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Luke Skywalker Is Gay?

Fan fiction is America's literature of obsession.

By David Plotz

Posted Friday, April 14, 2000, at 6:30 PM PT

BETTER LATE THAN
NEVER !!

Have you heard the latest dish from Hollywood? On *Friends*, Monica and Rachel are both pregnant! Dr. Susan Lewis is returning to *ER*, and she's going to marry Mark Greene. (You always knew they belonged together.) Speaking of *ER*, Dr. John Carter has a new love interest too: He's dating Walter Skinner from *The X-Files*, who has just broken off his three-way affair with Special Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully.

Meanwhile, in a galaxy far, far away, Luke Skywalker has gone over to the Dark Side—and I'm not talking about his infatuation with Han Solo, though that's as hot as ever. "Han turned his head, tipped my palm up, pressed his lips to the center of it. ... His kiss connected with the core of me."

Sadly, we'll never see Luke and Han smooching on the big screen. Their torrid romance is occurring only in the fevered imagination of one pseudonymous Destina Fortunato, an acolyte of one of the oddest and most delightful subcultures on the Web: fan fiction. In "fanfic," as practitioners call it, devotees of a TV show, movie, or (less often) book write stories about its characters. They chronicle the alternative adventures of Xena, warrior princess; open the X files that Mulder and Scully don't dare touch; and fill in the back story to *Star Wars Episode I*.

Fanfic, like so much weirdness in American culture, is rooted in the '60s, though it has older antecedents. When Arthur Conan Doyle stopped publishing Sherlock Holmes stories, his readers wrote their own. *Star Trek: The Original Series* (or "TOS," in fanspeak) kick-started the fanfic vogue in the late '60s. Within a year of the show's debut, Trekkers were scribbling their own tales of Kirk and Spock, binding them in mimeographed zines, and handing them out at conventions. Fanfic communities rewrote *Star Wars* and TV shows such as *Starsky and Hutch*.

Fanfic used to be confined to fanatics who attended conventions and mailed their zines to several dozen (or, in rare cases, several hundred) subscribers. That zine industry still exists, but most fanfic has decamped to the Web. The Web has taken fanfic public, massively increasing the number of writers and readers. Today there are fanfic sites devoted to every TV show you have heard of and many you haven't. *Star Trek's* "fandom"—the show's fans—maintains hundreds of fanfic archives in every possible category: *TOS*, *Deep Space 9*, *Ensign Chekov*, *Data*, etc. Each archive may contain hundreds of stories. The *Star Wars* and *X-Files* fandoms are nearly as prolific. The *X-Files* fandom even issues annual literary awards—"The Spookys." Dozens of fanfic archives pay homage to *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Highlander*, and *ER*. *Blake's 7*, an old British sci-fi series, enralls writers. *Due South*, which concerns a Canadian Mountie, has a fanfic cult. So do *The A-Team* and *Miami Vice*.

Most fanfic authors write short stories, but novels, screenplays, poems, and even songs (called "filks") are popular as well. (A "fan film" industry thrives, too: Click [here](#) to learn more about it.) The quality of the writing varies. Some fics brim with misspellings, grammatical lapses, and risible dialogue. But many are surprisingly good, with excellent character sketches and vivid descriptions. Fanfic writers tend to be highly educated, and several fanfic writers have graduated to careers as science fiction novelists.

Some fanfics fill in plot holes left by lazy producers: A Spock half-brother appeared out of the blue in a late *Star Trek* movie. Fanfic writers responded by inventing a credible past for him. Other writers simply deliver extra episodes to junkies: When *Millennium* was canceled, loyal fans posted a whole new season of episodes. Still others explore alternate universes. What would happen if Luke joined the Dark Side? Fanfics frequently resurrect popular characters whom producers had rudely killed off.

Fanfics often celebrate peripheral characters who don't get the screen time they deserve: Writers have

lavished millions of words on Boba Fett, the bounty hunter who cameos in the *Star Wars* series. Skinner, the minor boss on the *X-Files*, has won a rabid fanfic audience. "Crossover" fanfics drop characters from one show into another's universe. Mulder and Scully visit Buffy to investigate vampires. Benton Fraser, the *Due South* Mountie, teams with U.S. Marshal Sam Gerard—Tommy Lee Jones' character in *The Fugitive*—to hunt Canadian villains. In some fics reviled by veteran authors, fans act out their fantasies—seducing Obi-Wan Kenobi, for example—by inserting themselves into their stories. These stories are called "Mary Sues."

One surprising aspect of fanfic is its indifference to plot. The vast majority of its writers are women, and Deborah Tannenism pervades it. Most stories are much more attuned to emotional dynamics than narrative. MIT professor Henry Jenkins, the leading scholar of fanfic, notes that fans usually choose shows with a pair of closely bonded leads: Kirk and Spock, Mulder and Scully, Xena and Gabrielle, Starsky and Hutch. Fanfic writers pore over the relationship between the pair. One popular subgenre is "hurt-comfort," which explores what happens when one lead gets hurt and the other has to help him. Some *X-Files* fans write only "MSR" fics, their acronym for "Mulder-Scully Relationship."

The obsession with emotional intensity has spawned "slash," the most flamboyant genre and perhaps the weirdest prose in America today. "Slash" fanfic describes, in vivid detail, homosexual relationships between characters such as Starsky and Hutch or Kirk and Spock. (Click [here](#) for a history and discussion of "slash." *Definitely* click.)

Fanfic writers are not nutters or losers or lowlifes. A slash fanfic writer whose pseudonym is WPAdmirer (for "Walker Percy Admirer") told me that her circle of writers includes a lawyer, a linguist, a computer specialist, an insurance executive, and a mystery novelist. She, like most of the 20 other writers I interviewed, is well-employed. Many have spouses and children.

So why on earth do normal people spend their lives writing fantasies about TV characters? Almost all fanfic writers hide behind pseudonyms. They rightly fear ridicule, because fanfic invites mockery. Though the United States admires sports fans, it treats TV and movie junkies derisively. America's most famous movie fan: John Hinckley. Pop culture fans are pinned by caricature: Spock-eared Trekkers or loon-bird stalkers. Fanfic seems to confirm every stereotype about fans: They are obsessive. They can't separate fantasy from reality. Their lives are so empty that they fixate on banal TV shows. (What kind of loser writes story after story about *Quantum Leap* or *The A-Team*?) They don't even have the imagination to make up their own characters.

But this condescension misses the point. In his superb *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, MIT's Jenkins argues that fanfic represents a flowering of modern folk culture. For thousands of years, we have shared stories about mythical popular heroes, from Prometheus to Paul Bunyan to Brer Rabbit. Each storyteller embellished the tale, inventing characters, adding details, rewriting the ending. In the 20th century, however, folk culture has been privatized. The characters we share today are TV icons and movie heroes. Paul Bunyan has been supplanted by Xena. These characters don't belong to the public. They are literally owned by studios and producers, who run the character's "life" and expect us to accept their decisions gratefully.

Fan fiction rebels against the private folk culture, Jenkins argues. Writers reclaim folk heroes by creating new stories about them. They embellish the myth. Viewed through Jenkins' lens, a fanfic writer keen on Capt. Jean Luc Picard is no different from a 19th-century folksinger who paid tribute to John Henry. Fanfic writers assert control over a pop culture designed to be passively consumed. "I wanted to make the show mine," explains Kat of her *Friends* fanfics, echoing the battle cry of fan writers. By writing fics about Monica and Chandler, Kat is insisting that they belong to her as much as to NBC. Fan fiction puts the pop back in popular culture.

Writing fanfic, Jenkins argues, is an act of "fascination and frustration." Writers are fascinated by the characters but frustrated at the cavalier way producers treat them. Fanfic is a "way of repairing the

damage done to the core mythology by producers who mess up. The fanfic folk culture pulls it back into realignment." When producers make a beloved character disappear or end a love affair that should continue, fanfic restores the mythology. "Even though I love *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, there are times when the show doesn't go my way. So I use fanfic to create the outcome I want," says Buffy fanfic writer Carrie Cook. The actor George Clooney has left *ER* for a movie career, but fanfic writers adore his character, Doug Ross. They also know that Doug and Nurse Carol Hathaway belong together. So they write story after story about the characters' continuing romance. (The Clooney/Ross split highlights the first commandment of fanfic: Thou shalt not write about real people. [Click here for why.](#))

Fanfic also can be a political act, a way to elevate marginalized minority characters. Fanfic writers worship Lt. Uhura, the neglected black woman on the original *Star Trek*. In fanfic, she has been promoted, given her own starship, and made the mistress of a torrid threesome with Lt. Sulu and Ensign Chekov. *ER*'s producers overlook crippled, irritable Dr. Kerry Weaver. Other characters lead glamorous, romantic lives. She goes home alone. But fic writers have corrected that with stories about her love life.

Fanfic seems odd in part because it defies modern convention about what writers do. In the individualistic United States, the author is supposed to be an untethered brain: Her ideas and characters and plots are her own. By this standard, fan fiction looks like a cop-out. Writers too lazy to invent their own characters rip off plot, dialogue, and ideas from the boob tube.

But fanfic turns writing into a communal art, as folk culture has always done. Writing and reading become collaborative. We share the characters and work together to make them interesting and funny and sexy. Write a short story about your crazy uncle and post it on the Web, and no one will read it. Write a short story about Dr. Who, and hundreds of folks will flock to your site. Fanfic writers meet at conventions ("cons"). Thanks to the Internet, writers communicate constantly on e-mail listservs. They invite e-mail responses and crave feedback. MedianCat, who writes Buffy fanfic, says he has heard from more than 400 people about his stories. Of the two-dozen-odd fanfic writers I e-mailed about their work, only one did not respond. (The Internet is also changing fanfic by opening it to kids. [Click here for how the Backstreet Boys became literary heroes.](#))

Having juiced fanfic, the Internet may now cripple it. Studios own the characters and shows that fanfic borrows, a fact that is never lost on writers. Every fanfic opens with a disclaimer noting Paramount or Fox or whoever's copyright and renouncing any intent to profit from the story. (All fanfic writers are amateurs by necessity.) But since fan activity has migrated to the Web, studios have grown anxious about trademark and copyright protection. (Trademark law requires holders to police their trademarks by preventing unauthorized use.) Sites hosting fanfics also usually have transcripts, audio and video clips, screen captures, and logos. Studios don't like this. Fox recently sent cease-and-desist letters to *Buffy* sites ordering them to remove show transcripts. Fox also warned *Millennium* sites to remove logos and clips. Lucasfilm cracked down on audio clips and logos from *Star Wars*, and Paramount has been similarly protective of *Star Trek*.

The studios have treated fanfic more gently, so far. No court has ever addressed the legality of fanfic but, unlike transcripts or clips, it could be protected as "fair use." A 1997 article by Rebecca Tushnet in *Loyola of Los Angeles Entertainment Law Journal* concludes that fanfic constitutes fair use because it is noncommercial—(no writers try to profit from their work)—because it sufficiently transforms the original work, and because it does not damage the market for the original work. (On the contrary, fanfic keeps viewers engaged during the six days a week the *X-Files* is not on.) Perhaps mindful of their dubious legal standing, studios tend to leave fanfic alone. Lucasfilm has suppressed Skywalker slash on the grounds that it harms the *Star Wars* image, but it allows PG-rated fanfic. Fox ignored fanfic when it went after the *Buffy* sites.

But fear is mounting among fans that the studios are getting too pushy. Lucasfilm lit a brushfire last

month when it offered fans free pages on its cherished www.starwars.com site. Fans would be allowed to post all their *Star Wars* hagiography there, including stories, songs, messages to other fans, and essays. But the small print says that Lucasfilm retains all copyright to anything placed on the site. If I were to write a great story about how Anakin Skywalker becomes Darth Vader and post it on my starwars.com fan page, George Lucas would own my idea.

Lucasfilm is flexing this muscle for obvious reasons. It fears a lawsuit by some fan claiming that Lucas stole her plot for his next movie. But fans believe Lucas has gone too far and have launched an online rebellion. Their complaints resonate. They adore Lucas and his movies. But *Star Wars* is theirs, too. After all, they think about it, write about it, talk about it, and care about it as much as Lucas does. "Legally, it's theirs. But emotionally we feel we have a right to participate in the story," says Elizabeth Durack, a fanfic writer who is leading the starwars.com protest. Lucas jury-rigged *Star Wars* from a hundred myths that he heisted from Joseph Campbell. Fanfic writers are borrowing it back. They don't want a dime in return. They just want to be left alone to write their own, very modern myths.

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Amateur directors have made at least 100 *Star Wars* fan films, many of which you can watch on the Web. The Mos Eisley Multiplex links to a dozen of the best, including *Troops*, a brilliant and hilarious fusion of *Star Wars* and *Cops*. It's well worth the hassle of downloading it. Horror movie buffs produced a spate of *Blair Witch Project* fan films last summer.

The ethos of fan films differs from that of fanfic. Fanfic writers tend to be passionate amateurs: They are uninterested in turning their fanfic into TV writing careers. Young directors, by contrast, often make their fan films to grab attention from the movie industry. A couple of fan film directors, including *Troops'* Kevin Rubio, have parlayed their tributes into snazzy industry jobs.

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Within a year of the first *Star Trek* fanfic, "slash" had kinked off on its own. Women fascinated by the friendship between the emotional Kirk and the logical Spock began writing stories that, shall we say, advanced their relationship. The Vulcan "mind-meld" was not the only kind of melding going on.

Fans called the first erotic sketches "Kirk/Spock" or "K/S" stories. Soon the genre was named for the slash between the names. Starsky and Hutch soon found themselves in bed. Luke Skywalker and Han Solo were slashed, so were Luke and Lando Calrissian. Today the most popular couples include Mulder/Skinner, Qui-Gon/Obi-Wan from *Star Wars Episode I*, and Xena/Gabrielle from *Xena: Warrior Princess*. (Lesbian slash is somewhat less common than gay slash.) Almost every character on television has been placed in a compromising position. Crockett and Tubbs engage in their own special Miami vice. Hawkeye and Trapper snuggle in their cold *M*A*S*H* tent when Frank Burns takes a three-day pass to Tokyo. Jar Jar Binks from *Episode I* can be found pleasuring Darth Maul. Lock up the kids! Click here to witness some of this variety: Scroll to the bottom of the screen for a guide to slash abbreviations: "SS/JL: Sam Seaborn/Josh Lyman (*The West Wing*)"; "C/P: Chakotay/Tom Paris (*Star Trek: Voyager*)"; "SA-M/O: Sith Academy's Maul/Obi-Wan (*Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*)"; etc., etc., etc.

Reading slash for the first time is disorienting. I'm a straight prude who likes to keep his favorite TV characters locked in the television. My brain could hardly process the images—in lubed-up detail—of

Hawkeye and Trapper masturbating each other and Obi-Wan Kenobi having anal sex with Qui-Gon. (Pause for a practical question: How do fanfic writers move Spock and Kirk from consulting on the *Enterprise's* holodeck to rolling around in bed? [Click here](#) for an example.)

Slash certainly is intended to feed sexual fantasies. "I find the idea of two men together to be erotic," says WPAdmirer, who writes Carter/Skinner slash. "And I don't know anyone who could look at the body of Mitch Pileggi [who plays Skinner] and not be interested."

But the porn generally isn't the point. Even at its filthiest, slash, too, is guided by Tannen, not Larry Flynt. According to Jenkins and to slash writers, slash is rooted in female fascination with deep male friendships. Slash writers seek to turn men inside out. "Theirs is one of the most intense friendships I have seen on television, and it seems quite plausible to me that the relationship could have a physical component," says Jane St. Clair, who writes Kirk/Spock slash.

Protagonists spend more time talking about their feelings than groping each other. "What could be more exciting than love between two grown men—the hiding, the secret meetings, the confessions of love?" asks Belynda, a slash archiver.

What matters is not the sex, says Chrysothemis, who writes *Due South* slash, but "the emotional relationship of the two characters." Her slash often mimics romance novels, with sex hinted at but not described. Slash's interest in how characters feel sometimes reaches parodic proportions. In some K/S slash, Kirk and Spock quit their jobs with Starfleet to work on their relationship.

If you missed the link on how slash writers get their characters into bed, [click here](#).

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Slash writers employ any number of tricks to get their characters in bed. Most involve tearful late-night confessions of attraction, but in one early fanfic described by Henry Jenkins, Kirk and Spock are marooned on a distant planet. According to *Star Trek* lore, Vulcans go into heat every seven years, a mating frenzy called "Pon Farr." They must have sex or die. Spock goes into heat. Kirk has the choice: Will he sleep with his friend or let him die? He sleeps with him and finds that he enjoys it.

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Writing about real people is taboo among traditional fanfic writers. "Actorfic" violates the basic

principle of fanfic, which is that writers are creating a rich, expanded universe around a show or movie. Actorfic merely indulges a fantasy. This is doubly true in slash, where writers risk enraging straight actors. Slash infuriates actors even when it focuses only on fictional characters. According to slash writers, one reason William Shatner so detests Trekkers is that he's disgusted by the slash fanfic written about Kirk. He takes it personally.

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Educated, white, middle-aged women have traditionally dominated fanfic. But the Web is opening the culture up to kids. Their writing usually limps, and they don't share old-timers' interest in shows with pair-bonded leads. But they are wonderfully boisterous. Younger writers have deluged the Web with fanfics about *Buffy* and *Dawson's Creek*.

They also irk the traditional fanfic community by writing about real people, especially music idols. Jakob Dylan of the Wallflowers and the young men from 'N Sync are subjects of much fanfic. The most prolific fandom belongs to the Backstreet Boys. BSB fanfic is heavy on first-person "Mary Sue" daydreams—"The Boys saved me after our plane crashed" and the like—but slash also pops up regularly. Stories such as "Backstreet Lust" describe how a Backstreet Boy—usually Nick or Brian, the two pretty ones—seduces a young male fan. Unlike other slash, Backstreet Boys slash tends to be written by males. An Internet skirmish is raging over Backstreet Boys erotica. Some BSB worshippers have organized online opposition to the X-rated fanfics. Their motto is "WWTT," as in, "What Would They [the Boys] Think?"

Article URL: <http://slate.msn.com/?id=80225>



I tripped over the above gem via a reference in *Slate* review of the new DVD of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. I'm pleased that *Slate*, like *Time* before it, is capable of catching up with a social trend, like fanfic and slash ... even if it takes them 30 years.

(The illustration at left appeared with the original article.)

--- JLC