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“Oh my God, the Fanfiction!”
Dumbledore’s Outing and the Online Harry Potter Fandom

Catherine Tosenberger

For anyone who wishes to observe the cultural impact of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, the online fandom is an excellent place to start. Readers who participate in the Potter fandom do not simply passively absorb the texts but actively respond to them. These responses to the Potter books include “wizard rock” (see Karin Westman’s essay), experimental fiction, slushy romances, visual art, and densely academic analyses. Online Potter fandom is an invaluable repository of the creative and critical responses of the series’ most dedicated and engaged readers. Jill P. May has critiqued the tendency of children’s literature scholarship to invent an “imaginary” young reader and to base analysis upon a fantasy of what this imaginary reader will get out of a given text (82–83); though not made up exclusively of young people, online Potter fandom makes accessible the responses of the real, rather than the imaginary, audience. Fans’ immersion in the texts and attention to detail often results in sharp, rigorous analysis; much fanwork is concerned with romance and sexuality, and fans’ discussions of these issues with regard to the Potter books are especially thoughtful and nuanced.

Among participatory fans, one contingent was unsurprised when Rowling, during an appearance at Carnegie Hall, announced that Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore was gay: readers and writers of “slash” fanfiction. Slash—fanfiction that concerns a romantic and/or sexual relationship between characters of the same gender—is one of the most popular forms of Potter fanfiction. Slash fans are always on the lookout for hints of homoeroticism in the source text that can be spun into a story, and the description of the relationship between Dumbledore and his boyhood friend-turned-enemy Gellert Grindelwald proved especially fruitful in this respect; fans began creating stories, art, and critical essays concerning their relationship immediately following the release of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows—anticipating Rowling’s announcement by three months. Immediately after her revelation, Rowling laughed, “Oh my god, the fanfiction” (Italie). Over the years, Rowling has proven to be not simply

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aware, but actively supportive, of fanfiction; her confirmation of Dumbledore’s sexuality lends support to Sarah Gwenllian Jones’s articulation of slash not as a perverse “resistance” to a given text’s presumed heteronormativity but rather “an actualization of latent textual elements” (82).

Following Rowling’s bombshell, journalists and fans debated the “canonicity” of Dumbledore’s homosexuality. Journalist Jeffrey Weiss claimed, “If you didn’t put it in the books, please don’t tell us now” (Weiss), a view echoed by some fans. Further, Rebecca Traister, in Salon, argued, “[Rowling’s] pronouncements are robbing us of the chance to let our imagination take over where she left off, one of the great treats of engaging with fictional narrative” (Traister). However, fans have always disregarded aspects of the books that are unequivocally canonical if they interfere with the stories fans want to create, so Rowling’s extratextual pronouncements pose few impediments to fans’ imagination. But the question of how much influence an author has, or should have, over the interpretation of her text is of obvious relevance to fandom, and fans were divided in their perceptions of Rowling’s motives; some saw her as benignly supplying more information upon direct fan request, while others saw a more sinister desire to control the interpretation of her books.

Rowling appears to believe that her announcement of Dumbledore’s gayness is not, in fact, extratexual; during a press conference after her Carnegie Hall appearance, she indicated that she felt the nature of Dumbledore’s feelings for Grindelwald was evident within the text: “It is in the book. He had—it’s very clear in the book . . . I think a child will see a friendship and a sensitive adult may well understand that it was an infatuation” (“Web Exclusive”; Ahearn). As mentioned above, Rowling is well-informed about fandom; without straying into the realm of intentional fallacy, it is possible that Rowling’s conviction that Dumbledore’s homosexuality is “very clear in the book” may be connected to her awareness of slash fans—a large, visible group of “sensitive” readers whose ability to tease out potential homoerotic subtext is part of their enjoyment of the series.

If Rowling was expecting slash fans to apprehend the nature of Dumbledore’s feelings for Grindelwald, they did not disappoint. The day after the release of Deathly Hallows, the community Grindeldore appeared on Livejournal.com. Dedicated to “[f]anworks and discussion focusing on Grindelwald/Dumbledore,” the community became a locus for fanfiction, fan art, and fan essays (“meta”) on the relationship. A few days later, Riibu, a fan, posted an interesting essay to the community, analyzing the romantic potential of the relationship:

[Dumbledore and Grindelwald’s] relationship is something quite fascinating, both in canon and in [fandom], where it obviously becomes more overtly slash. I’ve got the feeling that even the canon version has a slight slash subtext in it. I seriously want to write it. I hope others will, too.

Others did. Dumbledore/Grindelwald became one of the most popular post-Hallows pairings, and a great deal of fanfiction, meta, and fan art was
produced, not just at *Grindeldore* but all over the fandom. This was months before Rowling’s Carnegie Hall appearance; since then, interest in the pairing has only grown. Slash fans are often accused of “misreading,” “distorting,” or, if the accuser is being positive, “resisting” the text, but in this case, slash fans functioned as “ideal” readers. Pia'sharn, a fan, said, “[I]t amuses me to no end that the slashers were right . . . about Dumbledore/Grindelwald. Hell, that’s more than the Harry/Hermione fans can say!”

However, while most slash fans picked up on the Dumbledore/Grindelwald pairing, not all felt Rowling had been sufficiently clear in presenting the relationship. Heteronormative reading practices dominate in our culture: as Jones remarks, “[e]ven where characters’ sexualities are not indicated in the . . . text, a wider cultural logic dictates that heterosexuality can be assumed while homosexuality must be proved” (81). Rowling’s evocation of Dumbledore’s feelings was possibly too subtle for readers lacking queer consciousness (or “slash goggles”); Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace note in their postscript that “most fans,” meaning general readers, were surprised by the revelation.

While slash fans were generally pleased to see queerness represented in the Wizarding world, and to have their reading practices validated, some critiqued the manner in which Rowling conveyed Dumbledore’s homosexuality. Coell argued that the apparent ambiguity of Rowling’s text must have been deliberate: “Sure, we [slash fans] gay-up plenty of people, not only because we’re omni-curious, but anyone with half a Gaydar had zero trouble seeing the possibility. . . . [I]t was so obvious a possibility that JKR could only omit it with purpose, right?” Nevermindirah, while applauding the fact that Rowling declared such a “high-profile, three-dimensional, good-but-deeply-flawed character” to be gay, nonetheless had reservations about the manner in which she conveyed this information:

[Rowling] is clearly not trying to make any kind of political statement. She just knows Albus is gay, in the same way that she knows Ron is straight and McGonagall is an Animagus. . . . I think it’s very sweet, in a straight liberal naïve way, that she’s taking minority sexual orientation as simple fact and ignoring political implications. . . . This is the point I want our culture to get to. The unfortunate reality is that our culture is not at this point yet. . . . There’s a big difference between being slashable and actually being gay.

Nevermindirah’s characterization of Rowling’s attitudes as “naïve” is astute. Dumbledore, in the usual phrase, “just happens to be gay”—an attitude that Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins dub “gay assimilation,” which is commonly found in young adult novels with gay themes of the 1980s and 1990s (xx). Dumbledore is the world’s most powerful and respected wizard, a complex, brilliant, and benevolent man, and one of the major characters in the series—and he is also gay. Furthermore, he is an excellent teacher and headmaster of Hogwarts, a jab at those who would equate homosexuality with pedophilia. Rowling uses the loathsome Rita Skeeter to make the point explicit:
in her vicious, rumor-mongering biography of Dumbledore, Rita implies that Dumbledore’s interest in Harry is “unnatural” (Hallows 27), which Harry and the readers understand is obviously ridiculous. So far, so positive.

However, some fans point out that Dumbledore is over a century old and therefore presumably celibate, which means that his homosexuality is safely contained—squeamish readers need not confront the threatening specter of a sexually active gay male body. Others argue that elderly people have as much right to sexual desire and agency as young people and that the complaints about Dumbledore smack of ageism. Too, the textual glimpses of a young, attractive Dumbledore and Grindelwald have furnished fan writers and artists with enough inspiration to create more traditional erotic scenarios.

But these glimpses are all readers receive of any element of Dumbledore’s romantic life: Grindelwald appears to be his first, and last, romantic interest. Caras Galadhon, a fan, notes, “Dumbledore’s ‘great love’ lets him down. He’s gay, therefore if he loves at all, it cannot come to fruition, and I mean that in all ways.” While Dumbledore’s experience of a single, unhappy love affair is not incompatible with either the historical circumstances or the literary conventions of the nineteenth century in which he was born, it serves to reinforce the notion that homosexuals are doomed to eternal isolation.

Rowling appears to be unaware of the longstanding trope in literature and film—including early entries in the young adult genre to which her later books belong—that gay characters must be not just lonely and celibate but dead (Cart 225–26; Cart and Jenkins 22–23). As Caras Galadhon remarks, “Dumbledore is dead. Her only author-identified gay character is dead. Does this not fall in line with the Dead Minority/Gay/Lesbian Character Cliché?”

Prior to Dumbledore’s outing, the characters most likely to be read by fans as (possibly) canonically queer were Remus Lupin and Sirius Black; when one considers that Remus and Sirius are also dead, it begins to look as if Rowling is (willfully?) ignorant of the ramifications of killing off gay characters. At the same time, Dumbledore does fill the role of the hero’s mentor; Pugh and Wallace have observed that the Potter books are, in many ways, Joseph Campbell–style “hero narratives,” and in such stories it is a requirement that the mentor die to make way for the independent achievement of the hero (274–75). Fans debated whether it was Dumbledore’s status as mentor or minority that ultimately doomed him.

In the realm of fiction, fans have used Dumbledore’s circumstances as a springboard to explore the tragic aspects of love and desire. Sahara Storm’s “Love Letters” paints a haunting portrait of Dumbledore and Grindelwald’s brief passion and lifelong obsession. The story alternates between Dumbledore and Grindelwald’s perspectives; in the most wrenching scene, Grindelwald realizes what keeps him in prison:

Gellert recognised his erstwhile best friend’s magic immediately. He didn’t know how, but he knew for certain that it was Albus who had fortified the charms and
defences, who had secured and closed up those tiny, deliberate weaknesses in
the defensive magic, who had sealed up both of the two secret passages. It was
like a brand; he could feel it as definitely as he could feel the wounds that he
had sustained in the duel; wounds that had as much to do with his mind as his
body and flesh.

The narrative moves from the present to the past, and the last scene is their
first sexual encounter. At the beginning and the end of the story, Sahara Storm
affixed scans of their letters to each other, which are horrible in their bigotry
and heartbreaking in their ignorance of the eventual outcome of their rela-
tionship.

Slash fans’ exultation and frustration with Dumbledore’s outing have
proven to be powerful inspirations to creativity. Fans celebrate Dumbledore’s
sexuality by depicting his youthful passion in all its glory and his dignity and
integrity even in loneliness. Dissatisfaction with the source text is an equally
compelling motivation to write fanfiction, and fans examine his isolation and
heartbreak, explore the possibilities of other lovers for him (Elphias Doge is a
prime candidate), and invent alternate universes where he can be happily in
love. In slash fandom, Dumbledore’s sexuality can achieve expression beyond
what Rowling was willing or able to put on the page, and fan responses are an
invaluable resource for assessing the ultimate implications of his outing.

Notes

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Moulton, Tim Smith, Hallie Tibbets, and Nemesister for reading and commenting on
drafts of this essay.

1. For an overview of contemporary media fandom, see Jenkins and Coppa.
2. For more information on slash, see Green et al., Jenkins, Jones, Lamb and Veith,
Penley, Russ, and Willis, among others. For more information on Potter slash, see Willis
and Tosenberger.
3. Grindeldore (<www.livejournal.com>) was founded July 21, 2007. All online fan
material is used with the permission of the authors and/or community moderators.
5. See Jones and Willis for critiques of the “incorporation/resistance” model of slash
scholarship.
.com>.
.com>.
.com>.
10. Ibid.
11. See Tosenberger for more information on Remus/Sirius.

Works Cited


