

Your favorite television series just aired its final episode, but you're not ready for the story to end. What happens to the show's characters ten years from now? Or maybe the ending of the novel you just finished doesn't explain what happened to Mary Anne, the girl next door from chapter six who clearly had a major crush on the story's hero, and she was so darn sweet she just *has* to have a happy ending too. You close the book or turn off the TV and imagine elaborate plots and scenarios to expand or continue these stories... you're creating fan fiction.

Fan fiction is a derivative work written without the consent or knowledge of the original work's creator. It applies not just to books, but also television, movies, plays, video games, and comics. Fan fiction writers use the worlds and characters from their favorite stories, but write their own plots. While the vast majority of fan fiction is admittedly hardly better than poorly written drivel, there are some stories that are truly outstanding, and on the rare occasion better even than the work on which they are based.

The modern phenomenon that is fan fiction began back in the 1960s with *Star Trek* fanzines (fan-created and fan-oriented magazines) that published fan-written stories based on the show. With the advent of the internet fan fiction has expanded into thousands of different fandoms (the fan culture centered on a particular work) and genres. What began with electronic mailing lists has grown into massive and multiple website archives dedicated to posting and publicizing fan fiction. In 1998, Fanfiction.net came online as a one-stop archive for just about every fandom in existence. Its easily accessible archive and publishing system, as well as the ability to review stories directly on the site, made it incredibly popular; it now hosts millions of stories in hundreds of fandoms in over a dozen languages, and is easily the largest archive online.

What authors and anti-fanfictionists don't seem to realize though is fan fiction has existed since the dawn of literary history. Geoffrey Chaucer did not create the story of Troilus and Criseyde; he borrowed it from the 12th century French poem *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, which itself was based on Greek mythology of the Trojan War. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* are technically Biblical fan fiction, and were so influential that our modern understanding of the "Fall of Lucifer" and the "Seven Deadly Sins" is completely different from their original representation in the Bible. And there are no less than 26 published sequels to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, none by the author herself. The fact is, people have been writing, publishing and profiting from works based on other people's originals for as long as there have been written works. It wasn't until the implementation of copyright laws that this practice suddenly became an issue.

Modern copyright laws gives the copyright owner an exclusive right to copy and exploit the copyrighted work, or license others to do so, and the right to prevent anyone else from doing so without consent. The use of a work for dramatization, translation and derivative works (including fan fiction) fall within the scope of copyright. At the moment, copyright generally expires within 50 to 70 years following the death of the last surviving creator, at which point the work enters the public domain.

In spite of fan fiction's immense popularity, it suffers from an authenticity complex rooted in the fact that fan fiction writers cannot publish their stories without running afoul of copyright laws. Authors are understandably possessive of their creations and wary of those who would seek to create a profit from their hard work and talent. Their concerns are not entirely unfounded – certainly anyone who tries to get published is looking to make a profit, and undoubtedly there has been the occasional derivative work that surpassed the fame and success of the original – films based on novels are the most obvious example of this (*Dances With Wolves*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Forest Gump* all come to mind). But more often than not, a successful derivative work will only bring more attention to its archetype – the many adaptations and re-writes of Shakespeare's plays, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* are prime examples. What must be understood about fan fiction is that it is first and foremost a tribute to the original, without which the derivative work wouldn't exist at all. As Canadian science fiction author and Creative Commons advocate Cory Doctorow points out, "fans who are so bought into your fiction that they'll make it their own are fans forever, fans who'll evangelize your work to their friends, fans who'll seek out your work however you publish it."

Authors want good readers, and a good reader is an active reader, someone who will not just accept the story at its surface, but delve into its messages, interpret its characters and really try to understand the author's universe. Literature classes the world over are devoted to exactly this exercise: reading between the lines, questioning, analyzing, and interpreting. Fan fiction writers simply have a more creative way of expressing their interpretations, through plot instead of essay.

"Writers can't ask readers not to interpret their work," Doctorow states. "You can't enjoy a novel that you haven't interpreted – unless you model the author's characters in your head, you can't care about what they do and why they do it. And once readers model a character, it's only natural that readers will take pleasure in imagining what that character might do offstage."

If old habits die hard, then hundred-year-old practices such as fan fiction die even harder, because fan fiction continues to be published today: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to Austen's *Jane Eyre*, won her the WH Smith Literary Award in 1967. Geraldine Brook's novel *March*, a retelling of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* from the point of view of the protagonist's absent father, earned her the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. And it gets even better. Pamela Aidan's *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman* trilogy based on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was first debuted on a fan fiction website before being snatched up by Simon & Schuster publishers. But these stories could only be published because the works on which they are based are considered public domain.

While there are still many authors who are adamantly against fan fiction, there are others who are starting to warm up to the idea. Anne McCaffrey, author of the popular *Dragon Riders of Pern* series, recently retracted her ban against fan fiction, and now allows it provided the stories are free and minor-friendly. J. K. Rowling and Stephanie Meyer both consider fan fiction highly flattering. Naomi Novik, author of the award-winning *Temeraire* series, is a fan fiction writer herself, and Eric Flint, author of the *1632* saga, set up a formal site for the submission of fan fiction, which is regularly published alongside his own stories and essays in an e-magazine called *The Grantville Gazette*. And more and more professional authors are admitting to having dabbled in fan fiction – novelists Cassandra

Clare and Sarah Rees Brennan (authors of *The Mortal Instruments* and *The Demon's Lexicon* respectively) were both widely known as the popular Harry Potter fan fiction writers Cassandra Claire and Maya long before they were known for their original works, and as such had a massive fan base before their first books even hit the shelves.

It is when one reads a truly amazing piece of fan fiction that the reality of our capitalist culture really hits home. Because that fan fiction will likely never see print due to its derivative nature. Poet, novelist, and professor, Sheenagh Pugh recalls that when she first starting reading fan fiction, it astounded her that many fan fiction writers chose never to attempt publishing original works: "I was watching writers post hundreds of thousands of words on the web for nothing," she reflects. "Because of the genre they were writing in, these stories never would be published commercially, for legal reasons – it didn't matter how good they were."

When one considers the great (and many) derivative works that are now praised as classics and literary influences, it is astounding that anyone would try to stop fan fiction writers simply to ensure the original authors are the only people who make any profit. Fan fiction needs to be recognized for its valuable and substantial impact on both our literary past and our literary future. The issue of copyright needs to be revisited and allowances should be considered – while it would be neither prudent nor beneficial to abolish copyright entirely, perhaps fan fiction could be published if credit was given to the original work, or if the original creator received royalties from the derivative work.

Thankfully, there are those who are willing to advocate for such copyright changes. The Organization of Transformative Works, led by an impressive group of professional authors and academics – including author Naomi Novik, Inkberry co-founder Rachel Barenblat, and Muhlenberg College Professor of English Francesca Coppa – has been making efforts since 2007 to foster a "future in which all fannish works are recognized as legal and transformative and are accepted as a legitimate creative activity." The Creative Commons, a non-profit organization devoted to expanding the range of creative works available for others to legally build on and share, offers copyright licenses that allow creators to communicate which rights they reserve and which rights they waive for the benefit of recipients or other creators. For those who spend a great deal of their time and talent pursuing fan-related hobbies, this is positive progress.

While fan fiction remains primarily the pastime of amateurs, there exist a few exceptional individuals, the "Big Name Fans" such as Clare and Maya, who produce truly stunning work – work which, if copyright laws don't change, will never be seen outside an exclusive group or earn their creators credit. Perhaps, in time, more authors will accept fan fiction and copyright laws will follow suit. After all, they say imitation is the highest form of flattery, so having dozens of works all based on your own is certainly a mighty accomplishment. And in the same way that an apprentice painter's imitation of his master's work can be called art, so too should these apprentice writers' works have the opportunity to be called literature.