

Talking back to the Culture: The Growing Literary Subculture of Fan Fiction

Everyday thousands of fan fictions are being written and uploaded onto the internet. Is the fan fiction phenomenon a waste of time? Is it obsession? Or is fan fiction a different type of creative expression?

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Have you ever watched a movie or read a book or played a video game and fallen in love? You love the characters and the stories that give them life, and you even fall in love with the world they live in. Suddenly the credits roll or the show is canceled or you finally read that last sentence and then what? Does the love you feel just go away? For some people it does but for a growing number of individuals the love evolves into a controversial project: fan fiction.

Fan fiction is exactly what the name implies: fiction written by fans about the fictional universes that these fans fall in love with. So just because an author has finished writing your favorite series doesn't mean the subject or characters will ever go away. Of course they won't be printed into bound books anymore; instead they will find a new home on the internet.

FanFiction.net-- the largest archive of miscellaneous fan works on the internet--totals 3,362 pieces written about *Sherlock Holmes* on their website as of December 4, 2012 even though Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has been dead for eighty-two years. And that's certainly not all; *Harry Potter* tops the site's archives with 620,757 entries, even the *Bible* has 3,399, and new entries that vary from one page to roughly the length of a novel are added to FanFiction.net every day. However, FanFiction.net isn't the only site that hosts and encourages a fan community;

Common Fan

Fiction Terms:

Canon— *The plot or rules of the original creator.*

Alternate Universe (AU)—*A work where characters from one universe are placed into a modern setting or a setting that disregards canon.*

Original Character (OC)—*A character that is fan created.*

Crossfic (X over)—*Where characters from one universe are placed in the setting of another universe to interact with the characters of the second universe. (i.e. Harry Potter attending the Mad Hatters tea party in Wonderland).*

One-shot—*A fan fiction that is one chapter long.*

Crackfic—*A fan fiction that is written for the authors amusement and is usually overly random.*

Fluff (Lemon)—*An overly sweet or emotional fan fiction.*

Beta—*A person who edits fan fiction.*

websites like LiveJournal, Archive of Our Own, and Tumblr are infested with fans and the works that they produce; along with numerous sites that specialize in fan fiction of one universe, such as PatronusCharm.net which hosts only *Harry Potter* fan fiction.

This subculture of devout fans has matured and thrived on the internet but it was born long before, when fan fiction was written for no one but the individual fan. It is believed that Trekkies are the parents of modern fan fiction in the late 1970s when Star Trek fans would print fanzines and circulate them among the fan base of an area (Alter).

I've never read any *Star Trek* fan fiction but like all types of fan fiction I'm sure it has its highs and lows. Some fans stick to writing about one universe their entire fan lives but more fans write and read for many universe's worth of fan fiction as their tastes evolve with personal growth and they are introduced to new stories worthy of fans.

I am one of the latter, eclectic fans; I started reading fan fiction as a *Twilight* fan when I was thirteen in 2005, but by the next year I was fed up with the repetitive fan fictions of vampires and began writing my own *Harry Potter* fan fiction. I joined FanFiction.net and began uploading my fan works to the site in 2007. Since then, every time I am introduced to a movie or book that captures my interest, I will go online and check out the quality of the fan fiction written for it. I don't write fan fiction anymore but I am still a reader and an avid supporter of the culture.

A Labor of Love or Obsession?

“Don’t these people have anything better to do?” The majority of people who hear about this type of activity automatically think this. Next they will console themselves by imagining that people who write fan fiction are either lonely shut-ins who live with their mom or kids who are just going through a passing phase. However, this is only a very small part of the truth. People who write fan fiction are normal; some have families, they have jobs and in some cases have very good careers, some are college students, and some are aspiring writers. Many people use fan fiction as a writing exercise, or as free therapy. They write it because it can be fun and relaxing, or they use fan fiction as a way to expand their creativity. Lev Grossman describes fan fiction in an article for Time magazine in my favorite way: “Fan fiction,” he says,

“is what literature might look like if it were reinvented from scratch after a nuclear apocalypse by a band of brilliant pop-culture junkies trapped in a sealed bunker. They don't do it for money. That's not what it's about. The writers write it and put it up online just for the satisfaction. They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language.”

Fan Fiction for Profit?

Before you get the idea that working from someone else’s creative work can in no way assist another writer I would like to point out that numerous authors, such as Meg Cabot, Cassandra Clare, S.E. Hamilton, and Neil Gaiman, wrote fan fiction as young adults and some published writers continue to do so despite the fact that they get paid to write their own works (Alter). In addition, some authors such as Scott Westerman and J.K. Rowling encourage fan

fictions of their stories. Still, few authors feel fan fiction is a violation of their creative rights; Anne Rice is strictly against fan based works using her characters, but authors like Orson Scott Card are being swayed toward the harmless subculture. Card spent years sending out cease-and-desist letters to fan fiction writers but has recently admitted that “Every piece of fan fiction is an ad for my book” (Alter).

What are the boundaries between an original work and a fan work? The currently popular book *50 Shades of Grey* started out as a *Twilight* fan fiction titled “Master of the Universe” (Alter). Change the names and move the location (in this case to a different part of the state of Washington), and you have a publishable work. Couldn’t *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* be considered an alternate universe fan fiction? It’s the same story; the author just adds zombie attacks in some parts and makes a feature of a good husband the ability to defend his estate against zombies.

In these cases, and many less profitable ones, the legality of writing fan fiction is questionable. Most fan fiction hosting websites make the users issue a “disclaimer” at the start of every story stating that the user is not the original creator of the work and that the fan author makes no money from borrowing the characters and setting (Grossman). Usually the only time people make a profit from fan work is when they publish a critique or parody of the original work; in which case the fan work is protected under fair use laws.

Fan writers don’t write for profit. If fan fiction could be published then it wouldn’t be written in as large quantities as it is presently. It is meant to be relaxing and a tribute to the original work. Generally anything that can be published legally or that has been altered specifically for publication is no longer considered fan fiction because fans have a deep respect

for the original work and its creators. If it weren't for the creator then the universes that fans dabble in would not exist.

Fan Fiction as a Writing Teacher

Like the rule of thumb that not everything you find on the internet is worth your time; not every fan fiction written is worth reading. Some fan works have grammar and spelling mistakes that are so bad the fan fiction is hard to understand, or are written in a confusing tense that can baffle the reader. However, there are intelligent people who write good fan fiction. In some cases the fan work is of a higher quality than the original. (I consider niteryde's *Dragon Ball Z* fan fiction "Point of No Return" to be one example: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/5785965/1/>). These are the cases where reading fan fiction pays off since reading other peoples work is a good way to start developing good writing skills and examples of both good and bad writing can be found on fan fiction sites; anyone who wants to look can see what they should or shouldn't be doing as a writer.

Fan fiction can also be helpful to aspiring writers because of its large community. There are perks to writing for an audience that can give the writer constant feedback and encouragement. People who write and read fan fiction keep each other motivated and, since fan fiction exists largely on the internet where anonymity is an option, no one is shy about pointing out mistakes or offering suggestions for improvement. The obvious problem with using fan fiction to build writing skills is that there are already set plots and set characters that fans have to work with, which can take away some of the creativity. But just because spring boarding from original works can limit creativity doesn't mean fan writers don't find ways around being stifled.

Some fans create original characters that help move the story forward or expand the plot to lengths that the original creators never imagined.

Necessary Elements

All in all I believe that writing fan fiction requires both love and obsession. A fan has to be able to accept the merits and flaws of the fictional people they write about without being stuck in a state of infatuation, if not the fan fiction they produce will end up being nothing but fantasy fulfillment. There are already mass quantities of fan fiction written just for the fan's pacing whim but if fan fiction is ever going to be taken seriously there needs to be less of this and more fictions that keep characterization and purpose true to the original work.

The original creators themes and intentions also have to be analyzed and understood; and a fan has to have a running knowledge of the plot, the past, and the present of the universe they are writing for. Otherwise they run the risk of producing meaningless fan fiction. A fan also needs to obsess over the universes they are a fan of in order to maintain the love of producing fan fiction; because without the love it really is a waste of time.

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