Fan

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Abstract

This essay explores the intersections between Fandom Studies and Children's Literature, showcasing some of the ways in which "fan" as a keyword can illuminate both problems and potential solutions in children's media and education. Although children have historically been excluded from much of fan-organized fandom, the idea of fannishness is intertwined with that of childishness, raising questions about maturity and seriousness in the fan experience. With the rise of the Internet, children have gained more immediate access to fandom, a phenomenon accompanied both by the potential dangers of children and adults interacting in the same fan spaces and by the opportunity to hear children's thoughts about the media they consume. While some scholars focus on the commodification of children's fannish pursuits, others look at the possibilities that fandom and fanfiction can provide for engaging children in conversations about texts, especially in the classroom. Fans have also started to make appearances in children's literature and media, creating new character archetypes, tropes, and genres. Understanding fannish identities, practices, and communities can provide valuable insight to scholars and educators as fandom continues to move into mainstream popular culture, influencing both children and children's media.

Keywords: Fandom studies, participatory culture, fanfiction, maturity

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As we are all fans of something—sports teams, television shows, bands—labelling ourselves as fans seems like an easy designation. However, in the age of the Internet, where already blurry relationships between cultural creators and cultural consumers have become blurred even more, the label "fan" actually invokes complicated concepts of identity, community, and agency. The scope of the word fan itself is contested, with academics such as Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) outlining differences between "fans," "cultists," and "enthusiasts," while fandoms make distinctions about who the "real" fans are along lines of gender, emotional investment, and knowledge of the text/person (Busse, 2013; Jenkins, 1992). Although fan studies is a relatively new field, its brief history closely intertwines with that of children's literature and media—a field for which questions of audience and authorship are already highly contested. As a keyword for children's literature, tensions about fans coalesce around how fannishness is connected to childhood, who gets to be a fan, and what young fans (and fan characters) can accomplish in children's media.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2011) notes that the word fan, short for fanatic, originated in baseball and was then expanded to mean, more generally, "a keen follower of a specified hobby or amusement … an enthusiast for a particular person or thing." For the longer form, fanatic, the OED lists a number of definitions which often have pejorative and/or religious connotations, such as actions that "might result from possession" or "[c]haracterized…by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm, *esp*. in religious matters." Although the definition of fan itself lacks such derogatory denotations, Henry Jenkins (1992) notes that the word fan "never fully escaped its earlier connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness" (p. 12). We can see these pejorative traces in more recent additions to the OED, including the compound entries for "fanboy" and "fangirl," which connote negativity by invoking, through the use of –boy and –girl, a sense of immaturity.

Although children have been involved in fan spaces such as the Mickey Mouse club for decades (Kline, 1993), much of early fan-organized fandom excluded children for a number of reasons. For one, as Catherine Tosenberger (2014) points out, the pre-internet age of fandom often required its members to have certain resources, like money to go to fan conventions, which left out children. Furthermore, part of fandom has always been concerned with "adult" activities (i.e. erotic fanfiction), making fannish interaction seem inappropriate for children (Tosenberger, 2014). Early fan studies investigations by scholars like Jenkins (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992), therefore, tended to focus on adult fans and the media they enjoyed—*Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, *The X-Files*, etc. And yet, even in excluding actual child-fans, childishness figured heavily into discussions of fandom through accusations that such interest in pop culture texts is inherently immature. One common stereotype positions fannish behaviour as child-like, relying on conceptions of the child as naïve, irrational, and "unable to separate fantasy from reality" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 10). These comparisons of fans and children highlight how fans have historically been pathologized and Othered in much the same way as children have (Tosenberger, 2014). Henry Jenkins (1992) and Perry Nodelman (1992) make remarkably similar points about how trying to imagine the response of a hypothetical fan or child (rather than paying attention to our own responses, the only ones we can be sure of) leads to "imagining that someone else as more vulnerable, gullible, and susceptible to influence" (Jenkins, Rand, & Hellekson, 2011).

Recent fan studies scholarship has addressed both children and children's literature more directly, especially as a rise in popular young adult texts has generated intergenerational fandoms and, subsequently, raised difficult questions about who is *allowed* to be a fan of a text written for children or teens. After *Harry Potter* took the world by storm, accompanied by the rise of online

fan spaces and prompting what Tosenberger (2014) sees as the first crossover fandom, a rash of opinion pieces cropped up taking stances on the controversial topic of adult fans of children's and Young Adult (YA) literature. A. S. Byatt (2003), for example, complains that contemporary adults obsess over *Harry Potter* because they, lacking the ability or desire to identify "real magic," are content with regressing into less magnificent stories. Responses from Alyssa Rosenberg (2014) and Rachel Carter (2014), among others, counter these criticisms of adults reading children's literature by defending the quality of YA books, pointing out the benefits of the genre(s), and arguing that there should be nothing "guilty" about guilty pleasure reading. The underlying question still remains, *can adults be fans of children's media?*

Of course, the fans of children's media also include actual children. Some scholars see children's participation in fandom, particularly fanfiction, as an opportunity to "make… accessible the responses of the real, rather than the imaginary, audience" (Tosenberger, 2008, p. 200). In this way, perhaps, fan studies could mitigate concerns about projecting onto imaginary child readers, raised notably by Nodelman (1996) and Jacqueline Rose (1984). Sara K. Day (2014), for example, uses fanfiction produced by teenage girls to discuss how the sexual messages and morals of *Twilight* are received, interpreted, and challenged. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo (2016) advocate for utilizing fanfiction in the classroom, making use of what they call "restorying"—"reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences" (p. 314). Fanfiction allows for all kinds of permutations with restorying potential, including racebending and genderbending (changing the race or gender of a character), writing self-insert characters, placing stories in alternate universes, and rewriting problematic or stereotypical representations. Fandom thus provides a space for child readers to interact critically and radically with even the least critical and least radical texts—or at least, it offers that potential, since as Matt Hills (2002) notes, fans' participation in consumer culture necessarily complicates their agency and ability to be resistant or subversive. As much as child fandom is full of radical potential, it also raises concerns about how media interpellates children into capitalist fan interactions, as scholars like Stephen Kline (1993) and Robby London (2007) explore in the disconcerting connections between children's television, advertising, and toy sales.

Fans have also made their way into children's media, spawning new genres and character archetypes. Now, beyond just having nerd/geek characters, we have fan characters who actively participate in fanfiction, cosplay, and conventions. Perhaps the most obvious example is the protagonist of Rainbow Rowell's 2013 YA novel *Fangirl*: Cath, a fanfiction author who navigates the challenges of starting college, positioning her coming-of-age through the lens of fan identity. In fact, a new genre of coming-of-age YA fiction about fans continues to gain momentum, usually focusing on music fans. For example, Hilary Weisman Graham's *Reunited* (2012) looks at the power of fan activity to create community as three estranged friends take a road trip to see their favourite band perform one last time. Fan characters pop up in other mediums, too, like comics: the new Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, fangirls over Wolverine and talks about writing X-Men fanfiction, allowing the comics to directly address superhero fandom (Wilson, 2015). On television, the titular character of the Cartoon Network show *Steven Universe* (2013-present) is an avid TV fan, especially of the fictional show "Crying Breakfast Friends." Steven's fan activity provides a space to explore emotions and conflict resolution, once again figuring fan identity as part of the coming-of-age process. In some of these stories, fandom is associated with childhood, and characters like Cath or Steven have to grapple with whether or not their fan interests are immature: does fanfiction stifle "mature" creativity by celebrating the unoriginal copies of young artists and writers? Does fandom promote an unhealthy obsession with fantasy over reality? Given

the negative associations with childishness which have followed fandom since its early days, it may prove useful to interrogate this use of fan identity in coming-of-age stories further, as it could both validate the fannish interests of children and perpetuate potentially problematic assumptions about the fan/child needing to grow up/grow out of fandom to be taken seriously.

Fan studies itself is still "growing up" as a discipline and must often fight to be taken seriously, much like the field of children's literature. Aligning a fannish perspective with children's literature can produce useful friction around children's agency, innocence, and role as an audience. A fan studies lens illuminates tensions not only within children's media but also around it—in conversations about reader response, writing and publishing, and participating in fan communities. It may even lead us to rethink our positions as scholars of children's literature, since many of us are probably also fans of children's literature. There is a lot of work left to do in investigating fan studies and its relationship with children's literature, but as we look out into that vast expanse of unexplored academic territory, let us do what those original *Star Trek* fans would, and boldly go where no one has gone before.

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