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# The Boy Who Lived Forever

By Lev Grossman

J.K. Rowling probably isn't going to write any more *Harry Potter* books. That doesn't mean there won't be any more. It just means they won't be written by J.K. Rowling. Instead they'll be written by people like Racheline Maltese.

Maltese is 38. She's an actor and a professional writer — journalism, cultural criticism, fiction, poetry. She describes herself as queer. She lives in New York City. She's a fan of Harry Potter. Sometimes she writes stories about Harry and the other characters from the Potterverse and posts them online for free. "For me, it's sort of like an acting or improvisation exercise," Maltese says. "You have known characters. You apply a set of given circumstances to them. Then you wait and see what happens." ([See a \*Harry Potter\* primer.](#))

Maltese is a writer of fan fiction: stories and novels that make use of the characters and settings from other people's professional creative work. Fan fiction is what literature might look like if it were reinvented from scratch after a nuclear apocalypse by a band of brilliant pop-culture junkies trapped in a sealed bunker. They don't do it for money. That's not what it's about. The writers write it and put it up online just for the satisfaction. They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language.

Right now fan fiction is still the cultural equivalent of dark matter: it's largely invisible to the mainstream, but at the same time, it's unbelievably massive. Fan fiction predates the Internet, but the Web has made it exponentially easier to talk and be heard, and it holds hundreds of millions of words of fan fiction. There's fan fiction based on books, movies, TV shows, video games, plays, musicals, rock bands and board games. There's fan fiction based on the Bible. In most cases, the quantity of fan fiction generated by a given work is volumetrically larger than the work itself; in some cases, the quality is higher than that of the original too. FanFiction.net, the largest archive on the Web (though only one of many), hosts over 2 million pieces of fan fiction, ranging in length from short-short stories to full-length novels. The *Harry Potter* section alone contained, at press time, 526,085 entries. ([See the top 10 movies based on kids' books.](#))

Nobody makes money from fan fiction, but whether anybody loses money on fan fiction is a separate question. The people who create the works that fan fiction borrows from are sharply divided on it. Rowling

and Stephenie Meyer have given *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* fan fiction their blessing; if anything, fan fiction has acted as a viral marketing agent for their work. Other writers consider it a violation of their copyrights, and more, of their emotional claim to their own creations. They feel as if their characters had been kidnapped by strangers.

You can see both sides of the issue. Do characters belong to the person who created them? Or to the fans who love them so passionately that they spend their nights and weekends laboring to extend those characters' lives, for free? There's a division here, a geological fault line, that looks small on the surface but runs deep into our culture, and the tectonic plates are only moving farther apart. Is art about making up new things or about transforming the raw material that's out there? Cutting, pasting, sampling, remixing and mashing up have become mainstream modes of cultural expression, and fan fiction is part of that. It challenges just about everything we thought we knew about art and creativity.

[See the world's biggest \*Harry Potter\* fan.](#)

[See pictures of Stephenie Meyer.](#)

### **A Weird Planet**

You could begin a history of fan fiction in any number of places, but one of them is *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, a TV show about the agents of an international espionage organization called the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. It ran for four seasons, 1964 to '68, and although it was never a runaway hit — it peaked at No. 13 in 1965 — it had another, less easily definable quality. It attracted not just viewers but *fans*: people for whom the world in which *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* took place felt so real that it seemed to have a life beyond the show, as if you could turn the camera around and see not a TV studio but an entire planet populated by men, women and children from U.N.C.L.E. The fans published mimeographed and xeroxed fanzines about it, and a few of the zines ran original stories that were set there.

The generic term for the fan culture organized around any given media franchise is a *fandom*. *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (it's sometimes abbreviated to *Muncle*) fandom provided a template for what was to come. *Star Trek* went on the air in 1966, and the first *Star Trek* fanzine appeared in 1967. It bore the instantly definitive title *Spockanalia*. ([See pictures of \*Star Trek\*'s most notorious villains.](#))

Even back then it was apparent that fan fiction was not just an homage to the glory of the original but also a reaction to it. It was about finding the boundaries that the original couldn't or wouldn't break, and breaking them. Issue No. 3 of *Spockanalia* included a story called "Visit to a Weird Planet," in which Kirk, Spock and Bones are transported to the set where *Star Trek* is being filmed and get confused with the actors who play them (Bones: "I'm a doctor, not an actor!"). *Spockanalia* No. 4 ran a story in which Spock has an affair with a fellow Federation officer. These were homages to *Star Trek*, but at the same time they

were critiques: I love the show, but what if it went further? What happens if I press this big, shiny, red button that says "Do not press"?

It was a way to bring to light hidden subtexts that the show couldn't address. For example, what if the tense, rivalrous friendship between Kirk and Spock included an undercurrent of sexual attraction? That's not an idea Hollywood could touch, but in 1974 an adults-only *Star Trek* zine called *Grup* published a story called "A Fragment Out of Time," which featured Kirk and Spock in a gay love scene. (The characters are unnamed but recognizable, and anyway the illustrations give them away.)

The premise of "A Fragment Out of Time" became so popular that it acquired a shorthand label: Kirk/Spock, or just K/S, or eventually just slash. *Slash* has since become a generic term for any fan fiction that pairs two same-sex characters, be they Holmes/Watson or Cagney/Lacey or Snape/Harry. It can be a verb, something you can do: if you have written a story in which Edward and Jacob from *Twilight* get together, you have slashed them. ([See "New Moon Portraits: A Twilight Gallery."](#))

### **Joyful Play**

There are a lot of misconceptions floating around about people who write fan fiction and why they write it, so let's knock off a few of them right up front. Fan-fiction writers are not pornographers. (This perception is so pervasive that in order to avoid confusing their friends and colleagues, many of the people interviewed for this article declined to be identified by their real names.) There's plenty of sex in fan fiction, but it's only a small part of the picture. Fan-fiction writers aren't plagiarists who can't come up with their own ideas, and they're not all amateurs. Naomi Novik, whose *Temeraire* novels are best sellers and have been optioned by Peter Jackson, who directed the *Lord of the Rings* movies, writes fan fiction. "Fanfic writing isn't work, it's joyful play," she says. "The problem is that for most people, any kind of writing looks like work to them, so they get confused why anyone would want to write fanfic instead of original professional material, even though they don't have any problem understanding why someone would want to mess around on a guitar playing Simon and Garfunkel."

[See the 100 best novels of all time.](#)

Fan-fiction writers aren't guys who live in their parents' basements. They aren't even all guys. If anything, anecdotal evidence suggests that most fan fiction is written by women. (They're also not all writers. They draw and paint and make videos and stage musicals. Darren Criss, currently a regular on *Glee*, made his mark in the fan production *A Very Potter Musical*, which is findable, and quite watchable, on YouTube.) It's also an intensely social, communal activity. Like punk rock, fan fiction is inherently inclusive, and people spend as much time hanging out talking to one another about it as they do reading and writing it. "I've been in fandom since early 2005, when I was getting ready to turn 12," says Kelli Joyce. "For me, starting so young, fanfic became my English teacher, my sex-ed class, my favorite hobby and the source of some of my dearest friends. It also provided me with a crash course in social justice and how to respect and

celebrate diversity, both of characters and fic writers."

Diversity: the fan-fiction scene is hyperdiverse. You'll find every race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, age and sexual orientation represented there, both as writers and as characters. For people who don't recognize themselves in the media they watch, it's a way of taking those media into their own hands and correcting the picture. "For me, fanfic is partially a political act," says "XT." "MGM is too cowardly to put a gay man in one of their multimillion-dollar blockbusters? And somehow want me to be content with the occasional subtext crumb from the table? Why should I?" ([See the top 10 offbeat fan followings.](#))

### ***Alternity and Beyond***

Fan fiction is a world unto itself, with its own rules and genres and conventions. It's its own pocket ecosystem — the literary equivalent of Australia. There's no way to make a definitive or even convincing taxonomy of fan fiction, which is huge and ever evolving and constantly the subject of heated internal debate, but if you wanted to make a quixotic stab at it, one place to start would be with canon. *Canon*, in the fannish sense, refers to the facts and laws of a given fictional universe as laid out by its creator: Harry Potter is a wizard, his parents are dead, and so on. Some fan fiction coexists peaceably with canon and operates within its constraints. You wouldn't think that would leave a lot of room for creativity, but you would be wrong.

Fictional worlds, while they appear solid, are riddled with blank spots and unexposed surfaces. There's a moment toward the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* when Dumbledore suggests offhandedly that Sirius Black should "lie low at Lupin's" for a while, referring to Harry's former teacher Remus Lupin. What exactly did Sirius and Remus get up to there, chez Lupin, while they were lying low? How low did they lie? (Cough, *slash*, cough.) Rowling never says, but that one little gap has given rise to so much fan fiction that "lie low at Lupin's" has become a recognized trope of *Harry Potter* fan fiction, a sub-subgenre in its own right. ([See pictures of the Harry Potter theme park.](#))

It's human nature to press at the boundaries of stories, to scrabble at the edges, to want to know what's going on just out of range of the camera. Fan fiction teems with prequels and sequels, missing scenes restored and plot holes patched. It retells canonical stories from new points of view — the reverse-angle instant replay. How did the events of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* look from Neville Longbottom's perspective? Moaning Myrtle's? Mrs. Norris'? "To say that a story stops after we close a book is absurd," says Maltese. "To say that we can think certain things about a story or what might happen next in a story or what might have happened if someone had turned left instead of right but that we can't write them down is absurd."

The Potterverse has an unusually detailed and well-documented canon. More-minor canons offer less raw material but more space to play in. FanFiction.net hosts 21 stories set in the universe of *Covington Cross*, a TV show with a medieval setting that — even though it starred the exquisite Ione Skye — lasted only seven episodes in the fall of 1992. The same site also has 87 examples of Tetris fan fiction, which are a showcase

for the resourcefulness of writers spinning stories from the thinnest of threads: "L-block has just found out that his life partner, Square block, was cheating on him with his brother, Inverse L-block ..."

[See the 100 best TV shows of all time.](#)

Fan fiction that isn't constrained by canon is known as AU, which stands for Alternate Universe, and in AU all bets are off. The canon is fired. Imagine how Harry Potter's story would have played out if on his first day at Hogwarts he'd been sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor. Or if he were a vampire, or a werewolf? Or for that matter, what if he were black? Or if instead of trying to kill baby Harry, Voldemort adopted him, raised him as Harry Marvolo and conquered the entire British Isles? (This scenario has been intensively explored in a group of fan stories known collectively as *Alternity*.)

In AU, the writer's readerly id takes full control and, unrestrained by the superego of canon, runs riot. It annihilates the conventional set of literary genres and organically makes up new ones, which form a kind of map of human fictional compulsions. "Hurt/comfort" stories revolve — as you might imagine — around one character's getting injured physically or emotionally and another character's providing solace. There are "genderswap" stories and "bodyswap" stories (figure it out). In fan fiction, all fictional universes adjoin one another and characters slip through; "crossover" stories connect the world of, say, *Harry Potter* with that of, say, *Anne of Green Gables* or the Halo games or *The West Wing* or *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Even reality is just another genre: that's RPF, or real-person fiction. RPF includes bandfic, which deals with the lives of real-life rock stars. There are stories that, executing a twisting narrative backflip, dump Daniel Radcliffe and Rupert Grint directly into Hogwarts alongside the characters they play in the movies (à la "Visit to a Weird Planet"). ([See the best books for the summer of 2011.](#))

There is, of course, a ton of sex in fan fiction. It's a monument to the diversity of human sexual whim. There are stories that take any and every character you can name and pair them up romantically or erotically or pornographically. (One of the axioms of Internet culture is known as Rule No. 34: "If it exists, there is porn of it.") A lot of alien plants turn out to produce pollen with powerful aphrodisiac effects. You'd be amazed.

And that's the tame end of the spectrum. Fan fiction mines some dark veins, and you can follow them down as far as you want. Wherever you choose to stop, you'll see that somebody else has gone further. Incest is not off-limits (nor is "twincest"). There's a genre called Mpreg, which is about male characters getting pregnant, and it's way more popular than you'd think. There is such a thing as "dubcon" (short for dubious consent) and "rapefic." Responsible writers of explicit fan fiction add warnings to their stories. At the well-curated fan-fiction website Archive of Our Own, the menu of possible warnings includes "Graphic Depictions of Violence," "Major Character Death," "Rape/Non-Con" and "Underage."

## **Something Borrowed, Something New**

All this discussion of the richness and complexity of fan fiction leaves out the pressing questions of whether fan fiction is legal or ethical. The key legal issue is, of course, copyright. In the U.S., at least, copyright is checked by something called fair use: if a work qualifies as fair use, it can borrow from a copyrighted work without permission and without paying for it. There are four factors that determine whether a work qualifies, the most germane here being whether it can be considered competition for the original work in the marketplace, and whether it's "transformative": it has to change what it borrows, making "something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression, meaning or message." (The words are those of Supreme Court Justice David Souter in *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music Inc.*, which concerned whether 2 Live Crew's "Pretty Woman" made fair use of Roy Orbison's "Oh, Pretty Woman." The court decided unanimously that it did.) Does fan fiction transform, or does it merely imitate? Is it critique or just homage?

There are plenty of major writers who can't abide fan fiction based on their work. They post statements about it on their websites. Orson Scott Card, author of the classic *Ender's Game* books, has written, "I will sue, because if I do NOT act vigorously to protect my copyright, I will lose that copyright ... So fan fiction, while flattering, is also an attack on my means of livelihood." Anne Rice is every bit as vehement: "I do not allow fan fiction. The characters are copyrighted. It upsets me terribly to even think about fan fiction with my characters. I advise my readers to write your own original stories with your own characters."

[See pictures of Anne Rice.](#)

The legal argument against fan fiction isn't actually very strong. The scenario Card describes, in which an author's rights are diminished because he or she doesn't actively defend them, is associated more with trademark than with copyright. But in practice, a fan-fiction writer who receives a cease-and-desist letter has almost no choice but to comply. No fan wants to go through the bother and expense of litigating against a celebrity or a major corporation. As a result, no definitive legal precedent exists.

But there's more to argue about than legal niceties. A lot of authors feel emotionally and viscerally that nobody else has any business using their characters. George R.R. Martin, author of *A Game of Thrones*, writes on his website, "My characters are my children ... I don't want people making off with them, thank you. Even people who say they love my children." Ursula K. Le Guin, another giant of the fantasy canon, writes, "To me, it's not sharing but an invasion, literally — strangers coming in and taking over the country I live in, my heartland." ([See a Tuned In interview with George R.R. Martin.](#))

The confusing thing about this disagreement is that neither side is wrong. The contradiction lies in our culture, which supports both positions at the same time and hasn't sorted out a good way to mediate between them. Up until relatively recently, creating original characters from scratch wasn't a major part of an author's job description. When Virgil wrote *The Aeneid*, he didn't invent Aeneas; Aeneas was a minor character in Homer's *Odyssey* whose unauthorized further adventures Virgil decided to chronicle.

Shakespeare didn't invent Hamlet and King Lear; he plucked them from historical and literary sources. Writers weren't the originators of the stories they told; they were just the temporary curators of them. Real creation was something the gods did.

All that has changed. Today the way we think of creativity is dominated by Romantic notions of individual genius and originality, and late-capitalist concepts of intellectual property, under which artists are businesspeople whose creations are the commodities they have for sale. But the pendulum is swinging back the other way. The particular feature, or bug, of our millennial moment is a double vision that allows us to look at stories both ways at once. In 1966, the year *Star Trek* premiered, Jean Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which retold the story of the mad wife from *Jane Eyre*, and Tom Stoppard staged *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which borrowed two bit players from Hamlet. Both works fused homage and critique as surely as *Spockanalia* did. In her 2005 novel *March*, Geraldine Brooks filched the absent father from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and took him on a tour of Civil War battlefields. *March* won the Pulitzer Prize.

These works aren't fan fiction in any strict sense. They're written for profit, and they're adorned with the trappings of cultural prestige; true fan fiction has naught to do with either one. But they come from the same place fan fiction does: that moment when a reader enters a world that was created by someone else and remakes that world in his or her own image. It's hard to throw out "A Fragment Out of Time" without throwing out *March* as well, and where would that end? If authorship is no longer the exclusive domain of the gods, it's no longer the exclusive domain of authors either.

There may be hurt in that, but there's a great deal of comfort as well. A writer's characters are his or her children, but even children have to grow up eventually and do things their parents wouldn't approve of. "We don't own nonfictional people," Maltese says, "and at the end of the day, I don't think we can own fictional ones either."

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