Fanfiction 101: A quick and dirty introduction

Fanfiction is increasingly in the news, but is it—or does it belong—in our libraries? There is in fact more to fanfiction than porn, more in its relationship to commercial fiction than Kindle Worlds, and the line between literary heritage and transformative work has never been more blurred. Fanfiction isn't safe, but it's a part of the changes in the publishing world that we in libraries increasingly need to be prepared to navigate knowledgeably.

About me: I'm Savannah Lewis and about a year and a half ago I retired from a position as the library director for the Seldovia Public Library after working there and in the Seldovia school library for more than a decade.

Audience survey: I like your shoelaces. (ref)

What is fanfiction?

Fanfiction is what happens when we think critically about the media we consume. For some of us, this process begins and ends in our heads, with "why did he do that" and "what would have happened if she'd done that?" It continues with "and if instead of ending they'd gone on to" until it finally ends up with "if this were that and they were not, how would it look, then?" It begins with critical thought and it ends in a full-scale new work.
Authors are less in control of the story than they may imagine.

“Killed Holmes”
— Diary Entry by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, December 1893

Why do fans engage beyond what is simply in the story as given?
- continue the story's pleasure longer
- change the story's plot

“Joss Whedon, George R. R. Martin, and Steven Moffat walk into a bar and everyone you've ever loved dies”.
-PaperClippe
Fanfic as fixit: makes a story better by allowing groups who are not well-represented by the male-dominated commercial marketplace to recontextualize works in ways that re-empower them to their own social/sexual/gendered/racial needs.

Which meets the needs of the patron? Giving a biracial queer girl a copy of *Hunger Games* and telling her to use her imagination to enjoy it, or giving the book along with a mention that after she reads it, she might enjoy some of the fanfiction that reinterprets the story in a context closer to her own?

Fanfiction can even reach beyond one work and combine elements of multiple works into a single production.

(for a number of video examples of these, please see the YouTube playlist in the references)
This is all very fine, you may be saying, but that still doesn't make a case for why libraries need to pay attention to it. So let's look at some of the misconceptions that exist about fanfic.

**Misconception #1: Fanfiction is trivial and personal; it doesn't warrant much time spent on it**

Every work has a hidden reservoir of fans, especially today where audiences can be worldwide.
The Archive of Our Own (AO3), run by the Organization for Transformative Works, is one relatively new but large archive that has just last week posted some impressive stats:

- Celebrating 1 million fanworks on Archive of Our Own
- Fanfiction, fanart, podfic
- From 886 to 14,353 fandoms

- Supernatural: 62,488
- Sherlock: 52,930
- Harry Potter: 51,975
- Doctor Who: 21,231

- Marvel: 63,296
- DC Universe: 26,150

- 14th November 2009: Open beta
- 15th February 2014: Present time

- 270,000 accounts
- 1 million unregistered users visiting each day

- 750 invitations a day

Visit today! archiveofourown.org

Organization for Transformative Works is a parent organisation for Archive of Our Own.
For more information and statistics visit: [http://archiveofourown.org/admin_posts/366](http://archiveofourown.org/admin_posts/366)

Created by Alice Wieckowska:
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Wattpad:

- Every minute Wattpad connects more than 10,000 readers with a new story from some of the thousands that are being added to our library each day.
- Writers use Wattpad to connect and engage with our monthly audience of over 10 million readers to share their work, build a fan base, and receive instant feedback on their stories.
- More than 500 writers have published pieces that have been read more than a million times.

And this doesn't count works on:

- Dreamwidth.org
- LiveJournal
- Fanfiction.net
- or any of the many single-fandom archives.

More than numbers, however, let's look at financial impact.

This, more than any other fanwork, is emblematic of the new importance of fanfiction to commercial publishing: *Master of the Universe* by SnowQueen's Icedragon, a work in the Twilight fandom but written not as a member of the fandom but as a test marketing project for an original novel the author wanted to take commercial.
Re-released (with "the serial numbers filed off") as this published book, it has had two notable effects upon commercial publishing:

- publishing companies are looking through fanfiction archives to recruit new authors
- female-oriented erotica has become a huge new market

Additionally, fanfiction is more accessible than ever through internet publishing (as compared to historical 'zines) and growing use of ereaders. As a 2014 Pew report notes, "the percentage of adults who read an e-book in the past year has risen to 28%, up from 23% at the end of 2012." (http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2014/E-Reading-Update.aspx)

**Misconception #2: fanfiction is written by and for fans, who are all squealy teenaged girls**

Hahaha. No. Media portrayals are about selling, not accurately representing.

Among fans writing fanfiction you will find:

- in the Sherlock fandom on Tumblr
  - 47 yo Shakespeare & media studies prof @ SOU
  - 50 yo transcultural media professor in Tidewater VA
  - 40 yo zookeeper in Ohio
  - 52 yo university literature instructor w/ specialty in Victorian lit in N. England
  - 48 yo autistic artist in New Orleans
  - me
- a huge number of commercially-published authors like Cassandra Claire, Naomi Novik, Neil Gaiman (who won a Hugo for his Sherlock/HP Lovecraft crossover)
Misconception #3: fanfiction is poorly written if not illiterate

Fanfiction:

- used widely to learn English by engaging with an interesting text and a topic that excites readers in a supportive community
- contains works of high as well as low literary complexity & polish
- the community provides a mentoring system of beta editors, technical consultants and writing groups to foster and reward improved skills
- has its own syntax and tagging conventions, providing an education in metacommentary as well as writing
Misconception #4: fanfiction is all just porn

Women's erotica is growing genre when compared traditional male-oriented porn. Do we really need to defend erotica as a literary genre?

"Every pleasure deserves to be taken seriously. If you take your pleasures seriously, you can understand them and think them through. If you understand your pleasures and think them through, you can make more of them. If you think your pleasures through and make more of them, you can connect to other people through them. And let me tell you: pleasure, understanding, and connection—those are pretty much the most human human values there are."
—Professorfangirl

"Next time someone suggests that doing sustained critical work on slash isn’t somehow serious, remind them: Sade, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Bataille, Barthes, Foucault, Guyotat, Irigaray, Wittig…wait, are you seeing a pattern? " Anne Jamison

"I’ve decided that every single person who makes fun of porn in fan fiction should be required to write 250 words of it.” acafanmom

But of course, some of our squeamishness is because this is women's erotica, and women aren't supposed to be like that.

“You’ve got to remember you’re on a bit of shaky ground here, after all your fanfic isn’t about 19 year old female virgins being tied up and sexually abused by creepy older male billionaires, it’s about consensual sex between two adult men.”
—advice from my husband on handling negative posts and publicity, mildredandbobbin

In fact, one of the things that fans repeatedly assert is that erotic fanfic provides as safe place to explore alt-sexualities and practices as well as to learn about what appeals to them.

But fanfiction also has rating systems built into major archives and a strong part of tagging culture is to prevent any reader from being exposed to anything they would find uncomfortable. This includes things like ratings for sex, violence, and specific practices.
Misconception #5: it can't be worth much if you have to give it away

Or: only things we can charge for have value

The endpoint of this argument is trying to define the measure of literary value

- Readership?
  - There are fanworks of novel length with more readers than novels on the NYT best seller list.

- Ownership of ideas?
  - What about the concept of literary heritage, that no book at all is written in a vacuum of pure originality.

- Economic impact?
  - Within the gift economy of fandom, highly-regarded works are highly-compensated for.

- Educational value?
  - Many kids growing up on the internet are finding their sexual education, especially an education about non-binary sexual orientation and queer theory, in fanfiction.

- Creativity?
  - Really? Because fanfiction, in being seen as less "serious" also has a lower barrier to writing entry purely because it's seen as fun.

- Fame?
  - Fanfiction writing happens in a community where privacy is preserved and there is some psychic distance from the issues discussed, providing an opportunity to examine issues we would not want linked to our identities.

Misconception #6: Fanfiction breaks the law

This is the elephant in the room, but it’s actually a chimera.

What is the difference between literary heritage and intellectual property? Nothing. The exact place that literary heritage meets fanfiction is over the fence of 20th century intellectual property ownership.

Pyramus and Thisbe are two characters of Roman mythology.
Right around the year 0, a guy named Ovid wrote a fanfic about them into his Metamorphoses.

About 1500 years later, a guy named Bill wrote a fanfic about Ovid's characters. He called it Romeo & Juliet. You've heard of it.

About 300 years after that, a guy named Donizetti wrote a fanfic about Ovid's work, and called it L'elisir d'amore. It appears as number 12 on the Operabase list of the most-performed operas worldwide

About 150 years later, a guy named Lenny wrote a fanfic version of Bill's story. He called it West Side Story. Broadway, Emmies, film, Academy Awards, worldwide performance--it's done it all. And entered into common vernacular as seen in such productions as Friends, The Newsroom, and Glee.

That was about the same time as Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones also wrote a fanfic about Pyramus and Thisbe that became the world's longest-running musical, a total of 42 years and 17,162 performances, called The Fantasticks. As of 2010, its original investors have earned 240 times their original investments. The musical has played throughout the U.S. and in at least 67 foreign countries

Today on AO3, there is one fanwork of Pyramus and Thisbe; 264 of R&J, 3 for The Fantsticks, and 60 for WSS.

"All novels are sequels; influence is bliss." —Michael Chabon, "Maps and Legends"

But the law is the law.

No, because the critical issue turns out to be the transformative nature of the work, which thus falls under the Fair Use doctrine in US law (and comparables in Canadian and UK law).


Do you agree with others that courts have recently shifted from considering the affect on the market as the most important fair use factor to considering how transformative the work is as the most important one?

And if that shift is occurring, is it better or worse for those trying to make use of fair use?

Rebecca Tushnet:
Yes, I’d say that courts are paying more and more attention to transformativeness. I think that’s a good result, because major copyright owners have made clear that they
don’t believe that there should be any fair use at all given that they are willing to accept payment for any use—they’d like to replace fair use with universal licensing. Using transformativeness as the keystone of fair use is a way to protect against that: it says to copyright owners that they don’t have the right to make money from every possible use, even if they have the desire to do so.

Okay, how does this pertain to my library?

1. **working with writers/groups/students**: writing challenge, also giving advice to writers on how to be published & the value of the social feedback; filing the numbers off—low entry barrier to writing for pleasure as well as (look @ OTW statement for ref) value of remix culture in leveling digital divide and providing digital skills

2. **readers**: permission to delve into a new/extended pleasure-esp providing an in for alt-gendered or other races

3. **professional understanding**: historical moment as publishing makes some pivotal changes

4. extend professional understanding & share it w/ public re: actual legalities of intellectual property ownership vs fandom myths

5. **reader's advisory/tech support**: finding and downloading fanfics, rating systems, tag searching

6. for libraries without **policies** that include erotica: popular demand for titles like 50Shades may make them increasingly necessary

Example: Seldovia/50 shades

board member: 50 shades is a hoot, we're having fun reading it at the bar, library needs to get it

me: doesn't meet existing collection dev policy so need board give approval to change policy

bm: oh you so stuffy lol

me: also, since we don't tell any patrons, even kids, that they may not check out any particular item, am requesting the board enact policy for dealing with this (you _want_ to deal with this before facing the irate mother dragging in her 10-year-old who just checked out 50Shades) and, be warned, a single-book policy isn't going to get it and no, I am not reading every book in the collection to develop a scary sex rating system for an under-the-counter policy

rest of library board: ...
No story is an island. That is to say, the act of reading a novel affects it—every reader is a participant in the story, whether she imagines herself in place of the protagonist or she's taking a voyeuristic approach. When a story stays with you, when you think about it and dream of what happens after the final page, you are writing a fanfiction. When you apply critical thought to a text, you are participating in the novel. (Jamison 12)
Fanfiction 101 — Savannah Lewis

References


Fan Fiction vs. Copyright - Q&A with Rebecca Tushnet https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g4c57qf_9Q


OTW’s Legal Committee Comments to the NTIA/PTO http://transformativeworks.org/news/otws-legal-committee-comments-ntiapto


Fandom and Fanworks on Tumblr http://fandomfanworks.tumblr.com/

We didn't start the fire, video by fiercynn & scribe http://scribe.dreamwidth.org/318883.html

Fanfiction YouTube playlist https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMqPyX7DhFRP07v6v7ZkHaU15zir6_9X7

Examples of fanfiction (that won’t embarrass you if someone’s reading over your shoulder):

And is there Honey still for Tea? by Jay Tryfanstone http://archiveofourown.org/works/489533

If you happen to have read another book about Edward Bear, you may remember that he lived with his friends in a wood called the Hundred Acre Wood. It was a small wood, and small things happened, the kind of things that happen to bears in places where even if elevenses are late there is always a little something for tea.

This isn't that story.
Fandom: Winnie-the-Pooh - A. A. Milne

**Alone on the Water** by madlori
http://archiveofourown.org/works/210785
Sherlock Holmes never expected to live a long life, but he never imagined that it would end like this.
Fandom: Sherlock (TV)

**Kept the Hives** by aderyn  (work in progress)
http://archiveofourown.org/bookmarks/9156226
They did name her Sherlock.
Fandom: Sherlock (TV) (requires having seen series 3, Jan 2014)