

# Fanthropology Part 2 with Meredith Levine

## Ologies Podcast

### March 23, 2021

Oh heeey, it's still that throwback picture from when you wore baggy jeans and shell necklaces, Alie Ward, back with Part 2 of a pop-cultural and psychological episode y'all loved the start of last week. We're going to finish it off with more of your great questions. Shall we? We shall.

If you have not listened to last week, you want to hop over to Part 1 first. You'll hear the definition of Fanthropology from an actual living, breathing researcher whose Twitter bio reads, "Fanthropologist, Entertainment Futurist, YouTube Enthusiast, and Defender of Teen Girl Taste." In Part 1 we covered sports, and religion, and K-pop goblins for good, and the practice of Disneybounding, which I completely failed to ever define. (It's subtly dressing like Disney characters in the theme parks in a way that only other Disney fanatics might catch. That's Disneybounding.) We talked about fanfiction, and *Frasier*, and how complex and kind-of-evil algorithms tell us what to like. We talk about free-range children, what to do if your favorite author turns out to be problematic, and more. So that is Part 1.

In this episode, we're going to hear about shipping, which is short for 'relationshiping', I suppose, or dreaming up unions that exist only in your horny daydreams, and fan versus stans – stans being kind of the creepy variety – and the line between cults and Fandoms, and that all-important question: If you want to build an empire and Fandom over which you preside, how do you become internet famous? Do you *want* to be internet famous? All that and more.

A quick thanks first to all the listeners of *Ologies*. I could not do these interviews or make the show without the wonderfully weird and insightful questions from patrons. You can give a dollar or more a month to support the show at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://Patreon.com/Ologies). Thanks as well to all the folks who just spread the word, and the links, and leave reviews. I creep on you and I read every single one. This week, thank you to Trisha S, and also BronzeKraken, aka PD, who wrote:

*Dearest Father,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I have verily enjoyed your audio recordings. I listen to each new one with gusto and look forward to the next.*

*Your Internet Child,*

*-PD*

See? Proof. So leave one.

Okay, everyone else who left one, I read it for sure. Your weird internet UncleDad hearts you very much and is earnestly so happy you're here. Let's shove off into Part 2 of Fanthropology with behavioral researcher and legit, professional, on-her-business-card unironically, Fanthropologist Meredith Levine.

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**Alie Ward:** I'm going to make us go through Patreon questions because there are questions I want to ask you that patrons asked. So I'm going to ask their questions through my mouth. Is that cool?

**Meredith Levine:** Great. Let's do it.

**Alie:** Okay. This one was at the top of my tongue, and it was asked by patrons Anna Thompson, Elle McCall, Matt Ceccato, Iselin Helløy, Bonnie, Tamara Mann, Keri, Caitlyn Powell, Anya, Levi Bourke, Hope, Lexi Reitz, Rachel Weiss, Lee Katherine Ayerhart, and Gianna McClain. They all wanted to know about obsessive fandom. Bonnie asked: What's the line between being a healthy fan of something and obsession? And Tamara wanted to know: When does fandom cross the line to inappropriate and unhealthy. And also a stan. When does a fan become a stan? [*"Good question."*]

**Meredith:** So, let's start with obsessive. Fandom has historically been pathologized in a negative way. And fans generally aren't that. They are generally not malicious. When does it become unhealthy? It becomes unhealthy when you neglect all of the things in your life that actually lead to a healthy life, like eating, and sleeping, and going to work and/or school. But who's to say what a good use of time is? Especially in an age where one can be a professional fan if, like, that's the thing you want to do.

When does it become unhealthy? When your life and relationships suffer as a result. Plenty of people have found their life partners and gotten married and stuff through fandom, and that's a thing that happens now. And by fandom I mean, like, pop culture Fandom, like with a capital F. So, that's not necessarily unhealthy.

What *is* unhealthy is when you have the rogue person... This happens a lot in, like, influencer culture and those kinds of fandoms because this particular type of object of fandom is themselves for a living, where... I'm friends with a bunch of creators as an offshoot of my life, and oftentimes they get the question of, "What's the weirdest thing a fan has ever done?" or "What's the scariest, or creepiest..." or whatever. And that is when it gets to be scary, and creepy, and bad, is in those in-person interactions, for the most part, of like screaming at someone in Target, or going and waiting outside of their house. Anything that is a breach of personal privacy for the object of fandom is when it gets to be bad because then it's, like, actively dehumanizing to those people who are objects of fandom.

**Alie:** But wouldn't some people argue that they have taken themselves out of being a human and been striving for something like "superhuman" where they are getting more than a normal human's share of attention, or wealth, or privilege? I mean... I'm saying this as someone who also knows a lot of creators and is a creator. Is there anything where there's been a consensus that you have surrendered your privacy by selling it?

**Meredith:** No. In my opinion, everyone is entitled to their privacy and as much of it as they want. That being said, it's also important for objects of fandom to understand that and be a little bit more careful with their personal information. In the event that you are an object of fandom or want to be an object of fandom, step one is cultivate an audience. But in that process, people with kids have to make the decision of how much of their kids' lives are part of their brands, and that's a personal decision, especially if their kids are too young to consent to that. And there are choices that everyone has to make about, like, how much of their personal lives they want to show. Celebrities deal with this also. It's a little bit less of an issue when you're a non-human entity with fans.

**Aside:** I'm hoping she means [*Meredith repeated, "non-human entity."*] like Gritty, the floopy, grumpy, flaming orange figurehead of the Philadelphia Flyers, who has been described by newspapers as, "An acid trip of a mascot," and "a ghastly, empty-eyed Muppet."

Neither human nor beast, Gritty was born in 2018 out of the design prompt, “Something you’d high-five... but not hug.” And sure, I did go down a rabbit hole looking at pictures of Gritty tattoos, such as one bearing the words, “Chaos Reigns.” [*clip from Antichrist, deep, spooky voice, “Chaos. Reigns.”*]

**Meredith:** But even still, showing up to a place of home or work is when it gets to be obsessive and bad, which is not the same thing as toxic fandom.

**Alie:** Yeah, can we talk about toxic fandoms? Patrons Mike Monikowski, Samantha Ryan, Jessie Dragon, Anna Thompson, Justin McCormick, and Colleeneebie, and Will Johnston wanted to know... Will asked: What, in your opinion, is the most toxic fandom, and also what’s the best fandom and why is it Terry Pratchett’s DiscoWorld? Discworld! I thought it said DiscoWorld and I thought, “That sounds *tight*.” But I guess Discworld, maybe that’s frisbee? I don’t know.

**Aside:** I earnestly thought that Discworld was similar to Terry Bradshaw’s NFL video game but with Ultimate Frisbee. And then I realized that it’s actually John Madden’s NFL game.

Anyway, Discworld is a series of novels set in a flat world, perched on the back of four giant elephants perched on a giant turtle. It was written, not by NFL coach Terry Bradshaw, but by literary figure Sir Terry Pratchett. My point is that Discworld fandom has nothing to do with sports or disco pantsuits.

**Meredith:** Uh... I would totally go to DiscoWorld.

**Alie:** [*laughs*] Me too, dude!

**Meredith:** I would love it there. So, what is the most toxic fandom?

**Alie:** Yeah! What *is* toxic fandom? When does it become shitty? I’m trying to think of... All I can think about are, like, people who are out in 30° weather with no shirt on and their body painted sports colors. And I’m sure that that is not even toxic compared to what is out there.

**Aside:** That’s just *uncomfortable* fandoms.

**Meredith:** So, generally when people refer to toxic fandoms, they refer to intra-fandom fighting with ad hominem attacks and actively, like, shutting other people down, and yucking their yums, and generally being, like, know-it-alls, wet blankets, gatekeepers, and shunning and shaming people who like the same things. So, when those kinds of tools get used within a fandom, or when actions are taken against marginalized identities, or those are not respected, oftentimes that is another thing that’s referenced as a toxic fandom.

I’m all for sports fans who go shirtless in the middle of winter to paint their bodies. You do you. Your body. Whatever. I’m not going to tell you to put on a sweater. But kink-shame someone for their fanfiction, which also came up a lot, that’s kind of bad. Or telling someone that they don’t belong or that they’re not “fan enough.” Everyone starts as a beginner, and just because someone doesn’t have the same fandom origin story as someone else doesn’t necessarily make them less of a fan or less of a worthy fan.

**Aside:** So do other fans call newbies posers? That’s a little toxic. Now, confession. I have actually never seen *Rocky Horror Picture Show* live because I heard that they write a ‘V’ for ‘Virgin’ on your forehead if you’ve never been, like with lipstick. I think that’s good-

natured and not toxic, but I was so afraid of getting a constellation of pimples in a V on my forehead on my bad teen skin so I chickened out at every opportunity to attend a midnight fishnetted screening.

But yes, fandoms in which people genuinely, not-good-naturedly harass each other, those are the bad ones.

**Meredith:** Sometimes it happens also when there are ‘ship wars’ that happen, when there are two dominant ‘ships’ that come to the forefront of the fandom and they actively don’t believe and are against each other, which is... Shipping culture is this whole other... It’s part of Fandom with a capital F. But it’s this whole other thing, and if you want to know a lot more about fanfiction, and shipping culture, and that kind of Fandom, I highly recommend the *Fansplaining* podcast with Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel. Great podcast if you’re interested in Fandom.

**Alie:** You know, dovetailing off of that, listeners Diane Bao, Taryn Fernacz, Kelly Semon, and Jamie Kishimoto... Jaime had a great question and asked: Have you done any studies on the phenomenon of queer baiting and how it creates die-hard fandoms of shippers but never delivers a happy queer ending?

**Meredith:** I would say, never say never. The media landscape is shifting and we have an example of that recently. But my guess is there’s a specific IP behind this and my hunch is that it might be *Teen Wolf*.

**Aside:** I looked this up, and the MTV series *Teen Wolf* debuted in 2011, and I’m going to quote an article from *The Advocate* to sum up the beef with the beefy, but ultimately empty, romance arcs. *The Advocate* said:

*The continued teases that a character might be bisexual with no payoff, the same-sex romances that end as quickly as they begin with little development, the disappearance of gay characters without explanation, and the absence of any well-developed LGBT character four seasons into a show that appeared to bank heavily on its queer appeal early on have left vocal fans howling.*

And though its final season was in 2017, many moons ago, history remembers *Teen Wolf* as, kind of, a hairy situation.

**Meredith:** And I personally think that queer baiting is exploitative, as are a lot of the tropes that get used, like ‘bury your gays’, and ‘fridging’, and that sort of thing that shows historically have used. And I think that as queer voices become more prominent in writer’s rooms and in the production process, I think that will happen less and less. Especially since fans also can take collective action and do grassroots awareness of what these issues are and why it’s harmful.

Having very coded behavior is also very typically Hollywood and stems from a very long history of what was acceptable in film and television by those standards of, like, Hays Code stuff; what it means to get a rating for PG-13 versus R.

**Aside:** Hays Codes, side note, were essentially written in the late 1920s by a Jesuit priest and a church elder as a sort of code of standards for the motion picture industry. And it set precedents forbidding all kinds of fun stuff, such as nudity, suggestive dancing, discussions of sexual perversity, any ridicule of religion, any interracial relationship, lustful kissing, and any scenes of passion. Obviously, this was not friendly to any queer depictions or werewolf make-outs, to say the least.

**Meredith:** There's a lot of institutionalized things to unpack around queer baiting, because to attribute it to a writer's room isn't entirely the whole story, and to attribute to a marketing team isn't entirely the whole story, in my opinion. It's unfortunate, but also tends to draw out people who are like-minded and want to go into that level of imagining. I don't love it, but also the effects of it have done community-building things.

So, a lot of the time, why queer 'ships exist is because there aren't as many well-rounded characters to imagine, and reimagine, and reshape that are women, and nonbinary, and on the other gender spectrum. Hollywood is still incredibly male-dominated. When it comes to playing around with characters, often the best ones are guys.

**Alie:** That's interesting. That's such a good point.

**Aside:** So because movies, and TV, and comic books seem to be well-stocked on man-people in general, those lead characters are fleshed out with more complexity, so they get shipped more often in fan fantasies, because who wants to ship a boring character? That's like trying to make a sexy sandwich with one soggy bread slice. No thank you. Give me two nutty, rich, tangy slices. I don't care what gender they are!

Now, on the topic of that.

**Alie:** Off of that, listener Sylvia Scharf had a question. They wrote: People talk about fangirling or fanboying over a person. What is the gender-neutral term for this behavior? It isn't fanning. Signed; agender person who definitely does this thing but is neither a girl nor a boy.

**Meredith:** So, if I had to remove gender from it, I would say 'fanning out' as a phrase. "I'm fanning out." But fangirling and fanboying often have implied different sets of behaviors, regardless of gender but having to do with typically masculine and typically feminine traits, based on their portrayals in the media. So like, when I hear 'fangirling', I hear a sound.

**Alie:** Yes! Of course! *Of course!*

**Meredith:** And I'm sure everyone hears this sound of this high-pitched...

**Alie:** [laughs]

**Meredith:** It's a squeal. And it's a sound. [*clip of a crowd of girls screaming/squealing*] I hear Beatlemania, and crying, and fainting, and a lot of it is associated with proximity to object of fandom.

**Alie:** Yes! Yes. [laughs]

**Meredith:** Versus being a fanboy. I ascribe it to – regardless of gender – slightly more pedantic behavior, and behavior of, like, nerd-joking, or 'true-fanning', which is quizzing people and having all the information. There's a very outdated model about affirmational and transformational fandom that was, like, an academic paper from, I think, maybe the late '90s, possibly the early 2000s. It was about ways that Fandom express themselves, and some is in transformation and some is in completionism of, like, "Are you reimaging and playing with the work? The work is a springboard for one's own imagination." Or is it more encyclopedic and religious? Where it's about knowing everything and being an expert in the thing.

**Aside:** So transformational Fandom is like, "Hey, thanks for making this world, these characters. As fans, it's now ours to run with and make more elaborate and weirder if

we want to.” But affirmational Fandom is like, “This is what the creator intended and we may only observe, and fawn over, and memorize this particular world and characters.” Also, if you like video games? *[snobbily]* “Hmph. Name all the video games!”

**Meredith:** So these conflicting models of what people think of as fans can often inhibit the experience of being one. One of the other questions that gets asked a lot is, “Do you have to be part of a community to be a fan?” And the answer is no. You can be a fan all on your own and, like, do whatever it is that you do, and not interact with a soul around it and still be a good fan because being a fan is something that one imagines themselves to be, not a set of behaviors.

**Alie:** But we would call that, in general, fanning out? I like ‘fanning out’.

**Meredith:** Fanning out! If there’s a gender-neutral term for having an overwhelming moment of excitement as a result of something having to do with the object of fandom that makes one’s self sensorily overloaded or sensorily frozen, I would call it fanning out.

**Alie:** I love it. On the topic of forging ahead with neologisms, which is a word I can never say... NeOLogism? NeoLOgism? New words?

**Meredith:** I’ve only read it.

**Alie:** *[clip of internet pronunciation: “neOLogism.”]* Anna Thompson and Forrest Stotts had questions. Do people typically connect more *[switches to ultra-smooth NPR voice]* with podcasts than other types of media because listening is more intimate?

**Meredith:** *[NPR voice]* Oh, thank you for your podcast voice. I love this ASMR moment.

**Alie:** *[giggles]*

**Meredith:** There are a lot of things that have to do with connecting with podcast hosts. Part of it has to do with being in someone’s ears and how intimate actually talking is, especially in the age of, like, visuals and texting. Part of it has to do with how much time podcasters spend in the ears of their fans. It’s somewhere between 20 minutes and an hour or two a week, depending on what kind of podcast you’re listening to, and it’s, like, every week. So, this is a friend. This is a familiar voice. It’s the kind of experience you put on to be a little less alone, usually whilst doing something else, like driving, or dishes, or laundry, or going on a walk. Dedicated podcast listening, high-fidelity style, “This is all I’m doing. I’m sitting and I’m listening to this voice,” is a little less prevalent, behaviorally. But there is a lot of familiarity, assuming that the library consisting that... Most podcasts don’t make it over ten episodes.

**Alie:** *[befuddled]* D... Wh... Really??

**Meredith:** Yeah, a lot fail in the first 90 days and will have *a* season. But to be able to sustain and develop an audience in podcast form often requires a lot of dedication to the format and the ability to do so. There are a lot of people who dabble. As the podcast scene gets more robust, there are more podcasts that can’t go on indefinitely. But yes, there is a certain level of intimacy that is similar to vloggers because of the amount of time that this person, as themselves, spends with the audience. It’s a very audience-inclusive format.

So yes, there is a great reason as to why podcast hosts have fandom in a way that feels a little bit more friendly than Jared Padalecki. Which is beautiful and a lot easier under the independent creator model than it is to do when you’re a major studio with, like, a massive legal team and all sorts of issues, like with including any idea that didn’t come

out of the writer's room. There are a lot of infrastructural reasons why big studios can't do what podcasters do.

**Alie:** I never thought that I would love this medium as much as I do. It's just been so rewarding, I think, because of that connection to listeners. And I have said before, and even more so now that we are in an era of not-in-person weddings. But if two Ologites met through the show and get married, I am a Universal Life Church minister, I will be happy to Zoom marry you. [*"Mawage is wot bwings us togeder today."*] I feel like it is my duty.

**Meredith:** You heard it here, Ologites! You heard it here. Do you want DadWard to marry you two? All you have to do is meet somebody, and then fall in love, and then decide to get married.

**Alie:** There is an Ologies Facebook singles group. I think it's called Flirtology. I'll put it in an aside.

**Aside:** Please see the Facebook group: Flirtology Singles. "A place for Ologites and other nerds, geeks, dweebs, wonks and boffins to meet, mingle, flirt, chat, and canoodle." There's 908 hot dorks waiting for you. So maybe... maybe this is the universe (aka me) telling you to maybe join. Text a crush about the bangs you just cut. We're all going to die anyway. Just take a chance.

Also, quick ad break right now. A double donation was made to the Project for Awesome, thanks to sponsors of the show. Links to sponsors and to that charity are in the show notes.

[*Ad Break*]

Okay. I think we were talking about... Yes, Flirtology Singles.

**Alie:** So if you're single and you like learning things about slug dicks, let me hook you up with someone.

A lot of people asked about the positives and benefits of certain fandoms. Bailey Sperling, LettersFromEleanorRigby, Carrie Cimo, Kathleen Sachs, Natalie Rhoades, and Kim Bonacker all kind of asked: What's the most moving thing you've ever seen a group of fans do for someone else? Or what's been the most wholesome view of the world? What kinds of experiences have really touched you?

**Meredith:** What's having a moment this year, which is a really beautiful thing to watch, is fans rallying together to be pro-social with causes and to actively help shape the world. Like, there is this budding form of activism called Fan Activism. And one of my favorite instances is the Project for Awesome, which has been going on for over ten years now, which is a Nerdfighter John and Hank thing but extends to their larger network of creators. It actually started as, like, an algorithmic hack to get on the front page of YouTube, back when that was a thing, and it's now a major fundraising for charity experience.

Fandoms do all sorts of beautiful things. There's a great book called *Will the Vampire People Please Leave the Lobby?* about fans funding other Buffy fans in, like, the '90s to get them plane tickets and get them to fan meetups. I've seen K-pop fans, honestly, doing some great work this season. There are a lot of Twitch streamers and gamers who do a lot of fundraising for charity. St. Jude is a recipient for a lot of those. There's a lot of beautiful stuff that happens when you can get a community together and move them in

a positive direction. What I'm really enjoying right now is the community of people on TikTok who are building the *Ratatouille* musical.

**Alie:** [laughs] Is it cast with real rats? Please say yes.

**Meredith:** No, but it's this beautiful work of, like, collaborative creativity.

**Aside:** So, this was recorded in December, sidenote, out of order with the rats episode, which you may reference if you would like to know all about rodents and *Ratatouille* TikTok musicals. And also hear a career Rodentologist talk about the zaniest things he's seen a rat abscond with. Also, I do break down into tears about rats giving each other presents, like a chewed-on biscuit, or a dead moth. That's normal. Everything's fine.

**Alie:** Are there any thoughts that you have about fandom being cultish or religious? A ton of listeners, who I will say their names in an aside...

**Aside:** Your names. My mouth. Let's do it. Toni Jane, Cat Lindsay, Reagan L Hereford, Hilary Larson, Ashley Scrivner, Sharika Elahi, Kathleen Sachs, and Amber-Leigh Noelle.

**Alie:** Or are those just so different in severity, and harm, and emotional impact that they're not even comparable?

**Meredith:** Oh... I mean, if you are cutting off all of your social ties and devoting all of your financial capital to a fandom, it's probably a cult. But outside of those contexts, communities develop language and rituals all the time, and if your ritual is, you know, "Buy yourself a dozen roses and have your girlfriends over once a week to watch *The Bachelorette*, [clip from *The Bachelorette*: "I don't want to be a cliché, but I'm not here to make friends."] that's a ritual. Not a cult. Which... admirable ritual. Buy yourself a dozen roses every week. That's a great treat. Why not?

**Aside:** Meredith, ever the anthropologist, says that from a community evolutionary perspective, we, as big bald apes, are constantly trying to find who is chill and who is sus. And when fandoms get too large, like even over 200 people in a group, it's scary for us to trust each other, so people get bitchy. Folks begin to bicker. Sub-fandoms schism off based on who they ship. Or maybe what seasons or franchises they like more.

**Meredith:** Are they cults? Most likely not. Again, if you or someone you know is cutting off everybody who doesn't belong and also devoting all of their financial resources to this outside organization, probably a cult. Most fandoms are not. In fact, I can't really think of a fandom that is, aside from occasional, like, actual cults of personality, in which case they're small but hold a lot of weight. Or religions, like Scientology, which are large and hold a lot of weight. I mean, do religions offspring off of objects of fandom and works of science fiction? Scientology is an example of that happening. So, it could happen. It's not outside the realm of possibility.

**Aside:** Scientology episode, anyone? JK, I'm too scared.

**Alie:** And those are based on science fiction books, Scientology in particular. One last Patreon question I have to ask. So many. Hannah, MissKitti, Monica, first-time question-asker Irena Dezazzo, Caitlyn Powell, Aviva Elizabeth, Paulina Krasieńska, Samantha Ryan, Jolanta Benal, Lauren Mascibroda, Deborah Baudoin, and Samantha Steelman all had questions about fanfiction. Monica asked: What is the academic discussion surrounding fanfiction writing? Are they taken seriously in academic context? And Irena, first-time question-asker, wants to know what your thoughts are: When does it cross the line from creative expression to privacy invasion?



**Meredith:** I have never had fanfiction written about me, so I don't have a lot of experience about privacy invasion, but a lot of it is imaginings rather than spying on someone. Academia takes fanfiction very seriously.

**Alie:** Does it really?!

**Meredith:** It's a very interesting subject of research for a lot of people. It blends into fan labor discussions; it blends into representation discussions. There are a lot of people who have done math and quantitative analyses of the fanfiction landscapes. It blends into, like, legal challenges. It's a really interesting space for fan studies, and it's a really interesting place to be, which is one of the reasons I think it's so heavily associated with the idea of fandom.

I think it's a delight. I used to read a lot of it. I read less of it now, mostly because time and tastes change, and the fandoms that I'm interested in reading about, like the kinds of fic I want, isn't necessarily the kinds of fic that's prolific because I want story continuity. Like right now I'm starting to hunt down fic for *The Magicians* because that series ended, and I really just want more of those characters and of that world, and it left on a really great, like, "new beginning" ending, rather than "everything that had to be said was said" ending. There was a lot of negative space in that show for imagining and really am, like, interested in that.

But fic is also really heavily into... it crosses heavily into shipping, although not all fic is shipping by any means, and not all shipping happens in fic. And erotica, and sex positivity, there are all sorts of genres that people may take some sort of issue with, like real-person fic, or dub-con, or non-con.

**Aside:** Just a quick jargon rundown. Fanfic is fanfiction. Shipping, once again, creating relationships. And dub-con and non-con, I had to look it up, and it means portraying sexual elements of dubious consent or non-consent. So of course, fanfiction about real people and depictions of violence are areas people get understandably squicky about.

**Meredith:** But one of the things about fanfiction and one of the interesting things about the internet is, like, when fanfiction was happening there was almost no way that an object of fandom would read it. Writer's rooms can't because they can't risk ideas from fic. They can't risk the idea of, like, idea theft. So writers for writer's rooms can't read fic for their own series, or typically can't. I only know a few writers, but that's generally the operating procedure. Which isn't to say that authors don't write fic and writers don't write fic. They do, but under pseudonyms and stuff like that because of the way that intellectual property works.

And I think it's fascinating because you can see the most interesting characters are male, it's very, very white, it's a microcosm of the internet more broadly, where there are issues of representation, and issues of expression, and issues of labor... It's just a beautiful little microcosm of all of the other issues that, as a society, we're dealing with today in this of-varying-quality, niche-ified, experience for people who want that. So I'm very pro fanfiction even though I don't read a lot of it.

**Aside:** Fanfiction is a way to create art that, perhaps, breaks the bounds of what a lot of typical mainstream studio entertainment looks like, where executives have to answer to shareholders and corporations rely on a few big tent-pole movies to keep the whole studio standing. And fanfiction doesn't have those restrictions. Anything can happen in

your own word processing doc or notebook. So creators are like, “Y’all dream up whatever you want, but your tweets are not going to influence what I want to write.”

My very good friend Dailyn Rodriguez is a showrunner for *Queen of the South* and she says her DMs get filled with people sending their opinions on storylines and relationships between characters. She doesn’t even open them. She appreciates the enthusiasm but doesn’t engage because she has a whole show to run.

**Meredith:** Being good on Twitter is its own skill.

**Alie:** I know!

**Meredith:** Not all creators of objects of fandom have any interest or ability to be objects of fandom themselves. And this is where, like, respecting the creative process, I think, happens. One of the other things that happens a lot is fan entitlement of... like, there’s a balance between the creative process and what audiences want. It’s a lot easier for independent creators to give audiences more of what they want, but there’s also that Ford quote of, like, “If I asked the people what they want, they would’ve said ‘faster horses’.”

**Alie:** [laughs]

**Meredith:** So there’s this balance between the creative process and the stories that creators have inside themselves and want to get out, versus design-by-committee, which, you know, can be good but also can take things to weird or less emotionally compelling places for the sake of fitting everything in.

**Alie:** Right. Last couple questions of my own. Biggest flimflam about fandom? Any myths that you would like to get on a soapbox and bust?

**Meredith:** That’s it’s only for teenage girls. Conversely, that teenage girl taste doesn’t matter.

**Alie:** Right!

**Meredith:** Like, how can this be such an important cultural phenomenon and discount one of the loudest contingencies of it? If I could soapbox forever, it would be: Teen girls taste matters to what actually becomes population and commercially viable in this and other countries. So, I think it’s derision of teen girl taste. I really hate it when talk show hosts drag out fanfiction and fan art as, like, a tool for embarrassment of the actors in an IP.

**Alie:** Aww. That sucks!

**Meredith:** I hate that. It wasn’t written for you. So there’s that. There’s also the assumption, like in my job, and I get this a lot, is like, “Oh, you study fandom? So you must study the fandom that I’m in!” And that is absolutely not the case. I did not grow up in emo bandom. I can’t tell you about the culture of My Chemical Romance fans. I know they exist; that’s the extent of my knowledge. So, it’s really easy to have the fallacy of, “Fandom only exists in my experience of fandom,” which is not the case because the experience of being a fan is just as diverse as the people who are fans of stuff.

**Alie:** I imagine you must’ve heard a lot about really upset *Game of Thrones* fans who were just like, “Welp. I’m done now. Done forever.”

**Meredith:** Yeah. When fans willfully break and are like, “Nope. This is not part of my identity anymore,” not realizing that, like, hating on something is still a form of fandom, because you’re still caring. The opposite of love isn’t hate; it’s apathy.

[clip from *10 Things I Hate About You*: "... but mostly I hate the way I don't hate you. Not even close. Not even a little bit. Not even at all."]

**Alie:** Is that what you hate the most about your job? Not *Game of Thrones*, but people having assumptions about it? What's the worst thing about being a Fanthropologist?

**Meredith:** Probably that people have a very monolithic understanding of fandom and really want to define it however they went into it. It's hard to broaden horizons, is the hardest and worst part about my job. Because it's so tied to identity, either on the production side or the consumption side, like... Change is hard and slow, and there's a lot of risk aversion, is probably the hardest part about my job. Convincing people to 1) take risks, and 2) have empathy for the other parts of the process.

**Aside:** So, a lot of us think we know what fandom is and entails, but fanthropologists know that identity, and self-care, and brand loyalty, and exploring your own faults through fiction is very complicated, which is why fanthropology is fascinating.

**Alie:** What about the best? What's the coolest part? Is it all the free lanyards you get when going to conventions when there's not a plague?

**Meredith:** I think it's just opening my eyes to what other people like and are interested in. I get to see so many facets of the cultural landscape that I... because I work in the private sector, not in academia, my research is dictated by my clients, not my personal research interests. So I get to explore all sorts of other worlds that I would otherwise consider myself too old for, or too young for, or would not normally gravitate towards it, or any other number traits. So I get to see a much wider version of culture than most people's individual feeds would feed them.

**Alie:** How do you feel when people tell you that they're a big fan of *you*?

**Meredith:** Uh... Doesn't happen a lot. I'm one of those professionals that, like, I know what it takes to be famous and build and brand on the internet, and I have actively and deliberately chosen not to do that for myself. [*"Nah, man."*]

**Alie:** What do you tell people who are like, "Hey, my niece wants to be internet famous," and you're like, "Oh yeah, I hold the keys to that in a little box." What do you tell people?

**Meredith:** I think... Okay, so if your niece wants to be internet famous, I would say that they need to figure out what they like to make, and then make a lot of it. Like, make a lot and understand what about it they like, what about it they don't like, get help where they can in the stuff that they don't like doing, and spend a lot of time watching stuff that they like for the express purpose of understanding why they like it.

**Alie:** Ah!

**Meredith:** A lot of creative professionals spend a lot of their time consuming other people's content in order to look at it with a critical eye. So, in the age of the internet, it's like, "What is unique to you and what do you want to borrow from other stuff you like?" And having that blend of unique-to-you and borrowed such that it is familiar is really, really important in the beginning stages. As is knowing what you want out of being a creator. Like, are you doing this because you want to be famous?

Do you want to be famous because it's sometimes a proxy for having financial stability? Drill down into the "why that." Is it because you want to have fun and communicate the having-fun part? Is it about having freedom of expression? Or is it about financial

stability? Or is it about personal growth needs like learning how to develop a skill? Why are you doing this, what do you like about the content that you consume? And make a lot of it and understand how to tweak the stuff that you're making if you want to grow. If you want to be a professional you have to scale to a size that can sustain being a professional. But if you just want to make stuff to make stuff, then make stuff and make a lot of it. And practice and build those skills. Skill stack.

**Alie:** That's such good advice. That's going to change at least one listener's life, I'm sure. That's so exciting. That's literally like the end scene of *Pulp Fiction* with the briefcase. Like, "Here's what's in it, guys." Oh my god.

**Meredith:** That's what's in it!

**Alie:** In no way did I intend to make this a two-hour interview, and I'm so thankful you stuck around. This looks like it's going to be a two-parter, I'm sure. This has just been so exciting. Ever since I was handed your business card, it has been on my desk for probably a year. So, I'm so excited to finally talk to you.

**Meredith:** Likewise! Can I give you *my* interview questions?

**Alie:** Yeah! Absolutely.

**Meredith:** Okay. So, Alie, what do you consider yourself to be a fan of?

**Alie:** Oh! Okay. Things I'm a fan of. I think that I'm the biggest, like, stan of, probably Fiona Apple. I think that if I were to ever meet her, I think... And I have met her very briefly and I just... I don't think I even said a sentence. I think I was just like, "Blupblupblup." She was, like, in a lobby leaving an event as I was coming in. I think that would be, probably, someone that I have so much awe and respect for, and whose music, and words, and mission, and ethos have meant probably the most to me over time. Yeah. She's someone who just... I'm never disappointed by her.

**Meredith:** What is your earliest memory of being a fan of anything?

**Alie:** Okay, [laughs] all right. Do you want to know my first cosplay?

**Meredith:** Yes!

**Alie:** I was the youngest of three girls, and I also, as the youngest, watched way-too stuff that was inappropriate for my age because my sisters were older, so tons of R movies when I was just barely in kindergarten. Like, they'd be on cable. So, we would watch *Escape from New York* too much. And when I was five or six, really was excited about dressing up like Snake Plissken, so I cut off the arms of a shirt into, like, a muscle tank. And I made a rubber eyepatch out of an old bike tire. And then also took my mom's... She was not happy about it, but I took her eyeshadow and made a five o'clock shadow. [laughs] ["Call me Snake."]

And I was like, in bliss. I think we may have had a toy gun, but I just remember marching around the backyard being like, "I *am* Snake Plissken. I'm not dressed as Snake Plissken. Right now, I am Snake Plissken of *Escape from New York* played by Kurt Russell in a post-apocalyptic world." Somewhere there exists a Polaroid of it and it's one of those treasures that my family... If we ever find it. Oh my god. The bounty I would pay. Augh! That was me at my most badass. I peaked!

**Meredith:** Thanks for taking more than an hour.

**Alie:** Oh, I love this! Are you kidding? As soon as you were like, “I don’t have anywhere to be,” I was like, “Game on!” [laughs]

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So what is the lesson here, y’all? Ask smart, passionate people about the smart, passionate people they study. Study people who study people who study characters. And cut bangs if you want ‘em, and just make a lot of stuff. Just make things! Get dirty, be weirder than you think is okay to be.

Meanwhile, follow [@MeredithGene](#) on Twitter. She’s also on Clubhouse where she’s been leading discussions on things like fandom and the attention economy. You can follow me, if you like, @AlieWard on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). We’re also [@Ologies](#) on [both](#). You can join the [Ologies Podcast Facebook Group](#). Thank you, Erin Talbert, for adminning that. You can find other Ologites in the wild with merch at [OlogiesMerch.com](#). Thank you, Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch of the comedy podcast *You Are That* for managing all that. Thank you Noel Dilworth for keeping the whole ship running. Thanks, Emily White and all the transcribers, for making transcripts available on our website at [AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras](#). There’s a link for those, for free, in the show notes, as well as bleeped episodes. Thank you Caleb Patton for bleeping them.

Thank you, to editors Jarrett Sleeper, megahunk who hosts Quarantine Calisthenics every weekday at 9am Pacific on Twitch. And thanks to *Jurassic Park* fanatic and kitty lover Steven Ray Morris of the podcasts *See Jurassic Right* and *The Purrrcast*, and the new *Everything But The Movie: A Star Wars Book Club Podcast*. Nick Thorburn of the very good band Islands wrote and played the theme music. They have a new album due out in June! Exciting.

At the end of each episode I tell a secret, and this week it’s not very juicy but it’s something I think about all day every day.

There’s this long strip of plastic tangled in my neighbor’s eucalyptus tree and it’s probably, like, 15 or 20 feet in the air. And I see it whippin’ in the wind every day and I think, “Should I risk breaking several femurs to just go remove that?” because it bums me out, and I keep staring at it, and I keep thinking, “How am I gonna get that thing down?!” So stay tuned. I gotta do *something*!

Anyway. I’m a fan of you. Berbye.

*Transcribed by Emily White at [TheWordary.com](#)*

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