

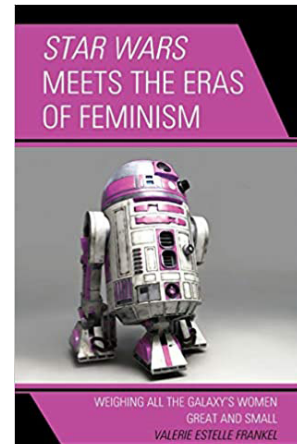
Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism, by Valerie Estelle Frankel



Kara Kennedy

Valerie Estelle Frankel. *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism: Weighing All the Galaxy's Women Great and Small*. Lexington Books, 2018. Hardcover. 353 pg. \$120.00. ISBN 9781498583862.

Valerie Estelle Frankel takes on the daunting task of analyzing all of the women who appear in the *Star Wars* Universe in *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism: Weighing All the Galaxy's Women Great and Small*. The resulting study is a pleasurable and enlightening trip through the decades of *Star Wars* media, where one may be simultaneously cringing in agreement with the criticism while marveling at the many interesting ways of examining the representation of women. It is clear that Frankel has a solid grasp of the vast amount of material to be able to discuss women in the films and television shows, as well as the comics, novels, video games, and other media from the legacy expanded universe and the Disney canon. It is unfortunate that the book was published before the final film in the Sequel Trilogy was released, but there is certainly room for continuing studies as new media are produced. For those who have not had the time to keep up with the *Star Wars* Universe, this book may spark interest in reengaging with the franchise to discover characters such as rogue archaeologist Doctor Aphra, who currently only appears in the comics and an audio drama adaptation.



Frankel takes advantage of a variety of metrics in her analysis, moving between lenses such as the male gaze, the Bechdel Test, agency, and diversity to discuss the representation of women and intersectional issues of race and sexuality. The resulting richness and multi-layered nature of the analysis demonstrate the value in drawing from a wide theoretical pool. Her study brings together conversations and critical perspectives largely occurring in popular culture publications alongside theories and analyses found in academic articles and books. This provides a real sense of a larger picture unfolding in the world of science fiction and fantasy about the place of women and other marginalized people.

Frankel begins her study in section one, “The Original Trilogy Meets Seventies Feminism,” with a thorough discussion of Princess Leia Organa and other Original Trilogy women in relation to second wave feminism of the 1970s. She weaves together commentary on Leia’s costuming, changes in agency across the trilogy, and the extent to which she reflects tropes about princesses

and damsels in distress. Frankel acknowledges the breakthroughs Leia represented in the historical time period, but she does not shy away from interrogating problematic areas. The analyses in this section of characters such as Leia, Mon Mothma, and Oola the Twi'lek are important in establishing the context for the discussion of women in *Star Wars* and also allowing for comparisons with later depictions of the same characters or species. Frankel thus carefully layers her arguments to be able to demonstrate some movement away from stereotypical portrayals of women.

In “The Girl Power Prequel Era,” Frankel moves into an analysis of women in the Prequel Trilogy and legacy multimedia and how they reflect aspects of third wave feminism and girl power. For example, her critique of Padmé/Queen Amidala reveals a complicated web of images that help explain the difficulty in labeling female characters in simple terms. Indeed, Frankel calls this “an era of contradictions, seen in the variously empowered and weakened character” (43). The analysis of Padmé’s complex costumes and the downward trend of her agency is insightful and further strengthened when placed in conversation with the idealistic markers of third wave feminism and key texts such as Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994).

In the final section, “The Fourth Wave Hits the Sequel Era,” Frankel covers the increased presence of women in the franchise since 2008 and explores the extent to which they align with fourth wave feminism. Moving fluidly between major characters, their expanded characterization in other media, and minor characters, she is able to show both progression and setbacks in the franchise’s movement toward greater inclusion of a diverse range of women. There is significant attention to female Force users such as Ahsoka Tano and Rey, and the increased diversity in the Sequel Trilogy and *Rogue One*. Even the more experimental media of the *Forces of Destiny* cartoons—designed as tasters of the larger universe for young girls—receive coverage. The closing analysis of the women in *Solo* shows a return to traditional archetypes; however, Frankel suggests that the droid L3-37 represents a stand-out character as “a delightful voice for empowerment” who, though cast as humorous, reminds the audience of the rights some characters must still fight for (318).

Accessible and engaging, this book offers a solid addition to the growing body of scholarship on *Star Wars*, and the representation of women and diversity in particular. One of its advantages is its comprehensiveness with regards to the sheer amount of media covered in both primary and secondary sources. The strength of Frankel’s arguments is fairly even throughout, though there are some rare places where her conclusions seem overly generous in trying to find positive representations. She relies on relevant direct quotations to support the thread of her analysis, which enables a multiplicity of voices to comment on the material under discussion. The study thus adds value by bringing key points of previous material in conversation with each other as filtered through Frankel’s perspective of each character, though sometimes the other voices dwarf

Frankel's own. This book would be useful to scholars and students in a cross-section of disciplines including science fiction and fantasy studies, feminist and women's studies, film and media studies, and cultural studies. However, it is also presented and written in a way that can engage general readers with an interest in analyses of the *Star Wars* universe.

Kara Kennedy is a researcher and writer in the areas of science fiction and digital literacy. Her doctoral work focused on women in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, and she has also published articles on world-building in the series. She has forthcoming works on other topics in the series and posts literary analyses of *Dune* for a mainstream audience on her blog at DuneScholar.com.