

BOOK REVIEW: FANDOM AT THE CROSSROADS

By Margo Collins

Zubernis, Lynn and Katherine Larsen. *Fandom At The Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships*. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. Pp. 249.

In their introduction to *Fandom At The Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships*, Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen write that there is

a pervasive sense of shame permeates both fan spaces and academic approaches to the subject. There is shame about being a fan at all, shame over the extremity of ‘some’ fans, shame over ‘certain’ fan practices, over having those practices revealed to the rest of the world, or to the fannish objects themselves. . . . There is also shame about studying something as ‘frivolous’ as fandom—or worse, taking frivolous pleasure ourselves, ‘sitting too close’ instead of remaining suitably detached observers. (1)

In this book, the authors set out to examine this sense of shame by studying the world of fandom surrounding the television show *Supernatural*, a weekly series known for its vocal and active fan base—of which the authors themselves are a part, claiming that “our decision to write from a position of immersion within *Supernatural* fandom is intended, undoubtedly with varying degrees of success, to reduce that distance” (7).

In many ways, Zubernis and Larsen seem uncomfortable in their dual roles—as they themselves note on several occasions. The authors offer explanations for their own immersion in *Supernatural* fandom in virtually every chapter. These apologetics both illustrate and underscore their argument that fandom is a site and source of shame. Indeed, the title doesn’t even mention *Supernatural*, despite the fact that the book focuses entirely on fandom as it pertains to that particular series—perhaps because including the name of the show in the title would make the book seem less scholarly, an exercise in examining the fans of one show rather than fan practices in general. The exclusion of the series’ title from the book’s title, however, seems more than a little disingenuous, since exploring one group of fans is precisely what the book does.

The authors’ attempts to write about fan practices from within fan practices leads to another, more pervasive problem: a tendency to forget that not all of their readers share that fannish space with them, evident in their tendency to use terms with which their readers might not be familiar and define them much later in the book (if at all). For example, Zubernis and Larsen use the term “aca-fans” (academic fans) repeatedly without overtly defining it—and although “acafan” has become a fairly well-known term in the field of fan studies, a reader new to the field might need a clearer gloss. More problematically, the term “wank” is used at least three times before it is actually defined on page 115 as “bullying, backstabbing, shaming, and relational aggression” within fan communities; similarly, the term “ship” is used early on in the book, but isn’t defined as referring to relationships between characters in fan fiction until page 131. Finally, “the anon meme” (120) is apparently a reference to “the *spn_permanon* community

on L[ive] J[ournal],” but is never adequately explained for readers who are not intimately familiar with the group.

Despite these problems, the book offers an interesting reading of the interactions among fans; between fans and the “text” of the show; and between fans and the actors, writers, directors, and other producers of that text. In “Chapter One: Lost in Space: Participatory Fandom and the Negotiation of Fan Spaces,” Zubernis and Larsen trace the history of fan studies’ discussion of fans as “categorized in terms of their modes of participation, with that participation usually defined in terms of production” (16). While this may be true, the authors note, “. . . a significant number of fans would define their participation in terms of active consumption of information about their fanned objects” and “this kind of interaction with the text involves obtaining a wide ranging knowledge of the fanned object and requires a significant amount of time and effort and a specific set of technical skills.” That is, fans may both consume and produce fan culture, including (for example) art, fiction, or videos.

“Chapter Two, Taking Sides: Business or Pleasure?” attempts to place the authors in the worlds of both fandom and academia, noting that they attempted, to some degree, to separate their personas by keeping their fan activities (primarily on Live Journal) separate from their academic research. As they note, though, “the problem here is that the rules and ‘ethical standards’ are completely different, and perhaps mutually exclusive. This may be why academic attempts to integrate academic and fan sides ultimately fail—hence our own (imperfect) decision to keep our fan and academic sides separate for the most part” (52).

“Chapter Three, I’m Too Sexy For My Stereotype” discusses the connections among fans, sexuality, and shame. As Zubernis and Larsen write, “While male media fans fear being perceived as not sexual enough, female fans fear being categorized as too sexual, or at the very least too emotional” (59)—a problem that leads to an internalization of shame about fan practices. Thus female fans “have internalized such a strong sense of shame that they’ve projected it onto the objects of their affection, expressing their fear that the celebrities are either terrified or disgusted by their own female fans” (69).

“Chapter Four, Fandom as Change Agent: Transformative Whats?” examines “the therapeutic potential of fandom” (84), comparing fanfic (fan-produced fiction) to more traditional narrative therapy—a form of therapy that allows patients to revise their own internal narratives. In traditional therapy, the authors note, “the therapist is the one who’s witness to the expression of long-buried pain and reinforces the rewritten life story. Similarly, the support and feedback of the fandom community appears to play a role in facilitating change for fanfiction writers reworking their narratives” (114). Moreover, Zubernis and Larsen make a strong claim for fan-produced work as a means of individual empowerment, in which “the freedom fandom provides to read and write and say what you want—and what you genuinely feel—is cherished as an antidote to the shame we explored in the previous chapter” (95).

“Chapter Five, Only Love Can Break Your Heart: Fandom Wank and Policing the Safe Space” examines “the dark underbelly of fan communities—trolling, bullying, backstabbing, shaming, and relational aggression, also known as fandom wank” (115). In particular, the authors examine the ways in which fan communities police their own groups by creating “out-groups”

with the accusations that they are either “doing [fandom] wrong” (125) or “doing it way too much!” (128)—that is, the groups use shame as a form of control within specific fan communities. Despite the apparent negative possibilities inherent in such group control, Zubernis and Larsen ultimately view it as ultimately performing an important function, claiming that

Not only do fanworks explore the experience of marginalized or stigmatized people, which can increase empathy and create more positive attitudes . . . but fannish discussion about how these issues are explored contributes to the cultural dialogue by challenging norms related to racism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia, and other social problems. Fans may disagree (often loudly) about what these norms should be, but discussion has the potential to be more transformative than silence. Fandom wank focused inwards creates a constant interrogation of our own fannish practices and their broader implications. (141)

“Chapter Six, And The (Fourth) Walls Come Tumbling Down” examines the much-discussed metafictional episodes of *Supernatural*, noting that in the fourth-season episode ‘The Monster at the End of this Book,’ “*Supernatural* began a series of portrayals of fans that closely mirror the show’s own fanbase, and a tradition of poking fun at both sides of the reciprocal relationship” (159). This portrayal of fans, particularly as seen in the character of the fan Becky, was met with no small amount of resistance among *Supernatural* fans:

Supernatural also eventually blurred the distinction between acknowledging fan opinion and outing fan practices. Academics, reviewers, and the fans themselves have been divided in their opinions of *Supernatural*’s meta episodes and the Show’s incorporation into canon of fans and fan practices, especially the more controversial ones. (157)

In any case, the authors argue, the series illustrates what can happen when producers (like *Supernatural*’s Eric Kripke and Sera Gamble) are aware of fan practices to the degree that they are “in the ideal position to take the gaze of the fan and turn it back on itself, putting the fan in the spotlight” (156). According to Zubernis and Larsen, “producer incursion into fan spaces can be . . . deeply problematic,” creating a lack of trust on both sides.

“Chapter Seven, The Reciprocal Relationship: How Much is Too Much?” includes excerpts from a number of interviews with *Supernatural*’s actors and writers in which the actors and writers acknowledge both their debt to fans and the need to maintain boundaries between the fans and the creators of the show. This careful balancing act illustrates the fact that

the boundary between fans and the creative side is thus shored up from both sides, with too much fluidity a threat to fannish expression and fantasy investment on one side and creative control on the other. The balance remains precarious, and subject to

constant re-negotiation, but seems essential to the reciprocal relationship.

Throughout the chapters, the authors include personal anecdotes that tie their academic interests to their personal fandom. These anecdotes, sometimes indicated by italicized text, highlight the authors' occasional discomfiture, who,

having already attempted to straddle the line between academic and fan . . . set out to cross an even more thickly drawn line—that between fan and creator. Juggling all three roles landed us in more uncomfortable positions than we were prepared for, but also brought to light, in an immediate and personal way, the tensions inherent in being a fan and in studying fandom. (8)

This problem occurs frequently, as Zubernis and Larsen note: “crossing the boundary to actually speak to the creative side allowed us to add that missing viewpoint to our analysis of fandom. It also broke the First Rule of Fandom [nobody talks about fandom] repeatedly, leaving us in the uncomfortable position of straddling the fence between ‘good fan’ and ‘good researcher’” (229). Their stories include encountering police officers during midnight pilgrimages to *Supernatural* filming sites, meeting with the actors, and being escorted off the set, and add a personal touch to the book that highlights its strengths, predicated as the book is on the insiders' views of one particular fan group.

Fandom at the Crossroads ends with an exhortation to other researchers:

The challenge now is to move to a more nuanced understanding of fandom with a 360 degree perspective, acknowledging the changing modes of interaction and resulting shifts in power that are reshaping the reciprocal relationship between fans and the things they love. (229)

Ultimately, despite the difficulties they encountered in their attempts to write an academic book from a fannish space, Zubernis and Larsen have done just that. *Fandom at the Crossroads* is an important addition to fan studies in general and to *Supernatural* and its fans in particular.

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