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## Book Review

**Tanya Cook, Kaela Joseph: Fandom Acts of Kindness: A Heroic Guide to Activism, Advocacy, and Doing Chaotic Good**

### KEYWORDS

fan activism, social movement studies, fan studies, self-care, sustainability, fan communities, random acts

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## Book Review

**Tanya Cook, Kaela Joseph: *Fandom Acts of Kindness: A Heroic Guide to Activism, Advocacy, and Doing Chaotic Good***

**Dallas: Smart Pop/BenBella Books 2023, 192 pp., ISBN 9781637741702, USD 17.95**

“Did you know that fans of the ‘90s TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* have donated over \$28 million to charity? How about the *Supernatural* fans who helped rescue over three hundred people from flooding after devastating hurricanes in 2017? What about the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* cosplayers who put aside their ‘which is better’ debates to visit sick kids in the hospital?” (5).

Fan activism—understood here as participatory fan practices mobilized toward social or political goals—has become increasingly visible through high-profile case studies like the ones mentioned above, and the growing scholarly conversation around them. *Fandom Acts of Kindness: A Heroic Guide to Activism, Advocacy, and Doing Chaotic Good* enters that arena as a sort of ‘hybrid’ between inspirational manifesto (“Fandom can save the world,” as the back cover proclaims), impressively comprehensive archive of fan activist endeavors across the decades, and concrete ‘how to’ guidebook. Drawing on six years of research into fandom-based activism and charity, this collaboration between sociologist Tanya Cook and clinical psychologist Kaela Joseph arose directly from the fan spaces they study: After Cook’s presentation on fandom as a social movement was shared widely online by none other than *Supernatural* actor Misha Collins, Joseph reached out to discuss overlapping interests. This contact developed into a long-term project aimed at translating the authors’ observations, interviews, as well as their own participation in fan (activist) spaces into practical steps for other fans who had told them they also wished to transform their pop culture enthusiasm into civic engagement but did not know how to get started (cf. 2). The connection to *Supernatural* runs through the book’s entire framing, reinforced by *Supernatural* actress Rachel Miner’s “Foreword” (vii-ix) and the visible influence of Collins’ charitable organization Random Acts, of which Miner is now executive director and which not only became one of many prominent case studies to be presented in the book, but is also a beneficiary of the book itself, since a portion of its proceeds go towards supporting the non-profit.

Across its nine chapters, *Fandom Acts of Kindness* traces a clear progression from individual motivation to collective action and sustainable practice, a journey framed as a heroic ‘quest’ or ‘adventure.’ Chapter 1, “Start with What You Love,” shows how fannish passion can serve as a catalyst for social change by transforming emotional investment in media texts into concrete activism, beginning with the identification of personal causes and values through the lens of character alignment. Chapter 2, “Know Your Why,” explains why fan activism matters both individually and communally, breaking down processes of change via the “social-ecological model” (27)—very creatively translated into different levels of the “rainbow bridge to Asgard” (28)—while also offering plenty of truly inspiring examples of successful fan-led campaigns. Chapter 3, “This Is the Way,” details the practical tools of activism (both analogue and digital)—research, petitions, boycotts, donations, and awareness campaigns among other practi-

ces—framed through a ‘levelling-up’-gaming metaphor (cf. 43) that encourages readers to begin with small, random acts of kindness before taking on more ambitious projects. Chapter 4, “Joining a Team,” stresses the importance of community by guiding readers to locate and join existing organizations such as Random Acts, Fandom Forward, or GISH, and by demonstrating how collective structures strengthen advocacy efforts. Chapter 5, “Leadership,” introduces principles of decentralized leadership and collaborative ethics, coalition building, and stakeholder analysis, outlining how to initiate an activist group or start a new chapter of an existing one. Chapter 6, “Living in a Material World,” situates fandom within consumer culture, offering methods for navigating this field of tension (e.g., by researching corporate ethics, collecting merchandise more responsibly/sustainably, supporting non-profit conventions, and respecting intellectual property). Chapter 7, “You Cannot Pour from an Empty Cup,” turns inward to address activist burnout, presenting self-care, boundary-setting, and mindful communication as practices that make civic engagement possible as a long-term commitment. The metaphor of collecting different “Infinity Stones” (123) is used to illustrate how wellbeing involves multiple interlocking domains which can be addressed through different exercises and habits. Interestingly enough, fandom itself is understood as a potential restorative space and to that end, fan practices such as gaming or binge-watching—practices often cast in a bad light—are reframed more positively as possible routes towards mindful self-care. Chapter 8, “The Dark Side of Fandom,” confronts bigotry, online harassment, and intra-fandom conflict—from shipping wars to parasocial relationships breaking down after disillusionment with certain idols—providing practical advice for de-escalation, (dis)engagement, and emotional safety. Finally, the conclusion, “To Boldly Go,” functions as a call to action, urging readers to actually apply the lessons of the book.

From its opening pages, *Fandom Acts of Kindness* establishes a warm and humorous tone aimed at maximizing inclusion and accessibility. Readers are directly addressed (“Yes, you, Dear reader!” [1]). In this sense, the book appears to be written by fans for fans. Each chapter begins with a quotation from a famous pop-culture character, drawn from *Supernatural* (2005-2020), *Star Wars’ The Last Jedi* (2017), or *Avatar the Last Airbender* (2005-2008) to name only a few, which bridges fictional heroes’ journeys with real-world ethics. The authors use these epigraphs to position fandom not as escapism from our world’s problems but as a “training ground” (113) for empathy, courage, and social mobilization tactics (see Kligler-Vilenchik, Neta: “‘Decreasing World Suck’: Harnessing Popular Culture for Fan Activism.” In: Jenkins, Henry/Shresthova, Sangita/Gamber-Thompson, Liana/Kligler-Vilenchik, Neta/Zimmerman, Arely M. [eds.]: *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*. New York: New York UP, 2016, 102-148). By treating fictional characters’ trajectories as both examples and cautionary tales, the authors frequently draw parallels between storyworlds and our real world to make abstract concepts (e.g., causes, values, social justice) more tangible and emotionally impactful. Various fan practices and the skills honed through them (including tabletop games, LARPing, and gaming) are compared to the steps necessary in successful activism and charity projects (e.g., communication, teamwork, progressing through different experience levels).

The examples serve as bridges to help readers understand more complex ideas of social change, social movement theory, and community organization. For example, the book’s titular metaphor of *Doing Chaotic Good* is adapted from the *Dungeons & Dragons* character alignment chart. It conveys a philosophy of principled (sometimes whimsical, sometimes slightly disorganized) resistance to unjust authority. To be ‘chaotic good’ is to act compassionately while rejecting and working towards overthrowing



systems that perpetuate harm, even when doing so disrupts convention. This stance becomes especially urgent when one's mere existence is treated as disruptive to oppressive norms, as is often the case for queer, BIPOC, disabled, and other marginalized individuals. For many readers familiar with role-playing culture, the metaphor provides an intuitive shorthand for identifying the moral compass woven through this book.

At times, however, the alignment framework risks oversimplification of ethical nuance and complexities, for instance when it is used to conduct a so-called "stakeholder analysis" (89) for organizing/managing an activist project. Those supporting your cause are aligned with 'good,' while those who are against it, are aligned with 'evil.' The authors do try to mitigate any possible misunderstandings by stating that evil here does not mean 'literally evil' but simply opposing a cause for possibly "very good reasons" (90). However, since the character examples used to explain the various evil character types (Tammy 1, Jeremy Jamm, and Tammy 2 from *Parks and Recreation* [2009-2015] or Tywin Lannister, Roose Bolton, and Joffrey Baratheon from *Game of Thrones* [2011-2019]) will be viewed by many as highly immoral characters or as comically villainous (which undoubtedly fulfils important functions in each genre), it might be a good idea to more explicitly signal to readers that, as useful as they are for making social issues and their solutions more accessible, metaphors and character comparisons also have their limitations.

As stated at the onset, the book's methodology combines research and participatory reflection. This insider-researcher position gives the work great immediacy: The authors empathetically and believably relay what it feels like to be a new activist—because they have been there. The writing anticipates readers' hesitations, questions and possible struggles, and provides step-by-step reassurance. The conversational style does not detract from a well-structured pedagogical design: definitions are introduced gradually in accessible language and activities are generally scaffolded from simple to more complex. The volume is designed to be read from start to finish but is modular enough that each chapter may stand on its own, and readers are invited to work through activities repeatedly over time. The book has an explicit 'workbook' layout with many direct questions, visual gaps for notes, and spaces with lines that 'demand' to be filled. Each fandom example and pop-cultural reference is contextualized well enough, so that even readers outside a particular fandom can follow. Although the text remains largely situated within a Western, Anglophone framework (as far as the media examples, case studies of organizations and information on governmental structures go), it demonstrates commendable awareness of global fan participation and strives to welcome readers from diverse backgrounds. The book explicitly mentions some originally non-Western content: *Death Note* (2006-2017), *Cowboy Bebop* (1998-2000), and *Squid Game* (2021-2025) (though all of these have amassed a large Western following), and the authors also actively encourage cross-cultural and foreign language media consumption (via subtitles).

Inclusivity is not just manifested in the attempts to acknowledge as many different fandoms as possible but also in the book's approach towards activism and social change. Its pragmatic tone is consistently affirming that activism can take multiple forms and that we are all only human (and therefore fallible). The underlying philosophy seems to be a sense of 'give what you can' and 'use what you have,' resisting the moral perfectionism that often deters participation. (You can be an activist even if you shop from Amazon, "Because, for many of us, it may be our only viable option for acquiring needed goods" [101]). Activism is presented as iterative and flexible, scaled to each reader's circumstances. This orientation reflects a deep awareness of the psychological and material barriers to engagement: limited time, financial insecurity, disability, and social anxiety, among others. By acknowledging these constraints, the

authors normalize imperfection and promote consistency, enjoyment and sustainability over intensity or moral ‘purity.’

In fact, roughly a third of the book addresses self-care, an emphasis that might surprise those expecting more conventional social movement discourse focusing on painful accounts of injustice and the plights of others. Yet this focus proves to be one of the book’s strongest selling points. Cook and Joseph recognize the emotional and physical toll of advocacy—the burnout, the guilt, the sense of being overwhelmed in the face of the multitudes of ways in which the world is burning—and offer mindful, practical strategies for coping such as monitoring sleep, news consumption rules (“no doomscrolling” [46]), embodied emotional literacy, and boundary setting. Some practices (like chakra meditation or self-affirmations) may not resonate with every individual, which the authors also acknowledge. Further, the book is careful to say “[t]his is not a therapy book” (139) and to refer audiences to professionals such as therapists or mindfulness instructors, which is very responsible but also, importantly, not accessible for every reader depending on socio-economic background—a fact that could be addressed a tad more prominently.

The discussion of parasocial relationships is another particularly strong element of this guide. Cook and Joseph take the intense emotional connections fans may feel towards characters or celebrities very seriously—neither demonizing nor romanticizing them. The authors discuss how to use parasocial relationships productively and critically understand them for what they are: relationships with an inbuilt power imbalance—and with benefits and limits to them. The book explains how ‘starcipants’ (celebrities who engage with fans in social action [cf. 80ff.]) can amplify activist/charitable campaigns while also creating vulnerabilities when things go sour. The guidance on the re-negotiation/re-contextualization of such relationships after potential disillusionment with former idols feels particularly timely.

On the flipside, something that could be seen as a final potential point of criticism for some, stems from the same accessibility strategy that makes the book appealing to others. Frequent parenthetical references or footnotes to cite sources can make a text unwieldy and cumbersome to read. However, the near absence of in-text citations in this book and its reliance on endnotes instead mean that many ideas are not directly traceable to their academic influences. A great repository of foundational scholars and research on fan activism are cited in the “References” section at the end (cf. 193ff.); however, it is not quite clear what they each contributed to the definitions and concepts used in the book in particular. Generally, it might have been interesting to see the methodology unpacked in more detail. The book employs a compelling mix of methods, combining previous research on fan activism with interviews, fieldwork in fan spaces, and an autoethnographic approach. A more explicit discussion of how these methods were applied and what specific insights they yielded, could have further enriched the work. At the same time, one must keep in mind that the authors intended for their publication to be a practical guidebook rather than a theoretical scholarly text.

In her “Foreword,” Rachel Miner describes *Fandom Acts of Kindness* as a “map” that will guide readers to “make the most” of their fandom experience and navigate fan activism “in a healthy and fulfilling way” (viii). The book more than delivers on that promise. It treats fans as potential organizers of powerful civic efforts and recognizes affect as a legitimate source of motivation. The prose is clear, the examples (and fannish Easter eggs) plentiful, and the optimism measured by a healthy dose of realism that rejects moral absolutes and acknowledges that (fan) activism is hard work. The authors fundamentally leave the reader with a lasting impression of hope and agency—something incredibly necessary and vital to our current times.

