

Fanfiction was the guilty pleasure that helped me unlock the internet

My affair with fanfiction started off as an English assignment. At the tender age of 12, my tiger parents forced me to spend every free moment at a local cram school. It was about 6PM on a Friday night in July. None of us had eaten dinner, and our English instructor knew she was losing us. Ms. L looked at us over the top of her reading glasses, lips pursed, and said, "Your assignment for the weekend is to write a one-page alternative ending to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*."

At the time, I didn't realize we were being told to write fanfiction, but that's how the same medium that begot *Fifty Shades of Grey* ended up becoming a decades-long guilty pleasure.

Normally, I resented the extra homework cram school piled onto my plate. But for whatever reason, that *Romeo and Juliet* assignment sparked something in my academically fried brain. Cram schools revolve around brute forcing math and vocabulary drills until you can factor quadratic polynomials in your sleep. None of the 20-page homework packets ever asked us to ponder "what if..."

What if Juliet decided Romeo's corpse was a sign she should run away from her abusive family and get herself to the nunnery Ophelia shunned? I stayed up late Sunday night writing, editing, rewriting, and reediting my one-page masterpiece. It got a B-plus, which in my family, was the equivalent of a double F-minus. I was grounded, but something deep and primal in my soul had changed.

It's cringe to admit, but I spent most of that summer obsessed

with *Gundam Wing*. I was raised on a healthy diet of Cartoon Network's Toonami, and I have no defense other than being a weak preteen. In protest of my grueling homework load, I snuck into my living room after my parents fell asleep and prayed that the crackle of a 56K modem wouldn't wake them up. Google was starting to pop off, and it led me straight to the horny world of *Gundam Wing* fanfiction. It was the first time I used the internet for anything other than homework or AOL games.

Ninety-nine percent of it gave me a heart attack. I hid my tomato-red face behind my fingers while browsing through fan-curated libraries. Yet I was equally thrilled as I was scandalized. Here were thousands of people reaching through the computer to ask "what if?" Granted, most of the questions were, "What if protagonists one and two boned in the most deranged way possible?" But they had the audacity to ask such a brazen question *and* write about it in excruciating detail. Publicly.

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As an anxious preteen, that confidence was alluring. I wanted the freedom to ask unhinged "what if" questions and explore them. I stayed up late into the night on LiveJournal, lurking as smarter people than I created communities around fandoms they loved, wondering how I could tap into that. I clicked link after link until I ended up at Fanfiction.net. Suddenly, I gained access to a free library full of thousands of stories that offered a glimpse into a world beyond the one my parents planned for me. It was the very first time I understood what made the internet and the subcultures it spawned so exciting.

Before I knew it, I started asking more of my own "what if" questions every time I finished a movie, TV show, or novel. Eventually, I started giving myself permission to scribble some answers down.

My English teachers disapproved. This was an unprestigious way to express creativity. True genius, they said, came from original work, and it was a waste of talent to ponder legally dubious what-ifs. (Ironically, this is how I learned about the fair use doctrine.)

I wanted to spit back that I was tired of *only* reading the stiff prose of dead men. I wanted to yell that there was an army of deranged authors online writing some of the most transgressive stories I'd ever laid eyes on. Sure, you can tell some of them are written by folks with a tenuous grasp of grammar (see: *My Immortal*, a *Harry Potter* fanfic that is widely regarded as the worst on the internet and has its own wiki). But I couldn't find anything like it on the shelves of my local bookstores. I wanted to argue that, in 2001, this was one of the few online spaces that introduced me to the idea that queer people could have a happily ever after. But I didn't have the vocabulary to say any of that yet, so I kept my mouth firmly shut.

Out of spite, I kept reading my uncouth fics on top of my more "legitimate" reading.