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The Archive of Our Own just won a Hugo. That's huge for fanfiction.

4.7 million fanfics are now Hugo winners, thanks to AO3 and the transformative culture that built it.

By Aja Romano | @ajaromano | Updated Aug 19, 2019, 10:35am EDT



The OTW

The **Archive of Our Own**, universally affectionately shorthanded as AO3, is one of the internet's most well-known fanfiction archives. It just won the Hugo Award for Best Related Work — a significant honor in the sci-fi/fantasy literature world.

The Hugos are annual science fiction and fantasy awards which are handed out every year at Worldcon. They are sourced and voted on by Worldcon attendees, and, along with the **Nebulas**, they're considered the speculative literary community's most prestigious awards. The awards ceremony took place on August 18, 2019 at Worldcon in Dublin, where AO3 co-founder Naomi Novik, accepted it on behalf of all of the website's creators and readers.

"All fanwork, from fanfic to vids to fanart to podfic, centers the idea that art happens not in isolation but in community. And that is true of the AO3 itself," Novik **said** in her acceptance speech. "All our hard work and contributions [as AO3 volunteers] would mean nothing without the work of the fan creators who share their work freely with other fans, and the fans who read their stories and ... nourish the community in their turn."

Novik then asked audience members who were part of the AO3's community to stand and accept the award with her.



Adam Whitehead
@Werthead

[#hugoawards](#) Every fanfic writer in the audience was asked to stand & co accept the award for Best Related Work.



3,287 4:06 PM - Aug 18, 2019

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Online, the mood was equally celebratory, as thousands of fans on Tumblr and Twitter described themselves as ‘Hugo-award-winning writers,’ and congratulated each other on their (our) wins.



Aja Romano

@ajaromano

Everyone i know tonight is greeting each other on the internet with: Hi, congrats on our Hugo win 🥳

62 9:07 PM - Aug 18, 2019

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Becca @tired ❤️🦁

@rfarrowster

hey... did you hear the news?

"Award Winning Fic" Enamel Pins

👉 PREORDERS NOW OPEN 👈

beccafarrow.storenvy.com/products/28506...



877 6:47 PM - Aug 18, 2019

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The organization’s 1,800 voting members chose the Archive of Our Own as the year’s Best Related Work, a category that has traditionally included books or essays that involve critical

commentary, tie-in works, or other works adjacent to speculative fiction.

While the category can include some experimental entries, it's very rare for it to include an entire website — and Hugo members have never nominated unpublished fanfiction before. But now the Hugo voters have sent the emphatic message that not only does an entire fanfiction archive constitute a single “related work,” but that work is worthy of standing alongside some of the most renowned sci-fi/fantasy authors around. For example, Novik herself is a three-time Hugo nominated novelist, but within fandom, she's perhaps even better known as a major fanfiction author, a writer with a tremendous output who's had a hand in shaping some of the subculture's most significant fandoms and fan projects, including the AO3 itself.

The Hugo win is a huge validation for many fanfic authors — many of whom are used to **being dismissed and culturally maligned** — that all of their non-professional works are worthy of respect.

The Archive of Our Own was born out of fans rebelling against corporate exploitation

AO3 isn't just a fanfic archive: It's the most well-known project from an organization called the **Organization for Transformative Works** (OTW). The OTW is an entirely fan-run nonprofit organization, with thousands of members and hundreds of volunteers devoted to protecting, preserving, and defending fanworks and their legal right to exist. There's a whole backstory here, and it comes down to a group of fans — mostly women — deciding to take the fates of their fanworks into their own hands. (Full disclosure: I was a member of the OTW from 2008 to 2016 and served on its development and membership committee from 2011 to 2014.)

The OTW, and subsequently AO3, was founded in response to **a single 2007 LiveJournal post** written by an influential fanfic writer called astolat. Astolat, a well-known writer of **queer (also known as “slash”)** fics with a large readership amid a community of other influential slash fans, was responding to community uproar over the creation of a company called “**FanLib**,” which had, like many companies before it, attempted to disrupt the fanfiction community by commodifying fanfiction and exploiting fans for their work.

As astolat noted in her post:

[T]he people behind fanlib ... don't actually care about fanfic, the fanfic community, or anything except making money off content created entirely by other people and getting media attention. They don't have a single fanfic reader or writer on their board; they don't even have a single woman on their board.

They're creating a lawsuit-bait site while being bad potential defendants, and they deserve to be chased out being pelted with rocks.

It's common for companies to exploit members of fanwork communities, demanding that writers pay to have their work distinguished or offering to pay them very little money to produce fanwork; fans know to be wary of it. Over time, writers developed swift and mobilized ways to protect themselves, essentially forming walls around their independent, creative garden. The goal: keep it free and flourishing. How most fans manage this is by insisting on their right to create noncommercial, "transformative" fanfiction — the legally protected term for works that qualify as **Fair Use** in US copyright law.

But if the sites that host fanfiction aren't also on the side of content creators, then fans may struggle to successfully create, post, and share fanworks online. In 2007, most fanfiction hosting sites were either tiny or large and commercialized — like FanLib and LiveJournal itself. That meant fans were vulnerable to **takedowns, content purges**, and general **exploitation** based on fans' legally precarious position and the **internalized shame** over their works that had been drilled into many fanfiction writers — who, again, tend to be **mainly women**, queer, and genderqueer members of fandom.

Astolat's big idea was straightforward but revolutionary: Why not build an entirely self-sufficient, creator-funded archive to protect fanworks?

"We are sitting quietly by the fireside, creating piles and piles of content around us, and other people are going to look at that and see an opportunity," she wrote. "And they are going to end up creating the front doors that new fanfic writers walk through, unless we stand up and build our OWN front door."

The Archive of Our Own would become that front door.

The Archive of Our Own became about much more than just hosting fanfic

Fans immediately got behind astolat's summons and began mapping out their ideal fanfiction archive. But it quickly became obvious during the planning that what they needed wasn't *just* an archive, but rather an overall approach to combating fanfiction's perpetually endangered status. What astolat proposed would essentially become the backbone of the OTW, which was officially founded in September 2007, a few months after her post.

The OTW evolved into five distinct projects:

- The Archive of Our Own, which launched in an invite-only beta form on November 14, 2009, formally **pledges** “to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms. We believe that fanworks are transformative and that transformative works are legitimate.”
- **Fanlore**, an open source wiki focused on preserving fandom history and collective knowledge
- **Transformative Works and Cultures**, a peer-edited academic journal devoted to advancing fandom scholarship
- **Open Doors**, a fanworks preservation project that identifies older fanfiction archives in danger of shuttering and being lost to time, then rescuing them by transferring their contents to AO3
- **Formalized legal advocacy** for fanworks and other transformative works through the organization’s legal committee, which does things like filing and joining amicus briefs in cases impacting the fan community. The committee also educates fans on important laws and alerts them about changes to laws throughout the world that could impact fanwork practices.

A lot of this might seem needlessly trumped up — you might wonder, for example, why it would be so important to keep a tiny online fanfiction collection from disappearing. But these projects illustrate that the OTW’s ultimate goal isn’t just to combat specific exploitative corporate practices — it’s to empower fans.

Remember, the OTW was created by fans who had spent years, in some cases even decades, facing **stigmatization, censorship, legal troubles**, hosting sites **abruptly deleting their work**, and in many cases **authorial wrath**, all because of the generally negative cultural view of fanfiction. Indeed, even years after the OTW was formed, **fans are still trying to overcome** many tired, shaming, often **openly sexist stereotypes about fanfiction**.

But none of these stereotypes aligned with fans’ experiences of fandom as a deeply creative, flourishing space that gives voice to **misfits and marginalized members** of society. Moreover, fandom has given rise to a thriving culture of empowered writers, who embraced the idea and practice of fanfiction as a fully legitimate literary craft in its own right. By launching a multifaceted service designed to protect fanworks, fans were sending a public message to outsiders, as well as to themselves, that their work was legitimate and not something to be ashamed of.

The Archive of Our Own has had a fundamental role in altering the way we think about fanfiction

That empowered attitude arising among fans who built and used AO3 would coincide with a sea change in the way we think about fanfiction.

The creation of the AO3 in 2009 happened parallel to the rise of social media. This was a highly significant coincidence for fandom. AO3 was formed as an independent, fully non-corporatized community just when the internet was dividing into venture capital-funded platforms like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. The more these types of spaces consolidated the “free” internet, the more necessary a site like AO3 became to fans worried that their hosting ISPs wouldn’t be willing to entertain their defense of fair use against a Digital Millennium Copyright Act takedown notice — an issue many YouTube creators are **all too familiar with**.

But social media was also hugely responsible for mainstreaming transformative fandom — the women-dominated side of fandom that **emphasizes** creating new world-building and fanworks, often critiquing or deconstructing the source material. Before social media, fans clung to the idea of the fourth wall, a kind of mythical secret barrier and “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that allowed them to conduct their activities without outside scrutiny. But by the launch of AO3, social media was giving marginalized people new, important public platforms. It was also making visible the importance of transformative fandom spaces, where historically marginalized fans could express the diversity of their experiences and identities. The collective desire for what was essentially a shame filter around fanworks was finally fading.

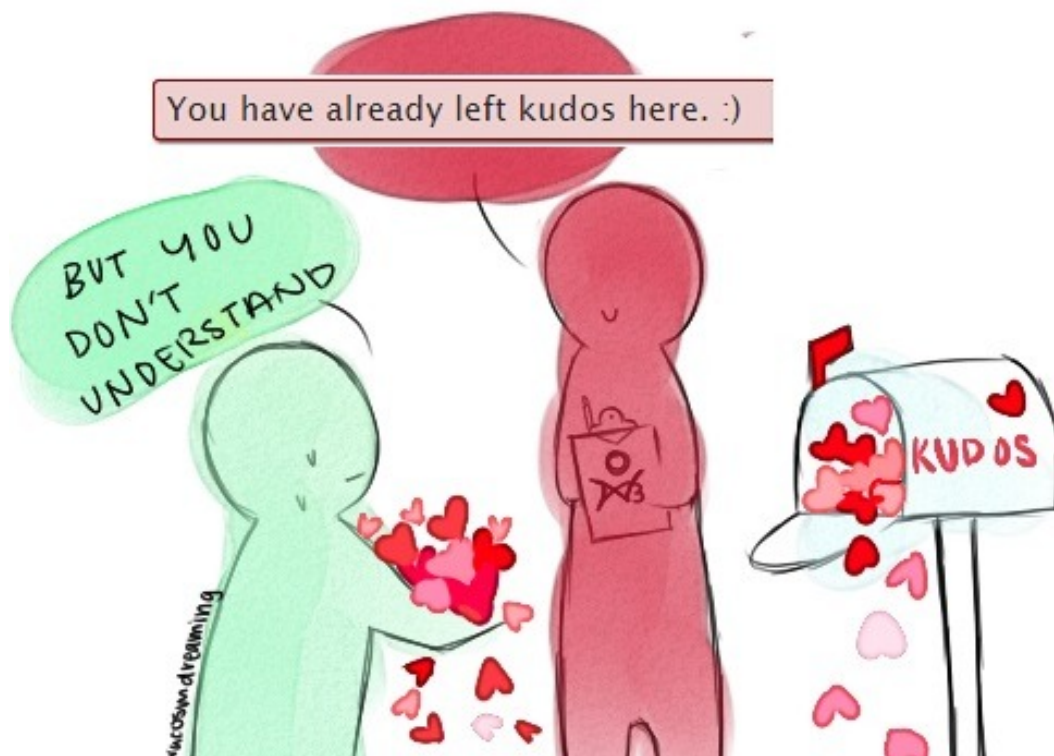
But with the rise of social media, fans were suddenly newly able to discuss their fandom activities in public alongside other fans. The AO3 and Tumblr in particular operated in synergy, as fans new and old came to Tumblr, adopted AO3 as a unique, beloved fanfiction site, and passed along **the communal narrative** of the OTW as an **important safe haven** for fans.

And those fans were becoming more vocal and open about writing fanfiction than at any previous point in cultural history. AO3’s founding in 2009 was still several years before the phenomenon of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2011, which would really open the floodgates on mainstream acceptance of fanfiction. But on Tumblr, which was quietly making its own **enormous cultural impact**, AO3 was becoming a household name, synonymous with fangirls, queer fanfic, and fandom itself.



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As of July 2019, the archive **boasts** over 5 million stories in more than 30,000 recognized fandoms (currently ranging from **07-Ghost** to 킹덤) **in 11 broad categories**, posted by 2 million registered users and read by untold millions more. It receives an average of 179 million views a month; SimilarWeb **ranks it** as the No. 3 literary website (after the corporate fiction/fanfic site **Wattpad** and a manga reading site), and within the top 200 websites globally.

For all of this to have grown out of a bunch of slash fangirls wanting a place to read their queer fanfiction is remarkable, especially given that those women planned, designed, and

hand-coded the site from the ground up, all by themselves — a massive project undertaken **during an era** where women were still fighting to be taken seriously as designers and coders throughout Silicon Valley. (The AO3 **runs on the Ruby on Rails** source engine, for any tech types wondering.)

It's been **lauded** for its incredibly sophisticated filtering system, which allows fans to aggressively curate their reading experiences. This requires a volunteer team of “tag wranglers,” whose sole job is to curate the many user-generated tags added to the archive daily; that's in addition to the other hundreds of volunteers who maintain the site and contribute to the OTW's other projects.

Also astonishing is that it remains supported fully by fans, who have kept the archive funded and the servers running purely through donations for the past decade. (For comparison, the internet's other bastion of grassroots community, Reddit, was bought by Condé Nast in 2006, the year before the OTW was formed.)

What's perhaps even more remarkable than all of this, given the legacy of cultural shame around fanfiction that the archive was formed in part to resist, is that AO3 has helped rehabilitate how fanfiction is perceived by the mainstream. In 2013, **Time magazine named the Archive** one of the best sites on the web. There are AO3 **tag generators** and a **tag-of-the-day** Tumblr. “You have already left kudos here” is a **lowkey internet meme**. It's not uncommon to see once-isolated fans **recognize each other on public transit** because of the unmistakable look of the AO3 interface. AO3 has arguably boosted the average internet user's understanding of fanfiction — and, crucially, this familiarity has come from a positive outgrowth of fandom community, rather than a corporatized promotion of it.

That legacy is represented by AO3's Hugo nomination, recognized as a “huge deal” among followers of the archive and awards body.



Alexandra Rowland ✨ @_alexrowland · Apr 2, 2019

Replying to @seananmcguire @ao3org
YES!!!!!!!!!!!!!! YES YES YES



Seanan McGuire

@seananmcguire

This is a HUGE DEAL. This is a chance to say "fanfic is a legitimate and vital part of fandom" on our biggest stage.

113 11:18 AM - Apr 2, 2019

Much of AO3's story is a story of alienation, of being an online outsider. Fanfiction is **primarily** the bastion of women, queer, and genderqueer fans, who have long been barred from traditionally sanctioned (if equally culturally maligned) curatorial fandom, often due to prejudices. (Remember the “**fake geek girl**” meme?) Women have also been kept from Silicon Valley. Fanfiction is still dismissed as a serious literary genre, lampooned as something only shrill teen girls write — even though many of those girls grow up to become Hugo-winning authors themselves (who **still write fanfiction**).

The Hugos themselves, along with the broader culture of speculative fiction, have been undergoing a **decade-long period** of progressive reform to be more inclusive and diverse that neatly coincides with the rise of AO3. The Hugos have always represented innovation in genre and fandom, created by a lot of geeks and misfits, and AO3 represents the rise of a set of geeks and misfits who have long been invisible to Hugo voters.

Although this is the first year a fanfiction archive has been nominated, transformative fandom has slipped into or near the nominations before. The podcast **Fangirl Happy Hour** has been nominated several times in the category of Best Fancast, and the podcast **Be the Serpent**, which explicitly critiques and analyzes fanfiction by framing it as an important speculative literary tradition, is also nominated for Best Fancast this year. Several bloggers known for championing fanfiction, like **Foz Meadows**, have received nods within the Best Fan Writing category in recent years too.

So AO3's nomination, given the turn the Hugos have gradually been making to embrace fandom more explicitly, feels less remarkable than inevitable — not just a legitimate literary organization saying, “We see you,” but rather, “We see you, and you're one of us.”

The awards are a long-deserved acknowledgment of the tremendous driving force of creators working together to create a space for themselves — the strength of their talent, community, technology, literary skill, and sheer passion in making the world a little more their own.