

## Crimes of Passion: Collecting Fan-made Comics and *Dōjinshi*

In 2010, I attended New York Comic Con with a single mission. I was an art student at the time, pursuing my dream of becoming a comic book artist. While there were many big publishers in the hall that day, it was an unofficial item I wanted: *Water Tribe* Vol. 1 & 2 by Johane Matte, a 447-page comic about a villain from the Nickelodeon cartoon *Avatar: the Last Airbender*. Matte was not only a prolific “fan artist” of the show during its run, but worked on it as a storyboard artist for several episodes. Discovering this as a teenager was revolutionary to me, as I began to realize that the line between “professional” and “fan” was not an iron-clad division of skill, but something relative to the circumstances surrounding the creation of a piece of art.



Water Tribe Vol. 1 & 2, an *Avatar: the Last Airbender* fancomic by Johane Matte.

Human beings’ compulsion to build off of existing stories is as old as time. Famous examples of “fan fiction” are all around us, from the *Aeneid* to *Sweeney Todd* to BBC’s *Sherlock*. Looking at Matte’s masterfully drawn passion project, it occurred to me

that most of the modern-day distinctions between official and derivative art - and the assumptions of quality attached to each - were based on concerns of property, not an evaluation of the art itself. There was something incredibly alluring to me about comics art created at a professional standard of quality without the expectation of professional reward. Without giving it much conscious thought, I continued to seek out fan-made comics from then on. I currently have 490 books, ranging from hand-folded photocopy zines to hardcover anthologies. The bulk of the collection are Japanese *dōjinshi*<sup>1</sup> (self-published fancomics) in the format most common to their production: thin, perfect-bound comics with color covers and black & white interiors.

Oddly enough, the books that started my collection are likely the rarest in it. Matte only produced a single, limited print run, which she sold at a handful of comics conventions in 2010-2011. In the traditional sense, I suppose few fan-made comics would be described as “rare,” except for those whose creator achieved fame in some other, more legitimate way. Printed independently, sold cheaply at comics conventions, and discreetly advertised to those who are already like-minded, they are by nature sparsely documented, and by typical standards, worthless. Their existence is precarious in a way that has less to do with the number of copies printed, and more to do with the prevailing notion that as unsanctioned derivative works, they are not “real.”

Discovery of the world of *dōjinshi* transformed my casual interest into a dedicated hobby. In the Western world of fandom I knew, *Water Tribe* was something of an anomaly. Creation of fan art had always been a thriving practice online, but to reproduce a fan-made comic in print was, until recently, almost unheard of. Meanwhile, the *dōjinshi* industry - because it is huge enough to be described as such, despite its dubious legal standing - is massive, eclipsing the entire American mainstream comics market. In Japan, a culture that values comics and differences in the laws surrounding copyright have allowed for a long-standing tradition of *dōjinshi* creation that could not

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<sup>1</sup> The word *dōjinshi* describes any self-published material. The Japanese term for the books in my collection would be “parody” *dōjinshi*. “Parody” in this context simply indicates that the contents of the book are what we would call “fan” work, and does not imply that the story is humorous or satirical in nature. However, the prevalence of fanbooks has made the word *dōjinshi* near synonymous with the “parody” genre, and for simplicity I have used it this way throughout this essay.

exist elsewhere. My focus quickly shifted to these books simply because I had found where these practices flourished. I continue to seek out fanbooks with different origins, but now tend to view them in contrast to Japanese-made *dōjinshi*: how they differ in format and style, and what they reflect about the landscape of creative fans outside of Japan. As *dōjinshi* become more well-known internationally, cartoonists around the world have begun to imitate them, creating their own fancomics within similar stylistic conventions. I myself have modeled some of my own zines after the practices of *dōjinshi* creation. Others active in the U.S. independent comics scene have done the same, one notable example being E.K. Weaver, who is well known for her Harvey award winning graphic novel *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ & Amal*. The most recent books in my collection are several erotic comedies she created for the TV anime *Yuri!!! On Ice* under the name bigbigtruck.

Usually, *dōjinshi* in Japan are also printed under a pseudonym in order to separate the creator's original work from their fanbooks; but the alias of a published manga artist is rarely a real secret. Among my collection are *dōjinshi* by published manga creators Kodaka Kazuma, Ogeretsu Tanaka, Kizu Natsuki, Yoshi, Mitsuki Emi, and others. Some, like Kodaka Kazuma, are well-established manga artists who continue to create *dōjinshi* alongside their published work. Others, like Mitsuki Emi, I have watched step from the creation of *dōjinshi* to professional serialization over the course of my time following their work. Mitsuki's collected edition of *Naruto* stories *Re: so long* was the first Japanese fanbook I ever obtained, sometime during 2013. I was irresistibly drawn to her clean, expressive art style and her ability to balance humor and melodrama through comics storytelling. Today, her original manga *A Love That Won't Float Away* has been distributed internationally in English and French, while she appears to have ceased drawing *dōjinshi* for the time being.



*Naruto fanbooks by Mitsuki Emi, printed under the name “10-Rankai.” Also visible: collected works of prolific Haikyuu!! dōjinshi creator Bubunhanten.*

The majority of *dōjinshi* by women are romance stories and/or erotica. I believe it is no coincidence that these two categories, so often dismissed as frivolous or shameful, flourish in fan spaces. In an arena without editorial oversight, where making money is a secondary concern, women create art that does not need to appeal to anyone but themselves. When I first visited one of the secondhand shops in Tokyo where *dōjinshi* are re-circulated, I felt an unexpected sense of awe, realizing that I had never before been in a room where so much artwork created by women was gathered in one spot.<sup>2</sup> Not only were the tens of thousands of books on the shelves a breathtaking reminder of

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<sup>2</sup> Genres in Japan (for published manga as well as *dōjinshi*) are based on the intended audience’s gender and age group; secondhand *dōjinshi* shops are separated by establishment or floor into books “for women” and “for men.” While there are certainly exceptions, it can be safely assumed that 99% of the books in a shop or comics event “for women” were created by women, for women.

just how many female cartoonists were out there, but each represented a moment where a woman had been so inspired by another work of fiction that she felt compelled to grab hold of that world and use it to tell her own stories. That spark of pure, irrepressible passion is what I see within every fan-made comic, and what I want to cherish.

The sheer amount of *dōjinshi* in the world means I have to be selective in what I pick up (a lesson I learned after my first trip to Japan, emerging from a fugue state with a whole new suitcase full of books!) I usually look for a unique art style or design sense that brings something new and refreshing to the source material. Obstacles to finding a book also have a strange power to make that book more desirable, a feeling which I suspect fuels every collector. In this case though, it is not only the difficulty of finding a particular book, but the rarity of subject matter that might inspire me. A memorable find was the handful of *Transformers: More Than Meets the Eye* books that I located in another secondhand shop in Tokyo. This Western comic series has never even been officially translated into Japanese, so to find fanworks for it in Japan gratified the part of me that loves to find the ultra-niche within the niche.



*Pictured left: Two books from IDW comic series Transformers: More Than Meets the Eye.  
Right: Two dōjinshi featuring More Than Meets the Eye characters.*

I am probably most excited when I find something with thoughtful book design. One such book is a *Yuri!!! on Ice dōjinshi* called *The Autumn of Yu-topia*. It has a beautiful die cut half-sleeve that forms a pleasant composition with the visible half of the cover. This can be removed to view the full illustration, which is revealed to be bustling with characters where, before, there seemed to be an empty room. Attractive or elaborate book design in fanwork captivates me - it is proof that someone valued their own work deeply enough to treat it as an art object, not merely a vehicle for distributing ideas.



*The Autumn of Yu-topia*, a *Yuri!!! On Ice fanbook* by “mizunoto,” with die cut sleeve.

I’m not sure what the future holds for my collection. I was drawn into the world of *dōjinshi* through my fascination with fan art and fan cultures, and recently I have taken an interest in the work of people who study *dōjinshi* from an academic perspective. It would be wonderful if one day, years from now, my collection could offer

a window to a subset of artists active during this time. Perhaps I will even follow my passion far enough to begin an academic study of fancomics myself. Whatever paths this fixation may lead me on next, I do know that I will never lose my love for *dōjinshi* as a fan and a reader. In them, I found a thriving world of art driven by women that I have not seen the equal of anywhere else. It is possible that few others will ever see the books in my collection with the same admiration I do. Regardless, I will always feel this drive to celebrate and showcase what is beautiful about the illegitimate, the indulgent, and the disposable.

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folded from a single sheet. 6 pages. 2018.

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Black & white interior with full-color cover. Stapled. 44 pages. 2018.

## Wish List

KOTTERI. *KOTTERHYTHM*. A *Transformers: More Than Meets the Eye* fanbook.

Black & white interior with full color cover. Perfect bound. 52 pages. 2014.

As mentioned in my essay, I have a few other *dōjinshi* based on the comic series *More Than Meets the Eye*, which has not yet been published in Japanese. Because of the inaccessibility of the comic, enthusiastic fans of the series in Japan must be extremely few in number. I was excited to find these books regardless of who the artists were and what their art looked like, just because such a small group of dedicated fans creating fanart for one another is something I admire. To find any book by Kotteri would be even more exciting. In 2015, she was hired to draw a short story called *Silent Light* that appeared in the *More Than Meets the Eye* issue *Transformers Holiday Special*, released on December 23 of that year. While there is plenty of professional overlap among *dōjinshi* creators, she represents an unusual situation for two reasons: one, that her work as a fan directly led to her contributing to the official source material, and two, that she published fanbooks in Japan and went on to work for a U.S. publisher. Additionally, her artwork is beautiful, and she brings a fluid, exaggerated sense of movement to robotic characters.

Yusugi ゆすぎ. *And Laugh With Each Other*. A *Yuri!!! On Ice* fanbook. Two-color comic in black & cyan ink. Stapled. 28 pages. 2018.

I want this book for a simple but powerful reason: I like it, and I am almost convinced I will never find it. I saw photographs of the book posted on the

artist's social media account and was instantly taken with its sparse, stylish design and use of limited color. It appears to be a cheaply produced zine, probably printed by the artist at a convenience store or using some other public copy machine. Other than the date of the event she first brought it to, I do not know much about the book; I don't know how many copies she made, or whether she sold it or gave it away. If I keep my eyes open, perhaps there is a slim chance I will happen across a copy of it in a secondhand shop one day.

Shisinden 紫宸殿. *Moon Omelette*. A *Harry Potter* fanbook. Black & white interior with full color cover. Perfect bound. 104 pages. 2006.

This book is a reprint of some of the stories by the artist collective "Shisinden," focusing on the "Marauders" characters from the *Harry Potter* books. It collects comics drawn between 2001 and 2003. Apparently fairly hard to find secondhand today, and moderately expensive due to the popularity of the artist. When I was a young girl, *Harry Potter* was one of my first and most powerful obsessions, and I was a fan of the Marauders in particular. A lot of my first exposures to the world of "fandom" and all the creative activities within it were taking place around the same time these *dōjinshi* were first printed, but it would be several more years before I became aware of the wider world of fancomics. For sentimental reasons, I'd like to find a few of the kind of books I might have wanted to read back then.