



CREDIT: ALL ARTISTS GAVE PERMISSION TO PRINT THEIR WORK.

ALL SHAPES OF HUNGER

TEENAGERS AND FANFICTION

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◀ THE TRIO BY ANONYMOUS
FANFIC AUTHOR AND ARTIST.

... "Oh, no," Draco said dismissively. "It's a terrible name. Harry, for instance. To harry means to worry or harass, and to potter means to amble about. Think about the message you're sending out to the world! It sounds like you wander around harassing people."

"Well, now I see. Obviously, it should be your name."

Because young adult librarians are hyperlinked to pop culture, you probably know that the above quote is not a teaser from Book Six, but a snippet from one of the tens of thousands of *Harry Potter* fanfics on the Web (*Underwater Light* by Maya). You probably know that fanfiction is a genre in which writers borrow settings, characters, events, and/or concepts from books, movies, TV shows, bands, etc., using those borrowings to craft their own stories. You might know that these writers post their prose—from three-line "drabbles" to exhaustively researched novels—on the Web, for all and sundry to tout or skewer. What you might not know is why you should care.

The answer is, of course, that teenagers are writing and reading fanfiction every day, in ever increasing numbers.

When modern fanfiction (arguably) began in 1969 with the cancellation of the original *Star Trek*, its writers were mostly educated, white women over the age of twenty (Jenkins). Although women still dominate, the genesis of the Internet diversified and shifted fanfiction's demographics, particularly with the arrival of thousands of teenagers (Plotz). Add in the unparalleled inspiration of *Harry Potter*, and teens

have turned fanfiction into a pop-culture phenomenon.

Most readers discover fanfiction by accident, while surfing the Web (Perenson). Like the Internet itself, fanfic sites develop somewhat spontaneously, and the places where writers post stories are diverse and disjointed. Those places include open archives that publish all comers (*Fanfiction.net*), selective archives with submission processes (*The Sugar Quill*), invitation-only closed archives, mailing lists, personal sites, Weblogs like those on *livejournal.com* (which are slowly superceding many mailing lists), and bulletin boards. Readers can navigate by search engine, but personal or hyperlinked recommendations are a better way to find stories worth reading.

Opinions on whether to laud or lament teenagers' involvement in fanfic are as divided as Captain Jack Sparrow and genteel restraint. Yet sweeping value judgements have little merit; fanfiction is literature's teenager and is thus as contradictory and equivocal as any sampling of students. Unground in the mills of mass media and political correctness, fanfiction is raw, real, unsanitized, and un-"spun." It is naïve and jaded, stumbling and soaring, snide and sappy, ebullient and brooding. It shocks and repels, or offers Avalon. Above all, it offers an honest glimpse into the psyches of its thousands of writers.

Teenagers read and write fanfiction—sometimes to the point of addiction—because it feeds powerful hungers not sated elsewhere. What greater reason could an educator want for exploring its byways? See what this “ongoing online wonderland” (Klotz) has to offer, and draw your own conclusions.

The Art of Writing

“Words, like notes, have tempo and color and innate sequence, and they are as elusive as will-o-the-wisps; the right words, that is, the ones we must struggle to find.” —Paula Fox.

Chris Ebert Flench comments that educators regularly encounter avid readers, but rarely any avid writers. Although we may easily feed a hunger for reading, feeding a hunger for writing requires more effort. The writer needs inspiration, story elements, writing skills, and perhaps most important for amateur writers, an audience. Web-published fanfiction provides all of the above. Most teen fanfic authors begin their involvement with a passion for writing. As they seek to sate that hunger, avid writers are more plentiful than orcs in Moria.

Inspiration: *“Our favorite stories are ones we want to roll around in and not come out of for a long, long time.” —Virginia Euwer Wolff.*

Most fanfiction writers start out as fanfiction readers, and librarians need stretch their imaginations no further than *The Hardy Boys* or *Nancy Drew* to realize that teenagers pursue the familiar. Teens find a world they like, befriend the characters, and move in. From reading, it’s a simple step to seeking a more intimate connection with the characters by writing them—in some senses becoming them and living in their world.

Existing worlds, such as that of Harry Potter, offer young writers “a helpful creative scaffolding” (Jenkins) on which to build their own stories. Having to create everything entirely on one’s own can often lead to frustration and defeat, but with J. K. Rowling providing background and characters, young writers can focus on other elements such as plot and flow. In addition, writers can derive plot ideas by pondering what transpired before or after a canon scene, how another character might view the event, how to “fix” unpopular canon developments (such as Sirius Black’s death), and who’s snogging whom, just for starters. Going a step further, source material can also offer teenagers a much needed connection to their characters. The teen years are frequently times of self-focus, when it is difficult to step back and see through someone else’s eyes. Deep familiarity and friendship with beloved characters can help teens achieve the empathy necessary to take that vital step (Jenkins).

Pop culture tenders the inspiration and story elements that young writers need to spur them to compose. After all, writing requires effort, and who wouldn’t rather write *Legolas Greenleaf and the Lost Jewels of Mirkwood* than *The Exports of Malaysia*? Pop culture also offers an automatic audience of like-minded fans and the instant gratification of swift responses, both of which

encourage young writers to persevere. Whatever its drawbacks, pop culture releases creativity that might otherwise languish unfulfilled.

Writing Mechanics: *“You must learn the rules before you can break them.” —John Cassavetes (?).*

Believe it or not, many young writers want to learn to write well, and prove more willing to pursue and master literary skills when pop culture is involved (Jenkins). If they take advantage of the teaching benefits that fanfiction offers, writers learn all about grammar, plotting, characterization, structure, flow, language, rewriting, research (vital when writing in someone else’s world), editing, and more.

Some learning derives merely from reading, of course, and other learning comes from trial and error. Most learning, however, occurs from active

involvement in the wider fanfiction community. Teens can join online writing forums or contribute to spontaneous discussions on bulletin boards or Weblogs. Many resource sites also exist for fanfiction writers, discussing everything from grammar to research to how to describe sex acts that the writer has never experienced (not kidding). The true gem of fanfiction education, however, is the beta-reading system.

Beta readers are mentors who critique writers’ work to help improve the stories. Betas can be friends or strangers; often strangers prove more useful when a writer needs honest criticism. New writers find the *Harry Potter* fandom particularly welcoming because of the betaing on some of the archive sites. At **Fiction Alley**, for example, forty betas welcome new participants individually (Jenkins). At **The Sugar Quill**, designed as “a school for aspiring writers” (Cha), site volunteers beta every story submitted. Many of these volunteers are teachers or librarians. Although many teens find criticism difficult to swallow and **The Sugar Quill** accepts only a third of its

submissions, hopeful writers still deluge the site with their tales.

Professional opinion is divided on the quality and impact of Web writing, particularly that of teenagers. Neuropsychologist Richard Restak (quoted in Weeks) claims that reading on a computer screen evokes the same parts of the brain as television, since the computer is a visual media. Online readers and writers thus use fewer critical capacities, think and

write with less complexity, and tend toward rudeness and laconicity. Stories are riddled with typos, bad grammar, and foul language. Other observers praise the energy and irreverence of net writing, describing it as “wonderfully boisterous” (Plotz), “young, sassy, and full of life” (Weeks), and “gleefully perverse” (Chonin).

Fanfiction’s uneven literary quality remains one of its critics’ big bones of contention. Because Web publishing lacks standards and not all writers take advantage of learning opportunities, all too often you’ll encounter egregiously abysmal prose:

Christney was 18, about 5’ 8” with brown eyes, light brown hair down to her shoulders, and was athletically built. Her and Justin were together about 5 months now. Andrea was 19 about 5’ 7” with brown eyes, dirty blond hair to mid-back, and she was athletically built too, but was more like a tomboy.
—*Immortal Pop Star* (author’s name withheld).



▲ DANIEL RADCLIFFE AS HARRY POTTER, BY ANONYMOUS FANFIC WRITER. PENCIL.



▲ THE HOMEPAGE OF FICTION ALLEY, ONE OF THE MAJOR ARCHIVES FOR THE HARRY POTTER FANDOM.

However, if you learn how to look, you can also unearth writing that will take your breath away:

It was the kind of school meant, [he] knew, to toughen him up, to make him a man, and while he saw the boys around him grow hard and cruel, he knew he was growing softer; that there was somehow an unbearable gentleness in him; it was the only way he knew to protest. —Helen (title withheld).

If they are willing to make the effort, young writers can find in fanfiction the help they need to strive for literary excellence.

Recognition

"If a story was posted on an archive and nobody reviewed it, did the story really exist?" —Fanfiction writer [name withheld].

We all yearn to be recognized and appreciated for our talents. One reason that young authors find it so problematical to earn recognition as writers is the difficulty of finding a responsive audience (Flench). Posting fanfiction harnesses both the power of pop culture and the power of the Internet (as a grassroots publisher) to generate an automatic potential fanbase, which in turn can lead to the recognition that young writers crave.

Fanfiction has been called a labor of love. Writers do it for themselves and their friends, and the only extrinsic payment they receive is feedback or reviews. Not one fanfiction writer doesn't yearn for good reviews. After all, friends generally feel compelled to praise stories, but positive feedback from a total stranger engenders a heady ego boost. Feedback offers affirmation and encouragement for writers who frequently work in a vacuum, often imparting the courage to try original fiction.

There are drawbacks, however, both to feedback and the desire for feedback. Feedback does not always represent readership; not everyone who reads a writer's story, even if she loved it, will review it. The lack of feedback can prove very discouraging, and writing solely for feedback will lead to disappointment. In a large fandom, lots of possibilities exist for reviews, but new writers are Hufflepuff firsties in a pride of seventh-year Gryffindors. Although smaller fandoms offer a better chance for "fame," they offer less chance for feedback. Finally if a writer never receives negative feedback or constructive criticism, she has little impetus to stretch herself or improve her writing.

Fanfiction offers the possibility of audience and response. Whether or not writers find that possibility fulfilled, the prospect remains a far stronger motivator than the vacuum.

Personal and Emotional Hungers

"Every once in a while, you discover a story that fills exactly the shape of the hunger you have." —Fanfiction writer [name withheld].

Teenagers have myriad hungers, and their writings and readings feed those hungers. Although it doesn't necessarily make for Austenesque literature, it does illumine their passions and motivations. Escapism, possibility, and "youth empowerment" (Jenkins) frequent teenagers' stories, as well as romantic wish-fulfillment, perhaps through thinly disguised self-representations called "Mary Sues." Other stories brave deeper waters, for after all, writing and reading are excellent ways for teenagers to sort through the many confusions in their lives.

Fanfiction's liberating anonymity offers a forum to open up about topics too embarrassing to broach with friends, family, or teachers—topics such as the many aspects of sexuality.

Sexuality: *"I am everything you want, I am everything you need."* —Vertical Horizon.

Sexuality is one of teenagers' major concerns and interests, and they are searching for ways to comprehend and feed its urges. Sometimes they just want a fluffy, feel-good romance, but sometimes they crave more explicit fantasies. This is fanfiction's slipperiest slope, as overt sexuality pervades a huge portion of the genre, particularly slash (homosexual pairings of canonically straight characters). Sexual content ranges from innocent handholding to hardcore kink, and writing of both types often inhabits the same sites or even the same stories. Even the most "kid-safe" archives, like **Fanfiction.net** and **The Sugar Quill**, contain R-rated stories. While fanfiction offers a "safe" way to explore sexual issues, what sensitive readers find might shock and disturb them. Discovering how young adults slake their voracious hungers might equally shock and disturb adults.

Fanfiction writers recognize that their work is not appropriate for every audience and have no desire to dupe anyone—deliberately or

accidentally—into reading stories (or viewing "fanart") that will offend or upset them. Writers bedeck virtually all sexually explicit fanfic sites with warnings and disclaimers, usually rating their stories on a self-determined scale from G to NC-17. Some writers password-protect their sites, or require readers to affirm their age. In what is mostly the honor system, however, teens access these stories with ease. They also write them.

The one area in which fanfiction's overt sexuality might prove beneficial is in offering gay teens the type of stories so plentiful for straight teens. One can buy fluffy straight romances at any bookstore, after all, but few stores stock gay romances. Few of the

sparse titles featuring gay teens are as lighthearted and heartwarming as David Levithan's **Boy Meets Boy** (Knopf, 2003/VOYA October 2003), treating homosexuality as a non-issue. Slash, however, is gay romance galore, particularly of the male/male variety. Just the pure volume of it, quality aside, could provide an affirmation and escape to teens who feel disenfranchised by most of the current culture. While it might be more realistic to address the serious issues, sometimes teens (and the rest of us) just want a fairy tale. Fanfiction can offer them in sheaves.

Connection and Community: *"The union of well-tuned hearts."*

—Katherine Fowler.

Not all fanfiction writers pursue writing as more than a hobby, whether or not they strive to improve. Most have no expectation of publishing their fanfics anywhere but on the Web (Harmon). Thus when sneering critics claim that fanfiction offers no preparation for writing original fiction, they are both overgeneralizing and missing the point (Klotz). Fanfiction is about filling needs, and two of the greatest are those for connection and community.

Fanfiction is all about connection and community, and writers can involve themselves however much they choose. They can enter into online discussions, join mailing lists, acquire and become betas, send and receive feedback, respond to challenges and round robins, and collaborate with other writers. Close friendships can spring up without regard to age, appearance, or geographical location, and the fanfiction community can become almost a surrogate family for some participants (Klotz). Writers



▲ FLAMBARDS SCENE BY TESSERACT, COLLEGE STUDENT AND FANFIC WRITER. PENCIL FLAMBARDS SERIES WRITTEN BY K. M. PEYTON.

The Good, the Bad, and the Squeeworthy: The Insider's Guide to Fanfic Slang

Glossary terms are cross-referenced; if you encounter an unfamiliar term in a definition, find it in alphabetical order.

AU, AR: Alternate universe, alternate reality. Stories set in a non-canonical world, such as "Kirk and Spock, Live at the Apollo."

Beta: Beta reader. Someone who reads and critiques stories before a writer posts them. Also used as a verb: "Would you beta my new LOTR/BTVS crossover? I swear this time Buffy doesn't feed Legolas to a slime demon for being prettier than she is."

Canon: Original history/background of a book/movie/TV series, etc. In a canon story set after *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (OotP, in the fandom), Sirius Black would be dead. In a non-canon story, he might be living in sin with Arabella Figg.

Concrit: Constructive criticism. "Would you give me some concrit for my Peter Pan fic?" "Uh, you do know that the original Lost Boys weren't vampires, right?"

Crossover, Xover: Story combining characters from two or more fandoms, such as "Severus Snape and The Backstreet Boys: The Fashion Victim Years."

Drabble: Very short story, usually no more than a few paragraphs, and sometimes just a few lines. Excellent for extracting maximum feedback with minimum effort.

Fanon: Commonly accepted fandom tenets with no verifiable correlation in the canon, i.e. Sirius Black and Remus Lupin are an item.

Fb, Feedback, Reviews: Response to posted stories. The only payment a fanfiction writer ever receives, after which they lust as Paris Hilton lusts after her own line of haircare potions—uh, products.

Ficlet: A story longer than a drabble, but not much. Slightly more effort expended for the feedback.

Flame: An insulting or cruel response to a story or writer. Also used as a verb: "Yo, I got way flamed for my 130-part Celine Dion epic, 'Dion Does Vegas.'" "Your grandma's a harsh beta, man!"

Fluff: A cotton candy story that makes you feel all warm and fuzzy. Good fluff oozes cuteness, earnestness, and humor but no whiff of saccharine (see *schmoop*). "Marcus Flint woos a bemused Oliver Wood by writing him egregiously bad love poetry." Awwwww!

Gen: General interest. Stories without romantic/sexual pairings, at least as the main focus, although sometimes het stories are labelled gen. Most stories appropriate for younger students are gen.

Het: Stories featuring heterosexual romantic/sexual pairings. Het is an actual squick for some people. "Kermit and Miss Piggy? Ewwwww! Squick-o-rama!"

H/C or Hurt/Comfort: Stories in which one romantic lead is ill/wounded and the other supplies aid and comfort. Usually leads to snogging, despite gangrenous lesions or just general mucosity.

LJ: Livejournal. A livejournal is a blog on the livejournal.com site, and many writers post stories in their LJs. Extra bonus: Readers can post fb right on your LJ, so everyone can see how many "squeeeeee!!!!!"s you got.

Mary Sue: When an author engages in wish-fulfillment by writing him or herself into a fanfiction story—usually as the most gorgeous, brilliant, resourceful, daring, fill-in-the-superlative character in the tale—both story and character are called "Mary Sues."

Marty Stu, Gary Stu, Harry Stu: Rarer, male version of a Mary Sue.

M/M: Male/male. Slash pairing. Not to be confused with Eminem.

OC: Original character. Hopefully not a Mary Sue.

OOO: Out of character. For example: Chewbacca exfoliating with the Ewoks or Mary Sue getting a zit.

OTP: One True Pairing. Many writers and readers prefer one fandom pairing above all others. Fox Mulder/Dana Scully, Clark Kent/Lana Lang, or my personal OTP, Rupert Giles/card catalog.

Plot Bunny: Idea to get you hopping off on your newest story. Example: Britney's belly gem gives her hives one day before the Celebrity PopDiva Deathmatch ab-flexing competition. How will she conceal her hideous deformity?

Popslash: Slash stories featuring pop-music artists. See also *RPS*.

POV: Point of view.

PWP: Plot? What plot? Alternately, "porn without plot." Bring on the snogfest, hold the storyline. Lighter fare would be called "snoglets" or "snogfics." Typical summary: "Rory Gilmore discovers that books aren't the only thing in libraries that can rouse her passions!" (Right, Rupert?)

Rec (v., n.), Pimp (v.): Recommend, recommendation. Pimping is more enthusiastic. "I pimped your new *Everwood* songfic in my LJ." Some fanfic writers actually troll **Google** to see how many people have rec'd them. Nobody I know, of course.

RPS: Real person slash. Slash stories featuring real people, such as Jon Bon Jovi or Orlando Bloom. Another potential squick. "Madonna kissing Britney onstage at the VMAs? Couldn't you come up with something believable?"

Schmoop: If Hallmark published fanfiction, it would be schmoop, the literary equivalent of a sticky bun drowning in syrup. Sample plotline: Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey pledge their eternal love with red roses and champagne while cuddling on a bearskin rug in front of a roaring fire. Sugar shock!

'Ship, 'Shipper: Relationship, relationshipper. Refers to a specific pairing, and one who adheres to that pairing. "I 'ship Xena/Gabrielle." "I'm a Xena/Ares 'shipper, myself." "I 'ship Gilderoy Lockhart/Gilderoy Lockhart."

Slash, Femslash: Stories featuring homosexual pairings, usually of canonically straight characters such as Frodo and Sam or Clark Kent and Lex Luthor. Since m/m predominates slash, f/f pairings are sometimes categorized as "femslash." (What an awesome name for a punk band!)

Songfic: Story based on the lyrics of a song. "Spike's not crazy/He's just a little unwell." Probably the basis for a classic h/c.

Spoilers: If a story reveals secrets about the original book/movie, etc., the writer often adds a "spoiler" note for readers who haven't seen the original and don't want any surprises ruined.

Squee: Expression of extreme approval. The more the approval, the more appended e's. Used as a noun, verb, or interjection. "Orlando Bloom in eyeliner? Squeeeeeeeeeee!!!!!"

Squick: Anything that turns a reader off. Everyone has his or her own squicks, from gender switching to cross-dressing to male pregnancy. "Avril Lavigne with clean hair? Ewwww! Squickification!" Also used as a verb.

TPTB: The Powers That Be. Those who own the characters/shows that the fanfic writer borrows.

UST: Unresolved sexual tension. "Is it just me, or is there, like, major UST between Elizabeth Swan and Jack Sparrow?" "It's just you. The real UST is between Jack and the Pearl."

WIP: Work in progress. The unfortunate—or perhaps all-too-fortunate—state of many fanfic novels. "Tear's in My He4art: Eljia Woods's Secrit F%orbidden PA+shion. Part 48/?"

welcome the support and friendship, and return it in kind.

Of course, every community has its drawbacks, as teens might well discover. Maintaining the community and your place in it requires time and vigilance: participating in discussions and regularly trolling key sites to stay in the know. Frustrations, jealousies, and infighting can arise, sometimes to the point of destroying someone's interest or welcome in the fandom. BNFs (Big Name Fans, the fandom stars) can dictate an irritating conformity; for example, claiming that if you write about a pop group you must love all its members, and if you dare to write an unpopular characterization, no one will read your stories. Fandom awards mostly devolve into popularity contests, and it's difficult to make a name for oneself in huge fandoms.

Teenagers might not find all they're looking for in their fanfiction community. The benefits, however, exceed the drawbacks, particularly for teenagers adrift in the real-life popularity contests of their schools. Fanfiction values no athletes or homecoming queens, and can prove a safe haven for outcasts. It can let them know that they're not alone, even if their tastes are unusual (Justin Timberlake with wings), or embarrassing (Aragorn with Legolas). It can reaffirm their intrinsic value. What more could you ask from a community?

Copyright Issues

"Writers create worlds, the fans move in, and the publishers charge rent." —Sharyn McCrumb.

"On the Internet, no one can hear you sue." —Natascha Walter.

One of the most hotly contested issues in fanfiction is its legality. Is fanfiction lawful? The answer seems to be a resounding "Um . . ." The arguments are many and varied, too detailed to explore here (see Ariana Cha's excellent article). In most cases, the "Powers That Be" ignore fanfiction so long as writers give due credit and receive no payment. Not everyone agrees, however. A few authors, such as Anne Rice and J. K. Rowling, have had lawyers send "cease and desist" letters to fanfiction sites, although Rowling has since officially sanctioned non-"obscene" *Harry Potter* fanfiction (Waters). Whatever action lawyers and fans do or do not take, however, fanfiction is clearly flourishing. Considering the current uncertain state of copyright law, and the struggle to redefine the boundaries between fair use and the rights of copyright holders, it will be interesting to see how the debate over fanfiction pans out.

Philosophy—Cultural Robin-Hooding

Although academics disagree about the value and significance of modern fanfiction—some branding writers and readers as merely "ideal consumers" (Flanigan)—the primary theory seems to come from professor Henry Jenkins at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, author of *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 1992). According to Jenkins, fanfiction rebels against a folk culture owned by dispassionate corporations, and attempts to restore one in which key stories and characters (such as King Arthur) belong to everyone. Along the way, something once merely a product for mindless consumption evolved into a springboard for creativity (Nina Smith quoted in Harmon), and marks a possible "return to the folk tradition of participatory storytelling" (Harmon). Some writers themselves see fanfiction as a developing art form, uniquely suited to the Internet (Cha).

What does this mean to teenaged fanfic writers? Probably not a whole lot. But for young adult librarians, it means that in a pop-culture world drowning in inconsequentialities and image, fanfiction is something more. It's something real, something heartfelt, and something connected to the greater discussion of ourselves, our world, and our perception of that world. It is as worthy of discussion and attention as the teenagers who write it. ■

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