

Fix-It Fics

Challenging the Status Quo through Fan Fiction

Edited by

Kaitlin Tonti

Albright College

Series in Critical Media Studies



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Thank you to Mel Lowery and Alexander Siddig, who made the performance of “Little Achievements” and the Sid City Social Club a reality.

Most importantly, thank you to fan fiction writers everywhere. You make the world a better place, one word at a time.

Introduction: Fixing the Status Quo

Kaitlin Tonti

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In an episode of Mindy Kaling's hit teen drama, *Never Have I Ever*, Kamala Nadiwadal, played by Richa Moorjani, is faced with an important decision complicated by culture and family. She must decide between marrying the man her family has chosen for her to stay with, or Steve, the man she had fallen in love with while away at school. In a scene where Kamala reunites with Steve to declare her love, she rambles, "I want to be with you even if you were from the wrong side of town and your dad was in jail for embezzling money." When he responds that he does not understand, she says, "I'm sorry, I just watched sixteen hours of *Riverdale*. Plus, some fan fiction where Jughead kisses Harry Potter."¹ *Never Have I Ever* will unlikely survive as a popular classic in the passing of time; however, this scene points to the permanent role that fan fiction has achieved in popular culture. It no longer resonates as a smaller appendage of fandom studies but has revealed its value as its own cultural currency.

Many now consider fan fiction as a literary art form; however, scholars continue to debate its purpose, practice, and relevance. Kamala's character is not meant to have participated in any fandoms or understood the significance of fan fiction, let alone know where to access it in the first place. This scene is read as a joke, an illusion of Kamala stepping into the teenage world that occupies her cousin Devi, the main character, as a way to navigate her own romantic failings. Nevertheless, Kamala's turn to fan fiction was her first action after being introduced to the *Riverdale* world. In other words, Kamala is immediately introduced to another outlet where the *Riverdale* narrative takes on new paths and overlaps with other fandoms. The implication is that fan fiction is just as powerful for a new viewer as the original content that drew in the consumer.

The beginnings and function of fan fiction are highly debated arenas of thought. Some suggest that fan fiction began with Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series,² while others insist that fan fiction, as a larger component of fan

¹ *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 3, "...gotten drunk with the popular kids," Kaling, Mindy, et al., writer, directed by Linda Mendoza, featuring Maitreyi Ramakrishnan and Richa Moorjani, aired April 27, 2020, Netflix.

² Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co), 1930.

studies, started with *Star Trek*³ and the beginning of zine culture in the 1960s. If it is defined simply as “a form of collective storytelling,” then some might argue that *The Odyssey*⁴ and *The Iliad*⁵ also function as forms of fan fiction.⁶ Henry Jenkins’ seminal text uses De Certeau’s term “poachers” to demonstrate how writers use fan fiction to claim a spot in cultural production. He also suggests that “fans operate from a position of cultural marginalization and social weakness.”⁷ However, this is no longer the fan fiction writer of the twenty-first century. Fan fiction has developed as a literary form, and with the advent of open-access services such as *Archive of Our Own (AO3)* and *Tumblr*, fan fiction writers have emerged from the limitations of subscribing to mailed zines, which has made their work as public as the original content. Furthermore, fan fiction is now a genre that has developed its own subgenres.

The Fix-It Fic

The central focus of this collection is the fix-it fic, a subgenre of fan fiction that Urban Dictionary defines as “fan fiction” where “characters who were originally dead in the actual books, shows, or movies are now alive and well... catastrophes are prevented by the author of the fan fiction and (almost) everyone gets the happy ending they deserved.”⁸ However, this definition of the fix-it fic is narrow and limiting in that recovering dead characters is the least of what the genre can accomplish. Lesley Goodman suggests that some popular interpretations of the fix-it fic attempt to define it as a vengeful outlet for angry fans to fix what the original creator or creators did wrong. However, she rejects this argument as still too simple, suggesting instead that “fan interpretation privileges the coherence of the fictional universe while downplaying the authority of the text, insisting that the author is not dead, but a failure and a disappointment.”⁹ Extending the definition of fix-it fics, this collection will explore the genre as a means of advocacy and activism. Fix-it fics allow writers to advocate for overlooked and underappreciated cultures and groups, and when in

³ *Star Trek*, written by Gene Roddenberry, performed by William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy, (1966-1969).

⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, NY: Doubleday), 1961.

⁵ Homer, *The Iliad*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday), 1974.

⁶ Kristina Busse, “Introduction,” *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2014), 4.

⁷ Henry Jenkins, “Textual Poachers,” *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2014), 28.

⁸ “Fix-It Fics,” *Urban Dictionary*, January 14, 2017, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fix%20it%20fics>.

⁹ Lesley Goodman, “Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 0, no. 0 (2015): 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12223>

conversation with each other, it becomes a form of activism. As both advocacy and activism, fix-it fics serve as both a personal evolution for the individual writers and as an extension of awareness into the larger public that challenges heteronormative, abled, and white privileged perspectives. In other words, the fix-it fic author writes with the intention of changing the status quo.

Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's seminal work on fan fiction offers insight into how fan fiction scholarship is divided into several categories, including fan fiction as "an interpretation of the source text" and "fan fiction as individual engagement and identificatory practice."¹⁰ Together, these functions point to how fan fiction is the intersection at which the individual practices and performs identity. The fix-it fic extends this idea to fix the stories that fail to recognize forms of bias. Fan fiction as a form of advocacy and activism demonstrates how the fan's interpretation and connection do not conclude at boundaries of the original content. Instead, these boundaries extend to challenge real-world social structures that ignore, invalidate, and promote hatred.

Fans find solace in fix-it fics because they can recreate the worlds they love as safe, comfortable places. Bronwen Thomas writes that fan fiction is a transformative force because it "offers a voice for marginalized groups..." in "seemingly safe or familiar storyworlds."¹¹ However, the fix-it fic as a form of advocacy and activism is to move beyond the text as a written source of comfort. Sometimes, writers find new aspects of their identity by creating fix-it fics. In a personal interview with Elmie K-E (known as *almassi* on AO3), a popular author in the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Rabbit Lightning*, and *Good Omens* fandoms, they described fan fiction as an advocacy for the self, a means of exploration and understanding. They stated:

But there's one constant throughline in a great deal of my work: gender exploration. I only recently noted it as personally significant and determined what my angle was. Specifically, I am drawn to writing masculine cisgender men engaging with and enjoying the feminine, more often than not as a sexual act. Trying makeup, wearing lingerie, imagining themselves as a woman. Occasionally I've written transgender characters, but the sexual aspect is absent under those circumstances. Although I am an AFAB nonbinary person who prefers a feminine presentation, the urge to write men seeking femininity turned out to be

¹⁰ Busse, "Introduction," 8-9.

¹¹ Bronwen Thomas, "What is Fan Fiction and Why are People Saying Such Nice Things about it?," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3, (2011), 1-24.

an unconscious reflection of myself, returning again and again in my writing. I cannot yet fully explain it, but I have recently been challenging myself to write more on this subject, and hopefully, I'll find the words so I can understand myself better.¹²

Elmie K-E's experience suggests that by exploring the creative realms they have come to admire, they have also ignited a desire to know themselves more intimately and thoroughly. In many cases, the greater recognition of the self through fan fiction, specifically fix-it fics, results in more opportunities for advocacy that extend to online community activism. Dean Leetal describes fan fiction as an "activism of care," defined as "activism that takes the social structure into account including the activists positioning and implements elements of care ethics."¹³ Ze suggests that traditional activism results in some groups still being left out – especially those with physical disabilities. However, fan fiction writers take activism online, and with its public accessibility through forums such as AO3, they showcase worlds where underrepresented groups' existences are normalized and accepted. Through activism, for instance, slash fiction is not all that controversial but encouraged and consumed regularly. In other words, fan fiction as activism no longer only breaks the boundaries between fan and creator. It also makes the fan an advocate who uses their writing to showcase the possibilities of a world where acceptance, care, and empathy are universally and regularly practiced.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Elmie K-E challenged the boundaries of fix-it fic activism when their story, "Little Achievements," was performed by the actors who originated the roles of both their characters.¹⁴ Between April 2020 and October 2022, Alexander Siddig, the actor who played Dr. Julian Bashir on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DS9)*,¹⁵ encouraged fans to join a Zoom session where they would have the opportunity to chat with Siddig, or Sid, as his fans call him. The meetings were scheduled twice a week (Tuesday and Friday) to accommodate the large international population that attended the Sid City Social Club meetings. Conversations ranged on various personal topics with every individual who spent fifteen minutes talking with Siddig. Eventually, the question of fan fiction arose, and so did conversations regarding the assumed

¹² Elmie K-E, "Interview," March 2023.

¹³ Dean Leetal, "Those Crazy Fangirls on the Internet: Activism of Care, Disability, and Fan Fiction," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 8, no. 2, (2019), 46-73.

¹⁴ Elmie K-E, "Little Achievements," *Archive of Our Own*, August 8, 2023, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/26073979/chapters/63417001>.

¹⁵ *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, written by Rick Berman, performed by Avery Brooks and Nana Visitor (1993-1999), Paramount Pictures, TV Show.

romantic relationship between Siddig's character, Bashir, and actor Andrew (Andy) Robinson's character, Elim Garak.

Fan fiction featuring the relationship between Garak and Bashir, often referenced as "Garashir," is not a new phenomenon. Much like the assumed romantic relationship between Captain James Kirk and Spock of the original *Star Trek* series, Garak and Bashir's characters have attracted fan fiction authors for years. Of the over 5,000 works featuring the tag Julian Bashir/Elim Garak, most showcase fix-it fic features.¹⁶ In several stories, the fix-it occurs at the point in the series finale, "What You Leave Behind," when at the end of the Dominion War, Garak and Bashir bid each other farewell with the promise of likely never seeing each other again.¹⁷ Others place the fix-it during season two's "The Wire," when Bashir helps Garak overcome a near fatal addiction, and, in a moment of non-sexual intimacy, forgives Garak for "whatever it is you did."¹⁸ In 2020, Siddig agreed to act with Robinson in producing "Little Achievements," also directed by Elmie K-E. On their AO3 page, Elmie summarizes the play as "A *DS9* story about the everyday things we should be proud of."¹⁹ However, what excited the first audience of over 192 people was when, in a moment of frustration, Garak asked Bashir, "What must I give to have a decent, uninterrupted conversation with my husband?"²⁰ This line confirmed many decades of fan suspicion: Bashir and Garak's relationship was of mutual, romantic attraction.

In my interview with Elmie, they state of the experience:

Sid was afraid there would be backlash against me and what we made the characters say, but as far as I know, it hasn't come. I've seen celebratory memes, I've seen gifs. I've seen articles and *YouTube* analysis videos. It's all been good stuff. I don't know what deeper effect "Little Achievements" had, at large, but when people recognize my name now, they recognize me for that.²¹

¹⁶ Julian Bashir/Elim Garak on *Archive of Our Own*, https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Julian%20Bashir*s*Elim%20Garak/works

¹⁷ *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, 176, "What You Leave Behind," directed by Allan Kroeker, May 31, 1999, Paramount Pictures.

¹⁸ *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, 42, "The Wire," directed by Kim Friedman, May 8, 1994, Paramount Pictures.

¹⁹ Elmie K-E, "Little Achievements."

²⁰ Elmie K-E, "Little Achievements."

²¹ Elmie K-E, "Interview."

Elmie's humble analysis of their work underscores the significance of "Little Achievements" in how, through the performance, Siddig and Robinson affirmed their characters' relationship, thus replacing the original writers' portrayal of their characters in favor of the fans' interpretation. In an interview with Siddig, he states of "Little Achievements":

I think the magic that Elmie conjures is rooted in their rare ability to edify implicitly while being overtly entertaining. A crowd of people on Zoom (all of us yearning for some respite from the dreariness of the pandemic) found "Little Achievements" to be a delight. It's a work that is, at once, gently reassuring, brimming with pathos and laugh-out-loud funny. It's nice to be reminded that raw humanity comes in so many surprising guises. On the day we read it for our group, we were lucky enough to have the inimitable Andy Robinson with us. I was lucky enough to be married to him for a short time! There were some beautiful things that arrived with that virus. How lucky we were...²²

Siddig and Robinson's acceptance of their characters' roles as husbands in a post *Deep Space Nine* era produces the type of outreach that showcases fan fiction as a form of activism. Bashir and Garak's relationship, once confined to the fandom, is now widely known among all *Star Trek* fans, and only time will tell if it becomes more widely accepted. The performance is still cherished today, three years later. As Mel Lowery, writer, organizer of the Sid City Social Club, and producer of "Little Achievements," said:

We knew the story would resonate with our audience. We also knew a significant portion of that audience would be delighted to have Sid and Andy perform their characters as an old married couple. More than two years later, we still receive comments from viewers just discovering the video who are entertained, comforted, and thrilled by "Little Achievements." Not bad for a no-budget, Zoom-based production.²³

Elmie K-E's experience writing fan fiction is indicative of the journey for many fan fiction writers that evolves from the personal and results in public activism. For Elmie K-E, fan fiction began, and remains, a place of support in the face of debilitating health issues. However, they add that fan fiction is not just a venue for individuals to explore their personal existence, but also one that asks the public to join them in that adventure. As they state, "I do believe fanfic was the

²² Siddig, "Interview."

²³ Lowery, "Interview."

outreach program, soapbox, and public library gathering that allowed change to percolate, reaching new people who would care.”²⁴ “Little Achievements” is just one example of how fan fiction can be a tool for challenging the status quo. Busse and Hellekson, Jenkins, and Thomas concur that fan fiction allows authors to break the confines of the original content and create safe spaces where their version of events exists online. The purpose of *Fix-It Fics: Challenging the Status Quo through Fan Fiction* is to expand the conversation about what fan fiction can accomplish, specifically the fix-it fic. Focused chiefly on queer cultural victories and struggles, the authors in this collection demonstrate how the hermeneutics of the fix-it fic reach beyond the boundaries of the individual fan fiction writer, thus creating a global space to highlight where cultural biases exist. In a world drastically changed by the Covid-19 Pandemic, this edited collection offers a variety of insights into different modes of the fix-it fic and how it moves beyond the individual exploration of identity to exist as a communal, online activist effort.

About the Book

The book is divided into three sections. The first is “Part One: Putting in the *Fix*,” which delves into the precision of what the fix-it fic can accomplish. This section begins with Perceville Forester’s “Fan Fiction Fixes for Queer Erasure in Mainstream Media,” which broadly discusses the fix-it fic as a liminal space between the fan and anti-fan, where both excitement and ambivalence are motivating factors in writing. Using the theory of affective response, Forester examines the cultural frustration and exhaustion that occurs when fix-it fics come up against the mainstream media in a battle for control. Ethan Calof’s “Fannish Yiddish and Communal Becoming in the Rouge Archive” examines how fix-it fic authors use Jewish culture and the Yiddish language to establish cross-cultural connections in the world that the fix-it author is revising. Paige Hartenburg’s “Beyond the Knot: Reparative Fiction and the Omegaverse” explores the Omegaverse in *Voltron Legendary Defender* fix-it fics and demonstrates how the Omegaverse is a subgenre that re-imagines gendered hierarchy as a response to queerbaiting. Sharon Sutherland and Darsey Meredith’s “The Macro Fix: Practicing Activism through Fan Fiction” analyzes fix-it fics that use the law and legal jargon to examine characters’ points of view who have undergone injustice based on their sexual orientation.

“Part Two: Fixing the Canon, Fixing the Author” highlights how fix-it fics challenge the original creator’s visions, thus fashioning a better environment for the characters. These chapters show how fix-it fics authors are activists in

²⁴ Elmie K-E, “Interview.”

how they fight for acceptance by creating characters that challenge the original creator's lack of cultural awareness, specifically their anti-Queer stances. Laura Tolbert's "Fan Fiction Fights Back: The Effort to Build a Better Wizarding World" argues that *Harry Potter* fix-it fics erase Rowling's epilogue to counter her public, transphobic comments that dim the excitement that *Harry Potter* fans once found in the wizarding world. Anna Canterino provides an introspective on *Supernatural's* lack of penance for several instances of queerbaiting in "I have my version and you have yours': Fan Fiction and *Supernatural* Fan's Road to Damascus." The article also highlights the show's unstable relationship with fan fiction, consistently mocking the form throughout the series. Rounding out this section, Jamie MacGregor's chapter, "This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us': *Hannibal* Post-Canon Fics and Queer Futurity" and Kristy Smith's chapter "Fixing 'The Fixer': Fan Fiction Representations of *Wentworth's* Joan Ferguson in Lesbian Relationships" demonstrate the way fix-it fic authors offer characters who, the victims of queerbaiting by their original creators, a space for peacefully exploring life with their chosen partners.

"Part Three: Fixing Other Genres" considers how fix-it fics have leaked into other forms of multimedia. In "The Fix-It Novel: How Commercial Authors Instrumentalize Fan Fiction's Subversive Potential," Amanda Boyce analyzes the commercial authors who have used fan fiction to create stories that focus on characters hoping to change their favorite character's outcomes and thus their own, personal predicaments. Jordan Hansen's chapter, "Real-Life Magic: *Harry Potter* and the Fan Film Canon," analyzes the fix-it fic through the lens of fan films on *YouTube*, while Meghan N. Cronin analyzes the various incarnations of *Batman* and how theatrical satire critiques superheroes in "Satire, Parody, and Multi-Modal Intertextuality in *Holy Musical B@man*."

Ultimately, this book hopes to demonstrate fix-it fics essential and indispensable role in our cultural milieu. The fact that it has flourished and grown in its production, appearance, and purpose over the last several decades is a testimony to its lasting power and the momentous influence it has in the lives of those who read and write it. My own experience reading fan fiction brought me through the Covid-19 pandemic, offering a world that was accessible without fear of illness and one that offered a creative outlet in a moment that seemed so uncertain. I hope that for you, the person holding this book in their hands (or reading it online), a world of opportunity for reading, writing, advocating, and activism will come alive through fan fiction. The fix-it fic is no longer a taboo subject; it is an endless opportunity for imagination, feeling, and community empathy.

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