There is something classic and powerful about two characters sharing the role of hero in a single world. I’m thinking of Butch and Sundance, Kirk and Spock, Stewart and Colbert. In the piece that follows, Swendson argues that Mal and Simon are co-heroes of the Firefly saga, and she makes a good case. If the classic hero takes a familiar journey, Mal and Simon certainly travel roads that run through the fascinating tulgey woods nearby.

A Tale of Two Heroes

SHANNA SWENDSON

Before you can tell a story, you have to know whose story you’re telling, and when you’re watching or reading a story, you want to know whose story it is. In other words, who’s the hero? Not the hero in the sense of who wears the white hat and beats the bad guys, but more in the mythological sense—the man on a mission, the one who has to step out of his comfort zone and face potentially life-threatening situations and be forever transformed in order to achieve his goals.

Who’s the hero of Firefly? In the television series, that changed from week to week, depending on the plot of the particular episode—Mal was usually the one taking the lead, but Simon was the criminal mastermind behind the caper in “Ariel,” Wash refused to leave a man behind in “War Stories,” River saved the day in “Objects in Space,” and even Jayne got to be a hero in “Jaynestown.” But whose story does the saga as a whole tell? At first it seemed pretty obvious that Mal Reynolds would be our hero. He was the first character we met, the captain of the ship, the one running the show. But after facing the battle of Serenity Valley in the opening sequence, he became a man very specifically without a mission. All he wanted was to make enough money to keep his ship and his crew going so that he never had to answer to anyone else ever again. As much as he hated the Alliance, he wasn’t ready to start a rebellion, fight the Alliance (except in
self-defense), or do much of anything other than stay out of the way. He was done with missions and grand fights, causes, and that sort of thing. He’d learned that great causes only get your heart broken.

Then along came Simon Tam, the young doctor who was very much on a mission: to rescue his sister, keep her safe from the Alliance, and figure out what they did to her and why—and then maybe, just maybe, fix it. He didn’t know yet if that would involve something as small as finding the right dosage of the right drugs to make her sane again or something as large as changing the entire government so that it wouldn’t try to get her back to finish whatever it was that it was doing to her, but he didn’t much care. Whatever it was, whatever it took, he’d do it—and he’d do it willingly, without much thought for what it cost him. He’d already given up everything he had and everything else that mattered to him. Any further sacrifices—up to and including his life—would be relatively inconsequential to him.

Now, that’s a hero of mythological proportions—the man on a mission greater than himself who is willing to take on all odds and overcome all obstacles to carry it out. And from a storytelling standpoint, that mission was also the element of change that kicked Mal’s story into gear. Simon and River’s plight was the catalyst that forced Mal into action and out of his comfortable world, into the unknown where he’d have to take a stand eventually. When he offered Simon a job instead of kicking Simon and River off Serenity at the end of the pilot, he forever changed life on board his ship. That put Mal on a path toward possible rebirth and transformation.

So, who is the hero of Firefly, the man on the mission, or the man who takes on that mission even though he’s not quite ready to believe in it fully? Maybe it’s both.

**SUPERFICIAL DIFFERENCES, VOLCANO SIMILARITIES**

At first glance, Mal and Simon couldn’t appear to be more different. Mal is from a more rough-and-tumble part of the ’verse, a former ranch kid who grew up to be a soldier and then a mercenary/thief/smuggler/transport ship captain. He talks with a drawl and uses uncultured slang, dresses in Western/cavalry gear, and goes out of his way to subvert most rules of social propriety. He’s comfortable with guns and violence as a way of life.
Meanwhile, Simon is from a cultured, wealthy background in the Core of the system. He's educated—a doctor—speaks properly, avoids swearing (unless it's appropriate), and dresses in perfectly tailored business attire. His concession to the more casual life in his first months on board *Serenity* was to stop wearing a necktie. He knows all the rules for proper social conduct and abides by them, even when nobody else around him follows those rules and even when that kind of behavior is seen as more insulting than polite. Before coming on board *Serenity*, he seemingly had little experience with violence. He'll pick up a gun if he has to in self-defense, or in defense of his sister or shipmates, but he's far better at patching up the results of violence (or being the victim of violence) than he is at committing violence himself.

Beneath the surface, however, these two men are very much alike, which could explain both why they clash so often and how they also manage to develop a certain respect for each other. Both of them use snark and sarcasm as weapons when they feel threatened or when they want to keep someone from getting too close to the truth. Both of them would do absolutely anything to protect the people for whom they have responsibility. Mal's protectiveness of his crew is very much like Simon's protectiveness toward River. They both also have an old-fashioned, courtly attitude toward women that occasionally gets them in trouble with their respective romantic interests. Inara wasn't particularly impressed when Mal got himself into a duel over her honor, and Kaylee was outright insulted at Simon's implication that she wasn't the kind of girl he'd get drunk and have sex with in a sleazy bar.

In spite of Mal's often gregarious nature, he has a talent for annoying others that's very much like a talent he himself noticed in Simon. Book remarked that Mal wasn't overly concerned with ingratiating himself with anyone, while Mal commented on Simon's remarkable talent for alienating folks. Neither of them is good at forming close, intimate relationships. Zoe is really the only person on *Serenity* who is what one might call Mal's true friend, and even their relationship is more businesslike than emotionally intimate. Whenever Inara gets close to anything resembling emotional closeness with Mal, he resorts to sarcasm or outright obnoxiousness. Simon is too new to have true friends on the ship, but he's not trying too hard, either. His focus is on River, and when
he gets too close to intimacy with Kaylee, he falters, as in “The Message” when he managed to compliment her without thinking, but when she asked for more compliments he panicked and ended up infuriating her instead after he weakly turned the compliment into a joke. Both are shown to have a knack for planning. Mal’s plans are usually mocked because they tend to rely on improvisation, but they often end up working in the long run, while Simon’s effort at playing mastermind in “Ariel” was later referenced as the best job the crew ever pulled.

Both men also play big brother roles—Mal with Kaylee and Simon with River. These interactions serve as a humanizing touch for both characters. In “Serenity,” when Mal was generally being a jerk to everyone, he was nice to Kaylee—and since the audience couldn’t help but like Kaylee, we figured this meant he was basically an okay guy. Almost every scene of Mal being mean, harsh, or cruel was balanced by a scene of him being a good “big brother” to Kaylee. In that same episode, Simon’s devotion to his sister thawed his personality significantly. He was introduced as a potential villain, the one we were led to believe was the Alliance spy, and even after we knew he wasn’t the spy he still could have been a bad guy—he was a wanted man desperate enough to essentially use Kaylee as a hostage to ensure his escape. Until his sister was revealed, he came across as cold, distant, calculating, and a touch arrogant, but once we saw him with River and learned what he’d done for her, all was forgiven.

Even those similarities are still somewhat superficial, though. If you want to really know a man, you have to see how he reacts in a crisis. Or, in the words of the Firefly universe’s psychotic dictator/warrior poet Shan-Yu, you have to tie him up and hold him over the volcano’s edge. When either Mal or Simon is held over that metaphorical volcano’s edge, they both react the same way—with sarcasm, stubbornness, and a touch of recklessness. Both of them come into their own in a crisis, where even if they’re not in control of the greater situation, they’re totally in control of themselves and willing to stand up to or take on anyone. They don’t back down, even when all looks lost.

We first saw this trait in Mal during the flashback at the beginning of the pilot “Serenity,” when he was able to keep his troops together and get his job done under fire, even if that required improvising. Simon first
demonstrated his ability to think under pressure when he coerced Mal to make a run for it by refusing to treat Kaylee until Mal agreed not to turn him over to the Feds. Later, we saw that he didn’t let a death sentence hanging over his head slow him down at all. Instead of groveling and begging for his life, as many people would do, he kept arguing with Mal, up to the point where he got himself decked. He flung himself off a catwalk and fought with the federal marshal when River’s safety was at stake—the kind of reckless move you could imagine Mal making. Mal never gave a straight answer as to why he hired Simon instead of strand- ing him on Whitefall, as he’d originally planned to do, beyond “You ain’t weak, and that’s not nothing,” but it’s not hard to guess that Simon’s feistiness under pressure had a lot to do with it.

These core traits repeated themselves throughout the series: Mal thinking his way calmly through the life-threatening crisis when the ship died in the middle of nowhere in “Out of Gas”; Simon’s icy dressings-down of both a hospital resident and the federal officer who captured him in “Ariel.” They even have similar ways of dealing with Jayne. When Simon quietly lectured Jayne about his disloyalty during the Ariel caper in “Trash,” he echoed some of the terms and arguments and even the hint of ruthless menace that Mal used when lecturing Jayne on the same event at the end of “Ariel.” Both focused on the concept of crew unity and loyalty.

The similarity under pressure, however, was most obvious in the episodes “War Stories” and “Objects in Space.” In “War Stories,” Mal never lost his sarcastic edge while being tortured by Niska. He looked for and found his opening to strike back at his captors, and he didn’t let himself stop fighting until the fight was over. In “Objects in Space,” Simon reacted in much the same way when he was taken captive by bounty hunter Jubal Early. He kept his sass thoroughly intact, no matter how threatened he was, waited for his opportunity, and then tried to take on an armed, armored man nearly twice his size while he was unarmed, barefoot, and in his pajamas—and then kept trying to fight even after he was shot, because he thought he was all that stood between Early and his sister.

You could probably swap these characters in these situations and get almost identical results. Simon being tortured by Niska might have
made different snarky wisecracks, but he would have kept up the sarcasm until the very end—and as a doctor he might have been even more creative about the way he turned the torture implements on his torturer. Likewise, Mal, put in Simon’s situation with Early, would have been just as sarcastic, defiant, calculating, and reckless, though he probably wouldn’t have used the word “incorporeally” in his taunts.

Although Simon and Mal had very different upbringings, there is one major element in their backgrounds that they have in common. They’ve each faced their own “Serenity Valley” of sorts, a time when they were disappointed and betrayed by something or someone they believed in, and when they found out that they really were all alone in the universe.

Mal had the literal Serenity Valley, the battle where he and his forces were left without support to face the enemy on their own. According to a deleted scene from the episode “Serenity,” the soldiers were left in that hellhole without supplies or help while the leaders negotiated a settlement. It was in Serenity Valley that Mal lost his faith in God, when he learned that prayers aren’t answered, and his faith in his cause, when he learned that his loyalty wasn’t returned by the people to whom he gave it, those who left him and his people to die in the aftermath of battle. He was left believing in nothing but himself and Zoe, with no greater cause than just getting by.

We saw Simon’s metaphoric Serenity Valley in flashbacks during the episode “Safe,” when he learned that the parents who had seemed supportive of him wouldn’t be there when he really needed them. They wouldn’t believe him when he was worried about River, and they didn’t support the actions he took to help her. His father’s declaration that if he got in trouble again, he would be on his own, his father would not come for him again, was for Simon the equivalent of the moment when Mal learned that there would be no air support at Serenity Valley. Someone he believed in and counted on had let him down, bringing everything else he believed in into question. The fact that it was the government Simon had previously supported that had harmed River was yet another betrayal.

Both Mal and Simon even responded to their own Serenity Valley experiences in a similar way, by escaping society and heading for the blackness of space—the only place where they could have any semblance of
freedom. We don't know the whole story of how Mal went from the immediate aftermath of Serenity Valley to purchasing Serenity, but he makes it clear that he wants no part of the government's control over his life, and he took the person who mattered most to him at the time—Zoe— with him. Simon's escape was somewhat less than voluntary, as he had government agents chasing him, but he, too, wanted to get away from government control and took the most important person in his life—River—with him. And of course, both of them ultimately ended up in the same place, on board Serenity, and they both found a new kind of home and family there.

From "Serenity" to Serenity

So, is Mal the hero, or is Simon—or is there even a distinction? In a sense, these aren't two separate characters but rather different reflections on the same character, which allows us to see the hero in different phases of his life and on different parts of his journey. The two of them represent the range of possibilities for each other's futures. Depending on what happens to them, how they react to events, and the choices they make, each could end up very much like the other.

The comparison between the two characters and their journey as the two heroes of the saga is most obvious between the episode "Serenity," which begins the story, and the movie Serenity, which completes the story arc (for now, we can only hope). These two "episodes" taken together present a complete mythic hero's journey for these two characters.

The two characters were constantly depicted as reflections of each other throughout the episode "Serenity." When Simon was first introduced, there was a long shot of him and Mal, facing each other across the cargo bay ramp. They stood on either end of the screen, framed as though they were looking into a mirror at each other, establishing the sense of comparison and contrast. At that point, Mal was a man without any mission greater than finding a customer for the cargo they were carrying, and he believed in nothing other than his ship and his crew. Simon was the one with a capital-M Mission, the one that would affect the rest of the story and change everyone's lives. He was still idealistic
enough to believe that good and right would ultimately win—enough so that when he was later caught by the federal marshal he felt that if he could just explain what had really happened, if the marshal could only understand why he’d taken River, everything would be okay. Even though he’d lost absolutely everything, he was still able to believe strongly enough in his love for his sister to get them both through the crisis and to hope that love would influence others.

In a structural sense, the moment when Simon boarded Serenity with River in the cryosleep chamber was when the story really began for the crew of Serenity, because it was the moment of change—yet another reason why FOX should have shown this episode first during the series’s original run. Simon’s story had already begun off-screen, when he learned River was in danger and accepted the responsibility of saving her.

Plot-wise, Mal and Simon have similar story arcs in the episode. Mal brought a box on board the ship and kept the secret of what was really in it (the marked goods) from his crew. He tried a dangerous plan (dealing with Patience) because he was desperate to keep flying. He ended up in a gunpoint standoff that was resolved in part by someone outside the standoff (Jayne) intervening. Likewise, Simon brought a box on board the ship and kept the secret of what was really in it from the crew. He tried a dangerous plan (essentially holding Kaylee hostage) because he was desperate to keep running. He ended up in a gunpoint standoff that was resolved by someone outside the standoff (Mal) intervening.

When Mal became aware of the change Simon had brought to his ship, he wasn’t welcoming of it. He decked Simon in the cargo bay as a suspected spy; planned to space him or, if things went well, strand him on an inhospitable planet, even after learning Simon’s true story; and decked him again when Simon remained defiant. As much as he hated the government, Mal wanted no part of Simon’s mission, and he didn’t want it associated with his ship. But then Mal had a change of heart after seeing Simon holding the federal agent at gunpoint, and instead of putting him and his sister off the ship, Mal offered Simon a job.

Mal knew what he was getting into at that point. He knew he was taking on fugitives, that by doing so he was in effect taking on Simon’s mission of keeping his sister safe, which also meant that he was putting himself in more active opposition of the Alliance government. He knew
that he was forever changing life for his crew. As the two men discussed the specifics of the job offer and what it meant for them, again they were framed as though they were looking into a mirror, on either side of the screen in nearly identical poses. The story question that seemed to be raised in this moment was how the decision would change them both, since they both had similar potential. Would Simon change to be more like Mal as he faced life on the fringes of society, becoming hard and bitter from having his ideals shattered? Or would Simon’s influence revive Mal’s long-lost idealism, his ability to believe in something greater than his immediate surroundings, to the point where he would be willing to take action to right a wrong instead of just keeping his head down and staying out of trouble?

The other story question raised in this moment is a central, unspoken conflict that would go on to drive much of the series and provide the core emotional conflict in the movie. We knew that the things these two believed in the most strongly were bound to be mutually exclusive at some point. Mal wanted to protect his ship and crew and stay out of major trouble, as much as possible (minor trouble is just a bit of fun). Simon wanted to protect River at all costs. As long as protecting the crew was the same as protecting River, they would be fine. But we knew that if there was ever a situation in which protecting River meant putting the crew at risk, or protecting the crew meant putting River at risk, well, there were two very strong-willed, determined, and occasionally reckless men who would be at odds. Mal’s promise to Simon in “Serenity” that if he ever shot Simon, “you’ll be awake, you’ll be facing me, and you’ll be armed,” had the ring of foreshadowing to it (though the premature cancellation of the series that required the shortening of the major arcs meant we never got to see that foreshadowed moment—or we haven’t yet). A couple of times during the run of the series situations arose that skirted such an opposition between River’s safety and the crew’s, but it never came to all-out war between Simon and Mal.

Which brings us to Serenity the movie. As we pick up with the crew after a gap of several months, the questions raised at the end of the pilot episode seem to be answered. Simon has become like the Mal of the series—harder, angrier, more confident, more defiant. He’s also become emotionally closed off to everyone but River, barely even looking at
Kaylee, with whom things had been looking up in the final episode of the series. We don't have much indication of what happened to Simon in the timeframe between the series and the movie, but whatever it was stripped away most of Simon's softness, youth, and vulnerability. As the ultimate sign of his transformation, this time he's the one to hit Mal with a sucker punch in the cargo bay. Because they seem to have reached an impasse in which, in Simon's opinion, Mal's view of what's good for the ship and crew isn't in line with what's good for River, Simon plans to leave the ship. He's ready to stand on his own.

But it also seems that some of Simon has rubbed off on Mal. He may act colder and harder-edged, but when River collapses after the fight in the Maidenhead, Mal's instinct is to bring her and Simon back on board, and he can't even explain why. She's proved that she isn't helpless at all, but Mal seems to sense that this actually puts her and her brother in even more danger, not least because Simon is ill-equipped to handle a semi-psychotic fighting machine armed only with a safety word. In making the decision to bring River back on board and keep her on board—even though he knows that the Alliance is actively seeking her, Mal takes on Simon's original mission to a degree he never had before, and this time willingly instead of by chance. And in doing so, he picks up again with the same battle he was fighting in the first scene of the pilot, openly rebelling against the Alliance.

By the midpoint of the movie, Mal has totally taken over what once was Simon's mission. Mal is the one meeting with the Operative, coming up with the plans, and making the decisions. In doing this, he frees Simon to lay down his burdens and focus on just being a big brother. Keeping River out of Alliance hands isn't solely his responsibility anymore. Even though the whole situation is about his sister and himself, Simon is just along for the ride. The Operative wants River and Simon; they are his quarry, and he has no quarrel with Mal or Serenity. But Mal puts himself in the position of intermediary. Simon and River never meet the Operative face-to-face during the entire film. In fact, at the film's climax, Mal goes on alone to complete the mission that will ultimately make River safe from the Alliance.

Although Mal is unquestionably the hero of the movie, Simon is still a co-hero of the saga, and he gets the proper ending to his hero's jour-
ney. One of the final stages of a mythic hero's journey is a symbolic death and resurrection, a moment when all seems lost and the hero is as good as dead, before he comes back, reborn, a new man. Both Mal and Simon go through this phase in the movie.

Mal is nearly defeated by the Operative during the final battle. He's run through with a sword, and only an old war wound saves him from paralysis that would have ended the fight. He comes back from what appears to be certain death, and he returns from completing the mission a changed man. After what he's gone through, he's learned to believe again in something greater than himself. He's taken on the kind of cause he'd given up on and, as his final scene with Inara demonstrates, he's begun allowing himself to open up more emotionally.

Simon also faces death in the climactic battle, when he is shot and gravely wounded. As he lies dying, he and River change roles. He lets go of his personal mission to protect her, as she comes into her own and becomes the protector. His letting go during this symbolic death means that he returns from his injury a changed man. He's reborn as someone who is open to love, who allows himself to live his own life, to do something for himself—something he'd forgotten how to do in his preoccupation with River's safety. His mission is complete and he has the chance to enjoy his reward: being able to start a relationship with Kaylee.

In the end, Mal and Simon have each learned, changed, and grown from the experiences they've had because of the other. If Simon had never boarded Serenity, Mal might never have learned to believe again. He might never have opened himself to a cause greater than himself. If Simon had never boarded Serenity, he might never have learned to be part of a family again, to trust in those around him and know that they trusted him, too.

The story, such as it is, is mythically complete. Our heroes have taken on their mission, faced death, and returned as new men. But we can always hope that there's another mission out there, some other wrong that needs to be set right, some other learning experience. The way these two characters reflect, contradict, complement, and reinforce each other opens the door to a variety of future storylines. Their different backgrounds mean that they're bound to clash, while their similarities could mean that they don't provide much in the way of checks or balances. If
they ever agreed fully on something and went after it together, their combined stubbornness, persistence, and recklessness could be a force to be reckoned with—or a disaster in the making. And wouldn't that be fun to watch?

SHANNA SWENDSON became a devoted Browncoat a few minutes into the first airing of “The Train Job” and still hasn’t given up. Although her comic fantasy novel Enchanted, Inc., was published by Ballantine Books in 2005, the highlight of her year was attending the Hollywood premiere of Serenity (although she was too shy to actually talk to anyone involved in the movie). In between watching Firefly DVDs, discussing the series with anyone who’ll listen, and meeting up with other Browncoats, she’s written two more novels, Once Upon Stilettos and Damsel Under Stress, as well as contributing to the Smart Pop books Flirting with Pride and Prejudice, Welcome to Wisteria Lane, So Say We All, and Perfectly Plum. Visit her Web site at www.shannaswendson.com.