

## Interview with Anna Wilson, the 2022 Winner of the Felicia Campbell Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award

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**Editor's Note:** I am thrilled to have had the chance to interview Anna Wilson for this issue. She is the 2022 recipient of the Felicia Campbell Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award. Her work with fan fiction is illuminating and she gives us, as scholars of diverse areas of popular culture, a great deal to think about. Amy M. Green, Editor.

### 1. WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN RESEARCHING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FAN FICTION AND PREMODERN LITERATURE?

When I started a BA in Classics, I was exposed for the first time to a whole literary culture built around adaptation—from Homer to Virgil to Milton. At that point I had been an avid reader of fan fiction for several years; I discovered it online when I was fifteen or sixteen, via an e-mail listserv I was on for fans of a particular TV show (I'm proud to be a listserv-generation fan!). There was this natural resonance between the literary approaches I was encountering in both areas, despite the vast historical and stylistic gulf. But there's a real tension in undergraduate courses on premodern history and literature around negotiating the pop culture routes that many young people take into those subjects. Medieval studies, for example, has a really complicated relationship with texts like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* that

bring students to our classes but then also have them expect and want certain things from the medieval past. When I was doing my BA it was HBO's *Rome* and Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. I was at Cambridge University, at a fantastic but traditional program, and I didn't feel like there was space for me to bring fan fiction into reading classical literature—it seemed too anachronistic, and almost disrespectful.

That started to shift when I was introduced by some wonderful teachers to the classical reception of late antiquity, like the fourth century poet Ausonius' *Marriage Cento* which combines half-lines of the *Aeneid* to make a pornographic poem. I learned that those literatures occupy a sort of denigrated cultural space within Classics—they're not canonical, and people look down their nose a bit at them because they're doubly derivative. From another angle, I also became fascinated with Christian thinkers like St Jerome and St Augustine who come from a very old and traditional elite Roman education and then later in life are wrestling with how to reconcile their lifelong love of pagan literatures with their new Christian commitments. The projects to reread through a Christian lens the great classical poems and philosophers that begin in late antiquity and run through into the Middle Ages, like Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and the *Ovide moralizé*, are picking apart and transforming canonical literature to suit their new audiences, which is what fan fiction does.

I had been privately thinking of these texts as fan fiction all the way through my undergraduate degree, reading some of the foundational works in Fan Studies independently—Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* was a revelation. I went to the Center of Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto from the UK to pursue an MA in medieval literature. I was lucky enough to have a professor, David Townsend, who was

the very rare combination of a brilliant medieval Latinist and queer theorist, who encouraged me to pursue my interests that straddled medieval literature and pop culture. The first paper I wrote for him was on the Mary Sue in medieval devotional literature, and that became the first chapter of my thesis, which he advised.

There was another element to my interest which was more about the context of my own education. Going from a state school in a very diverse and economically underprivileged part of west London—what in the U.S. would be called a public school—to a Classics degree at Cambridge was an alienating experience which made me very conscious of the classism and racism that is baked into higher education, which both Classics and Medieval Studies are negotiating in very interesting ways right now. Classics in particular has a long and complicated history in the British Empire as a tool of imperialism, forming an elite upper class with a shared language of references and cultural touchpoints. I was made very aware during my degree that I was being inculcated with those cultural touchpoints alongside young men and women who were going to go on to become part of the ruling political class; I vividly remember a class visit by Boris Johnson (who read Classics at Oxford). Fan fiction communities are also textual communities where shared references to specific texts form social bonds, but they stand in a very different relation to institutional power and cultural authority. Participating in fan communities was a relief to me from the political undercurrents at Cambridge, from which I felt deeply alienated. My emotional and intellectual relationships to the two different textual communities I was part of made me more aware of how they were both working on me, and also made me interested in textual communities from the past that likewise had complex relationships to power and authority.

**2. YOU DISCUSS IN YOUR WORK HOW FAN FICTION HAS BEEN FOLDED INTO THE LARGER IDEA OF TRANSFORMATIVE LITERATURE. CAN YOU SPEAK A BIT ABOUT HOW WE MIGHT DEFINE AND UNDERSTAND BOTH CONCEPTS?**

The term “transformative” came to be used in relation to fan fiction largely through the activism of the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), a nonprofit organization which runs one of the largest online fan fiction archives, *The Archive of Our Own*, and one of the major Fan Studies peer-reviewed journals, *Transformative Works and Cultures*. The OTW was founded from within Anglophone media fan communities in the early 2000s in response to the threats to fan fiction communities represented by the incursion of corporate censorship and monetization upon the increasingly profitable digital platforms that fans were using at that time to host fan fiction. The choice to use the term “transformative” was a statement about the OTW’s position on the legality of fan fiction in U.S. law. They maintain that fan fiction occupies a legal category of artistic works (including, for example, parody, or reviews that quote the original work) that have sufficiently transformed another property as to be “fair use” (Tushnet 61) and therefore not in infringement of copyright. In scholarship, the term “transformative” has been used explicitly to resist terms like “appropriative” or “derivative” that bring a value judgement that isn’t particularly appropriate or useful for scholarship. “Transformative” offers a very expansive umbrella where fan fiction sits alongside lots of other art forms that adapt or transform, from film parodies to genres of music that use sampling, and used in that way it can be a very powerful term, because it situates fan fiction amid a broader cultural turn towards adaptation and transformation that I think we’ve been seeing in the last thirty years. It also makes it possible to look at resistance and reception in

fan fiction alongside texts like Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which offer particular critiques and readings of their source texts. In making the decision to use that term, the OTW were building on theories of fan fiction from inside fandom, and also fan fiction studies by scholars like Henry Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, and Sheenagh Pugh.

But because the term “transformative” is very situated within modern copyright law and the modern marketplace, it is not one I find particularly useful for premodern literature. Almost all premodern literature is transformative in the sense that it adapts or retells previously existing stories that exist in a sort of cultural commons, and the legal framework that makes the term meaningful does not yet exist. The term “transformative” also strips away the specificities of the fan community; for me, the “fan” in “fan fiction” is very important. My work is interested in the relationships between reading communities and their literatures, so it's useful to me to use a fairly narrow definition of fan fiction as transformative literature which is produced and circulated within a fan community, and which forms part of a practice of self-fashioning as a fan, whatever that looks like in any given historical context. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a transformative work, but it is not fan fiction by that definition. The term “transformative” also has limitations for thinking about some kinds of present-day fan fiction. Real Person fan fiction—fan fiction about celebrities—is not necessarily transformative in the sense in which the OTW uses the term; the “text” that is being “transformed” is what Richard Dyer calls the “star image”: the celebrity insofar as they exist in the public sphere (Dyer 2; Busse, “My Life Is a WIP on My LJ: Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances,” 209). I find it very helpful to think

about fan fiction less through its relation to its source texts but as a self-contained literary movement with its own characteristic forms, themes, tropes, and aesthetics, and embedded in a specific community discourse.

So, for example, in one chapter in the book I am currently writing, I read the fourteenth century Italian poet Petrarch's letters as "fan fiction" in order to show how he links excessive love of the ancient Roman author Cicero, and deviant or queer masculinity. Petrarch has a lot of anxiety about his own love for Cicero and how it's taken his life outside the normative expectations for Italian upper-class men: he never marries, but he doesn't enter into a proper career in the Church either. While he continues to have sexual relationships with women, his emotional life is entirely organized around men, with long-dead classical authors almost interchangeable with his living friends, and he spends a lot of time thinking about that, particularly in a series of letters he writes to Cicero and the other long-dead classical authors who he loves. They're not actually transformative works in the sense that they're not adapting previous narratives, but like a lot of real person fan fiction, they imagine a relationship between a fan and celebrity in order to explore issues around parasocial relationships and resistance to heteronormativity, fandom as queerness, virtual communities, and the relationship between the self represented in the text and the self as we experience it (Busse, "I'm Jealous of the Fake Me': Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction"). Also, crucially, they are written for and circulated among a community of other Cicero fans, the epistolary network of antiquarian enthusiasts that Petrarch cultivated. So talking about fandom and fan fiction in relation to those letters is a really useful way of thinking about the relationships between gender and sexuality, desire, and reading communities

in those letters that other paradigms more conventional to medieval studies just don't really articulate, even though the term "transformative" doesn't apply.

**3. WHAT MIGHT STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS OF LITERATURE BE LOSING OUT ON—IN TERMS OF A WIDER UNDERSTANDING OF STORYTELLING AND ITS FORMS—WHEN THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND OR APPRECIATE THE ROLE OF FAN FICTION—BOTH ITS CURRENT ROLE, AND THE ROLE IT HAS PLAYED BACK INTO THE EARLY REACHES OF LITERATURE?**

The big answer to that question for scholars of literature is actually about pedagogy. There's a tendency among educators to focus on the dangers and harm to young people of being online, and the pandemic has made that debate more complex in all sorts of ways. Twenty-odd years ago, we speculated about what "digital natives" were going to be like, but now we know that being raised with devices does not necessarily mean that students are more computer-literate, while there is a lot of speculation about impact on attention spans, political polarization, and the erosion of empathy. But there has been growing interest in the educational sphere in the fascinating ways that fan fiction communities teach literary and critical skills through what Aragon and Davis call "distributed mentoring" (Aragon and Davis). Fan fiction communities draw in young people who are excited about narrative, and studies are showing that those students come into literature classrooms with a set of tools for reading and writing that they're ready to use, if we let them. They already are thinking about the relationship between style and form, about character, about the way texts circulate, and about cultural authority. It's a terrible waste to ignore, or, even worse, shame that knowledge so students compartmentalize it rather than integrating it into what they're doing in the classroom. Pop culture schol-

ars know that fan fiction and fan communities play a massive shaping role in how people interact with pop culture; it is time literature scholars understood that the skills young people hone in those communities are fully transferable.

I think also that we miss a major source of literary influence on contemporary genre fiction if we ignore fan fiction. It's important to remember that a lot of fan fiction *is* science-fiction or fantasy, those are the fandoms people write in, and while many people are familiar with the idea that fan fiction is a sort of training ground for writers, few people think about fan fiction as a literary influence on those writers who go on to publish in the mainstream. The teenagers I grew up with in fan communities are now winning Hugos and Nebulas and romance awards (formally RITAs, now Vivians). You can see a fan fiction aesthetic in a lot of fantasy, sci-fi, romance, and "women's fiction" coming out now; there's a greater interest in the interior lives of characters and emotional arcs, an interest in clever reworkings of tropes and clichés, more integration of romance and of women and queer characters into genres which have been hostile to that in the past, and more cross-genre literature from authors who have developed such a strong voice that they can break into the market across conventional categories. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the first example many people think of, but in many ways it's an outlier, in ways that Anne Jamison's book *Fic* does a great job of explaining (Jamison 265–74). I'm thinking more of novels like Tam-syn Muir's *Gideon the Ninth*, Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* series, N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, Arkady Martine's *Memory Called Empire*, Zen Cho's *Sorcerer to the Crown*, Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* and *Carry On*, Shelley Parker Chan's *She Who Became the Sun*, Nghi Vo's *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, Martha Wells' Murderbot series—I could go on at length, I haven't even started on short story writers.



Of course, this isn't the first generation of fan fiction authors to go pro, but we're now seeing the fruits of the massive expansion of fan fiction communities with the advent of home broadband in the early 2000s. All these authors have been open about the impact of fan fiction on their work (among other influences, obviously), but people rarely think of these novels as part of a movement, precisely because people think about fan fiction first and foremost as rewriting other people's work. Of all those novels, only Vo's is doing that in an explicit way (it's a magnificent reimagining of *The Great Gatsby*), while some of the others do have an element of pastiche (Novik's novels started life as Patrick O'Brian fan fiction, I believe, and Zen Cho's novel draws brilliantly on Georgette Heyer, who is herself following Jane Austen), but all are masterclasses in taking the conventions and styles of very established genres while making them new with the voices and characters they bring to them, which is a very fan fiction thing to do.

The question of what scholars of premodern literatures might miss out on by ignoring fan fiction is a bit more difficult, but I think we have been seeing in medieval studies in the last few decades a slow response to the turn in pop culture studies towards audiences that happened in the 1960s and 70s, in a rise in interest in the activity of premodern audiences and readers. Trends in cultural studies and literary theory are often slow to trickle into the premodern fields, because the process of disciplinary formation in those fields involves so much mastery of technical skills like dead languages and palaeography, that you need just to access the original texts; it takes a while for those fields to also figure out the impact of a new wave of cultural theory, for the right graduate students to find the right professors and institutions to do those projects, as I well know. Studying premodern readers also

presents special challenges because their traces are often so ephemeral, and traditional editorial practices, which standardize texts and remove marginalia, are not designed for studying the activity of individual anonymous readers even where we have the evidence of their work. Major digitization and transcription projects like *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive* and the *Kempe Project* have made it much easier to do large-scale studies of marginalia, manuscript variants, and the material traces of how books were used.<sup>1</sup> It's now much more possible to study how texts moved around and were transformed by ordinary readers who made adjustments, additions, and erasures to customize texts to themselves and their immediate audiences. In the last twenty years there has been some fantastic scholarship in book history and literary studies on premodern and early modern reading communities, which in some cases has been openly inspired by interest in or participation in modern fan communities.

#### **4. ALONG THESE SAME LINES, WHY DO YOU THINK THAT ACADEMIA AS A WHOLE TENDS TO LOOK DOWN ON MODERN "FAN FICTION," WHEREAS THE IDEA OF "TRANSFORMATIVE LITERATURES" HAS MORE ACCEPTABILITY?**

"Fan fiction" has a set of associations which make many people unwilling to take it seriously, and the OTW was fully aware of that in their strategic selection of what term to use to best advocate for fan fiction in the public sphere. The term "transformative literature" directs attention towards what the texts do rather than who is writing them, and so subtly alters the discourse. The Francis Spufford case is an interesting illustration of the dynamics in play here around the relative cultural meanings of the terms "fan fiction" and "transforma-

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1 <http://english.selu.edu/humanitiesonline/kempe/index.php>

tive literatures.” In 2019, the British novelist Francis Spufford wrote an “unauthorized Narnia novel” called *The Stone Table*, which was unlicensed by the Lewis estate (the books are in copyright until 2034). Spufford printed copies for friends and family, and Frank Cottrell-Boyce, a highly respected children’s novelist and friend of Spufford, with Spufford’s permission posted screencaps of the first two chapters on Twitter, apparently with the ultimate goal of eliciting approval from the Lewis estate. There was a lot of attention, mostly positive, from the mainstream media (Lea). The fan fiction community, however, reacted with bemusement and scorn to the publicity and the position Spufford had taken; they pointed out that he could have simply uploaded it to a fan fiction archive pseudonymously, where it could find an eager audience amidst hundreds of thousands of other pieces of Narnia fan fiction. Kate Gardner’s article for the web media outlet *The Mary Sue* was titled, “Let’s Call an “Unauthorized” Narnia Novel What It Is: Fan Fiction,” with the provocative subtitle, “I guess it gets a fancy title if a man writes it” (Gardner). Spufford’s avoidance of the word “fan fiction,” which was surely the most accurate term for what he was doing, shows that the term can describe a cultural positioning rather than a legal or artistic category. By avoiding both the term “fan fiction” and the digital contexts of fan fiction (such as a distribution venue like AO3), Spufford could rhetorically position *The Stone Table* as awaiting licensing rather than as unauthorized, as “serious literature” rather than a fan project, and therefore as a novel potentially partaking of the same cultural cachet as major literary works that transform others (I’ve already mentioned *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, but one might also mention *Paradise Lost*, *The Aeneid*, Arthurian romances, and so on). The fan fiction community interpreted Spufford’s choice as literary snobbery combined with sexism, based on stereotypes

about fan fiction and fan communities. Spufford is an older man with an established reputation in the literary scene, while fandom is overwhelmingly comprised of cis women and people of minoritized genders, and also heavily weighted towards younger people who are starting out writing for the first time. I discuss this in more detail below. The word “fan,” short for “fanatic,” evokes movies like *Misery* and *The Fan*, where obsessive fans become murderous, media scaremongering about hysterical teenage girls at pop concerts, or the famous “Get a life!” *Saturday Night Live* skit that William Shatner did in 1986, where he asks a group of (male) *Star Trek* fans, “Have you ever kissed a girl?” *The Stone Table* couldn’t possibly be fan fiction, not because of its own properties as a text, because of who Spufford is, what he wanted to do with the text, and who he saw as his audience.

In certain contexts, the phrase “transformative works” does useful and important work, and the adoption of the term has done a huge amount for fan fiction; the climate is completely different today than it was twenty years ago, and that is partly due to the advocacy of the OTW and other groups and individuals. I remember when the owners of personal websites that hosted *Star Wars* fan fiction were getting threatening letters from Lucasfilm lawyers. But for me and for my work, the whole point is that fan fiction is *of fans*, and it’s very important to me personally to use the word that is so weighted with cultural baggage, particularly for women.

**5. WHAT ARE A FEW OTHER EXAMPLES OF PRE-MODERN LITERATURE WHICH FIT THE DEFINITION OF FAN FICTION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER THESE WORKS BEYOND JUST THAT THEY ARE CANONICAL? WHY SHOULD WE CONSIDER THEM TO BE FAN FICTION AS WELL?**

In my 2021 article in *Transformative Works and Cultures*, I answer this question in detail (Wilson, “Fan Fiction and Pre-modern Literature: Methods and Definitions”). I think firstly we—and by that I mean all scholars of fan fiction, not just people working with premodern literature—need to spend a bit more time thinking about the different ways we define fan fiction, and for what purpose. I’ve already talked in my earlier answers about the uses of “transformative” as a definition. In my article, I describe what I call three axes of approach to fan fiction— “poaching,” “transformation,” and “affect.” Poaching is about defining fan fiction through its relationship to authority, transformation is about its artistic relationship to its source texts, and affect is about desire and identity. Because fan fiction is a literary form which is inseparable from its communities, it can be a really useful way to look at the way specific communities in historical specific moments have used techniques of literary transformation to make political statements, to articulate things about themselves, or to carve out a space in the cultural landscape. There is some really innovative and interesting work going on in the fields of classics and early modern and medieval literature—probably far more than I know about. There have been two issues of *Transformative Works and Cultures* on ancient scribal cultures and classical literature, including early Biblical and Talmudic texts. Angela Florschuetz has argued for reading the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as fan fiction that reflects on “Gawain fandom” within the poem, Kavita Mudan Finn, Jess McCall, and Louise Geddes have written on Shakespeare’s plays and responses to them, E.J. Nielsen has written on Christine de Pizan’s fifteenth-century *Book of the City of the Ladies*, Balaka Basu on Sir Philip Sydney’s *Arcadia*.

In the book I’m currently writing, I use fan fiction to discuss Petrarch’s letters, fifteenth century additions to *The Canter-*

*bury Tales*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is often called the first autobiography in English. It's an account of her life, interspersed with visions where Margery steps into the Gospels as a speaking character, interacting with the Virgin Mary, the apostles, and Jesus. Margery is technically illiterate, in the sense that many otherwise educated women were in the Middle Ages, in that she is familiar with a wide range of contemporary devotional writing that has been read aloud to her, and has parts of scripture and the liturgy memorized, but she cannot actually read or write herself (or at least she claims she can't), and she "writes" her book by dictation in collaboration with two different male scribes. So "reading" for her is something that takes place in the imagination and through bodily practices, and through discussion in her communities of other devout women and men. Fan fiction is a useful way to read the *Book of Margery Kempe*, for me, because it offers a way to think about the very complicated way it intertwines issues of authorship and authority, reading, self-fashioning, gender, and desire, through rewriting sections of the Gospels to include Margery (Wilson, "The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction"). I often have students at the beginning of their graduate careers approach me who are interested in considering different premodern texts as fan fiction. My question to them is always, what does fan fiction offer you as a lens or approach, rather than as taxonomy? What happens when we read this text as fan fiction? What kind of questions does it lead us to ask about it that we might not otherwise ask?

**6. IN TERMS OF MODERN FAN FICTION, WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF ITS WRITERS AND ITS READERS? ARE THEY PRIMARILY DRAWING FROM MARGINALIZED GROUPS? WHY ARE THESE DEMOGRAPHICS IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER?**

Because the fan fiction community is so large, disparate, and invested in maintaining a level of anonymity, it's been difficult to get accurate demographic data. I'm aware of several demographic studies done in the last fifteen years, the most recent, largest, and most comprehensive being a 2019 survey of attitudes to "shipping" (romantic pairings in fan fiction) by the hosts of the podcast *Fansplaining* and a data visualization professional (Klink et al.).<sup>2</sup> All those surveys suggest that fan fiction is overwhelmingly written and circulated by women and people of minoritized genders, including trans\*, gender non-binary, genderqueer, and agender people. The majority are in their late teens and early twenties, but there are many who are older; in the *Fansplaining* shipping survey, 28.7% of its 17,391 respondents were 30 or over, with 110 respondents (0.63%) self-reporting as 60 or over. Not all these surveys have asked respondents about race, but those that have sug-

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2 *Anna Wilson would like to acknowledge the support of the Institute of Advanced Studies, Princeton, at which she has the good fortune to be a visiting fellow in 2021-2.*

Fanlore's "Fandom Statistics" page links to a number of studies of fan fiction demographics done across different platforms and fandoms from the 2000s to 2019. URL: [https://fanlore.org/wiki/Fandom\\_Statistics](https://fanlore.org/wiki/Fandom_Statistics). Of particular note is the fact that 1990s studies of fan fiction assumed that most fan fiction writers were heterosexual. However, the 2008 Fandom Then/Now survey by Katherine Morrissey found that 28% of its 3,400 participants identified otherwise, while a 2013 survey by centrumlumina of Archive of Our Own users with 10,005 responses found that 54% of respondents identified themselves as being in a gender, sexual or romantic minority category, and in the 2019 Fansplaining shipping survey, with 17,391 participants, 80% identified as other than heterosexual, 72% identified as female, 21% as non-binary or genderqueer, and 9% as transgender. These studies also covered some other demographic categories: in centrumlumina's 2013 survey, 78% of respondents self-identified as white, and the majority were under 30. In the Fansplaining survey, 77% self-identified as white, and the largest number of respondents were between 18 and 24.

gest a community in which respondents who self-identify as white are in the majority (it's important to note that these were all demographic studies in English, that likely had little circulation in non-English fan communities, particularly within the enormous fan communities of Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean media, which have their own fan cultures and histories of fan production). These surveys show a relatively large proportion of respondents self-identifying as members of a gender, sexual or romantic minority, even outnumbering cisgendered, heterosexual fans in some fan community spaces (the *Fansplaining* survey, which primarily reached fans of male/male romance fan fiction or "slash," had only 19.57% of its respondents self-report as "straight/heterosexual").

These demographics raise several points. Firstly, they show the importance of contextualizing fan fiction within studies of young women and LGBTQ+ people in pop culture. Secondly, they show that fan fiction, like romance, is a gendered genre, by which I mean it's both more popular with and more associated with women. It's a form that particularly lends itself to drawing out perspectives and voices that have traditionally been underserved by mainstream media, for minoritized audiences to "see themselves" in the shows that they love. "Slash" (m/m) fan fiction has been read as a subversive feminist act that rewrites toxic masculinity by rewriting homosocial bonds in all-male casts as homoerotic. But using demographic data to make broad assumptions about what fan fiction is doing as a genre is a limited approach. Studies of the 1980s and 1990s tended to assume that most fan fiction writers were heterosexual women, based on anecdotal accounts and the fact that people were not necessarily "out," even in fan communities; those assumptions often led to fairly essentialist and limited interpretations of the popularity of m/m erotica in fan communities (then as now, significantly more popular



than f/f erotica). However, more recent studies have shown that many fan fiction communities now are overwhelmingly queer, and moreover are a vital support network for many LGBTQ+ people who are turning to them to explore their own sexualities and gender expression, and to imagine queer happiness. There are also many people within fandom living with disabilities and chronic illness who likewise use fan fiction to explore a range of experiences of gender and sexuality and ways of being in the world that rarely get sympathetic or detailed representation within mainstream media.

But there's an important caveat to understanding fan fiction as *fundamentally* subversive or committed to social justice because of its demographics. Some important recent studies, by Pande, Rebecca Wanzo, Alexis Lothian, Mel Stanfill, and others, have put forward a more nuanced view of the way whiteness structures fandom and fan fiction, from the discipline of fan studies to archive design (Wanzo, "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies"; Stanfill; Lothian and Stanfill). While fan fiction can be used to re-center perspectives marginalized in mainstream media, it can also reinforce the systematic erasure of nonwhite voices and perspectives or reinscribe racial stereotypes. Meanwhile, fans and scholars of color have described how the predominance of schools of thought that highlight the subversive potential of fan fiction have ironically created a culture particularly resistant to discussion of racism within fandom and in fan fiction. That scholarship is an important corrective to a tendency towards a certain defensive idealization of fandom in earlier scholarship, and is a sign of the strength of fan studies.

Understanding the demographics of fandom is also essential for ethical research. The ethical quandaries that researchers

of fan fiction face are familiar to people who work on digital communities and who come from disciplines that work with human subjects, but much less so for people who come through English Literature or similar graduate programs! Simply, that one can't necessarily treat a deeply personal piece of erotic fiction posted by a nineteen-year-old on a digital archive the same as we would a short story by an established novelist in a literary journal, even though both are in the public domain, even if we maintain the pseudonymity of the fan fiction writer. We know that members of minorities are more likely to receive online harassment; we know that taking fan fiction out of its immediate context into another context for which it was never intended runs the risk of giving shock or offense to those unfamiliar with the conventions of the genre; and that fan is only a click away. Fans also are not seeking to circulate their work in the public sphere, and are rarely prepared for any kind of attention at all from outside of the fan community. All of that doesn't mean that scholars—who are of course often themselves from fan communities—shouldn't work on fan fiction, but they are dealing with vulnerable communities, and are morally obligated, I think, to consider the ethics of their work at every stage of the research and publication process. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, the flagship journal of the Organization for Transformative Works (that also runs the *Archive of Our Own*), "strongly recommends" that authors obtain permission from the creators of any fanworks featured in their articles. But as Rukmini Pande has recently pointed out, expectations of this kind can limit critical work that can be done and makes researchers vulnerable in other ways. Offering fan authors veto power means that scholarship can rarely push against the fan community's own views of itself (Pande, para. 2.15-2.17).

It is also important to note the limitations of the story told

by the surveys I've described above. Studies of fan fiction like Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* often tell a story of a single, continuous fan fiction tradition that evolves from 1960s Trek fandom to *Archive of Our Own* users in the 2010s, with a relatively stable core population moving across platforms and fandoms, communicating shared norms and conventions. However, it's increasingly inaccurate to talk about a fan fiction community, or to assume that can one make generalizations that apply across fan fiction communities. There are Anglophone fan fiction communities which have emerged almost totally independently, on platforms like Wattpad, where even fundamental ideas of what fan fiction is are completely different, and which share very few members with the communities among which those surveys were done. There are numerous region- and language-specific fan communities; there are also huge global fan cultures with their own long histories, particularly in East Asia. When I'm discussing fan fiction in my own research, I try to be very clear that I'm discussing one specific Anglophone tradition with its own place and moment.

**7. WHAT DOES TRANSFORMATIVE LITERATURE, INCLUDING FAN FICTION, TELL US ABOUT READERS AND WRITERS, AND THE WAYS IN WHICH THEY ENGAGE WITH A TEXT? WHAT MIGHT DRIVE AUTHORS AND READERS TO SEEK OUT OR PRODUCE WORKS THAT FILL IN, FOR EXAMPLE, THE HISTORIES OF OTHERWISE MINOR CHARACTERS, OR PLACE CHARACTERS FROM ONE LITERARY WORK INTO A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENT, AS IS FOUND IN THE ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE, OR AU GENRE OF FAN FICTION?**

There are a few different answers to this question. The first is less to do with fan fiction as transformative literature and

more to do with it being an online community that is majority women and people of gender minorities, with a very large proportion of LGBTQ+ people, often supportive of beginning writers, and unconstrained by conventional publishing categories (but of course, those characteristics of fan fiction are inseparable from the fact that it's transformative literature, because fan fiction's ambiguous legality has kept it circulating in fan-created spaces and out of the mainstream marketplace). There is a spectrum, I think, among fan fiction readers. At one end are people who want to read near-unlimited quantities of queer romance and erotica for free and appreciate the highly searchable archives. Those people aren't very bothered about any particular source text, but browse fan fiction almost indiscriminately or follow particular authors from fandom to fandom. At the other end are people whose relationship to fan fiction is profoundly tied to their fandom for a particular source text, for whom fan fiction is a reading practice that enriches their relationship with that source text, and who form close bonds with that fan community which may last for decades. Most people, myself included, fall somewhere in between those two poles. I was drawn to fan fiction through my obsession with the Harry Potter books, and I tend to spend a year or two writing in a fandom before I lose interest and move on to another text. But between obsessions, fan fiction often gives me something that mainstream published romance, even queer romance, does not, whether it's more diverse protagonists, more combination of science fiction or fantasy plot elements with romance, or in-depth treatments of the lived experience of chronic anxiety within a romance. Those aspects of fan fiction keep me coming back to it for leisure reading even when I'm not deeply engrossed in a fandom. But as the critiques I mentioned above point out, it's a space that is very supportive of some kinds of bodily and experiential diversity, but which can be racially

and culturally monolithic in ways that echo the overwhelming whiteness of western media and the cultural dominance of the United States even in global online communities.

To describe a position somewhere between those two poles, I like to think of fan fiction in terms of “desire paths,” the term from urban planning that describes unplanned paths that spontaneously emerge from pedestrian traffic. Fan fiction lets fans take shortcuts through the landscape of texts, circle one particular spot, congregate in particular areas, and connect regions together. In this metaphor, fan fiction is a response to where the text’s infrastructure is insufficient to the needs of its users. Fan fiction can express frustration against the lack of attention given to a particular character, it can attempt to resolve inconsistencies in worldbuilding or characterization (this is one of the reasons why low-budget science-fiction shows with a large stable of writers often attract a lot of fan fiction!), it can flesh out the emotional impact of a particular narrative event on the characters that was given insufficient development in the original text, and it can imagine alternative narratives that hinge on a turning point in the text.

Another way to think about fan fiction is the “more of/more from” model that Sheenagh Pugh describes in her 2005 book *The Democratic Genre* (Pugh 19). The fan fiction I’ve described above offers fans *more from* a particular text. But a lot of fan fiction is also about iterative pleasure, it offers fans *more of* a particular text by extending or expanding it, or it offers more of the characters, or of a particular relationship dynamic or narrative structure. Alternative Universe stories (AUs) often fall into that latter category; *Fifty Shades of Grey* famously began life as an AU of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* which stripped out the paranormal elements of Meyer’s novel, but which retained some characterization and narrative elements that made the romance so compelling.

A final model is to think about fan fiction as a space to have communal conversations about stories and characters, through a creative medium. AUs are a fascinating case study for looking at what fan fiction does because they are the furthest removed from the original source, and the most likely to be lightly edited and republished as original fiction—the fine line between influence and transformation simply does not exist in some cases. But at the same time, AUs can be a creative way to perform experimental readings of particular characters or story elements by changing genres or narrative constraints. For example, there are hundreds of examples of AUs from many different fandoms which are fusions with Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, where the world is the same as ours in many ways but everybody has a daemon, a sort of semi-supernatural animal companion who is an external manifestation of their soul. Thinking about what kind of daemon your favourite character would have is way to creatively stress-test and share your knowledge and opinions of that character. Fan fiction is often part of a collaborative, communal process that begins with conversation on a blog or chat server, one of whose participants writes a story and posts it, and the conversation continues in the comments on that story, one of its readers writes another story in response, and so on. A single fan fiction story, taken out of its context, doesn’t give the whole picture.

**8. WHAT LAST THOUGHTS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE WITH OUR READERS ABOUT TRANSFORMATIVE LITERATURE, FAN FICTION, AND WHERE YOUR RESEARCH MIGHT TAKE YOU NEXT?**

I want to express my gratitude to the *Popular Culture Review* for inviting me to answer these questions and for honouring me with the Felicia Campbell Award, both for my own sake

and because I'm really happy to see fan fiction being taken seriously as a significant and influential area of pop culture in its own right. Cultural Studies and Media Studies have been the natural home for studies of fandom and fan cultures, but fan fiction studies tends to fall into a gap between disciplinary specialties. It's an exciting moment for the field and I look forward to seeing the way graduate students who are choosing to focus now on fan fiction and fan studies transform the field in the next decade, particularly in cross-disciplinary projects. I'm hoping that the book I am writing now will be useful for scholars of fan fiction as well as medievalists; I'm making an argument about the emergence of a distinct kind of "fannish" reading in the fourteenth century, but in doing so I'm articulating theories of fan fiction that I hope others can use and build on. I've benefited greatly from the intellectual generosity of pop culture scholarship that opens itself up to work in other fields and times and places, and I hope I'm writing in that tradition.

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