

## A Short History of Fanfiction

By Alyssa Dawson

*Abstract: This article introduces the reader to the genre of fanfiction. It gives a brief overview of fanfiction and how it has evolved over time.*

Fanfiction is a genre that has moved into the mainstream of creative literary endeavors in the digital age. The Internet has allowed the communities that create this type of literary expression to grow exponentially (Lipton, 2014). However, what exactly is fanfiction, and where did it start? There are many different definitions of fanfiction, each one suggesting different origins for the genre. The definition that will be used for the purposes of this paper is “[a]ny kind of written creativity that is based on an identifiable segment of popular culture, such as a television show and is not produced as ‘professional’ writing” (Lipton, 2014). This would be any piece of work that is written by a fan of an original work, and which expands upon the original. The writing of fanfiction derives from our desire to know what happens next, or our tendency to wonder “what if?” (Lipton, 2014). Generally, the writer will take a pre-existing storyworld and go in a new direction. An example would be writing a story about one of the characters from the *Harry Potter* series, looking at what happens to them after the series ends or before it began, or a storyline that is completely different from the original.

The origins of fanfiction are not strictly defined; Thomas (2011) suggests that it began in the 1920s and 1930s with science-fiction magazines, while Bay (2014) argues that the origins of the genre can be traced to the fanzines that were focused on the TV show *Star Trek* during the 1960s. A third school of thought suggests that fanfiction has existed since Homer, because stories in the oral traditions of the past would have been altered many times before they were written down. However, the term ‘fan’ didn’t come into use until the 1880s (Bay, 2014) and a fan of the original work did technically not write the variations of stories in oral traditions. Along with this, before copyright laws came into effect, authors would not have had any claim on their stories or the characters in them; anyone could write a story about any character. After copyright laws

came into play, people writing fanfiction fell under the umbrella of some sort of “fair use” clause, meaning that they are able to write stories using the characters or storyworld as long as it is “transformative or parodic” (Bay 2014). Even though they are not committing an illegal act, many of writers of fanfiction still like to protect themselves, and publish their stories under a pseudonym. Bay (2014) suggests that they may not know their rights, or be able to afford the costs of going through the courts.

In the early years of fanfiction, it was shared primarily through handmade fanzines (Bay, 2014). With the advent of the digital age, however, writers are now able to connect with a larger audience when they publish their stories to the web. They connect to people who share their interests, gaining feedback on their stories while also giving feedback to other fanfiction authors (Thomas, 2012). This facet of fanfiction is what makes it a transgressive medium, giving potentially marginalized groups a voice by showing what the world might be through use of storyworlds. Fanfiction’s subversive side is also demonstrated as it breaks down the barriers between the author and reader, as they are one and the same.

One of fanfiction’s defining features is that it is often proclaimed to be a “work in progress” (Thomas, 2011). This fact that it is constantly being edited and added to allows the readers to track the stories as they are being released, but it also leads to unfinished stories. The installments or chapters might have weeks, months, or even years between them, and the fans might push the author to complete the story, or they might write their own version to see how they would end it. This connects to the aspect of the fanfiction community discussed by Thomas (2011), who discusses the ways in which the separation between the reader and author dissolves. This allows for the interaction that goes beyond just simply reading a story and leads to the social networking and community building discussed by Thomas (2011).

Even now, fanfiction is continuing to evolve. Historically, it has not been used to make a profit and has just been for the members of a community to explore the “what if’s” of their favorite shows, movies and novels. However, it is increasingly becoming an acknowledged path to professional writing (Lipton, 2014). An example of an author taking their fanfiction and making it into an original work that could be published is

E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* series. In its original form, the first book of the series was a piece of *Twilight* fanfiction. In order to make it commercially viable, the names of the characters were changed, along with other details of the story (Lipton, 2014).

Another way that fanfiction is evolving into a commercial entity is with the advent of eBooks and e-readers. Lipton (2014) gives an example of the Kindle Works platform that was developed by Amazon. The writers of fanfiction are able to publish their stories in eBook format using the Kindle works platform. This allows the writer to share their stories, as well as creating profit-making potential.

While fanfiction as a genre of amateur writing has evolved over time from the fanzines to the large web presence it has today, at its core it is still an extension of an author's original work, embellished and worked upon by the audience's imagination. The rise of digital technologies has allowed the communities to connect with their favourite stories in ways that weren't possible before. Furthermore, it allows fans to connect over their shared interests and continue to network and build their communities.

#### Works Cited

- Lipton, J. D. Copyright and the Commercialization of Fanfiction.
- Bay, J. L. (2014). Re-writing publishing: fanfiction and self-publication in urban fantasy (Doctoral dissertation, Lethbridge, Alta.: University of Lethbridge, Dept. of English, c2014).
- Thomas, B. (2011). What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things about It?. *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 3(1), 1-24.