

Fan Fiction Takes Flight Among Teens

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Illustration by Michael Byers

Many years before Harry Potter was born, his parents, Lily and James, met and fell in love at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At first, Lily thought James was nothing more than an annoying show-off, but then she got to know the boy behind the bravado. Their romance was shaped by tribulations, triumphs, and the understanding that they were destined for something tremendous.

About that last part...*really*? Yes, according to *Those Green Eyes*, a work of online fan fiction by Summer Sellers, a Massachusetts teenager.

Sellers penned her tale about James and Lily as a way of working through a tough time in eighth and ninth grade. She posted *Those Green Eyes* on [Figment](#), an online writing community for young adults, at her mother's urging. She could not have anticipated that it would become the "Most Hearted" fan fiction post on Figment, but it did.

Now a senior, Sellers is still writing—and deeply immersed in the fan fiction, or "fanfic," universe, where fans craft stories that borrow characters, settings, and/or elements from books, movies, TV shows, cartoons, comics, manga, games, and even the lives of celebrities. The vast majority of fan fiction writers don't make money or become famous. For Sellers and other teens, the reward is being in the company of fellow writers they admire and respect. "The fan fiction community is so diverse...you can really see the fans giving back to the authors," she said. "The people who write fan fiction commit to it and finish their fan fiction—they're authors to me."

Fan fiction sites—including [Fiction Alley](#), a huge online Harry Potter fan fiction archive, and [Twilighted](#), hosting all-"Twilight" fanfic—have been around for years. But it took a publishing phenomenon for fanfic to hit the mainstream radar. In 2012, the extraordinary success of E. L. James's "Fifty Shades" trilogy (Viking), erotic fan fiction inspired by Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" series, brought fanfic to the world's attention. Since then, Amazon has launched a fan fiction publishing program, [Kindle Worlds](#); authors have confessed to fanfic writing pasts; and fanfic-centered novels have become bestsellers.

The generation of teens who grew up reading "Harry Potter" is embracing fandom and fueling events such as [LeakyCon](#), an annual convention for fans of many stripes that convened in Orlando, Florida, from July 30–August 3. These young people don't see fan fiction as something residing in a murky corner of the Internet but as a creative outlet: a way to express love for an author's work, a venue for exploring sexuality and emotions, and a liberating space to share and receive feedback on writing. As Robin Brenner, a teen librarian at the Brookline Public Library in Massachusetts, said, "My teens all know about [fan fiction], talk about it, and don't particularly judge each other for being involved (or not involved) in fan culture. It's ordinary, even expected, now, if you love a thing."

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—Robin Brenner, teen librarian, Brookline (MA) Public Library

A place to explore

Once upon a time, fans shared their stories at conventions and in zines. Today, they post on Tumblr and sites such as [FanFiction.net](#), [Livejournal](#), and [Wattpad](#), which boast millions of users. The fan-run nonprofit site [Archive of Our Own](#) has nearly 350,000 registered fans, and Figment includes roughly 100,000 teen contributors.

"In various ways, fan fiction resembles all storytelling," says Anne Jamison, an academic who both studies and writes fanfic, in the introduction to her book *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking over the World* (BenBella/Smart Pop, 2014). "People like to swap stories, period, and the Internet is like a big electronic campfire."

Fan fiction has its own ethos and language. "Worlds" are the many different fandoms to which one could belong

(e.g., “Lord of the Rings” or “Vampire Diaries”), while “The Powers That Be” are copyright holders (more on that later). People who act as editors—correcting grammar, refining dialogue and plot—are called “betas.” There’s the “canon”—the official, original story of the work being written about—and “head canon”—the plotlines, backgrounds, character pairings, etc., that a fan makes up in her imagination. For many, fanfic’s allure is being part of this community of shared enthusiasms. It’s about reading, analyzing, and asking, “What if?”

There are no taboos or rules in fan fiction, and much of it can be sexually explicit, shocking, and/or avant-garde. While this raises issues for the under-18 set, the lack of regulation also makes fan fiction welcoming for the LGBTQ community and teens examining their sexuality. “I can write a story in which I can imagine other kinds of relationships, and no one says, ‘Oh, that’s your sexuality,’” said Henry Jenkins, Provost’s Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at USC Annenberg. “Instead it’s a story I wrote.”

“Slash” fanfic, focusing on same-sex relationships, is one way that young adults can explore. Jamison notes in *Fic* that “‘Harry Potter’ slash helped shape and challenge attitudes toward sexual diversity among the generation that grew up reading it and arguing about it (a lot) online.”

At the same time, Jamison said, “the sexual life some fan fiction imagines for ‘Harry Potter’’s underage characters has long been a source of discomfort for their creator.” On most fanfic sites, young people can sign up for accounts at age 13. Which means, Jenkins said, that “you have space that exposes underage kids to sexually explicit material without a lot of adult supervision. It’s such a loaded category.”

The genre is also a venue for teens to probe their emotional lives, as Sellers did with *Those Green Eyes*. “Writing was a great outlet for me. I just portrayed my characters and the love that Lily and James felt for each other as the epitome of what I want for my life,” she said. “I made them go through difficult things and always come out scarred, but alive, because that’s how I felt a lot of the time.”

A place to grow

Seventeen-year-old Alaskan teen Maggie Clark devotes up to 10 hours a week to her fan fiction. “I spent a lot more time reading fan fiction than books,” she said. However, Clark, who has been writing fanfic since she was 15, said that she “wanted to get involved in fandom partially to become a better writer.” She believes her hours crafting stories, interacting with fans, and reading fanfic have helped her do just that.

Fan communities also offer young writers a place to share work without fear of judgment. “It creates a space where young people get real, enthusiastic, critical responses to what they write,” said Jenkins, “as opposed to getting a paper back with an ‘A’ written in red on the top and ‘good job’ next to it.”

Seventeen-year-old Daphney Diaz, a high school student in Queens, New York, also felt that her time on fanfiction.net made her a stronger writer. “The fandom community was really friendly. Most of the other writers and readers would comment on my stories with encouraging words or tips on how to make the story and my writing better,” she said. “Of course, there was the occasional hater, but they would be ignored.”

“What I love about fan fiction is that there are no rules. There are no storytelling rules,” said Printz Honor-winning Rainbow Rowell, author of *Fangirl* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2013), a young adult novel about a college freshman immersed in fandom. In fact, Rowell said, reading fan fiction inspires her to be more daring in her own work. “It’s incredibly experimental, and it’s very exciting for me as a writer to read a story that maybe I would never write or it would never occur to me to write...it’s very invigorating.” Rowell was scheduled to read from a “Harry Potter”-inspired novella she wrote at LeakyCon last month.

Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* has inspired its own fanworks, something that Rowell embraces. "It leaves me awed to think that people are invested in my stories and my characters so much that they want to make their own art and their own stories about them," she said.

Fielding copyright issues

Legal matters are an issue for fanfic writers of any age. Complicated copyright and trademark laws are made even more so once companies have a stake in an author's work. The website [Chilling Effects](#) provides information about what's legal in fanfic and how to face challenges.

However, "I can't think of very many cases where individual authors have sought legal recourse against fans," said Jenkins. "I can think of many where legal regimes become much tougher once corporations take over."

A campaign by Warner Bros. to protect the Harry Potter franchise exemplifies Jenkins's point. Although Rowling released a statement in 2004 that she was "flattered" by the writing her books inspired, the studio behind the Harry Potter films sent cease-and-desist (C&D) letters to hundreds of "Harry Potter" fanfic sites in the early 2000s, requesting that they remove content and/or shut down. The letters resulted in domain names being confiscated, but they also caused a public relations disaster and uproar from fans threatening to boycott the films.

Some writers just don't want fans playing with their characters, as *Game of Thrones* (Bantam, 1996) author George R. R. Martin made very clear during a November 2013 press conference. "I would rather they made up their own characters and their own stories," he said.

Going from fanfic to professional writer can be tumultuous. Sarah Rees Brennan, the author of "The Demon's Lexicon" trilogy (S. & S.), has been accused of everything from plagiarism to selling out. "I wrote a ton of free stories for fun and if people enjoyed it they don't owe me anything—except that I would truly appreciate it if they would just quit torturing me," Brennan wrote in a heartfelt [February 2014 Tumblr post](#), explaining how her teen fanfic past has hurt her professionally. "It was years ago. I'm sorry I did it."

No longer underground

Other authors' openness about their fanfic affiliations has helped to erode the stigma. Neil Gaiman, author of the 2009 Newberry Medal winner, *The Graveyard Book* (HarperCollins, 2008), has written H. P. Lovecraft and "Chronicles of Narnia" fanfic (<http://ow.ly/yVulp>). "Princess Diaries" series (HarperTeen) author Meg Cabot confessed to writing "Star Wars" fan fiction (<http://ow.ly/yVuPO>) when she was a tween. Cassandra Claire, author of the bestselling "Mortal Instruments" series (S. & S./McElderry), was once a hugely popular fanfic writer. Her "Harry Potter"-based "Draco Trilogy" and "Lord of the Rings" parody, "The Very Secret Diaries," are now legendary. S. E. Hinton, author of *The Outsiders* (Viking, 1967), has written fanfic about the paranormal TV show *Supernatural*, visited the set, and even made a cameo in a season seven episode.

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The Magicians (Viking, 2009), the first novel in Lev Grossman's best-selling "Magicians" trilogy, involves a boy who

is admitted to a secret college of magic in upstate New York and has been compared to “Harry Potter” in many laudatory reviews. While Grossman was worried about “people dismissing [my books] as knock-offs or works of plagiarism,” he said, “There’s been very little. People have been very receptive.”

The trilogy’s homage to Rowling’s series, C. S. Lewis’s “Chronicles of Narnia,” and other works of fiction, from T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* to Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, is deliberate, Grossman explained. “The line between the ‘Magicians’ and ‘Harry Potter’ fan fiction? There’s no line. It’s part of that continuum,” he said. “I’m certainly comfortable thinking of it as fan fiction.” *The Magician’s Land* (Viking), the trilogy’s final title, is out this month.

Profiting from fanfic

Meanwhile, some organizations are still striving to make a profit without alienating the fanfic community. In April, Wattpad announced that it had raised \$46 million, bringing the company’s total funding to more than \$60 million. Investors believe the site, which is free for contributors, will one day make a lot of money. How this will impact Wattpad’s more than 25 million users is uncertain.

It also remains to be seen how Kindle Worlds, Amazon’s fanfic publishing platform, will affect fandom. The venture is unique in that fanfic writers can earn royalties, and the “worlds” are sanctioned by rights holders. Since its June 2013 launch, Kindle Worlds has published more than 500 stories. Its current focus is on expansion and providing opportunities for newbie writers, general manager Nick Loeffler said in an email exchange. “Every rock [and] roll superstar guitarist started as an air guitarist, idealizing and mimicking their favorite musician and in many cases wishing they could learn and collaborate directly with their idols,” said Loeffler. “Storytelling and prose are similar. We want to take this engagement to a new level.”

What’s next?

In March 2014, the Organization for Transformative Works, a nonprofit run by and for fans, hosted a series of online chats about “[The Future of Fanworks](#).” Fan studies scholar Dr. Paul Booth expressed restrained optimism about fandom’s path toward legitimization. “I’m not sure if the geeks shall inherent the Earth yet—but it’s getting close.”

Rowell expressed a similar sentiment. “I think there’s going to be a real shift, where fanfiction is not this niche thing, and we all sort of know what fanfiction is,” she said. “It’s where these young writers are first trying it out.”

Kaila Hale-Stern, a trust and safety ambassador at Tumblr as well as a novelist and journalist, believes her nearly 20 years of “trying it out” by writing fan fiction led to her professional writing career. “I give more credit to having written this stuff and read it as a kid; I think that’s what made me a writer,” she said. “More than writing classes or being an English major, it was engaging with the incredible writers I was reading at 14 and 15, learning from them, writing in these communities, and reading comments and feedback and support. It’s invaluable.”



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