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“A fan fiction studies reader is overdue”: so the Fan Fiction Studies Reader announces itself, quite accurately, and sets about addressing this deficit. The study of fan fiction (alternately “fanfiction,” defined here in self-avowedly restrictive terms as “rewriting shared media”) may still be in its early days, but it is hardly as new as media treatments sometimes make it out to be. Unlike some of the journalistic queries I fielded in wake of the Twilight fanfiction-turned-bestseller Fifty Shades of Grey, the Reader goes farther back than the first few hits of a Google search. Even more careful searching would not immediately yield some of the essays collected here. As the editors Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson explain, one point of interest and a primary challenge of this emerging but fast-growing field is the ephemerality of its objects of study—and to a certain extent, this holds true of the work of fan fiction studies itself. This volume gathers together influential essays that will be familiar to established scholars but not always easy to come by for those who don’t already know where and how to look. Even the excerpts from the field’s two book-length watersheds, Camille Bacon-Smith’s Enterprising Women (1992) and Henry Jenkins’s foundational Textual Poachers (1992), while far from obscure, are very handy to have in the classroom.

The study of fan fiction encompasses work in various disciplines but remains marginalized or absent in most literature and English departments, where the study of fictional texts has traditionally been housed. Thus, the corpus of fan fiction studies is institutionally dispersed as well as diverse. Reflecting this history, the Reader is arranged by broad topic area and approach, although the identified approach does not necessarily correlate with the disciplinary or departmental home of each essayist. For example, the first section, “Fanfiction as Literature,” comprises essays by Jenkins in Media Studies, Roberta Pearson in Film and Television Studies, and Cornel Sandvoss in Media Studies and Journalism. Joanna Russ, the noted science fiction writer and early sex-positive feminist science fiction scholar, appears in “Fan Identity and Feminism”; Camille Bacon-Smith comes out of folklore studies and appears in “Fan Communities and Affect” along with Constance Penley, best known for feminist film theory, and the sociologists Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst. The final section, “Fan Creativity and Performance,” unites Kurt Lancaster, a digital filmmaker and documentarian housed in a Communication department, and Francesca Coppa, an English professor. The range of approaches, and the way they intersect, demonstrates how eclectic a field of study this is as well as the many interests and courses this volume might serve.
Although the volume is arranged topically rather than chronologically, its key asset is that it gathers work from the earliest formal studies in the 1980s through to 2007—work, in other words, least likely to be widely available online. Again, the selection itself is instructive beyond the focus of each individual essay: we quickly learn that some of the foundational, best-known work focuses on modes of production and distribution that hardly exist today and refers to media worlds almost entirely unfamiliar to those entering undergraduate and even graduate studies. Internet fan fiction is a remarkably synchronic institution; active readers and writers will often have encyclopedic knowledge of the fanfictional corpus of their preferred sources or platforms but very little understanding of how some foundational and still common terms and conventions (“shipping,” for example, or “slash”) came to be. The Reader easily corrects such gaps in knowledge, but from an embedded historical perspective rather than a simple overview with hindsight. When I taught from the book, the comparison between earlier and later treatments of fan fiction proved fruitful for class discussion. Such comparisons are facilitated by the excellent essays introducing each section and contextualizing the essays’ place in the history of the field and their relation to more contemporary debates.

I was particularly pleased to see so many texts from the early days of fan fiction studies well-represented. By means of a kind of untraceable osmosis, these texts are often responsible for, or at least concentrate, a number of oft-repeated tenets held by fan studies scholars and fan writers themselves, which here appear in their original context (and very often, are focused on Star Trek). Patricia Lamb and Diane Veith’s argument (1986) that slash (M/M romance or erotica) holds out the possibility of romance between equals not afforded by its media sources, the mainstream romance market, or the broader society continues to resonate and remains a common rationale for even lesbian women’s frequent preference for M/M slash fiction. Russ’s 1985 piece “Pornography By Women and For Women With Love,” as the editors’ framing essay explains, “encompasses its entire argument in its title,” but in its time, this bold pro-porn feminist stance was more radical than it would seem in today’s sex-positive feminist context. Some elements of Russ’s essay may seem dated: its singular focus on Kirk/Spock slash; what the editors rightly note as Russ’s “easy objectification of gay men”; her assumption of the heterosexuality of most fan fiction writers and readers despite her own identity as an out lesbian. Nonetheless, the case it makes for fan fiction’s value as a female-led creative community remains highly relevant to ongoing discussions in fan and scholarly communities alike, as does Russ’s defense of female pleasure even where it fails to escape the still-patriarchal values that underwrite many slash sources.

When over a decade later, Penley argued in “Future Men” that slash was part of a project of “retooling masculinity,” she was drawing on this work as well as an
additional 10 years of feminist and queer theory and a greater variety of readily accessible fan texts. A more diverse theoretical and fanfictional landscape is also apparent in Sara Gwenilllan Jones’s “The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters,” which challenges the by-then accepted view that slash is inherently oppositional or resistant. Instead, the essay suggests that the popularity of same-sex pairings in cult television fandoms may reflect that the sources themselves are queerer than is immediately apparent. In addressing the textual as well as sexual relations of fanfiction, Jones gets at the structural and imaginative distinctiveness of these hybrid fictional worlds: “the metaverses of cult television series always extend far beyond what is visible on screen” and that the “visible spaces . . . have invisible lateral resonance. . . . in an implied and hallucinatory realm of structured but unforeclosable possibilities” (123).

For fans, then, “major characters function as entry points” into this complex of potential worlds. Delving even more extensively into the realm of literary theory, Sandvoss answers Terry Eagleton’s critique of cultural studies by discussing how fan studies critics have positioned Barthes’s authorial death, Genette’s paratext, and various reader-response models with relation to fan fiction studies.

Besides giving the study of fan fiction a historical trajectory and theoretical framework, several essays engage media history, providing context for current concerns about the impact of “native digital” fan culture. Much of the early work collected here focuses on fanfiction that was fanzine-produced and disseminated, but Roberta Pearson’s piece on early Internet fandom (1997) anticipates many contemporary discussions as it addresses what was then called “Computer Mediated Communication” and its communal, mnemonic, and even bodily effects. Her attention to the world of listservs, bulletin boards, and Usenet will be familiar to fandom veterans but not to current undergraduate students or, for that matter, to anyone who has only recently learned of the existence of fan fiction and has sought out this volume for background. Finally, in the course of offering her own compelling theory of fan fiction as performance and suggesting that we understand its varieties of interpretations and iterations from a theatrical rather than a strictly textual perspective, Coppa also cogently illuminates the various media biases (print as opposed to film, for example) that continue to shape fandom dynamics and allegiances.

With the notable exception of the introduction and framing essays, the Reader’s most recent piece is nearly a decade old, a fact which, given the fast-changing nature of the field and its object of study, must be acknowledged as a limitation, albeit one planned and self-imposed (indeed, more readily visible dates on the essays would help clarify this aspect of the collection). In presenting the development of this still-young field, the volume necessarily reproduces many of the field’s early limitations. The essays focus on stories whose range of sources is limited to Western media—popular, almost
exclusively US television series. They are also heavily weighted to the discussion of slash fiction, especially erotica. Like the field during the period it represents, the collection emphasizes issues of sexuality and gender with little attention to other kinds of diversity that feature prominently in contemporary fandom discussions (Penley’s essay “Future Men” in discussing Spock’s status as racial and ethnic other is an exception). But the history of what has been influential in a field is not to be “retconned,” as fandom would put it, but rather acknowledged and redressed by future work.

This convenient, well-edited volume makes it clear that the study of fan fiction, while new, is nonetheless a multidisciplinary field with weight and history, encompassing different approaches and spanning markedly different eras of the production, distribution, visibility, and acceptance of the amateur stories it tells.