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A Literary Tool Among the Shades of Grey: Fanfiction, Libraries and Readers' Advisory

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Abstract:

Fanfiction is a work or story developed by fans that utilizes either characters, settings, or plot points from a source text or revolves around famous individuals that are not directly written by the original authors or creators. As a whole, it is a vast and widely misunderstood genre that is typically associated with the poorly written work of teenagers or the hyper sexualized content of famous works like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In all reality, fanfiction can serve as a vital tool for librarians and readers' advisory personnel to encourage reading. This paper takes a look at the content of fanfiction, noting how it is very similar to regular fiction in the sense of appeal factors and plot elements. While at the same time, these stories are seemingly endless in quantity, with works existing related to generally every topic, book, or piece of media in existence. Furthermore, fanfiction tends to have a wider acceptance of diversity due to the genre's lack of regulations, allowing for writers to explore all topics, identities, and sexualities while containing characters from essentially all races and ethnic backgrounds. This brief overview of fanfiction as a whole can serve as an introduction for librarians and RA personnel to begin navigating the content of fanfiction to further encourage reading.

Key words: Fanfiction, Encouraging Reading, Appeal Factors, Readers' Advisory

Have you ever been disappointed in the ending of a piece of media? Have you ever been devastated over the death of a fictional character? Have you ever finished something and longed to remain in that world? Have you simply wondered what would have happened or even thought about what's next for these characters? A simple solution remains for all of these questions: Fanfiction. Fanfiction is generally considered to be a work or story developed by fans that use characters, settings, or plot points from a source text or famous individuals, that are not directly written by the original author or creator, though many readers will argue that there is no definite definition for what constitutes a work of fanfiction (Klink, 2022). Regardless, fanfiction serves as an

excellent, but underutilized resource for librarians and other readers' advisory personnel to encourage reading due to its expansive and extensive range of content, its basis in pop culture, its acceptance of diversity and its similarity in appeal factors to regular fiction.

Typically when one thinks of fanfiction, they have a negative connotation associated with it. Many consider this type of writing to be fairly poor and do not see the point of writing stories with already existing characters. While others tend to associate the genre as being hyper sexual in nature, an ideology that resulted from the widespread popularity of the books and subsequent films of *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James, works that were initially posted, under the title *Master of the Universe*, on the website Fanfiction.net as fanfiction of the Twilight series by Stephanie Meyers. While both of these points are fair, as many young or inexperienced writers use fanfiction as their starting point and many of the existing works are in fact sexual in nature, it is not a fair assessment of the genre as a whole.

In fact, fanfiction has had a long history with many books that are regularly considered to be classics falling into the realm of fanfiction. Many of these stories take pre-existing stories and provide alternative perspectives on the included events or go further into detail on select moments. Take for example, the epic poem the *Aeneid* by the Roman poet Virgil, which is a retelling of Homer's epics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, with a focus on the side character of Aeneas or the epic poem by John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, which seeks to fill the gaps and answer many of the remaining questions from the first chapter of the Bible. While other stories utilized many of the common tropes or elements that are frequently found within modern fanfiction. Such as how Dante's *Inferno* is a self-insert story, in which the author has met the aforementioned poet Virgil

and together they travel through Hell, or how James Joyce's *Ulysses* is simply an alternate universe (or au) of Homer's *The Odyssey* taking place in 1920's Ireland rather than in ancient Greece.

In more recent years, published fanfiction has become more commonplace among readers of fiction. A popular trend among current authors is to provide alternative perspectives on well known content, with a particular focus on side characters or villains, leading to works that include *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller or *Wicked* by Gregory Maguire. While fanfiction authors, following the popularity and success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, have been following the trend of "pulling to publish" their work, which entails "rewriting and republishing for profit a work inspired by another's intellectual property" (Brennan & Large, 2014, p.28). Titles of which include *The Love Hypothesis* by Ali Hazelwood, a story initially written as a Star War fanfiction, or the *After* series by Anna Todd, which was a self insert story based around Harry Styles and the band One Direction.

Regardless, when it comes to using fanfiction as a tool to encourage reading, librarians should largely focus on the most commonly found form of fanfiction consisting of unpublished works that are shared within online spaces and fanfiction communities. The fanfiction found on these webpages are extensive and at times seemingly endless, and can range drastically in their covered content and length. Take for instance how on the fanfiction sharing site Archive of Our Own (<https://archiveofourown.org>), users can easily find content related to upwards of 54,000 different fandoms. These fandoms can range from being very popular such as the Harry Potter book series which has over 400,000 written stories or the Marvel movies that have roughly 600,000 related works to lesser known fandoms that include

the 2003 German film *Goodbye Lenin* which has fourteen items or even the 1986 flop *Solarbabies* which has four stories. In addition within this wide range of content, the average length of a given work drastically varies, with stories frequently reaching the length of novellas or full length novels to some having less than twenty words while others have upwards of six million. As a result, no matter how niche a reader's interests may be, they will most likely be able to find substantial content that satisfies their desires.

Due to its basis in pop culture and other media, many find fanfiction to be an easy and engaging way to get into reading. Typically younger readers tend to become engaged and interested in reading, assignments, or lesson plans focused around popular media or items selected by the students themselves. Such was the case with middle school librarian Tracey Kell (2009) who, while collaborating on a school lesson plan related to reading and writing fanfiction, found that “[the students] enjoyed writing about their favorite video game, movie, book, or television show. [Later], when asked if they would rather write or read a generic fiction piece or fanfiction, the overwhelming response was fanfiction” (para. 26). This is largely as a result of how fan written stories provide readers access to content that they genuinely care about while also providing them with the opportunity to see elements from the original work changed or expanded upon. In fact, numerous readers were initially drawn to this genre as a result of how a large portion of fanfiction focuses on the different relationships or pairings (frequently referred to as “ships” in fanfiction jargon) of characters that either are or are not explicitly shown being in a relationship throughout the course of their given media. This type of fanfiction allows fans that are either invested in that relationship or disappointed

that it never came to fruition to have a means of seeing those relationships play out time and time again in thousands of different ways.

In addition, many readers who are struggling or readers who are in the process of learning English have found that these stories based on pop culture or other media, are relatively easier to get into compared to regular fiction, as a result of their previously established plots, worlds, and characters. By going into a story already knowing what to visualize and, in a way, expect, a reader will be able to place more focus on following the actual plot of the story, without being bogged down by the descriptive details, regardless of how well their reading comprehension or familiarity of the English language is (Black, 2011, para. 26). Many individuals have noted that by continuing to read these easier to follow stories, they were able to both increase their vocabulary and, in turn improve, their reading capabilities. Such improvements were noted during a study conducted at the As-Syafiiyah Islamic University in Indonesia, investigating the motivation behind the desires of students to read English language fanfiction, the participants noted how they felt drawn to fanfiction as it not only provided access to stories about their favorite characters, but it also helped to improve their English vocabulary as these stories cover more realistic than the average textbook would (Abdulrahman & Restika Dwi Cahyati, 2020, p. 28).

Aside from attracting readers with pre-established stories and characters, fanfiction tends to also have a wider array of diverse content compared to that of regular fiction. I do want to begin this section by stating that while this may be the case, both fanfiction writers and the rest of the book industry do still have a long way to go related to creating all inclusive and diverse content. Regardless, part of what makes fanfiction so unique is how there are no rules that writers must adhere to while creating their

work. No one is posting their stories for a profit, nor does posting said story guarantee that there will be an audience for it. As journalist Chelsey Philpot (2014) put it, “there are no taboos or rules in fan fiction, and much of it can be sexually explicit, shocking, and/or avant-garde. While this raises issues for the under-18 set, the lack of regulation also makes fan fiction welcoming for the LGBTQ community and teens examining their sexuality”(para. 10). As a result, within the realms of fanfiction, one can find content covering relatively all topics, identities, and sexualities while containing characters from essentially all races and ethnic backgrounds. In addition, many turn to fanfiction as a way to provide representation that they feel are lacking in modern media or use the format to explore different identities or issues that they are experiencing. Take for example scholar Catherine Duchastel de Montrouge (2019), who as a disabled and queer individual, felt that fanfiction provided the “possibility of seeing [their] own story, a story not represented in mainstream culture or society, through narratives about shows [they] love,” (p. 14) as well as noting how “fanfiction can be quite a subversive experience for many people who do not see themselves represented in mainstream culture” (p. 24). Fanfiction is heavily dependent on the notion of fan interpretation (frequently referred to as “headcanons” in fanfiction jargon), as a result writers will often take well established characters and give them different sexualities or even disabilities. While this may not be perfect representation nor the best that one can find, the freedom involved in writing in these stories allows for the opportunity for readers to explore and find a wider array of work pertaining to their own identities or situations.

It should be noted that due to the wide variety of content that can be found within fanfiction websites, it is important, as a librarian recommending fanfiction, to be able to show users how to find the right content for themselves. Author Becca Schaffner

(2009) put it best by pointing out how it is “no one’s intent in fandom to traumatize anyone with content their various readers aren’t suited to” (para. 12). As a result essentially all of the main fanfiction based websites allow for the ability to filter content by age levels (i.e. general, teen, mature, etc.) and it is the standard practice for authors to include tags or content warnings at the top of their work that indicate particular topics or elements that will be brought up within that particular story. There is plenty of content out there for everyone, it is just a matter of being able to navigate one’s way to find exactly what one is looking for.

Nevertheless, fanfiction is very similar to general fiction in the sense that they have similar genres, themes, and appeal factors. When conducting a basic readers’ advisory interview, it is common to ask what it is they liked or disliked about a particular topic, whether that be particular characters, plot points, or even tonal elements. These are all elements that can be filtered within a fandom page on a fanfiction website as a result of their detailed tagging systems, in addition to the aforementioned content rating filters, making it easy to find desired content if one understands the site’s standardized terminology (Ford, 2016, para. 23). Take for example how on the site Archive Of Our Own, users are able to limit by or exclude from their search results categories that include ratings, warnings, characters, or relationships. In addition, users are able to further limit their results by searching for “tags,” which are elements that are included to help further describe the work to users. These elements can be very similar to the appeal factors and themes that one would search within a readers’ advisory tool like Novelist. For instance, if one was looking for a more amusing or heartwarming story they could include the tag “fluff,” while darker or moodier stories would have the tag “angst” (Honeycutt, 2019). These additional tags are

not limited to tonal elements, but could further describe the plot of the story, such as including “enemies to lovers” to indicate stories in which characters that are enemies fall in love, or tags like “sick fic” which covers stories that have characters that are dealing with sickness or illnesses. As a result of these similarities in appeals and themes, librarians can easily find alternative reading suggestions based on the reader’s regular fiction preferences.

In conclusion, while fanfiction will continue to be a genre that will often be misjudged, it is up to the librarians and readers’ advisory personnel to learn how to utilize this genre as a tool to encourage readers by focusing on its expansive and extensive range of content, its basis in pop culture, its acceptance of diversity and its similarity in appeal factors to regular fiction. Maybe it's time to think beyond S. R. Ranganathan’s laws of library science and consider that while every reader has their book, some may have fanfiction.

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