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The Fanfiction Reader

Folk Tales for the Digital Age

Francesca Coppa

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Spydere man spydere man
Doth al things a spydere kan
Sondry webbes he kan weaven
Thieves lyke flyes he kan cacchen
Lo anon comth spydere man
—Chaucer Doth Tweet @LeVostre GC (July 12, 2015)

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Introduction

Five Things That Fanfiction Is, and One Thing It Isn't

Fanfiction, and the broader culture of fandom within which fanfiction is written and read, seems to keep being discovered, and rediscovered, and re-rediscovered. Hardly a day goes by without some media outlet or other "discovering" fanfiction, though thankfully the tone of these articles is starting to change: fanfiction is no longer presented as a wacky thing that only strange people do, as if writing fiction was any weirder a hobby than gardening or painting or being in a garage band. In fact, fanfiction has become an increasingly mainstream art form, and fandom itself is moving fast from subculture to culture. More people than ever participate in some form of organized fan activity like reading or writing fanfiction, creating fan art, making fan films or vids, organizing wikis, collecting merchandise, writing meta, doing cosplay—or if they don't do these things themselves, they likely know someone who does.

Far from being a new phenomenon, fanfiction has a critical literature nearing forty years old. In 1975, in their famous last chapter of *Star Trek Lives* entitled "Do-It-Yourself Star Trek—the Fan Fiction," Jacqueline Lichtenberg, Sondra Marshak, and Joan Winston describe the same kinds of stories that you can find today at Fanfiction.net or the Archive of Our Own, everything "from outright sexual fantasies . . . to straight adventure, to tender love stories, to hilarious parodies, to provocative, voluminous, long-running series fiction."[1] Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston not only described and celebrated fanfiction (and wrote it themselves; Lichtenberg was nominated for a Hugo for her *Star Trek* fanfiction in 1974), but they also expanded the audience for it. "Do-It-Yourself Star Trek—the

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Fan Fiction" was many people's first exposure to the idea of fanfiction, and after reading about the wonderful range of stories described, many were moved to seek fanfiction out.

But what exactly is fanfiction? There are various ways to define it, each slightly different and none of them correct or exclusive. In fanfiction, fans have a genre called the "Five Things" story: a classic Five Things offers a reader five (often contradictory) scenarios featuring the same characters. In the spirit of a Five Things story, I hereby offer you five definitions of fanfiction, each with its own distinct emphasis; in fact, I'll give you what fans call a "5 + 1," or "Five Things That Fanfiction Is, and One That It Isn't."

1. Fanfiction is fiction created outside of the literary marketplace

> A lot of fanfic authors go on to become professional authors, and keep on writing fanfic in whatever spare time they have. I am not a special snowflake in this regard. I belong to a blizzard.
>
> —Seanan McGuire[2]

The term "fanfiction" comes out of science fiction fandom, where *fan* fiction was defined against *professional* fiction, and originally meant nothing more than original science fiction stories written in a nonprofessional or semiprofessional context, like a low-budget periodical or a zine. Many fanfiction writers aspire to be professional writers, and so write for practice and experience. But also, in the science fiction community, most if not all professional writers still identify as science fiction fans (even as poets must be poetry fans, and musicians music fans, though they might not take on a "fan" identity as such), and so may also write for low or no pay in certain contexts: this work is still commonly described as "fan" work, as opposed to normal paid, professional work. The World Science Fiction Society continues to give a Hugo Award for Best Fan Writer, and there is no rule that says that the award can't be won by someone who also publishes professionally. The award is given for fiction or nonfiction that appears in a semiprozine or fanzine, and now, increasingly, on a website or blog.

In the late 1960s, a group of mostly female science fiction fans—who would later reimagine themselves as "media" fans—began producing fanfiction that was even further outside of the literary marketplace in that

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it didn't even aspire to be "original"—and thus potentially publishable—fiction. Rather, as Camille Bacon-Smith has noted, it was created "for an insider audience trained to share in the conventions of the literature."[3] The fanfiction produced by media fans thus began to move "in a very different direction"[4] than the protoprofessional fanfiction produced in the science fiction community, with very different results; as Catherine Tosenberger has argued, writing fiction outside of the marketplace

> allows people to stake claims over texts that they wouldn't normally be allowed to if they wanted to publish, and frees them to tell the stories they want to tell. You can do things in fanfiction that would be difficult or impossible to do in fiction intended for commercial publication, such as experiments with form and subject matter that don't fit with prevailing tastes.[5]

One could argue that, today, media fanfiction is starting to function more like amateur science fiction does: that is, as direct preparation for a professional writing career. Some media fanfiction is finding a place in the market through old vehicles like tie-in novels and new vehicles like Kindle Worlds, and some fans are being solicited by literary agents and being offered publishing contracts on the strength of their fanfiction. Work created outside of the literary marketplace thus can be seen as a calling card or portfolio. But fanfiction is rarely a mere entry point to the market, instrumental: most fan-turned-professional writers continue to write fanfiction for fun (and for free) even as they write other stories for money, showing that fanfiction is its own thing with its own intrinsic value, and continues to be "outside the market" in important ways, routinely defying commercial norms in terms of theme, length, genre, and style.

What's important is that "fan" in this context indicates nothing about either the *originality* of the story elements or a story's *quality*; rather, it simply distinguishes work done for love (the original meaning of *amateur*) from work done for money. And one can argue that this definition is still the essential one. Fans do creative work that one could get paid for in the marketplace—if one were willing to accept the limitations and restrictions that make it more like work and less like self-expression. But most fanfiction writers write for love rather than for money, and to their own specifications rather than the market's.

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2. Fanfiction is fiction that rewrites and transforms other stories

> What doesn't change, or rather, what never disappears, is the writerly habit of writing from sources.
>
> —Anne Jamison[6]

Discussions of fanfiction tend to focus more on its appropriative aspects than its noncommercial ones. The definition of fanfiction that most people think of today is more like Lev Grossman's: "stories and novels that make use of the characters and settings from other people's professional creative work."[7] Grossman puts emphasis on fanfiction's engagement with other texts, and he therefore connects fanfiction to more mainstream literary works like Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (which rewrites *Hamlet*) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (which retells *Jane Eyre*). Grossman asserts that all these works have the same goals: to assert "the rights of storytellers to take possession of characters and settings of other people's narratives and tell their own tales about them—to expand and build upon the original, and, when they deem it necessary, to tweak it and optimize it for their own purposes."[8]

This move connects fanfiction to the broader literary tradition; in her book *Fic*, Anne Jamison connects fanfiction to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (the qualifier is necessary because, as Jamison explains, "Shakespeare [himself] wrote fic for the Ur-Hamlet," and that fic was "more compelling than its source")[9] and to the Arthurian tales, wryly framing Chrétien de Troyes's "Lancelot: The Knight of The Cart" as a threesome written for a long-ago Arthurian fanfiction challenge: "a request for Arthur/Lancelot/Guinevere with a cart (the exact wording of the request has been lost)."[10] Fans often construct this sort of literary lineage for themselves, arguing—only partly tongue in cheek—that Dante was not only writing Virgil fanfic in the *Inferno*, but a "Gary Stu" (a self-insert of the author) to boot.

This idea is also behind my organization of this book as a modern *Canterbury Tales*. Then as now, we pass the time by telling stories to each other; fanfiction reminds us that storytelling isn't a professional activity, but a human one in which originality and publishability is rarely the point. As in the *Canterbury Tales*, storytelling in fandom is social, communal, responsive; a game of sorts. The *Tales* is organized as a storytelling challenge ("That each of you, beguiling the long day / Shall tell two stories as you wend your way / To Canterbury town; and each of you / On coming home

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shall tell another two") of a kind familiar to any fanfiction writer. Fandom loves story challenges—ficathons and fests, Secret Santas and Big Bangs, porn battles, flash fiction, bingo challenges, Yuletide[11]—which encourage and organize creativity for the general pleasure of the group; just as the pilgrims get to hear all the tales, challenge participants get to read the glut of stories produced. And as the Host notes, this storytelling game shall "give you joy, and it shall cost you nought."

Moreover, as in Chaucer, not only are the framework and the tropes not original (others had used the pilgrimage to structure stories; others had told of the "loathly lady" and of patient Griselda) but the characters aren't the social-realistic individuals of the modern novel, but familiar types: the Knight, the Squire, the Merchant, the Clerk. The characters that fandom loves are similarly archetypical: the Starship Captain, the Spy, the Wizard, the Detective. And that might be James Kirk, James Bond, Harry Potter, and Sherlock Holmes—or it might be Mal Reynolds, Jason Bourne, Gandalf, and Veronica Mars—but the stories keep circulating. Our cultural myths, the stories that tie us together, are not about knights but about Jedi Knights, not lords but Time Lords. We love scientists, pilots, warriors and kings, gods and aliens; Prometheus and Icarus, Hercules and Arthur, Thor and Superman. Fanfiction is an essential part of the process by which these characters are expanded and made epic, loved by their fans into greatness.

Books become important when their interpretations are contested, when new readings of them are developed. Plays become important when they enter the repertory: as the theater scholar Alan Sinfield has noted, Shakespeare remains relevant because he is constantly interfered with:[12] Shakespeare has an army of fans—actors, directors, designers, critics—interpreting his characters, adding meanings that he never intended and making the stories relevant to new and different audiences. *Richard III* isn't about fascism; *Othello* isn't about race in America; *The Merchant of Venice* was not originally in conversation with the Holocaust. *Hamlet* is not about a graduate student who doesn't get along with his family. Except of course it is; of course they are. And, in literature as in fanfiction, some interpretations or elaborations of the source are so great they become what fans call "fanon," that is, a take on canon so convincing or fun that it's adopted by other fans wholesale. For instance, nearly everyone seems to agree, in the wake of Ernest Jones's study *Hamlet and Oedipus*, that Hamlet has an Oedipus complex; the Arthur/Lancelot/Guinevere triangle is now a permanent part of the mythos; and Sherlock Holmes now says "Elementary!" and wears a deerstalker cap.

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Holmes has not been harmed or made less valuable by the thousands of interpretations of him across literature, radio, television, film, video games, and other media; in fact, one could argue that the free hand that Arthur Conan Doyle gave his collaborators in interpreting Holmes—he told playwright William Gillette, "You may marry him, murder him, or do anything you like to him"—is largely responsible for the great detective's great success. Far from harming literary characters, appropriation and rewriting are the making of them. We care about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because of Stoppard; nobody cares about Reynaldo. (Yet.)

3. Fanfiction is fiction that rewrites and transforms stories currently owned by others

> Fan fiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk.
>
> —Henry Jenkins[13]

A definition of fanfiction that only emphasizes its continuities with the literary tradition does not explain why *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* launched Stoppard's theatrical career and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was a huge publishing success while most fanfiction has had to fight for its right to exist, let alone be recognized as valuable. While in my heart—and in my organization of this book—I agree with the idea that fanfiction is no different than other literary retellings or reimaginings, and that in fact retelling and reimagining—*revision*—is at the very heart of all creativity, full stop—I have often found it useful to define fanfiction more narrowly as "creative material featuring characters that have previously appeared in works whose copyright is held by others."[14]

The legal distinction is not meaningless—far from it; it has marginalized a group of (mostly female) writers and their literary practices. The definition of fanfiction as applying only to works currently covered by copyright, trademark, or some other intellectual property scheme serves to emphasize the (very odd) fact that stories can be *owned*. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one can argue, in Kristina Busse's formulation, that "copyright *embraced* and in a way *needed* an aesthetic theory that emphasized the original creation"[15] of an individual genius author, and furthermore that fans still embrace that formulation to the extent to which

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we sign our names—or our pen names, which are as reputation-bearing in fandom as legal names are in the regular world—to our fanfiction stories. But increasingly, the stories that we share on a national or even global level—the mass-media stories that Henry Jenkins refers to as "contemporary myths"—aren't even owned by individual auteurs, but by huge corporate conglomerates: that is, movie studios, television networks, production companies, and, increasingly, online behemoths like Apple, Netflix, Amazon, and Google. The average person is—in the Marxist sense—alienated from the process of storytelling.

It is only in such a system—where storytelling has been industrialized to the point that our shared culture is owned by others—that a category like "fanfiction" makes sense. Everyone's always surprised by how huge the world of fanfiction is; I'm not. Fanfiction is what happened to folk culture: to the appropriation of fables and the retellings of local legends, to the elaborations of tall tales and drinking songs and ghost stories told round the campfire. Fanfiction is the bastard child; the disavowed heir; outlawed.

4. Fanfiction is fiction written within and to the standards of a particular fannish community

> It starts like this. Somewhere, in cyberspace, someone complains: "I had a lousy day! Need some cheering up." Soon after, a friend posts a story dedicating the piece: "This is for you, hon—your favorite pairing and lots of schmoopy sex. Hope it'll cheer you up!"
>
> —Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson[16]

If you only define fanfiction in terms of its engagement with other stories, copyrighted or not, there's no distinction between fanfiction and, say, Gregory McGuire's novel *Wicked* (which retells *The Wizard of Oz* from the Wicked Witch of the West's point of view), or Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution* (which features a beekeeping detective uncannily like Sherlock Holmes). But it seems that there ought to be a distinction. Sure, unlike fanfiction, these books were produced for the market, but fanfiction isn't simply fiction created *outside* the market; it's also fiction produced *inside* the community and within the culture of fandom. One could argue that every girl to some degree invents fanfiction for herself: alone in her bedroom, she wonders "what if" and changes the story in her head. She may even write it down. But it's when she beings to share her work and to read

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and write with other fans that her stories become fanfiction per se, and begin to be shaped to community norms and expectations. Fans often experience the finding of fan community as a kind of homecoming: "I didn't know other people did this, too."

Fanfiction is a case study in community production and reception; what fanfiction writer, *New York Times* best-selling author, and Archive of Our Own founder Naomi Novik calls "the network." "Fanfiction," she notes, "is not just written from one single person, speaking to an audience"; rather, the stories are written within, from, and for a community, and these stories "communicate with one another, and they communicate with what's in canon at that particular time."[17] We can therefore define fanfiction as *networked creative work produced within and for a community of fans*; in particular, the (largely female) media fans who split from science fiction fandom in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and their exponentially multiplying descendants, who have communicated and organized over the years via BBS, Usenet, mailing lists, blogging and journaling platforms, Twitter, and Tumblr.[18] This community, as Mel Stanfill has noted, "isn't really just one community, but people who have been in fandom for a while, and in several fandoms over time, have been exposed to and/or acculturated into a set of practices and values that has had some continuity."[19]

In their introduction to *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson note that some from this group became fans of fanfiction itself:

> Fan fiction began to create its own fandom with its own infrastructure. Zines might include fan fiction from a variety of shows and cons, such as Media*West, held in Lansing, Michigan, which even today brings together media fans from multiple film and TV texts to celebrate and share fan creations, including fan fiction, filk, cosplay, vids, art, and crafts. Although there are many different forms of derivative and transformative fiction based on other media texts, the term fan fiction as the majority of fan scholars use it mostly tends to adhere to this tradition. As a result, other developing traditions, such as yaoi, boys' love, Sherlockian published pastiches, fantasies depicting fan relationships with their favorite movie stars, or even fan-written soap opera scripts often do not fit the generalizations put forth about fan fiction and media fandom.[20]

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By this definition, engagement with the community is crucial; fanfiction is not just any continuation or interpretation of a story, but one that happens within, because of, and for a particular community.

This isn't a simple matter of fandom being the audience or the marketplace for the work; rather, the key point is that fanfiction is shaped to the literary conventions, expectations, and desires of that community, and is written in genres developed by and in community—for example, in media fandom, *slash*, *het*, and *gen*, *first-time* stories and *alternate universe* stories and *sex pollen* stories and *cavefic* stories and *mpreg* stories. *Bodyswap*, *hurt/comfort*, *kidfic*, *hookerfic*, *PWP* (plot what plot?), *epilogue tags*, *fix its*, *teamfic*, *slavefic*, *undercover in a gay bar*—these[21] and literally hundreds more are as familiar to fans as the bildungsroman, lyric, tragedy, elegy, and epic are to literary scholars. They are labels indicating a set of narrative and thematic expectations. Anime and manga fandom has its own artistic styles, language, and forms that have now crossed into other communities: for example, *lemon* or *lime* for designating the intensity of erotic content; *yaoi* and *yuri* and *boys' love* and *magical girls*. More recent fans talk of *one shots* (vs. serials) and have developed genres like the *alpha/beta/omega* (A/B/O) universe, where sexual roles have a biological basis and are adopted from the study of animal behaviors, or *imagines*, self-insert teen fantasies ("Imagine being friends with Catwoman and your father, Bruce Wayne, catches you while stealing jewels from a rich family," "Imagine passing notes to Harry in class"). The point here is not to catalog all the various tropes and genres, which I couldn't possibly do anyway, but to argue that fanfiction is written within and for particular communities that have highly specific expectations for fiction, which can be seen in their elaborate vocabulary and critical literature, which fans call *meta*. Fans have never had any trouble explaining themselves to themselves, or their work to each other, in essays written for zines or on websites like The Fanfic Symposium, or Metafandom, or Fanhackers, or Fanlore.

The fiction that is written in and for fandom is not only written to community specifications; it is also typically written as a gift. This means more than that the work is written outside the marketplace; rather, it implies a whole social structure around gift giving and receiving. Fanfiction reading and writing tends to create social obligations: many people write their first story to say thank you for all the stories they read previously, to give something back to the community that's fed them, narratively speaking.

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In her famous 1999 essay, "Slash Fiction Is Like a Banquet" (sometimes known as "the hummus essay" for its central metaphor), Arduinna compares the slash fanfiction community to a big, pot-luck banquet, but complains that lately everyone's bringing the same thing to the table: lemon-garlic hummus.

> And for a long time, this banquet was sort of hidden away. People came, and enjoyed. Those who decided to contribute maybe started out on appetizers, but soon moved on to bringing other dishes as well. So the table kept expanding, as people kept adding more dishes. Some of the earlier dishes got pushed back into the shadows, but people remembered them, and talked about them, and newcomers eventually found their way back there to try them.
>
> Then a while ago, the doors to the banquet hall were thrown open, and people at the banquet looked out and smiled and said, "hey, come on in and enjoy! And if any of you can cook, great! Bring your favorite dish, we'd love to try it. If not, feel free to just eat whatever you want—we love having diners as well as cooks." And people came to the banquet and enjoyed. And a lot of them wanted to contribute, because they were having such a wonderful time. So they decided on an appetizer, but because they weren't really sure of their cooking ability yet, they went out and got a tub of store-bought lemon-garlic hummus and some pita bread, and that's what they brought. People were pleased; hummus is good! So there were all these little bowls of hummus, all with the exact same ingredients mixed in the exact same way, taking up more and more of the banquet table. And every time new people walked into the banquet hall, they'd see a table full of bowls of lemon-garlic hummus, and think "oh, it's a lemon-garlic hummus banquet! I can do that!" and they'd go buy the same hummus and put it in a bowl and put it on the table.[22]

Arduinna's essay is a critique of what she sees as the homogenization of stories by the sudden influx of new fans in the late 1990s, but it's her metaphor that's striking: fanfiction is a banquet that fans make together, with everyone cooking and diners prized as much as cooks. (There's a reason I use a food metaphor in the preface, "One Pringle, One Dorito, one Oreo"; the fan community I come from values communal eating.) It also values the gift: Karen Hellekson talks about the importance of gift culture to fandom in her essay "A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture." She points out that fanworks —fanfiction, as well as vids, art, archives,

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meta, wikis, and so on—are given by fans to each other to create solidarity, a social structure. These gifts "are incorporated into a multivocal dialogue that creates a metatext, the continual composition of which creates a community. . . . The individuality of that piece is lost; it becomes part of something greater."[23] This is another of the underlying assumptions of the preface: that there's something perverse about looking at a single fanfiction story in isolation, apart from the community that produced it.

There has lately been some pressure on the idea of fanworks as a gift. Fans themselves have questioned what's at stake in keeping fanfiction, a female-dominated art form, out of the marketplace. In her 2007 essay "How Fanfiction Keeps Us Poor," Cupidsbow notes, "A friend of mine who works in the publishing industry has two major objections to fanfiction: it's derivative and it keeps women poor. I think the 'derivative' argument has been well answered within the fanfic community, so I won't rehash it here. But the 'keeps women poor' comment made me pause." Does fanfiction's commitment to gift culture keep a huge swath of women's writing "in the unpaid ghetto along with other women's crafts"?[24] In a 2009 article, "Should Fanfiction Be Free?" Abigail DeKosnik claimed that fanfiction was fast approaching its "Sugarhill moment," that is, "the moment when an outsider takes up a subculture's invention and commodifies it for the mainstream before insiders do."[25] DeKosnik argued that female fans should commodify fanfiction themselves, both to do it right (that is, before the outsiders) and so that women could begin to profit from this female-dominated literary form instead of "giving our talents away as gifts."[26]

In 2012 that more or less happened: E. L. James published *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a version of her *Twilight* fanfiction "Master of the Universe," and made an enormous amount of money. In 2015, DeKosnik wrote a follow-up article, "Fifty Shades and the Archive of Women's Culture," in which she argued that *Fifty Shades* should not be equated with fanfiction because it was published "as a unique text rather than as a text embedded in a larger archive of fictions produced by a particular community of predominantly women writers and readers," James having disavowed the community within which *Fifty Shades of Grey* was created. DeKosnik was not the only one to disqualify *Fifty Shades* as fanfiction once it was removed from its community and context: Sarah Wanenchak noted in "*Fifty Shades of Grey* and the Ethics of Fannish Prosumption" that "fandom is intensely collaborative in nature, with inspiration for a work often hard to trace to a single source, and with many potential participants in the creation of a work,

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even though it may technically have only one listed author."[27] So James sold something created in, by, and for a network as a single, commodifiable object; a book. In "Fifty Shades of Exploitation: Fan Labor and *Fifty Shades of Grey*," Bethan Jones cites a fan who expresses her disappointment with James in terms that evoke gift culture and the banquet: "As much as she fed us [with her weekly installments of "Master of the Universe"], we fed her with our comments AND suggestions in how far she could or couldn't take the story."[28]

5. Fanfiction is speculative fiction about character rather than about the world

> Fanfic is speculative fiction where the speculation is centered on a story or person thought of as a character. SF is speculative fiction where the center is the nature of the world.
>
> —Mary Ellen Curtin[29]

Having rehearsed all these definitions—fanfiction as amateur work, as intertextual engagement, as transformation of copyrighted material, as a gift made within and for a community—I want to talk a little about the particular qualities of fanfiction as it is most typically recognized. We could argue about whether the *Aeneid* is fanfiction, or whether Pia Pera's *Lo's Diary* is, but there's no doubt that the hundreds of *Star Trek* zines and thousands of *X-Files* stories and hundreds of thousands of *Harry Potter* stories are, and these stories tend to have certain things in common.

Fanfiction tends to be deeply interested in character. Fan scholar Mary Ellen Curtin has gone so far as to define fanfiction as speculative fiction about character rather than the nature of the world. The phrase "speculative fiction," coined by Robert Heinlein in 1941, encompasses science fiction, fantasy, and horror, but also "Weird Tales, Amazing Stories, and Fantastic Fiction."[30] Speculative fiction is the genre of "What if?" and understanding that contemporary fanfiction spun out of the broader category of 1960s speculative fiction helps us understand the presence of genre elements like vampires, elves, time travel, aliens, and robots in universes where they don't originally appear. (Fans tend to think that few stories could not be improved by the addition of time travel or robots. I find myself thinking of Yahtzee's *Doctor Who / Sense and Sensibility* crossover, the charmingly titled "Relatives & Relativity,"[31] in which Elinor and Marianne

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Dashwood meet the Ninth Doctor; a story, alas, too long to be included in this volume.)

As Curtin notes, in science fiction "What if?" is a question that tends to be asked about the world: What if the world were different? (What if we colonized Mars? What if people were telepathic? What if you could genetically customize your child? What happens when we run out of fossil fuels? What if Hitler had won the Second World War? What if dragons were real? What if humanity came to earth from outer space?) In contrast, fanfiction tends to ask, "What if?" about characters: what if a person were different? (What if Bruce Wayne had gone to boarding school with fellow genius-billionaire Tony Stark? Who might Harry Potter grow up to be, considering we leave him as an eighteen-year-old orphaned war veteran? What if a family other than the Kents of Kansas had found that alien baby: who might Superman have grown up to be?) Fans are interested in transformations of social identity (what if a character were female, black, Jewish, queer, disabled?), as well as class identity (what if a character were a barista? a CEO? a single father of three?), and then there are the more fantastical experiments: what if she were a werewolf, a vampire, an elf? These are questions of background, of psychology, intended to unearth notable people, relationships, events, and experiences that affect our understanding of who a character is.

Mainstream science fiction was historically criticized for not being interested enough in character; on the page, it is primarily a literature of ideas, and, as interpreted by the mass media of television and film, it is a genre of spectacle and action. Fanfiction changes this, allowing for smaller, more intimate stories; stories on a different scale entirely from those produced by the mass media. A movie like *The Avengers* has to be successful across the globe, with international audiences and translated into multiple languages; a fanfiction story might be written as a gift for just one other person. If mass media is an industrial and global product, fanfiction is the opposite: handmade—often custom made—and local.

Relatedly, fanfiction is interested in turning moving pictures into prose; in fact, fanfiction typically changes the medium of the original story universe, and thus represents what we today call transmedia. In saying this, I do not intend to discount the history or value of literary pastiche, past or present, and certainly fans do write enormous amounts of fanfiction about books and other literary works. That said, the biggest book fandoms tend to be for books that have already gone transmedia[32] in some way, and much of the fanfiction written about books applies the tropes

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and genres developed in mass-media fandom to prose work rather than being—strictly speaking—about imitating and extending a specific narrative voice the way pastiche does.

An awful lot of fanfiction turns film and television into words, and literature has different artistic values than film. Writing privileges interiority: it allows us to know a character's thoughts and feelings much more easily than film, which has to resort to clumsy techniques like the voice-over. Prose often focuses explicitly on narrative point of view; in fact, I'd argue that fanfiction writers are obsessed with point of view in a way that most professional writers are not.[33] Text represents sexuality and sex acts in ways importantly different from film: while evoking the bodies[34] of actors associated with particular characters, erotic fanfiction, unlike filmic pornography, does not require actors or any other real people to perform, and so readers don't have to worry about the objectification or exploitation of those people. And of course, words are cheap to work with and don't require the same social capital as filmmaking, painting, or symphony composing; consequently, they have been the medium of choice of marginalized storytellers in general and women in particular. Writers can focus on characterization, and they can also create fantastic worlds on a miniscule budget: rocket ships, a cast of thousands, seamless special effects. As Rebecca Tushnet has noted, it takes a big studio to make *The Avengers*, but it doesn't take a big studio to write *Avengers* fanfiction,[35] and fanfiction can take us into a character's mind and heart as easily as outer space.

+1: Fanfiction is made for free, but not "for nothing"

> I keep seeing people saying [about Amazon's Kindle Worlds] "you'll get 20% to 35% of the profit. And that's better than nothing!" (Well, sidebar: I don't get "nothing" from writing fanfic. If you're not a fanfic writer who shares their fic with a community of readers, it would take me another two thousand words to explain what you *do* get, but trust me. It isn't nothing.)
>
> —Livia Penn[36]

The world of fanfiction that I've been describing—an art world where fiction is written and read for free—is currently under scrutiny due to its enormous success. The internet has made fandom more visible, not only to potential new fans—who are coming to the banquet in droves—but also to commercial interests, who see fandom's gift culture as ripe for

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exploitation and monetization. But also, as fandom keeps growing and mainstreaming, its community standards change. Mainstream commercial values are encroaching: there can be an easy slippage between *valuing* fanwork and *appraising* it.

Companies like Wattpad and Amazon's Kindle Worlds have created business models explicitly built upon fanfiction, though right now the work that appears on those sites still seems different in its market orientation than that found, say, on the nonprofit, fan-built Archive of Our Own. (Disclaimer: I am one of the founders of the AO3.) Literary agents and publishers have always been interested in taking on successful fan writers as clients, but this is happening today to an almost unprecedented degree. (Many of the fanfiction writers in this book are also professional fiction writers.) Fans themselves are coming together to form small presses, and some are using Kickstarter and other online fund-raising platforms to bring the "zine" era of fanfiction into the twenty-first century. Others are exploring the possibilities of the digital "tip jar," which allows the audience to donate money if it likes your work. Even this book you're holding—university press notwithstanding—represents a new level of public visibility for fanfiction.

There are many good things about these changes—in particular, I value the opportunity for more women to become professional writers, if they want to be; fanfiction shouldn't make us poor!—but there are things to be valued in noncommerciality. As Rebecca Tushnet has argued, "People who create with no hope of monetary reward make different things than people who want to participate in the money economy, and both are valuable,"[37] although they may accomplish different things. Professional writing may make you money, but "the organic, noncommercial communities that create transformative remixes cannot be moved into the commercial sector without being fundamentally altered and diminished," because "The market changes what it swallows." [38] Anne Jamison agrees, noting that "all the major publishing contracts . . . have gone to heterosexual romances," citing as illustrative the case of a fan author who changed her *Sherlock* fic from a m/m to a heterosexual romance in order to reach "the largest audience possible."[39]

Beyond this, as John Scalzi has noted, "There's a difference between writing fan fiction because you love the world and the characters on a personal level, and Amazon and Alloy actively exploiting that love for their corporate gain and throwing you a few coins for your trouble."[40] Money matters—and especially for poor and pink-collar workers it matters!—but

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there's also something depressing about being offered money for a labor of love, partly because it can't possibly be enough. It's as if you knitted a blanket for a friend's baby and she offered you six dollars for it.[41] And if you decided to go into the baby-blanket business, let's face it: it wouldn't be the same blanket. It couldn't be.

So it bears saying: this book is a labor of love. None of the writers, myself included, were paid for their words or their work, aside from the old zine standard of "trib" (contributor's) copies. Any profits that this book generates will be donated to the Organization for Transformative Works, which built and maintains the Archive of Our Own. All of these stories were previously posted on the internet and, as far as I know, remain there, free to whoever wants to read them: a gift to the community. We all of us in this book put it together because we're proud of fanfiction writing and want to give "newbies"—teachers and students especially—a curated collection, a place to start. We did it for love, for free—a cynic would say "for nothing,"—but, to adopt Viviana Zelizer's terminology,[42] our work and our creativity aren't worthless. They're priceless.

Suggested Further Reading

The founding texts of fan studies in general and fanfiction in particular remain the big three from 1992: Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (Routledge, 1992), Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), and Constance Penley's "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture" (in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Grossberg et al. Routledge, 1992), which she later expanded in her book *NASA/Trek* (Verso, 1997). Jenkins's book, a real field-founder that lays out many of the theories and terms still in use today, was also the best-received among fans because, ironically, it was he who identified most strongly and directly as a fan himself. That said, it behooves us to consider what was at stake in that choice: I don't think it was an accident that the two women scholars were at that time less inclined to speak of themselves as fans when writing about this female-dominated fan subculture, nor that female fans responded with particular enthusiasm to the validation of a male scholar from MIT. But also, Jenkins's identificatory, materialist, and art-focused stance as an English professor was preferred to Camille Bacon-Smith's ethnographic one (Bacon-Smith is a folklorist and science fiction writer) or Penley's feminist psychoanalysis, which left some fans feeling "othered"

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as an object of academic study. Jenkins's contribution to the field of fan studies has been revisited in various ways, most recently with a twentieth-anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers* and a special issue of the *Journal of Fandom Studies* reconsidering Jenkins's impact, but Penley and Bacon-Smith are also overdue for critical reevaluations.

While there were several important articles on fanfiction in the following years (notably Rebecca Tushnet's 1997 "Legal Fictions: Copyright, Fan Fiction, and a New Common Law," and Sara Gwenllian Jones's 2002 article "The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters," in *Screen*), as well as several monographs tracing fanfiction and particular communities of fanfiction writers (e.g., Sheenagh Pugh's *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*, 2005; Rhiannon Bury's 2005 *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online*), a second generation of fanfiction scholars came of age with the publication of Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (McFarland, 2006); this group, which includes Busse and Hellekson, Catherine Driscoll, Abigail DeKosnik, Louisa Stein, Deborah Kaplan, and others, including myself, was largely comprised of female scholars who were also active and self-identified fans. Many of us went on to found or publish in the open-access journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*, which is dedicated to the study of fanworks and fan culture, and which has nurtured a new wave of scholars, including Alexis Lothian, Anne Kustritz, Bethan Jones, Catherine Tosenberger, Mel Stanfill, Juli Parrish, and others. Fanfiction has also become a central case study in digital culture and the law; see, for instance, David Roh's book *Illegal Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015) and Aaron Schwabach's *Fan Fiction and Copyright: Outsider Works and Intellectual Property Protection* (Ashgate, 2011).

It is important, however, to remember that these studies of fanfiction published by scholars with PhDs through academic or university presses came out after a series of important texts written by fans themselves a decade earlier: the real foremothers of fanfiction scholarship include Joanna Lichtenberg, Sondra Marshak, and Joan Winston, authors of the 1975 book *Star Trek Lives!* with its famous concluding chapter: "Do-It-Yourself Star Trek—the Fan Fiction," Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diane Veith, who wrote the 1985 essay "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines," and Joanna Russ, whose "Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love," still inspires. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (Iowa, 2014) brings together essays from across these phases of study.

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