

Internet authors put TV buddies

in unusual romances

Web sites allow television show fans to publish graphic tales that will never make it onto the small screen

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It was a typical episode of *The X-Files* — the usual tantalizing but confusing dose of conspiracy and the paranormal — until seductive traitor Alex Krycek suddenly planted a kiss on FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder. As kisses go it was a fairly innocent, on-the-cheek number, but last season's unexpected smooch was enough to send fans who write "slash fiction" into an E-mailing frenzy.

Slash fiction — named for the punctuation that pairs such male TV characters as Kirk/Spock (*Star Trek*) and Fraser/Ray (*Due South*) — consists of fan-written stories, posted on Internet sites, that place the fictional pals in explicit homosexual fantasies. It has been around since the early 1970s, starting as an offshoot of the more traditional fan-written fiction and published in limited-circulation magazines. But while fan fiction helped keep a cancelled series like *Star Trek* alive for a small core of die-hards, today's Web sites have made it possible for anyone to spread tales of TV character couplings around the world in an instant; a quick Internet search will turn up slash stories based on shows from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *Babylon 5* and *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*

The quality of slash writing varies widely, as does the degree of sexual explicitness. A lot of slash is self-rated for adults only; some highly graphic stories are labelled with the

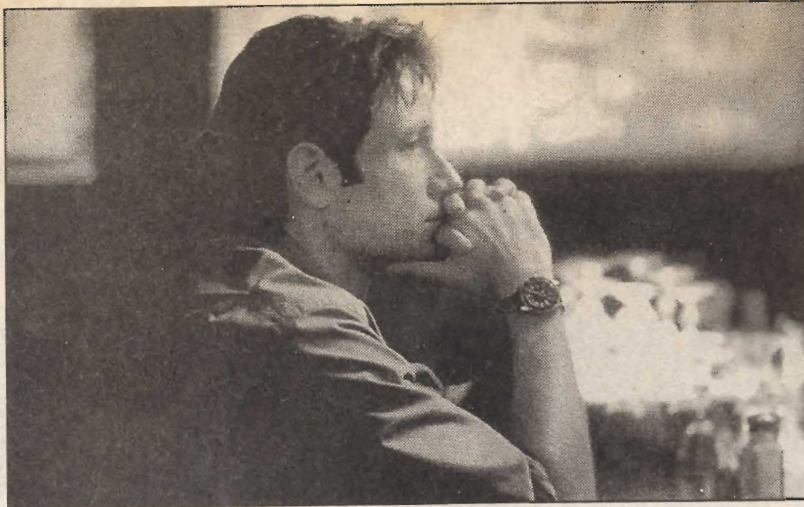
acronym PWP for "Plot? What plot?" or HSPABO for "Have spare panties available before opening." But while Mulder/Krycek stories may feature graphic (and sometimes violent) sex, the Due South Romance Association Web site (subtitled "Girls Who Like Boys Who Do Boys") is dedicated to romantic tales of RCMP Constable Benton Fraser and his partner, Chicago detective Ray Vecchio. Many *Due South* slash writers try to retain the strait-laced Mountie's innocence and logic, but they give him a new challenge. In one first-time story, Ray tells Fraser about his past experiences with men:

"Okay, what did we do? A little frottage, mutual masturbation, fellatio and you don't have a clue what I'm talking about do you?"

"No, Ray," Fraser circled one of his lovers nipples contemplatively. "Perhaps if you wrote it down I could look it up next time I'm in the library."

Slash fans are exasperated by the suggestion that the most radical aspect of their hobby is that women would read depictions of graphic sex between men. Slashers respond that not only are they appropriating commercial TV, they're reclaiming pornography — both worlds that have traditionally been male-dominated. If there are few strong female characters in TV to write about, slashers can at least make the male characters do their bidding. They point out that sex between women for the pleasure of men is a staple of mainstream pornography: why shouldn't

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The object of his affection? Fox Mulder (as played by David Duchovny, left) and his boss Walter Skinner (Mitch Pileggi, right) might get intimate, but only in the minds of fans who write Internet stories about these X-Files characters.

That doesn't mean slash heroes are sensitive New Age guys. An androgynous hybrid, they're strong and decisive and know how to use a gun (or a phaser); they're horny all the time, but they might interrupt sex to talk for several pages about their feelings. Life-and-death struggles with external demons give way to major internal angst; stories often explore loneliness, jealousy, even rape, suicide and psychotherapy (the memory of a cold or violent father is a frequent theme). And while the pursuit of aliens or serial killers may still consume the protagonists, they're just as eager to confront monogamy.

Some of it reads like a Harlequin Romance: *Walter looked deeply into his young friend's eyes. "I love you, Fox Mulder. I don't say that easily and I've only said it to very few others."* But where romance fiction often excludes graphic sex and mainstream porn excludes loving partnerships, slash proudly combines the two.

"To me, slash is partly about crossing gender boundaries," said a 32-year-old Baltimore librarian. It's "getting men to act like women by being emotionally involved in sexual relationships, and acting like a man myself — vicariously — by writing hot sex scenes."

Some TV producers claim they never read fan fiction, lest a writer should later accuse them of stealing an idea or plot. But Paul Gross, who plays Fraser on *Due South* and also serves as executive producer and writer, admits that he has read some

slash stories involving his character. After he recovered from a boyish fit of giggles, Gross said, "It seems like a very strange pursuit, but it certainly doesn't bother me." As polite as the Mountie he plays, he added that what he read was quite well written, and that as a writer he can see it would be a fun exercise.

He should know. Gross co-wrote a *Due South* episode in which Fraser saves his drowning partner by buddy-breathing underwater — a scene that was shot to look remarkably like a passionate kiss. Was he tipping his hat to slash fans? "No, not at all," he said. "It's too marginal an audience to worry about." Anyway, said Gross, "no one's clever enough in television to be putting anything like that in."

And while some TV and film producers have threatened legal action against slash authors, Gross pointed out that a fan's fantasies are not an area into which his copyright extends. "I suppose the character is public ground," he said. "If you're willing to bring it into people's houses every week, the [fans] are entitled to certain liberties, wherever their imagination is carried by those characters."

Slash fiction based on Due South and The X-Files can be found on the Internet at <http://slash.simplenet.com>.

For a comprehensive list of slash sites based on TV series from Law & Order to Xena: Warrior Princess, try <http://members.aol.com/KSNicholas/fanficslash.html>.

it work the other way around? Slash would seem to be the perfect porn for women: It's hot, and it features not just one beautiful male body, but two. And by definition, there are no women on the scene to be degraded (or to be jealous of), so the complaints of anti-porn feminists are neatly sidestepped. Sexually, it's a level playing field.

Wendy Pearson, a cultural studies professor at Trent University in Peterborough, Ont., says that slash writers get to reinvent men. "A lot of slash writing looks at the identity categories that the late 20th century has slotted people into — including straight and gay — and has decided that they're far too rigid and divisive."