

Welch-Larson, Sarah. *Becoming Alien: The Beginning and End of Evil in Science Fiction's most Idiosyncratic Film Franchise*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021. 144 pp. hardcover. \$37.00

In *Becoming Alien*, Sarah Welch-Larson addresses the main themes found in all six *Alien* films through the lens of Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep*.¹ While noting that each film individually has been read in many different - and valid - ways including commentaries on capitalism, war, and rape, *Becoming Alien* seeks to explore a wider perspective on the films as a whole.

Throughout the book, Welch-Larson tackles the issues of chaos, personhood, dehumanization, and Keller's concept of "discreation" — "creaturely relations that deny and exploit their own interrelation."² In this particular text, Welch-Larson is working with the idea of "discreation" as a theological denial of the worth of any created being, or a misuse of that creation for nefarious purposes. Working through the films in chronological order, Welch-Larson successfully adds layers to this concept, from the smallest kernel of *Alien* (1979) to the onion skin of *Alien: Covenant* (2017).

As Welch-Larson points out, it is difficult to easily settle on one main "evil" in the film series. The most obvious examples are the Xenomorphs (aliens) and The Company. The aliens act for reasons that are never fully clarified: do they have the sentience to be striking out for world domination? Are they functioning simply out of a biological drive to reproduce? The Company, on the other hand, repeatedly functions for profit and sacrifices anyone who stands in their way. Welch-Larson clearly summarizes the tension in each film between these "big bads," and how the other characters are trapped between the two.

Welch-Larson makes an argument for a larger story arc, an ongoing development of Keller's understanding of "discreation," tracing the move from creation out of chaos, to being, to un-being. In this imagined arc, the real tension lies between creation/personhood and subsequent dehumanization: the aliens and The Company (as well as many specific characters in-between) commit acts of evil by ignoring or actively attacking the ability of individuals to participate in determining their own existence. This evil might manifest in The Company sending the *Nostromo* on the initial rescue mission in *Alien*, or in the willingness of scientists to seed humans with alien embryos.

Though this theme permeates the films, the most difficult chapter of the book to tackle is the section on *Alien: Resurrection*. While labeling the film as a farce and reading it as an intentional reversal of the main themes she addresses elsewhere, Welch-Larson switches into a very different authorial tone. While the framework of Keller's theology remains, the chapter seems forced into the mold — perhaps much as the film itself feels forced into the series.

While the first four chapters make use of Keller's theology from *Face of the Deep* as needed, the connections are at times minimal: (1) *tehom*, the face of the deep in Genesis equates to the void/non-void of space; (2) The Company makes ultimately failed attempts to control that

¹ Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

² Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 80, as quoted in Sarah Welch-Larson, *Becoming Alien: The Beginning and End of Evil in Science Fiction's most Idiosyncratic Film Franchise* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 12.

chaos; and (3) evil resides in the ways we dehumanize and “discreate” others. The final two chapters (*Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*) draw on Keller’s theology more directly, though in many ways this is not surprising. Religious themes of chaos, creation, and the responsibility of the creator are blatantly present in the final two films, and it is nearly impossible to watch them without being aware of those ideas.

The final two chapters address in some detail the creation of the A.I. characters (Synthetics) whose personhoods are questioned, and more often than not rejected, throughout the series of films. One theme throughout *Becoming Alien* is an underscoring of Keller’s repeated return to “In the beginning...”, and her deep dive into the beginnings of A.I. is one of Welch-Larson’s most successful reflections. Welch-Larson returns to Ash — the Synthetic of the original film — in a way that ties together her other arguments as well: the Synthetic of *Alien: Covenant* will create his own descendants, but create them as tools rather than as fully independent beings who might themselves create.

In this sense, the book wraps up the series of films by using the Synthetics as the best examples of Welch-Larson’s take on evil. She argues that the concept of evil in the series is “exploitation, the act of overstepping the freedoms of another”³ and that the reduction of a being to a useful tool is the epitome of Keller’s “discreation.” Often in the series the Synthetics are quite literally stripped down to their component pieces, and those pieces are used by the humans as tools. By returning to the “original” Synthetic in the final two films (David), this argument comes full circle — David is both originated by a human as a tool, and in turn creates other Synthetics who *he* will use as tools.

One of the main strengths of this book is the focus on addressing the series of films as a whole, while not ignoring the plethora of readings that have accumulated in the last six decades. In Welch-Larson’s readings, each film might well encompass feminist critiques of power — or meditations on war, or on capitalism. Her approach of allowing multiple critical readings to co-exist, as well as acknowledging different directorial moods and intents, adds to the cohesiveness of her overview of the films.

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REFERENCES

- Keller, Catherine. *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Welch-Larson, Sarah. *Becoming Alien: The Beginning and End of Evil in Science Fiction’s most Idiosyncratic Film Franchise*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021.

³ Welch-Larson, *Becoming Alien*, xxiii.