

Slash Fan Fiction: Hobby or Vehicle for Social Change?

You may not know it but chances are that someone you know likes something called fan fiction. What is fan fiction you ask? Webster's defines fan fiction as, "A fictional account written by a fan of a show, movie, book, or video game to explore themes and ideas that will not or cannot be explored via the originating medium" ("Fan Fiction"). You know something else? There's a good chance that this person also likes slash fan fiction. The definition of slash fan fiction is "a type of fan fiction in which one or more media characters are involved in a homosexual relationship as the primary plot element" ("Slash Fiction"). This paper will examine if the existence and influence of Internet slash fiction helps or hinders mainstream acceptance or perception of gays and gay culture. First by examining the history of slash fan fiction, then by showing an example of how a fan might view a scene from a show to create a fan fiction couple, exploring hate crime data, and examining a viewpoint from the Gay community.

Do you know why you might not know that this person likes Slash fiction? He or she may be afraid for you to know. The same fears that keep lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in their closets are similar to the fears that keep many slash fans in closets of their own. They stay in a closet composed of their fears of persecution or ridicule by their family and friends about what they watch or write.

Slash fiction fans and writers are still out there, though. Secret signs, symbols, string of letters or words on nametags at conventions mark them as like minded. You'll see them huddled in corners talking in hushed whispers about the subtext of the last episode of *Stargate: Atlantis (SGA)*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)*, *NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigative Service)* or a similar show and if their favorite Slash pairing has just started, is in trouble, or ended. An example might be from the show *Stargate: Atlantis* where the characters John Sheppard and Rodney McKay are a popular slash fan fiction pairing, if a slash fiction writer writes a story they

may try and place it within the time line of the show versus some future time. An episode that has placed these characters in peril is a popular starting point, examples are the first season episodes *Thirty-Eight Minutes*, *The Storm*, *The Eye*, *The Defiant One* and *The Siege Parts One, Two, and Three* (part three actually aired in the second season).

Slash fans who might have been around since slash stories began appearing in the *Star Trek* fandom in the early 1970s may sit and wax nostalgically about older shows like *Star Trek*, *Starsky & Hutch*, *The Professionals* or *The Sentinel* and compare and contrast changes in production values and subtext (Bacon-Smith 184). They may remember how difficult it was to be a slash fiction fan or writer pre-Internet, where mailing lists weren't electronic but passed around via a snail mail circuit, you might have had to be vetted before joining it. Slash fanzines, (a fanzine is a fan published fan fiction anthology), were only sold to you because you knew someone, and could ask the person running the fanzine table of general fan fiction for the slash fanzines the correct way (Bacon-Smith 203-224).

Both generations of fans might show frustration with the executives of a show when changes to the characters alters the on screen chemistry of two male characters, probably the fans favorite slash couple, and they might hypothesize that those executives must have found out about the slash fiction for that show.

As illustrated in Camille Bacon-Smith book Enterprising Women.

To some extent, the viewer and the producer of the source product have a tacit agreement. The creator of the series will try to target a pleasurable experience for a wide variety of viewers, and in turn, the individual viewer will accept the interpretation the producer wishes her to make.

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The producers may to believe that the viewer is accurately interpreting their vision of what they create. This is their vision, their art, and their craft; to view the episode as something

other than what they would want the viewer to see is unthinkable. There are fans for whom the imagery or storyline the producer, director, or writer of an episode gives will strike a deeper or more resounding chord, than what might have been the original intention of the episode's crew. In this case it is not what the producer intends to show that the slash fan sees, but rather the subtle communication and gestures that a Slash fan might use according to Camille Bacon-Smith " . . . make judgments about the characters in the source products based on women's cultural definitions of intimacy" (193). A woman may attribute different meanings to signals such as a tilt of a head or a pat on the back than her male counterpart.

If it is true that show executives of a show will retool series to remove potential slash fan interpretation, does that imply that slash fiction hurts gay culture or, is there a stereotype of a homosexual male that must be adhered to, no deviation permitted--those gays "effeminate guys who do interior design or style hair?" They can't be a cop, soldier, or government agent? The generally accepted percentage of people who identify as homosexual is approximately 10-percent (Rodgers 46). While it is unclear whether this 10-percent figure accurately represents the portion of the population that is gay, there are some indications that this number is, in fact low for example, LGBT people are being more open, there is a rise in hate crimes against the homosexual community (see figure 1). One might argue that because of an increasing climate of fear, not all nonheterosexuals will publicly identify themselves as such, thus the 10-percent figure under represents the population.

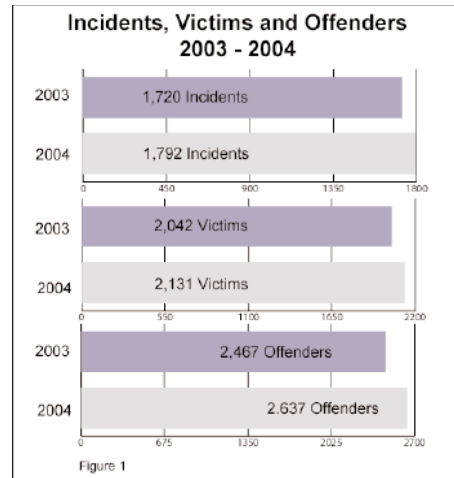


Figure 1 Data on hate crimes

Source: National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs.

The standard television fare of the sit-com has made the comedic facet of gay culture acceptable to mainstream America. Perhaps slash fiction writers want to do their part to further mainstream acceptance within the traditional one-hour drama show. Straight women write most slash fiction--fiction about two men, who, for all external appearances are the epitome of big, tough, strong men, usually in a crime drama or sci-fi genre. And the women write about these men in a homosexual relationship (Scodari, 114); (Kustritz 376). Why do they write it?

The answer is generally along the lines that the authors are interested in homosexual sex, that they find that the image or idea of two men together arousing, or that having two guys to themselves is a fantasy of their own (MacDonald 29).

How does this translate into the different ways fans view male characters in television shows? Two people can look at the same scene of a show and one just see a male friendship and another see a couple of men romantically involved but trying to keep the relationship a secret? It's all in how the person interprets body language and non-verbal cues. Camille Bacon-Smith calls it a gestural code. A slash fan will focus on a character's eyes (stories go into in-depth descriptions about a character's eyes), or how a character will stand in relation to another

character (some character's, stand in a way that there is no such thing as "personal space"). Others will identify actions that one normally wouldn't let someone do outside of an intimate relationship (Bacon-Smith 187). Camille Bacon-Smith goes on to describe an instance where she admits to her mentor that she couldn't see a certain pairing in a show; the mentor then has her watch the scene without sound. When Bacon-Smith focused just on body language, the same scene took on a more intimate effect (Bacon-Smith, 189-190).

An example of looking for subtexual cues can be found in the below images from an airing of a CBS show called *NCIS* (see figures 2 and 3). The characters shown are agents for NCIS, Michael Weatherly's character (see figure 3), Tony DiNozzo, senior field agent of the team and second in command for Gibbs, the team leader. DiNozzo acts like the consummate "lady's man," who stereotypes and sexually objectifies women. He is playboy type that many men in the main target demographic of the show can identify with, a real "man's man." In the image, Leroy Jethro Gibbs (see figure 2), his boss and leader of the team, is offering some tactile comfort to his second in command. Gibbs is described as a coffee drinking, tough-as-nails, ex-Marine, and a self-described bastard, who is building a wooden boat by hand in a basement from which he will not be able to remove it. According to the "men are tough" stereotype neither Gibbs nor DiNozzo, would give or accept this sort of comfort easily. Yet DiNozzo, being accused of a crime that he didn't commit, receives and accepts this sort little chin tap (Bellisario 2003).



Source: *NCIS*

Figures 2 and 3 Gibbs (Mark Harmon) reassuring DiNozzo (Michael Weatherly)

This is the sort of subtext that slash fiction women flock and drool over. These authors pore over the scene frame by frame, tearing apart each and every inflection of voice and movement of a body, the subtle subtext and the little clues that the directors might not have known they were putting in there (Bacon-Smith 232). Online mailing lists and discussion boards devoted to these Slash relationships buzz after each episode with theories and speculation about what happened subtextually. Soon after the fiction dealing with the episodes starts coming into the mailing lists (Kustritz 374).

Some may argue that this level of obsessive behavior with what television characters do sexually "off-screen" is what harms the acceptance of gays in the mainstream culture. Some homosexuals might claim that the ignorance of these writers in regards to gay culture and their perpetuation of some gay stereotypes is what harm this acceptance (Veinglory para. 5). This criticism maintains that since the majority of slash writers are women, they can't be fully aware of what happens within gay culture. Most of the time, slash authors agree: straight women aren't inside experts on gay culture, but can't they be given some credit for trying to promote tolerance? Some gays say yes and others do not. An article on the Gay-Wired web site titled "Slash Friction" expands on this divide. Emily Veinglory remarks that "... There have been some increasingly bitter remarks posted by male (and some female) readers of Slash fiction. The complaints are that the Slash writer's treatment of male characters is often "wrong."

Furthermore in the same article Veinglory begins to conclude that slash contains or continues stereotypes of gay culture because mainly women write it, and that gay men should not condemn it just for being written. (Veinglory para. 10).

As with mainstream perception of gays, there are stereotypes common to describing a slash fan, most of which are false. Slash writers are not obsessive about their show or pairing all the time, they do have other lives, they are not mentally ill; they are straight women for the

majority. There are some straight and gay men as well as lesbians in the ranks, but they are in the minority. The common demographic of a Slash writer is an educated, heterosexual woman, usually in some computer related field if not a college graduate (Kustritz 376).

That doesn't sound like some insane stalker. For the most part these women write or read slash because of the way the men can be portrayed differently from the straight male norm that we see around us. It's a measure of control that the authors of slash fiction can have and exercise (Bacon-Smith 248). The media have focused on the costumed fan (e.g., a "Trekkie") that can go on about technical aspects of a show (Jenkins 10). This negative assessment of a fan doesn't capture the fact that the fan is usually highly conscious of the material he or she writes and puts out to the fan community at large (Kustritz 377).

It is this consciousness that, regardless of objections from the gay community, will ultimately help promote an air of tolerance, as the straight women who write slash have children. They will demonstrate to their offspring a tolerance of alternative sexualities that given time will contribute mainstream acceptance of gays and gay culture.

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