



# The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl

by Barry Lyga

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [A Conversation with Barry Lyga](#)

Visit [www.vidlit.com/fanboy](http://www.vidlit.com/fanboy) for a short video preview of *Fanboy*, narrated by author Barry Lyga.

## About the Book

---

For most of his life, Donnie's followed his mother's advice, given when he was first picked on by bullies in grade school: *ignore them*. He lives mostly under the radar, both at school and at home, sailing through classes and working on his graphic novel, *Schemata*. His life sucks, but at least he knows what to expect. *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* relates what happens when someone notices him — really notices him — for the first time.

Mysterious goth girl Kyra, dressed in black and with an attitude just as dark, forces her way into his life, renaming him Fanboy. A loner in her own right, Kyra challenges Fanboy's perceptions of his possibilities. When Fanboy's longtime friend Cal starts hanging out with the jocks that have always made Fanboy's life a living hell, Kyra steps in to fill the void. She convinces him that greatness lies within reach, if only he can convince comic book guru Bendis to take a look at his graphic novel . . .

Author Barry Lyga, a comic book fan in his own right, writes intimately and respectfully about how the world sees and is seen by marginalized, creative, and conflicted teens whose only difference from those around them is that they read and write about superheroes.

## About the Author

---

**Barry Lyga** is a recovering comic book geek. When he was a kid, everyone told him that comic books were garbage and would rot his brain, but he had the last laugh. Raised on a steady diet of comics, he worked in the comic book industry for ten years but now writes full-time, because he can. *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* is Lyga's first novel. He lives near the Mason-Dixon line with his wife, a high school librarian and graphic novel fan, and a comic book collection that is just way too big. For more information on Lyga and his novel, visit [www.fanboyandgothgirl.com](http://www.fanboyandgothgirl.com).

## A Conversation with Barry Lyga

---

### Can you talk a little about your book?

A fifteen-year-old brainy outcast sees his best (and only) friend going over to the dark side, becoming more and more interested in sports and spending less time talking about their shared love of comic books. But that's OK because our hero has a secret — a graphic novel he's been working on without telling anyone about it, a graphic novel that he is convinced will lead to publication, fame, and — most important of all — a way out of the crappy little town he lives in and the bullies that make it all hell for him.

While he suffers the thousand indignities of high school and adolescence, plotting and planning his "escape" all the while, he's rocked to his core when he meets Kyra Sellers, a Goth Girl who shares his love of comics (though different ones) and also shares his hatred of the jocks and bullies who torment them both. Meeting someone who, it seems, actually understands him is an irresistible draw for "Fanboy" (as Kyra insists on calling him) and he finds himself willing to heed her advice to ignore or crush anyone who stands in his way. Ultimately, he comes to realize that if his dreams are to come true, he must be faithful to his own principles . . . once he can figure out what they are.

**There's a lot of information about comic books in *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl*. Did you make it all up? Did you have to do a lot of research? What do you think is appealing to young people about comic books or graphic novels?**

Considering that I've been reading comics my whole life and spent a great deal of time working with them professionally, you could say I have an opinion or two about this! I think there is a combination of reasons that comics appeal so much to teens.

First of all, there's the subject matter. In general, the most widely disseminated and widely read comics are, in one way or another, wish fulfillment. Superheroes — which make up the majority of comics in the United States — are adolescent power fantasies come to life. The recent infusion of manga continues the trend, with comics that look at romance from a streamlined, idealized viewpoint, for example. (I'm generalizing here, of course.) By their very nature, comics are concerned with broad concepts and symbols, stressing these over nitty-gritty details.

Second, comics are just plain fun. They're movies that stand still so that you can study them. They tend to continue each month, every month, so the next episode is right around the corner. Long before shows like *Lost* or *24* tried doing sustained long-form narratives, comics were telling stories that extended for years, doubled back on themselves, repeated themselves, etc.

Next, you have the unpredictability of the form. Since comics are pretty cheap to produce, you can afford to experiment a lot. If something doesn't work in one issue, there's always the next issue to try again. Opening up a comic book, you might find an extended fight sequence between two guys beating the crap out of each other for twenty pages, or you might find a heartfelt conversation in which a boyfriend struggles to tell his girlfriend a secret. You never know.

Last, I think there's an element of subversion. Particularly with manga. Reading a comic book is an acquired skill as you learn how to match up the words and pictures. And some manga is published in Japanese format, which is to say from right to left. To adult Western eyes, that can be incredibly difficult to read, but teens have no problem with it. I think teens like knowing that they can read something cool and new that adults can't interpret. It's the same reasoning that drove my parents' generation to love rock 'n' roll and my generation to embrace rap — you always want to have some secret from the grownups.

### **When you were in high school, were you like Fanboy?**

Yeah, there is a lot of me in Fanboy. I was sort of a loner, kept to myself a lot. I wasn't working on a graphic novel in high school, but I did write a novel. It was a really terrible one, too! *Schemata* is much better — if I could have written *Schemata* when I was in high school, my life would have been very different. I think Fanboy's a little smarter than I was. But the Great Ecuadorian Tortoise Blight is actually something I made up on the spur of the moment in a history class.

### **Why does Fanboy seem so mean and spiteful at times, but kind and timid at other times?**

I think that's part of growing up, in a way, but it's also part of just being human. He's a really smart guy in a situation that he has no control over. Sometimes he's going to lash out and do nasty things or say really awful things to his mother, like he does throughout the book. But we all do that when we're under pressure, when we're feeling stressed — we all lash out like that. For Fanboy, he gets no relief, so he's constantly under that pressure. At school he's picked on and at home he's surrounded by the step-fascist and a mother who's too distracted to pick up on what's bothering him. So he has a lot of anger and aggression to let out, and sometimes it comes out in pretty harsh terms.

### **Such as the fantasies of terrorists invading his high school?**

Exactly. Some people who've read the book really freaked out when they got to those parts because they thought I was advocating school violence. But you need to think when you read those passages — those fantasies are a way for Fanboy to deal with his hurt and his anger without actually harming anyone. And late in the book, he starts to take those fantasies a little too far, and he realizes it and pulls back. There's a huge difference between imagining something and doing something.

## **Did you ever know a girl like Kyra, a.k.a. Goth Girl?**

I wish! Kyra doesn't have a real-life "launching point." The other major characters started as a real person in my head and then morphed into characters as I wrote. But Kyra I just created . . . No, that's not even really accurate. I don't feel like I created Kyra. It's more like she walked up to me one day and demanded that I write her into the novel. Originally I was sort of trying to create a wish fulfillment character. You know, I wanted to create the kind of girl I wish I'd known in high school. But Kyra wouldn't let me turn her into a wish fulfillment. She kept saying these really brutal, really honest things, and I just couldn't stop her. She was supposed to be this sort of side presence in the book, this excuse for the narrator to say certain things, but she became very real. I sort of fell in love with her while I was writing her, and I'm pretty sure she'd laugh her ass off if she knew that.

## **What were your favorite books when you were in high school?**

I read a lot of comic books in high school, but high school is also when I discovered some really great writers. One of my favorites at that age was a guy named Joe Haldeman, who's a magnificent sci-fi writer. His imagination just blows my mind. I reread his short story anthology *Dealing in Futures* over and over again. I also loved Edgar Allen Poe. His writing was so dark and depressing and when you're fourteen or fifteen, you read it and you think, "Yeah, that's how life is." I mean, this guy wrote an entire poem about breaking into his girlfriend's coffin to cuddle up to her corpse, and they made us read it! In school! It was so subversive. I loved it.

## **What were your favorite comic books when you were younger? And what are they now?**

Okay, I will fully own up to my geekdom here. When I was a kid, my absolute favorite comic book in the world was *Legion of Super-Heroes*. It was this unbelievable, amazing comic — it took place a thousand years in the future, in the thirtieth century, and featured an army of teenage superheroes fighting evil all across the universe. You have to realize that as a kid I grew up on comic books. And they were always about one character or maybe six or seven. And then I discovered *Legion* and my God! There were thirty of them! And they all had families and enemies and supporting casts . . . And they had complete autonomy throughout the universe to fight crime and save the world(s). And they were just teenagers! It was tremendously attractive. It had all the trappings of great science fiction and great heroic fiction, wrapped up in a colorful package.

My other favorite comic book at that time was *Swamp Thing*, which was as different from *Legion* as you could get. It was a horror book, set in the swamps of Louisiana, but the central core of the book was about the environment and what it means to be human. A really marvelous series. It was intended for adults, but I was reading it when I was younger, and I loved every last panel of it.

It's tough to say what my favorite comic book is today. I used to read so many of them, but nowadays I'm pretty much down to reading *Legion*. It's still around, though it's very different from when I was a kid.

## **What's your favorite thing about being a writer?**

When I was a kid, I read a book titled *The Girl with the Silver Eyes*. It was a science-fiction book about a girl who had psychic powers, but what really hit me about it was that she was going through a tough time because her parents were divorced and her mom was dating a guy she didn't like. That book really helped me get through my own parents' divorce, because it showed me that there were other people out there going through what I was going through. I guess my favorite thing about being a writer is that someone out there might read something I've written and it'll help them deal with some problem in their life.

## **What is your writing day like?**

Writing is hard work, but it's also terrific fun. I have a blast. I wake up every morning at around seven-thirty and write straight through to noon or so. I usually write about three thousand words in that time, which is something like ten or twelve typed, double-spaced pages. Then I eat lunch and, depending on my mood, either read or do research. If I'm really in the groove or obsessed with a particular scene, I go right back to the writing after lunch. I've done six or seven thousand words in a day before, but that's exhausting, so I try not to do it too often.

## **What advice do you have for people who want to be writers?**

First, take it seriously. Learn how to write. Don't just figure that you can write because "everybody can write." Yes, everybody can write, but not everybody can write well. Second, read everything you can get your hands on, even stuff that sucks. You'll learn from all of it. From the stuff that sucks, you'll learn what not to do. Last, keep writing. There's a saying that every writer has a million bad words in him, and you have to write those million bad words before you can write anything worth reading. So keep writing.

I showed a writer friend a book once. He told me that it read like I'd been trying too hard, trying to make the chapters a specific length, trying to make the book a specific length, that sort of thing. He told me to forget about all of that and just tell the story: "Just do it till it's done," he said. And every time I sit down to write a book, that's what I tell myself. "Just do it till it's done."

## **What does your writing reflect about you as an individual? Are experiences from your own life woven into your stories?**

Sure. I think that's true of anyone. Everything written tells you something about the person who wrote it. We're all bundles of experiences, contradictions, emotions, and feelings, and those bundles are wholly unique. No one person is identical to any other person. So the writing is unique, too. Sometimes it's unique in small ways, like a word choice. Sometimes it's unique in big ways, like a whole new voice or way of looking at the world (or killing a form of poetry, like John Milton). Our experiences form that unique outlook and output.

For example, in *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl*, there's a moment where Fanboy sees a bumper sticker making fun of honor students. He goes off on a rant about how people don't like smart kids, and Kyra decides that she's going to ram the car with the bumper sticker. Now, I never rammed a car in my life and I never rode with a friend who did it. But I have seen those bumper stickers, and they made me as angry as

Fanboy was. So that was a case of taking something I felt, something I experienced, and turning it into a piece of fiction. Best of all, since it's fiction and it's made up, I could take the moment even further by showing Kyra's reaction to Fanboy's anger. And then, even better, I got to take it further by showing Fanboy's response to Kyra's reaction! So you start out with this little seed of reality, this kernel of truth, and you get to make it grow until you see all sorts of other ideas come from it.

### **What is your favorite book?**

Wow, that's a tough one! I'm going to say *Paradise Lost* is my favorite, if only because most of English literature descends from it in one way or another. Milton did something few people can claim to have done — he killed an entire mode of expression! After *Paradise Lost*, no one wrote heroic epic poetry anymore, because Milton did it to perfection. Not many people can claim to have done that!

### **At what age did you want to become a writer? When did you become serious in your efforts to write?**

I honestly can't remember a time in my life when I didn't want to be a writer. It's always been there. When I was really young, maybe seven or eight, my grandmother asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I said, "A writer." Now, she was this really cool Jewish grandmother, so that sort of amused her and she said, "Oh, I see. You want to starve."

Starving didn't sound so good at eight years old, but I was pretty stubborn. I figured out early on that I could write and do something else, too, to keep from starving. So as I got older, I wanted to be a physicist/writer, a teacher/writer, a lawyer/writer . . . There was even a very brief period where I considered being a priest/writer, but that didn't last very long.

I think I probably became serious about my writing in eighth grade, when I sent off my first short story. It got rejected, of course, but I made the attempt. Most important, the rejection didn't stop me — I sent out more stories after that one.

### **What are the steps in your writing process? Do you have certain rituals or habits?**

I'm a very haphazard writer, I have to admit. I have a friend who's very much a "mechanical" writer. She plans and plots everything down to the last bit before she even sits down to write the first word of the story. I've tried that before, but it just doesn't work for me. I tend to have the idea for the book. I usually know the beginning and the ending in my mind. The middle is sort of a foggy, marshy area where you can't see much and there're wolves howling in the distance.

Now, the smart thing to do would be to take a flashlight and map and go into that fog. Or maybe wait for the fog to burn off. But I don't do the smart thing. I just sort of plunge right on in and feel my way around and figure it out as I go along. This means that sometimes I step into quicksand and sometimes I trip and fall flat on my face, but it also means that sometimes I wander off the path and discover something truly amazing. There are risks and rewards associated with every kind of writing.

My rituals are pretty boring: I wake up at the same time every day, eat the same thing for breakfast, do a crossword puzzle to wake up my brain, and then get to work. When I'm done with the day's work, I go exercise for an hour to make up for the fact that I've been sitting on my butt all day!

### **How did you spend your afterschool hours in high school?**

My favorite place in high school was the town library. Honest to God. I loved that place. It was within walking distance of my school and my mom worked, so I would walk to the library after school and curl up in a corner somewhere to read for a few hours, then she would come pick me up when she got off work. I grew up in a little town in the middle of farm country, so this library was tiny; it was an old storefront on Main Street and it was crammed full of books because there was so little space. I read everything I could get my hands on. Then I would go home and write, because I wanted to have a book on one of those cramped little shelves someday.

**Why are teenagers reading less, and what can be done to bring them back to books?** Well, I guess first I have to accept the premise that they are reading less, though I'm not 100 percent sure of that. We live in the age of text messaging, after all, to say nothing of IM chat and the Web. I think it's fairer to say that they're reading fewer books. I've heard people blame the Internet and video games for this, but I'm not sure I buy it. Teenagers are just obsessed with what's cool, with what's popular. I think the trick is to make books cool again. Make them sexy. If reading a book becomes sexy, you'll see every teenager in the country burying his or her nose in one.

How do you do this? You do it by not talking down to the reader, by writing stories that are relevant to and reflective of their life experiences. If that means writing about sex or drugs or violence or whatever, then you do it. You do it responsibly, but you do it. You can't expect people to read something if it doesn't mean anything to them, if it doesn't resonate in some way. You have to write a story that clings to people and won't let go, something that makes them keep thinking long after they've put the book down. Teenagers aren't some alien race with different needs than adults. They want a good, compelling story to occupy their time, too, and we just need to write those stories.

### **What's your next book about?**

My next book is titled *Boy Toy* and it takes place in Brookdale, at South Brook High, like the first one. Some of the characters from *Astonishing Adventures* show up, but it's mostly a new crew — a guy, his friends, and his teacher . . . and a secret from five years ago.