

Popova, Milena. *Dubcon: Fanfiction, Power, and Sexual Consent*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021. Pp 216. US \$30.00 (hardcover). ISBN 9780262045964.

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Dubcon: Fanfiction, Power, and Sexual Consent is a monograph by Milena Popova. This is Popova's second book, after *Sexual Consent*, which was published as part of the MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series in 2019. *Dubcon* is based on Popova's doctoral thesis "*Slight dubcon but they both wanted it hardcore*": *Erotic fanfiction as a form of cultural activism around sexual consent*. The book investigates the fanfiction subgenre of dubcon (short for "dubious consent"). By looking at both texts and fan practice, Popova explores how fanfiction in this style acts as a form of cultural activism engaged in what they call 'discursive resistance'. Popova describes discursive resistance as "leveraging the power of discourse to resist...the power of discourse. Discursive resistance is about making the unthinkable thinkable, the unnameable nameable, the unsayable sayable" (2021, 27). Drawing on their work on sexual consent and porn, they use feminist theory to explore the cultural power of dubcon fanfiction to change the way people think and behave about sexual consent.

At 216 pages long, *Dubcon* is a relatively quick read. There are eight chapters plus a short interlude between the second and third, providing basics on the field of fanfiction for a reader unfamiliar with the form. The book offers a valuable contribution both to scholarship on sexuality and on fanfiction. It excels in providing deep-dives into specific tropes common in romantic and sexual fanfiction, and is thus particularly relevant for romance fiction scholars interested in trends occurring in fan-generated content. Popova uses a mixed-methods qualitative approach, analyzing specific fanworks, broader fandom practices, and interviews.

The first two chapters largely work to situate the text, both within the broader cultural moment, and within the theoretical foundations that the text is based on. In the first chapter Popova draws on non-fictional cultural representations of both rape culture and the nuances of modern understandings of the grey areas in consent. Repeatedly throughout the book they return to the examples laid out in the first chapter, which makes for a helpful through line and base point for understanding. In the second chapter Popova discusses the theoretical framings of the book. It begins by exploring the grey areas of consent, highlighting

feminist scholarship that challenges popular understanding of what sex is. They also present what I considered a uniquely ace-informed perspective of sexual interaction, “for sex to be truly consensual, never having sex again has to be a meaningful, available option” (2021, 15). Since perspectives of sex are so culturally pervasive, it becomes challenging to imagine new ways of interacting, and here Popova turns to Black scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Cornel West to provide ways to think outside the current structures.

The third chapter begins the deep dives, this one into the popular fanfiction trope of the Omegaverse. They look to the origin in *Supernatural* RPF (real person fiction) fandom and engage in a close reading of three early texts, using these works to highlight the way this trope allows authors to play with the concept of sexual scripts. The fics are chosen to highlight the three ways Popova considers these stories use the tropes of the Omegaverse: by playing them ‘straight-up’, inverting or subverting the tropes, or by pushing them to their extremes. Through their fic examples, Popova explores how fans can use the fantastic setting of Omegaverse fics to highlight, play with and, sometimes, challenge the sexual scripts of the fantasy and real-world settings.

The fourth chapter is another close reading, this time of the arranged marriage trope as written within the Marvel fandom pairing of Thor and Loki. This chapter follows a similar pattern, applying the theory of emotion work within relationships to the fanfiction trope. This time Popova looks at two fics, with each having a different member of the pairing in the subordinate position. In particular, they compare the two fanworks to popular romance novels dealing with the same trope. They highlight the way that while romance novels typically require the subordinate heroine to do the emotion work of understanding the hero, in the two fics, it is the partner with more positional power who caters to the subordinate partner. Again, Popova draws the real-world connection, highlighting that within the inherent power dynamics of modern life, it takes effort for partners to arrive at a place where some form of equality can be found, and consent can be made meaningful.

In the fifth chapter, Popova extends beyond a close reading of fic texts, to consider the way that hockey RPF fans considered and dealt with issues of consent when the real hockey player they were fixated on, Patrick Kane, was accused of sexual assault. In particular, Popova teases out the ways in which fans applied the practices of RPF, building out concepts of people from snippets of information, to humanize the lesser known and anonymous participants of the case. They emphasize the way this process challenged the law as ultimate arbiter of truth in the situation. Popova referred to this as bracketing – “accepting that the law has a place in society, but that it is not all that can be said on the subject” (2021, 106).

The next chapter shifts methods and is largely based on a series of eight interviews Popova engaged in at a convention. Within the course of these interviews, they tease out the ways in which readers use fic within their own lives and sexual experience. This highlights the very practical ways that fanfic helps to generate discursive resistance. More than one of the interviewees mentions that patterns modeled in fic, such as the way to discuss consent or the way in which ‘no’ can be taken as a valid answer, have helped them negotiate similar situations in their own lives. Through reading and writing dubcon fic, fans can generate new ways of knowing about and understanding consent.

The seventh chapter takes a step back, exploring the power of the term dubcon as a descriptor. Through the tagging of fic on AO3, dubcon acts as a key paratextual element, highlighting that the author is aware that their fic deals with issues of consent. Popova sees this as an example of the fic community’s “*praxis of consent*: the...enactment in the real world of their collective created knowledges about consent” (2021, 163 emphasis original). Not

only do fic readers and writers enact careful consensual boundaries through tagging practice, but they also take the lessons that fic teaches them about consent into their own interactions.

In the final chapter Popova hammers home the importance of their topic, highlighting the way in which the resurrection of the author discussed in the previous chapter emphasizes fans' understanding of the work fiction does in the real world. As fans circulate these new ideas they begin to spill over, touching on broader audiences. As Popova puts it "Audiences beyond fans are starting to ask questions about the interactions between text and real world, the role and responsibility of authors and producers" (2021, 170). Perhaps more importantly, Popova emphasizes the fact that the fanfiction community still has a way to go, particularly in the treatment of fans of colour. They end the book with a call to the Organization for Transformative Works, hosters of AO3, to uphold their central role in the fandom community. The recent introduction of comment blocking on AO3 already seems like a step in the right direction.

Overall, this monograph argues for the importance of one specific subgenre of fanfiction, not just as an area for academic attention but also for its importance as a site of cultural activism. A large portion of the analysis consists of deep dives into specific tropes and fandoms. Popova does a good job foregrounding these and explaining them for an audience who may be unfamiliar with the nuances of topics such as Omegaverse or RPF. However, their work on these topics is incredibly narrow, focusing on 2-3 fics or a single pairing. Particularly with the speed at which fandom can move, their argument might have been strengthened by broader reviews. Popova pairs each case study with a specific theoretical lens, playing them off each other in a powerful way that helps a reader familiar with either theory or fic, understand the other clearly.

While fanfiction as a practice has garnered significant scholarly attention, Popova's text confidently leans into some of the darker corners of the field. While much scholarship has focused on fanfiction as creative writing or community practice, areas that are undoubtedly important, Popova sheds light on the areas of fanfiction that popular press loves to giggle about but is not often discussed seriously. Rather than simply stopping at the transformative power of queer/slash fanfiction in its own regard, this book provides a meticulous reading of specific tropes and their impact. For example, Popova's clear understanding of the trope of Omegaverse as pornography allows them to discuss the affective power of porn in the context of fanfiction, and the ways that dubcon porn challenges and gives space for things that may not be discussed anywhere else. In the Introduction of *The Darker Side of Slash Fan Fiction* Spacey points out that "critical research into the darker side of slash fiction and the controversial discussions around it is limited" (2018, 6-7). Popova contributed a chapter to that text, and in *Dubcon*, continues at the task.

Dubcon: Fanfiction, Power, and Sexual Consent is an excellent contribution to the study of sexuality in fanfiction, particularly for its willingness to delve into the dark and sexy corners to draw out specific examples. While targeted towards fan studies scholars, it has value for scholars interested in sexual politics and feminism looking to expand their purview. It also contributes useful thought on sex and romance writing from non-professional writers. The accessible style, filled with salient examples, makes this practical for advanced undergraduate and postgraduate readers, and even general readership among those familiar with the fic practices outlined within.

References

Popova, Milena. *Sexual Consent*. MIT, 2019.

Spacey, Ashton. "Introduction." *The Darker Side of Slash Fan Fiction: Essays on Power, Consent and the Body*, edited by Ashton Spacey, McFarland & Company, 2018, pp. 5–24.