Harry Potter and the Revenge
of the Folk Narrative

Abstract

J. K. Rowling’s work has enjoyed unparalleled success not only in bookstores but also within cyberspace, where the *Harry Potter* books dominate the relatively recent phenomenon of “fan fiction”: anonymous stories, circulated on the Internet, which are based on the characters of established authors. These unauthorized tales of Harry Potter and friends may help us to see more clearly what is unique about Rowling’s work, and may also challenge us to reconsider our traditional assumptions about the authority of the author.
As a publishing phenomenon, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books can be described in a never-ending set of superlatives: most copies, most weeks on the best-seller list, most nations conquered, etc. The sixth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, had the unique distinction of dominating the best-seller lists in England and America for weeks before a single copy was available, solely through the strength of advance orders. (It is scheduled for publication July 16, after this article was completed but before the publication of this issue of *JLA*. All comments in this article about the world of *Harry Potter* are based only on books one through five.) Book sales, however, are not the only sign of the unique status the Rowling *oeuvre* holds among readers. There is another measurement which in some ways may be even more telling, because it speaks not only of the breadth of a book’s readership but of the depth of its readers’ fascination with it and devotion to it: the number of *Harry Potter* stories that have been written by authors other than J. K. Rowling. These stories – known as “fan fiction” – appear on numerous Internet sites such as [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net), [www.phoenixsong.net](http://www.phoenixsong.net), [www.sugarquill.net](http://www.sugarquill.net), mostly pseudonymously. They typically attempt either to anticipate what will happen to the characters in the time after
the author has last left them, or to provide a more “detailed” examination of events from the published works (often from the point of view of some character other than Harry), or to create a counter-tale or “what-if” story in which the “history” of events according to the book’s author has been subtly or radically changed. Stories vary wildly in literary quality, with some looking like the work of professional authors and others representing little more than the spontaneous outpouring of powerful adolescent emotion. They range in length from “one-shots” of a couple of hundred words to epics of a few thousand pages. The fan-fiction phenomenon is only slowly making its way into the consciousness of the broader public -- the majority of my students and colleagues are still unaware of its very existence -- but it offers an academic an extraordinary opportunity to analyze popular culture in terms of “reader-response” theory, and it offers a devotee of the books a chance to spend endless hours reading new tales about his favorite fictional universe rather than (as would have been the case in the days before the Internet) feeling forced to re-read the original books twenty times over. The ethics of disclosure require me to confess that I am both an academic and a devotee, and I will be writing in both capacities throughout this article.

These fan fictions are written about dozens of fictional worlds, from those of classic literature to those of current movies, but the number of fanfics inspired by these different worlds tells an astonishing story. As of July 1, 2005, the fanfiction.net site (which accepts submissions on virtually any imaginative work, not just *Harry Potter*: the other sites mentioned are Pottercentric) showed there had been 168 fictions inspired by the works of Jane Austen, 489 by the Sherlock Holmes tales, 626 by Shakespeare, and 193,002 by
Harry Potter. This discrepancy is not a simple matter of the Harry Potter books being current, popular literature while Austen and Shakespeare are old classics. Stephen King, for example, is also a contemporary author of tremendous popularity, and at 281 he weighs in between Austen and Holmes. Harry Potter’s closest competitors are Lord of the Rings, with 37,342, and the American television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer with 26,646. Star Wars comes next with 12,091. A first rough calculation has the number of Harry Potter fanfics surpassing the combined total of all other fan fictions – those based on the narratives of books, movies, TV series, and all other sources. Notably, the top four are all works of fantasy, but just as clearly that factor alone is no guarantee of popularity in the fanfic stakes.

Why, moreover, does Harry Potter so surpass even Lord of the Rings, one of the best-selling books (and most popular movies) of our time, a work which has certainly never lacked an intensely-devoted fan-base? The co-founder of Phoenixsong.net, who goes by “Musings,” answers:

I think part of it comes from times in which we live. I believe this is the first fandom that has truly been able to take advantage of the Internet in getting its message out to the masses. The Harry Potter books were first published in 1997. The World Wide Web was coming into its own at the same time and became an easy way for people all over the world to communicate.

So while many of the people who write fan-fiction for Harry Potter may also admire (say) Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter is “their”
book, in a way _LOTR_ will never become. For many, _Harry Potter_ is literally the first work of fiction they loved, and they felt it had been written for them, while _LOTR_ had been written for their parents. They also felt it natural to express their fancy in the anonymous, participatory community of cyberspace, a forum not available to the first readers and admirers of _LOTR_. The participatory aspect must not be overlooked; all sites offer readers opportunities to review the stories, and for writers to respond to the reviews. As “Jeconais” (the webmaster of Phoenixsong.net) notes, “Fan fiction can almost be looked upon as a form of apprenticeship, because people will tell you (if prodded) exactly what is wrong with what you have written, and accepting criticism, as hard as it can be, is the only way to learn.” Many fanfic authors are still in high school or college, and in a sense they are writing fan fictions instead of (or in addition to) writing book reports.

Speaking now as one who has read many book reports over the years, I think it is necessary to stress that the fanfic – even one that comes from a clearly unpolished pen – is oftentimes the more interesting and valuable way of responding to fiction. It requires, at the very least, an attempt to convey some sense of why the book matters to the reader, as well as an imaginative engagement with the text. True, the beginning writer may leave his reader struggling through a string of narrative clichés in order to get to the point of the exercise, but the “objective” format of the book report offers no protection against cliché, and may indeed attract it more strongly. This point needs emphasis in part because reaction to fan fiction is often laced not only with condescension but with a kind of horror, as if the writers were engaged in an act of vandalism, something akin to graffiti. When the
fan fiction phenomenon began building, some of the authors whose works were subjected to fan imitations had that suspicious and hostile reaction, at times taking legal action for violation of copyright. The most “victimized” author, however – J. K. Rowling – has not responded with any such hostility, and has generally averred that for the most part she feels more flattered than threatened (with the exception of pornographic *Harry Potter* stories, which she has challenged).

It would not have been surprising if she Rowling did take offense at some of the tales of Harry Potter and friends which circulate on the World Wide Web, since a good many of them (it must be said) more or less miss the point. That is, instead of engaging with what is unique and interesting in Rowling’s work, they simply use the characters’ names and the names of a few of the spells taught at Hogwarts in order to re-tell pre-fabricated narratives. (Obviously this is true of a good deal of fan fiction written for other works as well. For that matter it is equally true of a great many Hollywood “adaptations” of literary classics.) One way to summarize the tendencies in this more stereotyped work is by breaking them down into the “Four ‘R’s,” namely:

- **ROMANCE.** Harry’s fan-fictional love life often follows strict Hollywood rules: the secret passion that cannot be told though it tears out the heart, the terrible misunderstanding which sabotages the lovers at what should have been their moment of blissful recognition, the substitute partners who either treacherously fight to keep the man/woman who really belongs to another, or who finally and sadly recognize it is not for them to interfere with soulmate destiny, etc.
Despite J. K. Rowling’s own insistence that Hermione Granger is not romantically interested in Harry, some writers prefer that pairing. And despite Rowling’s declaration that Harry is incurably straight, many stories have Harry finding true happiness with Draco Malfoy (who also figures in more conventional romances as the beast who is saved by the love of the beauty, whether that beauty be Hermione or Ginny Weasley). The more orthodox partnership, however, is Harry and Ginny (though Ginny is described in the fifth book as having “given up” on Harry). The partner who is least favored, and most vigorously (at times frenziedly) opposed, is the only one Harry has ever gotten to first base with: Cho Chang. The partner who is most reviled is the dreaded “Mary Sue” (see below for definition).

- REVENGE. Harry lashes back at his long-time tormentors. The object of vengeance, interestingly enough, is generally not Lord Voldemort but more commonly the figures who represent the misuse of parental or quasi-parental authority. It’s no surprise that the Dursleys and Professor Snape often get what’s coming to them, either verbally or physically (and some tales of the latter type are quite gruesomely graphic). Readers may be surprised, though, by the number of tales in which Harry lashes back at Professor Dumbledore for his long train of deceptions and manipulations. Some of the charges against Dumbledore come from that old wizard’s own confession to Harry at
the end of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, but many others are essentially made up out of whole cloth in order to provide Harry with a cause for war. A subtler or more passive-aggressive form of the revenge tale has the dead Harry enjoying a kind of post-mortem revenge, as all those who misunderstood him repent their failure to properly appreciate and treasure him.

**REDEMPTION.** While some fanfic authors enjoy picturing Snape’s evisceration, an even greater number see him explaining himself and redeeming himself for his continual mistreatment of Harry. A flourishing sub-genre has Snape becoming Harry’s adoptive father. (A smaller but still active sub-genre has him revealed as Harry’s biological father.) Even more versions of Harry’s sixth and seventh years have Draco Malfoy seeing the light, and sacrificing himself to save Harry and his friends in the final battle against Voldemort. Another fairly popular plot has Harry in a sense redeeming himself by traveling back in time to fix his own mistakes.

**RECOGNITION.** Harry (or sometimes another character) has a great secret, sometimes one having to do with his powers, sometimes with his identity, and this is revealed at the crucial moment to the astonishment of all onlookers. Or, Harry (or some other character) does *not* know some great secret, and someone else must explain it to him. The most common form taken by this motif has
Harry suffering from amnesia and wandering obliviously through the Muggle world until recognized and returned to the fold. The emotional climax of such stories comes from the scenes of reunification.

I do not mean to suggest that the presence or dominance of one or more “R” is anything like a sure sign of low-quality work. The Four “R”s are of course among the stock motifs of melodrama, and have proven timelessly successful (when they are well-executed) in creating strong emotional effects. Naturally they appear very often in other fan fiction as well – and in many, many high-budget movies. Their prevalence in the Harry Potter fan fictions would seem to tell us little, then, except to confirm the continued appeal of these motifs and how readily and naturally they are grasped even by unpracticed writers.

Ironically, one way in which these forms of fan fiction are helpful is in pinpointing what the Harry Potter books are not. Like melodrama, children’s literature is generally assumed to thrive on the creation of a black and white world in which certain emotional responses – such as revenge fantasies – emerge almost reflexively. In Harry Potter, however, the moral and emotional responses elicited by the story are considerably more complex and ambiguous. The revenge instinct, for example, is for the most part shunned and rejected. Though Snape and the Dursleys occasionally receive some comic comeuppance, the balance sheets still show very large accounts owed which have not been paid back. More significantly, Harry is offered (in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban) a chance to take vengeance on the betrayer of his parents, and refuses it. Fictional indicators so far imply that this rejection of revenge is to be held up as the right decision,
both on a moral and a pragmatic level. As for the other “R”s, there is very little romance so far in Rowling’s novels, but what there is emphasizes the awkwardness and confusion of teen love rather than the glow of two hearts beating as one. It is impossible to be certain that redemption will never come for Snape or Draco, but so far it seems that petty malice and the sociopathic lust for domination are to be accepted as permanent features of some personalities.

The fourth “R,” recognition, raises some of the most intriguing issues. From its beginning the Harry Potter saga works as a clear case of what psychoanalysis calls the “family romance”: that is, it appeals to the persistent and near-universal fantasy (which becomes an actual delusion among some psychotics) that one’s apparent mother and father are only temporary caretakers, that one’s real parents are of much more exalted or exotic status, and that one’s secret true identity will surely be revealed at the right moment (and won’t our persecutors be sorry then!). For Harry this moment comes in the unforgettable scene where Hagrid brings news that he does not belong to the stifling gray world of Little Whinging, but to a world of extraordinary wonder; that he isn’t the worthless stepson doomed to be abused and picked upon forever, but the child of two powerful wizards and the inheritor of their power, and of an even greater destiny. (The “amnesiac Harry” tales are ways of recapturing, repeating and extending the emotions stirred by that moment, as once again we see Harry being informed that there is far, far more to him than he thought.) We are all familiar with family romances of this general type; they appear throughout history, from the ancient Greek who discovers he is really the son of a god to the medieval youth who discovers he is really the destined King of England to the Kansas farmboy who
discovers he is really the last survivor from another planet. Still, the tale scarcely comes in a purer form than it appears in *Harry Potter*, and there is no doubt of this being one source of the books’ appeal. Given this fact, however, it is striking how *little* emphasis is given to the family romance motif after the inevitable discoveries of the first book. After that, as Harry settles in at Hogwarts, another fictional technique comes to dominate, one with almost precisely the opposite valence to that of the family romance: the device known in literary criticism and cultural studies as “domestication.”

Domestication (or “naturalization”: the two terms are essentially interchangeable) refers to taking what is (or ordinarily seems) strange and wonderful and putting it in a context which turns it into something ordinary and familiar. Cartoons like “The Flintstones” and “The Jetsons” can serve as crude but clear examples: dinosaurs and androids (the strange and wonderful) appear, but they function as house pets and maids (the ordinary and familiar). The *Harry Potter* books constantly exploit this device: magical beings, spells and potions are the stuff of wonder, but they also function as parts of homework assignments, sales pitches, bureaucratic offices, and literally dozens of other contexts familiar from everyday life. (In one hour of one class of Children’s Literature, students came up with twenty eight examples from the first half of the first book alone.) Domestication is almost always a device of comedy, and these episodes are obviously comic in effect. (If that hypothesis really needs testing it can be confirmed by checking the audience reaction when such episodes come up in the *Harry Potter* movies.) They serve a further purpose however: as a counterbalance to the family romance aspect of the books. The message of family romance is “behind the tasks and routines of the dull, ordinary
world lurks something marvelous and extraordinary,” while the message of domestication is “behind this marvelous extraordinary world lurk the same tasks and routines you find in the dull, ordinary world.”

One factor which makes the *Harry Potter* books so compelling is this very balance between these two messages, each shown to contain some measure of truth. The truth behind the episodes of domestication, comic as they are, points to a theme which is ultimately rather sobering if not depressing, a theme which seems to me unmistakably deliberate and crucial to the construction of the books: magic power does not in itself change the world at all. It does not in itself make the slightest dent in the ongoing problems of life. It does not end war, or in-group vs. out-group conflict, or even sibling rivalry. It provides no cure for misunderstood adolescence, it does not put an end to the need for work and school and politics and bureaucracy and all the other institutions which are supposed to dissolve (like magic) in our utopian visions. At best, magic gives some individuals who would otherwise be helpless and persecuted (like Harry) the chance to fight back and work their way through these problems.

Each year that I have taught *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* as part of the Children’s Literature class, I have asked students for their favorite episode from that book, and two consistently stand out: Harry’s first great moment of triumph at Hogwarts when he shows his prowess on the broom, and Harry’s discovery of the Mirror of Erised where he sees a vision of the life he longs for with his late parents restored to life. Each episode reflects one half of the balance just referred to: the first validates the family romance, shows a fantasy coming true as Harry finds that the stories of his hidden ancestry and buried magical powers are actually real; the second illustrates the
limitations of magic, which cannot in the end give us the things we most desire, only tease us with unattainable visions of those things. (I would argue that “magic” here – as is so often the case in the most thoughtful and provocative works of fantasy – symbolizes, among other things, “power”; but that is a topic in itself.) The best of the fan fictions (for a very subjective and very partial list, see below) show that their authors understand very well what is going on in the *Harry Potter* books, and try to maintain this complexity. Crucially, in the best fanfic work Harry is allowed to remain a teenager: flawed, searching and unsure. (For older readers especially, one of the attractions of fan fiction is that some aspects of teenage life – most obviously, but not exclusively, sex – can be treated at greater length and with greater frankness than is possible in books for children.) One of the paradoxes and pitfalls visible in the less successful attempts at fan fiction is that some fans allow themselves to love the characters so much they end up destroying them. Authors who so identify with Harry they can’t tolerate the moments when he palpably blunders and loses, and so erase them by constructing an alternate-universe Harry who does everything right and always wins, are essentially erasing what made Harry such an interesting and appealing character to begin with. These “Super Harry!” stories still appear with some regularity, but it is fair to say that fan fiction has gotten well beyond it. Skeptics (at least open-minded ones) would, I think, be surprised to discover how much is available in the fanfic world aside from the pleasures of self-indulgence and wish fulfillment.

In addition to reading pleasure, the growth of fan-fiction poses some intriguing challenges to our common-sense ideas about how fiction and authorship work. What is fan-fiction, and can it be
distinguished from “real fiction” or “original fiction”? When the topic was discussed on Theresa Nielsen Hayden’s website *Making Light* (Hayden is an editor at a publishing house specializing in fantasy and science fiction), one commenter started by considering the basic m.o. of the genre: as already noted, a typical story on www.sugarquill.net or www.phoenixsong.net will take the point of view of a secondary character, and/or will extrapolate on what happens after the events of the last published *Harry Potter* book. With this in mind, the commenter semi-facetiously suggested that the first known example of the genre was Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Virgil, he argued, was doing what hundreds of Harry Potter fans are doing: taking a popular work (Homer’s *Iliad*), using its established plot and characters, selecting one such character (Aeneas, who has a very minor role in the *Iliad*) and then focusing on the story as seen from his point of view (instead of the p.o.v. of Homer’s hero, Achilles) and extrapolating on post-*Iliad* events.

It won’t do, therefore, to dismiss fan fiction as “not real literature” simply on the ground that it is “parasitic” on previous work. Obviously the “parasites” have already lodged themselves in the canon of Western literature. It would be an interesting exercise for the reader to imagine some definition of literature which would exclude anything appearing on one of the above-mentioned websites, without simultaneously demoting some accepted classic to “unreal” status. I submit it cannot be done. The only definition which seems to me to stand up is Hayden’s own: fan fiction is simply work which cannot legally be published and sold, because somebody else holds the copyright to its characters and situations. This of course is not an essential fact based on the nature and qualities of the work, but merely a temporary and contingent fact based on law and convention.
I believe many fanfic works are of high enough quality that when the copyright of *Harry Potter* lapses, they would have no difficulty finding publishers, assuming that book publishing continues in the future more or less in its present form. (Unfortunately, the authors may well be dead by that time as well.) Assuming I am correct, what will the *Harry Potter* world consist of then? Will the vast majority of readers make a sharp distinction between the “real” *Harry Potter* books – namely J. K. Rowling’s – whose word is ultimate law, and all the others, which are just for fun and disposable or ignorable at will? Perhaps. That was the reaction of most fans, for example, to recent attempts at expanding the fictional universe of *Gone With The Wind*: there is the genuine article, the book written by Margaret Mitchell, and there are later imitations/extrapolations, which may or may not be worth reading but which are not on the same level of authenticity as the canonical work. Some members of the *Harry Potter* fanfic community readily agree with this distinction. To quote “Jeconais” once again:

*JKR writes the Canon we follow. And despite how we might like to fool ourselves, she is the one telling the story, and she is the one in control of characters. We are just playing games building sandcastles in her sandpit. And while the sandpit could last for ever, our castles will be knocked over, destroyed, or even just fall apart over time.*

It seems to me less than certain, however, that the *Harry Potter* universe will follow the same example. Fan fiction has already built up such a base and such momentum that a new model of “authenticity” may be in the works. Take for example the character of Ginny Weasley.
A considerable body of fan fiction has already been composed centered on this character, extending to many hundreds of pages of rather high quality work, though if you added up all the lines in all the *Harry Potter* books spoken by her, to her, or about her, it would not by my estimate much exceed a dozen pages. These Ginny fics, however, actually hang together quite well. That is, they are fairly consistent in their depictions of her qualities and characteristics: she is passionate, temperamental, prickly, brave, generous, mischievous. There are hints of all these qualities in the *Harry Potter* books, but they are left mostly in broad and vague form. One might say, then, that as of now the character has been “rough-hewn” by J. K. Rowling, and then “shaped” by the fans. It is obviously within Rowling’s power to shape the character further in the next two books, which could take any of the following forms: 1) Rowling could flesh out the character more or less along the lines which the earlier books have already suggested and which fans have already picked up on – the events and dialogue would of course be different, but the basic character would be same as in the fanfic world; 2) Rowling could change direction with this character (as she has done already – Ginny has developed from the shrinking and blushing pre-teen of earlier books into a more self-possessed young woman) say by allowing some trauma to turn her into a bitter recluse; or 3) Rowling might – Merlin forbid – kill Ginny. Possibility 1) presents no problem for the fanfic world, but what about 2) or 3)? In scenario 2), considering all the momentum which has been built up behind “fan Ginny,” with what is by now a well-established personality in which so much work has been invested, would the fanfic world obediently pivot on a dime and begin rewriting the character according to the author’s new “instructions”? In scenario 3), would all the fans
who are so attached to the character accept her demise?

In his essay “Dingley Dell and the Fleet,” W. H. Auden made a point about those rare fictional characters who have entered so deeply into the popular imagination they have attained the status of myth:

All characters who are products of the mythopoetic imagination are instantaneously recognizable by the fact that their existence is not defined by their social and historical context; transfer them to another society or another age and their characters and behavior will remain unchanged. In consequence, once they have been created, they cease to be their author’s characters and become the reader’s; he can continue their story for himself. Anna Karenina is not such a character for the reader cannot imagine her apart from the particular milieu in which Tolstoi places her or the particular history of her life which he records; Sherlock Holmes, on the other hand, is: every reader, according to his fancy, can imagine adventures for him, which Conan Doyle forgot, as it were, to tell us. [Emphasis added.]

The authors of fan fiction are only providing a minor extension to the dynamic Auden describes: they imagine, and record, adventures for the Harry Potter characters which J. K. Rowling has either forgotten to tell us or has not had the time to tell us. The example of Conan Doyle is particularly useful for the purpose of this discussion, for Doyle famously discovered that he could not kill Sherlock Holmes: readers wouldn’t tolerate it. More precisely, readers badgered Doyle until
he finally gave in and himself resurrected the character. But, according to the assumptions about an author’s authority and ownership of his characters which were prevalent in Doyle’s time (and still for the most part accepted without much examination today), if Doyle had not done so, Holmes would have remained dead, even if any number of Doyle’s anonymous imitators had composed rafts of stories in which Holmes went on living and detecting. Such tales would not have consoled readers for whom the “real” Sherlock Holmes was “actually” dead. To return to the current hypothesis, if Ginny dies in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, initial reader reaction might be much along the same lines: i.e., no matter how many fan stories showed “impostor” Ginny marrying Harry and having his children in a happy post-Voldemort existence, the “real” Ginny would be dead.

’Twere to consider rather curiously, however, to consider thus. A moment’s thought should be enough to show that from a common-sense perspective, J. K. Rowling’s Ginny is no more “real” than the Ginny of (say) St. Margarets (the author of two novel-length tales and several stories featuring Ginny as a primary character). Both Ginnys are by definition unreal. From a more idealistic perspective we could say that their reality is a function of the reader’s attachment to or belief in the character, and so it is not *a priori* impossible for a fanfic’s Ginny to be as real as Rowling’s; it’s a matter of how well the story is told, not of who had priority on that character or legal copyright to her. In other words, why assume that the “Platonic idea” of Ginny, if such exists, must by necessity be better instantiated in Rowling’s work than in the work of any fan fiction author? Again, as Auden says, in some kinds of fiction, the world and its inhabitants no longer belong to the authors, they belong to all of
us. Given the growth of fan-fiction, given the assumptions of the Internet-weaned generation that they are rightful interactive participants in their favorite fantasy environments, given how much modern literary theory has challenged the status of the author, it is at least conceivable that we’ve reached the point where the fate of her characters is no longer in J. K. Rowling’s hands. Not, as in the case of Doyle, because she will feel compelled to give in to reader nagging and change her original intentions. (The possibility of that happening is essentially zero; Rowling has made it clear that the final chapter of the saga is already written and set, and that she has always had that end in mind when composing. Nor is she under any financial pressure to respond to fan demands, as Doyle was.) Rather, because whatever Rowling does, counter-stories will be told in which fans determine what they think should happen to those characters, and those stories won’t fold up and go away so easily. A genre which began out of reverence for a particular author and her work (and whose practitioners go on paying that author enthusiastic compliments at every opportunity) may end up standing as a party of opposition to that author.

Would it be a disaster for literature if that happened, a descent into mob rule? Not necessarily. Readers are still capable of discerning (at least over time) the difference between high quality and low quality work, and fictions whose only claim on readers is that they aren’t cruel enough to kill the reader’s favorite characters, that in their stories everybody gets what they deserve, aren’t likely to survive no matter what changes take place in our assumptions about authorship. It is not as if we have no historical experience with imaginative work which has no one author but passes through many anonymous hands or mouths: our favorite folk tales, and even (if we accept the conclusions
of most current scholars) the Book of Genesis, were perfected through this process. The best of these possess a power equal to that of any work created by any single author of genius. The process by which these anonymous tales were forged is one akin to natural selection, as the subtractions, additions and changes to a story which were favored by the environment of readers survive to be passed on to other readers, who in turn subtracted, added, changed, etc. Because the Internet, like the old oral community, is a medium in which combination, modification and selection can operate with surprising efficiency, modern technology may thus help restore a method of literary production most of us thought primitive and essentially extinct. One major step which would be needed, to make this possible, would be for fanfiction authors to permit their own works to become malleable and adaptable, rather than insisting they themselves be “canonized” and archived in permanent form. There are already examples of works which, instead of building on the events in Rowling’s books, build on the events of other authors’ fanfics. With time we may see fan fiction works (like oral narratives) continuing to build on one another, being changed a little bit here and a little bit there in response to their environment, being grafted, cloned and spliced with the assistance of many hands until the stories which emerge have been compressed and polished enough to stand up to the most acute examination. Perhaps the set of Harry Potter books bought for a child’s birthday in 2055 will include some by J. K. Rowling and others with several names or no names on their title pages.

Whether or not these speculations pan out, Book Seven of the Harry Potter series certainly will not be “the end.” As “Musings”
says, “We, as fan fiction writers, know that we’ve only seen a glimpse of what the Harry Potter universe is like; taking what Rowling has given us and extrapolating the possibilities is a delight.... Once we’ve had the official ‘canon’ established, fan fiction authors will have definitive answers to how life will go on for The Boy Who Lived and that kind of temptation is much too sweet for those of us who love Harry Potter and the fandom to ignore.”

Prepare for the sequel: *Harry Potter and the Revenge of the Folk Narrative.*

**Supplement 1: Some terms from fan fiction.**

**angst:** misery, melancholy, self-reproach (usually Harry’s). Stories featuring Harry suffering such torments are very popular, though he is often rescued by the love of a good woman (see also *fluff*).

**AU:** alternate universe, i.e. one which departs in a significant way from *canon* (for example by keeping Sirius alive).

**beta:** in effect, the editor. (Some but not all websites require that stories be “beta-ed” before they appear on that site.) Derived from the “beta stage” of software release, which is almost ready for the general public but first needs testing by select users.

**canon:** the source -- the works by the characters’ creator. The *Harry Potter* canon includes all Rowling’s published work as well as interviews in which Rowling provides further details about this world and its characters (such as Ron’s and Hermione’s birthdays).

**fluff:** unapologetically sappily romantic, ending happily. Stories which begin with angst but end in fluff are sometimes called “flangst.”
Mary Sue: an OC who (in Theresa Nielsen Hayden’s words) “just goes around being perfect every barfing step of the way,” makes everybody fall in love with her and solves everybody’s problems. Usually a female (though male versions, sometimes called “Marty Stu,” exist as well) who appears in the first work of a young female author, but has also been identified in the work of professional authors, male and female.

OC: original character (created by the fanfic author, not in canon)

R&R: “[Please] read and review!” (All fan-fiction sites offer readers the chance to review the stories; this is the only form of “payment” they receive.)

ship: romantic relationship or partnership between two characters. A “shipper” is one who favors a particular such relationship. (“I’m a H/G shipper” means “I prefer stories in which Harry and Ginny are romantic partners.”)

slash: a story in which a homosexual relationship is central.

WIP: Work In Progress (not yet completed).

Supplement 2: Author’s Choice of 15 Top Harry Potter Fanfics

If the summary appears within quotes, it is the author’s own “teaser” for the story; otherwise it is mine. The “Angstometer” measures the degree of angst (see definitions of terms, above), with 0.0 being weightless comic fluff and 10.0 being incitement to suicide. (In my experience, most good stories come in between 3.0 and 7.0.) Stories with an asterisk (*) are WIP.
After the End by Arabella and Zsenya

http://www.sugarquill.net/read.php?storyid=619&chapno=1

“It’s the summer after seventh year, and Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and the rest of the wizarding world must learn to live without fear.” You could say this is the one that showed everybody how it could be done: one of the earliest (written well before OoTP) and still one of the best attempts to imagine what happens to all the characters after the defeat of Voldemort (with plenty of flashbacks to the earlier battles). Romance, pathos, recognitions, pulls out all stops. STRONGEST ELEMENT: Very convincing characterization of Ron and Hermione. (My wife still refuses to believe Hermione could be attracted to a berk like Ron, but this might change her mind.) STRONG ROLES FOR: Everybody who is anybody in the first four books. ANGSTOMETER: 6.4

The Awakening Power by Sib

http://www.phoenixsong.net/symphony/story.php?cid=1143

“Challenges fill Harry’s busy sixth year: growing powers, Snape becoming Defense teacher (and Harry’s not in the mood for abuse), a new Potions teacher, a girl with a new crush on him, Quidditch, Voldemort, and a certain redheaded girl named Ginny who may help him through it all. What are the goblins up to? Will Ron win Hermione back? And what exactly is Voldemort’s diabolical plan to kill Harry and plunge magical society into anarchy? Lots of romance, drama, action and humor! Voted Phoenix Song’s Best Novel-Length Story (along with Best Harry and Best Kiss).” STRONGEST ELEMENT: Just as the teaser says, something of everything and something for everybody, carried off with great panache. The “Best Kiss” is worth the wait.
STRONG ROLES FOR: above-mentioned characters, and a very strong role for Dumbledore. ANGSTOMETER: 3.6

**Disavowals** by Elsha

http://www.sugarquill.net/index.php?action=profile&id=772

Theodore Knott, Slytherin and son of a Death-Eater, forms a friendship with Muggleborn Anne Fairleigh and comes to question his family’s “pureblood” stance. Elsha has written several shorter stories about the pair, and this novel-length tale takes them through the seventh year. STRONGEST ELEMENT: Very powerful depiction of what it is like to find oneself in a war -- and be forced to chose sides -- while still young. Voldemort’s followers are presented as deluded human beings rather than inhuman beasts. [Not too much of a role for any character except the two leads.] ANGSTOMETER: 5.9

**Harry Potter and the Bloody Summer** by Ash

http://www.phoenixsong.net/symphony/story/155/

“Harry is stuck inside the Dursleys’ home for the entire Summer. But Lucius Malfoy is free again and Voldemort is impatient. Harry won’t even have to set a foot outside Number Four to be in terrible danger....” STRONGEST ELEMENTS: A near-death experience almost every chapter, but somehow it stays exhilarating, as the author skillfully manipulates the element of dark humor in the ‘never-ending cliffhanger’ plot structure. Follow-up, *Harry Potter and the Year of the One*, in progress and just as good. STRONG ROLES FOR: Weasleys and Dursleys. ANGSTOMETER: 5.5
Harry Potter and the Deadly Deception by Delylah

http://www.phoenixsong.net/symphony/story/276/

Harry is forced to fake his own death, assume a new identity, and return to Hogwarts. He cannot reveal himself even to his friends, who are in mourning for him. Yes, it’s a melodramatic plot line, but it’s executed very well. STRONGEST ELEMENTS: Very affecting, without blatantly grabbing for your tearducts. STRONG ROLES FOR: Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Dumbledore. ANGSTOMETER: 6.4

Harry Potter and the Emerald Tablet by Lady Alchymia

http://www.fanfiction.net/u/515360/

“Deals with Harry grieving for Sirius and coming to terms with the Prophecy.... I also use the summer period to develop Harry’s relationships with his best friends, with the Order, and with the DA. Basically, I use the summer as a major bonding period, where Harry gets support (and challenges) which help prepare him to face his destiny going into year 6.” STRONGEST ELEMENTS: Harry and company are real teenagers. Also some very imaginative and amusing extensions of the laws of magic as they appear in canon. Some well-drawn OCs. STRONG ROLES FOR: Remus, Cho, Susan Bones. ANGSTOMETER: 4.0

Harry Potter and the Enemy Within by Theowyn

http://www.sugarquill.net/index.php?action=profile&id=1023

“...Harry is tormented by the knowledge that he alone can end [Voldemort’s] reign of terror. Worse, his mysterious mental link to Voldemort is stronger than ever and threatens to overwhelm him. Only Snape can teach him to control the nightmarish visions, but can Harry and Snape learn to trust one another, or will an old grudge that
refuses to die destroy the wizarding world’s sole hope of defeating the Dark Lord?” STRONGEST ELEMENT: A powerful but dark tale which depicts Harry as a flawed, frightened and frustrated young man but one ultimately capable of great generosity of spirit, and gives us a Snape we can grudgingly respect without softening him too much. STRONG ROLES FOR: Primarily Harry and Snape. ANGSTOMETER: 6.9

Harry Potter and the Time of Good Intentions by Barb LP
http://www.schnoogle.com/authorLinks/Barb/
Actually part two of a three-part epic following the characters through their fifth, sixth and seventh years. This sixth-year tale has Harry altering the past to save his mother, living an alternate reality in which he has the loving family he has always wanted (and in which Draco Malfoy is his best friend), then realizing he has to undo all these changes. STRONGEST ELEMENTS: vivid and convincing characters, inventive plot development, very moving scenes in which Harry encounters the ghosts (literal and figurative) of his other life. STRONG ROLES FOR: all major characters in canon and quite a few minor ones. ANGSTOMETER: 5.5

The Letters of Summer by Kokopelli
http://www.phoenixsong.net/symphony/story.php?cid=53
“It’s the summer of 1996, after the events of The Order of the Phoenix. Harry is sorting out life after Sirius, life in light of the Prophesy. He’s figured out what he wants, but he’s got to get over Voldemort’s dead body to get there. Harry stays in touch with old friends over the summer, gets a new guardian, studies under a new tutor, and gets
turned into a dog - and that’s just in July!” STRONGEST ELEMENT: Extended meditations on life and love from the characters, but far from coming across as heavy-handed it leaves you asking for more. Some very intriguing and appealing magical inventions and situations. STRONG ROLES FOR: Ginny, a couple of good OCs (though one of them is just a little too wise and Yodaish for my taste.) ANGSTOMETER: 3.9

Never Alone, Never Again by Bored Beyond Belief
http://www.fanfiction.net/s/750576/1/
Written before Order of the Phoenix, shows Harry in desperate straits after the fourth year, seemingly helpless against Voldemort’s psychic torment but supported devotedly by Ron, Hermione and Sirius. STRONGEST ELEMENTS: Best-imagined “Voldemort’s Defeat” scene in all of fanfic, to my knowledge. (I hope Rowling’s is as good.) STRONG ROLES FOR: Snape, Percy. ANGSTOMETER: 6.9

The Power of Emotion by Melindaleo
http://www.phoenixsong.net/symphony/story/1560/
“As Harry struggles to come to terms with the events of his 5th year, can he learn to depend on those he calls family and become what he needs to be in order to survive? Can a certain sister of a friend show him there are still things worth fighting for?” STRONGEST ELEMENT: Well-imagined and well-developed “Harry and Ginny find each other” plot. STRONG ROLES FOR: Ron and Hermione. ANGSTOMETER: 4.7
Resonance by Green Gecko

http://www.fanfiction.net/s/1795399/1/

“When I came across the quote in JKR’s Book 4 about the low likelihood of Snape adopting Harry, I first considered addressing this topic comically, but that seemed too easy, and short, frankly. This is a serious attempt at making this realistic. Even though it is serious, it is supposed to be fun. Hopefully, even if the plot seems impossible, you’ll find the resulting situations entertaining enough to make up for it.” STRONGEST ELEMENT: The story succeeds at exactly what the author describes: serious fun, making the impossible seem realistic. Also features a wide variety of well-imagined challenges and conflicts (both magical and non-magical) for Harry. STRONG ROLES FOR: Snape, of course, and also Dumbledore, Tonks, and several strong OCs. Fans of Ron and Ginny may disapprove of the way they are portrayed. ANGSTOMETER: 5.3

Shifts by Fern Withy

http://www.sugarquill.net/index.php?action=profile&id=507

“During the year of Order of the Phoenix, Remus Lupin is assigned to protect Dudley Dursley by posing as a teacher at Smeltings.” STRONGEST ELEMENT: Characterization of the main pair, Remus and Tonks, and their slow-moving romance. A completely independent story line which is still very well integrated with the events of the fifth book. STRONG ROLES FOR: Dudley, Sirius. ANGSTOMETER: 5.6

The Test of Time by Alchemilla

http://www.sugarquill.net/read.php?storyid=189&chapno=1

“Four years after Hogwarts, Harry clings to the hope that he can regain
the love of his first and only sweetheart: Ginny, of course! But a single
night spent in a Hogsmeade flat threatens to undermine his (as well
as Ron’s and Hermione’s) happiness.” STRONGEST ELEMENT:
Just a great mix of action and humor. Download it to your laptop for
that long plane trip, it’s much better than that paperback at the newsstand.
STRONG ROLES FOR: Ron, Hermione, Colin. ANGSTOMETER: 3.4

**Wallpaper Moments** by St Margarets

[http://www.phoenixsong.net/symphony/story/1337/](http://www.phoenixsong.net/symphony/story/1337/)

“Harry and Ginny are put to the ultimate relationship test: wallpapering
together.” The tale is self-contained but also acts as a prelude to the
author’s novel-length sixth-year fiction **Red is the Heart**, which is also
excellent. STRONGEST ELEMENT: How to get one’s favorite
pair together is a perpetual challenge for shippers, and this is the best
job I’ve seen, done with insight and humor and dodging cliches
as nimbly as Harry avoids Bludgers. Irresistible. [Only two characters.]
ANGSTOMETER: 3.2

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