

*Co-editor of the groundbreaking volume Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet, Kristina Busse is an important voice in the field of fan studies. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, and she co-edits the fan studies journal Transformative Works and Cultures. Her essay here considers one legacy of the Star Trek slash fandom, showing how some of its edgier tropes now boldly go where, well, no one ever even thought of going before—and then maybe go a little bit further. Much of this book has focused on the development of fic communities within specific fandoms, but this essay illustrates how in internet fandom, tropes and storylines can cross-pollinate faster than sex spores, generating multi-fandom universes. Even more than your average pop song mashup, these multiverses remix species and cross biological boundaries—and they’re very popular.*

## Pon Farr, Mpreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse

Kristina Busse

When I started reading fanfiction nearly fifteen years ago, I was immediately fascinated by the huge amounts of sex and, more interestingly, the huge amounts of kinky sex. Every sex act I’d ever imagined—and some I hadn’t—were easily accessible and, even better, labelled. Thanks to headers and the then still-rudimentary search engines on fandom-specific archives, I could search and read all the stories of a particular scenario, whether it was driven by sex, plot, or character. Angel turning human and getting back together with Buffy in all its hundreds of variations; Mulder as Krycek’s hostage, and vice versa; Kirk, Spock, and Bones threesomes—it was there for me to search and read. “Infinite diversity in infinite combinations” might be the central Vulcan philosophical statement, but it is also the motto of media fans.

## Your Kink Is Okay; It's Just Not My Kink

One of the things I like best about fanfiction is that there is a clear sense of writing to specific kinks. Ellen Fremedon describes this as the Id Vortex: "In fandom, we've all got this agreement to just suspend shame . . . We all know right where the Id Vortex is, and we have this agreement to approach it with caution, but without any shame at all." Branding and bestiality, water sports and mind control, tentacles and voyeurism, but also domesticity and telepathy, amnesia and hurt/comfort, slavery and time travel—all of these are tropes that may get us to read a story; they may even turn us on and get us off.

Favorite tropes, of course, are different for everyone. But fandom is big enough that we can find someone who wants to read what we write and, if we're really lucky, who writes what we want to read. More than that, fanfic gives us that specific story many times over with exactly the characters and the scenarios we want to see. Heck, if we participate in a challenge or have good friends, they might write one to our detailed specifications! Also, fandom as a community is open-minded enough that most fans tend to accept tropes that don't appeal to them personally as Just Not My Kink, rather than as bad or wrong.

## Alpha Males and the Fannish Hive Mind

But even with the seeming loss of taboos and a general acceptance of all kinks, there are still some kinks that tend to be considered a bit kinkier than others. One particularly trendy trope at the moment is Alpha/Beta/Omega (A/B/O) stories, which are popular across various fandoms, including *Supernatural*, *Sherlock*, and *Teen Wolf*. Many A/B/O stories posit societies where biological imperatives divide people based on wolf pack hierarchies into sexual dominants (alphas), sexual submissives (omegas), and everyone else (betas). Beyond the biologically determined hierarchy, these wolf-like humans often have other wolf-like traits: they may scent their partners or imprint on first sight, and often mate for life. Sometimes the alphas and omegas are rare, sometimes they are only males, sometimes they have altered sex organs. Often omegas go into heat and release pheromones that drive alphas wild.

Animal terminology, such as *heat*, *mating cycles*, *claiming*, *mounting*, *breeding*, and the ever-popular *knot* (a swelling at the base of the penis found in canines after ejaculation that forces the penis to stay inside to

ensure impregnation), tends to be popular in A/B/O stories. While fandom has always had its share of animal transformations and bestiality kinks, A/B/O stories also seem to draw from other tropes, including mating and heat cycles, breeding, and male pregnancy (mpreg), as well as imprinting and soul bonds. In fact, it is difficult to make any generalization about the collections of tropes shorthand as A/B/O or “omegaverse” (while the two terms can be used interchangeably, the latter tends to be reserved for ideological world building rather than the simple sexual dynamics). Rather than attempting to define A/B/O and its multiple fandom-specific subvariants, I want to explore where the trope came from and how it has evolved, using that discussion to illustrate how tropes cross-pollinate, change, and mutate in and across fandoms.

### **Pon Farr as Ur-Trope**

The biological imperative of mating cycles appears in *Star Trek* canon and subsequently has been embraced across many fandoms. The original *Star Trek* is viewed by many as the first modern media fandom: in the late sixties, fans started to meet up at fan cons and began writing, editing, mimeographing, and mailing the first fanzines. Fans who have never heard of the episode “Amok Time,” in which Spock goes into pon farr, may know the term *pon farr*. And even if they haven’t, they probably will have read stories where a character’s biology forces him to have sex—sometimes with their partner, other times with anyone willing and able.

In *Star Trek*, pon farr describes the Vulcan mating cycle, during which Vulcans must have sex or suffer excruciating pain, insanity, and potential death. But fans are nothing if not creative! This particular moment in the original *Star Trek* series became the basis of a host of pon farr stories where Spock is slowly going insane—and Kirk is his only option. The same scenario also moved into other fandoms where there is no canonical support for pon farr: the justification can be magical, supernatural, or alien, but even in realistic cop shows like *CSI* or *Bones*, we still find myriad versions of this fuck-or-die scenario.

### **The Animal in All of Us**

Animals and animal transformations feature in a lot of fanfiction. A lot of media that inspires fanfiction include animal transformation as canon: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Harry Potter, *Twilight*, and *Teen Wolf*, for

example, all feature werewolves. Other fandoms often create shapeshifter alternate universes to explore ideas of identity and transformation, of monstrosity and otherness. While bestiality seems not to be that prevalent in fandom, it does exist—whether as a subset of shapeshifter-verses or otherwise. In fact, Harry Potter popularized bestiality kinks, often pairing human characters sexually with Remus in his werewolf form or Sirius in his Padfoot dog form. But it was the *Supernatural* RPF fandom, J2 (named for the first names of show leads Jared Padelecki and Jensen Ackles) and its kink memes that large-scale introduced bestiality into non-magical fandoms.

It thus may not be coincidental that *Supernatural* and J2 fandom more than likely originated A/B/O. In her primer, fanwriter Nora Bombay describes A/B/O as “something that appears to have been spontaneously created when J2 mpreg and J2 werewolves combined, had a soul bond, and created an idea that was perfect to spread out across all fandom.” Nor may it be coincidental that Jensen Ackles’ first fannish show, *Dark Angel*, featured him as a genetically engineered soldier with feline DNA. While *Dark Angel* only features heat cycles in female characters, fandom—especially slash fandom—of course responded with males in heat as well.

In fact, the focus on fertility and mating cycles in many fanfictions with male protagonists is certainly interesting when considering that a large majority of the slashers, and thus the writers who use this trope, are women. Whether it is a way to engage issues of enforced sex or to think through biology-based societal constraints, in many of these stories, the male characters in heat are forced to play out traditional female roles, victims of biology. In fact, when putting the man into the position of needing to be fucked, fan writers often alter male biology to include self-lubing asses.

### **Ass Babies and Boy Baby Bumps**

As if the desperate need to be fucked were not enough, the ultimate purpose of heat is, of course, impregnation. Male pregnancy (mpreg) is a popular trope across fandoms, sometimes explained within the logic of the source show’s universe through magic or science, but more often just occurring spontaneously. Whether Alex Krycek switches genders, Severus Snape creates a pregnancy-inducing potion, John Sheppard activates an ancient artifact, or Brian Kinney wakes up one morning pregnant for no reason whatsoever, a corner of fandom relishes impregnating

its male heroes. And while Kirk and Spock's love child only ever existed in fanfiction, the 2001 prequel series, *Star Trek: Enterprise*, did give us canonical mpreg when engineer Trip Tucker became pregnant during an encounter with a female alien.

Mpregs come in all shapes and sizes and, as a result, can fulfil a vast variety of fan desires: a romantic need to create a love child between male lovers, an interest in pregnancy's emotional and physical fallout on a partnership, or even a fascination with the horrors of forced breeding. Even more than the heat trope, mpreg allows a female writer to play out themes of female bodies, concerns of gender in relationships, and issues of reproduction. And she can interrogate all these ideas in a setting that allows for a certain emotional distance by divorcing the pregnancy from the female body. At the same time, one of the criticisms of mpreg is that it often replicates rather than critiques the portrayal of women by embracing stereotypical gender roles.

### **Wolves Mate for Life**

In fact, given how many mpreg stories feature unexpected, if not initially unwanted, births, the amount that depict happy families in which the child cements their love and lifelong bond is staggering. Then again, fandom generally seems to prefer happy over unhappy and soul mates over one-night stands. So while the fannish desire for intense bonds may not have any canon basis, source texts that celebrate bonding certainly don't hurt.

A/B/O may have transcended its name-giving wolf source, but the role of imprinting, mating, and bonding remains powerful. *Twilight*, for example, features not only intense bonds but gives us canonical imprinting when Jacob first meets Bella's baby. The imprinting trope effectively offers a biological determinism that mandates that the pair belong together. In fanfiction, where we write thousands of scenarios to get our beloved pair together, through space and time and alternate universes, imprinting is a satisfying and effective conceit.

### **My Mind to Your Mind**

Meanwhile, in *Star Trek*, the Vulcan mind meld, which guarantees "my mind to your mind," has generated a wealth of stories about deep and permanent mind bonds. Given that a lot of fanfiction and particularly

slash is about strong emotional bonds and eternal ties—about the love between partners—the predominance of bonding fic isn't a surprise. A marriage vow may only be as good as the participants who utter it, but a bond is forever.

Mind and soul bonds are simply the most extreme form of a trope that habitually collapses the physical and the emotional. It presents readers with a couple whose love is not only unlimited and forever but trustworthy: both partners can be sure of it, since they can feel the other's every thought and emotion. This trope then uses bodies, uses physicality, uses sex to signify emotional intimacy. Partners in these fics read each other's bodies, read thoughts from each other's eyes, know each other's state of mind from their posture, can sense their loved ones by sound or smell. Often their biology allows them—nay, forces them—to seek out the other person and know them in all their parts. All of these things may indeed be horrifying in reality, but if their popularity is anything to go by, as fictional metaphors they have immense emotional appeal.

### **Omegaverse: The Perfect Storm**

This brings us back to A/B/O, where all of these tropes come together in a seemingly perfect storm, often with a heavy helping of raunchy sex: huge, knotted dicks; an enormous amount of fertile alpha semen; and wet, open omega assholes. Still, just as important as the kinky aspects of the omegaverse are the emotional ones: the forcefulness of heat cycles and impulsive desire, the inevitability of imprinting and bonds, the joys and horrors of mpreg.

In the end, then, there can't be only one explanation for why fans enjoy Alpha/Beta/Omega fic, or even one description that encompasses all the stories. Some stories play with the primacy of the senses and the ability to smell one's mate. Some stories engage in dub-con scenarios where one or both partners are out of their minds with heat lust and lose all reasoning and inhibitions. Some stories create near-slave cultures where biology determines all aspects of society and sexuality is the central force of domination. Some stories play with the world building, while others just want the filthy, kinky sex; many do both.

And then there are those stories that play with the tropes only to subvert them: Tony Stark all but loses his company because investors don't trust alphas; Erik and Charles have an illicit alpha/alpha relationship; Sherlock hides his real scent with various chemical pheromones because

he doesn't want to be prey to biological prejudices; Mike hides his omega status by remaining close to Harvey. All these stories use A/B/O tropes to interrogate gender and sexuality as well as sexual orientation and cultural assumptions. And when successful, these stories are not only hot and allow our beloved sex objects to get and stay together in bonded bliss but they also interrogate some of the issues and prejudices of our day.