

The Rainbow Rowell Theory of Fan Fiction

A personal history of internet fandom from an author who was inspired by it.

by Kevin Nguyen

Rainbow Rowell is an expert on fandom. Her third novel, *Fangirl*, is an ode to the

power of online fan communities—forums, fan fiction, cosplay, and more. And while the vernacular of fandom may sound foreign to some, its intentions are deeply familiar: the desire to form communities.

But Rowell didn't just do armchair research for *Fangirl*. She has been an active participant in fan communities since she was a teenager, and she's watched fandom evolve since the introduction of the internet, converging with the popularity of *Harry Potter*. (In between books, Rowell wrote a 30,000-word Harry and Draco fan fiction.)

We talked to Rowell about her experience with fandom, and being on the other side of fandom, now that she has cultivated a community of her own dedicated readers.

The Oyster Review: Fandom is something that's important to you. It's a theme in your work and it supports your work. What's special about fandom?

Rainbow Rowell: I think fandom is community. It's often community for people who might struggle to find community in other ways. For me, I always had social anxiety and I would have difficulty connecting with people sometimes. With fandom, you

have that immediate connection. They're often the people who love the thing that you love—you might share more than just that.

The internet has allowed fandom to become even more of a community. When I was a teenager, if I was obsessed with something, it was something I loved by myself. I loved *Star Wars*. You wouldn't think it would be hard to find people who loved *Star Wars*—these are some of the most popular movies of all time. But still, in my little high school, that was enough to make me a weirdo. Which seems strange now.

Fandom and the internet really just give people a chance to find each other.

How do you think those communities have shifted? When you were in high school, were you on forums or—

—No, because there was no internet! This is very long ago. *There was no internet!* There were newsletters and zines. But that's not something most people would know about. That's not something I would've had access to as a teenager. If you liked something, there was this real sense of solitude with your interest. It was so rare to find someone who shared your interest, and when you did find someone, you clung to that person, even if you weren't the best match, because it was so rare to find someone.

It's really shifted to be more accessible. It's so much easier for people to find each other.

How does fan fiction play into this? Do you read *Eleanor and Park* fan fiction?

I don't read any fan fiction about my books. It would be too weird.

Do you have to resist?

It's not even tempting. It's not! I'm happy people are doing it. I think it's so cool that people are doing it.

Sometimes I'll run into people's headcanons. Do you know what that is?

I don't.

Canon is what's actually in the book. *Headcanon* is their [altered] belief system about something. People will tell me their head canons, and I'll be like, "No, oh no. I reject that." I really don't want to know. It feels like you're inside my brain telling me something when, no, I'm in control.

I'm super happy that it's happening. I read a lot of fan fiction, but I don't read my fan fiction.

I also read that you had written a 30,000-word *Harry Potter* fan fiction.

I did that very therapeutically. I needed a break, and I secretly took two weeks and worked on that.

So your break from writing was... *more* writing?

(laughs) That's absolutely true. It felt like cheating. It was so freeing to just write about these characters I love.

I was just talking to a comic book writer, and anyone who works for Marvel is a fan writer or a fan artist. If you work on *Spider-Man*, that's someone else's character that you get to play with.

That's true.

It's just fun. If there's a world you love, it's fun to play there. I've been writing fan fiction since I was a teenager. We didn't call it [that]. There's just no one I would have shared it with. And it's interesting when I meet other authors how common that [experience] is, especially authors my age who are pre-internet. It's super common for them to say, "I read *Watership Down* and I started writing *Watership Down* stories." I think it's very common for writers to start practicing on [other] people's books first. In the same way an artist would sketch their favorite characters before they create their own, I just think it's common for writers to. Like sticking your toe in the water.

maybe like a musician doing cover songs:

Exactly. Because when you're writing fan fiction, you don't have to create everything. So it's fun to just play.

It seems like *Harry Potter* made fan fiction huge on the internet?

I think *Harry Potter* was huge for *everything*. And *Harry Potter* happened in tandem with the internet. If you were to go back and look at the rise of the internet and *Harry Potter*, that's all happening at the same time. The thing that people love most, that's the thing they're gonna talk about.

For a while the *Harry Potter* books were coming out every year or so, like clockwork.

Then there's a gap—I think it's between books four and five—and people talk about that being the Three-Year Summer because for a while you only had to wait through a summer for your favorite book, and now you had to wait years. That's when *Harry Potter* fan fiction just exploded because people were so desperate for more.

When I was writing *Fangirl*, I read a lot about fandom. Definitely *Harry Potter* and the internet, growing up together and exploding together. *Harry Potter* is one of those fandoms where everyone is a *Harry Potter* fan. Like, everyone who reads books or watches movies. So it's something almost everyone can participate in.

