

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Nature of Fan Fiction, its Origins and History

#### *What is it?*

‘Fan fiction’ is the term used to denote written works which are inspired by a particular source – often referred to as ‘the canon’. The source may be anything from a work of literature, to TV series, movies, anime or computer games. Wikipedia defines fan fiction as follows:

Fan fiction is fiction written by people who enjoy a film, novel, television show or other media work, using the characters and situations developed in it and developing new plots in which to use these characters. Characters and plots from more than one media work may also be incorporated into a single fan fiction (known as ‘cross over’).

([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com), accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November 2005)

In other words, the source or canon provides the writer with a particular universe, peopled with particular characters, but the writer has enormous freedom to play around with that universe, combining characters from different sources or even situating the characters in a contingent or Alternative Universe (‘AU’). AU is just one of the sub-categories of fan fiction. Others which we will come across include ‘cross-over’ (mentioned above), ‘slash’, and ‘Mary Sue’.

The above definition of fan fiction is inadequate as it fails to capture the creative scope that the genre enjoys. For instance, a piece of fan fiction could be simply a ‘stream of consciousness’ from a particular character who appears in a computer RPG (Role Playing Game), possibly as a means of exploring a dilemma encountered by that character, moral or otherwise. Or it may resemble the ‘Shoebox Project’.<sup>2</sup> This is produced by two ‘Harry Potter’ fans and is based on the idea that a box has been found in an attic containing material relating to the stories. The ‘contents’ of the shoebox are a mix of letters,

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox\\_project](http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project).

scrawled notes, artwork and pieces of prose, sometimes poetic, other times dramatic, written from various characters' viewpoints.<sup>3</sup>

Fan fiction emerges from the various 'fandoms' or fan communities. Again, Wikipedia says: 'Keen aficionados of any phenomenon such as authors, hobbies, ideologies, genres or fashion, can collectively manifest as fandom.' (Wikipedia, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> November 2005). A fan is not, of course, restricted to one fandom. They may simultaneously belong to the Lord of the Rings fandom, the Harry Potter fandom and Star Trek fandom. And of course, they may switch fandoms. For example, moving from 'Harry Potter' to Philip Pullman's 'Dark Materials' trilogy.

Internet fan fiction is now vast and growing daily. As well as general fan fiction sites, such as [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net), there are sites specifically devoted to a particular fandom (see Appendix 3). Appendix 1 consists of the homepage of [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net), the book section and their 'Guidelines' page. The site's logo is a glowing light bulb, accompanied by the maxim 'unleash your imagination and free your soul'. From the homepage the fan can choose from 8 'browse sections': Anime, book, cartoon, comic, game, miscellaneous, movie and TV show. So, for instance, click on 'book' and, listed in alphabetical order, is a mix of all the titles and authors featured on the site. Clicking on, for example, 'Shakespeare' you find a list of titled pieces, the pen-name of their author, followed by a couple of sentences summarising the work (you can also go straight to the reviews if they have any). For example, one is "King Lear' by Josie Hardy, a look into Cordelia's thoughts after her banishment"; another "Alternate Ending' by Happygirl ('This story was actually written as a homework assignment for my English teacher. Anyway this is an alternate ending to Act 5 of Romeo and Juliet...'').<sup>4</sup> From here you simply click on the title to read the fan fiction, where you can leave a review if desired.

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<sup>3</sup> Besides fan fiction, the categories of fan art, fanimation, fansong and filk (see glossary), can also be found online.

<sup>4</sup> Already an interplay between fan fiction and formal education emerges. Happygirl's teacher has used a premise which is characteristic of the genre - 'What if things had gone had gone differently?' - and applied it to Romeo and Juliet.

Appendix 2, 'Fan Fiction – a User's Guide'<sup>5</sup>, argues that the greatest challenge when writing fan fiction lies in...

...capturing the essence of a well-known and much-loved mythos [or fandom].... To take the example of 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'... As well as overall tone, characters must also read right. Viewers see the characters week after week, and... become familiar with their mannerisms and their quirks... the [fan fiction] author would have to master a complex juxtaposition of dry, easy wit, baffled charm, a sense of mystical and intellectual inadequacy, insecurity... deep-down foundation of courage, loyalty and goodness of heart, simply to correctly portray Xander.

[www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A632062](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A632062), accessed 21/11/05

This idea of walking a creative tightrope comes through in the examples, in the answers to my questionnaire, and in my own experience as a fan fiction writer. Of course anyone *can* write fan fiction. Writing *good* fan fiction, however, requires great skill, imagination and discipline.

Within fan fiction there are various categories (although there is much fan fiction that does not fall into any of these categories). Some of these are AU or Alternative Universe, in which the premise of the canon is altered; cross-over, which takes the characters or plotlines from different canons and combines them in one story; and 'slash', in which the story centres around a romantic/erotic relationship between two characters of the same sex. The 'slash' category interests me most in that it appears to be a genuinely alternative genre, not to be found at present in most book stores, which appears to challenge society's assumptions and attitudes about young women, their fantasies and their sexuality. For this reason, I shall explore it further at the end of this chapter.

Also sometimes included in the categories is 'Mary Sue', sometimes also known 'self-insertion'. 'Mary Sue' refers to a story in which a perfect character - brave and beautiful, possessing amazing weapons and extraordinary talents - enters the realm of the canon and

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<sup>5</sup> Appendix 2 is useful as a guide and includes a more extensive glossary than the one I have produced. However, it is very much from the author's (by no means impartial) perspective, and says some controversial things, particularly about 'slash'. Because of its interactive nature, however, anyone can 'answer back' via email and these replies can be accessed by those browsing the site.

saves the day. The protagonist or another character, often a personal favourite of the author, invariably falls for her charms along the way. Often seen as a placeholder for the author, she is not so much a category as a phenomenon, and I discuss her in the *Fantasy and Identity* section of Chapter Three.

From the fanfiction.net 'guidelines' page it is clear that the site by no means offers unreined freedom to the would-be fan fiction writer. There are strict regulations and entries that break the rules can be removed from the site (for instance it asks that each piece is proof read before posting, and 'non-stories' are not allowed). Each piece of work posted is given a rating (see Appendix 1) which are similar to the guide used for movies. Fan fiction bearing the rating MA (18+ unverified), containing 'explicit contents for mature adults only' and previously rated as 'NC-17', is not allowed on fanfiction.net : fiction falling into this category was banned by the site in 2002.<sup>6</sup> The following reason was given:

NC-17 based entries will no longer be accepted. Though they are very small portion of the site the adult stories have generated almost all of the complaints filed on record in the past year. Moreover, the highest concentration of them are growing in areas with subjects targeted to younger readers and with increasingly controversial subject matters. However, not all NC-17 based stories fall into the description but as a result of their increasing volume a decision has been made to resolve this problem. Innocent writers will be affected but this has to be done considering the non-filtering scheme of the site.  
(‘Fan fiction current news from fanfiction.net, 13/09/02’,  
www.animeprime.com)

From this it is clear that the site wishes to be seen as offering a 'nanny service' to protect the interests of its younger readers, mimicking the non-cyber world of media rather than offering a true alternative.

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<sup>6</sup> 'NC-17 - May not be read by anyone under the age of 18. Stories may contain full and explicit descriptions of sexual intercourse, explicit descriptions of nudity and/or strong language. Graphic violence could also earn a story an NC-17 rating' (www.lcfanfic.com, accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2006)

The guidelines also include a list of authors who do not want fan fiction published which is based on their work. Indeed, some of these authors feel so strongly that they have threatened to sue any fan who does so. (This is in stark contrast to J.K. Rowling's attitude; she says she is flattered by fan fiction on Harry Potter<sup>7</sup>). The guidelines rule that they will not allow fan fiction which uses any of these authors' works as its source. This is another example of how strictly controlled the site is, although in this instance it looks as though the site is protecting itself from any possible legal action taken by these authors.

Any potential fan fiction writer is expected to read and agree to the guidelines, so it works as a contract. In return for abiding by the rules, the writer enjoys having their work posted on a popular site which offers various benefits, such as a recording and displaying the number of hits the writer's piece has received and a review page.

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So fan fiction is written by the fans, for the fans, and is based one or more well-loved work, but beyond that there is great opportunity for experiment and for the fusion of different mediums and genres. Fans collectively belong to one or more particular fandom (e.g. 'Lord of the Rings', the 'Final Fantasy' RPGs), and can swap allegiances and/or embrace more fandoms as they choose. Within the genre itself are various sub-genres, which interested fans can search for. The internet provides a rich and fertile arena for the fan both in terms of reading and writing, with both general and specific fan fiction sites. However, the notion that, with Internet fan fiction, anyone can write anything and post it appears to be a myth. These sites usually have a detailed 'guideline' page specifying what they allow, and they reserve the right to remove pieces that break their rules. Although anyone willing to abide by the rules can have their work posted, writing good fan fiction which attracts a serious following is not easy.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with J.K. Rowling, [www.scholastic.com/harrypotter](http://www.scholastic.com/harrypotter), accessed 20/11/05

### ***Where did it Start? How did it Develop?***

Although it can be argued that its roots go back to a pre-literary time when humans first began to weave stories and to exchange them within their communities, today's Internet fan fiction is thought to have begun life with what are now known as 'fanzines'; magazines devoted to a particular actor/character/literary or media work, which are written by the fans, for the fans. Wikipedia (accessed 27 December 2005) claims that fan fiction's origins can be traced to the fanzines of the early twentieth century. For example, in the 1920s fans of Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes' books formed a group called 'the Baker Street Irregulars', which treated Holmes and Watson as real people and published magazines containing their adventures.

But the work most cited on the internet when researching the origins of fan fiction is the 'Star Trek' series. In 1967 'Spocknalia', the first 'Star Trek' fanzine appeared while the original series was still being run. This contained some stories, and its fan fiction grew when the TV series came to an end. Frustrated fans imagined and wrote their own adventures, contributing to privately published magazines. The creator of 'Star Trek' (Gene Roddenberry) actively encouraged the writers, contributing an introduction to the first authorized collection to be published (Star Trek: The New Voyages, edited by Sonda Marshak and Myrna Culbreath). In 1996 the 'Strange New Worlds' contest was held. This was specifically designed to ferret out and encourage new 'Trek' writing talent. It is now an annual event resulting in the publication of several new 'Star Trek' volumes, collections of the winning fans' stories. Thus something apparently amateur and marginal became mainstream. The 'scribblings' of a few fans snowballed, resulting eventually in general acceptance and publication. So there is here a definite interplay between the fan fiction world and that of the canon, and a blurring of boundaries which is not, as I shall show, confined to the 'Star Trek' example.

In her thesis The Internet World of Fan Fiction (2005), Melissa Herzing points out that the fan communities of the late 1980s and early 1990s grew with the advances in

computer technology and the introduction of the World Wide Web. The first online fandoms used 'usenet' groups simply as a means of communicating information about such things as up-coming conventions or forthcoming episodes to other fans. Today, with the growth in personal computers and greater access to the Internet, and with the arrival of search engines such as 'Google', it is possible for a fan to locate her subject of interest almost instantaneously, and to find a site where she can both read fan fiction of her choice, review it, and contribute her own.

In his forthcoming book, Convergence Culture<sup>8</sup> Professor Henry Jenkins of MIT, claims there has been a definite movement in the profile of the average fan:

A decade ago, published fan fiction mostly came from women in their twenties, thirties, and beyond. Today, these older writers have been joined by a generation of new contributors, who found fan fiction surfing the Internet and decided to see what they could produce. 'Harry Potter' in particular has encouraged many young people to write and share their first stories.  
(Jenkins: 2005, p.269)

Professor Jenkins says that ninety per cent of fans are female (eighty-two per cent, according to my research). My survey – carried out in October to November of 2005 - also revealed an average age of around seventeen. So Internet fan fiction today is, at least in terms of numbers, dominated by a young females.

However, although there is little doubt that fan fiction is run by the fans, for the fans, it would appear that, on the whole, it is still the older women who control and regulate the fan fiction websites. Zsenya, the thirty-three-year-old webmistress of 'The Sugar Quill', a leading site for 'Harry Potter' fan fiction, says:

"In many cases, the adults really try to watch out for the younger members (theoretically, everybody who registers for our forums must be at least 13). They're a little bit like den mothers. I think it's really actually an amazing way to communicate... The absence of face-to-face equalizes everyone a little bit, so it gives the younger members a chance to talk with adults without perhaps some of the intimidation they might normally feel... And in the other direction, I think it helps

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<sup>8</sup> Draft emailed to me by Prof. Jenkins, October 2005.

the adults remember what it was like to be at a certain age or in a certain place in life...”  
(Jenkins, 2005, p.270)

So immediately we see a tension emerge. On the one hand Zsenya claims that the impersonal nature of the internet ‘equalizes everyone’, eliminating the power imbalance normally present in the adult/child relationship in the non-cyber world. On the other, she is claiming a maternal role, where the adults ‘watch out for the younger members... a little bit like den mothers.’ This highlights the complexity of relationships on the Internet. Nobody can be sure of the age of other fans, so in a sense that does equalize the relationship. On the other hand, older fans do appear to be wielding power in the sense they control what is posted on the site, and this inevitably alters the relationship between them and the younger fans.<sup>9</sup>

The older fans have set the tone in terms of fan fiction etiquette and convention. Any younger fan wishing to set up a site now – as we shall see with case of Heather Lawver in Chapter Three - would surely tend to follow the precedent set by her older sisters, using the guidelines of the existing sites as a template. In this respect, it would seem that the grown-up is still very much in evidence in the playground.

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So fan fiction in its modern form appears to have started in the fanzines of the early twentieth century, taking off in earnest with the ‘Star Trek’ fan magazines, when some fans’ work itself became canon. Advances in computer technology allowed the various fan communities to flourish. Stories written about the objects of their devotion could be instantly exchanged between the fans, and this in turn could be met with almost instant feedback in the form of praise, criticism or advice. Ten years ago Internet fan fiction was

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<sup>9</sup>When I wrote my piece of ‘Doctor Who’ fan fiction I chose not to reveal my age on my homepage, but I could not help feeling something of a fraud when the chatty reviews, which I imagine came mostly from young female fans, started coming in. I had become ‘one of them’ and yet I was a forty-seven-year-old woman. I felt like an impostor and, the more I carried on with the fiction, the less keen I became to disclose my age. At the back of my mind was the feeling that my followers would be shocked or disappointed if they knew.

dominated by female fans in the twenties or older, who set up sites and stipulated regulations for those wishing to post stories. Now, despite the huge influx of younger fans, the guidelines are still those introduced by the older generation and respected by the younger ones (who have little choice if they want to see their story posted on an established site). This calls into question the idea that fan fiction in cyberspace is a playground without adult supervision.

### *Slash*

Having said that fan fiction is supervised, the existence of the popular category of ‘slash’ in fan fiction (referring to a same-sex relationship between two protagonists), appears to suggest a truly subversive side to the genre. It is a category which has not yet (with the exception of some manga) found its way into the book stores. Without the internet, slash – which is a vast and growing genre – could surely not have flourished in the way it has. Despite the rules mentioned above, the restraints that exist for the canon are not in place on the Internet. Publishers, particularly when it comes to children and young adults, have to be seen as responsible for their readers, and so tend to have a somewhat nanny-like approach. As well as having to think about what will sell, they are also aware of having to justify themselves to the ‘grown-ups’, these being parents, teachers and librarians. As we have seen, this attitude filters down to the internet, and some fan fiction sites (including fanfiction.net) claim they will not publish anything remotely pornographic. However, slash in all its forms (ranging from the innocent to the obscene) has become such an established sub-genre that is to be found on nearly every fan fiction site. Because it has not yet been taken up by the media and publishers, it represents an almost revolutionary side to the genre. Young writers (usually female) have found a means of expressing a particular side to themselves, and their work - if it hits the right note - can attract a large audience of like-minded readers.

That the term ‘slash fiction’ immediately conjures up images of violence is misleading. Again, it appears to have originated with ‘Star Trek’ fan fiction, when fans wrote stories exploring a homoerotic relationship between Captain Kirk and Spock. The word ‘slash’