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SARAH DONNELLY
sarahd7276@aol.com

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Sarah Donnelly

Fan Fiction and Readers Advisory

“Fan fiction (often abbreviated “fanfic”) is fiction based on an existing work, such as a novel, television show, or movie.” (Ford, 2016)

Where do broken hearts go when they’ve closed the last page of *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*? Where can one turn when the battles are fought and won? When the guy gets the girl? When the series ends? Readers who found homes in the Shire or at 221B Baker Street, friends at Hogwarts or Camp Halfblood, families amongst vampires or werewolves, or their place amongst the Jedis or the Divergent, are left to wonder, “What’s next?” And, when the creator of their favorite band of heroes have shuttered those series, they’re left with a longing to continue with that journey. Thus, fan fiction is born.

History of Fan Fiction

Fan fiction goes back to the time of Shakespeare. In Anne Ford’s article, *Fellowship of the Fans: Connecting with Teens Through the Magic of Fan Fiction*, she explains how he borrowed characters and the plot line from Arthur Brooke’s *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet*. And, in 1913, Englishwoman Sybil G. Brinton took characters from six Jane Austen novels and brought them into one new work of her own, *Old Friends and New Fancies*. Another means of creating fanfic is to take an existing work and use it as a springboard for backstories, prequels, or the “what’s next?” for fan favorites. Some examples are *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, a prequel to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* which examines the back story of “the madwoman in the attic” and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* by Jack Thorne in which we see Harry as a less than ideal father to a child who is gifted and troubled.

Fanfic is rarely published, commissioned, or authorized by the creator of the original work. Fanfic authors used to share their work on zines or conventions. Now, they publish on sites such as Wattpad, Fanfiction.net, and Tumblr. The fan-run nonprofit site Archive of Our Own has nearly 350,000 registered fans, and Figment includes roughly 100,000 teen contributors. (Philpot, 2015)

In Latham and Gross' book, they suggest that authors and publishers are always concerned about "protecting their properties and potential profits, but many have apparently come to recognize that fan fiction supports, rather than detract from their profits, because it is freely produced and distributed, can actually serve to enhance a franchise, attracting even more readers or viewers." Librarians must also worry about copyright infringement. Sometimes, even the standard disclaimer for stories are not enough to ease the concerns of the original author or creator. (Griffis, 2018) Some authors actively discourage fanfic. Anne Rice insists that her fan base must write their own stories and leave her characters alone. While J.K. Rowling finds pleasure that her stories have inspired people to take time and expand her universe.

Fanfic's Place in the Library

Most librarians have known about fanfic for years because they've watched what children read and read what those children wrote. Now that fanfic has hit the mainstream, it's easier to engage with patrons about those narratives. In Rebecca Honeycutt's article, one thing is very clear: fanfiction readers know what they like to read. Honeycutt claims that fanfic readers are avid readers, but rarely read books because they can't find any that speak to their interests the same way fanfiction does. So, as a librarian, Honeycutt relies on NoveList's themes to help. "A lot of popular fanfiction tropes map easily onto NoveList's romance themes, which stands to reason — fanfic *is* a fantastic way to watch your ships fall in love over and over again. She goes

on to list Fanfic Tropes to NoveList Themes. It's important for librarians struggling with Readers Advisory in this genre to educate themselves in these tropes as they lend themselves to opening doors for fanfic readers.

In Deanna Walker's PowerPoint Presentation, *Promoting Literacy with Fanfiction to Young Adults*, she presents a demographic chart that shows 76% of fanfic communities are female dominated and are predominately young (11-14) when they discover "fandom". Participants in her survey demonstrated that before discovering fandom, they read 80 hours a week on average. After discovering fandom, that number changed to roughly 120 hours per week. This increase in reading and writing engagement shows the dedication to their craft. What most fanfic writers enjoy about the genre is that constructive criticism helps them develop and improve their skill set.

Another bonus of the fanfic community is how accepting they are of attracting a diverse population. The LGBTQA+ community feel safe there because they are not judged for their sexuality. The fantasy of fanfic lends itself to the experimentation of living out the life they're hiding, otherwise. The power here resides in the fanfiction writers' ability to right the wrongs or shortcomings in the original works, perhaps they change the characters race (Hermione being cast as a black woman) or gender identity, sexual preference, etc. Fanfic is about diversity and inclusion. Representation matters. This, however, can get tricky with younger readers. So, it's paramount for librarians to know the content so young children are not exposed to sexually explicit materials.

Roles of Readers Advisory and Fan Fiction

In *Reading Matters*, Catherine Ross recommends four highlights to support fanfiction in the library. First, provide access to materials that “reflect up-to-the-minute cultural interests of young people. Second, create and distribute “pathfinders that include web resources and venues for youth writing.” Third, offer workshops on “creative writing and support venues for publication.” Last, provide “access to ‘real live’ writers who might inspire young people to write.”

The first recommendation is a no-brainer. It’s what the Youth Services librarians do regularly. They stay up on current events and cultural shifts. Now, if staff needs help, they can glean a few things from educating themselves about fanfic. First, the tagging systems on fanfic sites do a much better job at directing traffic than the library’s standard tagging system. This would help librarians understand what fanfic readers want to read and how they find it. Second, kids are not always wearing their fanfic flair or carrying on about what they’re reading. But, if a librarian is into fanfic and can geek out about it like they do, those wallflower kids are more likely to gravitate toward them. Lastly, it gets kids in the library. If there’s an event for teenaged patrons to come out and develop their own fanfic or talk about what they’re reading, there may be a large turnout. And, again, librarians are privy to a world usually elusive to adults: the private life of fanfic teens. These teens may parlay into a teen advisory board where they can “make recommendations about collection development, help in developing programs, (and) assist in delivering those programs.” (Latham, 2014)

The second recommendation is helpful if your library is unable to house a teen reader advisory. Perhaps some hardcore fanfic readers and writers would be willing to create pathfinders for the patrons and staff. A pathfinder is nothing more than subject headings. Pinterest, Symbaloo, and Pearltree are wonderful and free websites to use to build your fanfic

base. In Brame's blog post, she discusses using draw.io to map out the organization of a Harry Potter flow chart that lead lookers to everything related to the stories: movies, fanfic, video games, etc. And, at the time of the article, she was working on linking everything in the collection to the library's catalog record for easier access. While it took her a few attempts on different platforms to achieve her goal, she persevered and created an easy interactive experience. Not all librarians need to know everything about Harry Potter fanfiction but having a tech savvy person on staff and some great research helpers to create these pathfinders certainly strengthens a library's ability to stay relevant in the fanfic universe.

Ross' third and fourth recommendations about creating spaces for teen writing is echoed in Lathan and Gross suggestion that librarians try "participatory strategies" to "elicit the highest degree of interaction and activity" from young adults. By creating events where fanfic patrons come together to "participate in collaborative fiction writing projects, create illustrations for published works or their own original works, post reviews of books they have read, and lead their own book discussions groups." These teens they continue, "(C)an deliver their own book talks, participate in storytelling sessions, and develop marketing campaigns for popular fiction titles."

Another move to bring fanfic into the library's mainstream conversation: book talks. If librarians allow teens to create these advisory boards, they can run the book talk sessions. And, really, who is more influential over teens than other teens? No one. These advisory board members can hold book talks and treat them like a salesperson convincing a potential client to buy what they're selling. These chats promote positive interaction amongst fanfic teens (and even teens who may be interested but overwhelmed by the amount of fanfic writing that's out there) and even adults who are or aren't well versed in the genre to learn about new writers,

tropes, titles. One important note about a successful book talk is the passion one has for the books they recommend. Fanfic readers and writers are passionate about the reading and writing of that genre.

Who is better qualified than a librarian to educate themselves on a topic and then serve it as a guide to help others who are interested in fanfic? Fandom has a superpower that connects people across time and place. When someone is wearing a pin with the Gryffindor emblem, one may pipe up, "I'm a Hufflepuff!" Or, if in a store one random afternoon, you hear someone say, "I've got a bad feeling about this." It may cause you to laugh because you know trouble is on its way thanks to the genius of George Lucas. Librarians wield a power over the books that are the doors to these other worlds. All they have to do is open that door, take a spin around the room, and report back to everyone who is anxiously awaiting to hear, "Here's what happens next!"

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PowerPoint Presentation.