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Review

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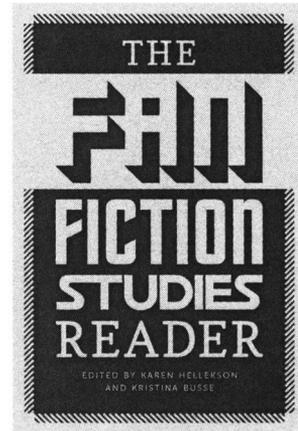
The Fan Fiction Studies Reader

edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. University of Iowa Press.
2014. \$29.95 paper; \$29.95 e-book. 276 pages.

reviewed by ANNE KUSTRITZ

The *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, who also edited *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, offers a vital set of shared resources to old, new, and future fan studies scholars.¹ Although it cannot completely avoid the pitfalls intrinsic to canon construction, the volume navigates and negotiates those limitations admirably. As the editors rightly point out, changes in both culture and scholarship make this an ideal moment for the publication of a scholarly reader about fan fiction, or stories written by amateur authors about a previously published source or public figure. Fan fiction's importance to contemporary culture is most clearly summarized by Hellekson and Busse when they note that "the unprecedented success of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, and the media attention it has prompted, might single-handedly justify a need to critically and comprehensively theorize fan fiction studies."² Our modern post-*Fifty Shades of Grey* media world, in which *Twilight* fan fiction can become a multimillion-dollar enterprise that mainstreams once-underground female sexual expression—rebranded by the suddenly ubiquitous term *mommy porn*—encapsulates the incredible influx of industry and scholarly interest in fan activities; yet simultaneously, heightened mainstream awareness of fan fiction also indicates the dangers of mistakenly separating *Fifty Shades* from a much longer history of fan production and scholarship as the industry repackages fan works for new audiences.³

Fans and fan fiction have become increasingly prominent in contemporary culture for at least two entwined reasons: first, fan practices



1 Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006); Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014) (hereafter *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*).

2 E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 3.

3 Stephanie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005).

once seen as unusual or even abnormal now make up a large portion of mainstream digital culture and the daily lives of many nonfans; and second, the media industry places ever-greater emphasis on cultivating, maintaining, and communicating with fan audiences. Digital technologies like file sharing, television on DVDs, DVRs, and computer video-editing software extend the practices of cult audiences to mass audiences, normalizing repeat and binge viewing, as well as ripping, remixing, and recirculating both professional and amateur media. In this environment, even once relatively hidden practices like fan fiction circulate much more visibly online, finding new audiences while also drawing the scrutiny of media professionals.

For the industry, changing technologies and audience practices have provoked many responses, from protective panic to wholesale embrace of digital fandom's opportunities. Corporations attempt to tap fan fiction either by republishing fan works for profit, as in *Fifty Shades*; monetizing existing fan works through legal means by asserting copyright claims; constructing their own private online spaces and inviting fans to produce works there; or viewing independent fan communities as a form of free advertising and amplifying their existence and visibility through closer contact with industry professionals. Actors like Misha Collins and Orlando Jones, who read fan fiction about themselves and promote it through social networking platforms like Twitter, mark an extreme of the latter strategy, and show how far fan fiction has moved from underground to mainstream culture.

In response to fandom and fan fiction's rising visibility and influence in mass culture, the amount and scope of scholarly work on fans has also expanded in recent years, bringing a wave of new scholars, methods, and productivity; fan-related panels currently appear in most media-related professional conferences; the journals *Transformative Works and Cultures* and *Journal of Fandom Studies* dedicate themselves solely to fan studies texts, and scholarly books increasingly appear in the listings of a variety of presses. Hellekson and Busse thus note that transformations in the scholarly (sub)field can be partially measured in the distance and difference in tone between Henry Jenkins's two landmark books: *Textual Poachers*, published in 1992, and *Convergence Culture*, published in 2006.⁴ They write that, "whereas Jenkins's early work suggests that fans are an ideal audience and that producers should pay attention to them, his latter work on media convergence addresses how producers mobilize fans and simulate fan spaces."⁵ This *Fan Fiction Studies Reader* comes at a point in history when the main questions of the field have shifted dramatically, making some of the early essays in the collection seem, as Hellekson and Busse note, somewhat quaint as they describe in rich detail how computer newsgroups functioned or devote themselves to a thorough defense of fan activities once seen as extreme but now taken for granted as part and parcel of modern digitally mediated existence.⁶ In other words, while the early scholars of fan studies often exerted considerable effort in defending fans and the right to study them, and although the contemporary legitimacy of scholarship

4 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

5 Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 22.

6 *Ibid.*, 23.

on fan topics including fan fiction is still not uncontested, both the cultural and the disciplinary landscape have shifted to make much more space for fan studies scholars to establish themselves.

Yet these very marks of success, as fan scholarship comes into its own as an established sub- and/or interfield or discipline, also create new challenges. The growth of digital-born fan practices, and scholars drawn to the field because of fans' newfound visibility and impact, create an exciting environment of innovation and a boom in research and publication, but also at times they introduce the possibility of losing touch with older predigital fan communities, continuities in fan practices over time, and the existence of an ongoing scholarly discussion about fans that predates but still bears relevance for Internet-based fandom. Hellekson and Busse repeatedly make this argument both implicitly and explicitly when they stress the usefulness of the volume for classrooms, students, early-career researchers, and those scholars established in other fields who are turning their attention to fandom for the first time: this collection of classic essays on predigital and early Internet fandom provides a necessary grounding in fan studies scholarship for the study of modern (and future) fan cultures. The production of a scholarly reader, handbook, or companion often encapsulates pressures around defining a relatively new field's identity, negotiating its limits, and setting the agenda for future research. *Fan Fiction Studies Reader* performs the invaluable service of centralizing an often-scattered subdiscipline and assembling a shared base through which scholars working in diverse disciplines and methods can have a common language and conversation. In this, the editors' detailed introduction and preface to each part proves as important as the selection of texts themselves, as they insightfully thematize and organize decades of scholarly literature from media studies, literary theory, sociology, ethnography, and performance into discrete patterns and approaches, all with their own context and history.

Hellekson and Busse identify six central themes that run throughout the history of fan fiction scholarship and the book's four units: fan fiction as interpretation of the source text, as communal gesture, as sociopolitical argument, as individual engagement and identificatory practice, as one element of audience response, and as pedagogical tool.⁷ These approaches and debates provide an important sense of continuity throughout the volume, as many of the essays can be read as participating in a conversation with one another on these topics. Keeping these six concepts in mind makes the book seem more like a dialogue that one can easily imagine continuing to the present rather than a series of isolated but historically important classic texts. The four units of the book likewise reinforce the feeling that essays that originally appeared across different disciplines and across large periods of time still have something productive to say to each other and to researchers working with these methods today. Thus, when paired with Roberta Pearson's 1997 discussion of early computer discussion boards, and Cornel Sandvoss's 2007 essay on contemporary literary theory, an excerpt from Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* not only appears as an artifact recording a long-past era of predigital fandom but also becomes part of an ongoing discussion of how fans exert agency through the industrial strategies and technological affordances

7 Ibid., 8–9.

of a given moment in history.⁸ Likewise, pairing Joanna Russ, Patricia Frazer Lamb, and Diana Veith, who each discussed sexual politics in homoerotic male/male slash fan fiction in the context of the highly polarized “porn wars” of the 1980s, with Sara Gwenllian-Jones’s 2002 article on the sexual politics of rewriting Xena also constructs surprising continuities.⁹ This cluster not only demonstrates how fans’ sexual norms have expanded on the Internet but also charts the profound shifts in feminist debates about sex and representation over the past three decades, making modern third-wave and postfeminist positions seem more like an extension of rather than a break with Russ, Lamb, and Veith’s engagement with the pleasures and dangers of romance, erotica, and porn.

In addition, framing the essays within four methods—literature, identity and feminism, affect, and performance—also implicitly asserts that these modes were historically most important to the development of fan fiction studies and will continue to offer fruitful pathways for future researchers. Thus, the organization of the book documents and canonizes a particular version of fan studies history—one that is multivocal and interdisciplinary but also still fundamentally engaged in a shared debate over the aesthetic, political, and cultural significance of fan fiction. However, this underlying argument also serves to downplay the extent to which many of these essays do not overtly respond to or cite each other, and often predominantly respond to concerns within their own separate disciplines, while the *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*’s centralization of humanities and ethnographic methods also excludes other disciplines and methods, such as quantitative psychology.

Thus, while the *Fan Fiction Studies Reader* helps preserve the history of fan scholarship in contemporary conversations and offers coherency to the development of fan studies, canon formation always remains a fraught endeavor, with the potential to forget as much as it remembers. By institutionalizing some texts, methods, and debates as central, it inherently makes others peripheral or potentially invisible. The editors acknowledge these complications throughout and often offer lengthy explanations for the selection and exclusion of particular texts and topics, as in their decision to focus on Western, written fan fiction at the expense of other fan works, like art and video, and other fan creative traditions, like Japanese *yaoi*.¹⁰ In most instances, the editors include essays from across an ideological spectrum that create a productive dialogue through their disagreements and overlaps. In their thorough contextualization of the volume and each subsequent part, they maintain a scrupulously evenhanded tone, presenting the history of debates in the field without taking sides and including representative articles from many perspectives. Yet gaps and potential judgments about the relative value of various articles and approaches inevitably remain, for example

8 Henry Jenkins, “Textual Poachers,” in *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 26–43; Roberta Pearson, “It’s Always 1895: Sherlock Holmes in Cyberspace,” in *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 44–60; Cornel Sandvoss, “The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture,” in *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 61–74.

9 Joanna Russ, “Pornography by Women for Women with Love,” in *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 82–96; Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana Veith, “Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines,” in *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 97–115; Sara Gwenllian Jones, “The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters,” in *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 116–130.

10 Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 2.

in the volume's lack of quantitative work or a very minor mention of Sandvoss's approach as "more philosophical," which could suggest by implication that the feminist essays that follow are less theoretically rigorous.¹¹ One might question as well whether the organization of essays into groups inherently follows a thesis-antithesis-synthesis model, wherein the last essay of each cluster unfairly appears to be positioned as advanced and superior in relation to the others; thus, for example, compared to Russ's and Lamb and Veith's articles, Jones's piece may seem not merely like a response to more recent feminist theory but like a more sophisticated and politically valuable form of feminism, by virtue of its position as the volume's last word on the topic.

Hellekson and Busse nevertheless navigate these potential objections by constantly reminding readers to contextualize even these pieces, potentially canonized through their placement in the *Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, within a rapidly expanding field of scholarly inquiry. They do so partly by including a voluminous bibliography and partly by situating each part within both its historical and its contemporary context, narrating not only what made these pieces important for their time and influential since their publication but also how more recent scholars have reinterpreted and added to these earlier works. By rigorously and widely citing scholarly literature from numerous disciplinary and ideological perspectives, Hellekson and Busse insistently frame their *Fan Fiction Studies Reader* not as one-stop shopping for everything one must know in order to go forth and write contemporary fan studies scholarship, but as a shared starting point and a first step. The volume thus does not create a sense of closure but demonstrates its own limits by repeatedly directing readers elsewhere, to the articles that exceed the space of the collection and the work yet to be written. Much like the fan fiction it analyzes, this volume offers endless opportunities to investigate further, and eventually to remix, rework, rewrite, and contribute to future scholarship. Ultimately, these texts are still poised to become a fan studies canon, with all that implies in terms of both increased coherence for the discipline and the possibility of the erasure of other works; yet as new generations of fan scholars enter the field, this text also serves as a vital form of memory, as well as an open invitation for readers to become the authors of a new generation of fan fiction studies. *

11 Ibid., 23.