

EM: You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky -- and I'm joined in the studio by Stephanie Billman.

SB: Hi!

EM: Stephanie and I used to work together at WNYC. I would say we were fellow geeks at a place where there were a lot of nerds but not a lot of geeks -- would you agree?

SB: Yeah, I totally agreed with that.

EM: I remember people were amused that I had action figures at my desk. Did you get comments about your Doctor Who stuff?

SB: All the time. Someone saw my picture of David Tennant and was like, is that one of the Beatles? No, it's not.

EM: So Stephanie pitched me this idea about Fan Fiction -- first the title of the email was Fan Fiction (Don't Judge) which I loved so much that I decided immediately was going to be the title of this episode! And before we get to your pitch, I should say I was always skeptical of doing an episode on fan fiction. I have to admit I had never read any fanfiction but I assumed most of it was really bad. It's an insult, like a lot of people said Game of Thrones this season felt like fanfic meaning it feels like the characters were fulfilling the fan's greatest wishes regardless of whether it makes sense for the story.

SB: Fan service.

EM: Fan service, yeah. And that's the other thing too, I was telling you I struggled to write screenplays for ten years and I took all these writing classes, read all these books on story structure -- and I got all this brutal feedback. And I have a new appreciation of how hard it is to write and so I always thought fan fiction was people saying I'm going to write a story, I'm going to put it on the Internet, and everyone tell me it's great because I don't want any criticism.

SB: And there is that, there's stories where author's note say no criticism, kudos only, kudos and positive comments only -- but there's an equal number of really quality fan fiction -- of really quality writing.

EM: In fact, you told me about something that totally tanked my stereotype of fan fiction – the role of the beta? What is a beta?

SM: So a beta is something you can find online and there's a whole system where you can read your story, either they read it as you're going along as you're writing or the finished product. And they can read it for content, they can read for grammar or both, it can be a collaboration, writers collaborating with the beta, or providing feedback at the end of your story.

EM: So why don't they just call them editors?

SM: Because at the beginning of fan fiction, there were so many people in the computer industry so beta is like the testing phase.

EM: Ah that's cool!

SM: And that's where the actual terminology came from.

EM: Do the betas get paid?

SB: No, it's totally voluntary, it's totally free, and the ones I enjoy the most are the ones that use betas and particularly use the same betas over and over again.

EM: So when you told me about betas that sold me on this idea but you also pointed out something that should've been obvious to me that most movies, most writer's rooms get made by straight white guys and bring that perspective to these stories and fan fiction because it's open to anybody completely changes our perspective on how these stories and that's where I was like – tell me more!

SB: I've always been in the geek space, so I was a huge fan of Star Wars growing up, so when I would go to the comic stores when I was younger, I would often be the only person of color and often the only girl in that space so coming into fan fiction it's really great and refreshing to see all these perspectives that are not straight white males – no offense to you, Eric.

EM: None taken!

SB: It's lovely!

EM: All right, so we talked to a bunch of people as well. We studied Francesca Coppa. She's a professor at Muhlenberg College and she studies fan fiction. She wrote a book called The Fan Fiction Reader.

FC: So I myself have been a fan girl since I was 12, so I have some cred in that area too.

EM: She was totally fascinating. I thought fan fiction as we know it started with Star Trek but she said it started over a hundred years ago with Sherlock Holmes.

FC: And almost right away people started writing more homes. And they did a lot of other things that we associate with modern fandom like they had a campaign. I mean he killed Holmes off after the tenth story. And people you know wore black armbands and they protested in the streets and they wrote letters and they made him bring him back.

EM: And so then there was this worldwide trend of people writing stories about Holmes and Watson.

SB: Yeah and back then those stories were mostly written by men so there wasn't that stigma that's currently attached to fan fiction.

EM: It was like a gentlemanly pursuit?

SB: Exactly and now it's mostly written by predominantly by women and read by women as well.

EM: Yeah and then also Francesca pointed out there's a difference between fan fiction then and now.

FC: We're only having a special episode about this because we're in a place with intellectual property which is a very recent phenomenon where suddenly this very natural making stories out of other people's stories is being legislated. Only special people are allowed to tell stories out of our common culture at least in this legal sense. But fans are saying well but this is the human activity we want to tell more stories and you kind of can't stop us. Oh it's a kind of illegal act but it's a profoundly human act.

EM: And then of course we get to modern fan fiction with Star Trek.

FC: We still know those original women who kind of built Star Trek fandom right. Oh there's a number of them but many of them were in fact professional science fiction

writers basically like science fiction book fandom kind of felt that women science fiction writers like Star Trek kind of too much. And for the wrong reasons which is by the way something people always tell women we like the story too much and for the wrong reasons.

EM: And when she says the wrong reasons is that because the women writing fan fiction are more interested in the relationship between the characters and not the big sci-fi high concept idea?

SB: yeah, I mean with fan fiction you can explore the relationships you don't have time on a movie or TV show.

EM: And the thing that fan fiction is known for is putting characters that are supposedly straight in a relationship but the most famous pairing of course is Spock and Kirk.

SB: Or Spirk.

EM: Spirk? I just found that out recently their couple name is Spirk.

SB: Laughs

EM: And the other thing that's interesting the women that Francesca is talking about, the women who started modern fan fiction were called the fore smutters based on fore mothers.

FC: So they do about fore smutters is we praise the older women who had the courage of the dirtiness of their imaginations. They were smutty.

SB: Francesca studies fan fiction but this is also personal for her as well. She was part of the generation that picked up the mantle after the fore smutters.

FC: And we had to do it old school in the mail sign you need to get your mom to write you a check for a fan magazine and you had to go to it like a collector's shop and you had to go to a bookstore. Like you need e dot get a plane ticket to fly to the convention, or to get your mom to take you, or you needed a check to send way for the zine, you couldn't do it if you were 13 years old unaided, but now you can online you can do it from your bedroom.

SB: Francesca and her writers and readers eventually created one of the popular clearinghouses for fan fiction called Archive of Our Own.

FC: And so we started in 2007 we started with a blank cursor of code, my friend. We designed it, and people started saying this is what we need. Do we have lawyers? Turns out fandom has lawyers. Do we have professors? We have professors. We had coders. We had all these women, and they were 99.9% women, come together and coders were like, since we're building it from scratch let's build it to do exactly what we want.

EM: You suggested that we talk with Brita Lundin, who is part of this third generation of contemporary fan fiction readers and writers.

SB: But she's actually a writer for Riverdale.

EM: Which is a – I keep calling it Dark Archie.

SB: Which I actually love! Because from the looks of it, it's pretty dark!

SB: And she discovered fan fiction pretty much around the time her family got an Internet connection in the mid '90s.

BL: And one of the first things I did was go on like Alta Vista.com and like search for the X-Files and it's like just a hop skip and jump from like that very first search to finding like people writing short stories about the X-Files on the Internet.

EM: What I thought was interesting is she was saying that writing TV isn't that different from writing fan fiction, which had never occurred to me.

BL: The idea of like writing characters who already exist in someone else's voice that already exists. Writing, for example, Mulder and Scully ah and trying to make it as close to Chris Carter's vision for the show as possible. That is basically what it's like writing for The X-Files, you know? When I'm writing an episode of Riverdale, I'm not writing Britta Lundin's imagination of what an episode of Riverdale should be. I'm writing as close to my showrunner's vision of what an episode of Riverdale should be. I'm writing his idea of Archie and his idea of Betty and Veronica and that's the job, you know? And if you bristle at the idea of taking someone else's characters, if you're someone who thinks fan fiction isn't real writing because you're not making up the characters and uh you haven't done any of the real work of like building the world then you're going to have a hard time

writing TV because that's all you're doing is taking someone else's ideas and trying to write the best episode possible.

EM: But that line between the professional writer and the hobbyist fan fiction writer has become blurred lately because of 50 Shades of Grey -- which of course started out as Twilight fan fiction – or as they say it was Twilight fan fiction with the serial numbers filed off.

SB: Exactly!

EM: I didn't realize this started this whole interest from companies that realized, oh there's suddenly money to be made in fan fiction. So what is Kindle Worlds?

SB: So Kindle Worlds is still a fairly new platform where they've purchased the rights to various properties – no many are good – and a fan fiction can go on there and write fan fiction based on these pre-selected intellectual properties.

EM: Do they own the rights to your fan fiction or do you own it?

SB: No they own the rights. You do get paid for it – every time someone downloads your story you get a certain percentage of it but at the end of the day, Kindle Amazon still owns the rights to that story.

EM: Yeah, Francesca was not a fan of this system, and she thinks that in general adding money – you were saying before that the betas do this for free, and adding money to that relationship changes things a lot.

SB: Yeah.

FC: So I'm worried about the power that's trying to turn my sub cultural hobby into something that exists in the marketplace because money changes things and it changes relationships between people.

EM: It also changes the whole point of fan fiction is to write without writing to a marketplace, and suddenly there's a market place entering fan fiction.

FC: Right. Or if people are seeing it that way, the big file offs, even if they were slash stories underneath the big successes turn into hereto love stories. One of the reasons I don't like 50 Shades is it's not that original. Fan fiction is more interesting as an out of the box as a genre, as a convention defying art form. Like why do we want to turn it more conventional, because the marketplace wants it conventional. I don't want their limitations. I don't want their money. I don't want any of it.

EM: It's interesting because as fan fiction gets bigger and bolder it's starting to butt up against commercial mainstream franchises it's borrowing from. It's one thing to imagine characters in relationships through fan fiction but the fans are now saying that's not good enough, they want those relationships to play out on screen. That kind of lobbying is called shipping, and shipping can work and change the course of the shows themselves. Or it can create conflict if the show runners are like, no stop telling us how to write our show.

SB: Yeah, that's a fascinating part of fandom today.

EM: But we're going to get to that after the break.

>> BREAK

EM: So I'm back with Stephanie Billman. And we talked to another fan fiction writer, Savannah Stoehr. How did you meet her?

SB: I actually met her through my husband. He belongs to a Star Trek Meet Up Group. And they met when he was at the 50th Star Trek celebration and that's when he realized she was not just a fan fiction writer but she was one of my favorite fan fiction writers.

EM: Because she told him what her fan fiction pseudonym is?

SB: Yeah or her street name as we like to call it. (Laughs)

EM: Is that what people in fan fiction call it, their street name?

SB: Yeah.

EM: Oh that's cool.

SB: And one of her favorite types of fan fiction to write is slash fiction.

EM: And tell me what slash fiction is because I love this explanation.

SB: So early on when fanfiction in order to be able to delineate the relationships you'd write Kirk slash Spock and because of the slash being a male-male relationship, they decided to call it slash fiction.

EM: I love that punctuation has created an entire like subgenre – and an important one...

SB: A very – yes – and now if it's a female to female characters, it's called fem slash.

EM: Hmm. So some of her early fan fiction work was Kirk slash Spock?

SB: Yes! And she's still pretty new to Star Trek and she only discovered it recently because of the reboots and her father who's a bit Star Trek fan was like you have to go back and watch the original series. And being into fan fiction, she came into it already thinking of Kirk and Spock as a couple.

SS: I really liked that Kirk and Spock were equals and they had this intense mutual respect and this almost reverence for each other in some ways. You see it more than once there's this self sacrificial nature. There's a line from a season 1 episode City on the Edge of Forever where Kirk is talking about a 22nd century novelist or something, who recommends let me help over I love you.

KIRK: Let me help.' A hundred years or so from now, I believe, a famous novelist will write a classic using that theme. He'll recommend those three words even over 'I love you.'"

SS: There's a word in ST fandom in the novelization of the first original movie ST the Motion Picture, it's a word T'hy'la, it's a Vulcan word that translate to friend/brother/lover that's supposed to represent the incredible bond that Kirk and Spock have, the chemistry they have and the loyalty and the unbounded devotion they have to each other and this intense understanding.

SPOCK: Please, Captain. Not in front of the Klingons.

I was curious how she imagines their relationship in her fan fiction.

SS: The transporter is always screwing up in the original series, and it's a running joke in the fandom so I wrote a fic where there's a transporter malfunction that splits Spock into a Vulcan half and a human half.

Oh, that's a great story.

SS: Yeah. The concept is an eye catcher and I think that's why it became so big but – ***But that was a slash story too?***

SS: (Laughs) It was

Was it the human part that says to Kirk his true feelings?

SS: No, a little bit, so that was the interesting thing for me, I didn't want it to be quite so human, now that he's human he'll just say it. Spock is Spock whatever his race. If he has feelings for someone but he doesn't trust his feelings, what is he going to do about that? Probably nothing even if you split him up Vulcan half and human half, maybe the human half more overt but wouldn't take a risk on them so the story was sort of – spoiler alert – it ends with after Kirk has conversation with each half separately he puts together the way Spock's been feeling, and it's him prodding Spock and saying you can take this risk, I'm here for this, let me help that finally brings them together.

Wow, that sounds moving actually

SS: (Laughs) It's one of my lighter ones!

EM: I have to say I have been watching Star Trek for most of my life, I've always thought of them as a very platonic friendship, but since talking with her I can not look at them now as anything but the love that dare not speak its name!

SB: Yeah, exactly, the other weekend me and my husband we were watching City on the Edge of Forever, and there's a particular scene where they've rented an apartment together because they're in a different time. That reminds me so much of my relationship with my own husband. They have to be more than just friends!

EM: And by the way, we should point out, fan fiction is known for slash especially Kirk slash Spock, but most of it is not slash. There is a HUGE variety of types of stories – but as Francesca was saying, it's not one of those things where it's like, “just look beyond the slash, fan fiction is really good.” Slash is a really important part of fan fiction, especially the idea that you have so many women imagining these supposedly straight male characters as gay.

SS: Some of it again depending on who you ask some of it was a way of creating a queer literature before there really was as much literature as there is now and there could still be more but gay representation extremely thin on the ground, in 1960, 1970, 1980, especially heroic queer representation. So if you had a gay character in 1982 there the wacky best friend, they're Kirk. A third reason was women wanted to create a literature that showcased equality and that in some ways almost gender politics were almost too toxic. So when you tell a story about Kirk and Spock you don't have to deal with even the questions that you deal with Mulder Scully kind of gender politics or she's going to get pregnant and who's going to stay home with the kids like everybody gets to be a hero. They're both allowed to kind of be equal in that love relationship. And

so it was a way of kind of sidestepping or working through some of the gender politics that I would say infected male female couples.

EM: So I knew about Kirk slash Spock, or Spirk.

SB: (Laughs)

EM: But until we started talking I had no idea the other big couple in fan fiction is Stucky, which is a fairly new ship but it's a HUGE part of fan fiction today. Tell me what is Stucky.

SB: So Stucky is the ship name between Captain Steve Rogers or Captain America and James "Bucky" Barnes. This is the relationship based on the MCU, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, not necessarily in the comics.

EM: Right and you were saying a lot of Stucky fan fic is not really about them confessing their feelings – they're already a couple and it's more about Steve helping Bucky recover from having been a brainwashed assassin?

SB: Yeah, that's exactly what it is and in fan fiction I can sit there and watch him struggle and I can watch what he's going through and for people who are struggling with mental health issues – I struggle with depression, I struggle with anxiety – so I really identified with that struggle that Bucky was going through, and in my relationship with my husband where he's more like Steve where he's trying to help me with that journey and because he loves me so for that – that's where my interest in Stucky started.

EM: Hmm. Now when we were talking to Francesca – who is a professor that studies fan fiction, and writes fan fiction. She writes Stucky fan fic right?

SB: Yes.

EM: And um, I hate the fact that the microphone was off – you asked her who she is, what her fan fiction name is as a writer and she said turn the microphone off so I did. And when she told you what her name was your reaction was amazing! I was like you made me turn off the mic for that?! (Laughs)

SB: (Laughs)

EM: Why were you so excited?

SB: She's like the Jane Austen of fan fiction for Stucky, she's such a phenomenal writer, she's one of my favorite writers she's probably – she's really prolific, but her stories are so rich and so complex, they're better than a lot of quote unquote legitimate fiction these days. And part of the reason I love what she does, she creates this world of Brooklyn, particularly 1940s Brooklyn, that is so authentic.

FC: I grew up in Brooklyn. Steve Rogers grew up in Brooklyn, so does Bucky Barnes come from Brooklyn in a culture that was sort of my father's -- my father right now is ill and in fact I have all of this kind of hands on knowledge of Brooklyn in the 40s that I'm really enjoying and kind of deploying to create a richer more realistic Brooklyn and a sort of sense of these Brooklyn boys growing up and the sort of late 30s and 40s and early 40s. I'm not alone in that. There are wonderful stories that have Steve working in the chewing gum factory that used to be in downtown Brooklyn right and having a workplace accident with the machinery. This is not when you think of fan fiction you don't think of like the Rogers union activist. And then there are people like to do an alternate universe.

What's an AU?

FC: An alternative univers where they're ballet dancers there. They could be anything. Who would they be if they were on the enterprise if they were you know, werewolves?

Laughs

FC: Why not? You have something against werewolves?

EM: By the way, I've listened to the tape of Francesca many times and I will never get tired of her saying what you got something against werewolves?

SB: (Overlapping) You got something against werewolves? (Laughs)

EM: So, now this brings us back to Brita Lundin because she's a fan fiction writer -- she's staffed on Riverdale -- and she said that one of the things that she learned too being on the inside is that there are so many factors that go into what we see on screen. It's not just the writers deciding they want something to happen and then poof it happens. I mean there's budget, there's actor negotiations, there's the weather. And the same thing is true when fans are lobbying for a gay ship to become canon, just because they hear nothing – like Marvel has been really quiet about the Stucky thing – it doesn't mean that behind the scenes, there's no discussion going on, especially on TV shows where there's more flexibility.

BL: They don't know what kind of conversations are having on the other side of that suggestion. They don't know if like are the showrunner's really considering it and the exec shut it down, did the show runner shut it down, did the actor shut it down? Or maybe they just don't even talk about it because they don't think it's worth even considering and that's the saddest version to me of like of to not even consider making that creative choice.

EM: I think the big question we're circling around here is who has the power? Obviously Hollywood makes this stuff. They've got the money, they've got the distribution network. But if the fans turn on them, the show's over, and that terrifies them.

SB: Rightly so.

BL: I've seen a lot of think pieces online for example of like toxic entitled fandom, right? Like fans, they think they're entitled to say what happens on shows. What does this all of a sudden fans think they're hot shit and they should get to decide what happens on shows not the creators. And to me it's like okay yeah I mean I get where that's coming from. I think where that's coming from is you're upset the fans that you can finally hear fans opinions. Fans have always had opinions about what the show should do. Uh but now they can like actually say it. They can @ the showrunner and like tell them exactly what they think. Ultimately, fans still don't really have any power. Ultimately, no matter how many messages a show runner gets on Twitter like they are still in charge of like what happens on the show or not.

SB: You know I got into fan fiction because of shipping. I was watching Arrow, and they were pushing Oliver Queen to get into a relationship with Laurel, who is his love interest in the comics, but he had better chemistry with this other character named Felicity. That's when my husband was like, you know they're a popular ship, you should go read fan fiction of them getting together. But this was a case where the show runners listened to the fans -- or maybe they saw the same thing, that he had better chemistry with this other actress -- but they switched and made Felicity his love interest on screen. But the way they did it was really disappointing. The fan fiction of Olicity, which was their ship name, was way better than what became the on screen canonical relationship.

EM: In talking to you and Brita and Francesca and Savannah -- you've actually made me question what is real in fiction. Which is ridiculous because obviously it's all made up but for so long I had taken as what comes from Hollywood as the

real thing and everything else is a joke. And in fact, I did go on to Archive of our Own.

SB: Congratulations!

EM: Thank you!

SB: Please tell me more about this!

EM: So, when you said there's everything there? Oh my God! There's fan fiction of Chinatown and like Tootsie!

SB: Yes! Sometimes a friend will be like, I wonder if there is fan fiction of A and B, and I'll look and there's at least five stories.

EM: I finally came across fan fiction of Fringe, and I loved Fringe, and I found this one story – and I know now to look up how many kudos they got and I got one of the highest kudos ones. And I was impressed it was set very specifically between certain episodes where the character Peter is looking for his love interest Olivia in an alternate universe – there's only one alternative universe in Fringe but this imagines many alternative universe, so we got to me all these other versions of Olivia that we didn't see on the show.

SB: Oh that's fascinating.

EM: And I impressed they captured Peter's voice really well! And the writer decided the one thing all the Olivias had in common was they had the same favorite spot on the Charles River – the show is set in Boston, I'm from Boston – and so I thought was lovely. But when it came time to mention what the spot was, it said in parenthesis and all caps TBD!

SB: (Laughs) So the person did not have a beta!

EM: He did! He had two betas! He even thanked them! I was like, you couldn't look on Google Maps?! The other thing I thought was interesting was that they also had fan fiction like the really crazy stuff was one story I came across Arya Stark from Game of Thrones was a) an adult, b) living in our world, c) she's an FBI agent and d) she meets the Terminator. And I saw this I was so offended by that story.

SB: Really?!

EM: Yeah, I couldn't believe how mad I was that they had strayed so far the source material! But then I was like, who cares? God, is my imagination really that conservative?

SB: See but you found fan fiction that fed to your conservative viewpoint!

EM: (Laughs)

SB: The thing is what's great about fan fiction is you don't have to abide by what's given to you by the powers that be. And to quote Sam Winchester – at the end of the day –

EM: Who's Sam Winchester?

SB: One of the two brothers in Supernatural.

SB: At the end of the day, it's our story so we get to write it.

EM: And that quote – when you think of fan fiction that quote keeps coming to mind for you?

SB: Yeah.

EM: Hmm.

SB: And what better way than to end of our conversation than to quote one half of the most popular ships in fan fiction.

EM: The ship between Sam Winchester and ---?

SB: Dean Winchester. His Brother.

EM: (Laughs) Really?! That's a big ship?

SB: (Laughs) It is a big ship actually!

EM: Incestuous ship?

SB: It is and they call them Wincest.

EM: (Laughs)

SB: Which I still don't understand! Just to be clear! I am not a fan of Wincest!

EM: All right, Stephanie.

SB: Thank you so much!

EM: And also thanks to Francesca Coppa, Savannah Stohr and Brita Lundin. By the way, Brita besides being a TV writer has written a novel called Ship It, which comes out this spring. It's about a teenage girl who's trying to make a gay ship canon, and how that actually affects

BL: I hope that once it's published someone can just be like, "Oh hey it sounds like you're dealing with an issue similar to that was in that book Ship It – here -- plops it down on their desk, "maybe you should read this'. And then you know they read it maybe like have a more nuanced view of both sides of the issue.

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. Let me know what your fan fiction is and I know a lot of it isn't just shipping. You can let me know on Twitter, I tweet at emolinsky. You can join the conversation on Facebook and my website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.