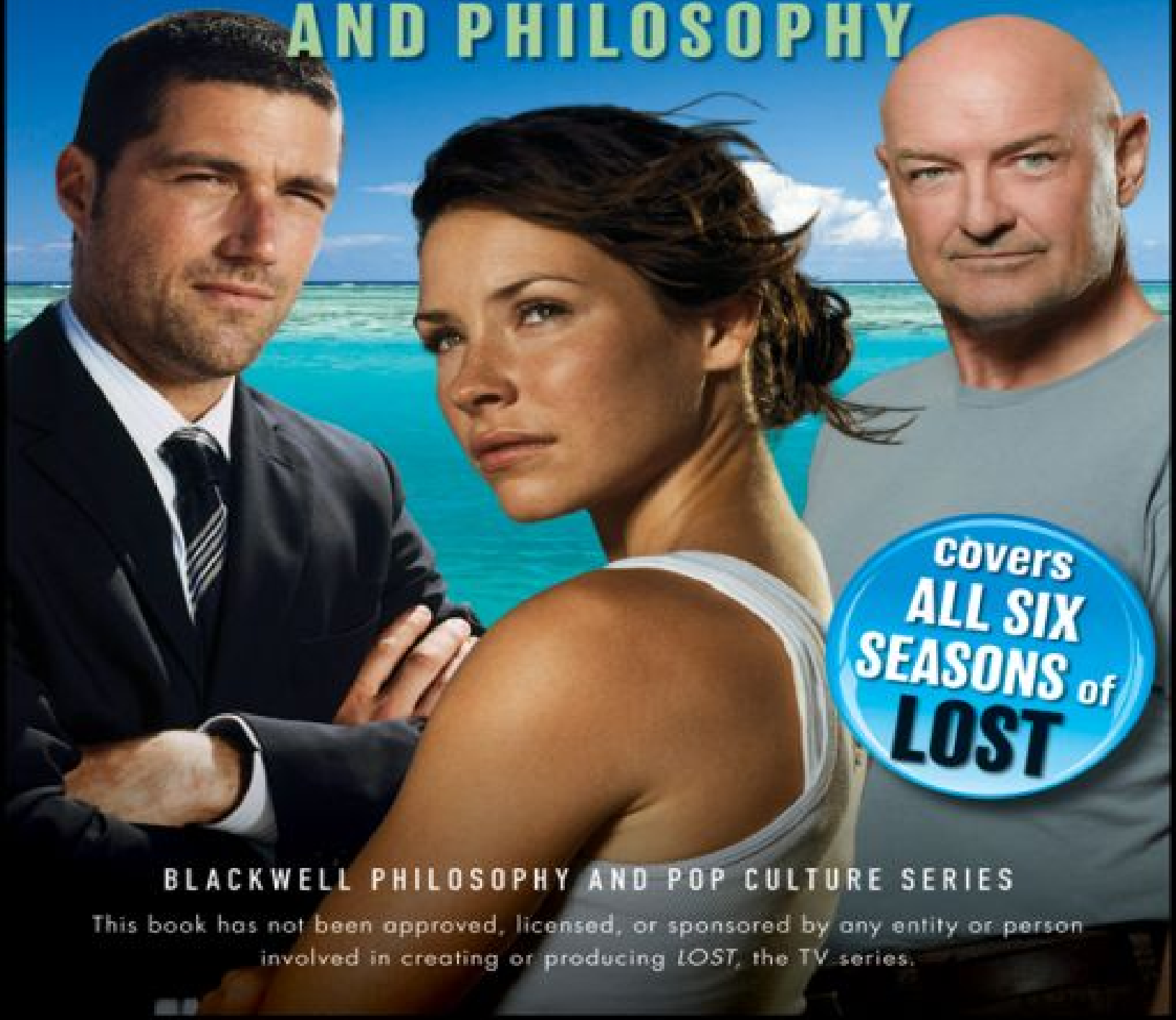
SERIES EDITOR: WILLIAM IRWIN

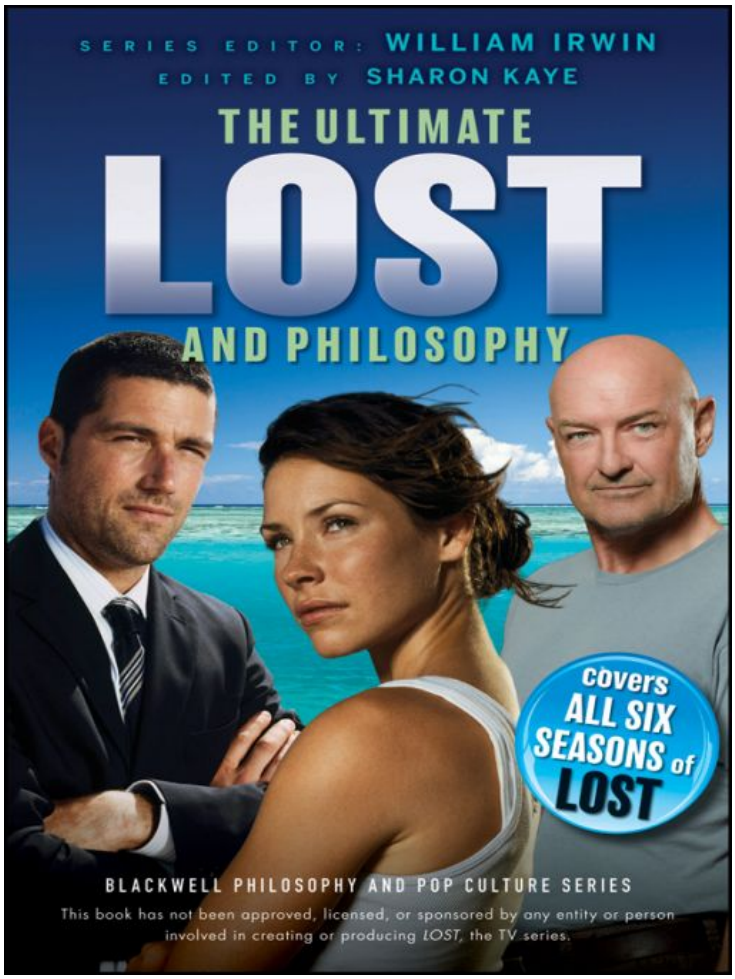
EDITED BY SHARON KAYE

THE ULTIMATE LOST AND PHILOSOPHY



Covers ALL SIX SEASONS of LOST

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES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THE ULTIMATE *LOST* AND PHILOSOPHY

THINK TOGETHER, DIE ALONE

Edited by
Sharon Kaye

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey
Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

The ultimate Lost and philosophy : think together, die alone / edited by Sharon Kaye.
p. cm.—(The Blackwell philosophy and pop culture series ; 35)

Includes index.
ISBN 978-0-470-63229-1 (paper : alk. paper);
ISBN 978-0-470-93073-1 (ebk);
ISBN 978-0-470-93075-5 (ebk);
ISBN 978-0-470-93078-6 (ebk)
1. Lost (Television program) I. Kaye, Sharon M.
PN1992.77.L67U48 2010
791.45’72—dc22
2010028339

INTRODUCTION

Lost and F.O.U.N.D.

As an avid fan of *Lost*, I've been trying to figure out what it is about this show that has such a hold on me. Other fans I've talked to feel the same way. It sinks its teeth into you and won't let go. After wondering about it for some time now, I think I finally figured out what it is. And so I have a question for you.

Have you ever been lost? Or rather, how did you feel when you were lost? Because you have been. We all have. Few of us have been stranded on a tropical island, but we have all had those moments when, far from home, we are suddenly struck by the horror that we will never find our way back.

[Fade to flashback.]

It's a meltingly hot, sunny day, June 1974, and we're at the annual summer carnival. The carnival comes to Madison, Wisconsin, for ten days every summer. It is the highlight of the year. Kids spend long, grueling hours babysitting, mowing lawns, and begging their parents for cash to buy the longest possible strip of tickets. One ticket will only get you on a baby ride; the best rides—the ones that gave you bat belly and bring you closest to mystical transcendence—cost four.

[Carnival music. Chillingly alluring. Then children's voices.]

"Are you going on the Zipper this year?"

“No way!”

“Wus!”

“Well, not if they have that same guy strapping people in.”

“It’s never the same guys.”

“That’s true. Okay, I get the outside seat ...”

At the carnival there are dangers of every kind, and each child is called on to perform at least one truly outstanding feat of bravery. I didn’t know any of this, though. I was only three years old, tagging along with the big kids for the first time.

True, I spent most of my time with my parents, observing my sisters and their friends, sampling the cuisine, and taking in the occasional baby ride. But my special challenge came at the end of the day.

There were seven of us, all sweaty and a bit dazed but still chattering away, as we trooped through the converted farmer’s field back to our car. It was a 1967 Volvo. A midnight-blue two-door with a brick-red vinyl interior and no seatbelts. This was the age of innocence, when you packed as many people into cars as you could fit, the littlest ones perching on the biggest ones’ laps.

Getting everyone in was a bit of a trick that day, with all of our carnival paraphernalia and the seats being hot enough to burn striped patterns on your butt right through your terry-cloth short shorts. Everyone vied for the best positions, and there was some bickering. Yet soon enough the little Volvo was on its way. Windows were cranked all the way down, and a windy discussion of the plan for the rest of the evening commenced.

Then, halfway home, Marcy, our neighbor, suddenly said, “Where’s Sherri?”

“She’s in the front.”

“No, she isn’t. She’s in the back.”

“Come on, quit kidding around.”

“We’re not kidding. She isn’t here.

“Oh, my gosh! We left her.”

It never occurred to anyone, not even to my parents, that I may have been snatched up by a pervert. (Such was the age of innocence.) Their only theory was that I must have somehow been hit by a car. As they sped back to the fairgrounds, my mother scanned for emergency vehicles. Everyone was asking the same question: Why didn’t she get in the car?

Why, indeed. It remains a mystery.

There were no emergency vehicles in the parking lot, and I was nowhere to be seen amid the cars. On reentering the carnival gates, however, my dad soon spotted me. I was sitting serenely on a bench between two old ladies. They had apparently found me wandering and bought me a soda. Although I was not crying, my face was red and streaked.

When I heard my name and caught sight of my family, a crushing wave of mixed emotions passed across my face. I welcomed their enthusiastic hugs and kisses, but I didn’t answer anyone’s questions, and I was quiet for the rest of the night. Once you have been lost, you are never quite the same.

The ABC hit drama *Lost* speaks to our deepest fear: the fear of being cut off from everything we know and love, left to fend for ourselves in a strange land. This fear is a philosophical fear, because it speaks to the human condition. It forces us to confront profound questions about ourselves and the world.

Why am I here?
Does my life matter?
Do I have a special purpose?
Can I make a difference?

[Fade to flash-sideways. More carnival music.]

How can it already be time to go home?

I am watching my feet as I shuffle along the fairgrounds. Bits of hay and interesting pieces of garbage are scattered about everywhere.

I stop to examine a paper boat containing a half-eaten hot dog. Though it looks just like many hot dogs I have eaten before, I strongly suspect I will not be allowed to taste it. I glance up to see if anyone is watching.

“Sherri, come on!” my sister shouts.

She does not see me pick up the hot dog. I grip it tighter and hurry along. I will bide my time and find the right moment for at least a taste.

My cheeks feel hot from a long afternoon in the sun, and the cotton candy sugar high that had me singing “Baa Baa, Black Sheep” at the top of my lungs not long ago has crashed hard, leaving me lethargic and irritable.

We reach the front gate of the carnival. My parents turn to see that everyone is in tow. My sister stops to take my hand. I shake her off, whining, “No!”

“Well, come on, then.”

Everyone is heading for the Volvo. I know that once we reach it, my salty, greasy treat will be discovered. I look around desperately for cover.

A white van is parked not far ahead. The side door slides open. Just inside sits the clown who made me a kitty cat out

of a long skinny pink balloon earlier today. He is eating a hot dog and looking right at me.

I slow to a stop, staring. He beckons me to come to him.

I cast a glance at my family, already loading the detritus of our day into the trunk, and begin to angle toward the van.

As I think about how tragic that day at the carnival might have turned out, I begin to wonder more about the two old ladies who saved me. Who were they? Was one of them me—time traveling from the future? What if they were two different future flash-sideways versions of me teaming up to make sure that I didn't come to an untimely end?

As I ask myself these questions, I begin to feel that my life may be important in ways I have not yet realized. Once you have been found, you are never quite the same.

The nineteen essays contained in this volume search for answers through the deepest philosophical labyrinth ever portrayed on television. We published the first version of this volume, *Lost and Philosophy*, in 2008, after the show's third season. The ultimate guide you now hold in your hand updates its best chapters in light of the second half of the series and adds six new chapters. I have organized them loosely into five main groups.

Part One: F Is for Fortune

The first set of essays probes the issue of time travel and alternate time lines, which became such an integral component of the show. Great thinkers throughout history have suggested that time travel is possible. What about the resulting metaphysical paradoxes, though? Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that concerns phenomena that lie beyond the explanation of science—but not beyond our philosophers.

Part Two: O Is for Origin

The second set of essays explores crucial epistemological issues raised by the show. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that concerns the nature and extent of human knowledge. What have our survivors learned about the capacities and limits of the human mind?

Part Three: U Is for Unity

The third set of essays looks at the most pressing social and political issues raised by the show. Social and political philosophy concerns all of the difficulties that arise when humans try to live together and form a unit larger than the individual. The island is a microcosm of the power dynamics we observe in our own communities.

Part Four: N Is for Necessity

The fourth set of essays examines the most heart-wrenching ethical issues raised by the show. Ethics is the branch of philosophy that concerns values, along with the nature of right and wrong. Being in such extreme circumstances, the characters on *Lost* face difficult decisions that reveal insights for the rest of us to consider in our own moral lives.

Part Five: D Is for Destiny

The fifth set of essays investigates the most intriguing religious issues raised by the show. Philosophy and religion are historically two sides of the same coin. By applying a rational analysis to some of the mystical moments portrayed on *Lost*, we can more fully appreciate their significance.

As a bonus, a handy appendix that gives you the lowdown on the philosophers' names that crop up on the show is included at the end of this volume. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did. On behalf of the authors, let me wish you the best of luck in your search for answers.

PART ONE

F IS FOR FORTUNE

1

LOST IN *LOST*'S TIMES

Richard Davies

Lost and Losties have a pretty bad reputation: they seem to get too much fun out of telling and talking about stories that everyone else finds just irritating. Even the *Onion* treats us like a bunch of fanatics. Is this fair? I want to argue that it isn't. Even if there are serious problems with some of the plot devices that *Lost* makes use of, these needn't spoil the enjoyment of anyone who finds the series fascinating.

Losing the Plot

After airing only a few episodes of the third season of *Lost* in late 2007, the Italian TV channel Rai Due canceled the show. Apparently, ratings were falling because viewers were having difficulty following the plot. Rai Due eventually resumed broadcasting, but only after airing *The Lost Survivor Guide*, which recounts the key moments of the first two seasons and gives a bit of background on the making of the series.

Even though I was an enthusiastic Lostie from the start, I was grateful for the *Guide*, if only because it reassured me that I wasn't the only one having trouble keeping track of who was who and who had done what.

Just how complicated can a plot become before people get turned off? From the outset, *Lost* presented a challenge by splicing flashbacks into the action so that it was up to viewers to work out the narrative sequence. In the fourth and fifth seasons, things got much more complicated with the introduction of flash-forwards and time travel. These are two types of narrative twists that cause special problems for keeping track of a plot and that also open a can of philosophical worms about time itself.

Constants and Variables

To set the scene about plot complication, I want to call on some very influential thoughts first put forward by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.).

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discussed tragedy, a form of theater written for civic and religious celebrations, in which the best plays were awarded prizes. Because ancient Greek tragedy was designed to gain the approval of the judges and the public, it followed certain formulas (think the Oscars, rather than Cannes or Sundance). Aristotle's analysis of these formulas can provide us with pointers for assessing the difficulty with *Lost*.

Most tragedies are based on well-known historical or mythic events. For instance, *Ajax* by Euripides (480 B.C.E.–406 B.C.E.) concerns a great hero of the Trojan War who commits suicide in a fit of shame and self-disgust when he does not receive the reward he thinks he deserves.

Using this example, Aristotle argued for two principles. First, every tragedy should deal with a single episode in the life of its main character. The audience should follow a clear causal chain from start to finish. Let's call this "the principle of closure." In line with this principle, Euripides' play begins

with Ajax's coveted reward being given to someone else and ends with his death.

Second, there should be some unity to the action, which is to say that merely accidental or unrelated events should be excluded. Let's call this "the principle of relevance." In line with this principle, Euripides' play does not recount Ajax's boyhood, regardless of how interesting this topic might be.

Does *Lost* follow Aristotle's principles of closure and of relevance? At the outset of the series, Oceanic flight 815 crashes, providing a clear starting point for the succeeding chain of events. We are introduced to the survivors, who all share the same predicament. Although the flashbacks begin right away, they are all carefully designed to shed light on the island narrative.

Complications, however, arrive with the Others. Although at first they function merely as antagonists for our survivors, they soon take on lives of their own. For example, through the character of Juliet, we follow a causal chain that begins before the crash of Oceanic flight 815 and ends before the resolution of the survivors' predicament. Aristotle would not give up on *Lost* so easily, though.

In addition to single tragedies, Aristotle discussed longer poetic compositions, known as epics, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer. These are big stories, the former dealing with the Trojan War and the latter with the ten-year journey home of one of its heroes. In epics, the narrative structure is much more complex than that of the standard tragedy. Yet Aristotle notes that even here, the story concentrates on a sequence of interconnected phases of action.

Thus, the *Odyssey* effectively begins, in Book One, not by focusing on its hero, Odysseus, who has not yet returned from the war, but on his son Telemachus, who is told to go

and track down his father. The two don’t actually meet until Book Fifteen (out of twenty-four). In the meantime, they are wandering around the Mediterranean and often find themselves recounting their travels to others, thus supplying the hearer/reader with backstories. For example, during his journey (and before the time of the events recounted in Book One), Odysseus outwitted the one-eyed monster known as Cyclops, but we find out about this only much later, in Book Nine, when Odysseus narrates his trick to the Phaeacian king. In this way, even though many events are presented out of their chronological order, we don’t have too much trouble constructing a coherent time line.

It seems that *Lost* is not so much a tragedy as an epic. Any given episode of *Lost* features a single individual who stands at the center of attention and who is the primary subject of the flashbacks and the flash-forwards. Although many episodes finish with cliff-hangers, the principles of closure and relevance are still at work over the longer run.

So Juliet’s causal chain can become part of the story as long as the audience cares about her connection to the survivors of Oceanic flight 815. If her mud fight with Kate wasn’t enough to make us care, then her relationship with Sawyer was.

A blur of unrelated incidents that is spread out over too long a time and that involves too many characters will not hold our attention. The point seems obvious. On the other hand, a story that is too simple is just boring. The hard part is finding a balance between narratives that are challenging and those that are merely confusing.

We’re All in This Together