

The Potential of Fanfiction: Let Us Let Go of Fifty Shades of Grey

The year 2012 did not bring the end of the world, no asteroids struck, no aliens landed, no world-ending cataclysmic event happened. Something nearly cataclysmic in the world of publishing *did* happen though...with the publishment of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. That's right, the erotic novel that spurred two sequels and a trio of movies, I do believe was singularly defining cataclysmic event to publishing. Dear Reader, you may find that sentiment a tad dramatic, you may even question the relevance of this article, after all, it's almost been ten years since its publishment. The description of "cataclysm" against the publishing industry may also seem a little obtuse as *Fifty Shades* was lauded a phenomenon—[it was named the best-selling book of the decade](#). The problem of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is more about the legacy it leads behind as a novel and movie franchise translated from being a popular *Twilight* fanfiction. Neither *Fifty Shades* nor fanfiction are the villains in this story, dear reader. The trouble starts with *Fifty Shades* being a terribly written, but popular book, which has opened up the floodgates for creators to capitalize on similarly badly written, but popular books to feed to the masses. Overall, this is a real problem, for the good of fanfiction as a genre, and for culture.

Producing books from fanfic then remaking the material into film isn't a bad strategy by either the publishing or the film industry. In fact, the strategy would be an abundant source of original material for both, if creators chose *good* rather than popular works to adapt. However, as it stands, creators have been choosing badly written works to adapt and it all starts with *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This is a shame, because fanfic being adapted into books and movies has historically been drawn from well-written and original fanfics. Some may scratch their heads in confusion, how could *fanfiction* create good art? Isn't fanfiction pornographic dribble that only women like? [Culturally, that's what we've made it out to be](#).

Who's afraid of Fanfiction?

Fanfiction doesn't need to scare us though, [a basic definition](#) will tell you that fanfiction is simply fiction that transforms the story and characters (sometimes just one) of another work of media, into their own original story. The process of fanfiction is an old literary tradition—one might even say technique. While the term 'fanfiction' is a modern conception, fanfiction could've very started with the *Aeneid*, or Dante's *Inferno*. Perhaps it started when Sherlock Holmes fans would [meet to discuss the stories and then write their own](#). Or, just on the cusp of the internet were the viewers of *Star Trek*, [many of them women and in the STEM field who published journals \(fanzines\) and organized conventions around the show](#). The lattermost has had an everlasting impact on media fandom and fan culture—including fanfiction. From the time of *Star Trek* into the information age fandom in all its facets has remained decidedly women centric. [A 2013 survey](#) by Archive Of Our Own (Ao3, a popular fanfiction website) reported that 90.3% of their respondents were female. Notably, more respondents identified as genderqueer (6 percent) than as male (4 percent). The gender-split could be explained in a [multiplicity of ways](#). From the theory that men don't like writing that's free to how women prefer written porn to fanfiction being a reaction of females trying to find their own pleasure in a landscape that caters mostly to white, straight, men.

This author prefers to understand fanfiction as an expression of architectural, transformative desire on behalf of the fanfic writers. That is, fanfiction is a way for writers to fix/repair, explore or redesign the primary media in manner that fulfills some desire on part of the writer or the intended audience. The early fanzines created for *Star Trek* after all, included sexy fictions between Kirk and Spock. Fictions like that, fill and explore a gap in the series' writing; one explanation is that viewers may have felt the female characters of the show lacked a complexity that only the main male characters were given. They also may have wished for more sexual and romantic themes, combine both desires—romance and female involvement—you get a surge of slash fanfiction (fiction that focuses on the romantic or sexual nature of a same-sex relationship).

Both the erotic and gendered skewed nature of fanfiction leads the wider culture to underestimate and belittle it as art and a respectable genre in itself. Coupled with the fact that fanfiction can be published on a number of platforms where authors don't have to edit or succumb to ethical constraints that may reflect on them, if they were published. These factors typically are what lead to people insisting that fanfiction is bad.

Why we need to let go of popular fanfiction

Fifty Shades of Gray is a terrible combination of poor writing and tropes that only belittle the larger fanfiction community and undercuts the significant culture impact it's had. By now, E.L. James' writing is infamous for its cringe-worthy and unoriginal prose. Another generalization about fanfiction is that it's more plagiarism than original work. *Fifty Shades* does nothing to help argue against this assumption. [In 2012, blogger Jane Little](#) ran *Master of the Universe* (the original fanfiction name for *Fifty Shades of Grey*) through the anti-plagiarism software Turnitin against *Twilight*. The conclusion? 89 percent of the works are the same. Of course, plagiarism is only a facet of the terrible writing that's found in the published book. In order to keep this article pg-13 instead of R-rated, unfortunately I cannot write out large passages of the deeply awkward, cliched, and (honestly?), gross words contained in this book. However, enjoy a few of the terrible one-liners that are written without a hint of irony or humor,

"I must be the color of the communist manifesto."

"My hormones are racing."

"Grabbing it [an actual toothbrush], I squirt toothpaste on it and brush my teeth in double quick time. I feel so naughty. It's such a thrill."

"'Put the chicken in the fridge.' This is not a sentence I had ever expected to hear from Christian, and only he can make it sound hot, really hot."

Besides prose, the plot and themes of *50 Shades of Grey* only fuel negative perceptions of fanfiction. The book is so infamous that the average reader of this article likely knows the broad strokes of the novel, but just case you don't, may I present a short summary. The book follows Anastasia 'Ana' Steele, a 21-year-old middle-class college student living in Vancouver, Washington. Anastasia meets Christian Grey, an older, incredibly handsome, worldly multi-millionaire CEO. There are ups and downs to the story but by the end of book one they're in love (although they've broken up) and on the trajectory towards having a kid and living the American Dream. The thing that makes millions of dollars though, is that Christian is really into BDSM—bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism. That by itself is not a problem, sex sells, and popular erotica is not a new invention. But, [as many BDSM practitioners have emphasized since the book's publication, there are healthy ways to combine sex and pain, and *Fifty Shades* does none of this.](#) To practice BDSM safely, communication, self-awareness, and emotional maturity all need to be present. Neither of our main characters are described as such. There are many times when Ana doesn't feel comfortable with voicing her reluctance to do certain things, or her out right non-consent. There are even moments in the book where she outright refuses to do certain things and Christian either ignores or coerces her to do them. When they're not having sex, Christian is regularly emotionally manipulative and abusive to Ana. And without the necessary precautions and constraints that BDSM usually as, many of the sex scenes between Ana and Christian could be constituted as

[As a story in the Atlantic discussed a few years ago,](#) *Fifty Shades* seems to reflect a startling reality in American culture—where 20 percent of women will be raped within their lifetime and 40 percent of those rapes will happen to women between 18 and 24. With *Fifty Shades'* prolific sales (15.2 million copies—its outsold *Harry Potter* through the last decade), it's impossible to ignore the impact *Fifty Shades* has had and will have on pop culture and sexual norms.

This impact has never been more apparent than in 2019, when *After*, a Harry Styles/ One Direction fanfic was adapted into film and heralded as the ["teen version of *Fifty Shades of Grey*."](#) The movie was apparently so popular that a sequel came out just a year later, and at least more movies had been lined up in consecutive years.

The movie depicts the torrid relationship between the young college student (in Washington State again) Theresa 'Tessa' and her rich bad boy boyfriend Hardin Scott. The sequel continues where the first one left off, chronicling the couple's trials and tribulations after their break-up in the previous movie. Like *Fifty Shades*, *After* draws readers in by essentially being a self-insert fic without saying Y/N (Your Name—as it's commonly written out in self-insert fanfics.) Both protagonists are bookish, clumsy, virginal, and good-girl brunettes who fall from grace because of some darkly handsome and brooding man. Neither protagonists really have strong goals or aspirations, values or personalities that may make our protagonists have any life outside of the main romance. Or, may even make them refuse the toxic and abusive nature of said relationships. These movies, yet again, utilize tired and badly written tropes to garner likes, which have been translated into purchases and views.

Again, like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the prose in *After* is terribly written, and translated to the big screen, is really no better. The dialogue is particularly atrocious, and awkward, here's only a taste:

"You're thinking about me and have that feeling...down there. Don't you, Theresa?"

"'He is such a lame,' Molly says, and I glare at here.'"

"'It's only my first semester, though so ask me again in a few months,' I joke, and everyone laughs..."

Writing mechanics aside, the books lurches from sex scenes, screaming matches to crying jags, then repeats the next chapter, with slim changes so the reader knows it's the next day. *After* also does the job when romanticizing a good deal of abuse.

"He tosses [my notes] in the air and they fall to the ground in a scattered mess...I scramble to pick them up before he steps on them, but that's only funny to him." Damaging her personal belongings and finding it funny? Check.

"For a second I think he might slap me." Fear of physical abuse when he's angry. Check.

"You are so pathetic. Don't you see that I don't want you here? I don't want you to be here for me. Just because I messed around with you doesn't mean I want anything to do with you. Yet here you are, leaving your nice boyfriend- who can actually stand to be around you- to come here and try to help me. That, Theresa, is the definition of pathetic." Cruelty, belittlement, name calling - emotional abuse. Check.

Unfortunately, there's several more quotes I could pull from this book to explicate the range of abuse romanticized, but that would actually take pages, and dear Reader, you've gotten the point. The publishing industry and Hollywood have gone too far in pursuing these types of stories. Stories that romanticize abuse and take pleasure in women falling in love with their abusers. Also, stories that are not good art in the first place, and are merely gawdy receptacles for likes. Like ugly beasts in cages, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *After* are merely creatures that are laughed at and given attention for superficial entertainment and not for the love of reading or writing. Creators need to give up adapting stories like this, they're both dangerous and offend the potential for fanfiction in the mainstream.

What Now?

Following the trend of publishing erotica from fanfiction there are plenty of works that don't romanticize abuse and toxic relationships, that are both original and popular—although perhaps not *as* popular as *Fifty Shades* and *After*. Beyond erotica, fanfiction sites are sitting on a goldmine of original stories. Simply filter what category/genre you're interested in producing and there are virtually millions of stories you could explore. Beyond fanfiction platforms, there's forum after discussion forum that details the attitude of what audiences are interested in at any time, and what fanfictions people thought were original and fulfilling stories.

Creators should be taking advantage of the sheer wealth of stories that fanfiction platforms are churning out—without taking queues purely from what gets the most hits. Particularly because media is trending away from the heteronormative, white, traditional narratives that both *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *After*, present. This year, two of Netflix's biggest hits were adaptations of novels (*Bridgerton* and *Shadow and Bone*), both had queer and people of color characters. I won't claim to think that the popularity of these shows is simply due to diverse casting or stories. However, I will claim that diversity enriches stories and inevitably draws larger audiences. And, diverse stories like the ones I've mentioned deserve larger audiences than *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *After*. Because, as I've mentioned *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *After* are not stories deserving of elevation into mainstream culture. Particularly because so much more influential media content is churned out in the advent of popular movies and tv shows. Fandom is a powerful force to be reckoned with. The countless pieces of fanart—including Etsy shops and products, the Pinterest boards, the discord groups, podcasts, Tumblr posts and internet traffic produced by film media doesn't exist in a vacuum. They all reflect and in turn change culture themselves.

More fanfiction modeled after *Fifty Shades* and *After*, in hopes of landing book or movie deals do not need to be created. Because as a culture we don't need more voices encouraging the violence and degradation of women. We also don't need to support the elevation of all-around bad writing. Fanfiction is more than that, it's a reputable genre that should be respected as such.