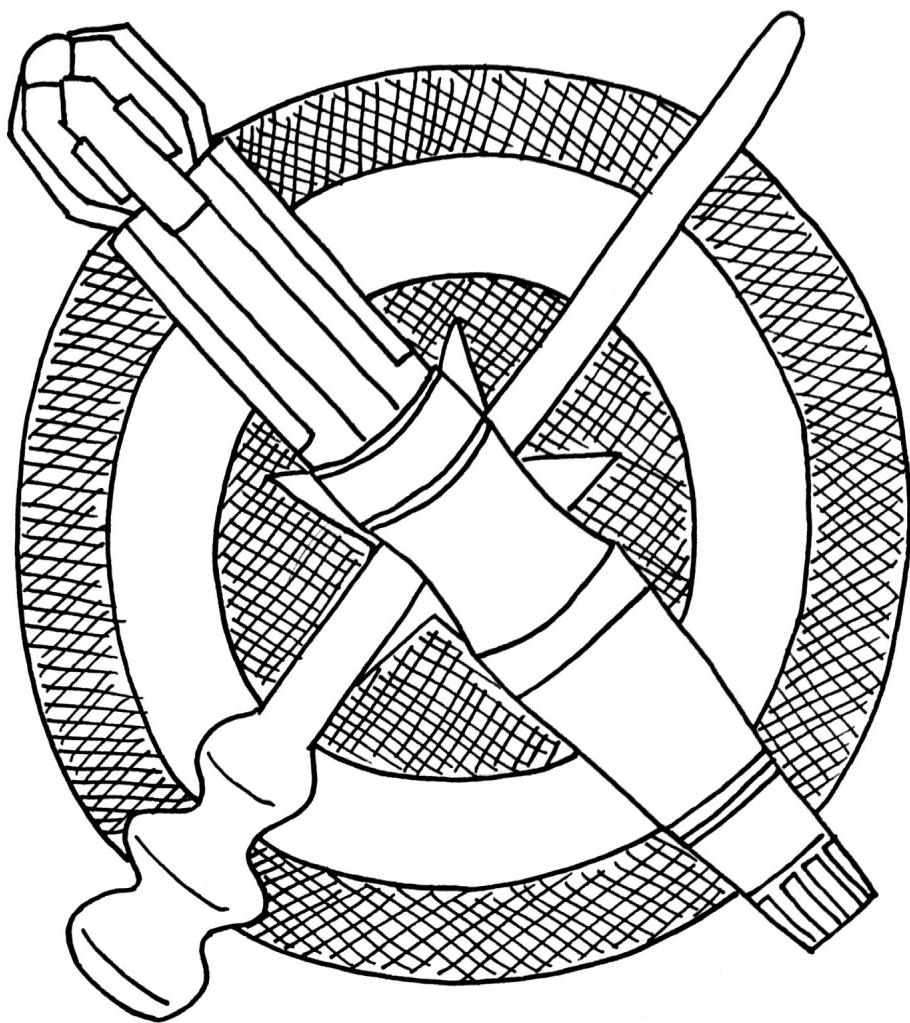


# FANGIRL 4 LIFE



FANDOM, FEMINISM, & THE FICTIONAL  
GIRLS WHO TAUGHT ME TO BE STRONG

# defining terms

This is a zine about fandom. More specifically, it's a zine about **fangirls**: the community and infrastructure we've built, our fannish history, the characters we love and the stories we tell about them. If you're not in my particular corner of fandom, parts of this zine might seem a little inside baseball, so let me get a few basic definitions out of the way.

**Fandom** is the community of fans who interact online and at conventions.

**Science fiction fandom** originated in the late 1930s, at the dawn of the Golden Age of science fiction. Historically, the demographics of literary SF fandom are less diverse along lines of race, age, gender, and sexuality, but that is changing.

**Media fandom** is the community of fans who focus on mostly Western, mostly English-language books, films, and TV shows. This community traces its roots to Star Trek in the late 60s. It has historically been majority-female, and has largely focused on the production of creative **fanwork**, such as **fanfiction**, **fanvids**, and **fanart**.

**Slash** is a subgenre of fanfiction that focuses on queer relationships. Most of the characters who appear in these stories are not LGBT in **canon**-- that is, in the source material the fanwork is based upon. There is a long history of fans interpreting canon based on perceived queer subtext, and writing stories that reflect that interpretation. Slash is not, by definition, pornographic-- it often is, but it is defined by the presence of a non-canonical queer relationship, not by how explicit it is.

If you are curious about the history of fandom, or require further clarification, **fanlore.org** is an excellent resource.

# the brief history of a fangirl

When I was seven, I read *Matilda*. She taught me to love books, to stand up to people who abuse those weaker than them, and that I might wind up with superpowers if I used my brain.

When I was eight, I read *A Wrinkle in Time*. I fell in love with other worlds, and longed to travel to them, and saw myself in prickly, smart, uncertain Meg.

When I was ten, I listened to the soundtrack of the *Les Miserables* musical until it wore a groove in my brain. Eponine was too tragically romantic for words, even if Marius wasn't exactly the sort of guy I'd take a bullet for.

When I was twelve, I had a bad year. A “sorry, but we can't be seen eating lunch with you anymore” kind of a year. I was awkward, and lonely, and I desperately missed having friends.

Thank goodness for the Internet.

I started posting on a message board for fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where I was the youngest poster by about ten years. Most of the adults I was talking to had been in my position as a kid, and having their friendly, encouraging voices on my screen, telling me I'd grow up and away from the misery of middle school, made a huge difference in my ability to cope with bullying and rejection.

Through high school, I loved *Buffy* first and best, though I was happy to devour most of the SF/F media that crossed my path. I started making a dent in Terry Pratchett's massive Discworld series; I jumped on board the *Save Farscape* campaign. I still posted on my *Buffy* board, but most of my fannish interaction took place on Livejournal, where there was a huge community of fans making fanwork for a huge variety of fandoms. I was still deeply, embarrassingly socially awkward in a lot of ways-- bad at reading social cues, unaware that people who didn't share my interests didn't want to hear about them at length. By this point,

though, I'd made real-world friends who either liked the things I liked or appreciated my enthusiasm, which helped a lot.

I finished high school right as *Buffy* ended, and it's kind of hard to say which was the bigger turning point. That was when I started feeling confident enough in my own writing to post it publicly, and the positive feedback I got for my fanfiction encouraged me to keep writing, though I struggled with finishing stories.

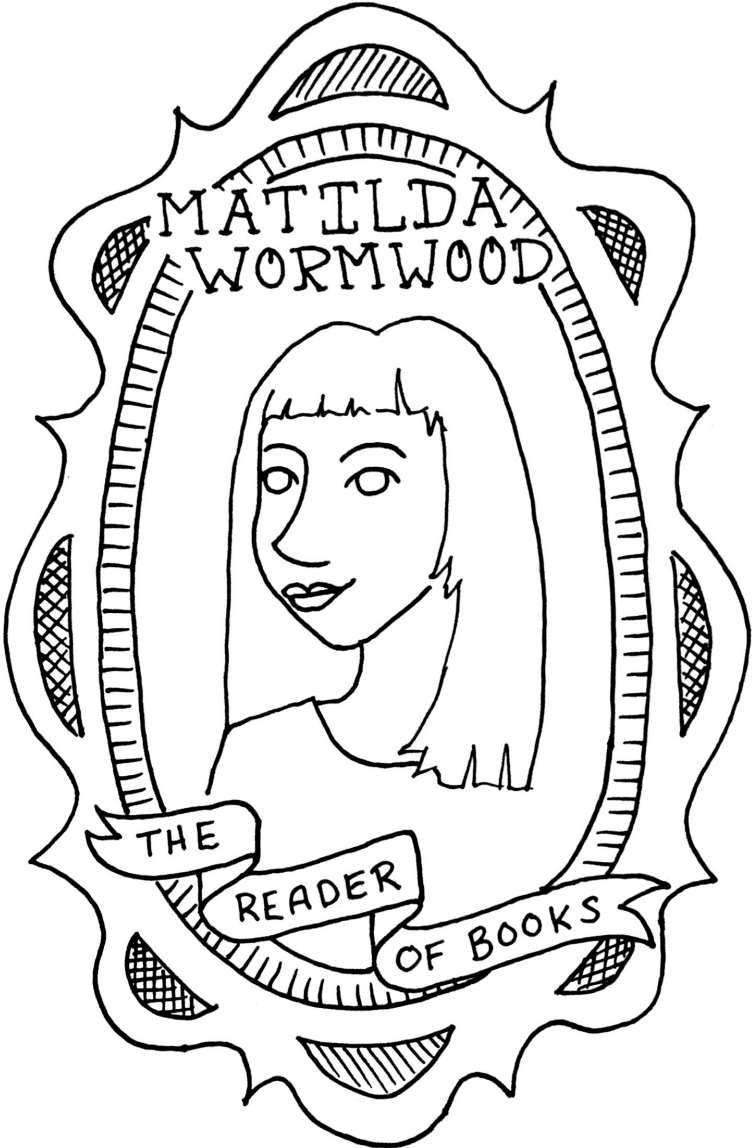
I have to admit to being a late bloomer: I was well out of high school before I started reading and writing slash. Before that, I avoided romantic and sexually explicit fanfiction; once I was ready to read it, though, slash was unbelievably compelling. I was already reading SF/F because I love to see characters in high-stakes, world-altering situations; I had loved *Buffy* in part because Buffy's heart getting broken didn't stop her from saving the world. Now I had an endless supply of stories where characters had to juggle romance and world-saving, the logical extensions of relationships marked by intense emotional bonds.

College and DC Comics are sort of inextricably linked, in my head. I probably spent more time and energy on the latter than the former. The trouble was, comics aren't the most welcoming fandom-- while I had a cohort of people (mostly women) from media fandom who'd all gotten interested in comics around the same time, the larger fandom and the industry itself were ruled by older men, who were often actively hostile to anyone who didn't fit their image of what a comics fan looked like. I still love superheroes, but after a few years in the fandom I soured on comics, largely because I'd been made to feel so unwelcome.

Since then, I've bounced around between fandoms, more engaged in the fan activity that grows up around a canon than in any one piece of source material. There's media I love, of course-- shows like *Avatar: the Last Airbender*, books like the Vorkosigan series; more recently I've come back around to superheroes by way of the Marvel movieverse. There was also a regrettable *Stargate: Atlantis* period, but let's leave that be.

It's the interaction with other fans that I'm here for, these days, more than any one piece of media: the conversations we have, the stories we tell each other. There are people who have been my friends for half my life, though fandom; there are fanworks that have moved me as much as or more than the canon they're based on. Fandom is my home; fans are the people I feel at home with. That's not changing.

PATRON SAINTS OF  
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:  
AN ARBITRARY SELECTION, PART I



# Fandoms I Have Loved: Buffy the Vampire Slayer

I can't talk about my fannish experience without talking about Buffy. It was the first fandom I discovered online, the first community of fans that welcomed me. And as a source text, it's a pretty great place to start being a fan.

The first episode of *Buffy* I ever saw was called "Invisible Girl." It told the story of a teenaged girl who was so ignored by her peers that she turned transparent.

This, needless to say, resonated.

I was hooked, right from the start, by the show's sharp-edged portrayal of adolescence, its acknowledgement that high school is hard for everyone-- even the beautiful and popular.

On *Buffy*, though, the unpopular kids saved the world on a regular basis. I've never had much patience for narratives where the only thing at stake is the health of someone's relationship, where pretty, wealthy people stab each other in the back over money and status. Buffy generally stabs people in the front, because they're trying to drink her blood. Which seems reasonable.

One of the smartest things I've ever heard said about *Buffy* is this: when you're a teenager, everything feels like the end of the world, but it never actually is. In Buffy's world, the emotional reality of her teen years is reflected in the monster-filled reality of the world around her. If it feels like the end of the world, for Buffy, that's because it probably is.

She wasn't my favorite character, though. As a teen, I related to Willow on a level that was uncomfortably intense-- she was my

role model, one of the only girls I saw in any media, anywhere, who I felt a sense of kinship with. I also took strength from her: if Willow could be a hero, if Willow could save the world, then couldn't I be strong too?

Later, when 'awkward smart girl' stopped feeling like a comfortable identity-- when I couldn't \*find\* a comfortable identity-- it was Xander I felt closest to, as he struggled to find a role to grow up into. As a teen, I never identified that strongly with Buffy herself.

Now, though? I get her. Because the world never stops throwing challenges at you, and you never really feel ready for them. You just have to keep up the good fight, even when it makes you tired, even when it makes you feel miserable and alone. And you come out stronger on the other side, every time.

Both the show and the fandom were environments that nurtured my budding feminism. While problematic in places, *Buffy* always told stories from the position that girls deserved to be strong, that power was as much our right as anyone else's. I've always loved the way the show ends: after years of feeling isolated by her strength, Buffy figures out that the solution to her loneliness is not to give up her power, but to share it. To find other girls who are ready to be strong, and give them the same chance she'd been given.

The way I related to *Buffy* shifted as I got older-- I was twelve when I started watching, and at twenty-eight it's almost a different show. I can see its faults, now, see the places where it wasn't made with as much care as perhaps it should have been. But I also see how hard it tried to give us characters who were flawed and real, with depth and complexity and nuance. And I'm grateful for the fandom, for the friends I made there, for the larger community I've been a part of ever since.

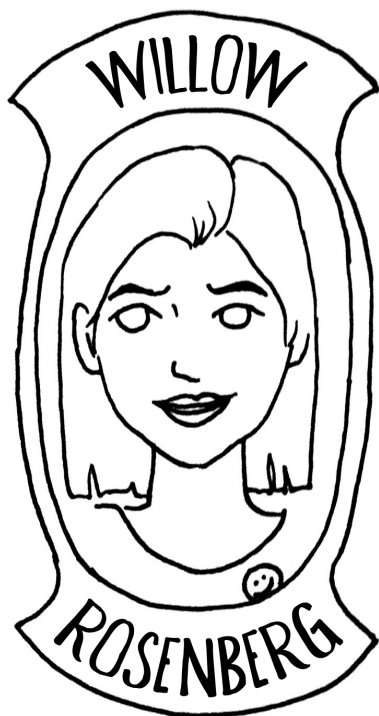
Believe me when I say this: *Buffy* changed my life.



WHEN IN DOUBT,  
BLOW SHIT UP.



YOU ARE STRONGER  
THAN YOU LOOK.



YOUR TALENTS AREN'T HIDDEN.

LESSONS I  
LEARNED FROM  
AWESOME  
FICTIONAL  
WOMEN





FAITH AND DOUBT  
CAN COEXIST



IF YOU DESERVE BETTER,  
WALK AWAY.



BEING STRONG  
DOESN'T MEAN  
YOUR HEART  
NEVER GETS  
BROKEN

# PATRON SAINTS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AN ARBITRARY SELECTION, PART 2



# a brief list of really important fanfic tropes

1. Best friends who fall in love.
2. Teenagers with the fate of the world on their shoulders.
3. When one character knows the other in their secret identity and out of it, but they haven't made the connection yet, and they're kind of in love with both versions.
4. Girls who are feminine and strong and smart all at once.
5. Girls who don't have to be feminine to be loved.
6. When everyone involved in a love triangle realizes that love triangles are stupid and threesomes fix everything.
7. Characters who realize that actually, if the relationship is **that** intense and meaningful and life-changing, it probably means they're in love.
8. Groundhog Day AUs, always-a-girl AUs, coffee shop AUs.
10. Crossovers.
11. First kisses. Best enemies. Soulbounds.
12. When the characters are so clearly in love and so clearly never going to do anything about it that other characters, aliens, bad guys, and possibly the universe itself all start creating situations where they have to make out. You know. Because the world will end otherwise.
13. Stories that are told with found artifacts-- old letters, magazine clippings, book reviews, scrapbook pages.
14. Stories about people who aren't a part of the grand drama, whose lives intersect with Our Heroes in tiny ways or not at all.
15. Stories that shine a light on a part of the world that the main characters would never go to and the canon would never touch.
16. Characters who have sex for the first time and it's awkward and rushed and messy and imperfect.
17. Characters who have sex for the first time and it's exactly right, in every detail just what they've been hoping it would be.
18. First times, in general.
19. Love stories, in general.

# PATRON SAINTS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AN ARBITRARY SELECTION, PART 3



# Geek Girl Cred

## (fuck you, I have plenty)

If you're not active in fannish spaces on the Internet, you might not be aware that over the past year or so, there's been a lot of ongoing conversation about who counts as a 'real' geek.

I'm being too polite. Actually, there's been a lot of bitching and moaning from entitled fanboys who don't want to tolerate people who look different from them in their secret clubhouse, and they like to accuse those people of being 'fake geeks.'

The conversation gets derailed a lot. People insist that there really are such things as fake geeks-- that bandwagons are being jumped on, that poses are being affected. But I don't see it happening all that much.

What I do see are real, rock-solid geeks with impeccable cred getting told they don't belong in geeky spaces, because they don't happen to fit a particular narrow mold.

I see female cosplayers being told they're just looking for male attention. I see fanartists told they're wrong for redrawing characters with brown skin. I see fanwriters mocked because their stories-- written with an encyclopedic knowledge of the source and a hell of a lot of love and effort-- happen to contain sex or romance.

Basically, I see a lot of shitty, entitled behavior-- a bunch of gatekeepers who don't have any more right to the doors they're defending than the people they're trying to push out. People who-- surprise! are mostly women and minorities.

I'm sick of it.

I give negative fucks about someone who started watching Doctor Who last week and thinks it's really cool. That person does me no harm; someday, they could be my friend. The guy who, upon hearing that I like comics, starts in with the scornful pop-quizzing? That guy is a problem.

Oh, they make excuses for their behavior. They claim that it's because they suffered for their geekdom, that they were picked on and ostracized for it, and that the people they're trying to exclude didn't earn their cred the way they did. That's bullshit, of course, but it provides a convenient cover for sneering at people whose sole crime is liking something they like while not looking or acting exactly like them.

The perfectly-made-up cosplayer who spent three hundred man-hours building a screen-accurate costume isn't doing it to get boys to like her, and if she is she's picked a funny way to go about it. The fanartist who's drawing South Asian superheroes isn't doing it because she hates the original versions-- she *loves* the original versions, enough to dream about what they would be like if they looked like her.

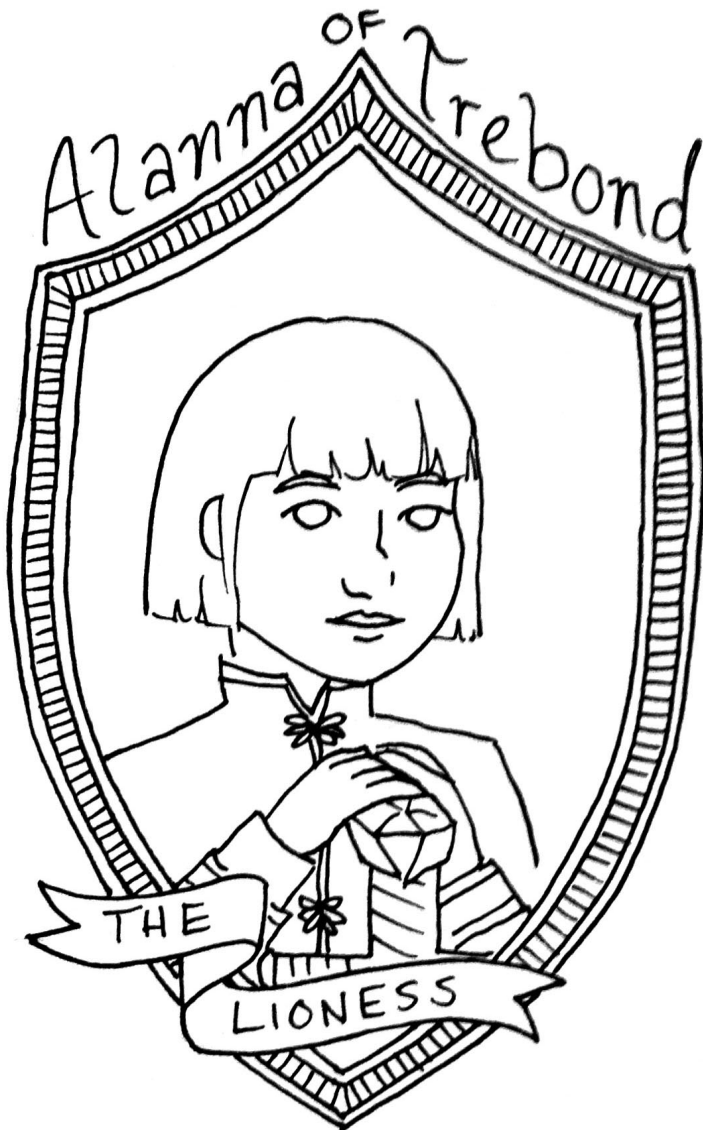
There's an army of fanwriters who've been reimagining the stories they love for as long as they've had technology to share those stories. (And remember, we're not just talking about mimeographed Trek zines, although that's where we got organized-- people wrote this stuff for Sherlock Holmes!) They write because they want things the stories aren't giving them, because the stories come from a society with all the same problems as fandom. Fandom is sexist because society still says it's okay to be sexist. Fandom treats minority fans poorly because society treats minorities poorly. We are not a world apart, as much as the old guard wants to pretend that fans are superior life forms. If we were, I wouldn't still be having to fight this fight. And yet, here I am.

I have self-identified as a geek since the age of *twelve*. I spent my childhood just as picked-on, just as ostracized, as any 'typical' geek-- if not more so, because girls aren't supposed to be geeky, right? I was told that I could be a geek or I could be a girl, and when I chose to be a geek I was told-- by other geeks-- that I still didn't belong.

Well, fuck that noise. I'm a fangirl. I'm obsessive and overenthusiastic about the things I love. I write fanfiction, I go to cons, I cosplay. I know more about Batman than you. I'm not new here. I'm not going anywhere. I'm part of a community of female fans that *built* a lot of the things you're claiming we have no right to. Now that we're speaking up about it, you're upset? Too fucking bad.

I'm a geek. If you don't like it, *you* can leave, because I belong here just as much as anyone else.

PATRON SAINTS OF  
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:  
AN ARBITRARY SELECTION, PART 4



# fanwork is (sometimes) subversive: a recs list

Fanwork (defined here as transformative works made by fans: fanfiction, fanart, fanvids, and so on) can be a lot of things. Wish fulfillment, id spelunking, scratching an itch that the canon doesn't satisfy.

Sometimes it's about getting the happy ending you were denied; sometimes it's about seeing how badly things could have gone. Sometimes you want to see True Love win out, and sometimes you just want to imagine your favorite characters bonking. Conveniently, sometimes that's the same thing.

Sometimes, though, it's a political statement. (Sometimes, even when you don't mean for it to be.)

When we make fanwork, we aren't just thinking about canon as it is. We're thinking about the canon that could have been: the show that didn't have a shitty attitude towards women; the book that wasn't mostly about white people; the movie that wasn't afraid to include queer characters.

The following is a list of fanworks that, in addition to being exceptionally good, don't shy from being critical of canon. These are works that take their source texts apart and put them back together in new shapes; works that make you wonder why the original wouldn't take these risks. I hope they change the way you see their canons.

**Note:** Including links proved unwieldy for most of these recs, but a quick Google of title and author should locate them easily. Also, **archiveofourown.org** is a wonderful resource for these and many more pieces of excellent fanfic.



**Vid: Women's Work, by Luminosity | Supernatural**

This vid was genuinely unsettling the first time I watched it. Lum's song choice ratchets up the disturbingness of the vid's content; it's hard to watch and not start to feel like something is seriously amiss with the show for having this footage in it to begin with. Warning: images of violence against women.

**Fic: Modern Love, by Penknife | Discworld**

This story has a pretty reasonable premise: dwarves are at least as complicated as humans. That means that not all dwarves fit into tidy categories of gender or sexuality.

**Fic: The First Time, by afrai | Star Trek**

This story shows us the Starfleet we don't see in canon-- the unglamorous, unadventurous work that mostly gets done by people who don't look like Jim Kirk. It also does a brilliant job of extrapolating a non-Western culture forward into the Trek universe's future.

**Vid: "White" and Nerdy, by Talitha78 | Psych**

Makes a really obvious point really well: you don't have to be white to be a huge, embarrassing nerd.

**Fic: notes from the wizarding world | Harry Potter**

Hosted at [livesandliesofwizards.tumblr.com](https://livesandliesofwizards.tumblr.com), this sprawling, years-long collaborative project (each mini-story is based on an accompanying photo) pokes into corners of the wizarding world we never see in the books, airs out their dirty laundry, and holds their secrets up to the light.

**Art: Kirk and her crew, by Celestedoodles | Star Trek**

Amazing set of drawings of a gender-flipped Enterprise crew. Kind of makes you wish the original was more like this.

**The Light Always Burning, by Raven | Nation**

One of my all-time favorite small fandom stories, it pushes the themes of the book forward through history so well. It's critical not of the book, but of the world for not living up to the book.

# PATRON SAINTS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AN ARBITRARY SELECTION, PART 5



# NECKBEARD POP QUIZ

## for fangirls with nothing to prove

The next time your geek credentials are called into question by some random asshole, present him with this handy quiz and a #2 pencil. Keep a few copies on hand when you go to cons-- you'll probably need them.

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1. Who is Bjo Trimble? Describe her extensive contributions to fandom.

2. Kandy Fong is widely regarded as the originator of the fanvid, and the creator of the oldest surviving proto-vid, a Star Trek slideshow set to which Joni Mitchell song?

- a. A Case of You
- b. Both Sides Now
- c. Big Yellow Taxi
- d. Court and Spark

3. Match the following women to their fannish contributions:

Joan Winston	Coined the term 'Mary Sue'
Diane Marchant	Organized first major Trek con
Sherna Burley & Devra Langsam	Dubbed 'Grandmother of Trek'
Paula Smith	Published the first Trek fanzine
Shirley Maiewski	Wrote first published K/S slash

4. True or false? In 2010, Paula Smith said in an interview:

“The SF guys didn't want to talk about things that women were interested in. Buck Coulson, an SF (and U.N.C.L.E.) writer, used to say, "There is no subtle discrimination against Trek fans in science fiction--it's blatant." And the women said, "The heck with this," and started making their own zines and organizing their own conventions....”

# FANGIRL 4 LIFE

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## **Pop Quiz Answers:**

1. Bjo Trimble was the original Trek BNF. She ran the fan campaign that, in part, prevented Star Trek's cancellation, and was instrumental in the formation of both Star Trek's fan community and of media fandom as a whole.
2. Both Sides Now
3. Joan Winston organized the first major Trek con  
Diane Marchant wrote the first published K/S slash  
Sherna Comerford Burley and Devra Langsam published the first Trek fanzine  
Paula Smith coined the term 'Mary Sue'  
Shirley Maiewski was dubbed 'Grandmother of Trek'
4. True, of course.