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Anne Collins Smith

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## [Smith on Jenkins, 'Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture'](#)

Review published on Friday, August 1, 1997

**Henry Jenkins.** *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. viii + 343 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-90571-8; \$38.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-90572-5.

**Reviewed by** Anne Collins Smith (Susquehanna University) **Published on** H-PCAACA (August, 1997)

In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins examines the underground world of the media fandom, people who create fiction, artwork, and other forms of expression based on television shows. Drawing on a rich theoretical background with sources ranging from feminist literary criticism to cultural anthropology, Jenkins applies and adapts Michel de Certeau's model of "poaching," in which an audience appropriates a text for itself. Taking a stand against the stereotypical portrayal of fans as obsessive nerds who are out of touch with reality, he demonstrates that fans are pro-active constructors of an alternative culture using elements "poached" and reworked from the popular media.

Jenkins addresses a number of fannish phenomena, including fan fiction and fan-produced music videos. He offers the most plausible academic explanation yet for the popularity of homoerotic fan fiction. Unlike earlier theorists who viewed this fiction as pornography, he analyzes it as a holistic narrative structure which includes--but is not limited to--depictions of sexual activity. Jenkins argues that fans are constructing a fluid continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual, a continuum that exists for women--no one blinks if straight women hug and kiss each other--but which is sharply divided for men.

I originally found it puzzling that Jenkins devoted a whole chapter to *filking* (science-fiction folksong writing and performance). He elucidated several important elements of filking, however, that justified its prominent position in his analysis and shed light on the whole atmosphere of fandom. While many *filks* are about specific media shows and characters, many others are about fans or the activities of fandom, providing a self-referential description not commonly available in other fannish products.

I found the analysis to be sound overall; only one chapter was structurally flawed. Jenkins' discussion of the relationship between fans and producers of ongoing TV shows lacks closure. He recounts how fans of *Beauty and the Beast* managed to keep the show on the air but were unable to influence its content, as the producers chose to de-emphasize the romantic qualities of the program in favor of action-adventure. He documents the feelings of helplessness and frustration that fans experience as a result of this and other programming decisions, but his analysis does not move beyond recounting these experiences. The questions that naturally arise from this chapter are never answered. Does Jenkins believe that fans are justified in their attempts to influence producers? Does he believe that producers are justified in ignoring the fans? Does the attempt by the consumer to alter the product at the source represent a new trend in mass consumption, or are there forces at work that will ensure the failure of these attempts?

The author's narrative voice is curiously distant. After taking some pains to establish his credentials as a member of the group being studied, Jenkins proceeds to adopt a third-person stand that gives no indication of his participation in fandom, giving his recounting of various events a spooky "eye in the sky" quality.

This book is theoretically complex, thoroughly researched, and tightly argued. Moreover, Jenkins models admirable behavior for the popular-culture researcher, carefully balancing respect for fans' privacy and a desire to let their voices be heard. This book would be an invaluable resource for anyone working in media studies or audience theory.

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