

Seven ways of looking at Fan Fiction by Ruby Parker

Abstract

This essay examines the phenomenon of fan fiction from different angles, from the point of view of the readers and writers, to the attitude of the literary establishment and my own personal experience as a member of the Harry Potter fandom. The purpose is to show the cultural significance and merits of this overlooked genre, which has grown exponentially in a post-internet, post-Potter world. This is done by examining its influence on a new generation of writers like Cassandra Clare, who got their start on platforms such as fanfiction.net and have since achieved great commercial success in publishing. It attempts to explain the popularity of the genre, by looking at how it functions as a ‘shadow world’ to established works of fiction like *Twilight*, allowing fan communities to take collective ownership of texts and create multiple interpretations. Many creators like Robin Hobb and Diana Gabaldon are threatened by this change in ownership – and accusations of plagiarism are often leveraged to retain control. However, the essay argues that the majority of fan fiction is not written to profit from another’s creation, but out of genuine love for it. Its popularity with young adults in particular has also made fan fiction an alternative tool of sexual education that allows marginalised individuals like members of the LGBTQI community to find representation, by writing themselves into popular narratives.

Filling the void

The best kinds of friendships are based on shared passions. When you are young, these can be borderline fanatical. My friends and I grew up as part of the *Harry Potter* generation. The first book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, was published in the UK in 1997. I encountered it two years later (in Afrikaans) at the age of nine. At the time, I was two years younger than its famous protagonist, but quickly caught up with him. After reading all four books in the series, I had to wait two years for *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* to be published (by that time I was reading the English versions).

I attended the launch of the fifth book at Exclusive Books in Canal Walk along with thousands of other young (and some considerably older) fans. Despite the swelling word counts, the books came out every two years like clockwork. But how were Potterheads supposed to get their fix as they waited for the next instalment to come out? Launches were fun but there were no other formal fan gatherings in South Africa at the time. So, we had to head online to sites such as *The Leaky Cauldron* or *Mugglenet* to find a digital community. There, we could speculate on forums about book theories or the tantalising hints dropped by JK Rowling in her latest interview. Was Sirius Black really dead? Who was R.A.B.? Could Severus Snape turn into a bat? (A popular theory at the time.) In the two years I spent waiting for *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, I must've read books one to four over 10 times. To fill the void, many fans took to writing their own stories set in the *Harry Potter* universe.

Before the advent of the internet, fan fiction had been restricted to science fiction fanzines (mostly produced by the *Star Trek* fandom) (Reich). These fanzines were shared at conventions and had a limited readership. However, the internet made it possible for fans to share their stories with a global audience. Fan fiction as we know it has been around almost as long as the internet. The largest site – *fanfiction.net* – was started in 1998 (Moore 530). It offered a new platform for fans to share stories set in beloved fictional universes, from books to movies and TV shows. There were canonical stories that stayed true to the fictional universe or cross-over ones that were a mash-up of different worlds. Buffy could now go to Hogwarts if she wanted to.

Training ground

The *Harry Potter* books have been widely praised for inspiring a generation of children to read, but what is often overlooked is that they also inspired many to write. Readers were desperate to go to Hogwarts and the only way they could visit it was on the page. Whereas the fantasy genre rallies against accusations of escapism, fan fiction embraces the label. It is pure wish fulfilment. Stories often star an author-insert that must find their way in the *Harry Potter* universe. A large percentage of fan fiction stories fall under 1000

words. What is known in the genre as “one-shot” stories or a text not comprising more than one chapter (“One Shot”).

However, the genre has also spawned a number of novel-length works. Freed from the constraints of a publisher’s schedule, they are delivered directly to readers in regular instalments like modern equivalents of Dickens’s serialised novels. One of the most famous works of fan fiction, *The Draco Trilogy* by Cassandra Clare¹, consisted of three novels, spanning 895 000 words in total (more than the first six Potter books combined) and took the author over six years to complete (“The Draco Trilogy”). Clare eventually leveraged her huge online readership to gain a book deal and has gone on to publish more than 20 original titles, of which there are currently over 50 million copies in print (“Cassandra Clare”).

Not all writers use fan fiction as a platform to gain exposure. Many merely use it to learn the nitty-gritty of storytelling: such as dialogue, scene creation, description, pace, plot. In addition to developing their skills, it also helps them build confidence. The anonymity of the platform makes it a safe space for emerging writers to publish their stories. It also gives them access to reviewers or commenters whose feedback helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses as a writer. Having an engaged audience also encourages writers to finish their work – something which most struggle with at the start of their careers.

Many prolific² authors, however, argue that fan fiction is not the best way for aspiring writers to learn the craft. George RR Martin, the author of the best-selling *Game of Thrones* series, has been one of the genre’s most vocal opponents. “Every writer needs to learn to create his own characters, world, and settings,” he said in an interview with sci-fi magazine *Galaxy’s Edge*. “Using someone else’s world is the lazy way out. If you don’t exercise those ‘literary muscles’, you

¹ The pseudonym for Judith Remelt. She was originally known as Cassandra Claire in the fan fiction community but dropped the ‘i’ after she became a professional writer.

² Professionally published fiction.

will never develop them” (“George R.R. Martin”). This view was also expressed by fantasy author Robin Hobb in her essay “The Fan Fiction Rant”. In the essay, Robb writes that “the first step to becoming a writer is to have your own idea. Not to take someone else’s idea, put a dent in it, and claim it as your own... Fan fiction is to writing what a cake mix is to gourmet cooking.” (Hobb)

Plagiarism

However, the more cynical amongst us will say these writers are not interested in raising a new generation of scribes so much as protecting their own interests. Some authors, such as JK Rowling, see no harm in letting fans write fiction set in their story worlds, so long as they do not profit from it. Others see it as a direct infringement of – and a threat to – their copyright. Since its origin, many authors have requested sites such as fanfiction.net to remove any stories featuring their creations. This list includes notable ‘genre’ writers such as Anne Rice, Raymond Feist and Nora Roberts, amongst others.

These authors argue that by not challenging fan fiction they are not actively protecting their copyright. A legal argument can therefore be made that they have abandoned it (Martin). In 2004, controversial science fiction writer Orson Scott Card defended his anti-fan fiction stance on his website: “In order to protect your copyright and potential filmmaking rights, you have to **AGGRESSIVELY** [sic] protect your own authorship of characters, precisely because it is the characters that film companies need to license and protect when your work is filmed.”

An incident that many writers, including George RR Martin, regularly cite to justify their attitude is the Marion Zimmer Bradley controversy. Zimmer Bradley used to permit fans to write fan fiction set in her *Darkover* universe and went as far as to read fan stories. This was until she allegedly came across an idea in a fan’s story that bore resemblances to her current work in progress. Bradley allegedly contacted the writer to explain the situation, and even offered her a small payment and acknowledgment, but the fan threatened to sue

and eventually Zimmer Bradley had to drop the project entirely (Martin). Unsurprisingly, she stopped reading fanfiction thereafter and wrote to the Science Fiction Writers of America to warn other authors of falling into the same trap³.

However, most established fan fiction sites respect author consent. On the guidelines section of *fanfiction.net* there is a whole list of writers that submitters are not allowed to emulate. In fact, the fan fiction community has their own rules regarding what they consider plagiarism, and these are strictly enforced. Word-for-word plagiarism, for example, is not tolerated and can get members banned from the community. The most famous instance of this is when so-called BNF⁴ Cassandra Clare was kicked off *fanfiction.net* in 2006 after it came to light that she plagiarised the opening section one of her *Draco* chapters from *The Hidden Land* (an out-of-print fantasy novel by Pamela Dean) (“The Cassandra Clare Plagiarism Debacle”). Clare had previously been known to borrow phrases from pop culture but usually cited them (as is the accepted practice in the community).

Shadow world

Many authors have gradually softened their stance on fan fiction, including Orson Scott Card and Anne Rice. Perhaps they realised they were fighting a losing battle, or that most fans did not seek to profit from their work. However, there have been exceptions where a work of fan fiction has gone on to enjoy commercial success, most notably E.L. James’s bestselling *Fifty Shades of Grey* series. Not all readers know that the books originally began as an alternative

³ Zimmer Bradley’s account has since been challenged by the fan in question, Jean Lamb, who spoke out after the author’s death.

⁴ Big Name Fan. A member of a small circle of fans who have risen to celebrity status through their contribution to fandom e.g. created a popular fan site or fan art.

universe⁵ *Twilight* fan fiction. Originally published in 2009 on *fanfiction.net* as *Master of the Universe*, it recast *Twilight* characters Bella and Edward as the naïve literature student Anastasia Steele and controlling CEO Christian Grey. *The Fifty Shades* trilogy was first released as eBooks and print-on-demand paperbacks by a small Australian publisher. The series was later snatched up by Random House's Vintage imprint and became an instant hit, going on to sell more than 100 million copies worldwide (Minkel).

Part of the books' success is that it replicates the central relationship of the of *Twilight* novels but with one big addition: sex. The *Twilight* novels operated in the same way as most romance novels using delayed desire to create tension. In the books Edward's vampirism prevents him from consummating his love with the mortal Bella (or so they believed). The sexual tension is so drawn out that when the couple eventually got around to it, many fans felt let down by the lack of description of the encounter. Not so with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which delivers on all of the sex that *Twilight* promised (with some light BDSM thrown in for good measure). With its themes of sadism and sexual exploration, *Fifty Shades* can be seen as operating as the *Twilight* series' shadow world, giving expression to characters' (and readers') suppressed desires.

Spank bank

Fan fiction stories are known to mine the erotic possibilities and tensions that lie beneath the surface of mainstream works of fantasy like *Lord of the Rings*. JK Rowling addressed the lack of sex in the *Harry Potter* books, saying "there are certain things you just don't do in fantasy. You don't have sex near unicorns. It's an ironclad rule. It's tacky" (Parker). The reality is that in the world of commercial publishing, readers are unlikely to find sex in a series marketed as

⁵ Characters from one fictional universe are transported to another (non-canonical fan fiction).

“children’s books”. As a result, more mature fans have to head online to speculate about their favourite characters’ sex lives. A large number of one-shot stories centre on such imagined sexual encounters. The lack of representation of LGBTQI characters in mainstream fiction has also given rise to “slash”, a popular sub-genre of fan fiction that pairs same-sex characters. However, the term has recently come to encompass any fan fiction that deals with sex.

For many teens, fan fiction is their first introduction to erotic fiction. Hungry for stories about their favourite characters, they stumble across these sexually explicit fantasies. For young women who are curious about sex, these stories offer an alternative pornography – which is often demeaning in its treatment of women. Their familiarity with the characters provides a compelling narrative which pornography can lack. Story tags like Hermione/Harry can help readers choose pairings that will appeal to specific fantasies. The popularity of these erotic stories has given rise to websites dedicated entirely to slash fiction like audltfan-fiction.org. This erotic sub-genre is the primary reason why fan fiction is deemed “trash” by the literary establishment.

The erotic appeal of fan fiction to female readers is not surprising considering the origins of the genre: Where fandom has traditionally been dominated by fanboys, women have historically dominated fan fiction. By 1970, 70% of Star Trek fan fiction writers were female, and 90% by 1973 (Moore 530). It is also commonly believed in fandom that most of the slash stories with male/male pairings found on fanfiction sites are written by heterosexual females, although there is little evidence to back up this claim.

Death of the Author

Many writers object to the genre based on its erotic treatment of their characters. Diana Gabaldon, the writer of the popular *Outlander* series, wrote on her blog that she “wouldn’t like people writing sex fantasies for public consumption about [her] or members of [her] family – why would [she then] be all right with them doing it to the intimate creations of [her] imagination and personality?” (Nepvue). (Due to the backlash from the fan fiction community, Gabaldon has since deleted the post from her website). In her essay “The Fan

Fiction Rant”, Robin Hobb also expresses disgust at her characters being used for “personal masturbation fantasies”.

However, Hobb’s main objection is that, by creating supplementary scenes or making characters behave in a different way, her authorial intent is being ignored. “The [fan fiction’s] reader’s impression of the writer’s work and creation is changed.” The idea that the text has one definitive interpretation forever chained to the author’s intent seems outdated to any student of literary theory. In his seminal essay “The Death of the Author” in 1967, Roland Barthes argues that “every text is eternally written here and now” (Gallix) and that the meaning of the text therefore lies with the reader. Fan fiction writers are not just re-reading a text but actively re-writing it. They are exploring the many possibilities of a text, which are removed when it is given a definitive author. Instead, the community takes collective ownership of the text, giving it multiple meanings.

Fantitlement

Fan fiction writers’ sense of ownership over an author’s fictional creations can sometimes lead to what is referred to as “fantitlement” – or the “belief by fans that passion and dedication to a person or intellectual property grant them rights and privileges.”(Champers) In the past, when authors such as Robin Hobb and Diana Gabaldon spoke out against fan fiction, their comments were met with an instant backlash from the community. Both were subsequently forced to remove posts criticising the practice on their websites and Gabaldon even had to close the comment section. Fans feel they have a right to write these stories and don’t always understand why authors would object when, according to them, they should feel flattered.

A fan recently asked JK Rowling on Twitter if Sirius Black was gay, but Rowling was adamant that he was not. Her response was met with anger from many LGBTQI fans, who told her that she was wrong. They believed that they knew her characters better than she did. The online abuse and bullying of creators at the hands of so-called fans shows the darker side of fan culture. However, the fan fiction community is so marginalised by the literary establishment.

Can we really blame them for pulling together when they feel under attack?

Until the very end

Despite authors' complaints that it tries to "fix" what is wrong with their stories, it is clear most fan fiction is written out of a genuine love for the material. When a series ends, fans are left with a gaping hole in their lives. JK Rowling has repeatedly stated since *Harry Potter and the Death Hallows* was published in 2007 that there would be no more *Harry Potter* books (we will not speak of *The Cursed Child*, as most *Harry Potter* fans would rather forget it existed). Fans now know how the series ends so there is no longer need for speculation. The "what if" scenarios some of these stories entertain do not necessarily mean fans want a different ending. It is just a way to revisit the material – and generate some more. After all, if JK Rowling is not going to write any more *Harry Potter* books, then why can they not do it themselves?

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