

“Family Don't End in Blood”: Growing Up in a *Supernatural* Blended Family

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**“Family Don’t End in Blood”:
Growing Up in a *Supernatural* Blended Family**

An Exchange by Will Dodson and Huxley Bailey

Robin Wood wrote that home and family lie at the center of American horror. This is one of the most cited comments in horror studies, and sensibly so. The home is the first origin of horror because, as Elisabeth Bronfen explains, it is “always already split in itself, familiar and strange, safe and dangerous” (2014, 109). This idea is literal in a blended family. The very concept of a “stepparent” and a “stepchild” is uncanny. In my own blended family, I am their dad, but not-dad. They are my daughters, but not-daughters. They are at home, but not-home. The uncanny nature of the blended family is, sadly, too often a source of horror for children. Abusive stepfathers and wicked stepmothers appear in every genre from Disney animated features to serious dramas (See, for example *Cinderella* [Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, 1950], or *This Boy’s Life* [Michael Caton-Jones, 1993]). Horror is particularly fertile generic soil for such tropes, perhaps most famously in *The Stepfather* series (Joseph Ruben, 1987; Jeff Burr, 1989; Guy Magar, 1992; Nelson McCormick, 2009). Abuse is occasionally even visited on the stepparents, as in the recent horror-comedy *Little Evil* (Eli Craig, 2017).

Less horrifically, the active formation of a blended family can also be an exercise in making the monstrous comfortable, a process which, as I’ll come to below, I’ve taken to calling “uncanny inclusion.” The relationship is not “natural,” in the sense that we do not share genes. In our case, we did not get the bonding time of infancy and early childhood. Our relationships had to be

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formed later, after the girls already developed their self-hoods, after they'd already bonded with their biological father and their childhood memories included the emotional link not just with him, but with *them*, the family unit of their mother and father. Now their mother is married to me, and not to him. Their father has a new partner, who is not their mother. Their mother has had a new child with me, a half-sister (such a mean-sounding word). Their father has had new children with his new partner, a half-brother and another half-sister. That "split," the source of horror to which Wood refers, is their lived experience. My stepdaughters now spend half their time with their mother and me, and half their time with their father and his partner. Their half-siblings spend all their time at their homes; my stepdaughters shuttle between homes. They are never totally settled. They always know that in a few days from whenever it is, they have to move to a new space. That unsettled-ness, that feeling of discomfort is always with them, underwriting whatever mood they are in each day.

Huxley

When you have yet to experience something for yourself, you rely on recounts of a situation told by other people. I, obviously, had never had a stepparent, or anything close to it, so my view on the whole dynamic came from only what I'd heard and absorbed in my short seven or eight years of life. As I'm sure you can imagine, a large majority of those examples were along the lines of the evil stepparent. This made my acclimation to having a new parental figure in my life a little rough, and when confronted with the idea of having to experience this new situation I was less than thrilled. I wanted nothing to do with him, I didn't want my mom to have anything to do with him, I didn't want him to be around us ever again. I thought he was dangerous, actually, and that it was my responsibility as the oldest sibling to protect the rest of my family from that imagined evil-ness.

When Mom first told me the two of them were dating, I was furious. I thought this was the most terrible thing that could have ever happened ever, and that it would just be horrible. The next few months was just me disliking him, waiting for something to happen and have the whole thing explode into the inevitable destruction that I was convinced was going to happen. But, then it didn't. It took me a second to realise it but eventually I actually looked forward to seeing him. Me and Harper were always so excited to have "sleepovers" at

his place, because it meant we got to hang out and watch cartoons all night long. Even after I recognised he came in peace, it was still weird trying to figure out this new relationship that I would have to form with someone who I hadn't really expected to come along at all, even after my parents got divorced. I wasn't quite sure how he saw my sister and me, which meant it was confusing to try and figure out how I felt about him. When we got to know each other better and eventually moved into his apartment, I was feeling better about him but we still didn't have a close relationship. *Supernatural* was really the thing that started to change that.

Will

When my wife and I married, my “new” daughters, Harper and Huxley, were five- and ten-years old. I looked for ways to connect with them, but our circumstances were difficult. Our new baby, Helen,¹ had just been born, and my wife left her job to be at home with her, so I was taking on extra work to keep the bills paid. We were in a relatively small apartment, with my stepdaughters sharing a room. Huxley, our ten-year old, had a later bedtime, and one night I asked her if she wanted to watch Netflix and try out this CW show called *Supernatural*, which my wife had recommended to me. At that point, 2012, the show was about to start its eighth season, and we started with the Pilot episode of Season One. Immediately we were thrust into a story where two brothers, whose mother had died at the hands of a demon, reunited to search for their missing father, a hunter of supernatural beings. The older brother, Dean, was taciturn, distrustful of outsiders, and intensely protective of his younger brother, Sam. It seemed to have some resonance with Huxley, so I put it mildly.

Huxley

I knew Will and mom liked horror stuff, and I was kinda nervous about all that. To small Huxley this show was like peak-horror, so I also was really excited to start watching this thing, especially with Will, because it was something more mature I hadn't gotten to experience yet. After the sixth

¹ The all-“H” names are just a coincidence!

episode, “Skin” (1.6), I remember asking him how scary *Supernatural* was on a scale of scariness (this was after I was closing my eyes hiding from the shape-shifter taking off its skin), and he said it was a 2 out of 10. I was completely shocked because for me, a tiny, easily frightened 10-year-old, I truly thought this was the most terrifying thing to grace the screen of anyone everywhere.

I remember the “Bugs” (1.8) episode, I thought it was so cool but also very gross for obvious reasons. This was before I got super into biology and insects and things of that nature, but I was still excited. I remember that this was when we started trying to predict the “bad guy” or the reason the supernatural thing was happening. I hadn’t done that before, and I was completely terrible at it, but I quickly got better at making connections and understanding the writing the more that we watched together and I saw the things he was looking for.

Will

Huxley was pretty scared the first few episodes. The Woman in White (“Pilot” 1.1), the Wendigo (“Wendigo” 1.2), the avenging spirit haunting the lake (“Dead in the Water” 1.3)—Season 1 leaned right into the horror. I jumped a couple of times myself! But she also got that feeling of excitement, the one all we (former) horror kids know so well, that delicious shiver that accompanies good horror stories, and we kept watching. We made it appointment viewing, a few episodes a week. Some weekend nights we’d stay up to watch two or three. It took several years, but we eventually caught up to Netflix, I think around Season 9 or 10, and then waited (im)patiently for each new season to get posted, studiously avoiding any Internet spoilers. (When the COVID pandemic delayed production of the second half of the final season, we agreed to wait until the entire season was posted before watching. As of this writing, we look forward to starting Season 15 in October!)

Huxley

Watching *Supernatural* with Will was the first thing we really did together. He had shown Harper and me movies before, and introduced us to the 1980s *She-Ra* and *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoons, but those were always more of a group

family thing with everyone. *Supernatural* was the first thing that was just between the two of us, and I think that was really important to little Huxley. At this point I believe both stepparents were present at both houses, but I hadn't made any real relationship with either Will or my dad's new partner aside from the obvious superficial stuff. When we started watching *Supernatural* it showed that he was invested in me as an individual and not just as an offshoot of mom that just came with getting married. I think that was when I started to realise that he thought of me as his daughter too and not just Mom's, or not just a stepdaughter. The show became a ritual. We would watch it when Harper and Helen went to sleep and I was done with my homework. It was something to add to my daily schedule that involved him, which was new and I think it really cemented all of us as a family, rather than ... familial-like roommates. When I watch shows by myself it's more of a way to pass the time and be generally entertained, but when I watch a show with Will it's more about the experience of watching it with someone? (I don't know if that makes sense.)

Will

When we began watching the show together, Huxley did not yet trust me, or have much of a bond with me. *Supernatural* became our shared experience—we have watched every single episode together, in order—and the start of what became a deep and loving relationship. We enjoyed the monster-hunting together, but the ongoing, evolving discourse about family has been an even more important part of our discussions over the years. She accepted my monstrosity, in other words, and our fan experience exemplifies *Supernatural's* fundamental themes of family. Over the years, and seasons of the show, I began to think of the Winchester family dynamic in *Supernatural* in terms of “uncanny inclusion,” that is to say, the ways in which the formation of familial bonds begins with an acceptance of (in Dean's case, grudging acceptance) and appreciation for monstrosity. In my stepdaughters' case, this meant expanding their understanding of what a parent could be, and developing a relationship that positioned me as a father figure separate from but similar to their biological dad. Really, what could be more uncanny than a stepparent? The inclusion of monstrosity within the concept of family involves reconceiving how bonds of love can work. This is most literally true for the bonds the Winchesters form with Castiel, and also (eventually) with Kevin (poor Kevin), Crowley, Rowena, and Jack, for example. But it also includes the relationships—

the trust—the brothers form with other hunters and allies along the way, from Bobby Singer to Jody Mills, Donna Hanscum, and Claire Novak. In every case, the brothers add members to their extended family by recognizing and accepting another's—or their own—monstrousness, their shared exile from "normal" society, and bonds that don't begin or end in blood.

Huxley

When we first see Sam and Dean, they actually are not very close or otherwise happy to see each other. Sam is wanting to go on with his pursuit of normalcy in law school and with his girlfriend, while Dean is frustrated that Sam is hesitant to go with him to find their father ("Pilot"). As the series progresses we obviously see them become close again, but we also get to see more of their childhoods and the effects that period had on them as adults. Both recognised each other as family and had these shared experiences, but they were affected in different ways. These differences make it hard for them to understand each other at some points, because they feel that these shared experiences are so familiar, but can't recognise the opposing effects as acceptable reactions to those experiences. That's actually one of the biggest things I've learned related to family, that even though we experienced the same things, our reactions do not always align.

It can be weird and creepy for someone to have such different views on the same experience, especially with a family member like a sibling. Harper and I went through the same things, but came out completely different people because of them. For a while I didn't know why she acted certain ways or believed certain things (I still don't all the time), but I never connected these actions back to anything in our shared past, because if I felt so strongly one way and acted on that because of this one experience, how could someone feel and see it in a completely opposite way? This is something I noticed with the Winchesters in the beginning, and even onwards throughout the series. Dean felt a responsibility over Sam, but also a loyalty to their father. Sam, on the other hand, felt alienated by his father's work, and never developed that same sense of kinship that Dean had. When confronted with these opposing views on the same experiences they actually get angry at each other before they are able to work through it more. I kind of related to that.

Will

Because Huxley and Harper shuttle back and forth between our homes, their bond as a unit within their blended families has been important. Huxley quickly became protective of Harper, and they became each other's support system as they went through the slow process of adjustment, navigating the times where their two sets of parents came into conflict and caused them discomfort. It's no coincidence that Huxley related in a certain way to Dean. To cope with the stress, she withdrew when it came to expressing her emotions, reluctant to show any vulnerability. She especially connected with the difficult relationship Dean had with his father, John, and the happy-but-complicated reunion with his mother, Mary. As the outside parent, I used many episodes' themes to triangulate conversations between the two of us as a way of checking in.

The show's mix of comedy and horror—the *douche-écossaise* indelible to the genre—became part of our bonding process, a way to let go of any outside tensions that bled over from conflicts between her mom and dad, especially when the stepparents were also involved. And, somewhat terrifying for me, it's also been a guidepost to Huxley's growing awareness of dirty jokes as she grew older. I was discomfited, for example, when we watched "Frontierland" (6.18) and she belly-laughed at Dean's immortal line, "I'm a posse magnet. I mean, I love posse." Such awkwardness aside, our shared laughter opened up space to talk a little about how she was feeling. No matter how close we get, I'll never have the same relationship with her as she has with her dad or her mom, but I am happy that she felt comfortable enough to let me to know when she was struggling or when she was doing well. Mostly, though, I think she saw me as the parent with whom she *didn't* have to have too many difficult conversations, and I was just fine with that role. Laughing together and getting scared together is good therapy for both of us.

Huxley

When *Supernatural* tries to be funny, it really is. I really like the dark humour that happens sometimes, like the murder of the imaginary friends ("Just My Imagination" 11.8), and things like that. Sometimes Will gets a reference

that I wouldn't have noticed and that's always fun too. I always look forward to episodes that are funny, it's always a good balance between dark humour and stress/suspense. Even if an episode as a whole isn't necessarily comedic, there can be some small comedic scenes that are very relieving in between stressful scenes.

I am generally still terrible with horror. Actually, it doesn't even have to be horror, as long as it has some kind of jump scares or general spookiness, I'll probably be pretty scared. *Supernatural* is no exception: I still hide my face when I know a jump scare is coming, or look away when something gross is happening, but I like the show a lot better than most scary things. The monsters are obviously supposed to be scary and mean and whatnot, but not always. A lot of times they're just being dumb; they're just like people who don't know quite what they're doing, so they just guess at making decisions, and get angry if someone says "no" to them. Eating people should be a pretty big "no," but you get the idea. A lot of times, once I get over the initial scare, I appreciate it afterwards. Especially things that are really neat conceptually. Like the one episode with that guy who became a man-eating monster because he was greedy, and then every time he was about to eat someone he whistled. ("Don't Go in the Woods" 14.16). That was creepy, and I liked the whistling.

Over the years that we've watched the show, I have really gone through quite a bit of personal identity figuring-out, as I suppose you do when you're a teenager. I went through about a year of questioning when I was around 12, came out at 13, figured out more about my own values and beliefs, and all kinds of fun stuff like that. I watched *Supernatural* with Will basically as I grew up. As I got older, I found I would pay attention to different things or have new impressions on situations that occurred in the show as we watched it. The broader, real life consequences of the show began to be something I actually paid attention to.

Will

For the first few years we watched together, our shared analysis of *Supernatural* was limited to discussing the mythology of the monsters. As Huxley became a teenager, though, we began thinking about the show in social terms as well, and our familial bond became one of growing awareness and maturity, on both our parts. We discussed ways in which Sam and Dean's masculinities were toxic (and John's, Bobby's, Crowley's, Castiel's, Lucifer's, Chuck's/God's

...). The show pokes fun at Dean's "tough guy" facade, but it's nevertheless true that it's a very male-oriented show, and women have interesting but usually marginalised roles. Other than Mary, Charlie, Jody, Donna, and Claire, most of the dynamic women characters are villains, like the demon Ruby or God's sister, Amara (aka, The Darkness). We're still mad that Charlie died, and even madder that she died off-screen in a completely stupid and preventable way ("Dark Dynasty" 10.21). (That she came back in Seasons 13-14 as alternate reality Charlie does not make up for it.)

We've discussed the whiteness of the show, and our own whiteness in terms of how we view and analyse the show. Characters of colour are few and far between, and often die quickly, like Isaac ("The Magnificent Seven" 3.1), Kevin Tran and his mother, Linda ("Reading is Fundamental" 7.21), or Missouri Mosley ("Patience" 13.3). We could go on. Those who live, like Isaac's widow, Tamara, or Missouri Mosley's granddaughter, Patience Turner, generally don't come back as more than a mention. Sam and Dean's whiteness facilitates their ongoing pose as secret agents. Do we think if the brothers were Black they could just walk up to crime scenes, claim to be agents Mayfield and Hayes, and start demanding access to files and records? In the rural South and Midwest? No, we don't think so. We are not in this space condemning the show for its lack of diversity,² but when we watch we are aware of it and we talk about it. Ironically, *Supernatural's* planned spinoffs, introduced in backdoor pilots "Bloodlines" (9.20) and "Wayward Sisters" (13.10), might have tackled these issues, as both shows planned to have diverse casts. We wish CW had picked them up ...

Huxley

I remember at one point we were talking about the show and the disproportionate killing off/general lack of women characters within the show. We of course talked about Charlie, who was killed off so suddenly without any real main reason I could see other than shock and motivation for Sam and Dean to hurry up and get the Frankenstein plot done with ("Book of the Damned" "Dark Dynasty" "The Prisoner" 10.20-22).

² Various fan essays have made cogent points on this matter. See, for example: Alaya Dawn Johnson, "An Open Letter to Eric Kripke," *The Angry Black Woman*. September 9, 2009, <http://theangryblackwoman.com/2009/09/09/an-open-letter-to-eric-kripke/>, and Tara Roy, "Dear Writers of *Supernatural*," *Medium.com*, January 27, 2017, <https://medium.com/@nerdypoc/dear-writers-of-supernatural-545e1a3c5cd1>

We also talked a lot about Mary, who at that point had just returned via Dean's wishing ("Alpha and Omega" 11.23), and how although we liked her character, she felt out of place at times in the beginning. In fact, she would sort of come and go without much explanation. Even as Mary becomes more of a pivotal character in the show, we see her become a more or less well rounded, intelligent, capable hunter, only for her to act so out of character that leads to her death ("Game Night" 14.17). After witnessing Jack brutally murder Nick, she is quick to question Jack and his wellbeing. However, he is clearly distraught and keeps telling her to stop, but she continues to push him to talk to her and to insist that they tell Sam and Dean what happened. Mary knows full well that despite the strong relationship she'd formed with Jack, he is still a Nephilim with huge amounts of power and a questionable soul situation, who had just got done murdering someone. Up until this moment she has always been smart and calculating, and approached things in ways that just make sense. Now would not be the time to stress Jack out any further. Yet, she goes so far out of basic human and personal logic to push the issues that she ends up dead. It felt weird, sudden, and out of place with her character up until that point, something in common with Charlie's death.

It seems whenever the show needs something for the Winchester boys to cry over and motivate them into doing or finishing something, the go-to move is killing people off (like Charlie, Mary, Ellen and Jo ["Abandon All Hope..." 5.10], etc.). Now, full circle here, the fact that these deaths happen is to be expected for such a show, and male characters die too, but the women are definitely more expendable. When we had these conversations we weren't necessarily always talking about societal interpretations, or representation, or the treatment of different groups within the media, we were just talking about a show we liked and characters we enjoyed. But these issues are always there, and plenty of other fans have certainly noticed patterns of character deaths or exclusion.

It's crazy to think about how thousands of other people are absorbing, processing, and enjoying the same show as we are and having their own thoughts or reactions to them. As I go on into the world, I'm sure I'll find other *Supernatural* fans with their own interpretations, and their own backstories. Maybe I'll go to a con! It's bittersweet in a way, the fact that I've pretty much grown up with the show. We started watching it when I was a little kid, and now it is coming to an end just as I am about to move on to this next stage of life, one where family doesn't play as much of an everyday role. I will leave for college soon after we watch the very last episodes. It's really strange but it also feels like that is the way things should be happening.

Supernatural helped us get closer and really come together as a for-real family, and now the show is going to end, right as I'll be leaving. Even though I will still rely on our relationship for support through whatever happens next, I've grown and changed so much since we started watching, from a kid to a not-quite-kid-anymore. As I go off on my own, I will meet new people who could be a new family in a sense. I actually think it's comparable to our own relationship. I will have to meet new people, and navigate what those relationships are and what they mean to me. Ideally none of these new people will marry my mom, so I suppose that is one key difference. But in terms of accepting new members of a family-like group I think I'll have some good prior experience. Who would've thought a show about monsters would have had a hand in preparing me for real-world interpersonal relationship building?

I don't know what will happen as I go off into the world and inevitably spend my days in a fluorescent-lit lab, staring at bugs, but the things I've done and do now can help me deal with whatever comes my way. So, in growing up watching the show and cementing our relationship, I've learned more about other people and how relationships can work. I know I've said this over and over, but it's really true that *Supernatural* was what brought the two of us together, and that taught me so much. Now, as this period of my life comes to an end, I will have to utilise the things I've learned, a lot of which wouldn't have happened without the show. Even things that Will taught me, totally unrelated to the show or story, wouldn't have happened without *Supernatural* because that is the thing that allowed us to get comfortable and really start talking in the first place. It's gonna be over, and I'm gonna be leaving, and I don't know what else to say about it.

Will

We discuss and joke about both of our gender identities and presentations and how those things too are part of how we think of ourselves as family. I can sometimes be a real Crowley when it comes to her chores, but I also can annoy her with my Sam-ish need to talk about our feelings. She's such a Dean, but also a Charlie (the real one). Looking back over this exchange, I think about how much life we've gone through. Huxley started watching this show as a 10-year-old. I was 34. I've changed and grown over that time nearly as much as she. As we prepare for the end, an end that can't be prevented by just convincing God to just talk to his sister ("Alpha and Omega" 11.23), we

look back on nearly a decade together on our couch, in the dark, while everyone else is asleep, laughing and covering our eyes, sometimes with pie.³

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³ P.S. Harper is thirteen now, and she likes to watch killer shark movies with me. So far, her favourites are *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *The Shallows* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2016). Helen, who is seven, currently tortures me with her love of *Trolls* (Mike Mitchell, 2016), but with luck, I’ll soon return the favour with *Troll 2* (Claudio Fragasso, 1990).

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