4. ***Connections*** Compare and contrast Knox's view of children and their emotional and intellectual needs with the view presented by Gerard Jones in "Violent Media Is Good for Kids" (p. 442). For example, Jones would likely agree with Knox that "while they read, [young readers] eagerly wish to be actors in the scenes which they admire" (par. 4). What is the power and influence of such vicarious experiences, according to Knox and Jones, respectively? How free should children be to choose their own vicarious pleasures? How do the two essays represent different conceptions of childhood?
5. ***Writing*** For Knox, the quality of a book is inseparable from the virtue of its moral message. Do you think art and entertainment should be "moral" and promote virtuous ideas and behavior? When you evaluate the quality of a book, movie, television show, or video game, do you include its morality in your judgment? Why or why not? What, if anything, makes a piece of popular culture "moral" or "immoral"? Write an essay that explains your answer.

ROBIN BRENNER

Teen Literature and Fan Culture

Robin Brenner is the teen librarian at the Brookline Public Library in Brookline, Massachusetts. She earned her undergraduate degree in creative writing from Bryn Mawr College and a graduate degree in library sciences from the University of Illinois. Brenner has written for Library Journal, VOYA, Knowledge Quest, *and other publications. She is also the editor-in-chief of* No Flying No Tights, *a Web site that reviews graphic novels. In this article, which appeared in the* Young Adult Library Services *journal, she considers the meaning and popularity of fan art—and fan fiction, in particular. Writers of fan fiction take the characters, plots, themes, and other aspects of their favorite books, television shows, or movies, and then create their own stories. As Brenner writes, these "devotees take the leap from speculation to creation" and "use their talents to fill in the gaps, to create alternative timelines, and mix universes."*

As you read, *reflect on a time when you have read a book or seen a movie, and then wondered "what happens next, what happened before, and what happened in scenes not shown." How has the meaning of "fan" changed, according to Brenner? What is her attitude toward fan fiction, and how does it come across in her tone? Would you ever consider writing fan fiction of your own?*

"Fan fiction is what literature might look like if it were reinvented from scratch after a nuclear apocalypse by a band of brilliant pop-culture junkies trapped in a sealed bunker. They don't do it for money. That's not what it's about. The writers write it and put it up online just for the satisfaction. They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language."[1]

Everyone has read a book and speculated about what might have been. When a work inspires, an engaged reader wonders

[1]Lev Grossman, qtd. in Robin Brenner, "Fanworks and Libraries Survey." *No Flying No Tights.* June 2012. Web. 23 Apr. 2013.

what happens next, what happened before, and what happened in scenes not shown. Many fans are content with contemplating the "what if" questions in their own imaginations, but with fan fiction, fan videos, and fan art, devotees take the leap from speculation to creation. They use their talents to fill in the gaps, to create alternative timelines, and mix universes. And that's just the beginning.

Once fans are satisfied with their effort, they share that work and vibrant communities build up rapidly. One power of the Internet is that if you really love a particular work, you can very easily find more people who love that work just as much as you do. Fans join forums and electronic discussion groups, and follow fan creators via social networking sites. Many create, but just as many participate by reading, commenting, editing, critiquing, and debating everything from character development and plot points to media tropes and minority representation. Everyone is involved in the creation, and everyone is involved in the conversation. All you need to join in is enthusiasm.

In my work as a teen librarian, I have noticed in the past ten years intersections between teen reading, literacy, creativity and the collaborative, creative world of fannish activity surrounding popular literature, television, and films. The engagement with creative works, from Harry Potter to *Twilight* to Star Trek to Sherlock, has led to adding voices, characters, points of view, and critique to any created universe. As author Lev Grossman notes in the quote above, being a fan today is about participation, community, and creative expression in a way that has never been quite so visible. In the past ten years, I've realized that not only are the teens I serve well aware of fan cultures, but many are active creators and participants.

The runaway success of works like E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which was originally written as fan fiction, to Stephenie Meyer's Twilight series, has brought fan creation front and center for people working in publishing and who may view fan culture as a rich creative training ground for new talent. In teen literature, published authors including Cassandra Clare, Marissa Meyer, Naomi Novik, Saundra Mitchell, and Claudia Gray[2] all started out writing in fan communities.

[2]Authors of *The Mortal Instruments*, *The Lunar Chronicles*, *Temeraire*, *Shadowed Summer*, and *Evernight*, respectively. [Editor's note.]

Being a fan is not new, of course, but today being a fan has become an increasingly public, shared act. The term originally applied to sports fans in the nineteenth century, and since science fiction enthusiasts adopted the label in the 1920s, the term has stuck for any enthusiast. A community of fans allied by their love for a particular source can be about anything from cats to a celebrity to a TV ad. When discussing fan culture in this article, the term identifies a community of fans that discuss, critique, and create around a particular source work, be it a film, a series of books, a television show, or a comic book. Fan works, which include creative writing (fan fiction), art (fan art), music (filk), video (fan vids), comics, costumes, and crafts, are as diverse as the people who create them.

A sticky question in this outpouring of creativity: just how legal is creating works so clearly inspired by and connected to copyrighted content? As panelists at the YALSA Young Adult Literature Symposium in St. Louis in November 2012 noted, the legal debate centers around whether fan works are considered derivative or transformative. If a work is considered derivative, adding nothing of value to the original work, then it is not allowed. If the work, however, is considered transformative, or building on what the original work created, then it is allowed. However, keep in mind, a lawsuit has yet to make its way through the courts and, without precedent, it is difficult to predict an outcome. Outside of the legal question, individual creators, including writers and artists, are increasingly moving toward a policy of permission and acceptance, especially as they recognize the harm in potentially alienating their fans if they pursue legal action. Recently, source material producers have shifted toward embracing fan culture by endorsing and hosting contests in creating fan works.

In order to help introduce fan creation and communities to library staff and others, I took part in a panel at the 2012 YALSA Young Adult Literature Symposium. (Other panelists included librarian and *School Library Journal* blogger Liz Burns, Aja Romano, fandom reporter for the *Daily Dot*; and Leslee Friedman, a representative from the Organization of Transformative Works and an ACLU Legal Fellow.)

Our symposium audience was full of librarians, authors, editors, and professionals interested in teen literature, and while some audience members were well versed in online fandom, many

were hearing about these creations and communities for the first time. Given the continuing discussion about authorship, publishing, and fan communities around the world, it was definitely the right time to discuss what being a fan means, the influence fan culture has on what and how we read, and to consider where the creativity of the fan community will lead us.

In order to be sure attendees saw the many formats fan works take, we included in our presentation a gallery of fan art, showing the extraordinary talent, sense of humor, and communication that happens through visual media. Everything from Harry Potter single-panel cartoons to elaborate portraits of the Avengers' Steve Rogers (a.k.a. Captain America) in the style of renowned illustrator J. C. Leyendecker[3] showed a brief glimpse of what fans create and share.

In the months before the panel, I conducted a survey to gather a snapshot of the fan community. I sent out word of the survey online through librarian electronic discussion groups, social networks, and with the help of the Organization of Transformative Works, I gathered over 500 responses from self-identified fans.

Looking over our survey data, the majority of our respondents were over 18, although we did have over 40 teens respond. The ages of respondents ranged from 13 to over 65, with most in their 20s or 30s. Over 93 percent of the respondents identified as female, with 5 percent identifying as male and 3 percent as other, including transgender, genderqueer, and androgynous. This percentage supports the impression from fan communities that the majority of participants are female. In terms of sexuality, 62 percent declared their sexuality is straight or mostly straight, while 35 percent identified as bisexual, gay, or lesbian, or questioning, and 3 percent identified as asexual. This shows a significant participation by GBLTQ people, and goes toward debunking the perception that fan creators are almost entirely straight women.

From the teens who responded, 97 percent read, watched, or viewed fan fiction, fan vids, or fan art, 85 percent have written fan fiction, and 55 percent have created fan art. Of the adults who responded, 97 percent read, watched, or viewed fan fiction, fan

[3]*Joseph Christian Leyendecker* (1874–1951): popular twentieth-century American illustrator best remembered for his illustrated advertisements and covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*. [Editor's note.]

vids, or fan art, 71 percent have written fan fiction, and 33 percent have created fan art. Of both teens and adults, 79 percent actively participate in fan communities, and 70 percent of adults and teens have written or blogged about fan culture. Forty-nine percent of teens and 65 percent of adults have been what's known as a beta—worked with another creator as an editor, copy editor, and cheerleader in the creation of work. While smaller percentages (5 to 25 percent) participate in creating or listening to podfic (audio recordings of fan fiction), filk (fan music), or fan mixes (music playlists tailored to a source or fan work), the fact that these options exist show the many ways fans can and do participate.

So why are all these people drawn to fan culture? There are many reasons, but the stated reasons from our survey include a love of compelling stories, finding community, gaining courage to create as well as becoming a better creator, finding a safe space for expression, and becoming more critical consumers.

Given the urges that prompt creating fan works, it's unsurprising that output can be both incredibly creative and critical. Remixing, retelling, and reinventing characters, worlds, plot points, and stories are the norm. Alternate universes (AU), or works that explore what makes characters true to their nature if they're placed in an entirely different place, situation, or time, are a popular way to riff on the original. Crossover works, which connect one or more fan sources and intermingle characters and ideas, are a key example of remixing. A recent example has been dubbed Superwholock and features the main characters of the television shows *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and the BBC's *Sherlock* solving crimes together. In today's world of strict media copyright, this kind of cross-pollination is virtually impossible through traditional channels.

The act of ripping apart source material and putting it together in new ways also allows fan creators to add in content they want to see but are not getting from professional published media. To put it simply, fan works are more inclusive than mainstream media. Fan works explore sexuality, gender identity, race, and class in an avenue of production that exists outside mainstream production gatekeepers. There is no budget bottom line or question of market appeal. By adding or giving more substantial voices to already existing characters of color, for example, fans can explore and comment on the diversity or lack thereof in a

favorite world. Alternate sexuality is frequently a part of fan works, showing a strong interest in highlighting and creating LGBTQ characters. Expanding and subverting established worlds show what fans feel are missing; survey respondents cited this inclusion over and over again as a major reason for seeking out fan work.

For many fans, finding a fan community online increases their confidence in social interactions, connects them with people through common interests, and helps them feel less isolated. As fan culture is also a forum for exploring sexuality and gender, many respondents reported that discovering these issues in fan circles helped them articulate and feel comfortable in their own identities. Despite the fact that much of fan culture's interaction takes place online through social media, many respondents also reported that online connections and community have led to invaluable in-person friendships.

As fan culture is based around creativity, respondents also noted the encouragement, consultation, collaboration, and feedback that thrive in creating and sharing fan works that have led many to try their hand at creation, to improve dramatically, and to feel more confident in their work, and successfully seek professional publication. As one teen notes, "Before fandoms, I thought you needed a fancy degree or a medal from the queen to write actual stories. But when I figured out there was more to life than Internet Explorer and Neopets, I realized that kids were writing. Everyone was writing. And everyone could do it. Then I started to do it . . . I honestly think I started out writing stories because I started writing fanfiction. And now I want to minor in creative writing."

Fans also learn to view what they love critically as they examine the source material, criticizing plot, characters, and storytelling decisions—and all of this is far outside the traditional rigor of a classroom. Critiquing an original work is part of participating in a fandom, from writing an essay examining character motivation to unpacking what a film's costumes say about the characters' class. Similarly, participating in fan culture has provoked many fans to consider questions of authorship, storytelling, and copyright. Many cite fan culture as forming their thoughts about how created worlds are shared, understanding (and potentially dismissing) authorial intent, and looking at the collaborative agreement between author and consumer that creates each reading. Fans in our survey noted over and over again that they became more critical consumers of media through participating in fan debates and reading or writing critical essays.

Fans encourage and hope that fan creators may move on to 20
create original work, as many have. The success of titles like *Fifty Shades of Grey* has opened the door publicly to how fan works can become traditionally published works. Making significant money off of fan work, which is ostensibly available for free to celebrate the original source, is considered gauche and potentially dangerous if it draws the legal attention of media producers. Respondents reported varying levels of comfort with crossing the line from fan work to professional work, especially given how uncertain and new this practice is for creators and publishers alike. Creating prints of fan art for sale or running conventions and fan events are considered allowable, but taking a fan fiction story, changing all the names, and publishing it as original is much more problematic. However, many creators are not simply changing the names and places of their fan work in order to publish, as James reputedly did. Instead, many are using what they have learned in the trenches of fan creation to create original work. Those who come from fandom, such as Naomi Novik and Marissa Meyer, are accepted in both worlds, but writing professionally and writing fan fiction are considered separate endeavors for different goals both creatively and economically. As more creators move from one world to the other, and the lines between them begin to blur, attitudes will continue to change.

Fan culture has become a vibrant and creative part of being a fan, and participating is part of many teens' daily lives. As fan culture, publishing, and teen literature continue to evolve, all of these creative outlets will become more intertwined, and no one can guarantee smooth sailing. As attitudes seem to be shifting toward embracing the creativity, talent, and sheer joy in stories that define fan works, fan creators are visible, vocal, talented, creative, collaborative, and, undoubtedly, here to stay.

For Discussion and Writing

1. ***Comprehension*** According to Brenner's survey, what are the main reasons people are drawn to fan culture?
2. ***Critical Reading*** How does the writer use rhetorical questions to **structure** her article? How are these questions related to her assumptions about her **audience**?