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The Winchester Gospel: The 'Supernatural' Fandom as a Religion

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Claremont McKenna College

The Winchester Gospel
The *Supernatural* Fandom as a Religion

submitted to
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and
Professor Thomas Connelly

by
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for
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**Dad's on a Hunting Trip and He Hasn't Been Home in a Few Days: My
Introduction to *Supernatural* and the SPN Family**

Supernatural (WB/CW Network, 2005-) is the longest running continuous science fiction television show in America. It is currently in its fourteenth season. And since season eight, there has been no serious discussion by the creator, Eric Kripke, the CW Network, the writers, or the actors about when the series will end. The show chronicles the lives of two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, as they travel about the United States in Dean's classic 1967 black Impala carrying out the family business of "saving people, hunting things." In the early foundational seasons of one through three, the brothers focused on fighting common supernatural entities found in world folklore (ghosts, shapeshifters, vampires, ghouls, werewolves, demonic spirits and witches) while they searched for their missing father. This pattern was broken in season four ('Lazarus Rising' Season 4, Episode 1) when Dean is saved from Hell by the angel, Castiel. The introduction of Castiel dramatically broadens the scope of the show, introducing Heaven, archangels, Judeo-Christian mythology, and God. The surprising on-screen chemistry between Castiel and Dean, inspired the fan creation of "Destiel," one of the most popular and enduring "ships," a relationship between characters, in television fandom.

The *Supernatural* fandom is one of the most prolific fan communities in recent history. This assertion is supported by the sheer magnitude of fan created content on the internet. The fandom dominates Tumblr, Instagram and other social media platforms. I decided to watch *Supernatural* because I was intrigued by the tremendous creative energy

exuded by the *Supernatural* fandom. Quite simply, I was a fan of the fandom. I had dabbled in fandoms before and had even attempted to run a One Direction fan account for a few months on Instagram in high school. But this was the first instance where I had become a fan before I had actually consumed the content. The fan creations and passionate fan interactions that crossed my feed were so imaginative and entertaining, that even though I shied away from media and literature classified as horror, I was compelled to understand how this television show could cultivate such intense dedication.

Far from synecopathic, fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions. In the process, fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings.¹

Over summer break, I binge watched the first twelve seasons on Netflix. I was hooked... doomed to impatiently wait for the October 12, 2017 premiere of its thirteenth season. “The development of new fandoms has increased dramatically since the easy access of videotapes allows the introduction of programs to viewer who may have missed them or were unaware of them when they were first broadcast.”² My quick addiction to the show enabled me to understand why the *Supernatural* fandom was and continues to be, so captivated by this series and its characters.

The *Supernatural* fandom is noted for their expert execution of the GIF. An acronym for Graphics Interchange Format, essentially a silent short movie, this type of

¹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1992), 23-24.

² Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 70.

image moves like animation because it consists of frames. The show, with fourteen seasons under its belt and close to 300 episodes, continually supplies the fandom with copious amounts of content as a springboard for their creativity. Without fail, when the *Supernatural* fandom decides to hijack a Tumblr post, the community is treated to a clever and flawlessly executed gif. Painstakingly constructed gifs are such a common occurrence that other Tumblr users bait the *Supernatural* fandom by trying to find a plot circumstance that the fandom does not have a gif for... a rare event since the fandom seems to have a gif for everything and every situation.



Figure 1.1 Example of *Supernatural* fandom interaction on Tumblr.

The stupidest thing you can possibly say on Tumblr...

supernaturalapocalypse:

super-who-locked-in:

allabitofablur:

vanconcastiel:

... is "Does the Supernatural fandom have a gif for THAT?"
because all you wind up with is a gif and shame.



oh my god seriously



Figure 1.2 Example of *Supernatural* fandom interaction on Tumblr.

Becoming familiar with a fandom before consuming the media it concerns itself with and comments on—comes with a unique set of challenges. The first challenge is managing preconceived notions about the content or the characters of the show. For instance, Castiel has been one of the most important and beloved characters on *Supernatural* for a decade—his persona is a popular source of fan discourse and fan created content. But since Cas was not introduced until season four, his absence from the first few seasons is frustrating to novice viewers.



Figure 1.3 Fan art and discourse about preconceived notions of the show.

His omnipresent and highly dissected character on fan sites makes it difficult for a new viewer to wait patiently for his appearance. There are even some veteran fans that would encourage new viewers to skip seasons one through three because Cas is not included in them. This would be a disservice to the show and the viewer since the first few seasons build the foundation of the Winchester brothers' relationship.

The second challenge to a new viewer is balancing ones understanding of the characters through the lens of the fandom with that of the *Supernatural* "canon." Canon here refers to all the information from the original or officially sanctioned material. Sometimes the ideas the fans entertain about a character jarringly conflicts with the writers' ideas. Dean's sexuality on the show is portrayed as strictly heterosexual in sharp contrast to fan evidence, art, vids, and fanfiction that advocates for his arguably obvious bisexuality. Dean's sexuality became a topic of intense fan debate when Cas entered the show's narrative. There is one very logical argument in the fandom asserting why Destiel

should be introduced as canon on the show. Namely, that Castiel is a meta-physical entity with no gender that had occupied female vessels in the past. If Cas had been introduced in a female vessel instead of a male one, Dean and Cas would have been made canon by the writers' years ago. Instead of sanctioning Destiel as canon, the writers continue to practice queerbaiting with Dean and Castiel's playful and seemingly flirtatious interactions on screen.

Regardless of the challenges of beginning a show years after its original airdate, I fell in love with the series quickly. Summer 2018, I attended San Diego Comic Con and was fortunate to make it into the *Supernatural* panel hall. Having the opportunity to listen to the actors, directors, writers, and producers discuss the show in person was enlightening. Witnessing the "cosplay" of fans (a contraction of costume and play) made me consider the serious commitment of time, money and creative energy that *Supernatural* fans expend to create costumes and dress as their favorite characters. However, the memories of the fans that I met while waiting in line for the panel are what have stayed with me the most. Many of the devoted fans camped outside the convention hall overnight in order to get seats as close to the stage as possible. The conversations I had with fellow fans were fascinating, as was their outright dedication to everything *Supernatural*. The hours spent in line passed quickly, as we were with kindred spirits and had much to discuss and debate. There were fans that had been at every single Comic Con *Supernatural* panel since the show began in 2005—it was their yearly pilgrimage, like visiting Mecca. And the ever-expanding flock included many new disciples, like me, that were attending their very first panel.

During my time spent participating in and researching fandom, I have observed that many fan practices closely resemble worldwide religious practices. In fact, “the word ‘fan’ has religious roots; it comes from the Latin *fanaticus*, meaning ‘of the temple’: so the fan is one who is excessively enthusiastic or taken up with a zeal that is most usually seen in religious fervor.”³ Dr. Clive Marsh at the University of Leicester concurs stating, “Like religion, fandom is time-consuming, life shaping, energizing and often provides a social network. Like religion, it provides a structure that helps people meet ‘needs’ such as finding friends, being affirmed and having a sense of self-worth, wanting to find a system of values, beliefs or symbols within which to live.”⁴ In a time when the world worships movie and rock stars rather than religious figures, it is of no surprise that people have joined fan communities as a secular alternative to religion. Movie, TV and Rock stars are, at the most basic level, storytellers... similar to Jesus and the written collection of stories in the Bible. The *Supernatural* fandom is an interesting case study due to the show’s religion-based story arcs and immense “religiously” devoted fan base.

Before continuing, it is important to provide a definition of religion. Catherine Albanese, a professor of Religious Studies at University of California—Santa Barbara argues that there are three types of definitions for religion: substantive, functional, and formal. For the purposes of this paper, I will define religion using her functional definitions. “Functional definitions of religion emphasize the effects of religion in actual

³ Jeffrey H. Mahan and Pete Ward. “Celebrity Worship as Parareligion: Bieber and the Beliebers,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, (California, University of California Press, 2017), 315.

⁴ University of Leicester Press Office, “Finding faith? Fandom and religion,” University of Leicester, July 20, 2015,

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/press/press-releases/2015/july/finding-faith-fandom-and-religion>

life. They stress the systems of meaning-making the religion provides and how it helps people deal with the ills, insecurities, and catastrophes of living.”⁵

⁵ Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981), xxi.

**Saving People, Hunting Things. The Family Business: Messages, Values and
Character Relationships that Foster a Community**

Supernatural presents itself as a television show about two brothers who travel the country hunting monsters and saving people. But most fans would say it is about two brothers willing to sacrifice anything to save each other. As the show has gone on, that fan description of devotion to the family unit has expanded to include Castiel and a few other characters as sort of “surrogate Winchesters.” The fan dedication to the show can be reduced down to one thing—family. This overarching theme is so important that it influenced the name of the *Supernatural* fandom itself—the SPN family. The community that the show fosters is considered by many fans to be a second family. The Winchesters view unyielding loyalty to family “as the organizing principle in [their lives]...the value or concern to which everything else is subordinate.”¹

The core of the show is the relationship between Dean and Sam. The brothers’ motto “...saving people, hunting things. The family business,” uttered by Dean to Sam in the first season (‘Wendigo’ Season 1, Episode 2) speaks to their common passion to protect mankind and their intense brotherly bond. Underneath the horror themed façade the show is about “the true value of family.”² In one of the show’s meta episodes, (‘The Real Ghostbusters’ Season 5, Episode 9) Damien, an attendee at the first ever

¹ Bruce David Forbes, “Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, (California, University of California Press, 2017), 10.

² Allison Broesder, “The Family in *Supernatural*,” in *Time Lords & Tribbles, Winchesters & Muggles: The Depaul Pop Culture Conference, a five year retrospective*, ed. Paul Booth and Isabella Menichiello (Chicago: DePaul University, 2017), 124.

‘Supernatural’ book convention, who is cosplaying as Sam, explains to Dean why the brother narrative is so critical to the fans. “In real life, he sells stereo equipment. I fix copiers. Our lives suck. But to be Sam and Dean, to wake up every morning and save the world. To have a brother who would die for you. Well, who wouldn’t want that?” Sam and Dean’s bond is something that every member of the fandom hopes to experience some day. It is something that “they take to be holy, sacred, or of the highest value.”³

When the Winchester family was introduced in the pilot on September 13, 2005 they were portrayed as the typical American nuclear family—the father, John Winchester, the mother, Mary and their sons, Dean and Sam. Within the first few moments of the show the family unit is shattered. Mary is brutally murdered by the demon Azazel, burned alive on the ceiling above Sam’s crib. As a result, John dedicated his life to avenging Mary’s murder, while at the same time raising his sons to be demon hunters with the intent to protect other innocent families. John spent weeks at a time away from the boys, hunting demons. This forced Dean, as a young boy, to become the primary parental figure to his younger brother, Sam. Dean’s entire life has been dedicated to protecting and taking care of Sam. The fierce love and devotion that the brothers have for each other (and to the people that they accept into their family) has dangerous implications. Although both Sam and Dean want to save the world, they refuse to sacrifice the other brother to do it.

³ Forbes, “Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places,” 10.



Figure 2.1 Fan edit about Sam and Dean's relationship.

However, Dean would sacrifice himself to save Sam and conversely Sam would willingly sacrifice himself to save Dean, which is, not coincidentally, how almost every season ends. A variation of this self-sacrificing scenario, fueled by brotherly love, is played out in each spring finale.

The 1967 Chevy Impala, affectionately named Baby, is an important symbol in the show and is considered by many to take on the role of a character rather than an object. The Impala embodies the only stability in Sam and Dean's lives, appearing in most of the episodes, as they traverse the country. The importance of the Impala in the Winchesters' lives and identities is most conspicuously mentioned in the season five finale ('Swan Song' Season 5, Episode 22). Chuck, the prophet, narrated the episode and solemnly stated:

On April 21, 1967, the 100 millionth GM vehicle rolled off the line at the plant in Janesville – a blue two-door Caprice. There was a big ceremony, speeches. The

lieutenant governor even showed up. Three days later, another car rolled off that same line. No one gave two craps about her. But they should have, because this 1967 Chevrolet Impala would turn out to be the most important car – no, the most important object – in pretty much the whole universe.

The Impala is a “symbol of their brotherhood”⁴ and plays a central role in the narrative structure of the show. The brothers have spent the majority of their lives driving around the country in the Impala, from childhood to adulthood. The car has made such an impact on the fandom that it is not uncommon for fans to cosplay as the Impala at conventions.

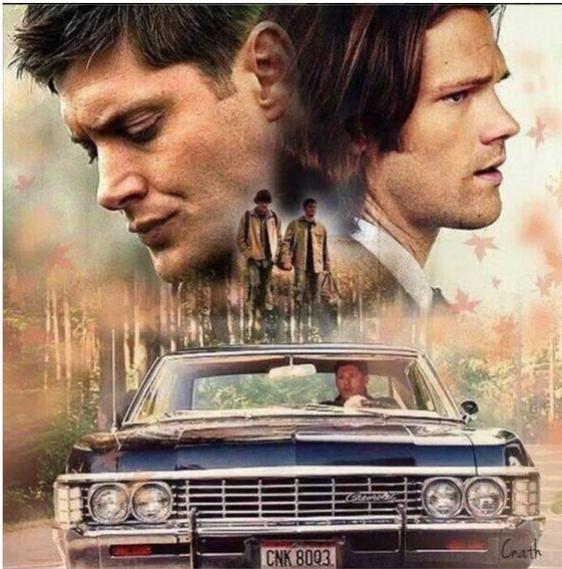


Figure 2.2 The Winchester brothers and the 1967 Impala fan art.

⁴ Charlotte E. Howell, “The Gospel of the Winchesters (And Their Fans): Neoreligious Fan Practices and Narrative in *Supernatural*,” *Media, Fans, and The Sacred* 4, no. 1 (August 2013): 24.



Figure 2.3 Example of a fan cosplaying as the Impala.

Supernatural is a long running series, and yet it is possible to count the number of episodes without a death on your fingers. So, it is of no surprise that the show has a long list of former characters. Additionally, *Supernatural* is one of the only television shows where death does not mean the end of a characters tenure. For instance, Dean Winchester has died over one hundred times, Sam Winchester has died six times, and Castiel has died five times. Not only does *Supernatural* present the viewer with unique concepts like the impermanence of death, in season twelve, Jack Klein's birth opened a rift to an alternate world ('Apocalypse World' Season 12, Episode 13). Apocalypse World is place where Sam and Dean were never born, and as a result, the Judeo-Christian apocalypse that the brothers successfully prevented, in season five, comes to fruition. The introduction of this alternate universe allowed the show's writers to bring back many of the fans' favorite characters in new ways.

The characters brought back on the show were the ones whose deaths proved most distressing to the fandom. Kevin Tran, Bobby Singer and Charlie Bradbury were extremely popular characters and each of their premature demises rattled the fandom. Kevin and Charlie were initially introduced relatively late in the series, towards the end of the seventh season, but Bobby was a fixture on the show from the season one finale through the season seven finale. Bobby acted as Sam and Dean's surrogate father and demon hunting mentor. His rough but loveable demeanor and unconditional love for the boys made him the paternal figure that the show was sorely lacking—he successfully filled the void vacated by John Winchester. Charlie was a fiery redheaded lesbian who worked in the Information Technology (IT) field and was a comic book nerd. She is often viewed as the writers' apology for the cringeworthy, 'Supernatural' book series super-fan Becky. Charlie is a fan favorite since she is considered by many to be the embodiment of the fandom on the show. After helping Sam and Dean stop the evil Leviathans (whom Castiel and Crowley recklessly released from purgatory) from drugging humans with the sinister intention of turning people into sluggish livestock. Charlie tried to avoid becoming a hunter like the Winchester boys but ultimately embraced the lifestyle when she returned in season eight.

Kevin joined the show the episode after Charlie. He was chosen to be the next Prophet of the Lord, and helped the Winchesters decipher the Angel Tablet as well as the Demon Tablet. Only the Prophet, the Scribe of God Metatron, or God himself could read what was encoded on the tablets. Before being chosen, Kevin was a typical high school senior, worried about the SAT and college applications. Both Kevin and Charlie were taken in by the Winchesters and treated like family. Therefore, their untimely deaths just

a few seasons later were extremely painful for Sam and Dean because they failed in their “big brother” roles and were not able to protect their “younger siblings.” Kevin’s death was particularly hard on Sam because he blamed himself. The evil Angel Gadreel, while using Sam as a vessel, killed Kevin. Kevin’s ghost returned to the show to tell Sam that he was not responsible for his death. With Kevin’s forgiveness and understanding—Sam could finally forgive himself and begin to heal.

The *Supernatural* character that the Winchester brothers are the most bonded to is Castiel. Since joining the show in season four, Castiel has been a constant companion to the brothers. Not only is his first appearance in ‘Lazarus Rising’ iconic, but also his first line, “I’m the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition,” is one of the most famous and quoted lines from the show. Castiel is emotionally close to both brothers but has admitted to having a “more profound bond with Dean.” The addition of Castiel to *Supernatural* widened the scope of the show to include angels, prophets, and God, although God did not reveal himself until season eleven. Castiel was the angel chosen by God to save Dean from Hell after his death in the season three finale. Dean’s rescue and retrieval from Hell was required so he could act as the Archangel Michael’s vessel in the prophesized, world-ending battle with Lucifer. This confrontation would take place later, in the season five finale. Unlike the other angels in the garrison (units or divisions in the Host of Heaven), Castiel’s first loyalty is always to human race. Which is why, when it comes to choosing sides, Castiel has historically chosen the Winchesters. Castiel has carelessly betrayed Sam and Dean a few times in the past, but his ultimate goal was and continues to be—to help the brothers, as well as humanity.

The themes of love and loyalty, regardless of blood relation, demonstrated by Sam, Dean, and their surrogate family are what draw most fans to the show. The idea that there is nothing, no line that will not be crossed, and no sacrifice too big, that would stop these characters from protecting the people they love is a compelling notion. This overwhelming devotion is something that everyone aspires to have in his or her life. The bond between the characters is commendable but the fandom is equally infatuated with the bond between the real-life people that are involved with the show. The stars of the show, Jensen Ross Ackles and Jared Tristan Padalecki, have formed a bond that, over the course of the last decade, has developed beyond friendship. They truly feel like the brothers they portray on screen. Both men were in their late twenties when the pilot premiered and they are now in their forties, married, with children. They were groomsmen at each other's weddings. Jensen's children refer to their father's co-star as "Uncle Jared" and Jared's children refer to Jensen as uncle, as well.

The character of Castiel was originally contracted to appear in a mere six episodes, therefore it took a little longer for the actor Misha Collins to bond with Jared and Jensen. The three of them are very good friends now, even though Misha is normally the subject of Jared and Jensen's pranks on set. Not only did the men meet their best friends on set, Jared met his wife, Genevieve Cortese, on the show. Genevieve played the demon Ruby in season four of *Supernatural*. Jensen's wife, Daneel Harris, has also appeared on the show as the Angel Anael, sometimes referred to as Sister Jo. Like Jared and Jensen, Genevieve and Daneel are the best of friends—sister-in-laws of a sort. Many members of the fandom are devoted to the show because of the talented cast members

that help make *Supernatural* possible. Not only are they genuine, nice people, but also they are just as dedicated to their fans as their fans are to them.

One way that *Supernatural* interacts with the fandom is through the meta episodes that have occurred throughout the series. The first of these episodes appears in season four ('The Monster at the End of This Book' Season 4, Episode 18). Sam and Dean learn that there is a book series called 'Supernatural' that is being written about their lives. As the brothers investigate, they learn that the book series has a cult following complete with disturbing online fanfiction. The novels are published under the pen name of Carver Edlund but they discover the author's real name is Chuck Shurley. Castiel reveals to the brothers that Chuck is a Prophet of the Lord. Castiel also informs Sam and Dean that the book series would come to be known as the Winchester Gospel to future generations. The books "can be interpreted as neoreligious objects because they enact the relationship between cult fans and their favored source text."⁵

Another meta episode materializes in season five ('The Real Ghostbusters' Season 5, Episode 9). 'Supernatural' super fan, Becky, tricked Sam and Dean into attending the inaugural 'Supernatural' book convention. Even though they don't want to be there, Sam and Dean reluctantly interact with cosplayers, while masking their shock at seeing people dressed as themselves. They experience a LARPing (Live Action Role Playing) competition firsthand, whose winner gets a \$50 Sizzler gift card. Of course, the fun and games are put on hold as ghosts threaten the safety of the people at the convention. There is a predominately comedic meta episode in season six which ('The

⁵ Howell, "The Gospel of the Winchesters (And Their Fans): Neoreligious Fan Practices and Narrative in *Supernatural*," 25.

French Mistake’ Season 6, Episode 15) charmingly shatters the fourth wall, defined as the invisible/imaginary wall that separates actors from the audience. Sam and Dean are sent to an alternate reality, where their lives are actually the TV show, *Supernatural*, and everyone thinks they are the actors, Jared and Jensen. They poke fun at themselves and the show: their past acting jobs, home lives, etc. Possibly the best part about this episode is Misha’s portrayal of himself. He seems like a loveable dork that just wants to fit in with Jared and Jensen. And his bad habit of overzealous and imprudent tweeting is on full display.

In the 200th episode of *Supernatural*, that takes place during season ten, (‘Fan Fiction’ Season 10, Episode 5) Sam and Dean investigate disappearances at an all girls’ high school, where they find that a group of students are performing their own musical interpretation of the ‘Supernatural’ book series. Sam and Dean learn the term “BM” which means “boy melodrama,” hear the scandalous ship name, Destiel, for the first time and are reminded that their half-brother, Adam Milligan, is still trapped in Hell (where he has been since the season five finale). This episode also features a few well-placed musical numbers, most notably, “Carry on Wayward Son.” This particular song by the band, Kansas, has become an anthem or theme song for the television series.

The acknowledgment of fan behavior within this episode is not an overt invitation to participate, but a demonstration that the producers/writers of the program are aware of exactly what their fandom is doing *without* an invitation. Whatever the producers’ stated intentions, whether their die-hard fans view this as an inclusive or exclusive act, a compliment or an insult, the end result is the same. The cult fan

is reminded that s/he cannot decide what is to be included and excluded, who can be complimented or insulted.⁶

⁶ Laura E. Felschow, "Hey, Check It Out, There's Actually Fans: (Dis)empowerment and (mis)representation of Cult Fandom in Supernatural." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4.0. (2010): n. pag. Web. 21 Nov. 2012.

There is No Singing in *Supernatural*: Fanfic, Fan Art and Fan Interpretation

The amount of time members of the *Supernatural* fandom devote to the show is, well, supernatural...

“Time spent on technology, digital media, and socializing in a virtual manner has not only replaced but arguable usurped old practices and beliefs, showing how popular culture could be moving from the profane to the sacred. Based upon sheer time and dedicated attention span, media have become the worshipped, proving a massive rupture in values and faith in the last half century from any time previous with the advent of an ever more variety of available frameworks to satisfy the seeming humanistic need to look for meaning outside of the individual.”¹

A typical fan spends his or her time watching episodes, reading and writing blogs, participating in discourse regarding the show’s canon and subtext, attending conventions, and creating content—such as, fanfiction, fan vids, and fan art. Fan content creation and distribution is at the heart of any fandom. The community functions primarily as a gift culture; relying on three crucial components—“to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.”² The value of this structure is not monetary. Instead, “the gifts have value within the fannish economy in that they are designed to create and cement a social structure.”³ The

¹ Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, *The Secular Religion of Fandom*, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016), 6.

² Karen Hellekson, “A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture.” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 114.

³ *Ibid.*, 115.

amount and quality of the content that a fan produces directly corresponds to the status of that fan within the community. “Women who have low prestige jobs or who are homemakers can gain national and even international recognition as fan writers and artists; fan publishing constitutes an alternative source of status, unacknowledged by the dominant social and economic systems but personally rewarding nevertheless.”⁴

Fanfiction is an early form of fan engagement that has garnered a lot of attention in recent years. Especially in regards to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise, which is a well-known fanfiction of *Twilight*. Although it is now a common topic in mainstream popular culture, fanfiction has been a well-protected fandom secret for decades. In fact, “*the first rule of fandom is: you do not talk about fanfic.*”⁵ Lynn Zubernis, a professor at West Chester University and Katherine Larsen, a professor at George Washington University, co-write about the *Supernatural* fandom, as well as participate in it. They acknowledge the internalized shame that fans are susceptible to feeling in regards to their interaction with the original text.⁶ They assert that this shame is not felt within the “safe space” provided by the fandom and only manifests itself when confronted by outsiders.

⁴ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 159.

⁵ Jules Wilkinson, “The Epic Love Story of *Supernatural* and Fanfic,” in *Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*, ed. Anne Jamison (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2013), 309.

⁶ Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis explore the theme of internalized shame throughout their book, *Fangasm: Supernatural Fangirls* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2013).

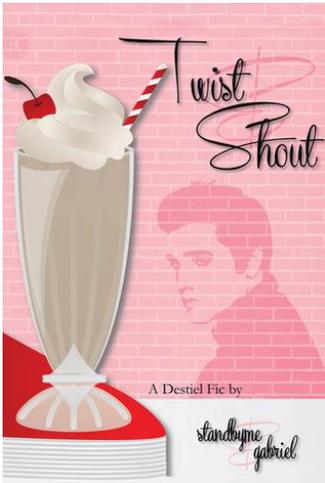


Figure 3.1 Cover art for a popular Destiel fanfic.

The internet has made it much easier for the fandom to interact and share fanworks. Fanfiction can be found on a plethora of websites, although there are a few dominant favorites: FF.net, Wattpad, AO3, and Tumblr. There are many subcategories of fanfiction, but the most common fanfic formats are the in-universe fic, the alternate universe or “AU,” and the work in progress “WIP,” which means that the fic is “posted in serial installments.”⁷ The fics produced also feature a variety of ships—heterosexual, slash, femslash, Genfic, RPF, and RPS. Although it is most common for fanfiction to include romantic relationships, platonic relationships can also be the subject of fanfic. As an alternative or companion to literary content, many fans produce fan art—paintings, drawings, photo manipulations, and fan videos. In the *Supernatural* fandom, the most common subjects of fanfic and fan art are Sam, Dean, and Castiel (and their real life counterparts).

⁷ Aja Romano, “Canon, fanon, shipping and more: a glossary of the tricky terminology that makes up fan culture, last modified June 7, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/6/7/11858680/fandom-glossary-fanfiction-explained>



Figure 3.2 Example of Team Free Will fan art.



Figure 3.3 Example of Castiel fan art.

Tumblr has become the primary website for fan content and discourse in recent years. There are three television fandoms that dominate the site: *Supernatural*, *Dr. Who*, and *Sherlock*—commonly referred to as *SuperWhoLock*. In my introduction, I stated that *Supernatural*'s dominant online fanbase, specifically on Tumblr and Instagram, was how

I was introduced to the show. I joyfully consumed copious amounts of fan art, gifs, and Tumblr posts, even without any exposure to the actual television series.

There are fewer opportunities for fans to interact with the source material and each other offline. Attending conventions is typically the only option. The company, Creation Entertainment, organizes television series specific conventions, with *Supernatural* being one of their most popular conventions. There are also events that are marketed to broader audiences, like the world famous San Diego Comic Con. Some have even compared the multi-day events to the Super Bowl, substituting football for fandoms. Conventions provide the opportunity for fans to interact with the creative side of the source material – the writers, directors, producers, actors, etc. – as well as purchase collectables, and meet and chat with fellow fans in person. Attendance for these events is limited and tickets are expensive, so those who are able to participate take full advantage of the events.

Gay Love Can Pierce Through the Veil of Death: The Importance of Slash Fiction

In the previous section, I examined content produced by fans. This section is devoted to content that focuses on gay relationships between the male characters, and actors, on *Supernatural*. These relationships, commonly abbreviated as ships, are not canon within the show itself. Ships emerge when fans detect chemistry between two characters and decide to create content inspired by that spark. I will focus on a few notable ships in this section: Sam/Dean (Wincest), Sam/Gabriel (Sabriel), and the most popular ship, Dean/Castiel (Destiel). I will also examine Real Person slash fiction (RPS)—Jared/Jenson (J2), Jared/Richard (very boringly called Jared&Richard), and Jensen/Misha (Cockles). Straight, female fans most commonly write slash fiction, something that the producers of the show are acutely aware of. Becky, the show’s interpretation or representation of female fandom—writes Wincest fanfiction.

Henry Jenkins argues that “slash fiction represents a reaction against the construction of male sexuality on television and in pornography; slash invites us to imagine something akin to the liberating transgression of gender hierarchy.”¹ That is, slash fiction is an opportunity for women to subvert the male gaze and objectify men rather than women; women want to explore the sexual desires that they are encouraged to suppress in mainstream society. Fandom is a welcome alternative or supplement “in a world where many young [people] will be appalled at how the male-dominated church

¹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 189.

leadership has made discrimination against women and homosexuals a defining feature”² of its mission.

The most controversial ship in the *Supernatural* fandom is Wincest—a combination of Winchester and Incest. This taboo ship is the manifestation of the fandom’s desire to see Sam and Dean’s brotherly bond develop into a sexual relationship. The first piece of fanfiction written about *Supernatural* was a Wincest slash fic.³ Because the initial seasons of the show focused almost exclusively on the brothers’ relationship, it is not surprising that their relationship dominated the fanfiction.

As Catherine Tosenberger argues in her study of Wincest fanfiction, the text invites the taboo: “Sam and Dean are unable to form romantic attachments to others, and therefore their love is locked in an eternal feedback loop, referring back only to itself. They don’t have anyone but each other (and their father) to love, and since their father’s death, they love none but each other.”⁴

Many fans are not comfortable with the incestuous nature of the ship and focused on the RPS alternative—J2. Not only is Wincest hotly debated within the fandom itself, but the show has also contributed canon discourse about the incestuous ship. In the episode, ‘The Monster at the End of this Book,’ Sam and Dean are doing research on the ‘Supernatural’ book series and happen upon online slash fiction.

Dean: What’s a slash fan?

Sam: As in Sam-slash-Dean...together.

² Bickerdike, *The Secular Religion of Fandom*, 12.

³ Wilkinson, “The Epic Love Story of Supernatural and Fanfic,” 309-10.

⁴ Howell, “The Gospel of the Winchesters (And Their Fans): Neoreligious Fan Practices and Narrative in *Supernatural*,” 20.

Dean: Like *together* together?

Sam: Yeah.

Dean (*horrified*): They do know we're brothers, right?

Sam: Doesn't seem to matter.

Dean: Oh, come on, that... that's just sick!⁵

Although most of the comments made on the show about Sam/Dean are judgmental, the creator of the show, Eric Kripke, and stars Jared and Jensen, have no issue with the ship. In fact, at one of the first *Supernatural* conventions, when Jensen was asked how he felt about fanfiction, he quipped, "My favorite is Wincest."⁶

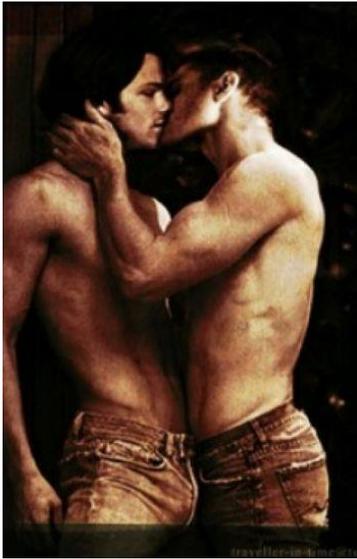


Figure 4.1 Example of Wincest fan art on Wattpad.

⁵ Art Herbig and Andrew F. Herrmann, "Polymediated Narrative: The Case of the Supernatural Episode 'Fan Fiction.'" *International Journal of Communication* 10, (2016): 758.

⁶ Larsen and Zubernis, *Fangasm: Supernatural Fangirls*, 33.

Another popular fandom ship is Sabriel, which is somewhat unexplainable since Sam and the Archangel Gabriel do not share much screen time, especially compared to the show's other most popular ships. Gabriel first appeared on the show in season two (impersonating Loki the Trickster God) but the ship did not build momentum until much later in season five ('Changing Channels' Season 5, Episode 8). In this episode, Gabriel trapped Sam and Dean inside TV land, with the goal of forcing them to play their roles in the upcoming apocalypse.

Although the two characters of Sam and Gabriel do not share much screen time, the fans are drawn to the ship for two reasons: (1) the opposing personalities of the characters and (2) the height difference between Sam and Gabriel—Jared is 6'5" and Richard is 5'8." Sam is the disciplined, responsible, mature type and Gabriel is the impulsive, reckless, and ridiculous type. Basically, fans love the idea of Gabriel acting as comic relief to Sam's uptight demeanor and Gabriel is valued for injecting childlike antics and levity into Sam's stressful hunter lifestyle.



Figure 4.2 Example of Sabriel fan art.

Gabriel has faked his own death countless times throughout the series, but Lucifer tells the Winchesters that Gabriel is really dead in season eleven, and that he is now the only useful archangel remaining. However, in season thirteen, Gabriel is discovered alive. He had been held captive in Hell. The character of Gabriel is a favorite on the show and many fans were very excited to have him back. Not only for his hilarious antics but also to witness more Sabriel interactions. However, fairly quickly upon his return, Gabriel had sex with Rowena, a powerful witch and Crowley's mother. Sabriel shippers felt betrayed by this development and wondered if the writers included that scene in an attempt to kill the Sabriel ship.

Destiel is by far the most popular ship in *Supernatural* fandom and is one of the best-known ships on the internet. The ship has also been the subject of some of the most popular *Supernatural* fanfics.

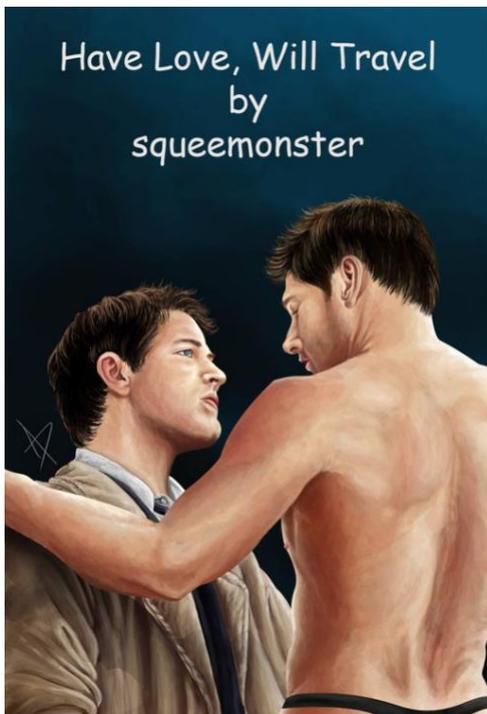


Figure 4.3 Cover art for a popular Destiel fanfic.

When Castiel was introduced on the show at the beginning of season four, the fans immediately noticed the chemistry between Dean and Castiel. Especially since Castiel's first words on the show were, "I'm the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition." In the season three finale, Dean died and went to Hell. Season four began with Dean waking up, buried, six months after he died. Castiel had been instructed by God to free Dean from Hell because God had plans for him. Castiel and Dean's bond grew quickly during the course of the show. The writers and the actors had been aware of the fandom's desire for Destiel to be canon and instead of sating that desire the writers have consistently participated in the practice of queerbaiting. That is, "a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility"⁷



Misha Collins ✓
@mishacollins

Following

Bert & Ernie were outed as gay, but their studio, @SesameWorkshop, denies it. All this gossip is outrageous! Never have we seen so many people getting so worked up over speculation about the sexual orientation of two fictional characters.

Hollywood Reporter ✓ @THR

Former #SesameStreet writer Mark Saltzman addressed the rumored relationship between the two puppets: "I always felt that without a huge agenda, when I was writing Bert & Ernie, they were. I didn't have any other way to contextualize them" thr.cm/iHmAjQ

3:41 PM - 18 Sep 2018

⁷ Judith Fathallah, "Moriarty's Ghost: Or the Queer Disruption of the BBC's Sherlock." *Television and New Media* 16, no. 5 (2015): 491.

Figure 4.3 Misha Collins tweet about Destiel being real.

Many characters make references to the close, intimate nature of Castiel and Dean's relationship.



#au in which angels and demons all know about dean and cas #oh wait

Figure 4.4 Angels and demons confirming Dean and Castiel's bond.

And the writers fan the flames by subtly including 1950s gay slang into Castiel and Dean's dialogue. The Destiel subtext in *Supernatural* is undeniable, even if the romantic relationship is not canon.



Figure 4.5 Example of subtle slang usage.

Destiel shippers have multiple convincing arguments regarding the validity of the relationship. The first of which I have already touched upon. Although Castiel is using a male vessel, angels have no gender. Not only that, Castiel has used a female vessel in the past and fans firmly believe that if Castiel were currently occupying a female vessel that Destiel would have become canon years ago. Another argument focuses on how the siren appeared to Dean in season four episode fourteen, 'Sex and Violence.' The brothers were investigating why three men killed their wives after having affairs with strippers from the same strip club. Sam and Dean found out that a siren, a creature that can shapeshift into whatever their prey desires most and then compel their prey to destroy their lives as a measure of devotion, was behind the murders. The siren drugged the men it seduced through shared saliva. The siren seduced Sam as a sexy female doctor and seduced Dean as a male FBI agent. Sam has sex with the doctor and falls under the siren's spell. Dean is drugged because he platonically shared his hip flask with the siren. The show tries to play

down the fact that the siren manifested as male for Dean by reiterating throughout the episode that Dean desired to have a closer bond with Sam, with the siren capitalizing on that desire. However, since Dean is the only “heterosexual” male that the siren chooses to seduce with a male appearance, many fans deem that as proof that Dean is bisexual. And there are plenty of other examples to draw upon as well.

Even though Destiel has never engaged in canonically sexual behavior, the fact that Castiel is in love with Dean is canon and has been confirmed by *Supernatural* writer, Robert Berens. Castiel even loses his wings and literally falls from Heaven for Dean. Throughout the show, both angels and demons mention how Dean is Castiel’s weakness.

Of course, there is always the possibility that the writers for the show are being censored by their bosses in the studio. “Fan writers, freed of the restraints of network censors, often want to explore the erotic dimension of characters’ lives. Their stories transform the relatively chaste, though often suggestive, world of popular television into an erogenous zone of sexual experimentation... the homosocial desires of series characters erupt into homoerotic passion as Kirk and Spock, Riker and Picard, Crockett and Castillo, even Simon and Simon become bedmates and lovers.”⁸

⁸ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 175.

**There's Nothing More Dangerous than Some A-hole Who Thinks He's on a Holy
Mission: Toxic Misrepresentations of Fandom**

Like any other community, the *Supernatural* fandom has members who misinterpret the messages of the show, add negative discourse, and generally engage with the show and fandom in a toxic manner. This behavior is eerily similar to those who use religion to justify their hateful rhetoric.

Fans are commonly viewed as crazy, obsessive people, especially fangirls. However, very few fans actually fit that description. The most infamous story in the *Supernatural* fandom is the 'Flying Fangirl.' At Jensen Ackles' first convention appearance, a fourteen-year-old girl jumped onto Jensen's back and would not let go. Jensen was shaken by the incident and increased his security.¹ Not only was the teenager removed from the convention, but the fandom as well. This incident was not premeditated; the girl was simply overwhelmed by seeing her favorite actor in person.

In a previous section, I discussed ships and how important they are for a fandom. It is normal for fans to have favorite ships. But it becomes toxic when fans become openly hostile to anyone or thing that could be considered an obstacle, preventing their preferred ships from being canon.

¹ Larsen and Zubernis, *Fangasm: Supernatural Fangirls*, 28.



Bex Taylor-Klaus ✓

@IBexWeBex



Sigh. The next over-the-top shipper who thinks I'm talking about their precious ship and sends me a death threat tonight is gonna get a call from the cops at 4am

7:04 PM · 25 Jul 18

181 Retweets **1,165 Likes**

Figure 5.1 Example of how intense certain shippers are.

Many J2 super fans are guilty of this hateful behavior. These fans stubbornly believe that Jared and Jensen are secretly in love, even with all the evidence to the contrary. One overzealous J2 shipper had been cited for giving Jared's wife, Gen, a voodoo doll version of herself with nails in it. These super fans have even attempted to have Misha removed from the show in 2012, and dubbed May 31st as I Hate Misha Collins Day.²

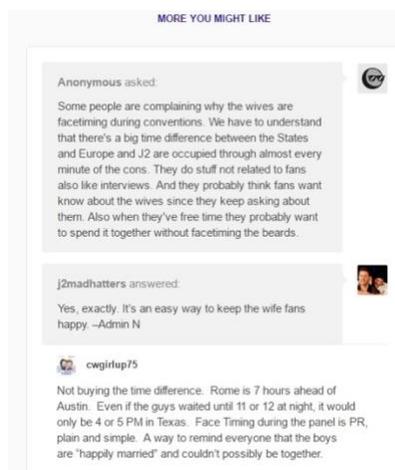


Figure 5.1 Example of J2 conspiracy theories.

² Selina Wilken, "Spiteful 'Supernatural' fans try to get Misha Collins fired, fail epically," May 31, 2012, <https://www.hypable.com/spiteful-supernatural-fans-try-to-get-misha-collins-fired-fail-epically/>

Another toxic aspect of fandom, not specific to the *Supernatural* fandom, is intra-fandom hate. This is most commonly seen in response to “the reading and writing of real person fiction.”³ For *Supernatural*, that is the fan that relentlessly argues the validity of a romantic relationship between Jared and Jensen or Jensen and Misha. These small subsets of troubled fans are viewed within the fandom, as having a negative impact on the way the fandom is perceived by the general public.

Two other characters that faced intense fan backlash were Jo Harvelle and Garth Fitzgerald IV. Jo and her mother, Ellen, were introduced in season two. Together they owned and operated a bar called, The Roadhouse. Jo’s father had died on a hunt when she was ten years old and so sole aspiration was to be was a hunter. But her mother was very protective and reluctant to let Jo hunt demons; she had already lost her husband after all. Jo and Dean flirted, but it never went further than that. In fact, their relationship resembled an older brother interacting with a younger sister. However, many fans could not tolerate the slightest possibility of Dean having a female love interest. To pacify the fans, Jo was killed off in season five. Jo made a short appearance as a ghost in season seven and made it clear that she forgave Dean for her death. Garth was also introduced in season seven, after Bobby’s death at the end of that season. Garth took over Bobby’s role in the hunting community. Originally, he was a popular recurring character, but large contingents of fans were outraged by the idea of Garth replacing Bobby so quickly on the heels of his death. As a result of intense bullying on social media, DJ Qualls, the actor who played Garth, decided to take some time away from the show. A

³ Bethan Jones, “‘I Will Throw You off Your Ship and You Will Drown and Die’: Death Threats, Intra-Fandom Hate, and the Performance of Fangirling,” in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 60.

concession to the fans for hurt feelings about the memory of Bobby being shunt aside prematurely. Garth's last appearance on the series was season nine, episode twelve. But there are rumors that Garth will be returning to the show in the second half of season fourteen. Although toxic behavior is common in both religious institutions and fandom communities, the people that participate in such negative ways are missing the broader inclusive messages of their sacred text.

This is the End of All Things: Final Thoughts

The *Supernatural* fandom is a community of people that are bonded together by their shared love of a television show about two brothers. The fans are drawn to the show by the themes of family, sacrifice for the greater good, and dedicating one's life to helping others. The values that drive Sam and Dean to save the world, time and time again, inspire the fans to incorporate those values into their own lives. The fandom fulfills the functional definitions of fandom, and overall has a positive impact on the lives of the people who participate in the community. As a person who doesn't necessarily view herself as religious, but participates in multiple fandoms, I have thoroughly enjoyed researching the ways in which fandom can act as a substitute for religion. If I were to continue this paper, I would explore the religious practices, symbols, and narratives of other fandoms. Specifically, music and movie fandoms.



Figure 6.1 Intertextual reference to *Gilmore Girls*.

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Important Characters List

Main Characters (Cast)

Sam Winchester (Jared Padalecki) – Sam attempted to leave hunting behind and have a normal life. He only truly devotes himself to hunting after the death of his long-time girlfriend Jess. He travels around the country with his older brother in their '67 Impala, “Baby.”

Dean Winchester (Jensen Ackles) – Dean has spent his entire life trying to make his father proud and protecting his younger brother.

Castiel/Jimmy Novak (Misha Collins) – Cas is an Angel of the Lord and was sent by God to rescue Dean from Hell at the beginning of season four. The vessel that he is occupying is named, Jimmy Novak.

Crowley (Mark A. Sheppard) – Crowley is a crossroads demon and is constantly working to maintain his position as the King of Hell.

Lucifer/Nick (Mark Pellegrino) – the archangel feels abandoned by God and resents all humans. In season twelve he produced a Nephilim offspring.

Jack (Alexander Calvert) – Jack is Lucifer’s son but has chosen Castiel to be his father instead. His mother died in childbirth and as a protective measure Jack quickly grew to adulthood. Castiel, Dean, and Sam are currently co-parenting him.

Recurring Characters (Cast)

Ruby (Katie Cassidy and Genevieve Cortese) – Ruby is a demon that manipulates Sam into opening Lucifer's cage and initiating the apocalypse.

Bobby Singer (Jim Beaver) – Bobby acts as a surrogate father and mentor, to Sam and Dean.

John Winchester (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) – John is Sam and Dean's biological father. He spent most of their young lives trying to avenge the murder of their mother rather than raising them. However, he makes the ultimate parental sacrifice. In order to save Dean's life, John trades his soul to the demon he had been hunting.

Mary Winchester (Samantha Smith) – Mary was killed when Sam was six months old and Dean was three years old. God's sister Amara, as a favor to Dean, brought her back to life in the season twelve premiere.

Jody Mills (Kim Rhodes) – Jody is a sheriff/hunter who serves as a mother figure for Sam and Dean.

Chuck Shurley (Rob Benedict) – Chuck was originally introduced as a Prophet of the Lord, responsible for writing the 'Supernatural' book series featured on the show. In season eleven, Chuck reveals himself to be God.

Ellen Harvelle (Samantha Ferris) – Ellen was a hunter and former friend of John Winchester. She owned a dive bar called, The Roadhouse, and she had a brief romance with Bobby Singer.

Jo Harvelle (Alona Tal) – Jo was Ellen's daughter. She was a possible romantic interest for Dean; however, their relationship was more akin to that of a brother and sister.

Claire Novak (Kathryn Newton) – Claire is the daughter of Jimmy Novak, Castiel's vessel. Claire became a hunter because of what happened to her family. She currently lives with Jody and few other female hunters.

Becky Rosen (Emily Perkins) – Becky was portrayed as the Winchester's number one fan. She was obsessed with the book series that Chuck authored and often went too far when showing her adoration for the brothers.

Garth Fitzgerald IV (DJ Qualls) – Garth is a hunter and good friend of Sam and Dean, but he hasn't been seen since he was turned into a werewolf. There are rumors that Garth will be back for some episodes in season fourteen.

Charlie Bradbury (Felicia Day) – Charlie was a computer genius that Sam and Dean met while fighting the Leviathans in season seven. She is a proud lesbian and all around adorable fangirl. Many fans of the series see Charlie as the writers' apology for Becky.

Kevin Tran (Osric Tran) – Kevin was a Prophet of the Lord who helped Sam and Dean decipher both the Demon Tablet and Angel Tablet.

Gabriel (Richard Speight Jr.) – the archangel pretended to be the Norse trickster god, Loki, until he revealed his true identity in an attempted to convince the Winchester brothers help to defeat Michael and Lucifer, and stop fighting the impending apocalypse.

Rowena (Ruth Connell) – Rowena is a powerful witch who is skilled at self-preservation. She tends to only help Sam and Dean when it benefits her. Rowena is also Crowley's birthmother, back when he was human.

Popular Ships

Fictional Characters

Destiel – Dean and Cas; has also been referred to as CasDean

Sabriel – Sam and Gabriel

Wincest – Sam and Dean; the most controversial ship in the fandom

Wincestiel – Sam, Dean, and Cas; this ménage à trios is also platonically referred to as

Team Free Will

Real People

Cockles – Misha Collins and Jensen Ackles

J2 – Jensen and Jared

J2M – Jensen, Jared, and Misha