

Abby Madar

It's Not Perfect, But It's Ours: Parasocial Relationships with LGBTQ+ Characters in *Legends of Tomorrow* Fanfiction

I know some people who make my life better by being in it. They make me laugh, are there for me when I'm sad, and inspire me to be my best authentic self. In this case, I am referring to the fictional characters in the TV series *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*—specifically Sara Lance and Ava Sharpe. I could also refer to my family and friends in the same way. However, the relationships I have with my family and friends are considered real, while my relationships with fictional characters typically are not. People like me spend a lot of time with fictional characters. We watch (and rewatch) the series, and we engage in fan spaces for additional content, like reading and writing fanfiction. They live in our heads as we go about our days. Still, people assert that they are not important because they are not real. Saying this invalidates the experience of everyone who has had parasocial relationships, which are one-sided emotional attachments, with fictional characters. There are certain marginalized identities, LGBTQ+ people for instance, who have also been historically invalidated and told they were not real. Someone who identifies as LGBTQ+ developing parasocial relationships with fictional LGBTQ+ characters can be a profound and empowering experience.

LGBTQ+ people and their parasocial relationships with fictional characters need more exploration. Work that has already been done correctly identifies the importance of positive representation of queer identities, but does not go much further than that (Hirshfield and Metcalf-Stotler). I decided to analyze fanfiction alongside parasocial relationships and LGBTQ+ identity

and representation. My research aims to show how fanfiction can demonstrate and be used to understand parasocial relationships between LGBTQ+ fans and LGBTQ+ characters, and vice versa: how parasocial relationships prompt and affect the writing of fanfiction. Writing is a powerful outlet in which people are able to explore parasocial bonds.

The overall historical and societal view on all three focuses of my research is that they are deviant. Being LGBTQ+ is viewed as an identity that deviates from the norms of being heterosexual and cisgender (Hirshfield and Metcalf-Stotler), having parasocial relationships with characters is not seen as something “normal” people do (Shackleford), and fanfiction is thought of as a shameful and lesser form of writing (Jenkins). I argue that none of these are true, and that while there is no “normal” person, anyone can benefit from emotionally connecting with characters and from writing stories about them (Shackleford et al.). Marginalized identities will often benefit the most from having such a space to express themselves.

Literature Review

My research centered on parasocial relationships and writing fanfiction to explore how they are emotionally fulfilling, especially to those who are already othered by society for their identity. The literature shows how relationships with fictional characters begin with an actively invested reader or viewer, and how we can use those parasocial studies to analyze and understand how that investment manifests through fanfiction.

Self-Sponsored Writing

Writing is the framework where we can see parasocial relationships allowing an author to explore and develop emotional wellbeing. Fanfiction, creative writing about characters or worlds

created by someone other than the fanfiction author, is a tool to demonstrate these very personal emotional attachments. Parasocial relationships do not require any more than an internal connection, but they can be developed even further through writing fanfiction. Fanfiction is an example of self-sponsored writing—writing that people do just because they want to, not because it is assigned for school or work (Roozen 137). These stories are often posted online to be shared with other fans on websites such as archiveofourown.org, popularly known as “ao3.” People write fanfiction because they have attachments to pre-existing characters. Because fanfiction authors are already passionate about their chosen characters, by choosing to write about them they can become passionate about writing itself (Jenkins 185). As people write fanfiction, they are working on their writing skills, expressing and developing their parasocial relationships, participating in the source material, and becoming part of a community of other fans and writers. All of these things create very meaningful experiences for both writers and readers.

Reader/Viewer Agency

Though emotional attachment to fictional characters can inspire meaning beyond the source material, many people still assume that watching television is a passive activity: that we just sit there and take in the story as it happens. People also often assume that reading is an anti-social activity because being engrossed in a book means we aren’t engaging with people around us. I argue that when people experience stories in an emotional or intellectual way, it requires the viewer or reader to actively engage with the material and practice social behavior.

Some scholars believe that the meaning of a story entirely depends on how the reader interprets it. This is known as reader response theory. Shaghayegh Ghandehari, a translator and scholar in English literature, argues that a reader’s role is essential to bring meaning to any text

(1381). She claims that interpretations of literature are fluid, changing with each person and the time that they read the text, and therefore the “meaning” of the text is constantly changing as well (1387). Readers have agency that begins when they take in a story and begin to process and interpret it. With that agency, they can take their interpretation of the story—something that is now part of them and belongs to them—and create new material.

Participatory Culture & Community

Fan works, the new material that readers create, all depend on the ways in which people interpret the source material. Linguist Anne Freedman explains that “uptake” is when an original text crosses boundaries to become something different. She describes uptake as a relationship between a source and its “interpretant” (40). As the interpretants, fans have the active power to bring personal perspectives and ideas to the source material. By taking up the material and creating something new, they can make concrete the meaning they have interpreted from the source.

When fans create new works from the basis of an outside source, they are participating in the story and any context surrounding the story (such as an active fandom). Participatory culture refers to the phenomenon of story consumers actively taking up methods of creating content alongside the traditional story creators (Potts 108). Fans create to contribute to a larger community, but more importantly they create for themselves, simply because they want to. As creators, fans simultaneously produce their own content and use things that were already created, a hybrid which Communication and English scholar Liza Potts termed “produsage” (109). Fan created uptakes exemplify the reader’s agency to interpret, modify, or add to an original text (Freedman). For underrepresented groups of people, fan uptakes can often become a place where

their identities can be added to a text where they were not present or not sufficiently developed. Many writers interpret, analyze, and create queer characters and relationships from the source material, regardless of whether the characters are queer in the original text. Uptakes such as fanfiction can then easily be defined by their relationship to “canon,” or what is considered part of the official source material. According to Cara Marta Messina, different forms of fan uptakes include canon complicit, explicit-implicit, canon resistant, and critical uptakes (151). These all show how uptake displays the writer’s agency in different ways. Canon complicit means creating within the existing canon, staying within the boundaries of an established story but interpreting or adding onto it—making their own perspectives and desires present in texts adjacent to the source material. Canon resistant is changing or ignoring the existing canon, where writers imagine and create new material using the source material as a foundation or jumping off point. Explicit-implicit is when the fan makes the “arguable subtext” from the original explicit (152). This can often be queer subtext that perhaps was censored. Critical uptakes are the works where fans choose to focus on exploring marginalized identities with a social justice focus (151-152). Critical uptakes can expand on the representation in the source material, or they can add representation that the original text lacks. Messina writes that “Fanfiction is not just about who and what are missing, but how they can be found” (177). Readers and viewers use their agency to react to stories in ways that matter to them and their own values.

DC’s Legends of Tomorrow, LGBTQ+ Themes, and Fanfiction

Viewers who value diversity, families of choice, and misfits who try their best may be drawn to programs like *DC’s Legends of Tomorrow*. *Legends* first aired on The CW in January of 2016. The show features an ensemble cast of lesser-to-unknown superheroes who time travel

in order to help people, protect history, and save the world. After a rough start with its first season, *Legends* found its place as the goofiest member of The CW's DC superhero show lineup, and one that embraces outcasts. There have been 8 canonically queer characters on the show. Sara Lance is the only Legend that has been on the show since season 1, and she has always been openly bisexual. In season 3, a new recurring character named Ava Sharpe was added to the show and became Sara's love interest. She was promoted to series regular in season 4, and the two women got married in season 6.

Sara and Ava are queer characters that are not only present but are the leaders of the team. They are co-captains of the Legends' time-ship and often act as surrogate mothers to the team. Their queerness is never a problem in the show. They have problems like one of them finds out she's a clone (which happened twice), or one has to save the other from an IKEA purgatory. Even when they travel back in time, the show typically acknowledges the contexts of homophobia and racism and represents them as ridiculous bigotry, not as a problem that the characters should internalize. The heart of the show is the found family dynamic of the superhero team because they all genuinely love and accept each other for everything they are.

At the time of writing this, *Legends* has 14,532 works of fanfiction on archiveofourown.org and Sara and Ava as a pairing have 2,989 works. As a canon queer couple, many people enjoy writing about Sara and Ava. They create fanfiction because they enjoy Sara and Ava's relationship on the show and wish to expand upon it themselves. Writers have plenty to work with: they can add onto what already exists on the show with fanfic like "missing scenes," interpret how the characters were feeling in certain scenes, and extrapolate their story or dynamic onto different scenarios in "alternate universe" fanfiction.

It was surprising to me that their stories only make up about one-fifth of *Legends* fanfiction, because they are the main couple on the show. The fact is that it is a relationship with two women, which are unfortunately not very popular within the whole of fandom communities. According to the 2021 archiveofourown.org ship stats, of the top 100 ships with the most overall works on ao3, only 4 were female/female pairings. There were 69 male/male pairings, 17 female/male, 7 classified “general,” which typically denotes a non-romantic pairing, and 3 “other,” which means that the gender of one half of the pairing is ambiguous. Two of the “other” classifications were male characters paired with reader-inserts and one was a male character paired with the player character of a video game in which the player decides their character’s gender. All of the characters in the “general” pairings were male. These statistics indicate that like society, fandom has an issue of excluding women, as only 25 of the 200 characters that comprise these relationships were women. The characters on the top 100 list were also predominantly white. 134 out of 200 were white, 53 were Asian, 4 were Latino, 1 was Black, and 8 were ambiguous. Though we can see how fanfiction and fan communities can be beneficial to those who take part in them, they have the same issues as the entertainment industry and society at large with their representation of women and people of color. This is why fanfiction that uplifts minorities are extremely important.

Parasocial Phenomena

“Real” Relationships

Legends of Tomorrow is not considered “real” because it does not portray real-life events, but that does not lessen its impact on the fans who love it. Parasocial relationships, the “one-sided psychological bond that feels very psychologically real to us, just as our ‘real-life’

friendships and romantic relationships feel to us” (Paravati et al. 69), are the primary social connections made through stories. Though not “real” in the sense that the relationship is not reciprocal, connections to characters are very real to people who experience them. The character does not ask anything of the reader, but the reader spends hours with the character getting to know them. We see their flaws, their insecurities, their triumphs, and their virtues. We are often allowed to get to know them better than people in our own lives, since through a narrative we are allowed “a level of scrutiny that is hardly ever possible in face-to-face interactions. Story recipients are free to ‘stare’ at characters’ reactions and to pry into their thoughts” (González Velázquez 96). Even though the relationship is one-sided, “psychological experiences we have related to our parasocial relationships have been found to be very similar to the psychological experiences we have related to our traditional relationship partners,” and the “emotions can be almost as intense for our favorite characters as they can be for our friends and family” (Paravati et al. 69).

Compassion and Empathy

When we feel attachment to fictional characters, we experience primarily empathy and compassion in much the same ways as we do with “real” people, like our friends and family. Compassion and empathy are understood as “motivational state[s]” with the “goal of increasing the welfare of the other person” (Shackleford 31). It is not just understanding or feeling the same emotions as another person, it comes with the (sometimes subconscious, especially when it comes to fictional characters) desire to help another person. Carlos González Velázquez posits that “Just like compassion motivates approach and altruistic behavior in real life, feeling compassion for a character incentivizes character involvement and thus narrative engagement as

a way to acquire information about the welfare of that character” (93). Our continued engagement in a narrative depends on compassion as a motivator, so “as long as compassion remains strong and hope exists, individuals will remain engaged” (González Velázquez 105). Parasocial relationships depend on us caring about another person, regardless of whether that person is fictional or not.

Identification and Projection

Attachment to fictional characters can simultaneously be the act of caring about a character as a person (or a simulation of one), and as a vessel for understanding and caring about one’s own self through identification and projection. The concept of dual empathy can be described as concurrently “empathizing with the character and with the self in the character’s role” (Shackleford 32). A character’s situation might remind us of our own life, so while we feel for the character, we are also feeling for ourselves. For example, a queer viewer might watch a scene where a character comes out as gay and be reminded of a time where they came out, or imagine future scenarios where they will come out. This brings up personal and intense emotions. This dual empathy is often related to various methods of identification with characters, which is “Adopting the perspective of a character in a story and vicariously experiencing story events through the character” (Shackleford 25). Identification can happen because the fan and character share demographic characteristics (similarity identification), the fan admires the character (affinity identification), or the fan wants to be more like the character (wishful identification) (Shackleford 36). Identification can happen in subtle or overt ways. It can be unclear at times whether strong attachment to a character happens because we relate to a

character, or if we project parts of our identity onto a character because we have a strong attachment to them already.

Emotional Intelligence

Beyond allowing us a space for introspection and self-acceptance, engaging meaningfully with characters in a narrative also allows people to develop emotional intelligence. We often experience TV show stories through the perspectives of many different characters. As humans, we “have an innate desire to understand the causes of behavior” (Paravati et al. 74), so as we learn about characters, we practice “theory of mind (the idea that each person has a perspective) and hon[e] our social skills related to perspective-taking and empathizing” (Shackleford 31). Thinking deeply and caring about characters from stories allows us to step out of our real-life emotions and engage with emotions we would not have experienced otherwise (Paravati et al. 86). Because we experience narratives as real, we take what we learn from characters and apply it to real life. The desire to analyze fictional characters can lead to a greater capacity for understanding humans and their behavior in our own lives.

Emotional Support and Prosocial Behavior

These relationships with characters, which are indeed real in their own right, can in fact be beneficial to both someone’s personal emotional wellbeing and their social relationships in “real life” because of the emotional work done through developing empathy towards the self and emotional intelligence towards others. These all work together to develop how we think about ourselves, other people, and the world. Through fictional characters and their stories, “We take away ideas that matter about our relationships. We have space to try out new philosophies,” and

in doing so, we find meaning for our own lives (Shackleford 22). We can discover or develop values and identities because we feel strongly about characters. On an everyday scale, parasocial relationships with characters can help us process and deal with our own emotions. Stories are often able to “clarify our social worlds, presenting relationships in ways that can be more digestible and more useful than the confused and jumbled world of our own relationships and conflicts” (Shackleford 19). Processing emotions can be easier to do through a vessel such as a favorite character, and empathizing with ourselves on our own is often harder than empathizing with ourself through shared experiences or emotions through a character. Identification and dual empathy contribute to the fact that “Feeling similar to a character whom we admire can boost our self-esteem and help us feel closer to the ideal versions of ourselves” (Paravati et al. 84). Characters can also always be present to offer support because we choose when to interact with them. Their presence and our relationship with them “can lead to positive outcomes including feeling less lonely, more satisfied in life, and more in line with our ideal selves (Paravati et al. 83).

Parasocial relationships with fictional characters can also inspire prosocial behavior. Caring about anyone, even if they are fictional, has psychological benefits and can affect how that person will view how to fairly treat others. Characters that people form attachments to are often complex but represent the morals of society. Characters who have “prosocial beliefs...may inspire us to hold similar altruistic ideologies” (Paravati et al. 84). We might see characters that we care about believing in saving the world, which can inspire us to believe in the goodness of humanity and do our own part in improving our world.

Methodology

Research Question

The research question that I set out to explore in this project was “How do parasocial relationships with fictional characters develop values and identity for people who identify as LGBTQIA+, and how can we see these relationships manifest through fanfiction?” My aim for the research was to understand myself more, especially as someone who has always been made to feel that I care “too much” about fictional characters. I also wanted to assert that people like me are not abnormal, and the fictional characters we love are emotionally important to our lives.

Qualitative Research Framework

I collected qualitative data from two semi-structured interviews that I conducted with two participants. I recruited participants from a Discord server for *Legends of Tomorrow* fanfiction writers that I was already part of. I asked for participants who identified as LGBTQ+ and wrote fanfiction about the relationship between the characters Sara Lance and Ava Sharpe. Two people were interested in being interviewed, and they were interviewed together both times. The interviews conducted over Zoom were each about 50 minutes long. Audio and video were recorded. The interviews had a casual tone as myself and my participants shared a connection with our shared passion for *Legends of Tomorrow* and fictional characters in general. I asked questions about their backgrounds with fandom, fanfiction, and *Legends* fandom specifically, questions about their writing process, their relationships with characters, and their relationship with the fan community. I asked questions inspired by my own life—I wanted to know if they felt or acted the same way as I do when I feel very emotionally attached to characters. Between the two interviews, I asked for a sample fanfiction from my participants that I could analyze. They sent me a fanfiction that they had published on archiveofourown.org. In the follow-up

interview, I asked about the emotions that inspire their fanfiction, their identification with characters, and why they made certain decisions in their fanfic. I analyzed the themes of the text and their responses from the interviews to identify key points. Quotations from the interviews used in this paper may have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Participants

My participants, Chocolate and Alien, are both seniors in high school and nonbinary lesbians whose pronouns are they/them. They are two *Legends of Tomorrow* fanfiction writers who primarily write about the relationship (or “ship”) between the two married co-captains in the show, Sara Lance and Ava Sharpe. Fans often abbreviate this relationship to Avalance, its “ship name,” which is a mash-up of two characters’ names that typically signals a real or imagined romantic connection between characters. Chocolate and Alien are somewhat unique in the realm of fanfiction because they act as cowriters. Alien acts as the primary writer, while Chocolate supplies ideas and edits their work. Their close collaboration starts with planning their fic. They talk in depth about the show, the characters, and what new situations they can place the characters in for their fanfiction. They told me they have very long documents filled with plans for current and future fic.

Analysis

Writing and Collaboration

Writing is the framework where I aim to show the very personal internal emotional attachments that people have with fictional characters. Fanfiction is self-sponsored writing that is not even necessarily built on a desire to write; it is built on the desires to feel closer to fictional

characters, to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that emerge from close engagement with an original source. Through fanfiction, we can see the work that people put into fan spaces and the relationships that they have with characters through. Parasocial relationships do not require any more than an internal connection, but they can be developed even further through writing fanfiction. My participants decided to write fanfiction about *Legends of Tomorrow* because they had ideas for stories that they wanted to see with these specific characters.

Alien: We got super into these characters and their stories, and we were having so many ideas, and like, staying up until 4 in the morning talking about them, so we were like: Why don't we just write these things? We have so many of these ideas let's just write them.

Chocolate: We were like, why not? For me, it was also like, I want to read this fic, so why don't I be the one to write it?

Alien: Sometimes it's annoying to have to be the one to make it, but if no one else is, I guess I'll make it.

Their writing is entirely self-sponsored. No one told them to write fanfiction, they did so because of their parasocial relationships with the characters. The motivation is to get to experience new stories for the characters that might not exist otherwise.

Fanfiction is an inherently collaborative experience, even if you do not write with a co-author like Chocolate and Alien. They collaborate with each other, but they also collaborate with the show's writers and other fans. Collaboration with each other is a reciprocal relationship where they can bounce ideas off each other and receive feedback. The collaboration with show writers and other fans that they do not have reciprocal relationships with is comparable to how parasocial relationships are not mutual, but they are still meaningful and real. They add onto or

change elements from the source material and read other fans' writing and ideas. As the story progresses, the show writers and other fans have had more ideas that they are implementing in their own work, so fans like Chocolate and Alien continuously have new material to react to. Chocolate and Alien both said that writing fanfiction is easier than other types of writing because they have a basis that they are already familiar with and that they (usually) already enjoy. Alien noted that "the character's already there and established, even if we do something really wacky with them. It's a lot easier to play around with them and figure things out, whereas other writing with original characters is a lot harder because you have to build a whole world." Fanfiction authors also know that their audience is already familiar with the characters, and that they are probably seeking out the fanfiction because they already like the characters. They do not have to establish for their reader why they should care about the characters; both reader and writer already know what make the character interesting.

Characters that fans create content about are not static or confined to their portrayal from the original material. The depiction of the character varies from person to person based on individual interpretations. Because people who write fanfiction are most often part of the fan community surrounding the characters they write about, fan interpretations combine and influence each other. Chocolate talked about how the version of Sara that they most closely relate to is likely an amalgamation of canon Sara plus various fan versions of Sara. The basis for the character is the same, but fans often build beyond the source material's boundaries. Sometimes a character to the fan community becomes almost completely unrecognizable from the original, but most often a fan's personal version of a character is a combination of both their canon and their fan-developed personalities.

Chocolate and Alien pointed out how talking about their ideas together is the easiest and most fun part of writing.

Chocolate: A lot of what I do is when we're just spitting out ideas. It's a lot more fun with you [Alien] because you give me feedback and add onto it. It gives it more depth than if we were working alone. Two minds working on something, you're gonna get different ideas, but we agree on stuff, so we're not fighting on what we're including.

They [Alien] will add on another part and it makes it a better scene overall: more funny, or more heartfelt, or emotionally deeper."

As a writing tutor, the idea of collaboration caught my attention. In my experience, writing is always improved by new perspectives and opinions that are brought to it by other people.

Writing is not solitary. Even if there is only a single person writing it, if they want to improve a piece of writing, they collaborate with themselves by leaving and coming back to the writing with new life experiences and new states of mind. Collaboration is useful to us as social creatures—we desire connection in many different ways.

Parasocial Phenomena

"Real" Relationships

Parasocial relationships reveal our ability to care about people who do not know us. We can say that these people we care about are not even real, but that distorts the truth to make parasocial relationships seem frivolous and unimportant. The truth is that the character exists, and that people care about them. The amount of people who know that a character from *Legends of Tomorrow* exists is larger than the amount of people who know that I, as a human being and

“real person,” exist. There are many different conditions someone could define as the state of being “real.”

The way people define and understand their parasocial relationships with characters varies from person to person. I asked Chocolate and Alien how they thought about the characters they write about—if they thought of them as friends, identified with them, or just really liked them.

Chocolate: I’d say I relate to them. I wouldn’t say they’re my friend. I wanna be their friend, but it’s more that I relate to them, and I like who they are as a character. I relate to Zari because she likes video games and donuts. And I like that Charlie is an outcast. And Sara is, like, a badass. I just like aspects of their characters, and I like writing about them because I like to expand on those aspects.

Alien: I would love to be their friend, but I relate to them, and writing about them kind of brings me closer in a way, too. And then expanding on who they are and their character beyond the show.

Their responses indicated that their parasocial relationships are related to identification. They demonstrate their desire to feel close to the characters in both similarity and affinity identification aspects. They naturally find traits that they themselves share with the characters and feel a connection because of them. They admire certain traits in characters which make the character even more appealing. Admiration, connection, and identification are the types of things that typically form the basis of friendships in real life. With fanfiction, Alien said they are able to expand on their character outside the show, which extends the character’s impact on their life. Fanfiction can, as Alien said, bring the author closer to the character by spending more time with them. Both Chocolate and Alien said they would like to be the characters’ friends but do not

think of them as their friends now. Perhaps they do not feel like their relationship is friendship because friendship is defined as being mutual. By this definition, we cannot be friends with people who we do not know and who are not “real,” but other aspects of friendship still exist in parasocial relationships.

One way that parasocial relationships with fictional characters manifest themselves in the language we use to talk about characters is through the use of pet names and through ways that people mark relationships (i.e., my son, my wife). I use these terms to refer to my favorite characters, which allows me to put my feelings about characters into context of “real life” relationships, because I grew up seeing other fans on the internet do so. Male characters that I like are typically “my son” or “my boy,” and female characters that I like are typically, “my wife,” “my girl,” and often, “the love of my life [insert character’s name here].” These terms and pet names are typically said tongue-in-cheek. Chocolate said, “I know I’ve said stuff before like, ‘God, I love them so much—my wife... I definitely call them pet names, just in a joking way. ‘Sweethearts you need to share your feelings.’” There is a joking element because fictional characters are not actually people’s sons, daughters, or spouses, but the personal connection is real.

Fandom spaces have established their own ways to talk about their parasocial relationships through internet memes. Chocolate and Alien introduced me to the concept of a “comfort character.” Chocolate said that a comfort character is “like my favorite character but more. Like, favorite character plus. I can’t describe how ‘plus,’ but it’s there.” A comfort character, then, might be a way to describe strong parasocial relationships. Saying they are a favorite character is not enough, so a comfort character is a term to make that connection stronger. Another excellent example of how people express their emotions for characters is

through the meme “blorbo from my shows.” This was a meme that was “initially intended as a mocking way to describe Tumblr fandoms,” but was adopted by fans as a term that seems synonymous with a parasocial relationship (“Blorbo From My Shows”). It denotes a special attachment to characters. Tumblr user tmanatural made a post in March 2022 that asked “who was your original blorbo? Like the first ever blorbo that you felt Blorbo Induced Emotions for.” The phrase “Blorbo Induced Emotions,” though silly, encapsulates these feelings of attachment to fictional characters that are strong and meaningful but not quite definable in the view of larger society. Pet names, markers for relationships, and the term “blorbo” all establish a connection that is very real to someone. Even if millions of people know a character, you can still claim a personal attachment to them by saying “that’s *my* blorbo from *my* show.”

Compassion and Empathy

A popular fanfiction genre is hurt/comfort, where one character is having a hard time and another character is there to comfort them. The appeal of these stories is compassion—when we read a sad story, we want the characters to feel better. We are invested because we want to know if they will be okay. It may seem counterintuitive that writing about characters in distress means that we care about them, but “compassion is a more typical response than sadness to vicarious pain” (González Velázquez 93). The sample fanfiction that my participants provided me with is a hurt/comfort fic where Sara is comforted by Ava when she has to confront trauma in her past. This kind of fanfiction is indicative of parasocial research and how stories are motivated by compassion. I identified dual empathy in this fic where the author and the reader are both the one comforting and the one being comforted. In the story, Ava is concerned about Sara, and the story says that “She wanted nothing more than to go over and hug Sara, to protect her and take the

pain away.” Ava represents compassion and empathy as an emotional state that is motivated to alleviate another person’s suffering. She cares about Sara, and we care about Sara as a character, so we want her to feel better. In that way we embody Ava’s role in the story. People also naturally want someone to make them feel like things are going to be okay when they are in distress, so we also embody Sara’s role in the story.

Alien agreed with these explanations, and said, “While I’m causing [Sara] pain, I also really want to comfort her, too.” They said Ava was a stand-in to comfort both Sara and themselves when they are writing in order to deal with feeling sad. Sara is the character that they connect with the most, so they said, “I project my feelings onto her, and put her through whatever so that she feels what I’m feeling, and then Ava comes in to comfort her, and it’s kind of like, ‘Oh yeah, Ava would comfort me, too.’ Or not Ava, just someone.” Ava is a stand-in for the writer/reader and their desire to help Sara, and at the same time she is a sort of self-comfort—a representation of our own desire to be comforted when going through difficult emotions. In reading and writing hurt/comfort, we feel for characters, and we feel for ourselves.

Identification and Projection

Identification is an important aspect of creating a bond with a fictional character. Chocolate and Alien have expressed that they identify with characters in a variety of different ways: admiring the character, sharing traits with the character, and to an extent wanting to be more like the character. They also said they project parts of themselves—emotions they are experiencing, traits they have, and small things that they do—onto characters in their fanfiction.

Alien: I know sometimes when I'm feeling sad or like, angsty or whatever, I'll just start writing some random angst, just to like deal with those emotions—without dealing with them myself, I make the characters deal with them, so that I can deal with them!

Chocolate: There's a lot less like, events, or putting feelings I'm feeling into the characters, but like small things that I do all the time. Like I'll be doing something, and I'll be like, "Oh, a character would definitely do that."

These kinds of identification make the characters feel more real to them, allow them to develop deeper connections to the characters, and help them deal with their own emotions.

Emotional Intelligence

My participants indicated to me that the reason they enjoy writing fanfiction is the emotional work behind it. They said they are interested in why characters are the way they are and why they act the way they do. Alien said, "If I'm thinking about writing a fic, I'll try to get into [the character's] head as much as possible: what they're thinking, what they're feeling, why they're acting the way they're acting." These deep dives into a character's psyche are ways to develop emotional intelligence and become more understanding of human behavior. Stories allow people, both writers and readers, to try to understand experiences we have never had.

Chocolate: For me, a lot of times giving characters traits like those [flaws and struggles]—some of it is definitely projecting, but I also like looking at it through canon and figuring out things they're scared of that are never explored. Like, I feel like Zari should have a lot more PTSD about guns, or being held down, or something. So, I wanted to write a fic where Zari gets like, restrained, and she has PTSD about being captured.

The inclination to have Zari experience emotional turmoil comes from a place of wanting to bring awareness to ways in which people struggle. We want to explore these distressed states because we want to understand how to help someone, how to prevent them from being in distress, and to help people understand that their reaction is warranted and worthy of attention. When we become more emotionally intelligent, we can become more understanding of different people and hopefully better at supporting others. Humans are inherently social creatures, so fanfiction is a way of both embodying the emotions of another and expressing your own personal relationship with a character. How we feel about ourselves and others is meaningfully developed through fanfiction and parasocial relationships.

Emotional Support and Prosocial Behavior

Parasocial relationships inspire internal and external emotional growth. Internally, there is a lot of emotional development that we can go through when we feel emotionally connected to a character. A story is able to give guidance that real life often does not, and it doesn't require anything from you back. Writing fanfiction can be a very effective way to process emotions.

Alien: Sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes it's a way for me to just like, deal with my own emotions from the perspective of a character. 'Cause like, I feel things weird, like it's always kind of tamped down for me until it's not. But like, I feel things still, and so writing hurt/comfort when I'm feeling those things is like, a way for me to deal with it, without like, having to deal with it in the perspective of my own life, and instead dealing with it through character's eyes. It's easier for me to relate to them and like, put my feelings into them instead of through my whole life.

It is easier for a lot of people to work through and understand their own emotions when they can take a step back and separate their own life from their emotions. Many people also find it easier to be kind to other people than to themselves. It can be hard to forgive ourselves for something we did that we would instantly forgive someone else for. Alien's explanation of why they chose to put Sara through the hurt she went through in their fic sets up this idea well. In the fic, Sara has to make sure her younger self gets on the boat that shipwrecks and kickstarts her whole traumatic backstory. Alien talked about why they chose to write it this way. They said they connected this with her beginning as a superhero. In the fanfiction, they wrote:

“You know,” Sara started after what felt like an eternity. She paused, taking a deep breath before continuing, “when I first started this whole... hero... thing,” she said the word slowly, hesitantly, as if she still didn't believe that was what she was, “my whole shtick was protecting women from creeps in the glades, I—when Sin asked why I rescued her from some guys one night, I, um, I told her that no woman should ever suffer at the hands of men.”

The line “No woman should ever suffer at the hands of men,” comes directly from the show. Alien said that Sara failing to save her 19-year-old self would add a layer of guilt for her, which would add more angst for her. Then the emotional fulfillment comes when Ava is there to “reassure her that she's still good, and not the evil monster that she sometimes still thinks she is.” The experiences in hurt/comfort fanfiction are often related to things like trauma, grief, or guilt. This fanfiction could potentially help someone struggling with their own guilt. If a reader or a writer of a fanfic like this had something in their life that they felt guilty about, and maybe were questioning whether they were a good person, they could more easily empathize with Sara, a character that they like, and slowly extrapolate those emotions onto themselves. It is easier to put

perspective to other people's guilt, whether it is deserved or not, than it is for our own. Guilt is just one example of an emotion people can work through with an angsty fanfiction.

Characters can inspire people, and can give them support when they need it. My participants often talked about projecting issues onto characters and then working through them with their fanfiction, often intentionally representing neurodiversity in their fanfic. So, if they're feeling very anxious, they might write about a character feeling anxious to help them process that emotion, make them feel like they're not alone in feeling that way, or think about how they can get through it.

Chocolate: That's a lot of what the neurodivergent AU [Alternate Universe] is.

Alien: It's us projecting.

Chocolate: Yeah, it's us projecting, but it's also like, this stuff we deal with is not something we alone deal with. And seeing—even if it's us writing it—seeing our comfort characters deal with those things as well.

Alien: Yeah, and then also have the support from the other characters that we might not always have.

C: Yeah, knowing that it's normal and that eventually one day we'll also have that kind of support system, it's just good, it's just nice.

In both the show and in fanfiction that people write, the characters accept and support each other however they can. Through characters who are supported, people can imagine a future where they find people who will care for them the way characters care for each other in their favorite shows and fanfiction. However, this idea reveals that a degree of support actually is already present—they can feel accepted and supported by the characters in the show and by the fan

community. If seeing a character that they can identify with makes them feel like they're not alone, they have at least one space where they feel accepted.

Characters can also support one's emotional wellbeing by just being an inspiration and example to them. Chocolate and Alien said that they draw strength from knowing that Sara has gone through many traumatic experiences and yet she is still kind, she is still a hero, and she does not let anything break her down.

Alien: I definitely draw strength from characters, especially characters like Sara Lance, who have gone through so much more than any person should ever go through. When I see characters like that, who have been through hell and back, and still come out the other side human, and kind, I definitely draw strength from that, in that no matter what I'm going through, I can get through it because this character has gone through it.

They enjoy writing about Sara so they can explore that strength, which fortifies in themselves their ability to be like her. The emotional and mental work people are doing when they have these relationships with characters happens in an internal space, but many times it also affects the real world by inspiring new or changed behaviors. Chocolate said, "I've definitely been braver or kinder because characters inspired me to be." I personally attribute a lot of my own values and morals to the way my parasocial relationships with characters made me care very deeply about the characters and what happened to them.

Support for Marginalized Identities

LGBTQ+ Inspiration

As a marginalized identity that requires some kind of self-discovery, self-acceptance, or self-actualization, parasocial relationships and fanfiction can often benefit queer people more

than others. For LGBTQ+ fans, characters who represent our identities can inspire us not only to act, but also to understand ourselves. Many people realize they are queer because of watching or reading queer stories. They can also be inspired by characters (queer or not) that they admire to accept themselves, to come out, or to speak out against injustice.

C: When I came out, I think I did it because—I can't remember what I was watching, I think it might have been *Criminal Minds*—but the person who was kidnapped like, fought back, and then there was this whole speech... I can't remember, but it was one of the reasons that gave me the courage to come out, because if this person could be this strong in this situation, and then come out of it and still be talking like this, then I can have the strength to do this.

All marginalized identities struggle with things that parasocial bonds can help with, like loneliness and confusion turning into support, acceptance, and bravery. Fanfiction can allow people to represent this. For my participants, *Legends of Tomorrow* sets up this idea by having a diverse cast. It is not just that marginalized identities are present; they are the focus of the show. Two married women are the captains of a time ship, and the other superheroes include BIPOC and other queer people.

Neurodiversity

My participants were passionate not only about LGBTQ+ representation, but also about representing neurodiversity in their fanfiction and in their interpretations of characters from the show. This is something that they brought to my attention as similar to LGBTQ+ representation. They recognize neurodiverse traits in characters even if the show does not address it. Then they specifically write these characters as neurodiverse in their fanfiction. Chocolate and Alien talked

about how most canon representation of neurodiverse characters is not nuanced, varied, accurate, or positive. Characters who are were not intended to be neurodiverse but can easily be interpreted as such by fans then come off as more authentic to real neurodiversity because they are not written as a caricature. Chocolate said, “It feels more authentic to the experience because if you look at most autistic or ADHD characters on TV, I don’t know how many there are, but they like, have to check the boxes: they have no empathy, they have like, two things that they're really interested in, that's all they ever talk about, they're really annoying. So [interpreted neurodivergence] just feels more authentic to who neurodivergent people actually are.”

Fanfiction can be a powerful tool for people to take their own stories into their hands to represent them when they were absent from the source material, or to attempt to fix stereotypes and misrepresentation. Interpreting characters that people love as neurodivergent, queer, or trans (all of which Chocolate and Alien do) allows people who read fanfiction about these characters to be exposed to more representations of marginalized identities. It also allows writers to normalize and accept their identities in themselves if they interpret their favorite characters as sharing those identities. This even goes beyond the characters themselves when others in the fan community support these interpretations.

Community

A stereotype about people who write fanfiction and people who have strong parasocial relationships with fictional characters is that they must be lonely and “don’t have real friends,” or even that they “can’t make real friends,” so they turn to fiction. This is first off simply false, and actually there is a compelling argument for the opposite to be true. People make friends through fanfiction and fandom because they share the same passion for characters. It is very easy to start

talking about the complexities of a certain character with another fan. Chocolate talked about the benefits that they found from being part of a fan community.

Chocolate: You have a community of people. You could go to someone and be like, “Hey, I’m writing a fic with this character, do you think they’d do this or this?” If I’m writing something else, I’m writing it for school, or because I have to. So, it feels like I’m doing something for me, but I’m also doing it for someone else, because someone else is going to read it, and hopefully they’ll like it, and it will add one good part to their day.

Parasocial relationships on their own can provide emotional support and benefits, but they can also lead to people who feel the same way about characters to bond and support each other in real life. When I asked Chocolate how they felt about the stigma surrounding fanfiction, they said, “I made friends through fanfic. If anything, it brings people together. I think if people were more openminded, they’d notice it’s an open community where people make friends and do things they love.”

Conclusion

Parasocial relationships, fanfiction, and LGBTQ+ identities are all stigmatized and undervalued. The benefits of what writing about characters can do for people should not be underestimated. People with parasocial relationships with characters are seen as abnormal, but they can actually benefit emotionally, mentally, and socially from these relationships. For my research, I talked to two people out of the millions whose lives have been enriched by engaging with characters and fandom. *Legends of Tomorrow*, its fans, and its fanfiction have been able to show people like Chocolate and Alien more acceptance, creativity, and compassion than they might be shown in real life. In turn, Chocolate and Alien give back those same qualities to

others, both in fandom and real life. Marginalized identities like LGBTQ+ people will often be drawn to things like fanfiction because they search for belonging in an unequal and heteronormative world. Parasocial relationships are meaningful and real because those of us who experience them are real.

References

- “AO3 Ship Stats 2021.” *Archive of Our Own*, 31 July 2021,
<https://archiveofourown.org/works/32940190>.
- “Blorbo From My Shows.” *Know Your Meme*, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/blorbo-from-my-shows>.
- DC’s Legends of Tomorrow*. Created by Greg Berlanti et al., DC Entertainment, 2016-2022.
- Freadman, Anne. “Uptake.” *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change*, edited by Richard Coe et al., Hampton, 2002, pp. 39-53.
- Gaillet, Lynée Lewis and Michelle Eble. “Interviews: Researching People.” *Primary Research and Writing: People, Places, and Spaces*. Routledge, 2016, pp. 177-201.
- Ghandehari, Shaghayegh. “Definition of Reader, as a Relative Concept, in Reader-Response Theories.” *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 70, 2013, pp. 1381-1388.
- González Velázquez, Carlos. “Why We Enjoy Sad Stories and Identify with Immoral Characters: The Role of Compassion.” *Real Characters: The Psychology of Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters*, edited by Karen Shackleford, Fielding University, 2020, pp. 91-116.
- Hirshfield, Aiden, and Melody Metcalf. “What do LGBTQIA+ Characters and Representations Mean to a Marginalized Audience?” *Real Characters: The Psychology of Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters*, edited by Karen Shackleford, Fielding University, 2020, pp. 215-233.
- Jenkins, Henry. “Why Heather Can Write: Media Literacy and the *Harry Potter* Wars.” *Convergence Culture*, New York University, 2006, pp. 169-205.

- Messina, Cara Marta. "Tracing Fan Uptakes: Tagging, Language, and Ideological Practices in *The Legend of Korra* Fanfictions." *The Journal of Writing Analytics*, vol. 3, 2019, pp. 151-182.
- Paravati, Elaine et al. "Ups and Downs: How Emotions Make Characters Real." *Real Characters: The Psychology of Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters*, edited by Karen Shackleford, Fielding University, 2020, pp. 67-89.
- Potts, Liza. "Still Flying: Writing as Participatory Activism Circulating Across the Firefly 'Verse.'" 30 Sept. 2017.
- Roozen, Kevin. "'Fan Fic-ing' English Studies: A Case Study Exploring the Interplay of Vernacular Literacies and Disciplinary Engagement." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 44, no. 2, Nov. 2009, pp. 136-169.
- Shackleford, Karen. "Mapping the Constellation of Psychological Experiences Involved in Our Connection with Fictional Characters and Actors." *Real Characters: The Psychology of Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters*, edited by Karen Shackleford, Fielding University, 2020, pp. 15-42.
- Tmanatural. "who was your original blorbo?" *Tumblr*, 30 Mar. 2022, <https://tmanatural.tumblr.com/post/680120705052033024/who-was-your-original-blorbo-like-the-first-ever>.