When Harry Met Bella: Fanfiction is all the rage

Remember when Harry Potter invited Bella Swan to Hogwarts’s big dance? And Ginny Weasley’s and Edward Cullen’s both went ballistic?

Fans of the Harry Potter and Twilight sagas know that’s crazy talk. After all, these fictional megastars aren’t even in the same series. Still, it’s a tantalizing scenario to consider: What if Bella decided to dump her handsome hunk of vampire? What if Harry transferred to her school, Forks High, in rainy Washington State? What if...?

Welcome to the world of fanfiction, where fans create stories using characters, settings, and events from their favourite books, movies, or television shows. Put another way, a known author or scriptwriter creates a “sandbox” full of characters and story lines and his fans can’t wait to “play” in it. In fanfiction, all offstage events are possible, whether they take place before, during, or after the established action. [...]

While fanfiction may seem new, it’s actually old. According to a recent article in Newsweek, when “Miguel de Cervantes was slow to produce the second volume of Don Quixote, an anonymous author wrote his or her own continuation of the saga to much acclaim”—and that was way back in 1614.

Why are people so eager to write (and read) fanfiction? The answer is simple: they want more, more, more. Chances are, at some point, you’ve written fanfiction—you just don’t know it. Remember the time your English teacher asked you to write a letter from Mercutio2 to Romeo or to rewrite a scene from The Great Gatsby3 from Daisy’s point of view? That’s fanfiction. You put your own spin on somebody else’s story.

A few years ago, Geraldine Brooks wondered about the father in Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women. Brooks’s “what if?” resulted in March (Penguin, 2005), a look into the lives (and loves) of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March’s parents. Using someone else’s characters or plot doesn’t mean the resulting work is less worthy than the original tale or than a story created from scratch. The committee that awarded Brooks the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for March sure didn’t think so. [...]

As for the accusation that fanfiction saps creativity, that’s a lot of you—know what. [...] Writers can actually be more creative (and less stressed out) when they don’t have to invent everything. Creating original, believable characters can be the toughest part of writing—and using existing characters allows fanfiction creators to concentrate on other areas of writing, such as pacing, style, and plot.

“Canon” refers to the facts and events portrayed in the source material. [...] Now that you know that “ canon” is the term used to describe the source material on which fanfiction is based, [...] you may even want to try our opening scenario: What would happen if Harry Potter and Bella Swan went out with each other?

E. Burns and C. Webber, School Library Journal, January 2009

In the case of Shakespeare fanfic, all of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets constitute the “canon.” However, some writers consciously deviate from the assumptions on which canon rests, and these deviations are called “Alternate Universes” or “AUs.” AUs generally take two forms. In the first form, the author alters the events of the canon narrative; he or she explores, for example, what might have happened had Romeo and Juliet survived. In the second form, the author transplants the entire plotline into a new timeperiod or physical location. Other stories may instead contain “original characters” (“OCs”), or characters invented by the fanfic writer to interact with canon characters.

1. After reading both texts, give a definition of the following words, using your own words:

- **Fanfiction:**
- **A canon:**

2. In the following chart, list the different possible changes a writer can make to a canon:

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<th>Canon</th>
<th>Types of transformations</th>
<th>Derivative work = the “new” version of the canon</th>
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DISCUSS

1. Discuss the different goals and effects of such transformations.
2. What issues/problems can fanfiction raise as regards the original writer’s canon and his/her character?
3. Is fanfiction plagiarism or the perfect thing to encourage writing?