

# fanmade

magazine

HURT / COMFORT

issue #0

## FROM THE EDITOR...

Working on FANMADE this past month has felt like a kind of homecoming. I've been in fandom spaces for over a decade, but I hadn't written or participated in a long time. It's good to be back – in this new way.

Despite having very little free time (making a magazine doesn't leave many free hours), I've found myself writing fanfiction again – scribbling ideas on the backs of my hands, hiding in stockroom corners during shifts, frantically typing paragraphs into my notes app.

Fandom, once you let it pull you in, has a way of making you create, and create, and create – until you forget what it's like not to. Most of what you make will probably be bad, but every bad word gets you closer to being better. What do they say? Make it exist first, make it good later.

This issue is a taste of what's to come – put together a bit frantically, the team still getting to know each other, figuring out how to make this thing work. But it's made with love and passion, and we hope that shines through.

The biggest difference between this issue and future ones is the diversity of voices. Here, most of the articles are written by me, simply because of timing – I had most of these pieces drafted before more people got involved. But rest assured, we've already commissioned a lot of new work, and the forms to pitch ideas are still open. The first official issue will be a mosaic of fandom voices.

A big concern when creating a curated editorial project like this is accidentally platforming a few voices and suggesting they speak for the whole community. FANMADE isn't here to speak for everyone – it's here to make space for everyone.

We're building a conversation, and we want you to be part of it. Whether you write fic, read fic, bind books, make memes, fan-edits, rec lists, or just love seeing other fans thrive – there's space for you here.

Fandom made us who we are. FANMADE is our way of giving something back.

With love,

magda

RATINGS – PLEASE READ RESPONSIBLY:

**G**

general  
audiences

**T**

teen and up

**M**

mature

**E**

explicit

fanmade  
TEAM

ASSISTANT EDITOR

VIOLETTAVONVIOLET

EDITORIAL TEAM

Kaysen Ashdan

BETA READERS

Hunter

Cassie

Shruthi

ADMIN TEAM

María Hernández

Ava Galison

Cal Reeves

WEBSITE TEAM  
(COMING SOON)

Martha

Jae

PAGE DESIGN TEAM

Eli H

DNA

# CONTENTS

## THE TROPE

hurt/comfort

7-12

whump and whumptober

**T**

13-16

## SKILL CORNER

fanbinding

17-20

Renegade Bookbinding Guild

21-22

fanbinding tutorial

**G**

23-26

## THE SCHOLAR

AO3 curse

27-30

queer readings

**G**

35-38

## TAG: REALISM

guide to writing injuries

**M**

47-50

**THE SHIP** Johnlock

39-42

**DEBATE** dub or sub in anime

43-46

**BOOKTOWER**

31-34

**FUN/FAN**

**G**

5-6

**FAN NEWS**

3-4

# FAN NEWS

## OMITB, Logan Lerman, and... Tumblr?

Okay, fess up, everyone - which one of us infiltrated the OMITB writers' room and snuck a Tumblr joke into the script?

Yeah, that happened.

"I kind of spiralled and spent the rest of high school in my room, with Tumblr," says Mabel, played by Selena Gomez.

"That's a pornography site." "Not anymore. They ruined it."

The exchange between Mabel, Oliver and Charles references the infamous Tumblr purge. In December 2018, Tumblr banned images and videos depicting nudity - with very few exceptions - leading to heaps of content being removed and entire communities migrating to other platforms.

Adding to the fandom galore of this season of OMITB, the new season stars Logan Lerman. This is a feat to anyone who remembers Selena Gomez admitting to him being her celebrity crush back in 2013 - which in turn inspired fanfiction and fan edits about the two.

We'll be keeping an eye on this...

## Enemies to lovers, anyone?

Following the release of Taylor Swift's new album, *The Life of a Showgirl*, something happened on A03. It might've been easy to miss - but we here at FANMADE have our hand on the pulse of fandom.

The album has prompted intense discussion, both about its sound and about certain lyrics, but it also sparked some writing.

One track on the album, *Actually Romantic*, is allegedly a diss track aimed at musician Charli XCX. And we all know how much fandom loves an enemies to lovers arc, right?

Right.

Well, just hours after the album dropped, fics started appearing under the tag Taylor Swift/Charli XCX. The devil works fast, but fandom works faster.



IMAGE: UNSPLASH

## A Directioner's best friend

If you were part of the One Direction fandom back in the day, you probably remember Danielle Peazer – then Liam Payne's girlfriend. Since Harry was the most popular member to write fanfic about, the girlfriends of Zayn, Louis and Liam became permanent fixtures in countless fics.

Many stories were self-insert fics starring an original female character dating Harry, with the other three women appearing as her friends. A classic trope: everyone living together in one big house, chaos ensuing. There were carrots, there were spoons, and general hilarity.

Recently, Danielle asked on TikTok what "Wattpad" was – and fans were more than willing to tell her. Standout replies included:

"You were my maid of honour when I married Zayn!"

"You consoled me when I broke up with Harry."

"You were my best friend in that house, Danielle."

"We bonded over being sold to One Direction!"

And (my personal favorite): "Girl, don't... we were all crazy."

Poor Danielle was understandably confused, saying she thought "everyone hated her". But no, Danielle – we never hated you. You were always there for us when we needed you.

## The Reylo of it all

Fanfic-to-screen adaptations are nothing new, but *The Love Hypothesis* might have just collapsed the multiverse. The amount of meta happening here is wild, and it's hard to believe it's all a coincidence – especially since the film is being produced by Lili Reinhart, who seems to be as chronically online as she is talented.

*The Love Hypothesis* by Ali Hazelwood is based on a Reylo (Rey Skywalker and Kylo Ren from *Star Wars*) fanfic titled *Head Over Feet*. A modern AU set at a university, many of the fanfic's details were kept in the published version. Of course, any reference to *Star Wars* was removed, and the characters were re-named Olive and... Adam. As in *Adam Driver*? Who plays Kylo? Yep.

Tom Bateman – married to Daisy Ridley, aka Rey herself – has been cast as Adam in the *Love Hypothesis* movie adaptation, starring alongside Lili Reinhart.

When interviewed by *Screen Rant* at the Toronto International Film Festival, Bateman said he only learned of the connection after being offered the role. He thought it just meant "that was what inspired Ali Hazelwood to start writing".

Oh, dear Tom. He said that he "became fully aware of how much love there is from the fans" after the cast announcement. All we have to say to that is: yes, there is love, don't dig too deep, Tom.

One thing is for sure – if this was done on purpose, it struck gold.

# FAN fun

## FANNISH WORD SEARCH

K L Q U E E R C O D I N G F S G A G  
V K H P B O O K T O W E R F J I T F  
Y X Y A H U R T C O M F O R T F D A  
I F B L O R B O F R X S W F R T F N  
E V H Y P E R F I X A T I O N E T F  
A R C H I V E R N V B R I I C C R I  
F A N B I N D I N G A E W Q U O O C  
A F A N N I S H F T A G T Y R N P T  
N C F O U N D F A M I L Y A S O E I  
O G E S H I P I T U M B L R E M Q O  
N R O O M M A T E S Y L F M U Y K N  
H O M E C O M I N G R V L G T V N X

fannish

beta

tumblr

fanon

hyperfixation

hurt comfort

found family

tag

fanfiction

gift economy

queercoding

ship

trope

curse

fanbinding

roommates

homecoming

archive

blorbo

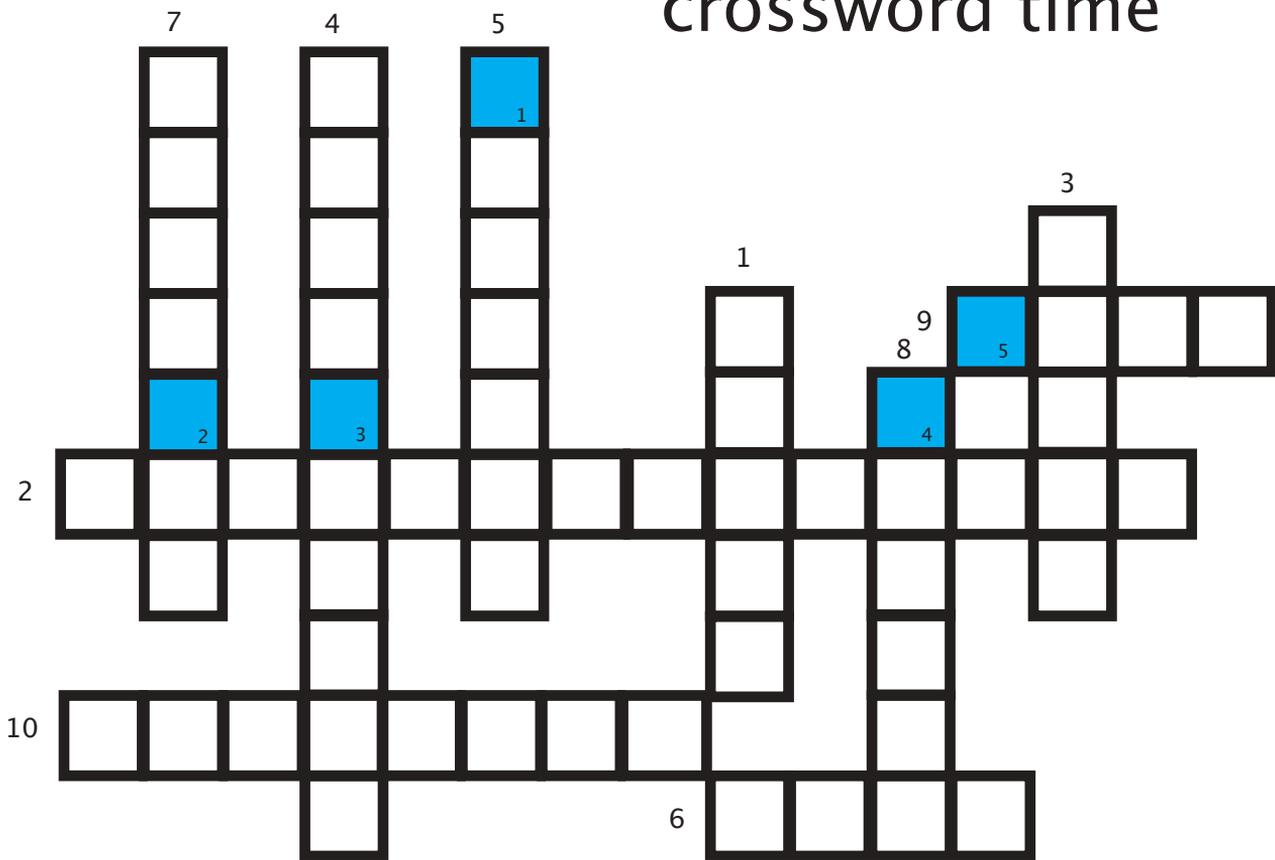
booktower

## WORD HUNT

5

Find the red words hidden through the issue. They form a secret message ending with **progress**.

# crossword time



- 1 Drew stars around your...
- 2 In the night sky.
- 3 A damsel in distress might...
- 4 When you hit your head, you might get a...
- 5 He was \_ in battle.
- 6 That looked like it...
- 7 That wasn't a faulty engine start...
- 8 Who's the fairest of them all, she asked the...
- 9 Do you feel any...
- 10 Sleepless nights.



word search created using  
superteacherworksheets.com

Let us know how you  
did on socials! And  
make sure to follow  
the instruction in the  
secret message...



# on the hurting, the comforting, and the in-between

Fandom has always been good at fixing what's broken. Hurt/comfort takes that impulse to the extreme: first the pain, then the patching up. But beneath the bandages lies something deeper - catharsis, intimacy, and fifty years of discourse.

If you're wondering what the hurt/comfort trope is, the name says it plainly: first you hurt the characters, then you comfort them. What exactly counts as "hurt" or "comfort" depends entirely on the author, and the range is vast. You don't realise how many ways you can break a character - and how many ways you can put them back together, until you discover the world of hurt/comfort fanfiction. And why would anyone want to put their favourite characters through that? The simplest answer: dramatic situations are the perfect chance to take characters apart and see what makes them tick.

the origin  
studying the fan  
slash  
catharsis  
from the inside out

This is not confined to fandom. Mainstream media has long capitalised on the audience's fascination with characters in pain and the intimacy of their recovery. These are the dramatic moments people live for – which is why trailers are so often packed with shots of fan favourites in various states of distress. People keep tuning in because they need to know what happens next. Think of House nearly dying every season, or Steve Harrington getting repeatedly hit in the head on *Stranger Things*.

The problem is that mainstream storytelling rarely lingers on the “comfort”. How many times can Steve get knocked out before someone finally takes him to the hospital? The poor guy is probably walking around with a mild concussion at all times. We can assume it happens off screen, once the dust settles and no monster is chasing the group. But most of the audience would love to see Steve being tended to and

fussed over, even if just in a short scene. The trouble is, such scenes veer into character study, and mainstream media often sees that as “filler”, not plot. But that assumes character work doesn't drive story.

When the source material won't give us what we want, fandom does. Hurt/comfort isn't tied to any single text – it's about what fans want from storytelling in general. And fandom, being remarkably good at fixing what's broken, excels at writing the character studies TV and film gloss over.

All this to say: hurt/comfort is an enormous part of fandom, and one that's been analysed and debated for decades. The thoughts that follow are my own two cents, though they draw heavily on what's already been said. To dig into anything fandom-related is to wade through decades of discourse – and it's impossible to cover the whole scope of a trope in one article.



## origin

The hurt/comfort trope can be traced back to “get ‘em” fics of the 1970s – and like so many fannish traditions, it began in the Star Trek fandom. The “get” could mean two things: “getting” as in hurting, or “getting” as in getting into bed. And not to sleep.

Most “get ‘em” stories leaned toward the first meaning, focusing on injury and suffering, but eventually evolved into what we now recognise as hurt/comfort in the digital age.

The key distinction between a story that simply depicts a character getting hurt and a hurt/comfort story is, at its core, love. In h/c, the author hurts the character because they love them – to see what makes them tick, yes, but also because the hurt is often only a means to an end. Pain creates the conditions for care.

Beyond Star Trek, hurt/comfort quickly spread through ‘70s–‘80s fanzines of other fandoms, especially buddy-cop shows that lent themselves well to one character getting hurt while the other looked after them (Starsky & Hutch, The Professionals, Man from U.N.C.L.E.).

In the 90s, The X-Files fandom took hurt/comfort to new levels. The extensive archive of stories in which Fox Mulder suffers every imaginable injury – titled Mulder Torture Anonymous – became a gold mine for h/c enthusiasts. So many people were writing fanfiction about Mulder’s suffering that a whole subgenre, Muldertorture, emerged.

Hurt/comfort has never been about a particular piece of media – it’s always been about the hurting, the comforting, and the emotions those two evoke in both writer and reader.

## studying the fan

One of the first academic takes on hurt/comfort appeared in Camille Bacon-Smith’s book *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992). Bacon-Smith positioned h/c as central to women’s fan writing, interpreting it as a way to process intimacy, vulnerability, and power through the “safe” bodies of male characters.

“Pain 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.”

Her reading wasn’t universally well-received. Some fans felt her descriptions reduced h/c to a mere psychological quirk rather than acknowledging it as a creative choice. From her limited interactions with fan communities, she

concluded that hurt/comfort was “the heart of fandom”, beloved because fans were carrying pain they needed to work through in their writing. That may have been true for some, but such broad generalisation landed her in hot water with the very communities she was studying. It also overlooked intentionality: even if writers draw on personal experience – consciously or unconsciously – that doesn’t make their creative decisions any less deliberate. And drawing from lived experience isn’t unique to fanfiction. It’s a universal feature of writing.

A few years later, Anne Collins Smith’s 1997 essay directly challenged Bacon-Smith’s interpretation. Smith argued that hurt/comfort should not be reduced to armchair psychology but recognised as a legitimate form of storytelling – one offering catharsis, emotional connection, and even ethical exploration. Where Bacon-Smith saw h/c as symptomatic, Smith reframed it as intentional: instead of unconsciously “working through issues,” fans were consciously using narrative to create meaning and intimacy.

This early back-and-forth between Bacon-Smith and Smith highlights something important: from the start, hurt/comfort wasn’t just a trope written in fandom, it was also the subject of debate. In zines, in academic essays, and in discourse that never quite ends, fans and scholars alike have been arguing over the “why” of h/c for decades.



## s L a s h

One of the earliest fannish discussions of the “why” of h/c appeared in Leslie Fish’s *This Deadly Innocence*, also known as “The End of the Hurt/Comfort Syndrome,” a piece of *Star Trek* fanfiction published in the 1970s. Fish framed hurt/comfort as a way for Kirk and Spock to express their feelings without openly acknowledging them – a substitute for intimacy.

Where most hurt/comfort fics ended with the payoff – one character injured, the other tending to them, both growing emotional and acting suspiciously like lovers – Fish’s story began there. McCoy accuses Kirk and Spock of deliberately putting themselves in danger, though unknowingly, “all for that one moment of payoff”. He then punishes them by sending them on a **leave on a planet** where injury is relatively impossible. Forced to confront each other without their usual excuse, Kirk and Spock must face their feelings head-on.

As such, this “why” of hurt/comfort was closely connected to the genre of slash (fanworks pairing same-gender characters romantically or sexually). Hurt/comfort provided a “socially acceptable” way for male characters to be vulnerable without emasculation,

and that vulnerability could tip into romance, and often sex. Worry often looks a lot like love. The fanfiction practically writes itself.

The problem, of course, is that this framing suggests men must be “punished” before they can love each other openly – the hurt becomes a rite of passage. While dated now, it made sense in the 1970s, when writing two seemingly straight men into a love scene outright remained controversial, even in some fandom spaces. Hurt/comfort offered a workaround: orchestrating a situation where care becomes more intimate than kissing. For a time, you could call h/c slash’s less controversial sister.

As one fan in the 1980s put it, however, “A love scene is a love scene, whether it is considered socially acceptable or not. And much of this lovingly detailed, movingly written h/c is just that – a love scene!”

It’s worth noting that hurt/comfort has always had a little slash in it – and not just typographically.

## catharsis

The idea of hurt/comfort as a way to deal with trauma has been explored before, both academically and within fandom itself. While this can’t be generalised across the whole community, it’s true for enough fans to be worth noting.

Writing and reading in general, not just in the context of fanfiction or hurt/comfort, often serves as a form of catharsis. The term goes back to the ancient Greek word *katharsis*, meaning purification or cleansing. What is purged through this process isn’t inherently “bad” – it is simply something unwanted, or too heavy to carry.

Hurt/comfort lends itself to catharsis particularly well because it builds emotional release into the very structure of the trope. The “hurt” allows for the surfacing of pain – whether physical, emotional, or both – and the “comfort” provides resolution and closure. Fans who are dealing with their own struggles often find satisfaction in watching their favourite characters go through something difficult and then be cared for. It offers the release of seeing pain acknowledged and soothed, when in reality those same comforts might not always be available.

And what about hurt/no comfort? Sometimes the catharsis comes from recognition: if someone wasn’t offered comfort themselves, it may feel validating to see a favourite character endure pain without resolution yet survive regardless.

Another motivation is control. In life, suffering is often random. In fiction, especially fanfiction, the writer controls not only the form of the hurt but also the healing. They can make it mean something in the larger context.

And then there is intimacy. As Amanda Straw, a long-time hurt/comfort writer and enjoyer, outlines in her master thesis: intimacy exists not only between characters in the story, but also between the reader and those characters. Hurt/comfort works because it opens a window into vulnerability, creating bonds through exposure to pain. As Straw puts it, “both experiences of pain and sexual pleasure provoke similar responses in the body, and we call them visceral reactions”. Pain, like sex, can break boundaries – it strips away defences, enabling characters (and readers) to experience closeness and honesty that might otherwise remain hidden.

In this way, hurt/comfort is less about sadism or voyeurism, and more about yearning to connect. The hurt tears characters open, and the comfort allows them to be seen and understood. For many readers and writers, that process is cathartic in itself.

# from the inside out

Why is hurt/comfort so popular? Why does it resonate so widely? As said before, there are as many answers as there are enjoyers of the trope. It's hard to understand if you don't enjoy it yourself – and even harder to talk about without putting parts of yourself in it.

One researcher who leaned into that personal angle is Amanda Straw, whose *Everybody Hurts: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Hurt/Comfort Fanfiction* explores the trope and all its intricacies through her own history with it.

“Vulnerability and intimacy are so intrinsic to hurt/comfort, I think the only way to look at it is by looking at your own experience. Other types of fan studies you can explore by just looking in. But with something where vulnerability and intimacy is the point, I think you have to put yourself into it.”

She admits there are aspects of the trope she didn't address, particularly the role of sexual fetishism. “There's a big chunk of hurt/comfort that's sexual fetishism,” she said, which reflects how closely pain and sex overlap on a basic level. For many fans, specific sexual fetishes are the heart of their attraction to hurt/comfort.

In the end, whether you're fascinated by the gory side of the trope, drawn in purely for the comfort, or fall somewhere in between, it all comes down to the same thing: hurt/comfort is about being human. However messy, the pain is what makes us real – and the comfort, whether it comes from others or from picking ourselves back up, is what makes us strong enough to survive.



# WHUMP

# WHUMP

From the Greek tragedies to Shakespeare, from Meng Jiang to Pururavas and Urvashi, from ancient gods to the MCU, we love to tell and read stories about characters in pain.

words by violettavonviolet

According to Fanlore, whump is a subgenre of hurt/comfort - one that leans heavily into the hurt. The exact definition has shifted over time, and it's hard to pinpoint when it first emerged. Many trace it back to the Stargate SG-1 fandom, where the term "Danny Whumping" caught the hearts of the masses. Some fans recall coming across the term earlier, which isn't surprising - the concept has been around much longer than the label.

According to tumblr user haich slash cee, whump as we know it today began solidifying around 2008/2009 - roughly around the same time AO3 launched.

### in the words of Whumptober mods:

*“ Whump is hurting a character, whether physically, emotionally, intellectually, psychologically, or any other way you can think of. Whump is like the umbrella term for a wide variety of pain - or discomfort - centered stories.*

*It can be soft, as with characters yearning for something they can't have and experiencing heartache because of it, or hard, with characters undergoing various forms of outright torture. Comfort can be part of it, too, as with hurt/comfort stories. Angst is certainly a subset of whump, focused more on the emotional or psychological pain than the physical.*

# WHUMPTOBER

Whumptober is a prompt-based creation challenge started in 2018 by Kat (la-vie-en-whump) - 31 days of whumpy prompts, filling the entirety of October. Participants can produce work in any media they choose, and participate as little or as much as they want. If you want to become a completionist, however, you'll have to fulfill a prompt every day for the entirety of the challenge. As a reward, you'll be shouted out in a post at the end of the month - in 2023, the challenge saw a whopping 209 completionists.

There are many variations of the -tober type prompt-list, ranging from Kinktober to Flufftober, but Whumptober has a very loyal fanbase of dedicated Whumpers. Nearly 30k fics on Archive Of Our Own and counting, Whumptober is a keystone of fandom culture.

The Whumptober tumblr page is run by Vanne, Surro, Yenn and Kitty, all long time participants of the event. While they handle the biggest task - compiling prompts - together, each of them has their own responsibilities.

Vanne handles the Discord and graphics, Yenn deals with site coding and compiles vote data, Surro handles the majority of administration - "basically keeping the team from running around like headless chickens", and Kitty manages the volunteers who help reblog participants' posts to the Whumptober archive blog.

To get a closer look at this event, FANMADE spoke to the people making it happen.

## How has the event changed since you got involved?

“ The earliest years had only one prompt per day. Over time, it evolved to the current format – four prompts per day, loosely connected by a theme. As far as we know, we’re one of few events providing that much variety.

We’ve tried to keep the event true to the format the previous mods left us, but we’ve added a few things since taking over, like creating a playlist to go with the prompts. We also decided to engage with the community by soliciting their votes for popular tropes each July.

Lately, we’ve also been engaging more on Discord, providing channels for writing games and generally trying to make it a fun place to hang out and chat about all sorts of things year-round.

## When does planning for next year start?

“ We usually go into hibernation in November, after we post our completionist lists and event badges, and we don’t come out until the summer. We spend several weeks throughout the summer planning heavily and getting hyped. The event really kicks off when we post prompts in late August or early September.

The prompts are always available and the AO3 collections are always open, so people can add to them year-round, even years later.

## Has your audience changed or grown? What do you think is driving that?

“ There’s definitely been a rise in popularity, which we can see from the increasing amount of works created each year and added to our AO3 collections.

People have always had dark fantasies – look at any piece of classical literature from nearly any culture worldwide and you’ll see examples of what we would call whump. It both distracts from and reflects our own existential agonies. I think as our real life culture keeps trying to convince us these stories are somehow bad or wrong, we resist by diving deeper into the tumultuous darkness of our own psyches.

## What are the most popular tropes?

“ The tropes that have placed top two every single year so far have been “Passing Out” and “I’m Fine”, with the next most popular tropes “Hidden Injury”, “Panic Attacks”, and “Ignoring an Injury”. Just goes to show that some classic tropes never grow old!

## How do you decide on the prompts?

“ Around July we post our trope vote, then take the top ones and put them on the list. Each of us adds our own prompts that go well together. Participants can also suggest prompts, and we'll choose ones that feel exciting or interesting – plus a few from the bottom of the vote, just to keep it challenging.

We also make an effort to incorporate different genres into the list, along with highlighting songs from small artists. Our biggest artist this year is Lady Gaga with 101 million monthly listeners on Spotify, while our smallest is Taryn Hadfield with 107.

A cool side effect of our playlist is small artists we feature have absolutely noticed the bump in listeners in September and October! Some tropes are absolute classics – passing out, bleeding, touch starved, etc. – so we try to come up with new ways of phrasing or incorporating those ideas to keep the list fresh. “Nightmares” in one year might become “dream journal” the next, or “surgical scars” might morph into “medical procedures”.

We want people to understand that they can use any trope they want

in their stories and still find a way to link it to the prompts – that's the fun of the challenge.

We really put each prompt under a microscope to analyze if it's interesting, not too difficult to interpret, and offers a wide range of ideas for interpretation. We also hide a few Easter Eggs just for us: a Taylor Swift quote for when her album drops, or Surro's favorite prompts on his birthday.

## What will the future of Whumptober look like?

“ The main goal is for Whumptober to continue for as long as possible – we're close to the 10th anniversary of the event! We're always trying to adapt the event based on feedback from participants, so who knows how different Whumptober will look down the line.

SCAN  
ME



“

**Sometimes it's just hot or fun or interesting to put our beloved blorbos into the blender, and don't we all need something fun in our lives right now?**

# FANBINDING

Fanbinding turns digital fanworks into physical treasures – but it’s not without complications.

Fanbinding is something many people are equally fascinated by, and confused about. If you happen to acquire a beautifully bound physical copy of your favourite fanfic and decide to share it online, you’ll almost immediately be met with questions and opinions. Some people will want to know where you got it and how they can get one too; others will want reassurance that your copy was made in the “right” and ethical way. The conversation that follows often spirals into confusion and misinformation, even though most people enter in with no malicious intent. You’ll see claims that using print-on-demand services is illegal – or that any kind of redistribution counts as theft. What starts out as an innocent post, suddenly turns into argument and panic.

Bookbinding as a craft has been around for centuries. Fanbinding – meaning bookbinding fannish works, most often fanfiction, but sometimes also fanart, meta **commentary**, and more – not as long, but probably longer than you’d think. Before fandom communities moved online, fanfiction was largely shared and read through fanzines, which were often sold quietly and discreetly (for legal

reasons). According to Francesca Coppa, a fan studies scholar and one of the founding members of the OTW, the first fanzine was *The Comet*, published in 1930. This, as most things in fandom, can be debated.

Fanzines were hugely popular in the ‘60s and ‘70s, driven primarily by *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* fandoms. Then, the internet happened. You know the rest.

Fanbinding as we know it today had a breakthrough moment in 2020, likely due in large part to the surge in free time many people had during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Fanfiction itself was being read and shared more than ever: AO3 jumped from 280 million weekly page views in December 2019 to 340 million in April 2020.

As such, fanbinding experienced what is called a containment breach – which happens when a niche idea or practice reaches a wider audience than originally intended. Some people drawn to fanbinding wanted to try it for themselves – but others were only interested in the finished product. That’s when things started to get complicated.

# GIFT ECONOMY

These days, commercialising comes naturally to people. They see demand and think profit.

Profiting off fanfiction has long been a clear no-no in fandom spaces – and everyone knows that. You don't own the IP, so you can't legally make money from it. People still do it, yes, but they know it's wrong, so trying to educate them into stopping is futile.

Fanbinding is a different story. It's much easier to commercialise than fanfiction itself. Not just because it's tangible, but because it's something people want, yet often don't know how to make. Although it isn't new to fandom, its recent rise in popularity has brought confusion and a fair amount of misinformation.

In its purest form, fanbinding is a rejection of the commercial sphere – a way of saying: look, we made this, and all we want from it is love and community.

Minna from Starblight Bindery told us about folks who upcycle materials in their binds – for example repurposing mass-produced politician memoirs to house fics celebrating the very marginalised groups those politicians oppose. Fanbinding, like most fan practices, is a form of resistance.

But that resistance only works if the principles of the gift economy are upheld.

What is the gift economy? In simple terms: fanworks are gifts, not products. Think of receiving a birthday present from a family member. They don't expect anything beyond your appreciation. When it's their birthday, you might give them a gift, too – and the cycle continues. The machine is powered by shared passion and generosity.

Most fanworks today are shared and enjoyed digitally – and have been for years. But history is not on the side of digital archives. The loss of fan content has been a part of internet fandom culture “nearly as long as fan works have existed in that space”.

The deeper we go into the digital age, the more fan content we create, the more we risk losing. Digital archives can preserve content at scales physical ones never could, and organisations like the OTW are doing vital work to keep fan culture safe. Still, anything online is always at risk – whether from takedowns, site closures, or personal deletion.

In that context, fanbinding becomes not just an art form or hobby – but also a form of preservation. If done right – and done ethically – a bound fanfic, accompanied by fanart, is a fanwork inside a fanwork inside a fanwork.

And isn't that kind of amazing?

“ Fanbinding, like most fandom practices, is a form of resistance.

# LEGALITY AND ETHICS

So, now you know what fanbinding is, and you're thinking of that one specific fanfic that you'd love to proudly display on your bookshelf. What now? There are a couple of ways to go about getting that copy, some less legal – or ethical – than others. Let's break it down and clear up some of the confusion.

## PRINT ON DEMAND

The POD debate is rampant in the fanbinding community. Opinions vary; some argue printing for personal use is “fine”. The simple legal answer, though, is no. Platforms like Lulu or Blurb have strict rules against printing any unauthorized copyrighted material. Of course, fans still find ways around the rules.

Remember the gift economy? Think of the lifespan of a fanwork as a line: you create it, share it online, receive feedback, engage in discourse. This line doesn't involve profit or any money changing hands. Until you upload the fanfiction to a POD service and pay them to print it out for you. By doing that, you've broken the non-commercial chain of the fanwork. Whether knowingly or not, you've nudged it out of the gift economy and into the commercial realm – where it now sits, screaming, crying and throwing up.

## ETSY/TIKTOK SHOP

Let me tell you something about those copies of popular fanfiction you see on Etsy or TikTok Shop, sold for absurd amounts of money – there's a reason they all look very similar. This

isn't based on data, just the gut feeling of someone tuned into fandom – but every time I see yet another copy of All the Young Dudes pop up, I can't help thinking: there's no way the seller cares about the fandom community they're profiting from beyond their wallet.

Do you think they went to the trouble of binding that book themselves? Some of these shops are recently set up, yet they've racked up hundreds of sales. They call it a “special edition”, but it's shipping from a warehouse. How special can it be if they're producing it at warehouse scale?

This is, without question, the most illegal and least ethical option out there. You're not just breaking the non-commercial streak. You're handing your money to someone who likely has zero regard for the community that created the material in the first place. And I can guarantee the seller never asked the author of the fanfic – or the artist of the cover – for permission.

That's not to say every listing is mass-produced – you can still find unique-looking copies, often accompanied by disclaimers claiming the seller is only charging for materials and shipping. But does that disclaimer make any difference legally? The answer, according to Rebecca Tushnet, member of OTW's legal team, is no:

“Courts usually reason more categorically than that. Although the situation of a person making single copies by hand is different than someone printing large numbers of copies, it's hard for courts to draw that line – it's very hard to distinguish profiting from not profiting once people are charging money.”

## KITCHEN TABLE BINDING

There are endless resources on how to bind fanfic – this magazine being one of them. And while it might seem hard, complicated, and pricey at first (especially when you’re looking at the beautifully made, intricate copies shared by more experienced binders), fanbinding has actually never been easier to get into.

As Minna from Starblight Bindery shared with us, one of the biggest misconceptions about fanbinding is that there’s only one way to do it. In recent years, there’s been a shift in mainstream bookbinding spaces – in the past, they were very focused on technique and education. It was important to have special equipment, to learn in a traditional environment.

Now, we’re seeing more and more of what’s called guerilla bookbinding, which is essentially low budget self-publishing.

“Someone derogatorily referred to this new cluster of binders as kitchen table binders, and my friends and I would joke: a kitchen table? In this economy? I’m on the floor,” Minna laughed.

When you think about it, what fanbinders, and guerilla bookbinders in general, are doing, is quite remarkable. Before, you’d have to go to an expensive bookbinding school, and have a lot of money for equipment.

“Now, you can get a secondhand printer and download stories from the other side of the world. You can hop on Discord and ask somebody in Germany at 3am how to do things,” she said.

As long as you’re okay with the fact

that your first bind won’t be perfect, and you’re willing to devote a bit of time to learning the craft, you can create a physical copy of your favourite fic proudly sitting on your bookshelf in no time. And then, when people ask about it, you don’t just get to go off on a tangent about why this story is so good it had to exist as a physical book – you also get bragging rights, because you made it yourself. Which is undeniably cooler.

It doesn’t have to be expensive, either. For your first bind, it’s entirely possible to repurpose materials from what you already have at home, which is exactly what I did for the purposes of this article. If you’ve got more questions, or need help tracking down cheap supplies in your area, a great place to start might be...

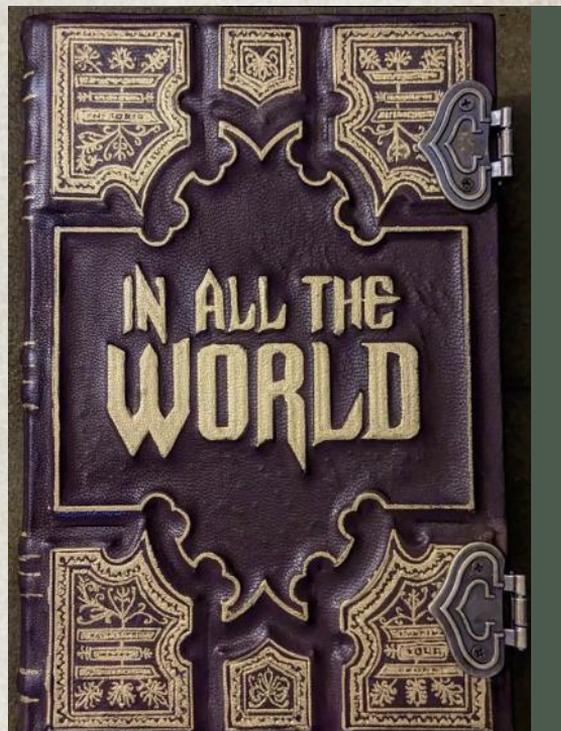
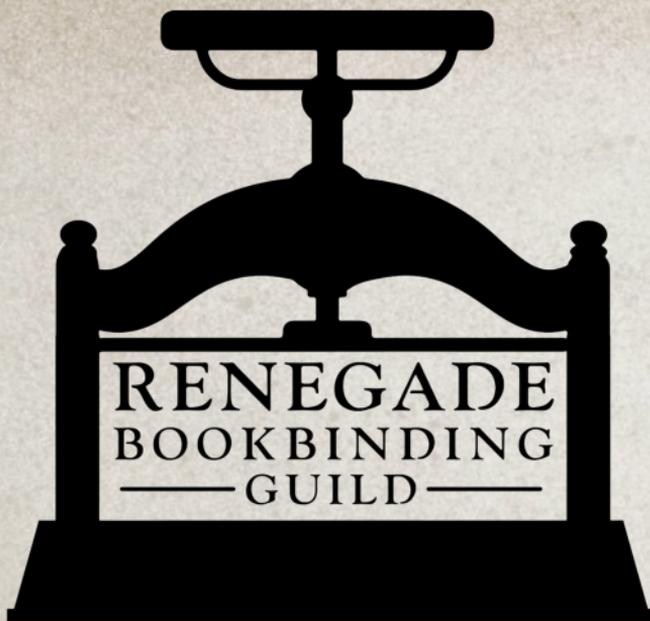


Photo credit: Starblight Bindery



The Renegade Bookbinding Guild is a community of artists dedicated to binding fannish works under the idea of the fandom gift economy. It began as a Discord server founded by user ArmoredSuperHeavy in June 2020.

As of October 2025, Renegade is officially recognised as a 501c3 educational nonprofit, allowing the organisation to support its rapid growth and host numerous events throughout the year – including the Renegade Exchange, Binderary, Fanfic Writer Appreciation Day, Tiny Books Bang, and more.

On their website, Renegade offers a wide range of free resources: a Bookbinding 101 kit, a typeset database, and a community imposer – a free app for formatting PDFs for bookbinding (a process called imposition).

For even more advice and connection, there's the Renegade Bindery Discord, home to more than 3,500 members worldwide. The Guild currently hosts about 11 servers, with the EU branch being the largest and California close behind. This is where fanbinders of all skill levels share tips, resources, support, and general nerd-outs about all things fandom.

If you want to take things a step further, you can apply to join the Guild itself – a global network of over 300 members who share the same values and agree to follow Renegade's Code of Conduct. It's important to note that Renegade is a resource, not a governing body. As Tiffo, president of the organisation, told me: "The Code of Conduct is mostly there to prevent monetization." It's a living document, evolving alongside the community through ongoing conversations about issues like consent in binding and other ethical questions.

Monetization remains one of the biggest issues in the fanbinding community. Renegade is committed to mitigating that risk by creating a framework that keeps fanbinding firmly within the gift economy. Their ethos centres on accessibility, affordability and preserving fanbinding as a craft rooted in passion, not profit.

## in conversation with...

To get a closer look at the heart of this community, we spoke to Tiffo, president of the Renegade Bookbinding Guild, and Minna from Starblight Bindery, a member of the Guild, about their journey into fanbinding and the binds they hold close.

### TIFFO

has been involved with fandom communities for over 20 years, both in person and online. Their first fandom was the X-Files in the 90s, but their introduction to fandom communities and reading fanfiction was Cowboy Bepop and Trigun.

They've helped run fan organisations and worked with non-fannish writing spaces. That overlap, they explain, made something click: non-fannish writers could get published and have people bring them copies to sign – but fannish writers couldn't do the same. Tiffo started thinking – if you can make a book, why couldn't you just put other stuff in it?

In 2021, they went looking for a bookbinding community – they joined the Renegade Discord server, then newly formed, and the rest is history.

### What's your favourite bind you've ever done?

“ I did a binding of a fic series called *The Devil Went Down to Georgia (And Then Went Down on Johnny)*.

My favourite thing about making books is reading the story and getting to incorporate parts of it into the design.

For this one, I burned the page edges so they look like they've sat in the fires of hell. The typeset uses a handwriting-style font, giving it the feel of a journal kept in hell. In the story, the devil wears a white suit, smokes campfire-scented cigarettes, and leaves black smears wherever he touches—so I made the book's case white linen. The paper, Mohawk Superfine, gives off a campfire scent when burnt, making the book itself smell like the devil. I sealed the pages only partly, so handling it leaves soot on your fingers—and sooty fingerprints on the white cover.

### MINNA

made her first fanbind during a difficult time in her life – and right in the middle of the pandemic. She wanted to use her crafting skills to create a copy of a book from *Star Wars Episode 8*. After that, she learned about fanfiction binding – and it all spiraled from there.

On her Instagram page and Tumblr, she shares tips for fanbinding on a budget, links to affordable tools, and even ways to make a book press for under \$100 using pipe fittings.

“ A *Buffy the Vampire* fic called *In All the World*. It was my first hardcover leather bound book, and a combination of so many crafts that I'd practiced throughout the years.

I learned how to work with leather in middle school and I brought back a lot of those skills. For the spines, I used graphic design skills I picked up in high school. Sewing skills I've gathered over a lifetime, I taught myself 3D modeling in Tinkercad, which is a very easy-to-use 3D modeling program. There was a lot of experimenting, and I think it challenged me to push my limits.

I was able to send a copy to the author as a surprise, which was delightful.

# SEMI-HELPFUL FANBINDING TUTORIAL

## ADVICE FROM MINNA

Good beginner length: 75k

Things beginners think they need (but don't): book press

Things worth splurging on later: bone folder; A3 paper – cutting it down so the grain direction is parallel to the spine of the book allows it to stay open better; hot foil pen

Warning: this tutorial will not teach you how to make a good fanbind. It'll teach you how to make a fanbind – imperfect, probably falling apart, but yours.

The first step to making any fanbind is reaching out to the fic author. Even if you're binding only for personal use and know the ethics and legality, it's still the respectful thing to do. Some authors aren't comfortable with binding at all, no matter the intent.

Plus, it's an excuse to talk to one of your favourite authors. I personally geeked out when I got a response. Birdie, if you're reading this, thank you for letting me bind your fic – and yes, I re-read it while working on it, cried, and now some pages have tears on them.

## 1 typeset

I started with the holy grail of any beginner fanbinder – the Bookbinding 101 doc by ArmouredSuperHeavy, available on Renegade's website. It's thorough and beautifully written. My brain, however, did not comprehend half of it. So, if you just want words on a page that vaguely look like a book: here's what I did.

Download the fic from AO3 as a HTML file and open it in your browser. Copy everything you want into Word. Don't copy directly from AO3 – it'll look like a crime scene. I removed the tags and author's notes because formatting them was confusing. You do you – just keep the author's username. Attribution is non-negotiable.

Now pick a font, make a title page, do some simple formatting on

chapter titles, and stop there. Don't overcomplicate it if you don't know what you're doing.

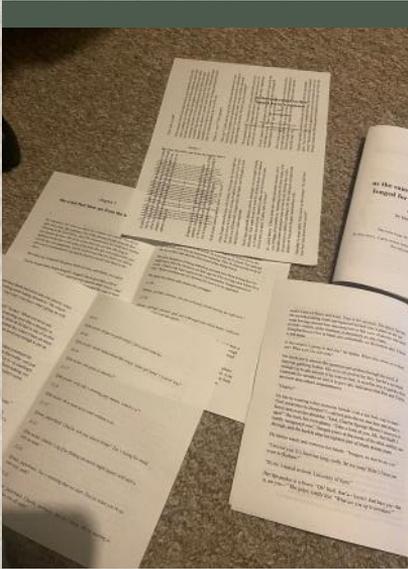
Change page size to A5 if you're printing on A4 paper – that way one sheet = two pages on one side. Set margins: Top 0.5", Bottom 0.3", Left/Right 0.4". It looks fine.

Now, I did something you're most likely not supposed to do, but it made sense to me – I split the files into chapters instead of exporting the whole fic as one.

Export chapters as PDF files.

Then, use the community imposer (also on Renegade's website) to make booklets for printing. Leave the settings alone, upload your PDF files and click generate.

## 2 printing

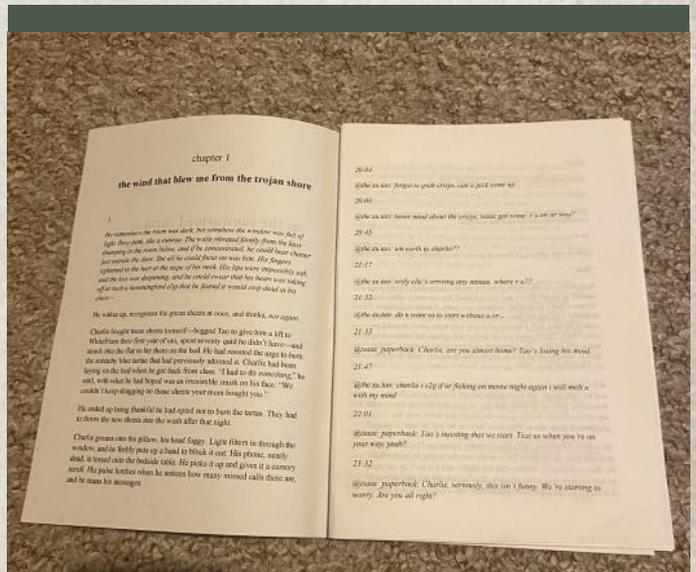
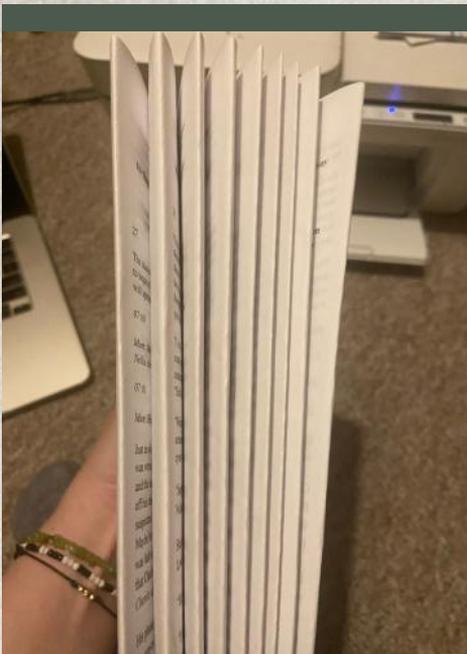


Then the fun began – and by fun, I mean tragedy struck. My printer disconnected from the internet. I won't name the brand (for legal and emotional reasons), but it's the bane of my existence. Not in the sexy Anthony Bridgerton way.

Two hours later, it finally worked – only to discover it doesn't support automatic double-sided printing.

If you encounter the same problem, you'll need to print even pages, flip the paper, then print odd pages. This is why I split the files into chapters – my brain couldn't comprehend how to do this another way. Again, probably not the right thing to do, but by then I was in too deep to care.

Now fold the pages into booklets.



# 3 stitching

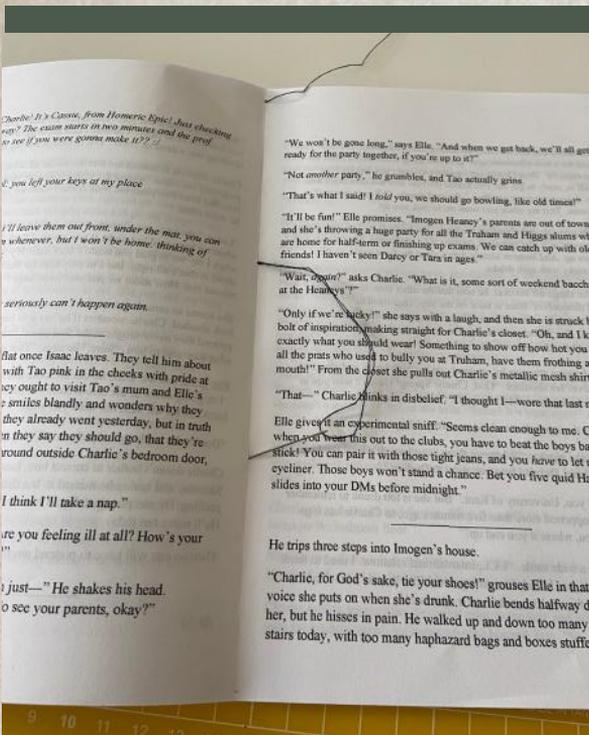
# TIP - PRACTICE STITCHING ON PLAIN PAPER TO SAVE INK

Once I figured out how to do it, stitching was actually fun. At first, though, I got overwhelmed by the number of tutorials - most of which involved tools I didn't own. I had thread, a needle, and a dream.

First, punch five evenly spaced holes in each booklet. It helps to make a cardboard guide. Mine weren't perfectly aligned, but close enough.

Make sure you punch all the way through each hole before stitching.

I followed this great kettle stitch tutorial by Glacier Bear Art Room. Pay close attention to which side the needle goes in and out. Also, don't use super-thin sewing thread; it tangles and makes you want to hurl it out of the window. Use something thicker and save your sanity.



# 4 gluing

This might be when people usually use a book press. I used a heavy box for an hour. I forgot to leave it overnight because I'm impatient. I clipped the book block with laundry clips (it felt right), propped it between two cans of baked beans (can you guess which country I'm in), and brushed white glue over the spine (don't ask what type of glue, it was white and it semi-worked).

The tutorial I followed said to wait 15 minutes, apply another layer, and wait 30 minutes. I waited three hours. It was still wet. I might've used too much.

For endpapers, I used whatever fancy-adjacent paper I could find - measure two A4 sheets, fold, and glue to the front and back of your text block. Supposedly, you should add gauze to the spine, too.



# 5 cover

Measure your book block – mine was 15.2 x 21.1cm – uneven from the chaotic stitching. Add 6mm to the length, that’s your board size. I cut mine from an old binder with a craft knife. For the spine board, measure your spine thickness and add the thickness of one of the cover boards. For me, it was 1.9 cm + 1mm.

Then make a hinge spacer (hinges are the gaps between the spine board and cover boards) – mine was 5mm (in hindsight, I think that was too much).

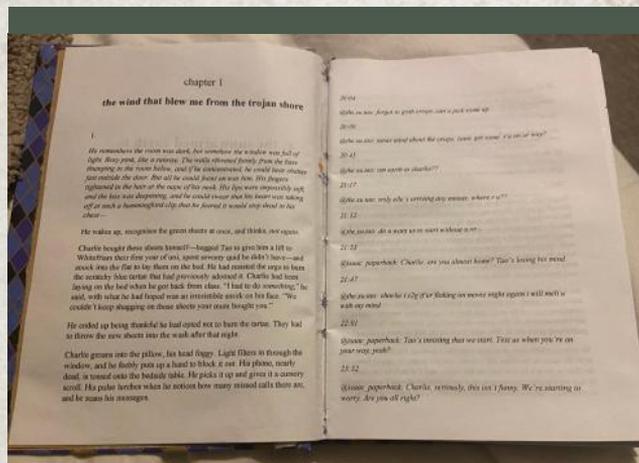
Put some washy tape on the spine board. Align everything and test fit the book block. It sort of worked, so I called it a success.

Then, covering the book boards. Most tutorials recommended using woven fabric, which is why I chose to use the ugly wrapping paper I had left over from Christmas. I glued the boards to it, cut the excess, and wrapped it like a badly done present.

Press the hinge gaps with whatever tool you used to fold pages earlier – it’ll make you feel like you know what you’re doing for a second.

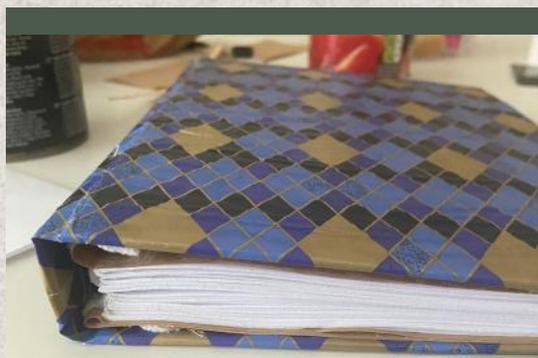
Finally, glue your endpapers to the cover. Mine looked terrible and immediately started falling apart because I didn’t let the glue dry between steps. You probably shouldn’t do that. But also – do whatever you want.

I designed cover art in Canva and glued it on top.



**Voila. My first fanbind, done. We are going to affectionately call it... book adjacent. Not perfect, not clean, but real – and entirely mine.**

**Last step – send pictures of your abomination to the fic author. Apologise for it looking bad. Promise to do better next time.**



This is a work in progress or is incomplete/unfulfilled.



# SHOULD YOU BE AFRAID OF THE AO3 CURSE?

The short answer is no – you shouldn't be scared. But you also shouldn't feel ashamed if you get a twinge of anxiety before posting a WIP.

In the words of a very wise fictional man – “I'm not superstitious, but I am a little stitious.” Michael Scott hit the nail on the head here, because although we might not realise it, a lot of us are a little stitious.

You might not believe Friday the 13th is cursed, but you might still look twice before crossing the road. And if something unlucky does happen, well – it is Friday the 13th...

That kind of behaviour doesn't make you superstitious, per se. But it does show how social superstition can sneak into your habits. You might knock on wood, consider finding a penny or a four-leaf clover a sign

of good fortune, feel anxiety rising if you break a mirror... Or hesitate before posting a fanfiction, worried it might somehow trigger chaos.

Superstition often operates in that in-between space, where logic and emotion don't fully align.

A 2024 study in the *Journal of Individual Differences* took a new approach to measuring superstitious belief – not just what people believed, but what they did. To the authors of the study, anyone who reported either belief or performance of superstition was considered superstitious. The final number? 97%. Almost everyone.

**Would you start posting a fic on Friday the 13th?**



## what is the ao3 curse?

The AO3 curse is as follows: if you start posting a longer work on Archive of Our Own, something in your life will go wrong – could be a common cold, could be your house burning down – to stop you from posting regularly. There’s no rhyme or reason to when the curse strikes. It might get you at chapter one or chapter 123, but according to many, it will get you eventually.

So, where did this idea come from? It likely started with a pattern. Readers noticed that many fanfic authors explained long absences with dramatic real-life events: “My house burned down.” “I went to prison.” “My loved one died.” “I had surgery.”

What followed was a simple connecting of dots – people experiencing these crazy circumstances are fic authors, therefore... it must be the fic making this happen. Right?

Of course, realistically, this is just life happening while you’re posting, not life happening because you’re posting.

You might think, “But it happens so often! And it’s happened to me! That’s when confirmation bias

kicks in. It’s a tendency to look for information that confirms what we already believe. Because once you’ve heard of the AO3 curse, anything that seems to prove it will stand out to you as evidence. If you’d never heard of it before, you probably wouldn’t connect your uncle’s surgery with the fact that you posted a fic last week.

Psychologist Dr Stuart Vyse explains:

“**Once you are conscious of the curse, any bad events that come along are automatically associated with it. Positive events or simply neutral happenings don’t make an impression.**”

This is a work in progress or is incomplete/unfulfilled.



## how superstition works

A superstition, according to Dr Vyse, is a belief or practice that is inconsistent with our understanding of science, used pragmatically to try and bring good luck or avoid bad luck. Superstitions serve a psychological purpose – especially in situations where we care deeply about the outcome but don't feel in control. Sound familiar? That's basically the whole fanfic posting experience.

“The primary function of superstition is to deal with anxiety in the moment,” Vyse told FANMADE. “In the case of writing, the most crucial moment is when the work goes public and is first subjected to public scrutiny.”

Writers know that feeling – the sudden fear that maybe nobody will like it. Maybe you should have waited. Changed that one scene. Re-read it one more time. That anxiety is a playground for magical thinking, even in people who swear they're not superstitious.

The disconnect between belief and behaviour is surprisingly common. People might say they don't believe in a curse but still avoid posting WIPs just in case. That's not necessarily hypocrisy or lying – it's just how our brains work. Superstitions exist in our intuition and can be weakened by rational thinking, but they don't always vanish just because we know better.

And it's not just a fandom thing, either – Dr Vyse notes that creative professions, especially those where your work is judged publicly, are breeding grounds for superstition.

“Actors, musicians, and other performers are traditionally more superstitious due to the public nature of mistakes or failures. People in the humanities are also more likely to be superstitious than those in the sciences.”

**“ The most crucial moment is when the work goes public. ”**

This is a work in progress or is incomplete/unfulfilled.



## why the ao3 curse keeps spreading

So, if the AO3 curse isn't real, why do we still talk about it? Part of it is social. We bond over shared struggles – and a running joke like “the AO3 curse got me” becomes shorthand, part of our collective language. It doesn't necessarily mean you believe in it, it's just another way of saying, “something went wrong”.

Tight-knit communities like fandoms are especially fertile ground for superstition to spread.

“Once these superstitions become a meme, they're hard to avoid. There is undoubtedly a bonding feature to sharing calamitous stories. Eventually, superstitions can become a common feature of a subculture,” said Dr Vyse.

It's funny until it's not. Eventually, the meme becomes a warning. The joke becomes anxiety. And people start genuinely worrying that if they post a WIP, something bad will happen. At that point, it might even start to feel like a self-fulfilling prophecy – and in some ways, it can be. The more we believe we're cursed, the more cursed we feel. Even if the fic had nothing to do with it.

## should you be scared, then?

Having a little bit of fear before posting is quite normal. It doesn't mean you suddenly believe in curses – it just means you care, and you feel a little out of control. But the one thing you do control is whether you share your work. Don't let the AO3 curse stop you. Life's unpredictable – posting isn't. At some point, you just have to press “post”.

# BookTower!

Built by fans, for fans, BookTower is part whimsical reading log, part digital bookshelf – and it's here to help you treasure your fanfic history without stars, ads, or ratings.

**B**ookTower describes itself as “a whimsical bookmark or a fancy spreadsheet” – a reading tracker with a fandom twist. It lets you log all **your** “readables” into a customisable digital book tower, from fanfiction on AO3, Wattpad, and fanfiction.net, to webcomics, web novels, and even traditionally published books. It's all your reading, in one place.

The project began the way many fandom creations do – as a love letter, and with someone being slightly unhinged about a piece of media. Dara, who co-founded BookTower with her husband John, fell deep into the Our Flag Means Death fandom a few years back. She was reading so much fic she started losing track of it all, sometimes

adding the same fics to her Marked for Later list on AO3.

What followed was, of course, a spreadsheet. At one point, it listed over a thousand fics, organised by fandom. John, who “hates spreadsheets,” saw it and said: enough. He built her a simple Chrome extension to track word counts – which quickly grew into the beta version of BookTower that exists today.

“There's this idea that reading fanfiction isn't really reading, which is absurd,” says Dara. BookTower is her way of saying: actually, yes, it is.

Now run by a small independent team – Dara, John, and Aerial, who handles marketing – BookTower remains invite-only but adds new users daily. Its Discord server doubles as tech support, fandom chatroom, and event space, with the community actively shaping the app's development.

Fan communities are rightly cautious when it comes to platforms that engage with fanworks. In recent years, there's been a rise in fanfiction being treated like published books – added to Goodreads, reviewed and rated. That kind of behaviour goes against long-established fandom norms.

So, let's clear up some common misconceptions and concerns about BookTower – straight from the team.



### Q: Does BookTower use AI?

“ Aerial: We don't have any AI features in the app, and we don't use AI for any of our art or other aspects of the site. We do automatically retrieve some meta information whenever users link to a new fic to make their lives easier, but that does not include the content of the story and that process does not use AI - it's our own automated system.

Whenever someone wants to read a work that you've added to your Tower, they'll be directed to bookstores, Ao3, Webtoons, and similar sites directly.

### Q: Do you have any rating or reviewing features?

“ Aerial: Booktower doesn't include any reviewing or ratings features for fanfiction or any of the readables, but users can leave notes on their own readable.

Dara: You can make the notes private by placing the entry on a private bookshelf. We did have recent feedback asking for private notes in general, so that is something we're considering for a future update.

Aerial: There is a way to add a readable to your favourites, but you can't leave a star review or anything of that kind. Personally, I use the notes as reminders - like what happens in the fic - so I can find it again later.



### Q: Is the plan for basic features to stay free?

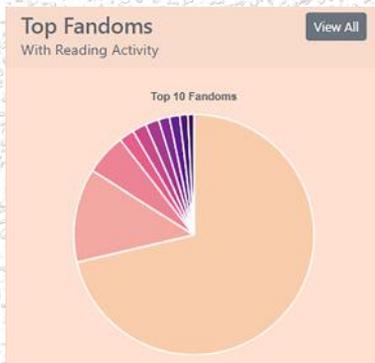
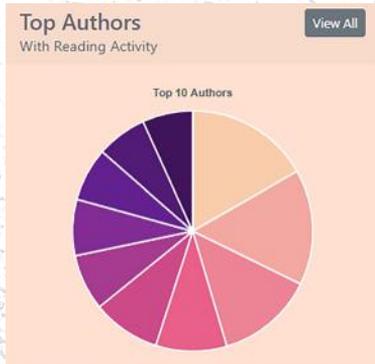
“ Aerial: Absolutely, yes. We do have a premium feature that gives you access to some cool stuff - 300 coins per month, custom covers for fanfic, discounts on merch. But we don't want to impose the premium on people, we just want them to know it's there - and that they can support us if they want.

Dara: We have the premium option because we didn't want to put any ads on the website. People don't want ads on fanworks, understandably. There are ways to earn coins on the website, as well, by just using it.

Aerial: I also wanted to clarify that we don't sell people's data. Booktower is extremely selective about the limited number of service providers that have access to user data.

sign up to the waitlist  
to join BookTower





URL

This is the link to the readable. [Learn More.](#)

STATUS

Read

READING ACTIVITY

READ EVERYTHING

Check this box if you'd like us to use the total number of pages/words/etc as your progress. The unit will be determined based on the type of readable.

PROGRESS  UNIT

The number of words/pages/etc you read.

When were you reading?

YEAR (REQUIRED)  MONTH (OPTIONAL)  DAY (OPTIONAL)  AUTO POPULATE

**!** If you do not provide a full date this Readable may be excluded from some statistics.

READING SESSION NOTES

If you want to share your thoughts about this particular reading session, you can do so here!

BOOKSHELVES

TAGS

ADDITIONAL SETTINGS

ADD IT!



The team is continuously improving BookTower. They're working on support for smaller reading sites and adding more customisation for the bookshelves.

Perhaps the most exciting feature is Bookends – a year-end wrap-up of your reading stats.

Bookends doesn't just count works. It gets playful – showing you, for example, how tall your Tower would be if you stacked every page you read. It usually drops around January or February.

So, for current users, the most exciting time is coming up. And for new users – start logging your readables now.

(The author of this article has read 300k words in the last three days. All one-shots. Send help.)

Dara also shared a dream feature the team would love to build someday:

“We would love to add a wheel you could spin to help you pick your next fic. You could say: I want to read a slow burn from this fandom, and it would randomly pick one from your list.”

We'd like that very much, thank you.



## FANDOM ORIGIN STORIES

### dara

“ The big one for me is Our Flag Means Death. I'd been in other fandoms before, but that was the one that made me go: “I can't go a day without reading fanfiction about this.” I was more of a casual fandom enjoyer before that – following people on Tumblr but not really engaging with the community.

### aeriel

“ My first time reading fanfic was Naruto, but I really got hooked through The Mandalorian fics. That fandom became an addiction. That was two or three years ago – that's when I fully came into the community.

# WHY DOES EVERYONE NEED TO BE GAY NOW?

The question usually comes as an annoyed remark, sparked when yet another pair of seemingly straight characters gets aggressively shipped by a fandom. Dean and Castiel from *Supernatural*. Emma and Regina from *Once Upon a Time*. The summer of 2022 brought us another example: Steve and Eddie from *Stranger Things*.

2025 isn't over yet, but it's already been a rough year for queer rights. In April, the UK Supreme Court ruled on the legal definition of a "woman." The Stonewall Monument website quietly removed several references to transgender and bisexual people. A request has been brought to the US Supreme Court to reconsider gay marriage. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

So, why does everyone need to be gay now? Queer readings exist for a reason: historically, queer people have had so little on-screen representation that reading between the lines was often the only way to see themselves. Representation isn't as hard to come across now, but the habit sticks.

According to media scholar Dr. Rhiannon Bury, the question of why queer readings happen comes down to how meaning works – specifically, the encoding/decoding model by Stuart Hall. The traditional model says: a message is sent and received, end of story. Hall's model presents an alternative explanation. It suggests a text is encoded with meaning, then decoded by the audience – and the two don't always match.

Meaning, even if the Duffer Brothers didn't encode Steve and Eddie as queer, decoding it in that way does not make you crazy bonkers. It just makes you a

normal person living in society. (You might be gay, though, get that checked out.)

For example – Steve accepting Robin being a lesbian after all of two seconds could be read as him having changed, a full circle moment from the douchey, potentially homophobic character we met in season one, which is most likely how it was encoded. But *Stranger Things* is set in a small town in the US in the 1980s, when a reaction like that from a male friend was almost unheard of. It's not far-fetched to take all of this into account and decode it as Steve possibly being queer himself.

When it comes to queer readings of "non-queer" texts in fan spaces, it all comes down to legitimacy. Did the writers mean for this character or scene to be read through a queer lens? If yes – congrats, you win. If not – you're wrong, and you should be ashamed. And if we never know the writers' intentions, well... enjoy arguing forever.

I arrive at the scene of the heated debate armed with literary theory, a few overused references, and a cursed memory of media moments. And in my five minutes of fame, I propose this: forget what's "correct" and just have fun with it. You might even learn something new.

Whatever opinion you have about text interpretation – how far it can be taken, what counts as “true” and whether “alternative” readings are valid – there’s probably a branch of literary theory that agrees with you.

## THE ANCIENT QUARREL

The idea that stories can be “read wrong” isn’t new – it’s practically ancient. In the Western tradition, it starts with Plato, 4th century BC. He thought fiction could stir irrational emotions and pull us away from truth. For him, literature was political – dangerous if it spread “lies” about the world.

Then came Aristotle, his student. He argued that literature should be judged on aesthetics, not politics. Yes, it affected people, but those effects could be good. In *Poetics*, he focused on structure, form, and catharsis. Where Plato saw risk, Aristotle saw emotional insight.

Plato thought stories should lead readers toward fixed truths; Aristotle, though he focused heavily on form and effect, left room for multiple readings – his *Poetics* has long been interpreted in divergent ways, showing that meaning isn’t always singular.

## THE ROMANTICS

Skip ahead to the late eighteenth century, when the romantics fell so in love with the author, they forgot the audience existed at all. This came with the rise of individualism after the Enlightenment, which valued reason and critical thinking above all else. Fair enough – we all know hyperfixations, right?

The romantics only cared what the author meant or felt at the time of writing. A lot of theorists thought a literary work should be a repetition and expression of the author’s self and soul. In the perfect world, a poet is not writing poetry with any audience in mind, therefore the audience is irrelevant.

M.H. Abrams explained this best in *The Mirror and the Lamp*. Before the romantics, literature was seen as a mirror – reflecting the world (Plato’s *mimesis*, meaning imitation). The romantics saw it as a lamp: the author’s inner soul, lighting up the world.

Much of contemporary theory is in response to those of the romantic period. So, even if you don’t agree with their ideas, you have to hand it to them – their words still echo. And in fandom, that echo lives on whenever someone says: but the Duffer brothers didn’t mean for Steve to be queer!

# DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

And so: the death of the author, the birth of the reader. In 1967, Roland Barthes published *The Death of the Author* in which he stated that once a text exists, the author's intentions stop mattering.

The essay opens with a crisis. While reading Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes asks: who's speaking? The hero? Balzac? Universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? In fandom terms: who's speaking when Eddie Munson says, "Don't ya, big boy"? The actor? The writer? The director? The character? Me and Roland, we really get each other.

The word "I" acts like a placeholder in language. Likewise, "the author" is just the person who wrote the words, not the source of ultimate truth. All writing is stitched together from other writing – a "tissue of citations." At some point, the "author" becomes so complicated, they disappear.

The unity of a text isn't in who wrote it – it's in who reads it.

Let's connect this 1960s essay to *Stranger Things*. Season 1, episode 5 – Mr Clarke explains how you could (theoretically) create a gateway to the Upside Down. The acrobat on the tightrope can't reach it by just walking along the rope – to get to the other dimension, you have to pierce the paper. Roland Barthes says the opposite: "the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated." Don't jab through the surface of a text looking for one hidden, ultimate truth – instead, move across the surface, exploring all the possible paths it offers.

Queer readings do just that. They don't "pierce" the text to prove the character was secretly queer all along. They explore what the text makes possible. The "truth" behind it – the mystical Upside Down – might be better left alone.

“ The space  
of the  
writing  
is to be  
traversed,  
not  
penetrated.”

# IS THERE A TEXT IN THIS CLASS?

As you can probably tell, I love a quarrel. Theorists were arguing in the 20th century too – like M.H. Abrams (mirror and lamp guy) and Stanley Fish, who had different ideas about just how far one could take interpretation before being called a madman.

Abrams and other theorists worried that if meaning depends entirely on the reader, it opens the floodgates to infinite interpretations, no way to tell what makes sense. Literary theory's version of opening the gate to the Upside Down with no Eleven to close it. Stanley Fish says that gate doesn't exist.

In his essay *Is there a text in this class?* Fish just won't stop talking. He takes one sentence and spirals into a very academic crash out.

Meaning is never context-free. No sentence (or text) exists in a vacuum. E.D. Hirsch claimed "The air is crisp" could stand alone and be understood. Fish disagreed – most people will agree on its meaning only because they're assuming the same context. Autumn mornings, chilly weather, and so on.

Some readings are so ingrained they feel "natural." Straightness is one of them. We're wired to see it unless something tells us not to.

Fish's main point is that meaning isn't fixed, but it's not infinite either. It's shaped by context, culture, and shared understanding – which is why queer readings flourish. Fandoms are their own interpretive communities, with in-jokes and shared references that make those readings feel obvious to insiders, and crazy bonkers to outsiders.

## THE ETERNAL QUARREL

So, why does everyone need to be gay now? Well – they don't need to be. But they can be. A TV show or a film is just a piece of text, and texts can be read in many ways, through many different lenses. And I know you'll still debate, argue, and defend – but now, maybe you'll bring some literary theory into it.

And when it all gets a bit much, just remember: people have been arguing about this since the 4th century BC, and no one's settled it yet.

# THE QUEERS OF



Sherlock Holmes, the renowned detective, and his trusty partner, the good doctor John Watson, are icons of today's age. First published in 1887, *A Study in Scarlet* by Arthur Conan Doyle quickly became a cult classic and has been adapted numerous times since. Most notably perhaps are the current TV adaptations: BBC's *Sherlock*, and to a lesser known degree, both *House MD* and *Elementary*.

Even in the 1880s, some doubted the nature of Sherlock and John's relationship. Victorian England was not welcoming to queer relationships, and yet, the duo could be viewed as queercoded, even for the time.

In fact, when Sherlock appears once more, alive and well, in the *Empty House* post *Reichenbach Falls*, Watson swoons much like regency damsels.

Both men touch and interact much more freely than was deemed proper for the time, whispering in each other's ears, holding hands, visiting each other's bedrooms frequently, and generally displaying a disregard for period-typical privacy.

They are also clearly possessive of each other, as Sherlock refers to John as 'His Boswell' multiple times.

“When I turned again Sherlock Holmes was standing smiling at me across my study table. I rose to my feet, stared at him for some seconds in utter amazement, and then it appears that I must have fainted for the first and the last time in my life.”

The Adventure of the Empty House (1903)

“I think that I had better go, Holmes.”  
“Not a bit, Doctor. Stay where you are. I am lost without my Boswell.”

A Scandal in Bohemia

“His hand closed like a vice upon my wrist in his agitation. Then he broke into a low laugh and put his lips to my ear.”

The Speckled Band

“I was still dressing in my bedroom next morning, when there was a tap at the door and Holmes entered, a telegram in his hand.”

The Six Napoleons

# BAKER STREET

art and words by  
violettavonviolet

...and they were roommates!

And they – especially Sherlock – exhibit gay stereotypes of the time. For one, there are many scenes where the pair visit Turkish bathhouses together, a place which, at the time, offered companionship with less risk of being discovered than, say, a brothel.

Being a bachelor in itself was considered somewhat queer, and being clean-shaven, like Sherlock, also had certain connotations. Matt Cook writes in *London and the culture of Homosexuality 1885–1914*: “[...] though certainly not a definitive indication of sexual deviance, [being clean-shaven] was a commonly noted feature of defendants in cases of gross indecency between men.”

A.C. D. also left certain clues in his texts that could be coincidences, but together paint a rather obvious picture. In 1895, the year the famously gay author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde, was on trial for “gross indecency”, many gay people left London to escape hostilities or similar fates.

Doyle and Wilde met each other at a fateful dinner in 1889 at which both *The Sign of Four* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were born. It has even been speculated that some of Sherlock’s more eccentric sensibilities were based on Wilde. A.C.D’s views on homosexuality were quite liberal for the time, and it’s not much of a stretch to think that he might have implied a gay subtext – although with more subtlety than Wilde.

Why else does John make a point of telling the reader that he and Sherlock leave London for an unnamed reason in that very same year, especially considering Sherlock is very much attached to London and voices his dislike for leaving his flat repeatedly?



Living a bohemian lifestyle, which Oscar Wilde was repeatedly accused of in his trial, was also seen as a clear indicator, which is curious because Sherlock himself is described as bohemian by none other than Watson himself in *A Scandal in Bohemia* (1891).

“...while Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings at Baker Street, buried among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition.

A bohemian lifestyle in the Victorian age was generally regarded as a rejection of typical social conventions, living much more “freely” than the strict rules of society allowed. Holmes fits this description well.

All this is to say, it’s no wonder that the very last words Sherlock leaves in his letter to John in the Reichenbach Falls are often interpreted as a queer man leaving his lover behind.

“ [...] and believe me to be, my dear fellow,  
Very sincerely yours,  
Sherlock Holmes”

There have been countless adaptations since the books were first published, and many of them have understood that, in some way, Sherlock and John’s relationship – affectionately dubbed Johnlock by the fandom – can be seen as romantic.

Even in media inspired by Sherlock Holmes, the romantic nature of their close relationship shines through, as evidenced by House MD. House, the universe’s Holmes, continuously flirts with Wilson, who himself jokes about their homosexual relationship often. Though they too don’t end up a couple, the writers went so far as having Wilson jokingly propose to House.

Queercoding has always been part of Sherlock Holmes’s story, perhaps made even more obvious by the adaptation starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman. BBC’s Sherlock is set in 2010s London with all its modern technologies and inventions. It follows John as he first meets and eventually befriends the eccentric consulting detective Sherlock Holmes, who struggles with addiction and general human interaction. Over four seasons, the friends (or lovers...) solve a variety of cases, culminating in the defeat of first the super villain Moriarty and later Sherlock’s evil (forgotten) sister. Yes, really.

Despite both the actors and writers admitting there is some sort of homosexual infatuation going on between the pair, the show itself never goes as far as confirming this.

The show’s creators, Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, claim the main inspiration for the show to be *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970) directed by Billy Wilder, who would later say he wished he’d been more daring and made Sherlock and John a couple. Ironically, it was A.C.D’s son who reportedly didn’t allow a homosexual adaptation.

## take the bait

BBC’s Sherlock is considered to be one of the most blatant examples of so-called queerbaiting, which is a term used to describe media continuously implying a queer relationship without intention to ever realize said relationship. This tactic is usually used to attract a primarily queer audience.

Examples include:

Mycroft asks them if “a happy announcement” is to be expected by the end of the week. (A Study In Pink)

John’s girlfriend tells John he’s “a great boyfriend and Sherlock Holmes is a very lucky man.” (A Scandal In Belgravia)

One of the gay innkeepers apparently snores at night, and his partner turns to John and asks him, “Is yours a snorer?”. (The Hounds of Baskerville)

In fact, in the very first episode, we get the now iconic dialogue:

JW: You don’t have a girlfriend, then?

SH: Girlfriend? No, not really my area...

JW: Alright. Do you have a boyfriend?... Which is fine, by the way

SH: I know it’s fine

JW: So you’ve got a boyfriend?

SH: No.

JW: Right, okay. So you’re unattached, just like me...

Note that Sherlock never refutes his potential attraction to men, whereas he clearly states that women are “not his area”. This dialogue occurs during a candlelit dinner, which the server explicitly calls a date, and immediately after the landlord, Mrs Hudson, assumes Sherlock and John will not be needing a second bedroom.

Other instances include the entirety of the scene in episode 3, season 1, The Great Game. In it, John is put in the traditional role of the damsel in distress, having to be saved by Sherlock.

The villain – Moriarty – straps bombs to John’s chest, and when Sherlock frantically strips him of his clothes they make a joke that an onlooker would misinterpret the situation.

Though the stereotypes of what a gay couple might look like have changed over the last century, our reluctance to call queer relationships what they are has not. We can only hope the next adaptation might change that.

## fandom and its tropes

Today, Johnlock has amassed over 75,000 works on Archive Of Our Own. The fics range from humorous short stories to intricate, hundreds-of-thousands-of-words-long, slowly simmering romance.

Common tropes include the pair meeting much earlier, John being more sure of his masculinity and thus embracing the chemistry between them, and a more dramatic reunion after Sherlock’s fake death. In many fics, John takes a key role in changing the events leading up to that very same death, or he’s at least in the know.

The long-standing fan favourite tag “accidental baby acquisition”, which is exactly what the name implies, thrives in the Sherlock Holmes fandom thanks to the presence of John’s daughter.. In canon, she’s the child of John and Mary Morstan, a former assassin turned wife, who’s quickly killed off to “bring the focus back to the core relationship between John and Sherlock”.

# SUBTITLES VS. DUBBING

Anime has gone global, but there was a time when being an anime fan was not cool.

In the early 2010s, admitting I liked *Naruto* or *One Piece* got me laughed at, with kids tossing rude comments about me watching “Chinese cartoons.” Never mind that neither of those were Chinese. (Although Chinese animation is amazing, too.) Anime back then was niche, weird, and easy to mock.

Fast forward to today, anime has gone mainstream. Netflix is releasing anime originals non stop, TikTok edits are everywhere, Ghibli movies are playing in theatres all over the globe, and suddenly the thing people used to bully you for is now “aesthetic.” Anime has officially broken containment, and with that comes... the eternal war. Sub vs Dub.

## why subs hit different

I’ll be real: subs have always been a natural choice for me. Not because I’m trying to be an “anime purist,” but because hearing the original voices just feels right. Japanese voice actors don’t just voice characters, they become them.

Take *One Piece*. The voice actress Mayumi Tanaka IS Monkey D. Luffy. When she’s goofy, she sells it. When she’s angry, you feel it. When she’s heartbroken, your chest aches. The English dub? Respect to the actors, but Luffy’s voice there often sounds flat. It’s one constant straight line no matter the emotion. Luffy deserves more freedom!

Another iconic title: *Naruto*. Junko Takeuchi’s performance brings so much stubbornness and energy to *Naruto*’s voice that you believe he’ll become Hokage. It’s raw, sometimes messy, but

always powerful. That’s the kind of thing that makes me pro-sub: you’re not just watching the animation; you’re hearing the soul of the character.

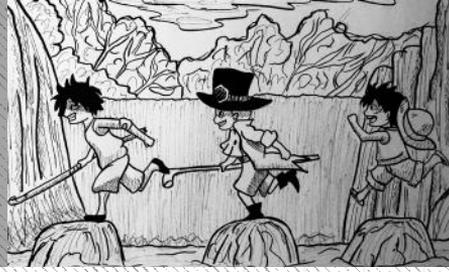
## in defense of dubs

I’ll give credit where it’s due. A great dub can shine. *Cowboy Bebop*? Legendary. Steve Blum made Spike Spiegel both effortlessly cool and heartbreakingly human, never once sounding forced. That dub is so good people still debate whether it’s better than the Japanese original.

Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood also deserves its flowers. The English cast brought so much weight and sincerity to the Elric brothers’ story that it still resonates today. It’s one of those cases where both the sub and the dub can stand tall side by side.

And then there’s Studio Ghibli. Their English dubs don’t erase cultural details or try to “Westernize” the magic – they enhance it. What’s even better is that a lot of the actors weren’t just clocking in for a job – some of them were fans themselves. Christian Bale, for example, was so excited to take part in a Ghibli film that he said he’d be happy with any role, just to be included. Of course, an actor of his calibre got more than a side role. He became Howl in *Howl’s Moving Castle* and absolutely nailed it.

Another amazing example is *Princess Mononoke*. In the English dub, Gillian Anderson voiced Moro, the wolf goddess of the forest. The team added a subtle echo effect to her lines, giving Moro this divine, otherworldly quality



that felt fresh while still honouring the original. It **worked** beautifully; she really sounded godly.

When dubs are given the same level of care and respect as the **originals**, the results can be magical. They don't just make anime more accessible – they create new interpretations that stand on their own, while still honouring the heart of the story.

## when dubs crash and burn

Of course, not every dub gets it right. Take Neon Genesis Evangelion, for example. The original English dub was produced by ADV Films, a company that brought many classic anime to Western audiences in the 1990s and early 2000s. Their dub is remembered by many fans, but it took some risky choices. Shinji came across much whinier than intended, and Asuka sounded more like a flat stereotype than the layered, complicated character she was in the Japanese version. That doesn't mean the actors didn't give it their all – it just ended up being a very different interpretation.

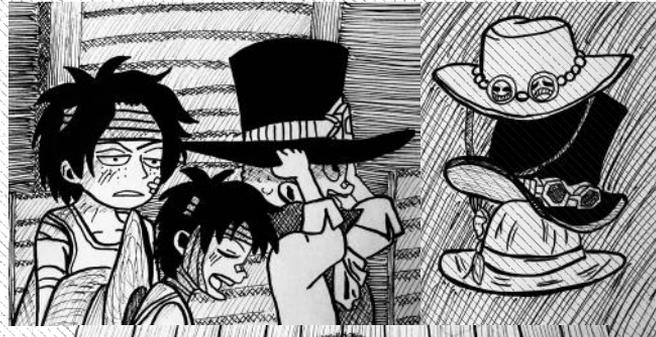
Years later, when Netflix added Evangelion to their platform, they commissioned a completely new English dub. This version aimed for more nuance and natural delivery, even if it lost some of the “infamous” over-the-top flair of the original.

And then there's Pokémon. Oh, Pokémon. The 4Kids dub really tried to hide that it was Japanese. Remember the rice balls magically turning into “jelly

donuts”? Yeah... because apparently Western kids couldn't handle the concept of rice. It's hilarious now, but also a masterclass in unnecessary censorship.

And of course, we can't forget Simuldubs. For anyone unfamiliar, that's when the English dub drops almost at the same time as the Japanese version, sometimes just days later. On the surface, it's nice – no long waits for dub fans, you can jump into the hype instantly. But speed comes at a cost. Actors don't always get the time to dig into their roles, and rushed translations can lose nuance or humour. The result isn't terrible, but it often feels more

words and art by Allaire



# DUBBING

## PROS

Accessibility – easier for younger people and people with disabilities

When they're good, they're really good

## CONS

Often rushed, lacking nuance

Risk of over-localization

Sometimes sound out of sync with the story's tone

# SUBTITLES

## PROS

Authentic, emotional, closest to the creator's vision

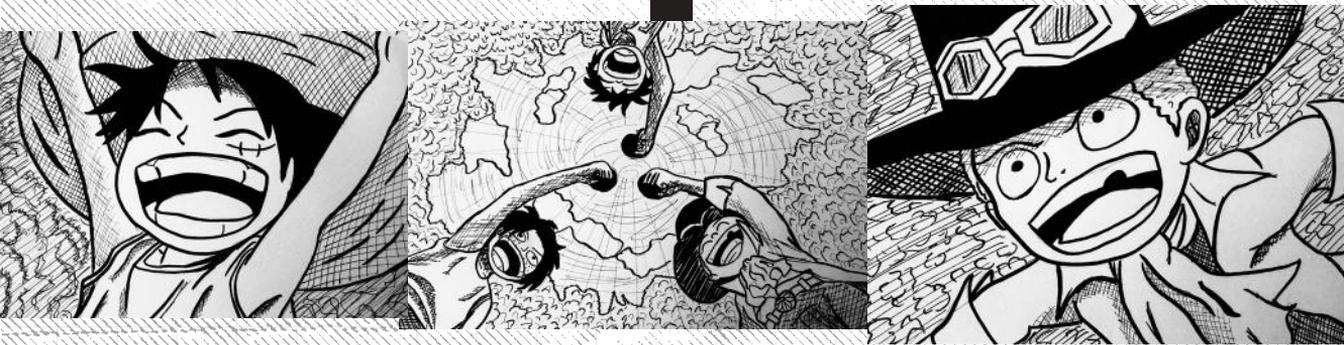
You feel the full weight of performances

## CONS

Reading subtitles isn't for everyone

Translations can vary in quality

Not great for multitasking



## let anime be anime

One thing that grates on me is seeing people online complain that sub-watchers “bully” dub-watchers. Let’s be real: nobody’s chasing people around screaming “DUBS ARE TRASH.” (And if anyone is, stop it? Why would you do that?) If anything, sub fans just feel closer to the heart of anime and want people to experience that too.

The bigger point is: why do we expect anime to bend to us? We watch American shows and movies in English without hesitation. But when Japan releases their work, suddenly it’s “too much effort” to watch the original? That mindset doesn’t just flatten anime, it flattens global storytelling. We can’t keep taking what other countries have to offer and trying

to bend it to American rules. If everything gets “Americanized,” we lose out on the originality and freshness that comes from different cultural voices.

There’s always something new to discover when you dive into films and series from other countries, and blending everything into one repetitive formula only limits that discovery. Director Bong Joon Ho put it perfectly when he said during his Golden Globe speech for *Parasite*: “Don’t be lazy, read subtitles.” He explained that once you overcome the small barrier of reading subs, a whole new world of incredible cinema opens up. The same applies to anime.

# ON THEME

## Nami's breakdown One Piece (Arlong Park arc)

As a child, Nami and her sister Nojiko were adopted by Bellemere, whose death at the hands of the pirate Arlong left Nami burdened with guilt and grief. Forced into Arlong's service for her cartography skills, she was told she could buy back her village's freedom for 100 million berries. So, she became a thief – cold and calculating on the surface but secretly sacrificing everything to protect her people. Her isolation was her first wound.

Years later, just as she neared her goal, corrupt Marines stole her treasure. Everything was lost, the years of pain, scars, the hatred she tolerated, all of it – was for nothing.

Nami's despair culminates in one of the rawest scenes in One Piece: she starts stabbing the tattoo of Arlong's mark on her arm, desperate to rid herself of the symbol of his control. It's a visceral rejection of her abuser, but the act also screams helplessness – she had no more hope.

When Luffy first appears, Nami doesn't want his help. She tells him to leave, leave, leave, leave, and finally cries for him to... help her.

Luffy's response stands in contrast to Nami's violent despair – he places his straw hat, his greatest treasure, on her head, and declares passionately that, of course, he will help her.

## my favourite hurt/comfort arc in anime



# IS MY CHARACTER DEAD?

A semi-realistic guide to hurting your characters. We sacrificed our search histories and did the morbid googling for you. You're welcome.

just keep **pressure** on it...  
**or: stab wounds**

Let's start with the basics: stab wounds – or, more accurately, incised wounds. These are caused by sharp objects that penetrate the skin. There are actually several types of wounds, each with their own quirks, and some work better than others depending on the level of angst you're going for.

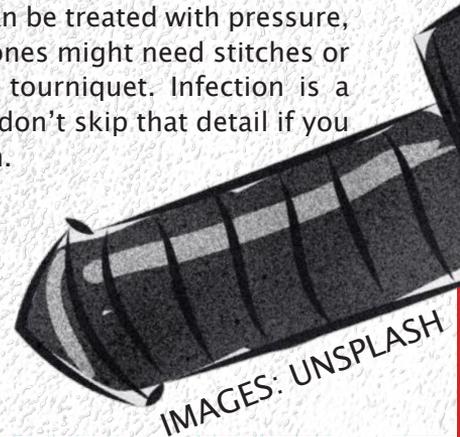
## PUNCTURE WOUNDS

A puncture wound is deeper than it is wide – your character might get one from a knife, an arrow, or a sword. The entry point is small, but the internal damage can be severe. They're perfect for hidden or surprise injury scenarios, since they look minor on the surface. There's usually little bleeding at first, lulling both the character and the reader into a false sense of security. Because of how deep they go, pain might not hit immediately, especially if the character is in shock. Watch for growing patches of red on their clothes instead of obvious bleeding. Wounds like these will almost always need professional medical attention.

## LACERATION WOUNDS

These are longer but shallow – clean if made by a blade, jagged if torn by debris, claws, or rough surfaces. They bleed heavily at first but rarely cause deep damage. They're messy, painful, and dramatic – great for showing the chaos of a fight without long-term consequences. Your character will feel the sting right away and see bright red blood seeping through fabric or pooling fast. Most can be treated with pressure, but deeper ones might need stitches or a makeshift tourniquet. Infection is a real risk, so don't skip that detail if you want realism.

Disclaimer: This is not medical advice. The information below is intended for writing fiction, not real-life emergencies. If you require medical assistance, please seek professional help.



## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

### HEAD/FACE

More likely to get slashes than stabs – the skull offers decent protection. Avoid the eyes unless you're going for something very graphic and catastrophic.

### NECK/CHEST

High-risk zone – most fatal injuries happen here. It's packed with vital organs and structures: the carotid arteries, jugular veins, larynx (voice box), trachea (airway), oesophagus (eating tube), spinal cord (paralysis risk), heart, lungs, diaphragm, and ribs (which can fracture). A stab wound to this area will almost always hit something important.

### ABDOMEN

stomach, liver, kidneys, intestines, uterus – these typically lead to internal bleeding, especially with a puncture wound.

### LIMBS/SPINE

major nerves and vessels are the areas to worry about – they can affect movement and sensation.

## ARTERIES, VEINS, NERVES...

Arteries carry blood away from the heart, and veins carry it back. You can tell an artery has been cut if the blood spurts in rhythm with the heartbeat – it's bright red because it's oxygen-rich. Your character will probably be dead within minutes unless it's treated immediately. Whump whump.

Veins are darker, more maroon in colour, and bleed in a steady flow rather than a pulse. They're serious but more manageable – have your characters apply pressure, and make sure they don't pull out the weapon. Or have them pull it out if you want to be messy. Dealer's choice.

Nerves are often overlooked, but they matter – especially if a character is stabbed or slashed in the limbs or back. Damage here can cause paralysis, loss of movement, or reduced sensation.

Fun fact (well, not fun, but you get it): in a modern setting, a stomach puncture could cause acid leakage and damage other organs. Do with that what you will.

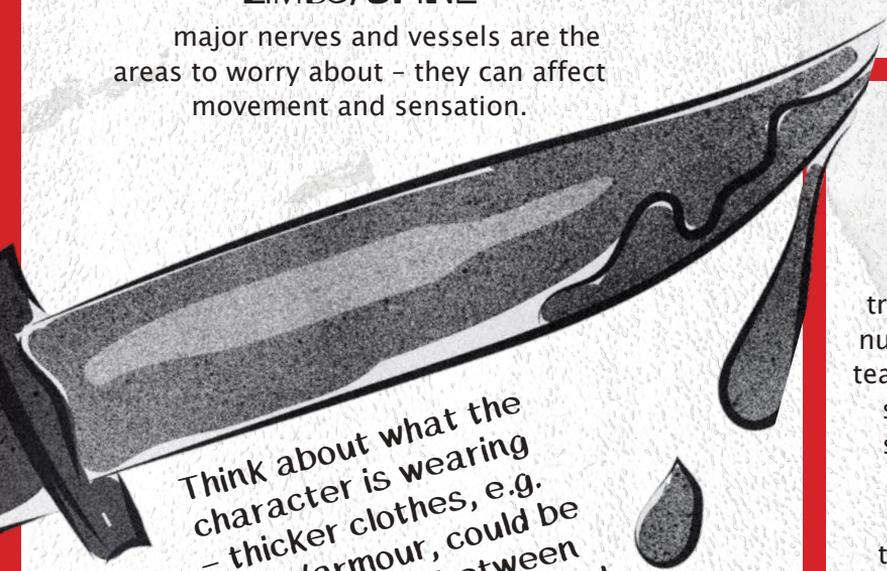
## shock vs. "in shock"

### EMOTIONAL SHOCK

the body's drowning in adrenaline after sudden trauma. It's a freeze response – numbness, blank stares, delayed tears, shaking hands, a voice that sounds too calm. They might seem fine... until they're not.

### MEDICAL SHOCK

the body isn't getting enough blood or oxygen. It's physical and life-threatening – pale skin, fast pulse, shallow breathing, confusion.



Think about what the character is wearing – thicker clothes, e.g. leather/armour, could be the difference between dramatic scar and funeral in the next scene.



## stay awake, stay with me... or: concussions (and other head trauma)

Writers love knocking characters out – it’s a good way to skip the boring bits or move the plot along. But in reality, losing consciousness isn’t just a nap. Head trauma bad enough to knock someone out would cause a severe concussion, at least. Boring, we know.

A concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury that happens when the brain slams or twists against the inside of the skull. Think of it like a pinball machine: the brain’s floating in a layer of jelly-like fluid called CSF (cerebrospinal fluid), but a sudden jolt can make it ricochet into bone. It’s not pretty.

Concussions can result from falls, fights, sports, or car accidents, and often come with other injuries like skull fractures or bruising.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A concussed character won’t always pass out. They might just seem dazed, glassy-eyed, or confused. Common symptoms include headache, dizziness, nausea, blurred vision, sensitivity to light and sound, and sluggish speech or reflexes.

Memory loss is also common – just not in the dramatic way you’ll be tempted to include. Even short-term memory loss can add plenty of tension and angst, if you use it right.

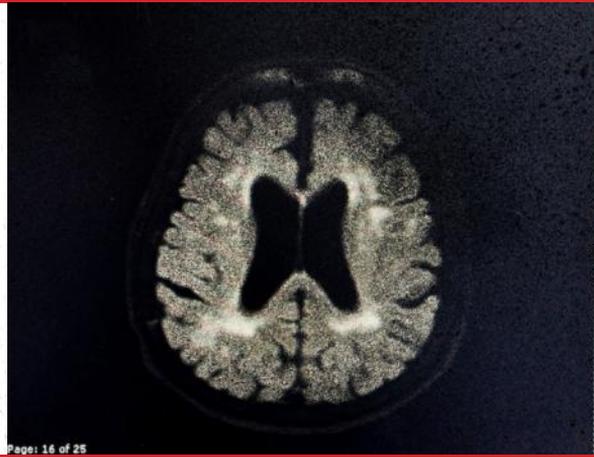
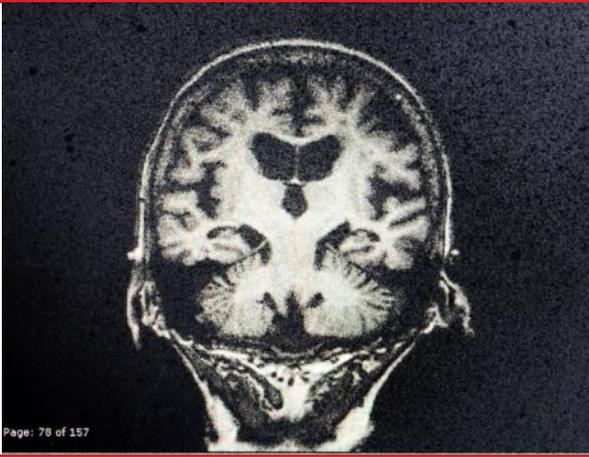
### RETROGRADE AMNESIA

forgetting the moments before the injury, caused by the brain’s short-term memory not getting a chance to transfer information into long-term storage before trauma hits.

### ANTEROGRADE AMNESIA

trouble forming new memories after waking up – think repeating questions or forgetting recent conversations.

Both usually improve within hours, but sometimes the lost moments never come back.



## DANGER ZONE

Is the “keep them awake” rule real? Yes, technically. After a head injury, waking the person periodically helps check whether something else occurred. Sleeping isn’t the danger – not waking up is.

In rare cases, a blood clot can develop, pressing the brain against the skull – a straight-to-the-ER situation. Warning signs include a worsening headache, repeated vomiting, slurred speech, odd behaviour, one pupil larger than the other, failure to recognize people or places, or loss of consciousness.

So, if your character is concussed and you want to keep it realistic, they shouldn’t bounce back instantly. Even a mild concussion can leave someone disoriented for hours, sometimes days.

And remember: head wounds bleed a lot. The scalp is packed with tiny blood vessels, so even a minor cut can look dramatic. Perfect for angst; still realistic.

## REPEAT OFFENDERS

If your character gets knocked out every other chapter, there are consequences.

Research from the University of Oxford and University of Exeter found that people with three or more concussions show significantly worse cognitive function – particularly in attention and problem solving.

Then there’s second impact syndrome (SIS) – a rare but often fatal condition that occurs when someone sustains a second concussion before recovering from the first. It leads to rapid brain swelling, causing loss of consciousness, seizures, potentially a coma, permanent disability or death. SIS requires immediate medical intervention.

Head injuries can cause all sorts of complications. And remember – even though long-term amnesia is a beloved trope, it almost never happens from a simple knock on the head. If your character’s going to lose the last ten years of their life, make it a memory spell or a serious accident, not just a tumble.

## LAST WORD

TAKE THE ADVICE, THEN BREAK IT - THERE ARE NO RULES IN FIC WRITING.

THANK YOU FOR READING

# fanmade

magazine



@fanmademag

pitch to us!



@fanmademagazine

join the team!

