

IN DEFENSE OF FAN FICTION

JANE SMITH

In my sophomore year of high school, I discovered the world of fanfiction. Yes, the Buffy-Summers-gets-graphically-banged-by-Faith-Lehane kind of fanfiction. No, I did not run away from my computer. I read it and fell in love. I read: Fix-its of awful season finales. Alternate universe settings and crossovers between genres. People loving other people, in every way.

Girls. Loving. Other. Girls.

And it was *all cool*.

Growing up in a traditional Asian family in the Southeast, I found fanfiction to be a revelation. Faith and Buffy can do the horizontal tango while fending off the undead menace. Tony Stark can wear the iron suit even when her full name is Antonia. Kate Bishop can shoot arrows to rival Clint Barton while arguing with her father in Vietnamese.

Fanfiction is flipping fantastic because it lets me think that I can be a hero.

Not everyone shares my high opinion of fanfiction, and there are more people having opinions on fanfiction than there were in my high-school days. 2015 [was recently dubbed](#) “the year that fanfiction came into the mainstream” by pop culture website *The Mary Sue*, and with great popularity comes great Internet vitriol. Fanfiction is derivative writing based on another author’s characters and settings, but that’s not how everyone describes it. Some Twitter users deem it “material for people with their mind in the gutter,” and George R. R. Martin, the writer of *Game of Thrones*, [declares](#) that “Using someone else’s world is the lazy way out. If you don’t exercise [your] ‘literary muscles,’ you’ll never develop them.” There’s a persistent, overarching notion that fanfiction is, in a word, trash—not a valid form of creative expression.

Yes, fanfiction—shortened to “fic” in fan communities—isn’t all Nobel-prize quality—but neither are the majority of published books. Yes, fic is derivative writing—and George R. R. Martin shouldn’t throw stones in the glass house of his immensely successful pastiche of Tolkien-influenced Anglo-Saxon literature and mythology. [To quote Steven Moffat](#), producer of *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*, fic is “creative and exciting,” and we should be “applauding until our hands bleed” in honor of fan authors.

Beyond being a valid form of creative expression, fanfiction is, above all, a way to give voice to narratives that aren’t seen on the big screen. Remember me saying that fic lets me think that I can be a hero? I can’t do that very often. Let’s review the issue of media representation. Popular media is meant to reflect reality. We’re supposed to be able to identify with the people on screen, to see the best and worst of ourselves in them

When [it turns out](#) that a whopping 16.7% of leading roles in blockbusters are people of color, 25.3% are women, LGBTQIA+ characters [appear](#) in 17.5% of major films (never in leading roles), and the 1% of TV characters with disabilities and mental illnesses [have no actual characterization](#) beyond their disabilities—what am I supposed to do? Think that I’m unimportant, or abnormal? Think that my only part in the story is to be a sidekick, running joke, or victim of a horrific accident? Think that I can’t love?

Fanfiction is a way to address and correct the egregious trend of deficient media representation that the larger world seems to accept. It is in fic that central narratives explore what Anne Jamison, professor of English at the University of Utah, [describes](#) as “love as experienced by neurological or physical disability, mental illness, and addiction, as well as through gradations of asexuality, bisexuality, demi-sexuality, and other forms of queerness.” What Twitter users see as proof of trashiness, I and many others see as fic’s ultimate strength: portraying marginalized loves and lives in a positive light.

One of my closest friends writes fic where characters cope with identity disorders and the effects of trauma as a way for her to express her personal experiences and help others with mental disabilities. Two of the girls in my dorm are proud K-Pop fans because it allows them to freely grapple with the intersections and differences between their traditional heritage and American upbringing. I read, write, and celebrate fic because it lets me accept myself. We need fic because it’s where we can see our stories being told.

It’s high time that the world recognizes the validity and value of fanfiction.

So, to the haters and anti-fic crusaders: the next time you dismiss fanfiction as disturbing, mindless trash, pause in your *key bashing*. Remember that there are people who need a world where Buffy Summers gets graphically banded by Faith Lehane. We need a world where we can see ourselves as heroes and villains. We need a world that reminds us that it’s okay—no, that it’s *normal* and *human* and *flipping fantastic*—to love and live like we do.

Jane Smith is a pseudonym. I am incredibly honored to be chosen for *The Morningside Review*. I’m proud of my essay and its subject, and I am proud of the elements of my personal life that I addressed within it. However, I’m from a very traditional family, and I am currently unable to be out at home.