

Fan Fiction and Fantasy Literature: If you like these books, write more yourself!

1. Introduction and History

What is fan fiction? Well... it's a number of things. It's a way to continue an existing story farther. It's a way to connect with fellow aficionados of a specific work. It's a way to play with other people's toys. And, not leastly, it's an introduction to creative writing for the uninitiated.

Broadly, fan-fiction literature involves newly created stories using another (usually previously published) author's characters. Length is not an issue (they can be the length of a short poem or multi-volume series in their own right) nor is faithfulness to the original work. It's a participatory act – a fan-fiction writer generally likes the 'world' of their chosen writer so much that they want to experience and control it for themselves.

Fan fiction is also a relatively obscure art form, existing only to those who care enough to find out about it, and appearing in the popular consciousness only occasionally, usually in the form of sensationalist or mocking news reportage. This is lessening somewhat in the hyper-connected age of the Internet – there are uncounted thousands upon thousands of discussion boards, archives, and webpages devoted to the practice. One of the largest and most popular on-line archives is FanFiction.net, with over 100,000 discrete archived works. It used to have guest editors and a lively discussion board as well, but the bandwidth and maintenance problems arising from this

site's rapid growth have necessitated the trimming-back of all nonessential features. Outside of the Internet, this subculture only appears occasionally, usually in fanzines and at conventions.

With a subculture comes its own attendant practices. Since fan-fiction is an exclusively written medium, this extends farthest into the realm of language. The fan fiction community in general and the smaller groups within it have created their own vocabulary to describe qualities and concepts specific to the subculture. Some are universally recognized, like *slash* and *het* (homosexual and heterosexual romantic or sexual pairings) or *canon* and *fanon* (the sum total of an author's works in contrast to intra-community assumptions about the author's characters or world). Specialized language exists to such an extent in some communities that their casual references are completely opaque to outsiders. This is especially the case in the larger communities, for example *Harry Potter For Grownups*, a discussion forum and e-mail list with 17,000 (or so) members. The list has so much traffic (on average over 100 messages a day, and nearer to 200 when something important is going on) that it has two dozen or so moderators, and an introductory FAQ so large its official name is the 'Humongous Bigfile'. A good introduction to fan fiction jargon can be found at <http://www.subreality.com/glossary/terms.htm>.

2. Copyright Issues

Another reason for this literature's underground nature is that its writing is essentially an act of copyright violation. A fanfiction author is deliberately using another author's intellectual property for his/

her own ends. Thusly, fan-fiction is unpublishable on a commercial scale, and often exists at the disapproval of the original property's author. An unfortunate example of possible conflicts is the 1992 case of Marion Zimmer Bradley, a popular fantasy author whose characters were often used in works of fan fiction up to that time. She regularly received unsolicited examples of these, the best being distributed to her through her publisher. One that turned up was uncannily like a novel which she had been writing for over a year. As the publisher knew of the fan-fiction, they panicked and refused to publish Bradley's work in fear of the fan fiction author's suing over the possible theft of his plotline. The fan-fiction author refused to cut a deal, insisting that his work should be acknowledged along with Bradley's. In the end, everybody got burnt – Bradley had a novel she couldn't publish, the publisher stopped taking submissions, and Bradley categorically declared that no-one but her could use her characters or 'world' anymore, at all, for any reason. Of course, an edict such as this is impossible to enforce, but it acted to nix all of her then-flourishing fanzines. Of course, this is a rare exception – most authors don't really care as long as the fan fiction author provides a copyright disclaimer and doesn't try to make money from their work.

3. Conclusions

So... is fan fiction worthwhile? Well, it is a pursuit that won't win you any fashion awards, for sure. It exists on the nerdy edge of popular culture. If a potential reader is confident enough with their self-image that it wouldn't be embarrassing to admit to enjoying the practice, go right ahead! Many a long-time reader was introduced to this thriving pastime

merely through the frustration of having to wait for the next installment of their favourite author's series. Upon delving into this world, well-written fan fiction can be just as nuanced and exciting as in the original (or even more so), exploring themes not considered by the original authors or according more time to interesting but little-known characters. It can also be a sea of the most abject abuses of English prose imaginable – enjoying the 'chase' of finding a consistent author or a good read can sometimes be almost as exciting as the read itself.

