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In Defense of Fan Fiction

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In Defense of Fan Fiction

The genre is often met with suspicion, but it is where I found my voice.

By Emma Gisclair
UCF Forum columnist
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(Photo by Stanley Dai on Unsplash)

Like many readers and writers of the millennial generation, some of my first attempts at creative writing were in the Internet community of fan fiction, those stories based on characters, worlds and plots that were created by someone else—even though the genre is often met with suspicion.

It's where I began to explore my writing voice, where I found other people who loved the same stories as me, and where I discovered the first thrill of sharing my work with the

world—if the 11 people who read my angst-filled Harry Potter fan fic count as “the world.” Simply put, fan fiction made me the person I am today.

Fan fiction has been misunderstood for years, from authors who attempt to forbid fan fiction based on their work, to late-night talk-show hosts who have used fan works to embarrass their celebrity guests. It’s assumed by many to be of poor quality (sure, some of it is, but so are some published novels), comprised completely of erotic content (there are millions of G-rated fics), and written solely by teenagers (there are plenty of teens and adults in the community). Fan fiction often isn’t seen as “real” writing and its creators are perceived as incapable of forming their own worlds and stories—even though their ranks include best-selling authors such as Andy Weir and Naomi Novik.

The spirit of fan fiction—if not the name—existed long before the Internet.

The spirit of fan fiction—if not the name—existed long before the Internet. We can even find examples in classic English literature. Shakespeare based *Romeo and Juliet* on a poem written 30 years earlier by Arthur Brooke, which was in turn based on a story from French and Italian literature. And isn’t *Paradise Lost* really an extensive Bible fan fic?

If we travel even further back through human history, we reach an inherently collaborative and adaptable form of sharing stories—oral storytelling. Without a definitive, printed version, stories were embellished and changed by whoever was telling them. Fan fiction continues this storytelling tradition today, by playing with the stories we love and making them our own.

For me and many others, fan fiction was a sandbox to play in before gaining the confidence to build castles on the beach. The world and characters had already been created, allowing me to focus on learning to craft a story. I explored tropes and pacing and dialogue; I attempted to wring emotion from my readers—often in a heavy-handed manner, but it was practice. Like an aspiring painter might experiment with other artist’s styles before finding their own, or a musician spends years studying and playing famous pieces before composing their magnum opus, I needed that time to develop my writing in a low-stakes environment.

I learned valuable lessons while writing and reading fan fiction that stick with me today as I craft my own stories. Writing fan fiction exposed me to readers’ opinions, both good and bad. I learned that you can’t please everyone—what one reader loves, another will hate—and that even if you say, “No flames, please!” (flame = an intentionally cruel comment), you can’t control anyone else’s actions. Some people just enjoy being mean.

I don’t worry when another writer has an idea similar to my own because fan fiction taught me that creativity isn’t solely based on ideas, but instead lies in each person’s unique take on a concept. A dozen people may write a fan fiction about Harry Potter’s secret twin, but none of their stories will be identical—each will reflect the style, preferences and perspective of the writer.

But more important than the writing lessons or the practice was the community I found. For a shy 13-year-old who years ago spent most of her time nose-deep in a book, finding other people who loved the same stories as me, people who wanted to explore the possibilities of those worlds, was a revelation. I discovered the joy of sharing my passion with other people. I gained confidence in my writing and in myself—which has enabled me to embrace opportunities like participating in the UCF Forum columns for the next year.

I hope that everyone can find that place in the world (or the internet) that helps them to express themselves.

And if you don't understand someone else's chosen community and are tempted to mock it, just remember: No flames, please.

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