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Representations of fanfiction in the works of Rainbow Rowell; ‘Borrowing... Repurposing. Remixing. Sampling’

Abstract:

Fanfiction is the realm of young people – usually young women. It offers a space for them to explore sexuality, relationship dynamics, notions of power, and agency in a safe space with recognisable characters and situations. Fanfiction tropes have occasionally found their way into published works, and some contemporary published authors began their careers as young fanfiction writers, but the fanfiction writing community has often drawn derision in popular culture. This paper examines the representation of fanfiction tropes and authors in the works of Rainbow Rowell, and argues that Rowell’s books *Fangirl* and *Carry On* model a more positive and inclusive approach to representing fanfiction. While *Fangirl* celebrates the work of fanfiction authors by exploring the positive effects of fanfiction writing practice, the supportive community which surrounds these authors, and the socio-cultural benefits to exploring sexuality and relationship dynamics through vicarious experience, *Carry On* offers a practical demonstration and model of fanfiction in action. Rowell’s works offer a metatextual encounter with fanfiction writing and community which celebrates the practice rather than condemning it.

Biographical note:

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Key words:

Young adult fiction – LGBTQ+ – fan studies – metatext – Rainbow Rowell – fanfiction

Introduction

Scholars have examined the potential educational benefits of fanfiction to authors and readers (Curwood, Magnifico and Lammers 2013; Citton 2015; Manifold 2009; Turk 2014), as well as the cultural benefits of producing texts which are not limited by the hegemonic concerns of mainstream publishers (Allington 2007; Tosenberger 2008; Brennan 2013). These theorists have concluded that writing fanfiction benefits not only the authors—who practice their craft in a safe space, learn how to develop narrative, setting and characterisation, and engage with feedback from within the community—but also readers who encounter issues and themes in fanfiction that are absent or sanitised in mainstream fiction. There has also been some significant work in the examination of traditions and tropes in fanfiction, and how they are expressed, such as slash relationships in the *Harry Potter* fandom (Tosenberger 2008), cross-media engagement through fan-produced works (Van Steenhuyse 2014), and the gift economy of fan labour (Turk 2014). This paper explores the representation of fanfiction in published, mainstream texts, focussing specifically on the works of Rainbow Rowell: *Fangirl* (2013) and *Carry On* (2015), and argues that Rowell's works engage in a metatextual encounter with the fanfiction community by celebrating and modelling the practice of writing it.

What is fanfiction?

Fanfiction offers a space for young authors to explore sexuality, power, relationship dynamics and agency through characters and stories that they are already familiar with in a community of like-minded people. As stated above, since the originary texts are protected by copyright, the fans cannot make profit on their derivative works—they can remix the original, repurpose and sample, but they must acknowledge the works which inspired theirs and or else ensure that their own work is so different that the relationship between the fanfic and the originary text is minimal. They explore the 'What if'—what if this character was a woman? What if this character were in a different universe? What if a new character were placed into this universe? These what if questions create a fertile ground for innovation and exploration of new ideas in the context of older, well-established stories. It is both derivative and transformative (Viars and Coker 2015).

Young adult fiction has long been a genre where innovation and exploration are an expectation (Kneen 2015; Dean-Ruzicka 2014; Curwood 2013), though these innovations can occasionally be limited by cultural gatekeepers and a desire to synthesise the texts that young people engage with (Nikolajeva 2009; Zipes 2002; 2009). Fanfiction is predominately produced *by* young people, and so it engages with many issues and themes which are relevant to young readers but remains largely absent from the narratives they have traditionally consumed—with mainstream publishers being slow to catch up. Fanfiction can, in some ways, act as proof that innovative cultural ideas (such as LGBTQ+ representation, female representation, etc) can form the basis of a strong story through its incorporation into existing stories. These fan works, as Curwood, Magnifico and Lammers (2013) note move away from the traditional ideal of texts created by a producer for a consumer:

[r]ather than being static, linear, individually created, and print based, these texts are fluid, dynamic, nonlinear, and often collaboratively constructed. Moreover, to engage in meaning-

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making activities with these texts, individuals must simultaneously read a variety of modes of representation ... which may occur in diverse, spatial contexts (678).

Essentially, the Internet has brought with it an environment that gives youth the power to engage creatively and critically with texts produced for them by adults. Online spaces have the capacity to turn consumers into 'prosumers'—young people who engage with the text as a secondary producer (Seymour, Roth and Flegel 2015).

Fanfiction has made its way into the mainstream with the release of *50 Shades of Grey* (James 2011), though published works have resembled fanfiction in the past in that they change aspects of other published works in order to engage creatively and critically with them. For example, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series (Larsson 2005) could be read as an 'alternative universe'—or AU—fanfic of *Pippi Longstocking* (Lindgren 1945) because of the resemblance between the two main characters, Pippi and Lisbeth. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (Maguire 1995) is a pre-canon (a story told before the events of the originary narrative) tale of *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1900) which casts a feminist spotlight female characters (Wolf 2011; Schrader 2013). There have been some arguments that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954) saga is essentially a fanfic of medieval traditions (Abrahamson 2013).

Young adult (YA) fiction engages with many traditions from the fanfiction writing community, though as stated above it has been slow to adapt and does not engage as readily as fanfiction does. It is difficult to tell whether the integration of minority groups in contemporary writing is a result of developing fanfiction communities, or whether there is just more discussion and engagement *overall* with previously controversial topics which have been der rigour in the online space but less acceptable in the mainstream until very recently. Regardless, there are recognisable elements from fanfiction in mainstream YA stories published in the last several decades. Fanfiction may or may not have fast-forwarded the process, but it has created an awareness and acceptance of minority issues among young readers.

Fanfiction tropes and traditions which have made their way into the mainstream can include slash stories (*The Song of Achilles: A Novel* (Miller 2012) is a re-telling of Homer's *Illiad* from the perspective of Achille's lover, Patroclus), alternate universes (there was controversy when Cassandra Claire's *Mortal Instruments* (2007-2014) began as a *Harry Potter* fanfic (Baker-Whitelaw 2013 <http://www.dailydot.com/fandom/fandom-guide-cassandra-clare-mortal-instruments/>)), and more confronting re-imaginings of sanitised stories for young people (Disney Press's *Twisted Tales* is a series of young adult retellings of popular Disney movies (Braswell 2016)). Fanfiction is a space for innovation, imagining old texts in new ways, and engaging with often exciting and controversial issues. The YA genre is similarly preoccupied with exploring new issues and new ideas in order to appeal to an audience that is one of the most socially and culturally engaged to come (Curwood et al 2013; Jenkins 2006). A resemblance between the two is therefore reasonable and recognisable.

The fact that tropes and traditions from fanfiction are making their way into mainstream fiction more readily than ever before demonstrates the power of the genre, as well as the legitimacy of reimagining texts to acknowledge certain marginalised and sidelined groups. There is, however, less of a recognition among publishers and authors of the creative debt

that YA owes to fanfiction. Cassandra Claire has distanced herself from her past as a fanfiction author (Baker-Whitelaw 2013), and the mainstream published stories which resemble fanfiction (*Song of Achilles*, *Wicked* and so on) are very rarely pitched as such in advertising. This could be a result of the popular, mainstream culture perception of fanfiction as plagiarism, with some critics arguing that the fiction cannot be legitimate because it is not ‘original’ (Lai 2013; Fforde cited in Smedley 2013). There is also concern that fanfiction will have a negative effect on social development. Steve Downes (2014), a contemporary Irish poet, historian and novelist, writes that fanfiction causes ‘the separation of young people from their own lives into the virtual lives of FanFic’, though his conclusions appear to be based on one verbal conversation with a fanfiction writer. Downes also goes on to argue that the staggering word counts that some fanfiction authors are producing (up to 300,000 words a year according to his research) is ‘wasted’ as the vast majority of FanFic authors will not go on to write in any professional sense’:

Additionally, the cost to their private lives, their social development and their social interaction skills outside of internet forums can only be detrimental, not to mention the diversion from study, which could have a huge effect on their college and career prospects (np).

I would argue that these perceptions are misguided. For one thing, an argument could be made that very few authors—whether they begin writing fanfiction or not—are able to cultivate a professional career in the contemporary publishing landscape. There is little evidence to indicate a significant detriment to young people who engage in fanfiction writing, and a lot of evidence (as explored above) of the benefits of engaging in fan communities and using fan labour platforms to encourage critical and creative thinking around social justice issues. Nevertheless, these expectations and stereotypes persist—labelling fanfiction writers and consumers as emotionally stunted thieves rehashing other peoples’ work for their own amusement.

The fanfic author in Fangirl

Rainbow Rowell’s *Fangirl* (2013) portrays a prolific fanfiction author, Cath, as she negotiates real-world reactions to her work and the apparent tension between ‘real’ writing and the writing she produces as part of the *Simon Snow and the Mage’s Heir* fan community. *Carry On* (Rowell 2015) is presented as a fanfic of the fictional book series *Simon Snow and the Mage’s Heir*, which is loosely based on the *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997-2007) series, and is the fanfic that Cath is writing during the events of *Fangirl*.

Cath is shown to be very anxious of the real world. She writes fanfiction of *Simon Snow and the Mage’s Heir*, focusing on the (not canon) relationship between Simon Snow and his nemesis Baz, in order to avoid the inter-personal relationships that she is having trouble maintaining in the real-world. Excerpts of her fanfics are used throughout the novel to show the relationship between her real-world experience of moving away from home and starting college and the fanfics she writes. Cath’s fanfiction explores issues of trust, engagement, and taking romantic risks, while she herself is shown to shun most of these issues—at least in the beginning of the narrative. My reading of the character is that, although she can control the events and characters in her fanfiction, she is shown to be unable to control her *own* story,

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and so she lives vicariously through Simon and Baz. The narrative shows Cath's changing relationship with the real-world, and how her engagement with fanfiction has allowed her to develop the skills she needs to approach situations when she is pushed out of her comfort zone by living vicariously through her characters in a safe, supportive online space.

Fanfiction in *Fangirl* is portrayed as drawing general bemusement from most characters. When Cath explains to her college roommate that she spends much of her time writing about a romance between two male characters, her roommate responds with good-humoured dismissal:

“When I write them,” Cath said, “they’re in love.”

“What do you mean when *you* write them?” Reagan stopped, pulling her T-shirt down over her head. “No, you know what? Never mind. I don’t want to know. It’s already hard enough to make eye contact with you” (KL 641-643).

Other characters, like Levi, Cath's love interest, respond with curiosity: “*You write stories about Simon Snow ...*” “You think this is funny.” “Yes,” Levi said. “But also sort of cool. Tell me about your stories.” (KL 1716-1718, *emphasis in original*). These different responses to Cath's fanfiction writing are important because they establish the real-world reactions that people have to fanfic writing. These reactions are then juxtaposed by the online responses—comments on Cath's fiction that she reads regularly—which are almost universally positive and encouraging. It shows the reader what real-world fanfiction authors can expect when they try to explain their hobby to non-fans.

Cath's fanfiction creates narrative tension when her creative writing professor accuses her of making an ‘immature mistake’ when she submits fanfiction for a university assignment (KL 1469):

“This is plagiarism ... These characters, this whole world belongs to someone else.”

“But the story is mine.”

“The characters and the world make the story... you can’t just steal someone else’s story and rearrange the characters” (KL 1451-1461).

Cath's professor is shown focusing almost entirely on the ‘originality’ of the stories, and the fact that Cath ought to be practicing original writing as part of her university studies. Importantly, her professor does not offer any critical feedback on the piece itself; after it is established that the submission is fanfic, the professor refuses to engage with it. This is shown to have such an adverse affect on Cath's engagement with the class that she nearly drops out: ‘Once I realized that it wasn’t right for me, I couldn’t bring myself to do it anymore. I just wanted to move on’ (KL 3724-3725). The place of fanfiction in the university setting is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is a question with a lot of potential for discussion in university circles. In this case, Rowell shows how being invalidated in a university setting creates an anxiety around writing practice for this particular character—going from a welcoming, engaging space online, to a space in the real world where her work isn’t even read by virtue of its perceived originality, Cath is shown to seriously consider changing her major. So fanfiction is framed in this case as a safe space which is difficult to find in the real-world, and the real-world is framed as a toxic environment to fanfiction writers.

While reactions of real-world people are shown to be mixed-to-negative, the story constructs Cath's fiction writing as benefiting her in real-world situations. The ability to subvert writing expectations and genre serves Cath during her creative writing classes. When another student tries to make her uncomfortable during a team-writing session by writing the beginnings of an erotic story, Cath is able to re-write the story so that the male character is gay and female character is his sister. Her prolific fanfiction writing is also shown to have a strengthening effect on her writing output, which becomes very useful when she has to write her university assessments: 'She practically could [write ten thousand words in her sleep]. She'd written ten thousand words of *Carry On* in one night before. Her wrists had really hurt the next day' (KL 3037-3038, *emphasis in original*). Because Cath has trained herself to publish on a regular schedule – a skill fanfiction authors develop as part of the online gift economy space—the harsh deadlines in her university course do not cause her the anxiety that they cause other students, notably Levi.

Another interesting element to the story is the relationship between Cath's fanfiction stories and her developing sexuality. *Fangirl* contains many scenes from Cath's various fanfics interspersed with the plotline, which serve as reminders that Cath has explored many of the issues she is dealing with in real-life through her fiction for years prior to the events of the story. When she is not sure whether to trust Levi, the narration cuts to a scene from one of her fanfics where Simon Snow is trying to decide whether to trust his own love interest, Baz (KL 3835-3841). Cath's scenes with Levi often centre on her reading him her fanfiction in lieu of performing the expected romantic rituals of a girl in a new relationship. Towards the end of the novel, Cath reads Levi a scene she'd written between Simon and Baz which explores the beginnings of their romance. The reading is broken up with reminders to the reader that Cath is avoiding focusing on the situation between her and Levi, concentrating instead on the situation between Simon and Baz: 'Levi's hand was still in Cath's hair... Cath concentrated on her phone' (KL 5412-5413). This could support the concerns articulated by Downes (2014) that fanfiction can create a disconnection between the real-world and the fictional world, but the disconnection is framed by the narrative as unhealthy, just as most of Cath's avoidance tactics are framed as unhealthy.

The connections between the fanfics that Cath writes—the vicarious romance between two men that she has constructed—and the real-world heterosexual romance are made clear towards the end of this scene when Cath finishes reading and allows herself to take control of the situation between herself and Levi.

“... as long as you're reading, you let me touch you.”

He was right: As long as she was reading, it was almost like he was touching someone else. Which was kind of messed up, now that she thought about it...

Cath let her phone drop to the floor. She slowly turned toward Levi, feeling her waist twist in his arms, looking up as far as his chin and shaking her head. “No,” she said. “No. I don't want to be distracted. I want to touch you back” (KL 5452-5456).

This is an important shift, not just in the relationship between the two characters but in Cath's character arc. By showing the reader that Cath has *considered* these ideas, but never acted, the reader sees how Cath has grown dependant on her vicarious experiences through fanfiction; the character develops over the course of the narrative to taking what she has

learned in her fanfiction writing and using it to take action in her own life.

***Carry On* as model**

Carry On (Rowell 2015) is an interesting example of mainstream-published fanfiction—it is authorised, in the sense that Rainbow Rowell owns the intellectual property to both *Fangirl* (2013) and *Simon Snow and the Mage's Heir*, the latter being a series that does not exist but is based loosely on the *Harry Potter* series. As *Carry On* is written by the originary author, it could be argued that the text is *not* an example of fanfiction. It is simply: fiction. But the text is not only framed as fanfiction when it is described in *Fangirl*, it also draws many traditions from fanfiction writing practice, including relationship tropes and positive representations of LGBTQ+ relationships. Despite some concerns that fanfiction is mostly made up of unhealthy BDSM (thanks in large part to the success of *50 Shades of Grey*), in general fans are mainly concerned with exploring *healthy* relationships, examining how dialogue and communication can be used effectively, and how relationship dynamics can be negotiated (Thrupkaew 2003).

Carry On is a very knowing take on the young hero/boarding school fantasy genre—the narrative is set in a wizarding boarding school, with a ‘Chosen One’ protagonist, Simon Snow, who is charged with saving the magical world from a great evil, the Insidious Humdrum. Simon and Baz’s relationship is constructed in *Carry On* as an enemies-to-friends-to-lovers narrative which is common in the *Harry Potter* community in fanfiction between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy—known occasionally as ‘enemyslash’, in which dislike becomes desire (Tosenberger 2008). The narration, told in first-person shifting perspective, shows that both Simon and Baz are preoccupied with each other, though Baz has more of an awareness of the romantic nature of his obsession: ‘Simon Snow is *alive*. And I’m hopelessly in love with him’ (Rowell 2015: KL 2081, *emphasis in the original*). Simon does not become aware of his own desire until their relationship has phased into the ‘friends’ stage, and he begins spending more time with Baz: ‘I want to kiss a bloke. That *is* a change’ (KL 4115). The enemies-to-friends-to-lovers trope depicts the romantic relationship as a gradual progression, and this fanfiction tradition allows writers to explore relationship dynamics in separate stages and experiment with approaches between characters.

Simon’s narration is preoccupied with the destructive potential of his magic: ‘I’m the most powerful magician the World of Mages has ever known... all that power is a good thing, or at least that it will be someday’ (KL 277). In the beginning of the narrative, Simon’s ‘someday’ is the heteronormative ideal of marrying his high school sweetheart at the end of the war—a troubling thought when it is structured around the destructive power he wields. This traditional relationship model is interrogated through *Carry On* when Simon’s girlfriend, Agatha, takes issue with the way he has constructed her in his mind:

“You just want a happy ending.”

“Merlin, Agatha, don’t you?”

“No! I don’t! I want to be someone’s *right now*, Simon, not their happily ever after. I don’t want to be the prize at the end. The thing you get if you beat all the bosses” (KL 1690-1694).

This more modern approach to the traditional expectation of heterosexual YA romance—

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where the male Chosen One completes his mission and wins the heart of the beautiful girl—establishes *Carry On* in the fanfiction tradition of challenging heteronormativity and gender expectations. The narrative reflects on the unhealthy toll that the relationship is taking on Agatha, which is important because it demonstrates that heteronormative ideals are not just toxic to the male partner and main character—they are also toxic to his female partner, a side character who—traditionally—would not get a similar exploration: ‘What is our relationship? Is it just me being there when you need a date to the ball? And crying for joy every time you come back from the dead?’ (KL 1686-1688). Giving voice to Agatha allows *Carry On* to explore the potentially toxic effects of the heteronormative ideal on the ‘love interest’ in the Chosen One narrative.

Later, Simon’s relationship with Baz is portrayed as contrasting his relationship with Agatha because Simon is open, from the beginning, with what he expects from the relationship, and a significant majority of the scenes between Simon and Baz are dominated by dialogue as the two try to talk through their feelings. This is a healthy juxtaposition with the unhealthy situation Simon is in with Agatha, which is defined by Simon avoiding communication.

“But, Simon, we have to ... I mean, shouldn’t we *talk* about this?”

“I’d rather just move on,” I say. “It’s not important. And it’s just—Agatha, it’s so good to see you.” I reach for her hand. (KL 921-922)

Although there are frequent comparisons between Simon/Baz and Simon/Agatha, the narrative does not construct heterosexual romance as necessarily less exciting or worthwhile than homosexual romance—just that the heteronormative desire for tradition is not as fulfilling for Simon as he’d thought that it would be. In the conclusion of the narrative, the language Simon, as narrator, uses to describe his relationship with Baz calls back to the ‘happy ending’ that he had been expecting from Agatha: ‘And a boy in my arms, instead of a girl. And a happy ending—even if it isn’t the ending I ever would have dreamt for myself’ (KL 6012-6013). In this way, *Carry On* models the fanfiction tradition of subverting expectations of romance, doing so in a way which ascribes agency to the female character as well as exploring healthy relationship dynamics which are a common theme in fanfiction writing. *Carry On* is essentially a YA novel written as though it were produced by a young adult fanfiction author.

Carry On has been received well in fanfiction circles, particularly among the *Harry Potter* fandom. As Tumblr user *rereadingcarryon* (2015) writes on their blog: ‘... along comes Rowell giving us the most perfect piece of fanfiction ever, except better because it’s not fanfiction ... It’s what we usually have to go to fanfiction to get’. The explicit connection with fanfiction allows Rowell to explore issues of sexuality and gendered expectations, and while this is certainly not new ground for YA fiction, it is exciting to see fanfiction traditions being used overtly in mainstream published as a platform for these ideas, because these traditions have been used for years in the fanfiction community, but it has not been recognised as legitimate.

Conclusion

Fanfiction is the realm of young people, especially young women, and so the fact that it has

been frequently stigmatized by mainstream critics is troubling and fails to acknowledge the net positives of the practice. Both the act of writing fanfiction and the act of reading it has received dismissal, despite academic writings that show the benefits of the practice on a personal, cultural, and educational level. The fact that Rainbow Rowell's metatextual engagement with the practice—both through the modelling of *Carry On* and the positive representation in *Fangirl*—offers a positive engagement with fanfiction writing that celebrates the works of fans, rather than condemning them, is important because it brings the act of fanfiction writing into the mainstream publishing discourse in a constructive and meaningful way.

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