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Article

# Reading Serial Killer Fanfiction: What's Fannish about It?

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**Abstract:** We have come to a point where the field of fan studies must acknowledge darker, more pathologized and potentially more sinister forms of fandom than we have heretofore. Serial killer fandom is, simultaneously, one of the most visible and least-academically discussed form of fandom, despite a general recognition that certain serial killers are, undeniably, celebrities. Serial killer fanfic is relatively rare, but it certainly exists. In this article, I build on some of the work I have already done on Real Person Fiction, specifically importing the lenses of metalepsis and multimodality as well as the self-conscious intersection between fiction and reality, to look at an example of serial killer fanfic on three platforms—Ao3, Tumblr and Wattpad. The article asks what we can learn from applying a fan studies approach to this phenomenon. Is there anything uniquely problematic about serial killer fanfiction, or is it the same process as what so many already do as a mainstream cultural practice, hypothesizing and imagining the 'backstage' of famous serial killers, as we do with all other celebrities? I compare the 2019 film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* which focuses on Bundy's private relationship with his long-time girlfriend, his circus-like televised murder trial and his eventual death sentence, with a selection of Ted Bundy fanfiction. Of course, the film does not call itself fanfiction (though several critics have considered it to glorify its subject). I will argue that the distinction between 'serial killer fanfiction' and authorized, industrialized and popular forms of serial killer media, actually, has very little to do with the content of the text, and is based on a complex network of assumptions regarding its author, context and modes of production and reception. If this is so, the questions we should ask of serial killer fanfic are, in fact, much broader questions regarding our cultural fascination with serial killer media, challenging the pathologization of a specific, feminine-coded and extremely stigmatized fannish practice.



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In coverage of serial murder, the boundaries between fiction and real life were often blurred to the point of non-distinction. (Jenkins 1994, p. 223)

This is a fanfiction not a news article. (queenofshit 2015)

## 1. Introduction

Early studies of fanfiction and fanfic community tended towards the celebratory (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). The first wave of fan studies had a distinct mission: to redeem the category of media fan from stereotyping and pathologizing as well as to demonstrate that fandom was a supportive, creative and collaborative community of normally developed adults. This is understandable—fandom was very much stigmatized until well into the 2000s (Jenson 1992; Zubernis and Larsen 2012), with fanfiction a particularly scandalous category, associated the women, girls, the feminine, queerness and a whole host of stigma that goes along with such identities (hysteria, silly, irrational, immature, either oversexed or undersexed or somehow, simultaneously, both). However, it is now 2022. The figure of the 'fan' has been sufficiently mainstreamed—not to mention commercialized and utilized by the cultural industry—that no particular stigma remains attached to many forms of fandom. Rather, stigma and Other-ing have reattached themselves to select ways of being a fan (Scott 2019): largely, ways that are too feminized, such as loving pop-cultural products

associated with femininity, or writing fanfic in a way that is considered too immature or too emotionally-invested (and/or not commercially exploitable enough).

In any case, we have come to a point where the field can no longer ignore the forms and aspects of fandom that make us uncomfortable, for fear of attracting stigma. Several academics have already published on so-called ‘toxic’ fandoms: forms of fandom that involve bullying, sexism, racism and related issues (Pande 2018; Proctor and Kies 2018; Williams and Bennett 2021). I am, presently, researching a book on a serial killer fandom, simultaneously one of the most visible and least-academically discussed form of fandom, despite a general recognition that certain serial killers are, undeniably, celebrities (Schmid 2005; Gibson 2006; Haggerty 2009). Indeed, Schmid calls the serial killer the ‘exemplary modern celebrity’ (Schmid 2005, p. 15): where the quality of knownness has replaced that of merit, and the quality of “being oneself”, the performance of a persona, takes primacy over the performance of specific actions. Serial killer fanfic is relatively rare, but it certainly exists. In this article, then, I want to build on some of the work I have already done on Real Person Fiction, specifically, by importing the lenses of metalepsis, and multimodality as well as the self-conscious intersection between fiction and reality, to look at an example of serial killer fanfic on three platforms—Ao3, Tumblr and Wattpad. I ask what we can learn by applying a fan studies approach to the phenomenon: is there anything uniquely problematic about serial killer fanfiction, or is it the same process as what so many already do as a mainstream cultural practice, hypothesizing and imagining the ‘backstage’ of famous serial killers, as we do with all other celebrities? Could it be both, or does each instance fall somewhere on a spectrum? As the stories I have selected focus on the 1970s serial killer Ted Bundy (see below for methodological choices), I will be comparing the recent film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (Berlinger 2019), which focuses on Bundy’s private relationship with his long-time girlfriend, his circus-like televised murder trial and his eventual death sentence. Of course, the film does not call itself fanfiction (though several critics have considered the director of *Extremely Wicked* and the camera’s gaze to be rather enamored with their subject: see Wilkinson (2019) or Sims (2019)). Instead, it bids for the cultural capital of a serious psychological study, like most of the endless stream of real-life serial-killer-based stories in mainstream media. In fact, the question of how one defines ‘fan’ fiction—even excluding professional media output, and focusing solely on user generated content—is a large one. What, precisely, is the difference between a fan of a serial killer and someone who is interested in true crime? (see Barnes 2019). Where do you draw the line between a pathologized, problematized practice and one that—after Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*—is, literally, culturally respectable? What precisely is the ‘fannish’ quality of serial killer fanfic? I will argue that the distinction, actually, has very little to do with the content of the text, and is based on a complex network of assumptions regarding its author, context and modes of production and reception. If this is so, the questions we should demand of serial killer fanfic are not ‘why does this exist?’ or ‘why would people read and write this?’, but in fact are much broader questions regarding our cultural fascination with serial killer media, challenging the pathologization of a specific, feminine-coded and extremely stigmatized fannish practice.

## 2. On RPF and How to Read It

First, I will review some of the pertinent work on real person fiction generally, notably the interplay between real-life material and the process of fictionalization. I will, then, recap some of the work on the professional mediatization of serial killers, with attention to Robinson’s distinction between the processes that they term ‘paraphrasis’ and ‘transreappropriation’ (Robinson 2014). Robinson explains:

Paraphrasis offers a model which considers both the artistic process as well as tangible source materials such as court documents, newspaper accounts, interviews, scholarly works, and photographs. Therefore, through the manipulation of multiple records an overtly fictive arrangement that creates distancing through name changes or apparent narrative shifts. Conversely, the term to describe the

counter process to paraphrasing is transreappropriation, which takes into account the process of transformation, as well as the repurposing and appropriation of a narrative. In a transreappropriated work the fictive elements, covertly presented as truth are repurposed to the adaptor's vision, with a disregard for the actual person and the life events. This is problematic because works such as this offer the disclaimer: based on a true story, derived from, or inspired by, or the little used faction. (Robinson 2014, pp. 12–13)

We should observe, from the outset, that, whilst fans who write RPF are, typically, at pains to point out that their usage of real-life material is a narrative construct, professional media, whether in the form of films, documentaries or news reports, is not. Then, I will go on to look at three examples of serial killer fanfic, taken from Wattpad, AO3 and Tumblr, respectively. I selected these platforms, as they seemed to host the greatest volume of serial killer fanfic—which, still, represented a tiny fraction of the fanfic available on those sites. For example, AO3 hosts over 6 million stories (Archive of Our Own 2020), and only 11 are tagged 'serial killer—fandom', as of 10 December 2021. This is not an exclusive label—some are, rather, tagged with the name of the serial killer in question—but we should be in no doubt that serial killer fanfic is very niche. The most represented serial killer across the sites seems to be Ted Bundy—which is probably unsurprising, given the recent film, which starred Disney alumni Zac Efron as the serial killer—and the fact that Bundy has a particular celebrity status, due to his outrageous, self-orchestrated trial being the first to be broadcast live on national television. On AO3 and Wattpad, then, I selected the most popular stories featuring Bundy, discounting those stories on Wattpad that explicitly declared themselves 'not a fanfiction'. Now, as noted above, this distinction is, definitely, worthy of interrogation, but I considered it prudent to begin an exploration of serial killer fanfic with serial killer fanfic that self-professes to be so, especially when we are comparing it to cultural products that would certainly disassociate themselves from the label. Popularity is much harder to gauge on Tumblr, as it does not have the 'number of comments' and 'number of kudos' metrics that I used to select the fics from the other sites, but, interestingly, despite Tumblr's reputation amongst true crime aficionados for hosting some of the 'worst' serial killer fans, I found the serial killer fanfic here to be very sparse. I did, eventually, find a suitable text for analysis, which was selected because it was the most prominent self-professed fanfic in the search results featuring Ted Bundy as a character (though Tumblr's search algorithm remains, as ever, a mystery).

Previous work on RPF has tended to focus on what Hagen calls 'the flexibility of celebrity identity'. These arguments have tended to focus on justifying RPF as a legitimate and ethical form of postmodern creativity, understanding the celebrity persona as equally as a 'character', rather than purporting to represent the truth about a human being. This does not really apply in serial killer RPF—writers *know* that most fans consider their output illegitimate and unethical, since they constantly receive comments telling them so. In addition, they rarely spend any time justifying their practice, instead directing commentators not to read it, if they do not approve. There is an interesting divergence here, from other forms of fanfic, which, as I demonstrated in *Fanfiction and Author* (Fathallah 2017), have a tendency to bid for cultural legitimacy by associating themselves with culturally respectable norms of quality fiction and authorship, even as they, necessarily, transform, confront and evade those norms at the level of both form and content. Serial killer fanfic does not such thing—on the contrary, it seems to buck against these norms, which are evident both in wider culture and in fanfic communities. Ironic pennames like 'queenofshit' or 'sluttyfluffartist' (where the first two descriptors undermine the seriousness of the 'artist' tag) undermine a normative author function that signals a quality text. Claims that a text has been written because 'that shit's funny' (sluttyfluffartist), and short retorts that those who do not approve of the fic should just ignore it, rebuff the position of universalism associated with artistic merit. Serial killer fanfic does not want to be legitimate: it revels in its taboo position.

In their 2015 article “Real Body, Fake Person: Recontextualizing Celebrity Bodies in Fandom and Film,” Melanie Piper ‘examin[es] the similarities between the textual process of adapting real people to fictional characters on both the cinema screen and the computer’ (Piper 2015). Piper argues that the fannish textual process of adapting real public figures to fictional contexts shares a common element with adapting public figures to the screen in the biopic: both work to recontextualize the public self of a celebrity, through the representation of a fictionalized or speculated private self.

I believe this is particularly true of serial killer fic. If we consider the recent film *Extremely Wicked*, which mixes real news footage related to Ted Bundy’s trial with re-enacted court scenes and imagined intimate encounters from the murderer’s private life with his long-time girlfriend Elizabeth Kloepfer, we can easily accommodate Piper’s insight that ‘the canonical source material [of RPF] is made up of textual fragments from the star image’ (2.2), as fans select from all the material publicly available on a celebrity, to create their own text from which to interpret and extrapolate. It is a question, then, why girls who write serial killer fanfic are so intensely pathologized, whilst directors like Berlinger receive plaudits and awards. Which is not to say that *Extremely Wicked* was met with universal acclaim: multiple critics noted that the upbeat 70s soundtrack, the camera’s obsession with Efron’s face and the total minimization of Bundy’s victims does more to glorify him than present any of the sociological or psychological insights serial killer films tend to claim as their cultural capital. As critic Alissa Wilkinson put it in a succinct review headline, ‘The Ted Bundy movie starring Zac Efron sure does love Ted Bundy’ (Wilkinson 2019). Granted, we could point to its source text—a personal narrative by Kloepfer, writing as Elizabeth Kendall (1981)—as necessitating a focus on the public sphere and away from the crimes of which she was unaware, but this does not explain the directorial and editorial choices:

The camera constantly pulls in close to Efron’s face, lingering on his portrayal of Bundy when he’s most sympathetic and funny and kind, rather than dwelling on his truly brutal moments. You know he’s evil, but the camera sure doesn’t. (Wilkinson 2019)

However, of course, there is more to the definition of RPF than ‘stories about a real person whom the author/director seems to admire’. Definition is a matter of fannish context and histories; of technological form and format; and of modes of expectation and reception. There is the matter of what Punday calls ‘texture’: a shared set of generic and cultural expectations that guides the way a reader engages with a text (Punday 2014). The texture of RPF is quite clear: everyone knows it is not ‘really real’. The texture around biopics, dramas ‘based on a true story’, or whatever *Extremely Wicked* is supposed to be, is much vaguer.

I have written previously that RPF, which is largely online, ought to be analyzed through at least some of the lenses we apply to reading digital fiction, since the ‘hypertextual, multimodal context of digital fiction allows for specific forms of metalepsis, which [ . . . ] we see at work in RPF in genre-specific ways’ (Fathallah 2018, p. 569). Metalepsis is the self-conscious interplay between fiction and reality, construction of reality or interpretations. In its most simplistic form, consider an interjection from a television character or a novel’s narrator that breaks the fourth wall—a moment of connection between author, reader and/or character that acknowledges their shared investment in the fictional construct of the story. Bell (2014) explains that ‘metalepsis was originally defined by the narrative theorist Genette as any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by the diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse’ (Genette [1972] 1980, pp. 234–35). In RPF, there is usually an intense self-consciousness about the construction of fiction: what Robinson would call paraphrasis. Sometimes, metalepsis, deliberately, flags up the differences between levels of reality or fiction, but we, also, observe in RPF a tendency towards what Ryan calls ‘ontological metalepsis’, which ‘opens a passage between levels’ of reality and, thus, ‘result(s) in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination’ (Ryan 2006, p. 207). In my previous study of RPF, I found this often. In my study of serial killer fanfic, I found it seldom—rather,



metaleptic shifting tended to operate between the story-world and the shared (real-world) interactions between the author and readers, setting the story at a further fictive remove. This was particularly true, as two of the stories sampled involved a proxy character for the reader to imagine themselves into, whether via second person narration or the author's specific instruction. This relates to the fact that like most digital fiction, RPF is communal: it contains what I have, previously, called a 'top plot', the diegetic narrative, and a secondary plot, readable in the introduction, the author's notes and the author–comments exchanges: this is the story of how the story was written, as part of a broader community of interest. Sometimes, the plots spill into each other, as when an author responds to comment requests for a plot feature.

I have not sought permission to cite these texts. When fanfiction communities were more closed, more based on personal connections and less platform-based (see Kelley 2021), I used to endorse the practice of seeking permission for every quotation. Now, this is no longer practical—as authors are both more anonymous and harder to contact—and less ethically necessary, as fanfiction is more public. None of these texts were written in personal journals, but on highly public platforms. Kelley (2021) argues that we ought to approach fanfic research ethics from a situational perspective, proceeding with an attitude of goodwill and respect towards our participants, even where the material is challenging to us. Perhaps, especially, when the material is challenging to us. To that end, I approach these texts with no intention to pathologize their authors or commenters, but the same way I would approach any of the other innumerable, culturally legitimated texts regarding private serial killers: from an attitude of neutrality, with an additional awareness that these (feminized, stigmatized, bad-fannish texts) are pathologized, whilst those are not. Moreover, I have opted not to create a permanent archive of said texts: the reader may access them by following the bibliography, only whilst the authors have elected to make them freely available.

### 3. Findings

The most-read serial killer story on Wattpad, as of September 2021, was titled *Hell Beside You*, by author 2KrunK. It had 587 comments, 4400 reads, and 70 'votes'. The vast discrepancy between the number of comments and positive votes is due the fact that serial killer fanfic attracts disproportionately negative attention: the vast majority of comments on other fanfic are positive, due to an unspoken norm of simply moving on in silence, if one does not enjoy a story one can, after all, access for free (Kelley 2021, p. 61). This story was ongoing, standing at 35 chapters. Actually, all the stories in the sample were ongoing or left unfinished, which may suggest less of a communal drive towards completion than in more popular fandoms. The story is extensively tagged, with tags including 'fiction'; 'nonfiction'; 'historical'; 'serialkiller' and 'truecrime'. Immediately a tension is set up between 'fiction' and 'nonfiction', and the story utilizes a real photograph of Bundy, dressed in his usual smart suit, at his trial. This might, initially, seem like ontological metalepsis: the deliberate commixture of fact and fiction, but the author's note makes clear this explicit fictionalizing: 'most of this is not historically accurate'. More ambiguous is the author's posture towards the main character. The author's note opens with the declarative: '[this is] a Ted Bundy fanfic'. This is shortly followed with the note:

(Understand that this is not to make Ted look good, and it's not to glorify him, it's simply just a story. Pls don't read this if you're the type to get triggered. Like, just don't.)

What does 'just a story' mean in this context? What does 'fanfic' mean, if the author states an intention *not* to glorify or make the persona 'look good'? Of course, all kinds of fanfic can be critical of characters, of writing, of authors and of directors—but, equally, the act of writing implies an emotional attachment, an investment. Perhaps no greater an investment than directors like Berlinger have in their murderous subjects—perhaps, even less of one, considering the time and labor invested in writing and directing a feature-length biopic (plus, in Berlinger's case, an almost-simultaneous documentary on the same subject).

Perhaps, in our intensely mediated, industry-convergent, ‘authenticity’-obsessed culture, the definition of fanfic is becoming, increasingly, blurred.

The premise of *Hell Beside You* is that the reader, who is also a serial killer, enters into a sexual and emotional relationship with Bundy, at the same time (fictional) investigators start to suspect him. The convention for fanfic, in which the reader inserts themselves into the role of a character, is for the author to use ‘(y/n)’ [your name] as a pronoun, but 2KrunK pronounces this ‘boring’, and informs that reader that, therefore, the character will be named Alary Wilson, but ‘ofc you read it however u want bb’. Note the texture being established: the rules of engagement with this text, in which the reader is free to insert themselves as the main character—or not, should they prefer. The endearment ‘bb’ (baby) establishes a convivial, conspiratorial relationship between author and reader, enhanced by the note that the story will ‘start off a tad gruesome, but that’s what you’re here for, aren’t you?’. There is no pretense of a moral stance—the investigative questioning and the sociological/psychological insights, which serial killer biopics propose to make (though they often do not), are eschewed. The story opens with a fictionalization of a scene at an unspecified ‘lake’, presumably Lake Sammamish, where Bundy abducted two women in 1974. The author informs us:

In real life, there was a lot of people at this lake one day and Ted sat in his car eyeing all the girls, he ended up killing two that day and sat and watched police search for them. I’m going off of that right now. (2KrunK 2020)

Notably, though, whilst the story could include the name or image of the lake, or even a link to a view of it, it does not. This is not ‘in real life’, after all. In this story, the reader murders another young woman, her former friend, whilst unbeknownst her, Ted Bundy observes her. The perspective in the story switches constantly, between the reader and Bundy (and, later, other characters), highlighting the fiction of the reader’s identification with the character that represents her. This form of metalepsis explicitly draws the reader in, sometimes via dramatic irony—the reader’s character is unaware that ‘Ted’ was initially considering killing her. However:

He thought of all those bad things he likes doing to women and thought of doing it to her. He could have easily done it, speaking that fact that he did bring a knife with him for that very reason, but he liked that she just killed another woman. So he decided he didn’t want to. He found her intriguing. (2KrunK 2020)

This may tap a fantasy often attributed to serial killer fans—that despite fitting the serial killer’s profile, they would be safe due to their special quality and ability to influence the murderer. However, my intention here is not to psychoanalyze the reader or author. It is, equally, plausible, given the frequency with which Bundy contemplates killing the reader’s character, that ‘you’ are being depicted as rather foolish for indulging in this idea. Indeed, having initially found the reader’s character interesting, Bundy immediately becomes annoyed with her expressions of regret, reflecting ‘Maybe I’ll end up killing her like I do every girl I meet’ and imagining himself strangling her. The reader’s character is repeatedly frightened by his abrupt changes in expression and action, just as was reported of the real Bundy and depicted in multiple biopics. Sometimes, the author seems to be explicitly mocking this notion, as they have the reader’s character reflect on ‘what he could do to me, but he has not yet’, musing, ‘I sure am something special huh?’

The reader’s character goes on to commit further murders, both with Bundy and alone, throughout an increasingly tumultuous relationship. Though most of the events in the story are pure fiction, the author invokes several well-known factual touchstones, such as Bundy’s car being a ‘tan Volkswagen’ and him keeping handcuffs in his car, evoking the 1970s via descriptions of fashion and technology. At other times, the author makes explicit metaleptic interjections into the story, commenting on the characters’ behaviors and speech, describing them as ‘they’, rather than the first-person pronouns utilized in the top plot. Sometimes, the author addresses the reader directly in the notes, using the nickname ‘killer’ that Bundy uses for the reader’s character in the story. In yet another metaleptic

complication, very occasionally, the author utilizes the 'I' pronoun of the reader's character, to make a self-conscious metaleptic interaction:

I went and sat in the living room, waiting for Ted to come get me. I had butterflies in my stomach, and my palms were sweaty, knees weak and my arms were heavy. Sorry, I shouldn't be quoting futuristic references and breaking the fourth wall. (2Krunck 2020)

The 'futuristic reference' is a paraphrased reference to the 2002 song 'Lose Yourself' by the rap artist Eminem, which has become an internet meme often used in jokes and bait-and-switch stories to break the reader's immersion. The upshot of these effects is that whilst biopics frequently foreground the 'real' elements of their story, in a bid for authenticity and cultural capital (Robinson 2014, p. 156), RPF foregrounds the 'fiction'. Finally, the author seems, at times, to highlight the cultural illegitimacy of serial killer fanfic, parenthetically inserting descriptions of their own text such as '(I'm wheezing rn, sorry if it's too weird for u)' (2Krunck 2020). Online, the expression 'I'm wheezing' typically refers to uncontrolled laughter or another bodily expression of excess. The author, also, metatextually highlights the connections between serial killer fanfiction and culturally legitimate biopics, inserting a meme into their author's notes that shows an image of actor Zac Efron morphing into a real-life image of Bundy (see Figure 1). The progression is captioned 'when she leaves you on read', implying that an ordinary man may become a murderer in response to a text left unreplied. It is, thus, impossible to ignore the exchange between these texts.

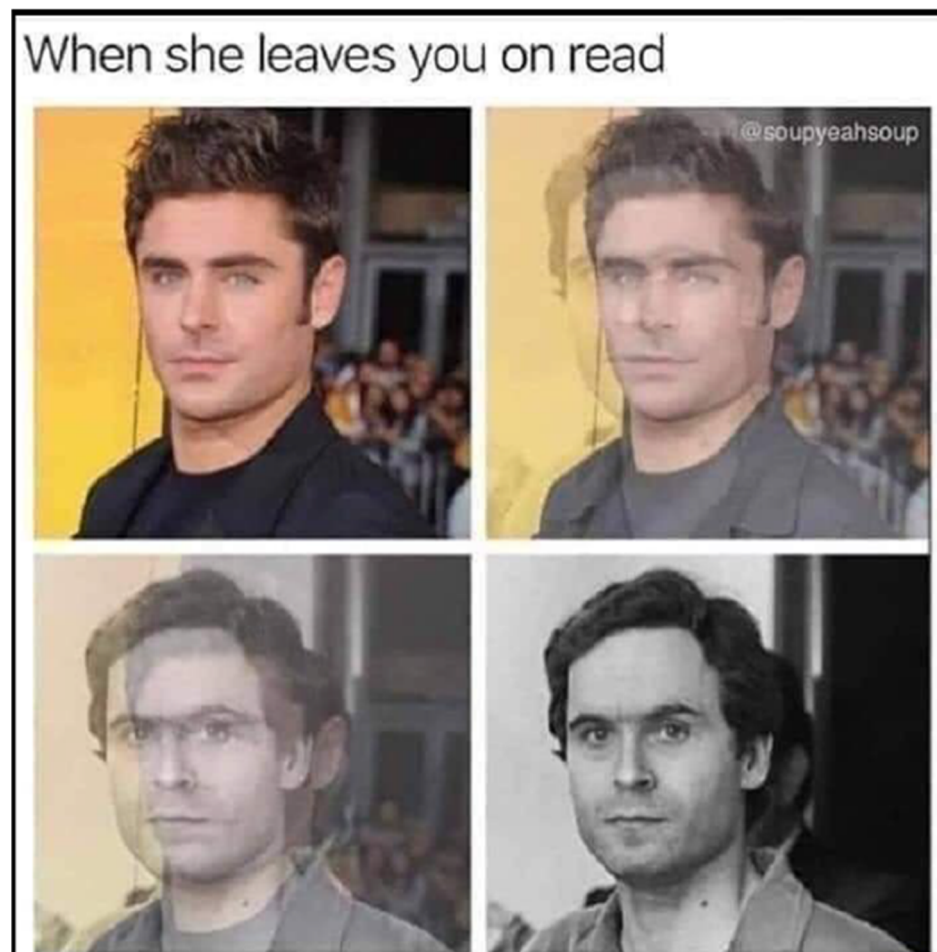


Figure 1. 'When she leaves you on read'.



As observed, a much higher proportion of the reviews for this text were negative than is typical in fanfic. The majority of reviews (587 of 1017) were on the first chapter, demonstrating that most readers simply wanted to comment on its existence rather than its content. Most of these are along the lines of ‘wtf is this’ ([caulifoluu 2021](#)); ‘this is sick as fuck’ ([mattheosgirlfriendd 2021](#)) or ‘u need help. u need to be locked in a mental asylum for a very long time’ ([vestalwitch 2021](#)). Some, explicitly, hark back to the pathologization of fandom that has now transferred onto certain fandoms specifically, appealing to the author to ‘please, be fucking normal you absolute social reject’ ([kurtcobaincumart 2021](#)). Others take explicit issue with what they perceive as the author’s and readers’ delusions: ‘I honestly hope people genuinely wanting to read this know he’d rape and torture them and dump their bodies like everyone else’s. Besties aren’t special’ followed by a skull emoji ([michahoioii 2021](#)). ‘Besties’ is current online slang for more-or-less anyone the writer is addressing, often used ironically to highlight the gap between the implication of ‘best friendship’ and the actual (lack of) relationship between writer and reader. Some comments draw explicit boundaries between the type of engagement with serial killer texts that is permissible or acceptable and that which is not:

I’m taking a psychology class and we’re learning about Ted Bundy because he was a serial killer and we’re gonna look at brain scans and such so I thought it would be funny to search and I’m shocked that people write and read in a non-educational way about him. ([potatoeduck 2021](#))

One might wonder why the shock, considering that the vast majority of writing about serial killers can hardly be called educational: the endless tabloid fodder, the pop-psych articles and the magazine ‘shocking escapes’. However, most commenters are in agreement that serial killer narratives must be fictional, educational or both, to be acceptable, and they, consistently, deny that the story is ‘fiction’:

‘This is fiction’. No it fucking isn’t. He killed, tortured and raped countless women, his youngest was fucking twelve. ([straight\\_f\\_student 2021](#))

The author and the readers who praise the text, consistently, make the same rebuttals: the story is fictional, no one is forcing the critical commenters to read it and they are free to read and write whatever they want. Naturally, once we move past the first chapter, the comments are more positive, mostly praising the quality of the writing and ignoring the issue of fiction all together. One point of particular interest is the readers’ intermittent identification with the central character, who is sometimes referred to as ‘she’ and other times as ‘we’. The metaleptic movement in and out of identification seems to be an explicit part of the texture, or rules of the story, that highlight its status as ‘unreal’.

As noted, serial killer fanfic was surprisingly difficult to find on Tumblr. Perhaps it is hidden in tags known only to enthusiasts. One blog to which that the algorithm returned consistently (upon searching ‘serial killer fanfic’), was the blog titled ‘sluttyfluffartist’, which incorporates the History Channel logo above its title on an all-black background (see [Figure 2](#)). The seriousness and claims to cultural capital of said logo are immediately parodied by the flippant tagline: ‘I write fanfics of real historical figures because that shit’s funny. Don’t like it then leave homeboy’ ([sluttyfluffartist n.d.](#)). Once again, the tension between fanfic and the real is established from the outset.



**Figure 2.** sluttyfluffartist header.

‘Fluff’, in fanfic terms, refers to fiction that is light-hearted and aims for sweetness, cuteness and/or an endearing quality, hardly the sort of content one would expect of serial killer fic. Yet this is what the short installments, which feature not only Ted Bundy but other murderers, such as Richard Ramirez and Jeffrey Dahmer, are comprised of. Given the total lack of focus on murder in these short episodes, which focus primarily on the juvenile and college days of said murderers (all simultaneously, and in the same town, apparently) and their interactions with a local girl named Cassidy, one has to wonder if, taken against the blog’s stated intention to be ‘funny’, this is simply a form of trolling. Some displays of killer fandom are certainly trolling (see [Rico 2015](#)): to bid for attention, to aggrieve and annoy for the sake of provoking a reaction and to lay claim to a taboo position that fandom, in general, no longer occupies. Yet, there are some similarities with ‘Hell Beside You’, thematically: the introduction of a young female central character, who feels both romantically and defensively towards the serial killers. There is very little plot, to speak of, just episodic interactions that are supported by Tumblr’s short text-post format: the characters play baseball, move moving boxes, visit each other’s houses and have flirtatious interactions with the main female character. These posts tend to receive some likes (typically ten to eleven), but, unsurprisingly, I saw no reblogs. The blog intersperses these posts with images, memes and gifs relating to serial killers, as well as Nazis—though it, also, explicitly mocks neo-Nazis. I am reasonably confident that the whole blog is an act of provocation—theatrical trolling, perhaps. All in all, it is—perhaps deliberately—very difficult to make sense of, and, once again, requires us to stretch and interrogate the boundaries of what RPF actually is—indeed, what fanfiction is, in this complex, multimediated and endlessly metatetual and intertextual landscape.

The top rated serial killer fanfic I found on Archive of Own was called ‘Your Timing is Impeccable’. This is actually tagged as ‘Historical American Criminals RPF’, though I did find it by searching for serial killers. The author calls herself ‘queenofshit’, a name that again suggests deliberate trolling, though this is actually a coherently crafted story standing at 12,628 words as of October 2021. It is also tagged ‘Ted Bundy/Reader’, positioning it as another story whereby the reader is represented by a central character, and ‘I’m Going to Hell’, acknowledging and displaying the genre’s taboo status. The author’s note informs us that she is ‘only a little sorry’ for publishing this, and utilizes the same pre-emptive defences we see all over serial killer RPF: ‘if you don’t like it don’t read it. Simple’. ([queenofshit 2015](#))

This story is written in second-person: the central character is explicitly ‘you’. As this is relatively unusual, in fanfic as in all fiction, there is something confronting and implicating about reading it. It is very difficult to refrain from imaging oneself as the

subject of sentences such as ‘You shifted in your seat’ or ‘You glanced at him’. Him being, of course, Ted Bundy. This story is explicit about the reader’s imaginative investment and participation, with the author reminding us:

Like I said before, this will not be a 100% accurate retelling (of course), hell you could pretend this takes place in 2015 if you wanted to. I tried to write it so you could but still, some details might be off and if so please be gentle. This is a fanfiction not a news article. ([queenofshit 2015](#))

There are several points of note here. The author’s request that readers ‘be gentle’ seems rather at odds with the topic, and connects reader and author explicitly in a negotiation around this taboo story that—presumably—readers have sought out. A03 makes it easy to filter content at quite specific levels, whereas searching for serial killer fanfics on Wattpad turned up all sorts of material, most of which concerned purely fictional characters. We might expect that the texture is different here then—there is more of an unspoken agreement that readers and author want to share this material, specifically, reflected in the fact that most of the 92 comments are positive. Secondly, the statement ‘this is a fanfiction not a news article’, omitting the term ‘real’, foregrounds the fictionality of the narrative, which the reader is invited to partake in: ‘you could pretend this takes places in 2015 if you wanted to’. Would this even qualify as paraphrasis? Finally, it is notable that the author posits a ‘news article’ as the, supposedly, factual counterpart of a story—most news articles about serial killers are a *mélange* of fact, exaggeration, speculation, rumor and inference, presented as fact through a similar process of transrepropration as biopics undertake. In an in-depth study of the social discursive construction of serial murder, Phillip Jenkins has shown that in ‘in coverage of serial murder, the boundaries between fiction and real life were often blurred to the point of non-distinction’ ([Jenkins 1994](#), p. 223).

Again, the plot of this story concerns the reader’s romantic liaisons with Bundy, who, intermittently, charms and causes her fear, though this time they are unaware that he is the murderer the news is presently reporting on. This was the real position of Bundy’s long-time girlfriend Elizabeth Kloepfer, who wrote the memoir that *Extremely Wicked* is based on. The reader’s identification with the ‘you-character’ is, thus, metaleptically complicated, as the real reader, of course, has the knowledge of hindsight. When ‘your’ friends warn ‘you’ that you had ‘better be careful’ as the missing girls ‘look an awful lot like you’:

You shook your head at your friend’s stupidity, Ted pulled you closer to him. ([queenofshit 2015](#))

The metaleptic split intensifies as the author instructs us in chapter notes ‘the reader is blissfully oblivious’: we are, of course, the farthest thing from it. In this invitation, to implicate ourselves in the fantasy, we are instructed to set the story-world aside from our ‘real’, reading selves, even as the repletion of physical features, such as ‘your fingers’ or ‘your eyebrows’, locates us within the story. The dramatic irony intensifies, as the (fictional) reader discovers the (real) tools that the (real) Bundy used and stored in his car, as the (real) reader is, likely, already aware, including ski mask, crow bar and tire iron. Putting on the mask:

You crept up behind him, and wrapped your hands around his waist. “I think you’ve been a bad boy, Theodore.” Ted wasn’t easily startled, not even close. He loved to sneak up on you, getting you every time, but you had never once scared him. But when he turned his head you were sure you’d almost scared him. His whole body tensed and his eyes widened.

“Where’d . . . . What . . . .”

You smiled, pulling away from him and hopping up on the counter.

You laughed, “And the crow bar?”

He moved his hands up your side, creeping under your shirt. “Every volkswagen owner has one”. ([queenofshit 2015](#))

As the fictional reader slowly becomes slightly more suspicious, their relationship becomes more tense despite becoming engaged, mirroring the narrative of Kloepfer's book and *Extremely Wicked*. If the reader has any knowledge of Kloepfer's narrative—which they likely do, given an existing interest in Bundy and the recent film, a further metaleptic split, thus, arises. These events really took place: Bundy was arrested, and maintained his innocence to his girlfriend, even as she, increasingly, suspected the weight of evidence against him. However, they did not happen to 'us'. In a way, then, this story puts the reader less in a position of empathy with a murderer than with a woman who was taken advantage of, tricked and manipulated into disbelieving the evidence in front of her own eyes. So, what makes it fanfiction? Specifically, what makes it *more fanfiction* than *Extremely Wicked*, which, likewise, contains several romantic and/or erotic sex scenes between Bundy and both Kloepfer and his later wife, Carol Boone? At the level of textual content, I would argue: nothing. It is, purely, the contexts of production that define the cultural status of the texts. One is communal, amateur, free, published in a fanfic archive, and tagged and discovered according to fandom conventions. The other bears the Foucauldian author-function of a filmic auteur, professional production values, requires a purchase or Netflix subscription and is sorted and promoted by industry algorithms and standards.

Even the comments on *Your Timing Is Impeccable* note the easy slide between cultural sanctioned texts and fanfic, describing their personalized experiences of media flow thus:

So I was watching a documentary earlier this evening on Ted Bundy and you know he's was crazy. So my brain being how it is said "That's hot. I wonder if there's any good fanfiction [sic] on him. So now I've read yours and I love all but one chapter of it. ([indigonightmare 2018](#))

And after a pause in updates:

OMG YOUR [sic] BACK?!?!?!?!? I'm so glad!!!!!! I was just watching a documentary and was like "man, I'm in the mood to re-read my favorite fan fiction of this monster." And was glad it's been updated!!!!!! ([Pookiepook 2019](#))

The comments depict divergent routes to the story, based on divergent readings of the culturally legitimate documentary form. One considered the documentary 'hot'—the other considers Bundy a 'monster', yet already knew about and relished the story, demonstrating an easy movement back and forth between the texts.

#### 4. Conclusions

In sum, then, it seems that the pathologization of serial killer fanfic has far less to do with its content than it does with its cultural position: feminized, amateur and free. If we wish to condemn it, to see it is a symptom of sickness or pathologization, we ought to, in the name of both fairness and rigor of analysis, apply exactly the same lens to all the endless professional texts on the backstage of serial killers: from tabloid speculation to Netflix hits. Which, indeed, some critics do. In fact, critics such as [Robinson \(2014\)](#), who consider the paraphrastic nature of these stories, which foreground the less problematic in contrast to biopics' obscuration of it, might say we should be *more* concerned about the professional products. These stories are certainly metaleptic, but the metalepsis operates more between the top plot and the secondary plot—the reader's investment in the fiction and their discussion with the author—than the 'real' world and a fictional one. We are, also, confronted with anomalies: forms of fanfic that barely seem like stories, more like trolling for provocation on blogs devoted to the same. Tragedy trolling is hardly new—in fact, it is an internet mainstay (kill all normies). Yet, serial killer fanfic is still depicted as something exceptionally shocking, some profoundly disturbing and unique symptom of contemporary culture (a strange perspective, given that serial killer fandom has existed at least since Victorian England), whilst the endless production of serial killer media goes unquestioned. The questions we need to ask are not 'why do girls write serial killer fanfic?' and 'what's wrong with them?', but 'why are serial killers the exemplary modern celebrity?' ([Schmid 2005](#), p. 15). Moreover, 'should we be concerned about that?'

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