

Mary Sue

A **Mary Sue** is an idealized and seemingly perfect fictional character. Typically, this character is recognized as an author insert or wish fulfillment.^[1] They can usually perform better at tasks than should be possible given the amount of training or experience,^[2] and usually are able through some means to upstage the protagonist of an established fictional setting, such as by saving the hero. Other traits of a Mary Sue include, bending the rules of the story (narrative, characterization and natural laws of the setting) and being an over centralizing figure.

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Origin and development of the meaning

The term "Mary Sue" comes from the name of a character created by Paula Smith in 1973 for her parody story "A Trekkie's Tale"^{[3]:15} published in her fanzine *Menagerie* #2.^[4] The story starred Lieutenant Mary Sue ("the youngest Lieutenant in the fleet — only fifteen and a half years old"), and satirized unrealistic characters in *Star Trek* fan fiction.^[5] The complete story reads:

"Gee, golly, gosh, gloriosky," thought Mary Sue as she stepped on the bridge of the Enterprise. "Here I am, the youngest lieutenant in the fleet - only fifteen and a half years old." Captain Kirk came up to her.

"Oh, Lieutenant, I love you madly. Will you come to bed with me?" "Captain! I am not that kind of girl!" "You're right, and I respect you for it. Here, take over the ship for a minute while I go get some coffee for us." Mr. Spock came onto the bridge. "What are you doing in the command seat, Lieutenant?" "The Captain told me to." "Flawlessly logical. I admire your mind."

Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott beamed down with Lt. Mary Sue to Rigel XXXVII. They were attacked by green androids and thrown into prison. In a moment of weakness Lt. Mary Sue revealed to Mr. Spock that she too was half Vulcan. Recovering quickly, she sprung the lock with her hairpin and they all got away back to the ship.

But back on board, Dr. McCoy and Lt. Mary Sue found out that the men who had beamed down were seriously stricken by the jumping cold robbies, Mary Sue less so. While the four officers languished in Sick Bay, Lt. Mary Sue ran the ship, and ran it so well she received the Nobel Peace Prize, the Vulcan Order of Gallantry and the Tralfamadorian Order of Good Guyhood.



The original work

However the disease finally got to her and she fell fatally ill. In the Sick Bay as she breathed her last, she was surrounded by Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Mr. Scott, all weeping unashamedly at the loss of her beautiful youth and youthful beauty, intelligence, capability and all around niceness. Even to this day her birthday is a national holiday of the Enterprise.

In 1976, *Menagerie's* editors referred to the original story, writing:

Mary Sue stories—the adventures of the youngest and smartest ever person to graduate from the academy and ever get a commission at such a tender age. Usually characterized by unprecedented skill in everything from art to zoology, including karate and arm-wrestling. This character can also be found burrowing her way into the good graces/heart/mind of one of the Big Three [Kirk, Spock, and McCoy], if not all three at once. She saves the day by her wit and ability, and, if we are lucky, has the good grace to die at the end, being grieved by the entire ship.^[6]

While originally used to describe fan fiction characterization^[7], the term has also been applied to professionally published fiction, one example being the main character of the *Star Trek* novel *Dreadnought!* (1986) by Diane Carey.^{[8][9][10]}

The term "Mary Sue" has gained a connotation of wish-fulfillment, and is commonly associated with self-insertion, though the characterization of upstaging the established protagonist remains fundamental. True self-insertion is a literal and generally undisguised representation of the author; most characters described as "Mary Sues" are not, though they are often called "proxies"^[11] for the author. The negative connotation comes from this "wish-fulfillment" implication: the "Mary Sue" is judged as a poorly developed character, too perfect and lacking in realism to be interesting.^[12]

Criticism

In chapter four of her book *Enterprising Women*,^[13] Camille Bacon-Smith states that fear of creating a "Mary Sue" may be restricting and even silencing to some writers.

Smith quotes an issue of the *Star Trek* fanzine *Archives*^[14] as identifying "Mary Sue" paranoia as one of the sources for the lack of "believable, competent, and identifiable-with [sic] female characters." In this article, author Joanna Cantor interviews her sister Edith, also an amateur editor, who says she receives stories with cover letters apologizing for the tale as "a Mary Sue", even when the author admits she does not know what a "Mary Sue" is. According to Edith Cantor, while Paula Smith's original "Trekkie's Tale" was only ten paragraphs long, "in terms of their impact on those whom they affect, those words [Mary Sue] have got to rank right up there with the Selective Service Act".^[15] At ClipperCon 1987 (a *Star Trek* fan convention held yearly in Baltimore, Maryland), Smith interviewed a panel of female authors who say they do not include female characters in their stories at all. She quoted one as saying "Every time I've tried to put a woman in any story I've ever written, everyone immediately says, this is a Mary Sue." Smith also pointed out that "Participants in a panel discussion in January 1990 noted with growing dismay that any female character created within the community is damned with the term Mary Sue."^[16]

However, Bacon-Smith notes that fans have argued that in *Star Trek* as originally created, James T. Kirk is himself a "Marty Stu," and that the label seems to be used more indiscriminately on female characters who do not behave in accordance with the dominant culture's images and expectations for females as opposed to males.^[17] Author Ann C. Crispin is quoted as saying: "The term 'Mary Sue' constitutes a put-down, implying that the character so summarily dismissed is *not* a true character, no matter how well drawn, what sex, species, or degree of individuality."^[18]

Variations

"Marty Stu", "Gary Sue", or "Larry Stu" are alternative names given to this trope, when the same wish-fulfillment aspect is applied to male characters.^{[19][20]} The *Star Trek: The Next Generation* character Wesley Crusher was described, in hostile terms, as a "Gary Sue" by the feminist popular culture magazine *Bitch*.^[21] There is speculation amongst fans and academics, mainly pejorative, that Wesley was a self-insertion character for Gene Roddenberry, Roddenberry's middle name being Wesley.^[22]

Further variant names have been suggested based on the specific personality of a Mary Sue, such as *Einstein Sue* (an implausibly intelligent character), *Mary Tzu* (one with unrealistically sharp tactical acumen), *Jerk Sue* (a short-tempered character who lashes out, yet is still loved by those around them), or *Sympathetic Sue* (a depressed character who is meant to incur the reader's sympathy).^[20]

Allusions

In 2004, David Orr, in a review of online fan fiction websites FanFiction.net and Godawful Fan Fiction for *The New York Times Book Review*, referred to "Mary Sue" as "a ludicrously empowered author proxy".^[23]

The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode "Superstar" has been analyzed as being a deliberate satire of Mary Sue/Marty Stu type of stories.^{[24][25]}

A popular subject of debate pertains to whether the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy features a Mary Sue in its protagonist, Rey. Screenwriter Max Landis opined on Twitter in 2015 that the character fits this description,^[26] claiming that Rey is excessively gifted at a variety of skills.^[27] Conversely, Caroline Framke of *Vox* contended that Rey did not fit the Mary Sue profile, stating that "Any additional skills Rey has—mechanical work, hand-to-hand combat, climbing, etc—are explained when we first meet her... If she hadn't picked up those skills, she'd probably be dead".^[28] Other writers, such as Tasha Robinson of *The Verge*, have defended the idea of Rey being a Mary Sue, stating that "for women who've felt underrepresented through decades where most of the ladies onscreen were victims, tokens, rewards, or shrews, it's natural to feel a sugar rush of fulfillment over characters like Katniss Everdeen and Emperor Furiosa".^[29]

See also

- Author surrogate
- Cameo appearance
- Competent man
- Deus ex machina
- Manic Pixie Dream Girl
- Pollyanna*
- Self-insertion

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