with the same issues as the audiences who watch them.

Gray characters, like viewers, embrace the basic elements of humanity: the need for connection with others, the capacity and need for love, and the desire for a meaningful life. A strength of these SF TV series is that they deal
with larger technological, political, military, ecological, and spiritual dilemmas, but their characters also face very personal human dramas: what it means to be a spouse or a parent (or a child), how to be a better person, what type of legacy to leave behind, how to face death—or life, what to believe.

What we do now determines what our future will be. According to the gray heroes and villains on post–2000 science fiction television, that future may be bleak unless we make the right choices. What separates gray heroes from villains may be slight shadings of right and wrong. The characters in the following chapters illustrate not only the myriad choices being made, on science fiction TV as well as in the real world, but the ramifications and consequences of these decisions. SF TV today, more than ever, mirrors our world and offers us less cheery but more realistic illustrations of who we are and where we might want (or not want) to go to ensure the survival of humanity, much less make that future a better one.

It is my hope that this book, like the TV series it explores, encourages discussion about these important topics and challenges readers and TV audiences as they struggle with their own decisions and philosophies. Perhaps we are all gray heroes in the making.