



Slash Fiction

by Mark McLelland

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Slash fiction refers to a genre of fan writing that imagines homoerotic bonds developing between the leads of a variety of "cult" mainstream media productions. The genre is considered to have begun in *Star Trek* fanzines of the early 1970s; the term "slash" derives from the "/" mark in the pairing Kirk/Spock, which was the first such homoerotic relationship to be elaborated.

Slash stories based on other cult shows such as *Starsky and Hutch*, *The Man from UNCLE*, and *The Professionals* were also circulated during the 1970s and 1980s in fanzines produced primarily by heterosexual female fans.

Queer theory offers some suggestions why strong male characters should be so susceptible to this kind of homoerotic "slashing." Eve Sedgwick's notion of "homosocial desire," for instance, draws attention to the sexual tension that exists between men in homosocial (single-sex) environments such as schools, fraternities, the armed forces, and sports teams. In many "buddy" series and movies featuring strong male leads, it is the relationship between the male leads (or rivalry between hero and villain) that drives the story line, and it can be argued that slash fiction heightens and makes explicit the homosocial desire that already exists between these characters.

Slash fandom has mainly been interested in male/male pairings since, until recently, there were few heroic roles for women in television and movies, and relationships between female leads were less developed than those between male stars. However, lesbian relationships are increasingly being written about in the context of "girl power" television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

Prior to the Internet, slash fanzines were expensive and time-consuming to produce and distribute, thus placing limits on their accessibility. However, with the advent of the World Wide Web, slash fiction has gained a more general audience and the genre has broadened to include a wider range of cultural products. Slash fiction now encompasses not just television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files* and major movies such as *The Lord of the Rings*, but also boy bands and fiction heroes such as Harry Potter and the vampire characters created by popular novelist Anne Rice.

As well as continuing to produce textual stories and scenarios, many fans are now taking advantage of digital media and altering image files to suggest homosexual interest between characters. These altered images are used to illustrate their stories and websites.

The slash readership has also become notably more diverse, with many younger women becoming interested in the genre as well as an increasing number of lesbians and gay men.

Originally an independent genre of fan fiction but now often linked to slash sites is YAOI--a Japanese acronym for homosexual manga (comic book) stories that are lacking in "resolution, point and meaning." Now increasingly popular among western fans, YAOI takes as its love objects "*bishonen*" or the "beautiful boy" heroes characteristic of Japanese manga and animation.

While the characters popular in slash fiction are generally adult and strongly "masculine" types, YAOI is more interested in androgynous, beautiful young men and boys, causing concern on the part of some critics that it panders to pedophile tastes. However, given that the genre is most popular among girls and college-age women, these concerns seem misplaced.

Indeed, both slash and YAOI continue to be dominated by straight female fans. Thus, these genres represent a very queer appropriation of mainstream media products whose actual story lines are often highly gender normative.

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About the Author

Mark McLelland is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland, where he researches and writes about sexuality and the media in Japan. He is author of *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities* and editor of *Japanese Cybercultures*. He serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.