Final Projects Winter 2023   Classification & Indexing

4-2023

Preferred Level of Weird: A Librarian's Guide to Fanfiction

Erin Hamilton

PREFERRED LEVEL

OF WEIRD:

A LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE

TO FANFICTION

Erin Hamilton
LIS 9201
April 2023

So, a patron asked you about fanfiction. You may have heard the word muttered, spoken furtively, almost shamefully. Miller (2022) notes that "While fandom remains a social hobby and some aspects of it have crossed over more firmly in the mainstream, there still exists at least some level of perceived stigma around talking about fan fiction with anyone other than friends or strangers on the internet." Or maybe you've heard it spoken with passion, exclaimed about and discussed with fervour.

This instruction guide aims to provide librarians with an understanding the basics of fanfiction including a glossary of terms, an introduction to the information seeking behaviours of fanfiction readers, and some search tips on a popular general fanfiction archive for helping both librarian and patron find the reading experience they are looking for, accessing their preferred level of weird.

Fanfiction: Background and a Brief History

What, exactly, is fanfiction? Merriam-Webster defines it as " stories involving popular fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted on the Internet." Fanfiction has a long history, with the earliest recorded fanfiction appearing among societies of "Janeites" (Jane Austen fans) and "Sherlockians" (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle fans) in the early 20th century. The popularity of fanfiction really started to rise in the 1960s-70s with the emergence of Star Trek fandom. Fans of the show began writing and sharing fanfiction at conventions through zines and word of mouth.

With the rise of the internet, fanfiction moved online. At first it was limited to special websites dedicated to specific fandoms like Star Wars, Doctor Who, and The X-Files. But as internet access increased, fanfiction exploded into a much larger medium. Today, fanfiction can be found on various websites, and multiple fandoms and genres can be hosted on a single site, making it easier for fans and writers to discover and share their works. The most well-known websites for fanfiction are fanfiction.net and Archive of Our Own. Social media platforms like Tumblr, Deviantart, and Instagram are also home to fanfiction and fanart. Fanfiction is more accessible than ever before*.

You may be surprised to know that the library has fanfiction in its collection right now. John Milton's "Paradise Lost" is a rewriting of the book of Genesis. Technically, fanfiction in a very early form. E.L. James' "Fifty Shade of Grey" trilogy is a famous example of fanfiction adapted and published in the mainstream market. However, for the most part "Fanfiction communities and their activities have evolved largely removed from the attention of library and information science (LIS)" Hill & Pecoskie, 2017, p. 844). But that doesn't mean that library patrons aren't engaging with fanfiction.

As of November 2022, Archive of Our Own hosted 10,220,000 works in over 54,020 fandoms and it is widely deemed the most popular of the general fanfiction sites. AO3 is a "noncommercial and nonprofit central hosting site for transformative fanworks such as fanfiction and, in the future, other transformative works such as fanart, fan videos, and podfic" (Archive of Our Own, n.d.a.). Over 10 million works. In over fifty thousand fandoms. Those numbers, along with the rise of fanfic to mainstream adaptions, indicate that it may be time for libraries to start paying attention.

Just like any type of writing, fanfiction can run the gamut from incredibly well-written to almost unreadable. The beauty of fanfiction archives is they are not limited by budget or shelf space. There is always room for another story, and fanfiction has an undeniably strong and fierce community. It is worth noting that a common misconception is that fanfiction is illegal, but that is false. Fanfiction is generally considered to be fair use under most copyright laws. Some authors are, well, fans of it, while others are vocal about not liking their characters and ideas used by others or used in certain ways.

*For a more detailed history, interested readers should check out Jill Bearup's History of Fanfiction videos on YouTube.

Fanfiction Terminology: The Basics

Term	Definition
AU	"Alternate Universe." Works that take the characters from canon and change their setting and/or circumstances
Angst	Story type: typically, very dark, involves torment of the characters, depression, and sadness.
Canon	Canon is the source material, the original story.
Canon-divergent	A story that starts in canon but diverges from the events of the original at a certain point.
Crossover	Multiple fandom universes collide. Could be taking characters and putting them in other universes or might be a merging of settings.
Disclaimer	Often included at the top of published fanfiction, stating that the author does not own the original source or its characters, and therefore avoid copyright issues. May also include information about sensitive/mature topics and triggers that the fanfic might contain.
Drabble	Extremely short work, often under 500 words
Fandom	A community of fans. Can be online or off, active or passive.
Femslash (F/F)	A genre of fanfiction in which the featured romantic ship is two women
Fix-it-fic	Story type: Where the fic writer seeks to fix something that happened in canon usually be canon-divergent
Fluff	Story type: stories that are typically short and sweet. Usually, there is some slight degree of romance but nothing graphic, just fun and happy. An alternative to angst.
HEA	"Happily Ever After", ensures a happy ending at the end of the fic
Headcannon	An individual fans idea of why something happened in canon that is not necessarily supported by the source material.
Hurt/Comfort	Story type: Some pain (like angst) followed by comforting and resolution
NSFW	"Not Safe For Work," the story will contain sexual content
On hiatus	The most dreaded status. Work is on hold and may or may not be updated in the future.
OC	"Original Character". Features a character created by the author.
OOC	"Out of character." A character (or many) may behave out of character or behave in a way not consistent with the original source
One shot	A work only one chapter in length. Can be long or short.

| Term	Definition
OTP	One true pairing. Another term that's usually associated with ships and refers to a ship that is endgame for you personally, although there may be others in the fandom who agree.
PWP	Short for "Plot, What Plot?" or "Porn, Without Plot". May also be labelled NSFW or Smut
RFP	"Real Person Fiction". A fic that features one or more people that exist in real life.
Ship	Short for relationship - In the tags it's usually separated by an "x" or a "/"
Slash M/M	A genre of fanfiction in which the featured romantic ship is two men.
Slowburn	Stories where the characters very slowly fall into a relationship
Smut	Sexual content (usually graphic) is a significant part of the story. See also "PWP"
WIP	"Work in Progress". A fic that is still in the process of being written and/or posted to one of the online archives.

Information Seeking Behaviours of Fanfiction Readers

The fanfiction community is made up of many, often intersecting groups, that are often also the primary user groups of libraries. This includes women, young adults, LGBTQ+ and BIPOC individuals. Yet, there is limited research on the information seeking behaviours of those that participate in this community. Hill and Pecoskie (2017) noted that currently there is " somewhat of a dearth of attention on the subject from researchers in the field" (p. 844). The fan fiction community has a range of diverse information needs and is proactive and skilled at fulfilling them, with various community members playing the role of librarian, guiding other users and directing the organization of materials. The main differences are the terminology used to refer to these practices and the actual functionality of the resulting databases or catalogs. For example, where library staff catalog, volunteers on Archive of Our Own "wrangle" tags (Koven-Matasy 2013, 31).

When considering the information seeking behaviour, consider the three types of browsing categories described by Marchionini (1995): directed browsing (searching systematically, often for a specific work known to them prior to beginning their search), undirected browsing (searching with little purpose or intention in the hopes of stumbling across something interesting), and semidirected browsing, which lies somewhere between the two (p. 106). Miller (2022) found that readers were more likely to use undirected browsing when looking for fiction via the library and semidirected browsing for fanfiction. When searching for fanfiction "their search process was thus more systematic. Participants described using tags, filters, and keywords to search for exactly the kind of stories they wanted to read." Archive of Our Own, allows for multiple points on access, beyond the standard "title", "author" "subject". As Lee (2021) says "The card catalogue would never". Libraries are often perceived as less user-friendly to search, which can lead patrons to feel overwhelmed and give up. Miller (2022) further found that participants overwhelmingly reported that fanfiction was easier to find than books.

Understanding the information seeking behaviours of these group in regard to fanfiction, provides a window into how these groups may interact with the library and its collection, and how the library might better serve them. Connecting those needs to library programs that benefit the fanfiction community, also helps to promote literacy, digital literacy as well as diversity and inclusion all of which are strongly supported by the fanfiction community as well as ALA frameworks.
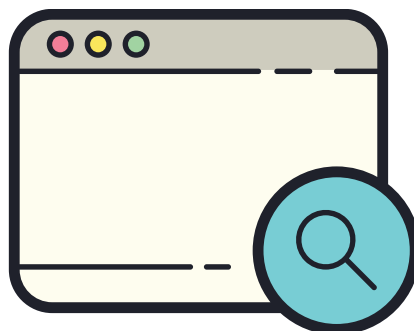
Fanfiction Classification

Fanfiction sites utilize user-led classification. It places the creators (the fans) in a position to have greater control over how they receive (and share) content (Johnson, 2014). There are many similarities between the practices used by fanfiction sites to organize works and those used library and information science (LIS), however the significant difference remains in who has the power to classify and what system they use to do it. Fanfiction communities use a variety of different methods to organize the content on their sites. "General fanfiction sites are organized along broad thematic categories, but more narrowly focused sites, ... offer unique organizational schema" (Hill & Pecoskie, 2017, p. 850). Some utilize folksonomy, a user-generated system of classifying and organizing online content into different categories using metadata. Others prefer to use a controlled vocabulary, where fanfics are classified only using the approved subject terms.

As a general fanfiction site AO3 uses hybrid folksonomy and tag wrangling. "This mode of operation allows authors to create tags using any terminology they consider applicable; tag wranglers work in the background to link synonyms and alternative wordings" (Johnson, 2014). This structure allows authors more control and keeps the power in the hands of the creator. However, it is also the most complex and time consuming to maintain, and it requires an extensive and dedicated volunteer base to accomplish. The AO3 tagging system is a combined self-tagging and automanual system that aims to provide clarity and differentiation between similar tags with different concepts, while keeping the ease of use for as many people as possible (AO3). The purpose of tags is to help users find works, and the purpose of tag wrangling is to group tags in the manner that most effectively enables users to find what they are looking for.

Pre-defined tags are suggested when filling them in, although users are also free to choose whatever terms they wish. "Tags do not take a hashtag format, and there are no restrictions on spaces, length or characters" (Price, 2019). The aim is to standardize canonical tags and synonym relationships as much as possible, keeping in mind that different fandoms and people organize information about their fandoms differently. Johnson (2014) found that "Because of the variation in tags, AO3's filtering options are not as reliable as those derived from controlled vocabulary systems and are subject to change as tags are wrangled in the background and new terms enter the folksonomy." However, AO3 has grown and developed guidelines for tagging and tag wrangling. Lee (2021) argued the use of tags on AO3 "let you easily sort through fandoms, ships, content warnings, ratings, relationship categories, characters, and so much more. You can truly just drill down to your preferred level of weirdo, which is just kind of a beautiful thing."

Title
Fandom
Character
Fluff
Rating
Relationship

SEARCH BY

HEA
Angst
Author
Completion status
Word count
Hurt/Comfrot

Classification Tags
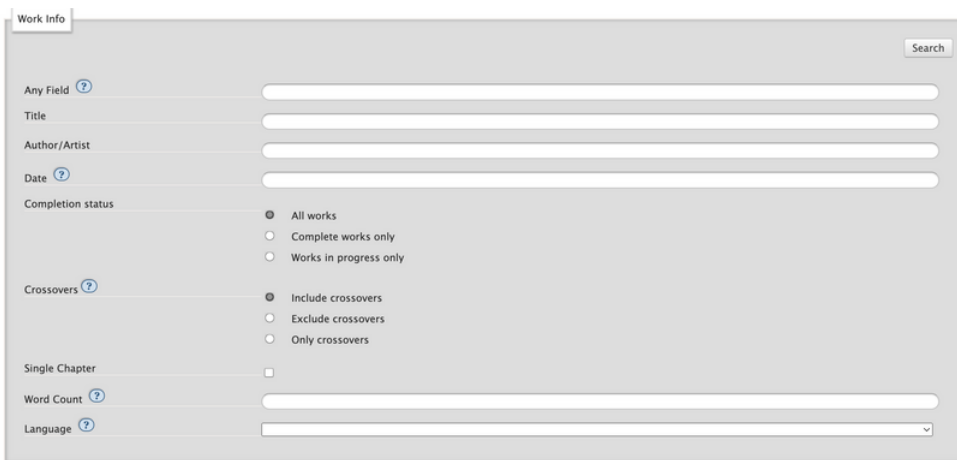
Type of Tag	Description
Fandom	The fandom name should be the name as shown on the show logo, book cover, or similar published media, with prefixes and/or universe identifiers as appropriate (AO3). Ex: Harry Potter - J.K. Rowling
Character	A tag for a specific character or group of characters treated as a single entity. The standard format for character names is given name followed by family name. Initials, titles, and suffixes should only be used if they are the standard in the source canon. Characters with only a title and family name (no given name) should be treated like a single-name character and may require disambiguation. Spelling and capitalization should match the source material. (AO3) Ex: Hermione Granger
Relationship	Relationship tags on the Archive can involve two or more individuals, and be used for platonic, romantic, or sexual relationships (AO3). All character names in relationship tags should be in the same form as names in the Character tags. Romantic/sexual relationships should follow the format Canonical Character Name 1/Canonical Character Name 2/Canonical Character Name 3 and so on, for all characters in the relationship. (AO3) Ex: Hermione Granger/Harry Potter Family/friendship/platonic relationships should follow the format Canonical Character Name 1 & Canonical Character Name 2 & Canonical Character Name 3 and so on, for all characters in the relationship. (AO3) Ex: Hermione Granger & Harry Potter & Ron Weasley
Disambiguated	Adding a qualifier to a canonical tag to distinguish it from a different but similarly named tagged. Fandoms are disambiguated by media, year, and country of broadcast or publication; other tags are disambiguated by fandom (AO3). Ex: X-men (Movies) vs X-men (Comics)
Rating	A tag which designates the audience for what the work is intended. Options include "General Audience", "Teen & Up", "Explicit", Mature", "Not Rated"
Canonical	A canonical tag is the master tag for a group of synonyms. Canonical tags will appear in the auto-complete and the filters. (AO3)
Additional	Also known as Freeform tag. These are added by the creator of a work to provide information they feel is important to the work. These can include warnings, tropes, and commentary. Most tags on works will fall under this category.

How to Search (or how to get the reader's preferred level of weird)

There are several ways to search on AO3, and many different access points for filtering down the search results.

General Search
- Start on the AO3 homepage at www.archiveofourown.org.
- In the top menu bar, you will see a "Search" option. You ca search by "Works", "Bookmarks", "Tags" or "People". The most fulsome search option is through "Works". Click on it to access the search page.
- On the search page, you will see several search options: "Work Info" including "Author", "Title", "Completion Status" fields, "Work Tags" including "Fandom", "Character", and "Relationship" fields. Use these options to refine your search.

- To search by keyword, use the "Any Field" at the top. Type in a word or phrase related to the content you are looking for. You can also use Boolean operators (such as "AND", "OR", and "NOT") to further refine your search.
- Once you have entered your search criteria, click on the "Search" button to see the results of your search.
- You can also use the "Advanced Search" option to further refine your search by specifying additional search criteria, such as word count, publication date, or completion status.
- When you find a work that you are interested in, click on its title to view its details page from which you will be able to access and read the work.

Fandom Search (a more precise search)

- Start on the AO3 homepage at www.archiveofourown.org.
- Select a fandom category from the main page under "Find Your Favourites" OR the drop-down menu labeled "Fandoms". Choose from the high level categories:

  - Anime & Manga
  - Books & Literature
  - Cartoons & Comics & Graphic Novels
  - Celebrities & Real People
  - Movies

  - Music & Bands
  - Other Media
  - Theatre
  - TV Shows
  - Video Games
  - Uncategorized

- Use the alphabetical list to find and select the specific fandom you're interested in (ex: In "Books & Literature", click "H" and then select "Harry Potter")

- Refine using the search filters located in the right-hand menu. Options include filtering by including OR excluding.

- Filter by character tags, relationship tags, crossover fandoms, additional tags as well as by completion status or date updated.

- Common or popular tag options will be listed but you can add utilize the "Other tags to include" search bar to add further specificity.

- Two other important filters are "rating" and "warnings", which allow you to control the type of story content which appears in your results and filter out things that may not be age appropriate. It should be noted that authors do not have to use warnings and as such that filter may not be as effective.

- Click on "Sort and Filter" to apply your criteria. When you find a work that you are interested in, click on its title to view its details page from which you will be able to access and read the work.
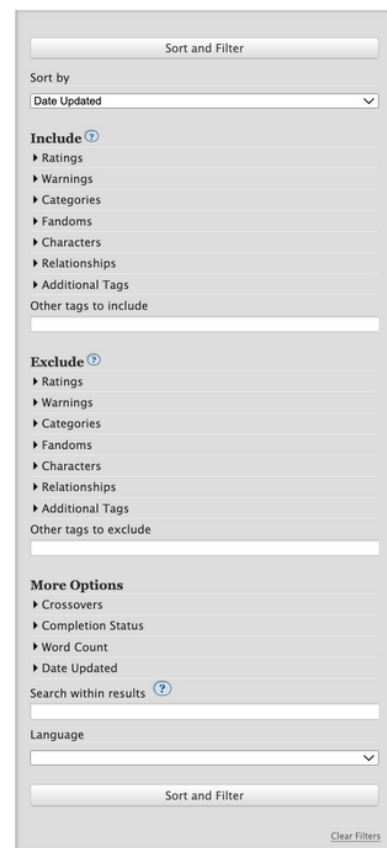
Tips and Tricks

Subscribe/Bookmark
Most sites have some way for you to "bookmark,", "follow" or "subscribe." You can subscribe or follow either a specific work or a favourite author. No need to obsessively check the site, this way you'll get an email about a new chapter being posted! Note: These features do require you to have an account with the site.

Check the status
There is nothing worse than falling in love with a fic that's on hiatus or worse, has been abandoned since 2016. Check the tags and author notes to see if something is a work in progress or complete and, on AO3, how many chapters the author expects to write.

Likes/Kudos/Comments
A great way to participate without actually writing a fic. Don't be a lurker – provide kind and encouraging feedback to creators when you love their work.

References

Bullard, J. (2016). Motivating Invisible Contributions. *International Conference on Supporting Group Work*. https://doi.org/10.1145/2957276.2957295

Delic, D. (2018). LibGuides: Fanfiction. *Simmons College*. https://simmonslis.libguides.com/c.php?g=889351&p=6393273

Gursoy, A., Wickett, K. M., & Feinberg, M. (2018). Understanding tag functions in a moderated, user-generated metadata ecosystem. *Journal of Documentation*. https://doi.org/10.1108/jd-09-2017-0134

Hill, H. C., & Pecoskie, J. L. (2017). Information activities as serious leisure within the fanfiction community. *Journal of Documentation*, 73(5), 843–857. https://doi.org/10.1108/jd-04-2016-0045

Johnson, S. L. (2014). Fan fiction metadata creation and utilization within fan fiction archives: Three primary models. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 17. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0578

Koven-Matasy, V. (2013). "Fannish librarians: the intersection of fandom and library and information science" MA Thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

Lee, D. (2021, May 27). A Beginners Guide to Reading Fanfiction | Book Riot. BOOK RIOT. https://bookriot.com/reading-fanfiction/

Miller, J. N. (2022). Information-seeking behaviors of young adult readers of fiction and fan fiction. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 37. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2245

Price, L. (2019). Fandom, Folksonomies and Creativity: the case of the Archive of Our Own. In T*he Human Position in an Artificial World: Creativity, Ethics and AI in Knowledge Organization* (pp. 11–37). Ergon. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783956505508-11

Works, O. F. T. (n.d.-b). Wrangling Guidelines | Archive of Our Own. http://archiveofourown.org/wrangling_guidelines