

Review

Kavita Mudan Finn (ed.), *Fan Phenomena: Game of Thrones*, Bristol: Intellect, 2017. 203pp. ISBN:978-1-78320-784-8.

Judith May Fathallah, *Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2017. 233pp. ISBN: 978-90-8964-995-9.

Anthony Gierzynski with Kathryn Eddy, *Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 118pp. ISBN-13: 97-1-4214-1033-3.

A Declaration of Interest to begin. I am currently one of the coordinators of the major international audience research project on *Game of Thrones* (see www.questeros.org). The three books that I am reviewing here each make claims (the third indirectly) to tell at least part of the story of audience engagements with this fictional universe. Each one, in the course of its argument, makes claims and assertions which to me are at the very least open to question. Important claims and assertions, and ones which seem to me to typify the kinds of public debate which accompany a series of this kind. And I am hoping that we will shortly, from our project, be in a position to broach some of those questions.

The three studies are quite different from each other. Finn's is an addition to the growing Fan Phenomena library, which report and self-diagnose the doings of particular fandoms, ranging from *The Lord of the Rings* to Jane Austen (there are 19 such at the time of writing). The second is a theoretically dense exploration, from within the fan studies domain, of the fanfiction associated with *Game of Thrones*, alongside *Sherlock* and *Supernatural*. The third is a slim volume reporting a sequence of experimental researches into the likely political influence of the Harry Potter series on the generation of readers and

viewers who grew up with them – but filtered through a theoretical framework which pretty much rules out the possibility that *Game of Thrones* might ever play such a role (and a subsequent Presentation [Gierzynski et al., 2015] pursues just that exclusion). All are for sure interesting and valuable – but each is in its own way significantly problematic, I believe. All concur in disagreeing, in effect, with Ian McShane’s (who appeared as ‘Septon Ray’, in the Sixth Season) dismissal of the series as just ‘tits and dragons’, in finding strands of seriousness and wider implications in audience engagements with the series. Each does it in different ways.

Finn’s edited collection, first. As in all in this series, the book collects together brief overview essays, critical explorations of particular features, interviews with key players within the fandom, some ‘position-takes’, some headlined quotes, and one or two wider exploratory pieces. There are in this volume, among other things, summaries of the main forms and places where fans congregate to talk about the books and the HBO adaptation – and the relations between them, of course. There are overviews of the range of merchandise – both official and otherwise. There is an interesting interview with the two fans (Elio Garcia and Linda Antonsson) who got the chance to work with George RR Martin on a ‘definitive’ volume about his ‘universe’ (*The World of Ice and Fire*). There are explorations of particular sites (eg Tumblr) where many feminists congregated to criticise what they saw as the TV series’ bad treatment of its women characters, and in particular its displays of sex and violence – while in a semi-reverse direction disabled activists gather to welcome, if in complicated ways, its handling of various disabilities. There are local examinations of particular ‘moments’ (eg, the nearly-sexual relationship between the Hound and Sansa Stark). And – my favourite two pieces – there are really thoughtful pieces about the piratical and queer reception of the series in India, and some results from a survey done in the USA, which produced some fascinating evidence of the take-up of the series into people’s everyday lives. These all make it one of the better books in this series.

But, to me like others in the series, it suffers at various points from having very little critical distance from the people, debates and events that it covers. It ‘takes sides’ with (particular groups of) fans, in ways which reduces the book’s capacity to help us think through the issues. For instance, Julie Escurignan’s survey of unofficial merchandising (particularly accessible via Etsy) talks about some of the unofficial ‘takes’ on the series’ most famous sayings. She muses on an apron which ‘subverts’ the most famous – “Winter Is Coming” – which retains the font but rewrites it as: “Dinner Is Coming”. This is claimed as an illustration of the ‘breadth of creativity’ (p.43) that fans of the show display – although she has to report that its creator had not at first even watched the series. This surely stretches and flattens the notions both of ‘creativity’, and of ‘fans’. To do *anything with anything* from the series can now become an instance of fan creative appropriation.

The book is prone also to ‘preferred positions’ – notably those which fit with the current American-sourced liberal notions of ‘social justice’ (the ones which have of course just taken a pummelling with Trump’s election). So, Briony Hannell’s essay on feminist debates about sex and sexual violence in the series rather *confirms* their criticisms, instead

of seeing them as *positions* which can be unpicked and thereby helping to reveal the particular discursive repertoires, and kinds of feminism, which are at work here. This recurs in Kapp-Klote's introduction to the topic of gendered responses, where it is pretty much assumed that we will agree that the series poses big problems from a gender and identity perspective – rather than asking what this might reveal about various kinds of identity politics. This sits curiously, mind, alongside Beth Walker's essay on the fascination with the 'brute' Hound (Sandor Clegane) in fanfic stories (almost all written by women) which frequently sexualise his encounters with Sansa in decidedly chancy ways. This sets up tensions that I can't help wondering about, concerning what might be concealed inside the book's overall bid to address 'fannish interests' which have 'tapped into contemporary Western attitudes to the world as a fundamentally broken place' (p.7). (I have to say that the essay on representations of disability is much more nuanced in this respect – acknowledging the complexity of these, while drawing attention to the fact that the disabled characters are overwhelmingly male – but without rushing to any kind of instant explanation of this.) If there is an overall 'position' in this book, it has to be a lament about the near-collapse of hope. And *Game of Thrones* (and all that fans do with it) slips and slides between being a symptom of and a commentary on the problem.

I must admit that, from my (personal and research) point of view, the most interesting essay comes near the end: a report on a small but fascinating sounding survey, clearly mainly conducted in the USA, into the reception of the programme. Although presented a bit too informally for my liking (we never actually get to hear how many people completed their survey), Jennifer Crumley and Amy Stavola uncover some fascinating ways in which people have taken up the series into their everyday personal and public lives (from the man who has found it to be a resource for overcoming shyness at parties, to the people who use names and references from the series in political debates).

Judith Fathallah's book is evidently a PhD conversion – and none the worse for that. But it does induce a certain chewiness. Fathallah proposes a new way of thinking about fan fiction. She pitches her work as a variant on the strong tendency in fan studies to draw on Pierre Bourdieu's ideas around 'taste cultures', and as a move away from an over-celebratory attitude to fans. Instead, she turns to the work of Michel Foucault, in several ways. First, she adopts his general approach to discourses: that these are contingent, distributed and localised, rather than centrally organised; that they are in themselves both acts of power, and responses to power; and the need to attend to the conditions of their emergence. She also picks up and runs with his argument (contra Roland Barthes on the 'death of the author') that we need to explore the *functions of the idea of the author*. This last is central to her investigation of fan fiction, and its relations with the canonised official text. For all these changes, though, there are some clear continuities with tendencies within fan studies. The normative impulse, for instance, is still there – well exemplified by her wish to designate some stories 'conservative' and others 'progressive'. Sometimes, frankly, this reads more like her *liking* some versions and not others. For example, if it is 'conservative'

to have a fan story motivated by biological impulses in males and females, why does this become 'progressive' simply because the genders are messed with? (See p.85.)

Fathallah adopts the interesting tactic of evaluating fanfics by the degree of attention and welcome that they get from readers. This provides her with a sorting criterion for which ones in particular to attend to. Mind, she does seem to me to 'cheat' a bit from time to time, when (for instance, p.128) she picks out themes from stories which have just a few positives and no negatives – taking this to be a sign of acceptance into 'fanon' (the agreed currency of themes among fans). Under each of her three case-studies, she examines a vast number of fan stories, evaluating them for their implicit and explicit moves away from their source 'texts'. In the case of *Game of Thrones* (which is what particularly interests this review), she goes in via a consideration of how 'authority' is constructed – first, in relation to the power struggles within Martin's universe (which are astutely analysed). Her examination of authority follows Max Weber's classic tripartite distinction of traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal kinds. But then, with a slide that for me raises all kinds of tricky questions, she addresses in the same vein the 'authority' relations between Martin, HBO and fans. She starts from Martin's own declared dislike and discouragement of fan fiction, labelling his position as that of an 'Author-God'.

There seems to me to be a significant paradox in her work as a whole. Having adopted as her founding position Foucault's notions of the contingency and distributed nature of discourses, in fact she falls back on a single binding factor: the problem of the Author-God being an 'already-empowered White male', who seeks to define and delimit what will count as the 'acceptable' text. I really do want to query this singularity. For many years I worked in the field of comicbook research, where I encountered and watched an evolving battle between on the one hand the publishers, and on the other the writers and artists. These battles took very concrete forms. Could artists get back and sell their original artwork (especially after comicbook fans hunted down their names, which were for a long time withheld)? Did creators of storyworlds have any rights over the use and development of their characters – including how they might be translated into other media (notably film)? The battles over these took twenty years, and are still not fully resolved. I tell this story to illustrate the dangers of reducing issues covering ownership, copyright, trademarks, and moral rights (see Jane Gaines' [1991] founding work in this area) to a singularly understood 'author-function' driven by 'White males'. Similar battles have gone on in software firms, in biomedical areas, and so on – and even in some universities over the 'ownership' of teaching materials, and research outputs (especially where these become marketable). Of course there are important discursive facets to these battles, but they are certainly much more than that.

Her work on *Game of Thrones* does come up with some interesting detailed findings. She notes for instance that *Game of Thrones* fiction gives very little attention to 'the commons' (ie, the Smallfolk of Westeros), even though fanfic is itself very much constituted 'from below', and even in principle 'subversive' (p.146). Instead fanon has tended to put forward new kinds of charismatic and rational-legal authority, with different central figures

(often women). This bothers her for not being as 'progressive' as she had hoped. But in some senses she remains more traditionally celebratory than perhaps she realises. When she lists possible reasons for this shortfall, all of the things suggested are *external conditions*, none of them to do with the characteristics of the fans themselves. (See p.155). Fans are effectively beyond criticism.

Anthony Gierzynski's book is very different. It is situated in the heartland of American mass communications research. The book reports a series of experiments, almost inevitably using students at various American universities as proxies for a generation, to ask: is there evidence that growing up and engaging seriously with the Harry Potter series leads to more 'liberal' views of the world? The research combines a kind of character/narrative analysis to identify a series of 'messages' he believes underpin Rowling's story-world. These messages include: accepting diversity; being sceptical without being cynical; resolving conflicts without violence or torture; and judging government leaders as corrupt and incompetent (the wordings of these are stereotypically 'American', it has to be said – almost as though Rowling was being offered citizenship ...). Using traditional questionnaire and statistical techniques, Gierzynski seeks out evidence that engagement with the books associates with greater liberality than otherwise – always putting in the standard caution that proving causation is harder than correlation.

There are of course the usual problems with this kind of experimental research. But this is not what most interests me. What is striking is the array of theoretical positions he adorns his book with – all derived from mainstream media psychology and political science, and all to do with the way the 'audience' is typically conceptualised there. These theories include: identification theory (roughly, that our attraction to central characters makes us more prone to align with their attitudes – a topic that has bothered me for a long time – see for instance Barker, 1989 (Chapter 5), and 2005); transportation theory (that fictions take us to places where we 'let go' and are more likely to be influenced); incidental learning theory (that you *think* you are watching for pleasure and relaxation, but that's not all you are getting!); cultivation theory (that repeated encounters with a kind of experience compile influentially); political socialisation theory (that the teenage period is a latency period for the formation of abiding values and attitudes); and so on. As a result of all these, Harry Potter's universe is predicted to be a powerful resource for 'liberalisation', in particular for the generation who grew up alongside it. But there is in there an implication – which Gierzynski is happy to spell out in the later Presentation – that *Game of Thrones* cannot possibly work in the same direction. Not having 'good' characters at its heart, not wearing 'kind and gentle values' on its sleeve, makes *GoT* problematic for him. Or as the Presentations' authors put it:

The Transportation-Imagery Model suggests that the state of narrative transportation that occurs when one becomes immersed in a story makes the internalization of such lessons of these stories highly likely. As the model predicts, we find that exposure to *Game of Thrones* and *House of Cards* is

associated with and a likely cause of an alteration in the politically relevant beliefs of those exposed to these shows.

The implications claimed are huge, that a series like *Game of Thrones* can lead to 'lower support for welfare spending and higher support for punitive criminal justice and terrorism policy, suggesting that the effect of *GoT* [...] may go beyond affecting how just their audiences view the world or the extent to which ends justify the means, but also indirectly affect specific political attitudes as well.' (Gierzynski et al, 2015). The notion of 'belief in a just world' is for him an obviously positive political value, and part of a larger 'value'-scheme which again just reeks of American self-perceptions. I don't wish to challenge his general position that 'that which we view and read for entertainment can play a role in shaping how we see the real world of politics'. But the theorisation of the *way this works* is drowned in the theoretical assumptions of uncritical mass communications theory.

So, as someone right now engaged in a major project on the audiences of *Game of Thrones*, what am I saying about these three books (+ essay)? It is right and good that researchers of different persuasions and orientations are willing to pay serious attention to the significance of a phenomenon like *Game of Thrones*. But the various combinations of normative assumptions, theoretical presuppositions and methodological preferences need serious checking. 'The audience' is neither singular, nor trackable along single dimensions. If three decades of contemporary careful audience research has taught us anything, it is the sheer variety of responses, and of communities of response, to all such cultural productions.

Fans are not *that* special, and certainly not self-evidently the most 'radical' respondents to the series – although they are for sure distinctive enough to warrant close attention to the distinctive contribution made by their productive online engagements. But 'fan' is not synonymous with 'committed audience'. Bringing into play people's engagement with for instance cosplay, or gaming, or fanfiction generate their own dynamics, and evaluative criteria which are going to need careful unpicking.

'Theory' has to play a different role than it does in media psychology-influenced research, where it reports in advance what to expect, and then structures research in ways that can hardly fail to find what it predicts. (And mass communications researchers, for heaven's sake, need to open their windows wide enough to notice that there have been critiques of their assumptions.)

Game of Thrones is for sure a significant contemporary phenomenon – the intensity of debates around it alone proves that. I don't have a single idea what we are going to find through our *Game of Thrones* project, about the structuring of different audiences' responses to it. How will favourite (and most admired) characters be chosen by different kinds of people? How will people's ways of viewing the series, and attitudes to things like Spoilers, relate to their wider judgements on it? What will differentiate people who follow the series 'just for enjoyment', and those who watch because of wider contemporary resonances? And so on, through many other questions. I am glad to have been provoked

by these three books, but it has turned out to be mainly a provocation to be ready to query, check and challenge.

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