Me, myself, and I: Fan fiction and the art of self-insertion

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It’s a secret rite of passage for many girls, particularly those who are aspiring authors: penning imaginative, often unspeakably bad fiction starring unrealistically perfect heroines. You know the type—if you haven’t written her, you’ve read about her: the brave and beautiful princess/ballerina/cowgirl who slays dragons/becomes president/marries a movie star. Sometimes she has her own story to tell, but frequently she worms her way into existing tales. She tends to bear an uncanny resemblance to her creator—ONLY STRONGER, WITTIER, SEXIER, FRIENDLIER, and WITHOUT THE GLASSES AND BAD SKIN.

Writers and readers of fan fiction know her as Mary Sue, and she’s one of the most loathed entities in fan culture. An original female character displaying unrealistically positive characteristics, Mary Sue is the enviable alter ego—part supermodel, part rocket scientist—of the writer who can’t help but insinuate her fantasy self into the lives of existing characters. You don’t have to look far to find Mary Sue—she’s all over fandom. Even a casual search of fanfic published on the internet will reveal a multitude of attractive, headstrong but feminine characters with “creamy white skin,” “curly jet-black ringlets,” and “bright-blue eyes that reflect the moonlight.” She’s Buffy’s beautiful, whip-smart cousin who’s a Slayer and a grad student in biophysics—that is, when she’s not fronting her own rock band. She’s the spunky, headstrong sister/daughter/girlfriend of Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings’ Legolas, the only one who can single handedly save Hogwarts/Middle earth from destruction—and she does so while boasting fabulous clothes and hair.

You can find an equal number of websites devoted to identifying, critiquing, and openly mocking Mary Sue and her creators, along with a variety of definitions—sometimes contradictory—of what constitutes a Mary Sue. The Mary Sue Society Avatar Appreciation Website (www.subreality.com/marysue.htm), for instance, which is dedicated to both celebrating and poking gentle fun at Mary Sue, describes her as “any original or deeply altered character who represents a slice of his/her creator’s own ego; s/he is treasured by his/her creator but only rarely by anyone else. More negatively, a Mary Sue is a prima donna (usually but not always badly written) who saps life and realism out of every other character around, taking over the plot...to serve his/her selfish purposes.”
Certainly, not all examples of self-insertion in fiction are so idealized, and not every exceptionally pretty, smart, and prominently featured female fanfic character is a reflection of the author's ego. And although Mary Sue is a creation of contemporary fan culture, echoes of her are found across the centuries and across mass media, wherever idealized female characters and thinly disguised author avatars pop up—but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

What commonly defines a Mary Sue is not simply the appearance of positive characteristics, but rather the exaggeration of those traits to an unattainable ideal: She's not just smart, kind, quirky, or pretty, she's smarter, nicer, quirkier, and prettier than any other female around—and her creator will allow no one to forget it. Mary Sues always display some unique ability—a latent magical power, exceptional intelligence, or technical acumen—that is required at a pivotal point in the narrative. Often appearing on the scene carrying some deep, dark secret—she's an unknown relative, say, or long-lost lover of another established character—she is intricately tied in some way to the major plot and characters of the story.

Mary Sue often performs a technical service to her creator as well, acting as a deus ex machina or a chameleonsque character actor able to play any role required of her. She's the glue that holds a story together, commenting on perceived flaws in a plan, uniting lovelorn characters who "belong together," transforming a villainous character into a virtuous one by the power of her love, bringing together major characters in a shared adoration of her. A Mary Sue is frequently deployed to "correct" problems that fans see in the original text: She becomes the beautiful, alternate-universe daughter of Buffy and Spike who visits from the future to ensure her birth by reuniting her parents. She's the tough, skilled—and don't forget hot!—female Jedi who rescues Star Wars' Qui-Gon Jinn from being killed by Darth Maul.

In short, Mary Sue makes the story all about her. She may not be the main character, but she is almost always the unifying factor. While this narcissistic aspect of Mary Sue is often criticized, it can also be viewed as an expression of agency by female authors—creating female characters who embody everything that their writers see as good and desirable and making the story turn out just right. The desire to insert take-charge female characters especially makes sense considering that the source texts for so much fan fiction—from Lord of the Rings to HBO prison series Oz—feature male characters running the show.

Some writers champion Mary Sue without shame, defending the trope as a way for fanfic writers—and fiction writers in general—to include their own most positive traits in the story, making themselves a major character, if not the true star of the show. It's equal parts ego-tripping and wish fulfillment: After all, what fiction writer doesn't secretly yearn to see him or herself as the center of the action? But it's also part and parcel of the writing process for many authors, particularly novices.

Where exactly did Mary Sue—or at least her official name—come from? As with so many other trends in fan culture, in the beginning there was Star Trek. Though the future as defined by the early incarnations of Star Trek was racially diverse, its gender outlook was less progressive: Female characters tended to be either alien love interests for Captain Kirk, or support staff like Lieutenant Uhura (whose portrayer, Nichelle Nichols, described the character as a "glorified switchboard operator"). The desire for more involved female characters led many fans to write their own Star Trek stories, positioning that if they were on the bridge of the Enterprise, things would have turned out differently. Many of these early fanfics attempted to condense all of the female attributes they wanted to see on the show into one female character, and Mary Sue was born.

**THE ARCHETYPE EXISTED IN FAN FICTION YEARS BEFORE SHE HAD A NAME.** "Mary Sue" was formally named after the main character in Paula Smith's 1974 Star Trek parody, "Trekkie's Tale." In Smith's story, Lieutenant Mary Sue, a beautiful and resourceful half-Vulcan, saves the Enterprise from destruction by using a hairpin, and then dies tragically, "surrounded by Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Mr. Scott all weeping unashamedly at the loss of her beautiful youth and youthful beauty, intelligence, capability, and all-around niceness." This urtext is reprinted in Camille Bacon-Smith's book Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth, in which Bacon-Smith describes Mary Sue as "the most universally denigrated genre in the entire canon of fan fiction." Over time, Mary Sue became the gendered exemplar of annoying self-inserted perfection, expanding her influence to fan works of all genres.

But while her name may be a modern creation, Mary Sue—like qualities fit into a larger historical and literary context. In a 1999 article, "Too Good to Be True: 150 Years of Mary Sue," scholar Pat Pflieger references the
use of proto-Mary Sues as far back as the 19th century, describing these creations as

"supergirls: multitalented females who have everything, do everything, and outshine everyone...." The Mary Sues who die in the 20th century are anything but pure and fragile, but their plot pattern draws from this image of 19th century perfection. [They] are an inspiration to the [other] characters..., an image of nobility and beauty that can become an icon of perfection.

Much like today's maligned Mary Sue of fanfic, idealized heroines have historically been viewed derivatively, even by female critics. In her 1856 essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," the (lady) novelist George Eliot describes a literary prototype of Mary Sue, who turns all men—whether they're primary or secondary characters—to mush:

[Male characters exist to] accompany the heroine on her "starring" expedition through life. They see her at a ball, and are dazzled; at a flower show, and they are fascinated; on a riding excursion, and they are witched by her noble horsemanship; at church, and they are awed by the sweet solemnity of her demeanour. She is the ideal woman in feelings, faculties and flounces.

It's understandable that, once finally allowed to take center stage, female writers choose to have their female characters embody all of the "best" of womanliness. The historical ideal of the perfect heroine has evolved and persisted over time—despite the fact that multifaceted female characters exist. Mary Sue is the modern version of the pretty princess who can do no wrong.

While Mary Sue is a fanfic archetype, the term has begun to make a jump from describing only fan-created characters to describing original female characters as they appear in other forms of mass media—though the use of the term "Mary Sue" in these contexts further complicates its multiple and conflicted definitions within fan culture. Film and TV abound with impossibly beautiful and smart females; however, not all can be classified as Mary Sues, considering that most female characters are shoehorned into a narrow definition of femininity. Those who are given the label by critical fans are usually characterized by a seemingly impenetrable wall of perfection, unyielding to common sense and plot necessity—overwhelming other female characters' screen time, forcing the viewer to pay attention only to her. For example, Days of Our Lives' Dr. Marlena Evans, introduced in the 1970s as a traditional soap-opera heroine, over time has developed Sue-like traits. Despite cheating on her husband, indirectly causing her daughter's insanity, and becoming a serial killer (actions later waved away by explaining that the entire town was under hypnosis), Marlena is held up as an exemplar of womanly beauty, intelligence, and strength by other characters on the show.

On the WB drama Smallville, Lana Lang is chock-full
of Mary Sue qualities. Earlier incarnations of the DC Comics character position her as a teen love interest of the boy who will become Superman, an antecedent to his eventual true love, Lois Lane. The TV series reenvisions Lana as a popular cheerleader frequently menaced by tertiary characters who have unusual powers and who become obsessed with her. Despite her parents’ tragic death, Lana is always friendly and cheerful, with no shortage of admirers (to counterbalance all those nemeses). In later seasons, she is revealed to be the descendent of Isabel, a witch burned at the stake in the Middle Ages, and is thereby blessed with mystical butt-kicking abilities.

Though many Smallville fans love Lana, she is detested by others, who attribute her deification to the male producer’s own fixation with the actor who plays her. “Chloe [the girl reporter/best friend of teen Clark Kent] is a great character—funny, interesting, and smart,” posts one fan descendent of Isabel, a witch burned at the stake in the Middle Ages, and is thereby blessed with mystical butt-kicking abilities.

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on a Smallville message board. “But the writers are continually giving her the short end of the time stick while Lana gets all the attention. What exactly is the appeal of Lana for them? I mean, seriously, she has few discernible character traits aside from being apparently ‘beautiful,’ which isn’t really a character trait at all.” Of course, on TV and in popular movies, being beautiful has often been considered a primary character trait—although it’s nice to see these fans wanting more.

While these Smallville fans detest Lana’s flawlessness, other characters with Mary Sue tendencies are viewed more positively. Roz Kaveney, in the April 29, 2005, Times Literary Supplement, describes Rose, a character in the 2005 incarnation of Doctor Who, as “what is commonly known as a ‘Mary Sue’—an unironic reflection of the writers’ and fans’ desire to get in there and help the Doctor out (while managing to stay pretty).” Considering that most of Doctor Who’s companions have traditionally been women, it is understandable—if also disturbing—that the role of the only prominent female character on the show is to fix problems and to do so cutely. In Kaveney’s assessment, Rose is perfection defined, “clearly a post-Buffy consort,” “attractively vulnerable [and] possessed of a common sense that counterpoints the Doctor’s sometimes naive idealism,” yet “a modern working-class woman [with] an affecting back story.” Of course there isn’t any room for any other potentially flawed female characters—Rose is everything a woman could be!

And this is the basis of many fans’ ire toward both fan-created Mary Sues and pop culture pseudo-Sues like Rose: By endowing one female with so many glowing attributes, it leaves little room for nuance when it comes to characterization. Mary Sue’s perfection is often upheld at the expense of other female characters, or leaves no room for them at all. This mirrors the very real pressure placed on real-life women to be the prettiest, the smartest, the most sexually desirable, the most traditionally feminine—or risk being supplanted or ignored. While not every positive portrayal of a female character in pop culture fits into the Mary Sue archetype, this absolutism and flatness of nuance sharply leans a character in that direction.

Though few hard numbers exist to support this claim, anecdotal evidence suggests that fan-fiction writing is a predominantly female-driven activity. According to Bacon-Smith, “women find themselves an overwhelming majority among media fans who create, read, and discuss their community’s own fiction and art based on the characters and situations in their favorite television, movie, and even book series.” Because of this, it is commonly assumed that Mary Sue is both a product and a function of female writers’ desire to live out an idealized version of themselves. However, examples of male Mary Sues are not uncommon. Regularly referred to as “Marty Stu,” or “Gary Sue,” they are especially prevalent in science fiction and fanfic, such as Star Wars’ blandly handsome protagonist Luke Skywalker or Star Trek’s Wesley Crusher, a brilliant teen who always seems to discover the answers to problems and who is promoted to the crew of the Enterprise with no formal training. Wesley is a blatant example of a quasi-Gary Sue—he’s even named for his creator, Eugene Wesley Roddenberry. He’s not the only one: As Bacon-Smith states, “Fans have noted [that] James Kirk is himself a Mary Sue, because he represents similarly exaggerated characteristics of
strength, intelligence, charm, and adventurousness. [Fans] note that the sobriquet ‘Mary Sue’ may be a self-imposed sexism—she can’t do that, she’s a girl.”

Pfieger points out that while there are multiple names for male Mary Sues, there’s only one term for her female incarnation, implying that some wiggle room is allowed for the idealized male, but not for Mary Sue, who will always be the idealized female archetype. She says, “Perhaps because male characters are expected to embody the ideals of perfection associated with the character, so the fact that they do isn’t noteworthy; perhaps because the dearth of admirable female characters in the source material makes admirable original female characters stand out all the more.”

You would think, then, that as more and more complex female characters appear in popular culture, the need for Mary Sue would wane. So why do many female fanfic writers continue to create Mary Sues? The obvious answer is that there are still not enough female characters, and the ones we have are not as satisfactory—or as perfect—as we’d like them to be.

Take the case of “Hermione Sue,” so named by fans of Harry Potter who have witnessed their brainy-witch heroine morph into a gothy teen sexpot within fan fiction. Series creator J.K. Rowling has admitted in several interviews that the character of Hermione Granger is “a loosely based caricature of what I was at 11. Brainy and outspoken, at that age, I was irritating. I stood out.” On her website, Rowling remarks, “I think I was seen by other people as a right little know-it-all, but I hope that it is clear that underneath Hermione’s swottiness there is a lot of insecurity and a great fear of failure.” But in fanfic, Hermione Sue often returns from a summer away from Hogwarts with a brand-new look—her frizzy brown hair usually straightened and dyed platinum blond or jet black—and a new personality (“outgoing, a party-lover, and very hot,” as she is described in one fan story). Sometimes Hermione Sue is even given a new family—a witch born to nonmagical parents in the books, her fanfic alter ego has special abilities that are often explained by a heretofore undiscovered magical lineage.

Of the three main characters of the Harry Potter series, only Hermione is so routinely morphed into flawlessness. Perhaps because girls who read and write Potterfic already identify with Hermione, they feel motivated to re-create her as an unattainable ideal, similar to one they are pressured to be—not just a girl who is smart and loyal, but one who comes from a socially acceptable (or even socially superior) background, who is mature and sexually active (but only while “in love”), and who is traditionally beautiful and shops at Hot Topic. Or perhaps it’s because, important as Hermione is, she is still a lonely figure in the male-dominated realm of popular fantasy/science-fiction literature.

As an entry point into fiction writing, there may be some use for Mary Sue. All burgeoning writers are told to write what they know, and who do we know better than ourselves? That girls (and women) wish to rewrite themselves as the very best version of who they are is not uncommon. But when such a narrow standard of “ideal” womanhood persists, and when three-dimensional female characters already extant in mass media are morphed into Mary Sue, because they are not “good enough” as they are, Mary Sue becomes more problematic. Rather than offering an opportunity for self-identification, Mary Sue often reinforces the impossible idea that women must strive for effortless perfection.

The archetype is so overused, and as a result so detested in fandom, that any strong, assertive, attractive female character in either fan culture or pop culture is at risk of being accused of being a Mary Sue. However, a major difference between Mary Sues and realistic female characters is that while Mary Sues are commonly defined by the characters around them, Anti-Sues, for lack of a better term, are fully realized, independent creations whose destiny, actions, and accomplishments are their own.

Mary Sue’s popularity made more sense back before pop culture narratives allowed strong, independent, and imperfect female characters to exist and be accepted without being marginalized. But in post-Xena, post-Buffy world, there’s a little more room for multifaceted female characters (such as Veronica Mars, Lorelai and Rory Gilmore, and Grey’s Anatomy’s Miranda Bailey and Cristina Yang), and the idea that a limited ideal must continue to exist for all female characters in popular culture should be ready for retirement.

Yet Mary Sue lives on. She may no longer be needed, but that doesn’t mean she’s not wanted. As long as real life and popular culture conspire to dish out unrealistic standards to women and girls, and as long as it isn’t enough to have characters who are smart and can kick butt, but who also have to be Hollywood polished, Mary Sue will always be written into the story, as conflicted and contentious as our very ideas about women, perfection, and power.

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