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Fans and Fan Spinoffs from Favorite Popular Culture

In *Enterprising Women* scholar Camille Bacon-Smith describes the underground culture of "media fandom," that is, the network of fans who create fiction, poetry, art, and other creative works based on favorite television shows and then gather to circulate these works. Because I have been an active participant in this culture for twenty years, Bacon-Smith's book was of particular interest to me, not only as an academic, but as a fan.

Bacon-Smith has taken on a daunting task: reporting on a cultural phenomenon both as an engaged participant and as an unbiased observer. Her position is typical of the ethnologist who studies contemporary society, and this book is a useful example of the ethnologist's dilemma, as well as an informative text on the culture she studies.

There are two factors that make Bacon-Smith's chosen subject particularly difficult for academics to study. One arises from the nature of the fandom itself. The quasi-illegal status of their activity (technically the participants are infringing on network-held copyrights) makes fans wary of publicity. The second problem concerns the past interaction of media fandom and academia. When media fandom was initially "discovered" by scholars, fans were deeply offended by academics who posed as fans in order to obtain and exploit underground material.

Bacon-Smith's forthrightness while doing her research went a long way toward ameliorating these factors. She consistently identified herself as an academic when participating in fannish activities, got permission before quoting people, allowing many to remain anonymous, and cautiously declined to identify certain authors, stories, or publications. This conscientious approach limited the amount of information she could present and had an effect on what she was allowed to observe; in exchange for these limitations, however, she is able to present a work that respects its subjects' dignity and privacy and smooths the way for future scholars who want to study this cultural phenomenon.

The book is organized chronologically, following Bacon-Smith's experiences in fandom. During the course of the book, as she progresses more and more deeply into the fannish world, she looks for its heart, the central core of its being. This can be confusing, as her focus swings back and forth among different types of fannish activities; nevertheless, we do get a sense of her increasing awareness as time passes. Here I will focus on certain specific issues and organize the review thematically, departing in places from the organizational structure of the book.

Enterprising Women opens with a brisk and informative rundown of the history of media fandom, including an account of its outgrowth from science-fiction fandom and a helpful explanation of the jargon used by fans. Bacon-Smith then proceeds more specifically to describe the social organization of members within fandom. Next, she turns to defining fanzines (fan fiction publications), the genres of work that appear therein, and the community that produces them. At this point, she runs into a problem as an ethnographer. Her tendency to generalize from small samples distorts her conclusions. Having described her own initiation into fandom, which consisted of a step-by-step introduction by experienced fans who acted as mentors, she concludes that this is how everyone comes into fandom, and that there is "an extensive mentor-apprentice system for training newcomers" (p.

81). Although this conclusion is based on her own experiences and those of other fans she knew, it is by no means a universal truth. Many fans are not "mentored into" fandom. What Bacon-Smith does not seem to realize, quite apart from the smallness of the sample, is that her own status most likely affected her treatment. Her position as an observer–which to her credit she openly acknowledged to her contacts–probably led her mentors to formalize the initiation procedure more than is normally done. For example, Bacon-Smith herself says that, when she was finally introduced to "circuit fandom" (stories photocopied and passed around rather than published in fanzines), she was surprised to learn that many of her informants had been active in circuit fandom all along and had concealed from her not only their involvement but the existence of circuit fandom itself. Yet she never makes the connection between this secrecy and her own status; she never considers that since the elaborate mentorship she describes herself receiving might be a result of her mentors' deciding step by step just how far to trust this observer/outsider, her experience therefore cannot be extrapolated to other participants.

Bacon-Smith also overgeneralizes with regard to the gender of fans, declining entirely to address the phenomenon of male participation in media fandom. Although it is true that men make up a minority of fanzine editors and contributors, their participation is nonetheless significant and should not be ignored. Some of Bacon-Smith's analyses pertain specifically to the psychological and social qualities of women; because not all fans are women, her analyses cannot be applied to fandom as a whole.

When it comes to analyzing fan fiction by women, Bacon-Smith provides interesting insights into the relationship between the stories and their creators. She asserts that fan fiction addresses the real-life concerns of its authors in a metaphorical way. Fan stories often center on trust, friendship, and support, which Bacon-Smith observes are central issues in the authors' lives. She discusses the risks fans take and the ways in which these risks are managed. Two risks in particular are examined: it is risky to reveal one's true concerns in fictional metaphor, a risk that is conserved by increasing the distance between the writer's personal situation and the fictional context; moreover, participation in fandom itself is risky, as fans are often poorly regarded by the "mundane" (non-fannish) world, a risk that fans conserve by downplaying their involvement in fandom when dealing with outsiders.

Bacon-Smith analyzes a number of specific genres within fan fiction with varying degrees of success. Her analysis of the "Mary Sue" genre within fan fiction is excellent. "Mary Sue" is the derogatory nickname given to the heroine of a certain type of story in which a beautiful young woman–typically considered a stand-in for the author herself–saves the day, wins the heart of the author's favorite character, and (usually) dies. Bacon-Smith identifies several characteristics common to the idealized female character central to such stories, and provides an explanation in terms of the social and psychological pressures experienced by adolescent women that accounts not only for why the stories are so common for beginning writers, but also why they are so greatly disliked by most readers. The weakness in her analysis is that it explains only the female version of the phenomenon; her account would not apply to the male equivalent (sometimes called "Billy Bob" stories; cf. the character of Wesley Crusher in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*), which therefore remains unexplained. Indeed, if idealized authorlike characters, which are common to both sexes, spring from a common source, Bacon-Smith's female-centered explanation cannot account for the entire phenomenon.

Bacon-Smith also considers the riskiest genre, homoerotic fiction in which two same-sex (usually male) television characters such as Kirk and Spock are portrayed as lovers. Here, as Bacon-Smith explains in an astute analysis, women can most greatly conserve the risk of expressing themselves in fictional metaphor, since a love story between two men is greatly distant from their personal experiences; however, they simultaneously increase the risks inherent in participating in fandom, because this kind of fiction is regarded even more negatively by outsiders than other forms, and because it is also regarded negatively by some fans. Bacon-Smith also tries to explain why women enjoy homoerotic fiction, and succeeds chiefly in disproving some earlier scholars' theories. Despite her application of her own discussion of risk and the expression of personal concerns to homoerotic fiction, she backs away from saying that the authors of such fiction are really writing about themselves; instead, she argues that they are writing about men but with a distinctly female voice.

An analysis of the "hurt/comfort" genre follows. Hurt/comfort stories are those in which a major character is injured physically or psychologically and another major character, usually a partner or close friend, responds with concern. Bacon-Smith observes that such stories often function as a catharsis for both author and audience. Indeed, it is through this genre, she says, that fans re-

lease the pain of their unfulfilled lives, that she claims to have found the heart of fandom. "[P]ain was so pervasive in the lives of women that it lay like a wash beneath all the creative efforts of a community they had made for themselves.... fans wrote to work through their own problems of personal suffering" (p. 270). Many fans have been upset by this characterization, disappointed that a book which for the most part depicts fans in a positive light concludes by describing them as failures who turn to fan fiction to address their misery vicariously.

I too find this conclusion troubling. My objection, however, is not that this portrait is unflattering; rather, my quarrel is with the soundness of her argument. First of all, her identification of hurt/comfort as the central genre of fandom is puzzling. It is significant that she opens this chapter by observing that many fans do not enjoy hurt/comfort. In addition, while describing the genre, she observes that it exists outside of fandom. For example, network advertisements are likely to highlight scenes in which one major character is injured or threatened, and another major character expresses concern for the injured or endangered character. Having offered evidence, therefore, that the genre of hurt/comfort is disliked by some fans and that it appeals to the general public–in other words, that it is neither common to fandom nor unique to fandom–she then draws the conclusion that it is a defining characteristic of fandom. This conclusion is not warranted by the evidence offered.

Another problem is her claim that many fans live unsatisfactory lives and experience unusually deep pain. A survey she cites as evidence for this claim was conducted among fans at a single small convention on the East Coast; although the number is not specified, it cannot be enough for a representative sample. She also mentions information from surveys conducted informally by fans themselves, but these are even less scientific. In addition, the evidence suffers from the lack of comparison to a control group. For example, she notes that many fans are overeducated for their present jobs, but fails to compare that to the percentage of the population that was underemployed at the time of the survey, which was undertaken during the recession of the mid-1980s. She also cites examples of painful occurrences in the lives of fans, but does not show that these painful occurrences are extraordinary or compare them to the painful experiences of any other group. She notes that about 70 percent of fans are unmarried, but does not state explicitly the linking premise that would be required to make this fact support her conclusion that fans are living unsatisfactory lives: namely, that being unmarried means being unfulfilled, a premise that should not go unchallenged.

Finally, the explanation propounded by Bacon-Smith for women's involvement in fandom rests on an unnecessary preconception. Bacon-Smith states (p. 269) that she had accepted at the beginning of her search that the heart of fandom is the place "where the tears fell." By pre-defining the object of her quest in this fashion, she is making the assumption that there must be something wrong with these women, an assumption which is not only unnecessary but pernicious. If one asks why the warm, talented women portrayed in this book would form creative and supportive communities, at least part of the answer lies in the question itself, in the warmth and talent of the participants. Certainly the answer need not assume that there must be something wrong with them. This undercuts the respect and dignity accorded her subjects in earlier chapters.

Enterprising Women is a landmark work in the study of media fandom, and despite its flaws, an important contribution to the field of contemporary ethnology. I found many of Bacon-Smith's analyses valuable and insightful, and her frankness about her observer status and her respect for her subjects' privacy set an excellent example for future researchers in this field. Anyone who studies media fandom should own this book.

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