

## Fanfiction as a carrier bag methodology of fiction

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### **Abstract**

This paper provides a short introduction to fanfiction as an example of Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. Through the analysis of the fanfiction drabble, this paper gives an initial outline of a methodology for the carrier bag theory, showing how the process of writing is supported by the community that surrounds fanfiction. As such, the writing and publishing of fanfiction can be seen as exemplary of a democratic, bottom-up method for creating the other stories, or life stories, in Le Guin's and Haraway's sense.

**Keywords:** fanfiction methodology; carrier bag theory of fiction; fandom writing events; drabble; fandom community

## The carrier bag theory of fiction – an introduction

“The trouble is, we’ve all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.”

(Le Guin 2019, p. 33)

This article takes its starting point in Ursula K. Le Guin’s brief essay titled *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, originally published in *Women of Vision* in 1988 (Le Guin 2019) as well as Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Le Guin and Haraway point towards the need for a new way of storytelling. Instead of focusing on the hero, a story should be seen as a carrier bag, a container, which envelops all the people and artefacts of the story to be told. The bag itself becomes the story, carrying along what we as writers and readers, as human beings, put into it. Le Guin compares this form of storytelling with the collecting of oats. Instead of collecting a few you can keep in your hands, you need a bag or other kind of container to collect as many as possible to transport and store them. In the same way, fanfiction can be seen as an example of collecting stories within a container, a fandom, an archive in which to keep them and make them public for other fans, readers, and writers.

We propose an initial sketch for the methodology of the carrier bag theory of fiction, constructed on the writing and archiving of fanfiction in the sense of fanfiction as exemplary of Le Guin’s ‘the other story’. Fanfiction is one element in the “community-centered creation of artistic fannish expressions (...) all done electronically among a group of people, mostly women, intimately involved in the creation and consumption of fannish goods.” (Busse and Helleson 2006, p. 6). Fandom and fanfiction has its fulcrum in popular culture, which according to Hermes (2005, p. 137) often is “(...) placed outside the realm of value and quality”, suggesting that popular culture is deemed less worthy, even threatening, by academia. Hills discusses the divide and dislike between fans and academia in *Fan Cultures* (2005, p. 13-15), agreeing with Hermes’ notion of the Othering of fans. Moving the view on fanfiction and fandom from a top-down approach back into a funder, created by

women to explore works created within the fannish domain, may give insights into both fandom narratives and practices. These practices, we argue, cannot be separated from the narratives, but are necessary parts of what substitutes a life story.

During the research of this paper, it became evident through our literature review that very few scholars have discussed fandom challenges and events within fandom and its narratives, some of the few being present authors (Jensen and Westberg 2016; Jensen 2018). While Booth (2015) and Nybro Petersen (2022) describe fan play, their focus is on the negotiation of understanding the original media, transforming and adapting it into fandom, rather than on the actual practice of writing events as we present them in this paper. The importance of fandom's life stories has, thus, far too long been overlooked, fanfiction deemed as works that, at best, are enjoyable derivatives.

Our main aim with this paper is to draft an initial methodology of the carrier bag of fiction based on fanfiction and fandom community practices.

We take our clues from fanfiction communities and the fan-developed and -maintained platform of AO3. Coppa's definition of fanfiction is based on fanfiction as opposed to mainstream published fiction. Fanfiction is a transformation and rewriting of original, published stories, or popular culture events. Fanfiction becomes Le Guin's recipient, a container in which to put the beloved characters. Fanfiction rarely follows the schematics of the hero's journey (Vogler 2007) as it is a life story, focussing on relationships.

Why fanfiction? Because this is where we tell the other stories. The small ones, the everyday ones, but also stories of love, life, forgiveness, betrayal – stories of enemies to lovers, stories of hot sex, stories that explore gender and sexuality, consent, relationships; stories that explore the art of tea making to show a relationship based on trust and unconditional love; tales that are told for—and because of—the community of people around the stories. These are the stories that in themselves show the need for a **supportive community** because 'the other stories' are not written in a vacuum. They are told by the people who live these stories every day—people who have those dreams and desires, wishes, and needs.

## The scope for a methodology of the carrier bag theory on fiction: The fandom bag

“If you haven’t got something to put in, food will escape you – even something as uncombative and unresourceful as an oat.”

(Le Guin 2019, p. 28)

There are several containers in use when creating fanfiction:

- The original stories, which in them carry the seeds for new and different fictions.
- Fandom, the fannish community which supports and creates the different bags for different kind of fictions.
- The archives, which contain the works in progress and finished fictions, including the feedback from readers in the form of comments, likes, bookmarks, and new derived fictions or artworks.

The first bag is, thus, the original fiction or media event. In it, we find the characters that will become our protagonists. The bag itself will also find its use in creating the fandom which will be weaving this new bag, a much larger bag, around the original bag. This second bag contains explanations of the original story, meta discussions, artwork, and other pieces and trinkets that all explain, enlarge, and decipher the original story’s characters’ relationships, development, their life, and background. Some pieces will become fanon: facts or characteristics not found in the original, but solely created, explained, and widely agreed upon within the fandom itself (Busse and Hellekson 2006). It is in the larger fandom bag that fanfiction will be written and stored. Maybe, some fanfictions will weave their own bags within the fandom bag. Certain genres, tropes, and pairings might develop their own particular kind of fandom, all within the larger fandom bag. In the fandom bag will be fandom events, which enlarge and deepen the relationship between the participants—the fans—within the fandom.

The fandom bag’s purpose is to develop and maintain a community in which the creation of fanworks in the form of art, music, gifs, fanvids, and fanfiction is possible and supported. For this to happen, a platform—or rather several platforms—are needed, becom-

ing new containers for the fandom bag to thrive within. Platforms like Tumblr enable fans to find other fans, and to connect and share their work. Discord and Slack facilitate a closer connection between members of a fandom. Here, smaller groups can organise and participate in online events, mentor each other, and become committed to the community at large. Archives like AO3 (archiveofourown.org) and FFnet (fanfiction.net) offer a space for authors to publish their fanfictions. These archives collect and categorise fanfictions, making it easy for new fans to find stories, and for older fans to re-read them. AO3 is special in the sense that fans themselves develop and maintain the platform, widening the fandom bag even further by collecting and conserving old archives, and by publishing the *Journal of Transformative Works and Culture*, which is an academic outlet for papers on fandom and fanworks. The *Organization for Transformative Works* (OTW) is the non-profit organisation “established by fans to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms.” (OTW 2023). Because it matters, who develops and maintains the platform which holds the fandom bags.

Le Guin’s idea of a carrier bag theory of fiction misses out on the importance of the community, which is needed to develop fiction. The community is present in her narration, but we would like to stress the significance of the community surrounding the storyteller since this community becomes the recipient and the co-builder of a new container for their storytelling. In Haraway’s introduction to Le Guin’s essay about the carrier bag, Haraway stresses the importance of the communities which enable the creation of carrier bags of all kinds. She tells her own story about three carrier bags, received from three different women, each representing the culture and history of their people (Haraway 2020). These carrier bags tell their own stories in the form they are woven, the colours and patterns used. But they also store artefacts and are stories in and through themselves. Likewise, fandom and storytelling cannot exist in a void; it needs other humans to receive and react upon the stories told.

### **Some methods within the fandom bag**

Fanfiction writing is supported and encouraged through fandom events. Fandom events play a significant role in content develop-

ment of stories for the fandom bag (Jensen 2018). Such events are organized within a fandom by the fans themselves. Using different online platforms, the organizers create a place for writers and other creators to develop ideas and partnerships for the writing of fanfiction. Different constraints, prompts, and timelines are used to further the writing and engage other fans in reading and commenting.

One of the main constraints in these types of events is the length of the story, typically 100 to 300 words, which must be counted and amount to exactly the specified amount to be liable for entering the writing event. As a rule, prompts will be the type of Le Guin's life stories. Examples of these are the main characters drink tea; one is a barista, the other the customer; fake date for a party; first meeting, etc. Small oats, collected in the fandom bag, some surprisingly new, others written and read a hundred times before, but still liked and commented upon. While the stories are finished within in the word limits, they are part of the bigger story told in fandom. Any fan can change and develop existing stories, creating their own bag within the larger bag.

The fanfiction archive is another bag inside the fandom bag. Fanfictions can be shared on other platforms and be copied into the archive from other platforms or archives. AO3 can be seen as a bazaar, which is open for anyone to participate, using different kinds of media, as well as linking out of the archive; FFnet is the cathedral, in which fanfictions are archived without the possibility to link to external sources or include other media than texts (Raymond 1999). Seen from a methodological viewpoint, as an archive, AO3 supports the theory of the carrier bag, making it possible to collect trinkets around the internet and archive them in one place, easy to find and retrieve because of tags, bookmarks, and subscriptions. AO3 is owned by the fanfiction community itself: any interested member of AO3 can run for the board, just as anyone may volunteer for participation of development and maintenance of the platform itself. Rules and regulations must be approved before implementation, ensuring a transparent use of the platform.

### Techniques from the fandom bag

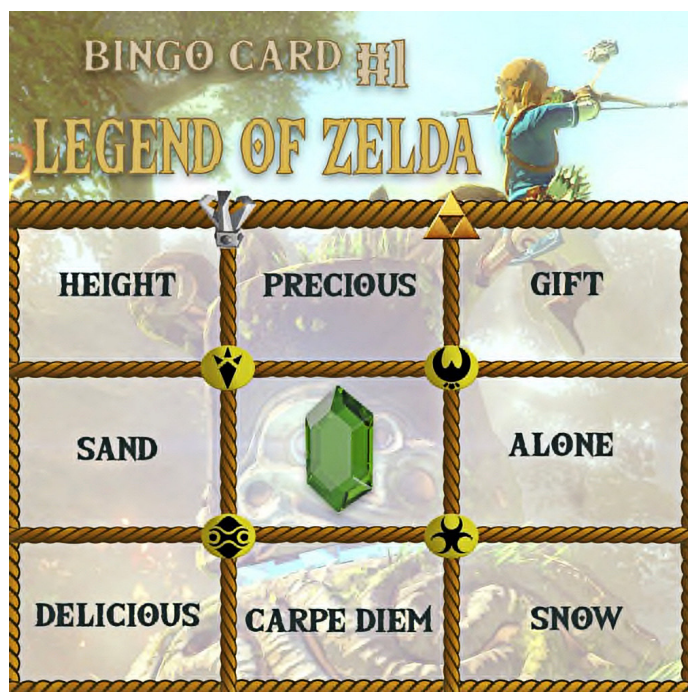
Writing can be a solitary pastime, frustrating at times. Again, the community of fans has techniques to help the content creator. Some are:

- Writing sprints—timed ‘write-as-many-words-as-you-are-able’-events—can be organised on Discord or Slack to motivate the writers.
- Anonymous prompts on a platform like Dreamwidth, which are answered in the comments by other anonymous participants, until someone collects the comments and writes the story.
- Gifs on Tumblr seen as prompts for writers to develop into full-blown stories.
- Developing limitations and constraints for a story.

Other constraints can be found in pairings; the intimate relationship between two (or more) characters. The characters from the media event which is the origin of the fandom are eligible for all kinds of pairings: the main villain with the hero; the sidekick with the female lead; the supporting character, only seen for seconds on screen, with the hero, or simply characters mentioned in a passing that set the author free to develop their characters within the canon setting.

Genre and tropes are other limitations or possibilities to motivate the writer to write. A common tool is bingo cards, containing several prompts, often tropes or a word that serve as a starting point for a story about a certain pairing or character. One such example can be seen below: here, the word ‘snow’ may lead to stories about the characters being snowed in, or it can be read metaphorically and lead to stories about the characters being in a relationship that has cooled off.

Roleplaying in online spaces like Tumblr may help finding ideas or co-writers. Writing from one point of view and having a co-writer writing from the other point of view gives inspiration, but also the needed commitment to writing. A beta-reader can help with grammar, plot, and characteristics (Karpovich 2006). Much of these tech-



Bingo card for the Legend of Zelda Bingo (Ximeria, 2021, by permission)

niques cement the idea of a carrier bag, consisting of the people surrounding the writer.

These bags within bags still contain the fandom bag, but the contents spill over into other carrier bags. Fandom friends become real-life friends, lovers, spouses. A fanfiction writer becomes a published mainstream author; however, they will return to their fandom base to enjoy the unconstrained life of a fanfiction writer.

### **An example: the tiniest handbag—the fanfiction drabble as container of condensed stories**

“The fitting shape of a story is a sack, a hollowed-out container to hold things that bear meanings and enable relationships, each mochila is a bag for the gripping tales and strange realism, the serious fiction, the science fiction, the SF required for inhabiting the worlds of stars”

(Le Guin 2019, p.11).

While fanfiction takes many shapes and sizes, one particular genre of fanfiction places itself firmly in the group of fiction that is the most condensed, minimalist story there is, while still being big enough to carry with it the immense addition of community and cooperation: the drabble. Following in the vein of community-created writing challenges such as the renga—a collection of interconnected haiku—and the Icelandic kenning, the drabble adheres to a strict word count of a hundred words that, within the word limit, must contain a full story. Coined by an unlikely source, Monty Python, in *Monty Python's Big Red Book*, 1971, a drabble was meant to be a “word game for 2 to 4 players. The four players sit from left to right and the first person to write a novel wins.” (Langford n.d.). As Derecho (2006) argues, even the smallest story can and may take a greater significance than the canon material it was based on.

Thus, a drabble, within the fandom space, should contain a story that, elaborated upon, could be a full scene, a short story, or even a novel. It should be noted that the term *drabble* in fandom has suffered vocabulary drift, in time the very strict definition of the drabble as a hundred-word finite story has mellowed in some parts of fandom, in places denoting a short fanfiction, usually below 1,000 words. However, the drabble at its best showcases the condensed



story; a tiny handbag in which the author and reader share a story that is the essence of a much meatier narrative.

### **Wild Thing (Draco Malfoy/Charlie Weasley)**

‘I am not comfortable with this... arrangement,’ Draco huffed. How anybody could live like this, in a building that resembled a shack more than anything else was beyond him.

‘You can put your things in the box over there.’ Charlie Weasley looked at Draco’s suitcases. ‘You won’t need all that.’

Outside the rickety building, dragons roared.

‘Perhaps a year in Azkaban had been better than—’ Draco waved a hand.

‘Whatever floats your boat. I’ll have a shower,’ Charlie said and pulled off his shirt. ‘Welcome to the wilderness.’

Then again, Draco reconsidered, staring, there were perhaps redeeming features.

(Story reproduced with permission from the author.)

Though drabbles are written and posted by single authors independently, they shine in particular in community-driven drabble challenges or in collections revolving a certain character or pairing; unsurprisingly, seeing that they exist because someone thought to invent them as a story written within a community setting. Particularly in the height of LiveJournal’s time as fandom hub, character- or pairing-driven drabble-writing communities like Snape100 or Snupin100 (Snupin being the pairing of Severus Snape and Remus Lupin) had a large following. While fandom cannot claim the glory for inventing the genre, there are quite a few methods of collaborative drabble writing that emerged from within fandom’s walls, among others:

*Drabble Wednesday* (or any day chosen for it). A regular weekly writing exercise. Each author writes a strict hundred-words

drabble in twenty minutes, then posts and shares it with the other participants for open praise and critique.

*Last drabble writer standing:* drabbles are written by the participants and shared. Each day, readers vote for the best, and the author with the least votes leaves the challenge. This is repeated until a winner has been found.

*Event-based drabble challenges:* single events where drabbles adhere to a particular topic, for instance New Years Eve for festive drabbles, or Talk Like a Pirate Day for your shivered timbers.

While the constraints may be challenging, the drabble's low word count is a gift to the budding writer or the writer exploring a new pairing for the first time: writing a drabble is a challenge that is not hard to overcome, while it in its demanding form introduces the new fandom author to fandom's particular rules and regulations. The drabble democratizes writing, and for that matter also to reading: not all fans have English as their first language and Western fandom is predominantly in English. A short text is a great starting point. While there are genres galore in fandom, drabbles just being an example, the tiny drabble handbag is a bit like Hermione Granger's handbag in Harry Potter: it contains everything you would need for your travels into fandom.

### **In conclusion: the fandom bag is wide open**

"It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what concepts we think to think other concepts with. It matters wherehow ouroroboros swallows its tale, again."

(Haraway 2019, p. 10)

Fandom travels, however, are not the heroes' journeys. Fans travel to find the stories that are not told, not published, not read, because they are about the Other. They are about the heroes that are no heroes, or about the heroes when they are being anything other than heroic. About the people who never meant to be heroes, or about the villains or the vilified. More importantly, fandom travels to tell the stories about characters that normative society at times sees as

villains: queer people, people of colour, minorities whose stories are rarely, if ever, told because they are not marketable. Fandom becomes the carrier bag of the Other, a place that makes it easy to find people and stories that mainstream media rarely tell or recognise if not for shock value; for a token minority; or for the struggle of being a person belonging to a minority group.

Le Guin's vision of the untold life story might have come to life through fanfiction stories. These stories are told because fans need to tell them: ideally, as a gift to themselves and the community. The stories of relationships, of friendships, told in apparently boring, everyday life settings; stories of tea- and lovemaking set on alien spaceships, but almost always with the spotlight on the relationship, the need for another person in your life.

The writing methods, as explained through the Drabble challenge above, focus on creation and maintaining the surrounding fandom community. The process of writing becomes a carrier bag of its own, carrying with it community-building, content-creating, support for writers and artists, as well as the option for creating new friendships and maintaining old.

Lastly, the fandom carrier bag is not limited to Western fandom. In Japan, *fujoshi* (a self-applied derogatory and debated term for 'rotten woman', female fans) carry their stories within a carrier bag of *moe talk* (*moe banashi*) — sessions, during which they discuss and share affective reactions to their favourite characters (Galbraith 2015). *Yaoi*, a subgenre of BL—Boys Love, homoerotic manga and novels, somewhat similar to slash fan fiction, tells stories that even in the genre's name announce that they do not necessarily make sense: *Yaoi* is an abbreviation for 'no climax, no punchline, no meaning'. In that, they mirror the short, and at a glance meaningless, life stories told in Western fandom. They carry meaning within the context of a carrier bag just as *yaoi* carries meaning in particular when it is shared with other *fujoshi*.

Similarly, the fanfiction as a life story loses any fandom life when it is taken outside the context of the carrier bag. This is a discussion for a later paper, but such a situation occurs for instance when a teacher asks students to write or read fan fiction, or when a fanfiction has its registration number filed off and is turned into a consumer product outside the fandom realm. This only underlines that

fandom, fandom events, and the fandom narrative—be it any fandom text—cannot be separated from its carrier bag without losing or changing its original purpose.

Fandom realm is the carrier bag of all things fannish.

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