

## Radway Roundtable Remarks

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I'm something of "a spy in the house of love." I don't "do" romance. And yet *Reading the Romance* has had a significant influence on foundational work in my field of fan studies, and on my own work as well.

Radway was initially confronted with a highly theorized (perhaps over-theorized) method of approaching the relationship of reader to text – one in which the reader largely seemed to be secondary. In "Women Read The Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context," which pre-dates *Reading the Romance*, Radway observed: "Because these interpreters do not take account of the actual day-to-day context within which romance reading occurs, and because they ignore romance readers' own book choice and theories about why they read, they fail to detect the ways in which the activity may serve positive functions," (54) as opposed to the accusations of romance reading being a frivolous waste of time or worse. My own journey into fan studies began on a similar trajectory, when confronted with a body of literature that, while enormously useful in setting the stage for looking at what fans do, was still either over theorized, or only approached from a select few theoretical positions (fans were poaching on the traditional preserves of producers, or female fans were engaged in guerrilla warfare against hegemonic, male dominated culture). None of this exactly explained my own experience as a fan and none addressed pleasure. Again, what seemed to be missing in early descriptions of fans, even when those descriptions were presented positively, were the fans themselves.

Well before the first work of its kind within fan studies, then, Radway's ethnographic approach served as both roadmap and reminder that we must not exclude the reader from the text and we must not be too quick to impose our own assumptions on the reading and viewing practices of others.

Even more significant to my own work on fan cultures, however, was Radway's confrontation of the guilt and shame associated with reading romance. In her interviews with the romance readers of Smithton, Radway heard not only guilt over the time and money spent on such a culturally unsanctioned activity, but more important, the shame arising from women expressing sexual desire through the act of reading (Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 103-104). Thirty years on we're still ashamed of our "indulgences." Several semesters ago, for example, when I had first begun to teach a class that included a unit on fan cultures, a student came to my office hours to discuss her final paper. She wanted to

write about *Buffy* fans. But she did not want anyone else in the class to *know* that she was a fan. She then proceeded to relate a story about her involvement in online *Buffy* communities. There she had found an outlet that she did not feel was attainable in her “real life” where she felt constrained just telling others that she loved the show. And she certainly would have never told anyone that she wrote fan fiction. Not even her best friend was privy to her “addiction”. Fortunately she met others in the community with whom she eventually became close – particularly one girl who it turned out was the same age as her, shared the same interests and, they discovered as their friendship around the television series blossomed, lived in the same area. They eventually arranged to meet.

Perhaps you see where this is going? The girl my student met online was, in fact, her best friend. Neither had felt comfortable in telling the other, both sought the comfort and anonymity of online fan communities as a refuge from the shame entailed on liking something that much. Not surprising in a culture that continually tells young women and girls that their dearest held and emotionally important interests (*One Direction*, *Twilight*) are ridiculous wastes of time.

And when we’re not busy internalizing all that shame the media is happy to step in to remind us how silly we’re being – or worse. Indeed the media continues to take delight in pointing out how “crazy” or “twisted” we are. Not much has changed since Radway cited a “scornful feature” in a local newspaper focusing on romance readers (*Reading* 104). Reporters’ joy at unearthing what they see as the worst aspects of fandom and holding them up for everyone, including the objects of that fandom, continues unabated. At the recent screening of an episode (“The Empty Hearse”) of the BBC’s *Sherlock*, Caitlin Moran, a television critic and author perhaps best known for her book *How to Be a Woman*, had no problems shaming other women by asking Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman to read an excerpt from a piece of slash fan fiction pairing their characters. Moran might have thought this would be amusing especially given the tone of this particular episode which focused on the fictionalized fans of Sherlock Holmes who have come together to discuss his “death” and theorize over how he might have faked it. The writers first poked fun at the fans within the episode itself and then the moderator shamed them further at the screening.

Chat show hosts like Graham Norton and Alan Carr also use the “overheated” reactions of fans as fodder for humor. Recently Alan Carr asked guest Tom Hiddleston if he ever Googles himself. When the actor said he didn’t, Carr replied “Well don’t – my god – the fans! The stuff that people talk about you is so twisted!” Cue fan art depicting Hiddleston’s character Loki (in the *Thor* and *Avengers* films) pole-dancing. Of course only moments before Carr had displayed enthusiasm for a suggestive scenario involving the actor and himself playing the front and back ends of a horse respectively. His own sexualized response to Hiddleston was played for laughs. The fans sexualized response was played for ridicule.

Worse yet, in my experience, are those times when these two responses to fans – shaming and being ashamed – happen simultaneously. The audience at a recent screening of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* starring Tom Hiddleston was, not unexpectedly, made up of a large number of the actor’s fans. During the intermission and after the more easily identified fans (they were wearing customized tee-shirts and carrying handbags with the actor’s face prominently displayed) passed by, an usher standing at the end of our row informed my husband and me that: “Those are Hiddlestoners.” There was something just

skirting disdain in her voice. During the next ten minutes or so of conversation however she revealed that she not only knew about, but avidly read and even analyzed fan fiction, was familiar with a wide variety of fan practices, and spoke the language of fandom fluently. All the while she was at pains to differentiate herself from those fans who more openly expressed their fandom.

As researchers I'm not sure that we've escaped that shame either. I've been to several panels just this weekend at the PCA conference where panelists have joked (somewhat uneasily) about their fan activities – justifying them as “research” – always careful to emphasize the scare quotes to an audience of like-minded “scholars.” And I'm no different. In fact, when I mentioned that recent performance of *Coriolanus* (which I saw twice) I put Shakespeare first and distanced myself from the Hiddlestoners just as much as the usher did. The act of going to see this play certainly needs no justification. That I may have seen it because of the actor might need justification under certain circumstances. That I went to see the play because of the actor's seriously dangerous cheek bones is a fact I'm not always comfortable sharing.

And this points to another issue Radway's work raised thirty years ago and one that continues unresolved. Radway put theory to the test by finding out what readers actually did with their texts, but was also careful to distance herself from her subjects and from the object of their enthusiasm. In contrast, Henry Jenkins (and subsequent practitioners in the field) embraced and celebrated his inner geek. We've been arguing about the efficacy of aca-fandom (the question of whether we need to be members of the groups we study in order to fully understand them or whether we need to keep our scholarly distance) ever since.

Thus, if Radway's work provided early practitioners in my field with a way forward, by listening to consumers of popular culture and by deftly addressing the shame attendant on that consumption, re-reading it also reminds us that we need to confront and resolve our own multiple identities as fans, as romance readers, and as academics.

### **Works Cited**

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