

Roswell, **TEXTUAL GAPS AND FANS'
SUBVERSIVE RESPONSE**

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The subject of this article is the emerging genre of internet fan fiction and the way in which this literary genre can offer alternate possibilities to the narrative of the television show it is based upon. Its specific focus is on six stories inspired by characters from the drama series *Roswell* that fan fiction author Elizabeth Spencer has appropriated for her own purposes. I am going to state that Elizabeth, in writing stories that fill in the gaps in the broadcast material, is reading the medium text in such a way that aims at displacing the “legitimate authors’” voice and subverting authorial meaning. The central argument in my thesis, therefore, is that, in adopting media characters and universe and translating them to the computer screen, Elizabeth succeeds in providing other fans with what I consider to be subversive options.

On Being a Fan Reader/Writer

Going through its third and possibly final season, *Roswell* focuses on a group of six friends at Roswell High in modern-day Roswell as they go through experiences growing up. The series spent its first season introducing us to a small family of aliens, who may or may not be the descendants of the original pilots who, some claim, fell

to Earth back in 1948 in Roswell, New Mexico. All are teens: two of them, Max and Isabel Evans, have been raised as brother and sister by unknowing parents. The other, Michael, has been bouncing around the foster system for ten years. When the show begins, they are as clueless as the humans who pass them by. They do not know when they have arrived or where they are from or who they really are. They only know they are different, having awoken, at the age of six, in human form, inside incubator like pods in the desert outside Roswell. A group of humans turned friends/allies accompany the alien trio on their quest to discover their past—Liz Parker (the girl whose healing by Max jump-starts the narrative and Max’s love interest); Maria DeLuca (Liz’s best friend and co-worker at the Crashdown Café who, later, is to become involved with Michael); Alex Whitman (best friend to both Liz and Maria and the last to be drawn into this alien world), and a string of secondary characters, including the town sheriff Jim Valenti, who is intent on finding out the truth about Max and the others; Jim’s son and former boyfriend to Liz, Kyle Valenti; the shapeshifter from the aliens’ home planet, Nasedo; and a fourth alien, Tess Harding, whom Max, Isabel and Michael have left behind when they emerged from their pods.

This is the fictional universe that plays out on Elizabeth’s screen as the credits roll. The average viewer may call it a day or catch the evening news, but Elizabeth is not an average viewer. She is a member of a somewhat different species: people with a certain creative itch, for whom a show’s characters pose nagging questions that will not let up until an answer is found. That answer often comes in the form of fan fiction. Fan fiction then can be very simply defined as fiction written and enjoyed by fans. It is “any kind of written creativity that is based on an identifiable segment of popular culture [. . .] and it is not produced as ‘professional’ writing” (Tushnet). Thus fan fiction writers take familiar elements from the TV series, movie, or commercial novel they are fans of and create narratives based on their interpretation of those elements. Thus for those who practice it a text may be but the starting point for new

flights of literary invention.

Fan fiction became a popular term with the emergence of *Star Trek* stories written by fans of the original series in the sixties and seventies, but the tradition itself is a much older one. In his *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins argues that fan fiction represents a flowering of modern folk culture (268-73). For most of the human history, the key stories people told themselves were stories that were important to everyone and belonged to everyone, the storyteller being the inheritor and protector of a shared cultural tradition. In the twenty-first century, however, the characters people find fascinating—the characters that bring people together—belong nowadays to studios and producers, for the most part. In a world in which entertainment conglomerates are the owners of mythical popular heroes, fan fiction, then, is about regaining control. Acting upon their fascination with the source material and their frustration over the refusal/inability of producers to tell the kind of stories they want to see, fan fiction writers take upon themselves to present a reading of the favored text that may repair or dismiss unsatisfying aspects, or develop interests not sufficiently explored. Looking back, one thing seems certain: Viewed through Jenkins' lens, it is clear that fan fiction, in a way, has probably been around for as long as humans have enjoyed storytelling (268-73). Elizabeth and her peers are simply the descendants of those ancient storytellers who would stand around campfires retelling the adventures of the heroes of their time and adding to these their own personal touches.

Like many have done before her, Elizabeth will then engage in speculations about the fates of someone else's characters or possible implications of the universe someone else has created, thus presenting a story that pushes aside the author's voice in favor of her own. She will shift attention away from what is depicted on the television screen to aspects of *Roswell* that most appeal to her in a personal level. In short, she is a spectator who transforms the experience of watching television into literary production.

In the end, Elizabeth's interaction with the medium text is bound to give it a meaning that might not have been anticipated by the author(s), a meaning that comes not from its narrative structure or broadcast, but rather from the significance she bestows upon the text through its fannish mode of reception. And, by invoking these fictionalized interpretations as a variation on reading (as, perhaps, fan fiction is a variation on the show's texts), we recognize the necessity of drawing on a theory that focuses attention on the agency of readers, as a characteristic of, if not a source of, fan fiction.

How Television Becomes Literature

This awareness of the opportunities of readership has been explored in a variety of ways, including the reception rendered by American academic circles to the work of German critic Wolfgang Iser. For this reader-response critic, the meaning and significance of any given text is bound up with the activity of the reader. Drawing on the phenomenology of Roman Ingarden—particularly on the idea that the aesthetic object is constituted only through the reader's act of cognition—Iser, in his *The Act of Reading*, switches focus from the text as an object to the text as potential, presenting it as a virtual structure whose "concretization" lies within the realm of the reader's agency (21).

The act of reading is thus a creative process of realization; it bridges the "gaps" in the structure and fills out the unwritten aspects of the text, allowing the readers to use their imagination in constructing meaning to account for the indeterminacies between textual units (such as words, or sentences, or chapters) (Iser "Interaction" 33-35). In Iser's view, readers create the text, filling in gaps, anticipating what is to come, all along using their own world of beliefs/values to process the work. But this is not to say that the text arrived at exists only as a subjective fabrication of the reader. The text actually exists before one's reading, except that it

is in its nature to allow for a variety of possible readings (*Reading* 23-25).

Like the readers privileged by Iser's theoretical works, fans of media texts are invited, by the gaps in the text, to fill what is not there. Like the readers impelled to grasp the text by a "network of response-inviting structures" (*Reading* 34), fans are "made to supply what is meant from what is not said" (*Reading* 168)—or, as the case also may be with media texts, what is neither shown nor performed. When a fan reads, therefore, the gaps are filled, or closed up, or developed by his/her reading consciousness and the text is thus invested with unforeseeable motivation and guided in some unpredictable directions. "Reading as a fan" in this frame of reference will involve, then, the promotion of textual interpretations via fiction. It will involve the realization of particular meanings through the creation of fictional narratives. And it will involve, eventually, the writing of such fictions down at a computer screen.

What is significant about fans in relation to Iser's model is that they are readers whose conceptual activities concretize the aesthetic object into something that the author of the text could not foresee or plan for. As such, they have elevated readership into producerhood, and find themselves enjoying the status of fan fiction writers. Fan fiction writers, then, exercise their right to folklore, personal interpretation, and collective storytelling by publishing, online, stories which elaborate on the situations proposed by an already circulating text; by presenting familiar textual elements in a new way, a way that is to add to other fan readers' understanding and enjoyment; that is to warrant the continuance of the existence of those characters who strike the writer's fancy well beyond the limitations of what has been shown on television. And, by emphasizing the things that are useful or pleasurable or intriguing to him/her, the fan writer often exposes different aspects than those highlighted by network publicity, thus making the television show his/her own and undermining the producers' intentions.

The very existence of fan fiction, then, is an evidence of the power of the reader to articulate different meanings from what is

being presented on the television screen; it is an evidence of the power of the reader to make public his/her private interpretation of a favored text. Contemplating fannish readings, therefore, leads inevitably to our awareness regarding the networks of organized fan culture within which making meaning and its subsequent conversion from the television screen into the one of the computer is to be understood. Fan fiction is “shaped through the social norms, aesthetic conventions, interpretive protocols, technological resources, and the competence of the larger fan community” (Jenkins 49); it moves relentlessly as a phenomenon and a practice, taking the collective text as the base from which to generate a wide range of media-related stories, the fan readers/writers exhibiting a fierce desire to engage, to create, and to share. Fan fiction writers are not unique in their status of popular readers/independent publishers, yet, they have developed both popular reading and self-sufficient publishing to an art form.

If I find Iser’s take on the interaction between text and reader a useful theoretical frame for thinking about popular reading and fanfic writing, I want to point out one important aspect of this model with which I disagree: Iser draws a separation between literary texts and other textual media. By describing films (filmed versions of novels in particular) as texts that fail to spark the process of ideation within the viewer, he strongly suggests that his model deals exclusively with reader’s response to literary fiction (*Reading* 135-39).

Iser is wrong, though, to confine his theory intrinsically to the realm of literary narratives. Interpretation should not be restricted to fiction books—it is bound to happen when one is confronted with making sense of any text, regardless of the medium through which that text materializes itself. So, as long as we assume that the quality that spurs readers into action is not exclusive to literary texts, the viewing of a television show can be as stimulating as the reading of a piece of literature.

Roswell, for all its commercialistic appeal and appearance of disposable entertainment, is a text that gives room to the kind of

reading Iser usually ascribes to Modernist Literature—a reading that subverts the reader’s expectation concerning a possible concretization of the possibilities inherent in the text (*Reading* 187-95). The program’s fictional universe and the canonical events therein make up a fantastic set of metaphors and dynamics which allow its fans to say something about “the real world.” The politics of resistance to a pre-determined life path; the gay relationships (subtextual but still there; slash is not just imposed at random); questions about the outsiders’ nature of teenage perspectives on life; the search for identity; what we owe to love versus what we owe to duty; all are there in *Roswell* waiting to be unpacked and explored.

Fans could do this unpacking and exploring by writing theory about it, or by talking to other fans about it—or by writing fanfic (an interpretation that purports to explain, in literary and figurative language, what has been presented on screen) about it. Each reaches a different audience and has different effects, but fan fiction usually gives them much greater possibilities than theory. Reading television as a fan does indeed include an act of creation—of making meaning—and the division between that and writing it down is one of volition and recorded creation rather than of substance. What is more, while Iser’s readers can re-read the meanings and experiences the texts do reflect, their meaning-production does not amount to the creation of enduring, permanent works. The fanfic authors, on the other hand, can and do go further than that, able as they are of not only re-writing the favored texts but also of making these re-writings material (through their publishing in websites), so that those become the fans’ by virtue of effectively reflecting their designs.

***Roswell*’s Text and Elizabeth’s Alternates**

The practice of reading as a fan, therefore, is all about intervening creatively into the source of inspiration, about finding the gaps, the shadowy spaces in the text the fan favors and filling them,

manipulating them to displace the authorial meaning so that the fan reader/writer can focus on details that are excessive or peripheral to the primary plots but gain significance within his/her realization of the text. To state that fans promote their own readings over those of producers is not to suggest, however, that fannish readings are always subversive ones. Many fans find themselves perfectly happy with the way the production companies have been handling the text(s), and their work are an expression of that. Respectful of the canon of the series, movies or books they love, these fan fiction writers create “more of the same,” their versions eventually reinscribing the meaning of the primary texts. Thus we are to find as many readings of a text as there are fans, and none of these apprehensions is to negate the other. Reactionary and progressive, assenting and subversive may therefore coexist through the writing and sharing of stories.

For those fans who are interested in making the text speak to different perspectives, fan fiction works then as a place to analyze canon, a place to express grief for the losses and rectify the injustices and pain canon may inflict upon its readers, and a place to present alternate—subversive—readings that are not likely to make their way into the fans’ television screens. By the way it bends the rules of the favored text, by the way it turns whispered subtext into text, Elizabeth Spencer’s literary production happens to be one among many.

Within *Roswell* community of fans during the past couple of years, Elizabeth has gradually risen to prominence as a fan fiction writer who resists the closure of the series she reads. Her stories may be described as non-canonical pieces, narratives which go beyond the canon of the show and inevitably lead to her finding all sorts of meanings the producers did not know were there. Indeed, the six fan fictions that are about to be scrutinized are all, in a way or another, engaged in a transgression of textual boundaries and a subversion of authorial voice.

In the first story, “No Man’s Land,” Elizabeth plays with the consequences of the defeat of Max, Michael, Isabel and Tess when

they finally face their opponents in battle. The story is then developed through the perspective of one of the conqueror's race (an original character Elizabeth has created), thus stretching the series' timeline while speculating about what life might bring to the inhabitants of Roswell. Here, the fan's reading of broadcast material allows for a construction of a future that goes beyond the range of stories that might be told in television. It is an interpretation tinged with hopelessness as it treats the characters and events with a darker tone and harsher edge than it was ever attempted in the original series. By presenting a future in which the heroes have been defeated; in which everyone but Liz has survived; in which humans have been deprived of free will and turned into slaves, she opens room to explore possibilities that definitely fall beyond the parameters of the text.

"Behind the Sun" and "Postcards from the Edge" offer yet another range of alternate possibilities for fans to find pleasure within the narratives of *Roswell*. Having to rely on the gaps within the broadcast material, Elizabeth has managed to translate that constant unspoken potential of what might be into love stories from between the lines. In "Behind the Sun" Isabel has recently learned that in another time, at another place, Michael and her were to be married. Once they had stayed together and the same is expected from them now. In the narrative, Isabel and Michael have become sexually involved, this fiction of Elizabeth pushing the *Roswell* mythos in a direction quite different from the one conceived by the original textual producers.

Thus, in a context in which the overtones of dreaded change are so palpable, passion brings misery. Not only does "Behind the Sun" expose the ambivalent pleasures of romantic entanglements; it also explores a scenario in which the heroine may never have her feelings returned. "Behind the Sun," therefore, concerns itself with a relationship that does not seem to be advancing toward a happy ending. And, by writing a tale of "love gone awry," Elizabeth has refused to confine her portrayals of relationships to traditional

commitment, permanence, and monogamy. But, more important, she has set herself up to push the boundaries of the show she works with to the limits, drawing a fictional account of love/desire based on a couple that may never be. She has outlined a narrative in which a certain “what if” is answered—what if Michael and Isabel cannot escape from their so-called destiny, what if they choose who they used to be over who they are—and, in doing so, has posed an alternate possibility, romantic-wise, to the television show’s text.

Elizabeth continues challenging the fans’ expectations regarding *Roswell*’s pairings in her “Postcards from the Edge.” From Elizabeth’s evaluation of *Roswell* emerges a reading in which Max ceases to be Liz’s ex-boyfriend or Michael’s best friend and grows into being Maria’s friend. This is the state of affairs between Max and Maria when an instant of closeness leads them down the path to becoming lovers. The story comes to its conclusion with Liz’s return from Florida, and with Maria and Max settling into a close, comfortable friendship. Far from a conventional romance, Elizabeth’s approach refuses to deal with sexuality and love in simple terms, but rather grapple with a relationship that seems to defy categorization. Out of Maria and Max’s search for comfort and understanding, then, comes this tale of awareness cascading into friendship cascading into something else all together—comes this tale of two people teetering on falling.

Thus in granting her readers a resolution that inevitably favors friendship over romance, the fan fiction author has managed, once again, to challenge our assumptions regarding the traditional progression of a love story. A tale of sexual awareness intermingled with friendship, “Postcards from the Edge” constitutes then another break with the conventions of romantic novel, as it shows a fleeting entanglement (a summer fling) in a clear and unapologetic light. If it is thus Michael and Isabel (“Behind the Sun”), or Max and Maria (“Postcards from the Edge”) in the context of *Roswell*, it gains power by its subversive nature—by the assumptions Elizabeth has made about the characters and their relationships; by the way she

has gone on interpreting lines of dialogue, brief glances, little smiles and unsuspecting touches as evidence of a relationship happening behind the television screen.

Elizabeth keeps on addressing unlikely pairings in the next two stories, only that the significant others are, now, of the same gender. With the writing of both “A Single Vowel in the Metallic Silence” and “Love Is Just Another Four Letter Word” Elizabeth has taken it upon herself to explore those aspects of sexuality which would most certainly not be addressed on network television. She has assumed, in good Freudian fashion, that any relationship between characters—friendly or adversarial, same gender or cross-gender—has a sexual undercurrent and proceeds on putting conventionally heterosexual characters in a situation where they are to experience the kind of love/desire that falls outside the norm. In “A Single Vowel in the Metallic Silence” Kyle Valenti, son of the town sheriff and an all American high school jock, finds himself drawn to Michael, who then becomes the embodiment of all the things he never considered feeling, and doing, and wanting. By the end of the story, when Kyle decides to stop running and Michael accepts the bond they share, both men have given important steps towards overcoming the conflicts that the surfacing of their reciprocated feelings and desires entailed. Such portrayal of male sexuality, with Kyle and Michael choosing to follow their true desires rather than conform to societal standards, champions homosexuality/bisexuality as enriching and valuable options.

“Love Is Just Another Four Letter Word”, on the other hand, delves into the emotional dynamics of Tess’ relationship with the character of Isabel Evans, whom Tess is to befriend so she can get closer to Isabel’s brother Max. It is that typical story in which the person who is supposed to be “the means to an end” becomes “the end” (Elizabeth “Word”). In making Tess fall in love with Isabel instead of Max, Elizabeth is then inviting the fans of *Roswell* to question conventional assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender roles. Cutting across existing constructions of

womanhood; urging the fans and ourselves to see beyond the equation of femaleness with sexual attraction towards men, her narrative drawn us in to the beauty that is Tess' awareness of another female body as a site of pleasure. Through Elizabeth's lens, therefore, Michael and Kyle ("A Single Vowel in the Metallic Silence") as well as Tess ("Love Is Just Another Four Letter Word") are to be read as gay/lesbian or bisexual, these representations of them thus contributing to the liberation of male and female sexuality from the rigid categorization we usually encounter in the media.

Finally, in "Your Little Voice," the fan writer provides an analysis of the degree to which *Roswell* operates via unequal power relations and an exposure of the mechanisms whereby abuse can be disguised as love. For Elizabeth, one of the most acutely felt contradictions within *Roswell's* ideology seems to be the show's treatment of the relationship between Michael and Maria. A couple that has grown into being as popular as the one formed by Max and Liz, the series' protagonists, their pairing has been often marketed as a model for passionate love. Extra-textual and textual discourses have then stressed the appeal of this relationship, while the gaps in the text invite the fan reader to risk filling what is not there. And that which is missing, according to Elizabeth's interpretation, is the perception that such a celebrated entanglement is, at its heart, extremely unhealthy. Such is the meaning the fan fiction author is trying to convey through "Your Little Voice." In it, Michael and Maria are featured as having been separated for a while, since the day Michael discontinued their relationship. The narrative then unravels with Michael missing Maria; with him reminiscing about his relationship with Hank, his foster father. The plot itself is nothing new to *Roswell* fan fiction. Where Elizabeth clearly departs from familiar territory is in choosing to portray both relationships in a peculiar light, diverse from what has ever been attempted in the history of the series.

First, she challenges authorial authority by suggesting, through the voice of the narrator, that there was more to Hank and his and

Michael's interactions than the producers let on. Keeping to her tradition of pushing beyond explicit textual information and shifting the show's priorities, she reads genuine affection between the lines, thus restoring ambiguity to *Roswell* and providing other fans with yet another alternative back story. While acknowledging the emotional ties that do indeed exist between abuser (Hank) and abused (Michael), Elizabeth continues expanding textual boundaries by addressing one among possible consequences of an abusive relationship: that one whom has been abused ends up reproducing the patterns of behavior once inflicted upon him/her.

Seen thus through her lens, this "Michael" finds himself perpetuating, in his relationship with Maria, a cycle of abuse he is all too familiar with. The celebrated love story of Michael and Maria, Elizabeth's reading suggests, is a process of idealization which serves to disguise co-dependency and abuse. Maria is read, by her, as co-dependent. She is read as weak. In writing "Your Little Voice," Elizabeth has then managed to crash the meaning of their romance, exposing it as the graven image it is. Such a realization of *Roswell* fits Elizabeth's fan fiction squarely within the realm of those readings that expose a text's ideological context and then proceed on reworking that consciousness with which the reader cannot identify. By doing this, she is rejecting the producers' narrative; she is refusing to legitimize those portrayals of characters and the relations among them that she deems offensive to her ideology and sensibilities.

Whether Elizabeth is re-assessing power relations between the sexes; whether she is seeking to represent and inscribe new female experiences; whether she is deconstructing the conventional clichés of sexuality; whether she is working to undo gender roles; whether she is interrogating the traditional models of romance; whether she is speculating on the future of characters, she is then always performing and enacting a theoretical position. She is always a reader who enters a pre-existing text from a subversive direction, her readings of *Roswell* representing the discovery/recovery of a

voice capable of undermining those other (authorial) voices.

Moreover, every and each one of these readings is motivated by a strong impulse to account for otherwise unacknowledged, unstudied, or alternate segments of culture, precisely those segments usually overlooked by more traditional presentations of gender roles, sexuality, romance conventions and so on in television and literature. Having then been reading *Roswell* in such a framework in which once ignored artifacts are turning into proper objects of knowledge; in which the shift of interpretative gaze from self-contained text to its discursive and social framings has already occurred (Souza 189-94), Elizabeth is herself implicated within the cultural discourses she is working to place and displace. Elizabeth is committed to enriching and articulating “the spirit of the age” she lives in and, in exploring the complexity of this pluralist and turbulent time, she has somehow managed, through the writing and publishing of fan fiction, a critical apprehension of not only the television series, but of the world and its culture as well. Comments on those cultural segments of Elizabeth’s choice, the six stories have then become cultural artifacts themselves, as worthy of attention as those elements they seek to subvert.

By committing herself to a text; expanding it; romancing it; sexing it; resisting it and playing with it, Elizabeth is thus opening up the sites of literature, sexual/gender politics and cultural practice, in ways which I consider to be innovative, exciting and intriguing. It may be true that “[r]eaders are not *always* resistant” (Jenkins 34); it may be true that fannish readings are not necessarily subversive, but Elizabeth, in offering other fans many alternate interpretations of the canon of *Roswell*, in unfixing the medium text into a variety of online versions may very well be pointing out the way to a subversive state of mind.

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