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How a *Professionals* slash writer disrupts readers' expectations

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1. From guns and girlfriends to Gloucestershire

[1.1] Many of us who are over 40 remember *The Professionals* (1977–1983), a 1970s prime-time urban British cop show centered on a fictional law-enforcement agency called CI5, with macho leads, big guns, girlfriends of the week, and the obligatory car chases through the streets of London. It acquired a strong fannish following in the UK, the United States, and Australia, in the main because of its two appealing male leads, Bodie and Doyle. But who would guess that our two ostensibly straight heroes are really gay and living in domestic bliss in rural Gloucestershire? Or so say some of the slashers, fans who use the strong homosocial ties between these CI5 agents to extrapolate a sexual bond as well. A particular favorite of many *Pros* fans is *The Larton Chronicles* by Rhiannon, a series of five stories. This alternate universe (AU) series lifts the characters from their usual setting—the mean streets of London, where they are busy fighting terrorism—and shifts them to another time and place—a cottage in a remote Gloucestershire village, in which they live as a couple and are shown celebrating the millennium together. I explore how the series both inverts and subverts the issues of sexuality, class, and race that are touched on in the show, and it will look at Rhiannon's use of canon versus fanon and how she constructs a recognizable fannish shorthand.

2. Reading a text

[2.1] As they progress through a fannish text, fans are discerning and perceptive consumers. They will pick up on authorial shorthand that, to the nonfannish

reader, would look like a throwaway reference. Fans also spend a great deal of time discussing the issue of canon versus fanon. Canon is what we see on the screen. Fanon is what enters fannish folklore as the truth. For example, it's canon that Doyle loans Bodie a pen and warns, "I shall want that pen back." Fanon is that he is tightfisted or stingy. It's canon that Bodie was a mercenary in Africa. It's fanon that he's either gay as a result of living among so many rugged men, or was raped during his time there. Sheenagh Pugh (2005, 26) says that fanon can become entrenched in fan fiction to the extent that it's often difficult to separate fanon from canon. Indeed, it's common to see new fans posting to discussion lists to ask whether a particular incident is canon or fanon.

[2.2] Fans, significantly, read a fan fiction text far differently from how they would read any other book. I am a crime fiction fan. I am used to seeing crime writers build their story's universe and develop their characters, and indeed I expect them to do so. Such writers cannot assume I know anything about their book. A fan writer, though, can and does engage in a form of shorthand. Because of fans' knowledge of canon, we already have a considerable amount of information about our heroes. If a writer refers to the "green-eyed man" or "the smaller man" or "the curly-haired man," we know she is alluding to Doyle. If she mentions the "ex-merc" or "the bigger man" or "the dark-haired man," that's Bodie. Large chunks of the narrative world are painted in already, without the fan writer having to lift a finger.

[2.3] *The Professionals* is one of the shows for which novelized versions of fan fiction have been produced commercially, but with the characters' names changed and "the serial numbers filed off." The stories that comprise *The Larton Chronicles* appeared from the specialist slash publisher Wayward Books under the title *The Larton Chronicles* and the pseudonym James Anson (itself a fan in-joke, as 3.2 "Backtrack" includes a CI5 agent named Anson). Doyle and Bodie become Robert March and Michael Faulkner. The book otherwise differs little from the zine in which the stories first appeared, but as a defanned version it appears to be an amusing but rather bemusing in-joke that doesn't quite survive the "search and replace" performed on the lead characters' names. A whole level of intertextuality is missing.

[2.4] A significant part of fans' reading of a text is that intertextuality. In Rhiannon's *The Larton Chronicles*, we get, for example, Doyle's chipped tooth, which is canon—Martin Shaw, the actor who plays Doyle, does have a chipped tooth, and it is visible in the show, but which in the fan story is blamed on a shot left in a pheasant. Doyle also attends an Oscar Wilde play, and fans will know that Shaw had a successful run in London's West End in Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. So a seemingly minor scene in "Best of All Ways," the fifth Larton story, in which Doyle phones home from London takes on extra meaning for readers when they realize

that Doyle has been watching the actor who plays him in the show—and also got a theater program signed for his friend Bunty. And this is why the professionally published version doesn't tell the full story. On the surface, this is a scene of Doyle reporting back on a disappointing night out at the theater. But to fans, it's another in-joke concerning the actors from the show.

3. Visiting other worlds: *Larton* and its place in the fandom

[3.1] *Professionals* fandom is a fertile ground for AU stories. Theories abound for why this is so. A common—and valid—one is that some of the fans, particularly those who remember the 1970s and 1980s, are politically uncomfortable with the secret-police aspect of the original show and so feel much happier transporting our heroes elsewhere, whether to ancient Greece, other planets, or fantasy settings. By lifting Bodie and Doyle out of the straitjacketed government setting of the 1970s and 1980s, a slash writer can take them to other worlds where they are not obliged to deal with the repercussions of homosexuality in the canon setting: being gay would almost certainly have got our heroes sacked.

[3.2] *The Larton Chronicles* was written by Rhiannon, a UK fan. The novel comprises five short stories (the first four stories were published in a zine in 1995, then republished in 2004 with "Best of All Ways" added) set in an alternate universe in which Doyle is a policeman turned crime writer and Bodie is a horse-mad Irish soldier, both living in a Gloucestershire village. *Larton* is a delightful and elaborate picaresque in-joke, with assorted references to traditional descriptions of Merrie England. Readers take pleasure in the subversion of an urban cop show by the transfer of its heroes to bucolic bliss in a Cotswold village. Many fans agree that Rhiannon's stories, though they may seem to come out of left field, capture the characters more accurately than much case-based fiction. Doyle is tetchy and temperamental, and he wears his emotions close to the surface. Fans frequently point to the scene in the controversial episode 1.13 "Klansmen"—which was not aired on British TV during the original run in the 1970s because it addressed the sensitive subject of racism—where Doyle cries over the stabbed Bodie. This transfers to *Larton* as Doyle blowing his nose hard in moments of emotion. The *Larton* Bodie is an army officer with a childlike innocence and enjoyment of life, not unlike his portrayal in the show, where we see a former mercenary and soldier with an often flippant sense of humor.

[3.3] *Larton*, though, is more than a witty utopian subversion of the show. It contains several harder-edged moments, as the tempestuous relationship between Bodie and Doyle plays out over a number of years, with a supporting cast who on the whole seem unconcerned by the pair's private life. One could argue that in no way does the series address the issue of a soldier living in a homosexual relationship, or ask whether the inhabitants of a tiny village would be quite so

liberal. But these concerns are not the writer's focus. Instead, this utopia is both wish fulfillment and, to a degree, a subversion of the homophobic civil service and military establishment of the time.

[3.4] Rhiannon's writing pokes gentle fun at the UK class system; Bodie's brother-in-law has a title and a tumbledown stately home, populated by an eccentric and shambolic family. In the show, George Cowley, the head of CI5, demonstrates an urbane courtesy and ability to glad-hand people from all walks of life, but this does not extend to allowing corruption to go unchecked in positions of power, as is seen in his pursuit of the crooked civil servant Dawson in 5.6 "Spy Probe" and his determination not to allow cover-ups on high in 1.8 "Everest Was Also Conquered" and 2.5 "In the Public Interest."

[3.5] The latter episode is a particularly revealing one, given the climate of the time, because in it Bodie and Doyle go undercover to unmask those responsible for attacks on a newly formed gay youth group (the culprits are revealed to be police heavies acting at the behest of an overzealous chief constable). A government minister says he wants "a city sewn up tight but safely...a city where hooligans are kept in check and suspicious characters are forced to move on. For God's sake, George, to most residents it sounds like Utopia!" Cowley's response is, "Aye...that's what they thought about Hitler's Germany!"

[3.6] In 1.3 "Old Dog with New Tricks," there is a passing reference to the fact that former soldier Bodie served in Northern Ireland during the Troubles —something he declines to discuss with Doyle. A fan will also think back to Doyle's tearfully calling Bodie a "half-Irish bastard" and pleading with him not to die in "Klansmen." So Rhiannon presents us with the irony of her Bodie's being a soldier in the army of the Republic of Ireland. But irony is gained through humor in "A Touch of Romance," the fourth Larton story, when Bodie is asked to give the bride away at a wedding at the Royal Military Chapel in London: "'I am not giving any bride away,' said Bodie in a dangerously calm voice. 'For one thing, remember, I wear a green uniform with *Sons of the Fianna* on my cap badge. I'll be lucky not to be arrested at the Guards Chapel door!'"

[3.7] He comes off worst in the subsequent exchange with his formidable sister Agnes, and eventually agrees to do it simply to annoy his brother Charles, who is in the British army.

[3.8] On the surface, *The Larton Chronicles* may evoke a particular stereotypical English setting seen in films, TV dramas, and even the Golden Age of Crime. We're familiar with the likes of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (itself the subject of a fannish rewrite), *Miss Marple*, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, and *Midsomer Murders*. But in fact it is a highly unusual AU in a highly idiosyncratic setting, even in a fandom used to seeing Bodie and Doyle as elves, cats, and artists.

[3.9] Our heroes meet when Doyle, a policeman turned author, becomes fed up with the noise and violence of London and decides to move to the country. He buys a lodge house once belonging to the manor, and has some unfavorable preconceptions about the lord of the manor. This lord happens to be Bodie, a hunting-mad soldier. As in *The Professionals*, early meetings between the pair don't go well. But Bodie, in despair over possible brain damage after he is wounded in the Middle East, attempts suicide. Doyle foils the suicide attempt and stays by Bodie's side during his recovery. They then settle down in domestic bliss in a cottage complete with an Aga, a brand of kitchen stove much aspired to by wealthy country dwellers.

[3.10] Larton is an idiosyncratic invention, and it is perhaps significant that it was created nearly two decades ago by an older fan and is seen through the prism of a seemingly timeless rural setting and a highly individual take on the world of media fandom. *Pros* doesn't seem to lend itself to humorous stories, set as it is in the gritty world of urban terrorism. So the transfer of Bodie and Doyle to an English village where CI5 doesn't exist is very much an oddity in the fandom—you either get it or you don't. In fact, a glossary to explain many of the uniquely British expressions has thoughtfully been provided for what Rhiannon might call the terminally bewildered.

[3.11] Most of the action in the five stories of the series—"One Bright Morning," "Second Round," "In the Deep Midwinter," "A Touch of Romance," and "The Best of All Ways"—takes place in this English Brigadoon. It's the kind of setting that you can picture as a 1950s black-and-white film, with Margaret Rutherford and Alastair Sim playing Bodie's sister, Agnes, and her husband, Jack. But it's also oddly timeless; the most significant clue we get to the series' chronological setting is in the final story, which is set around the millennium. And, on closer examination, we find that Larton is more than an affectionate rendering of a particular English way of life.

4. Reading Larton

[4.1] On the surface, Larton appears to be a nostalgic paean to a way of life that no longer exists; the fact the author provides a detailed glossary explaining a range of social and cultural references suggests a generation gap between her and her readers. The thought of a rural idyll, with its gardens of roses and lavender (Doyle opens their garden as part of the National Gardens Scheme), evokes images of the England the canonical George Cowley is so keen to protect. In his speech to new recruits in "Old Dog with New Tricks," he admits that the unpopularity that results from the organization's official brief to operate "by any means necessary" is "the price we have to pay to keep this island clean and smelling, even if ever so faintly, of roses and lavender."

[4.2] Nostalgia is a strong component of fandom and fan fiction, particularly when it comes to the TV shows we remember from our youth. This is evidenced by the success of shows such as *Life on Mars* where music, Curly Wurly chocolate bars, kipper ties, and real men produce a warm glow when seen through rose-tinted specs. But the village we all dream of moving to when we win the lottery, as evidenced by O. Yardley's Pros story "A Lovesome Thing," isn't the safe retreat we assume it to be. There appear to be as many dangers in the countryside around Larton as on the mean streets policed by CI5.

[4.3] On the surface, Larton may appear to be a pastiche of a number of films and books where the lord and lady of the manor rule benevolently over their minions, the vicar preaches to packed pews, the village bobby patrols his insular empire on foot and knows everyone within it, and the fox hunt look ever so handsome in their red outfits.

[4.4] But Larton has a twist, as it hints strongly at the bleakness behind rural life in the UK. Rhiannon's rural idyll is no tourist trap; this is a working village, complete with rural poverty and bored youths who race cars down country lanes at breakneck speeds. And the story includes grimness in the form of Bodie's thwarted suicide bid, Doyle's serious riding accident, and Bodie's apparent death in a helicopter crash.

[4.5] Rhiannon's ability to create her own highly individual universe, peopled by a full supporting cast, allows her to develop the idea of the village inhabited by eccentrics into which two more, with an unconventional private life, fit in. Both Bodie and Doyle (and Rhiannon, for that matter) would have come of age in a country where homosexuality wasn't legalized until 1967. So the characters maintain a certain awareness of what others might think—particularly when it comes to the upstairs-downstairs class divide. In "In the Deep Midwinter," Bodie isn't happy when he discovers he'll be sleeping alone when he and Doyle are roped into attending Agnes's Christmas house party:

[4.6] Bodie turned outraged blue eyes on him. "Am I to understand I'm sleeping alone till New Year's Day?" he inquired.

[4.7] "Absolutely," said Doyle. "There are the feelings of your sister's servants to be considered, there are children in the house, and it serves you right for mucking up my holiday."

[4.8] Not that this chaste setup lasts beyond the first night, when Doyle discovers that Jack and Agnes's stately home resembles the Arctic. This isn't merely a matter of "don't ask, don't tell"; it's a matter of a really rather civilized utopia where you know your neighbor's business (Lizzie, the village gossip, displays a deep interest in Doyle's love life in "The Best of All Ways"), but actually,

it doesn't matter what they do behind closed doors. The fact that these two men are living together in a homosexual relationship is entirely incidental most of the time.

[4.9] In this world, homophobia is a blot on the distant horizon, evidenced only by Bodie's pompous brother, Charles. "He's disgusted and won't be visiting," says Bodie in "One Bright Morning," after he and Doyle have set up house together.

[4.10] Like its American counterpart until recently, the Irish army apparently operates on the principle of "don't ask, don't tell"—Bodie comments that homosexuality doesn't happen in Ireland. In the fifth story in the sequence, "Best of All Worlds," there are several telling references to their relationship. Bodie attempts to excuse Doyle's bad behavior at a family wedding as due to his being upset because they can't legalize their union—civil partnerships did not become legal in the UK until 2004. And Doyle is seen sulking on Millennium Eve in "Best of All Worlds": "It's not fair, he thought resentfully, as all around them happy people embraced with enthusiasm, all Bodie and I can do is a chaste hug."

[4.11] Not, incidentally, that Bodie has any such qualms, as he grabs Doyle in a bear hug as fireworks go off around them. And our last sighting of the pair is as they walk home—the long way—hand in hand.

5. From the mean streets to Utopia

[5.1] At face value, *The Larton Chronicles* is a pleasant, cozy AU that bears only a token resemblance to the show that inspired it. On closer examination, though, it disrupts a number of the themes that thread through *The Professionals*, including those of sexuality, race, and class, using the lightest of light touches. The author's use of fan shorthand ensures that readers never lose sight of the show and of their favorite characters in the transition from the mean streets of London to a rural utopia.

6. Works cited

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