

An Introduction to Soulbonding

By Swiftpaw

My name is Swiftpaw and I'm in a system that's practiced soulbonding since 2016, and soulbonding was our introduction to the plural community coming from fictionkin. I both am a soulbonder individually and my system has soulbonds collectively, though our experiences are a bit complicated.

My system wanted to do this panel because discovering soulbonding was important for our journey as an alterhuman system, and soulbonding as a community is one we wanted to give more recognition to, especially for its overlap with alterhumanity. This is going to be an introduction to the concept, how it's experienced and who can experience it, why people do it, and a brief overview of how to do it. We will take questions towards the end.

What is soulbonding?

Soulbonding can be difficult to define because it's a term and subculture that's existed for over 25 years. It was originally coined by Amanda Flowers on the mailing list Just For Writers in 1998 to describe the experience of writers having living characters. By the 2000s, this term had spread to LiveJournal. It grew in popularity from there among both writers and non-writers. Around this time was also where the term got recognition in the multiplicity community, appearing in glossaries around 2003, and later the fictionkin community, where there was an overlap with some LiveJournal groups.

This is a very brief paraphrasing of the history of soulbonding, and admittedly a lot of it is hard to track because of many websites not being archived or pages being private, but for those looking for articles which discuss this, [The now defunct blog about-soulbonding did a writeup which I'll link here](#), and [LB Lee also covers soulbonding in their Plural History](#).

So, how do we define it? There are many sources which define soulbonding, and some even contradict each other. This can make just defining soulbonding a little complicated.

For a simple definition, [a quote sourced from Soul Whispers cites Laura Gilkey as defining it as follows](#):

soulbond: v. to form and/or experience a robust mental or empathic connection with one or more fictional characters.

Which is good as a short and simple definition, but to some alterhumans, this might sound closer to something like fictionhearted or synpaths. The emphasis here is more on the connection, not the soulbond being a separate entity like with plurality. We'll get more into why that is later.

Another definition I like under the now defunct [Living Library defines it as the following](#):

Soulbonding/living characters occur when a person, often after establishing a strong emotional connection to a fictional character, finds that said character has "come to life" in their mind. This new entity (called a *soulbond*, *muse*, or *living character*), though nonphysical, is autonomous in that they are capable of speaking and acting on their own, even outside of or in opposition to the expectations of the original person (called the

soulbonder or *author*). A soulbond essentially is or is strongly like a separate, conscious entity coinhabiting a brain with their soulbonder.

Which I think is still a solid definition to what soulbond is. Even though not all soulbonders are writers or experience soulbonds as being like muses, it is still a subculture that's associated with it.

If this sounds similar to "fictive", that's because it is. Soulbonding is the subculture where the term fictive started to be used to refer to fictional characters in systems, and was originally supposed to be a less-spiritual-sounding alternative to soulbond until it jumped to other communities. This can also make it difficult to give an exact difference between a soulbond and a fictive, and there isn't really a clear answer for the distinction beyond associations.

Soulbonding is arguably more host-centric and focuses on the relationship between a soulbonder and a soulbond. Though, this also isn't a hard rule either as some fictives in non-host systems may still identify as soulbonds. The degree to which soulbonding is spiritual or metaphysical is also disagreed on - some websites might define it as exclusively spiritual while others might imply something more psychological. Soulbonds usually come from *some* other place and come with a level of backstory, but this isn't inherently spiritual, and can have a psychological cause. This is akin to how some fictionkin might have memories but not ascribe them to anything spiritual.

There's also a grey area when it comes to thoughtforms or tulpamancy, which is consciously creating a headmate. For some soulbonders, they may be a type of thoughtform, but for others, they may be closer to a walk-in or something that just happened. It's another thing though where not all soulbonders consider it thoughtforms.

Regardless of all these associations and grey areas with other experiences, we can say at least that soulbonding is forming a connection to a character as someone separate from yourself to where that character is experienced as a presence in your mind.

So, how is soulbonding experienced?

It gets easier to understand what a soulbond is when looking at the ways it's experienced in actual practice. The way soulbonding is experienced is also varied, but there are a few common trends and ways soulbonds get described within the community.

Here are a few common day to day experiences of soulbonding:

- Giving feedback, particularly on their story or character. This can be suggesting where the story should go or even arguing with the writer during the writing process. Likewise, commenting on interpretations that seem out of character or wrong to them.
- Giving input during day to day events even if there's no writing or other creation going on - like suggesting clothes to wear or commenting on something funny or annoying.
- Providing comfort or advice to the soulbonder and vice versa, sometimes during times of stress for either the soulbond or soulbonder.
- Feeling projected alongside the soulbonder, such as feeling like the soulbond is sitting or laying next to them, or walking alongside them.

- The soulbond still having a full life of their own, even in their own reality. Sometimes coming in and out to interact with the soulbonder. Likewise, soulbonds might also exist in a headspace.

Three Types of Soulbonds - Another way of looking at it

[The fictionkin and soulbonding website From Fiction lists three types of soulbonds](#), and these are useful for visualizing how soulbonds can be experienced in different ways.

The first is a permanent resident, which is a soulbond that completely "moves in", and is either unable to or unwilling to return to their original world. For example this could be a soulbond that's dead in their world, but for others it might also be a choice not to go back.

The second are day trippers, which are soulbonds that come and go. The way this is done might vary between systems, some may experience it as something like astral travel, others may experience it as walking through a gate or veil, or it might be hand waved in that neither the soulbond or soulbonder understand how it works. It could also be a mentally check in/check out situation.

Then Internal cellphones are soulbonds that still have a mental connection while each party is doing their own thing in their own worlds. It's like two parallel lives coexisting where they can communicate like a shared phone line. The soulbonds in this case don't technically share a body with you.

Some soulbonders with the internal cellphone type might not even actually talk to their soulbonds. It can be experienced as something like looking into a window at another life. This is also why so many soulbond definitions emphasize a "mental connection" instead of body sharing. I've also heard this specific experience called "reverse soulbonding", but it's arguably still considered just regular soulbonding even if it's different from typical plural experiences and might not even count as plural at all.

What can be a soulbond?

Soulbonds sometimes get divided into insourced and outsourced. Insourced are soulbonds that are not-preexisting, like original characters or noncanon characters, while outsourced are pre-existing characters, like a character from a book or movie.

Anything broadly defined as a "character" can be a soulbond. This is usually what separates soulbonds from other forms of spirit work or walk-ins within systems. This includes any type of fan-character, OC, alternate universe, and also any character from fiction no matter what. Soulbonds can also be villains or morally grey characters. They can also be background characters. There is once again a grey area where some non-fictives walk-ins might still be counted as soulbonds, but it's very much associated with characters and the living character phenomenon.

There's also the concept of "factive" soulbonds, or soulbonds of real people, which is something where a lot of the information about it seems to be lost. It was originally called "BodyBrothers", and may have been coined on LiveJournal, but that account was purged and not backed up.

[Here is a definition of it from the website Fictive Kin:](#)

There is an additional phenomenon related to SBing, that of "BodyBrothers," wherein the 'Bonder has contact with someone that exists in their own reality (such as a movie star,

musician, etc.). This is not to say that the 'Bonder necessarily has a psychic connection to that person. Acceptance of this occurrence depends upon the existence of alternate timelines and/or parallel dimensions.

From what I found also implied this practice may have been controversial back then and I personally wouldn't encourage it, but still worth bringing up that it does exist. I also did find a few archives of soulbonders who had historical figures like Oscar Wilde or Shakespear as soulbonds, albeit more fictionalized or mythologized.

How common is soulbonding/who can experience soulbonding?

Soulbonding is actually very common. There's a bit of a meme of how the creator of Garfield has a "Garfield Tulpa", but that's actually a classic example of soulbonding. Other famous examples of soulbonding include Robert E. Howard, Edith Wharton, Philip Pullman, and Leonard Nimoy - the later being an example of this phenomenon happening to an actor.

This is common enough that it's discussed in psychology and appears in studies. A study was published titled ["I've learned I need to treat my characters like people': Varieties of agency and interaction in Writers' experiences of their Characters' Voices"](#) about this exact phenomenon. [Here is a Psychology Today article discussing the findings for those who can't view it or want a synopsis.](#) To paraphrase, some writers report their characters being able to have entire conversations or experience writing as just transcribing what's happening to their characters.

Here are some statistics from the article:

- 20% of the authors in the sample sometimes sense their characters in the room with them.
- 13% said their characters have full agency from the start.
- 27% said their characters develop agency only after a certain point in the writing process
- 22% said their characters had agency sometimes, but not always

The explanation given here is inner dialogue and closer to how people might hear others' voices in their head, and it's worth mentioning the study doesn't examine degrees of independence or how vivid these experiences are. A lot of this may also be close to thoughtforms, especially with the authors who reported characters only developing agency at a point in the writing process. Regardless though, soulbonding or experiences like it could be considered more common than most people would first think.

[Another 2003 study titled "The Illusion of Independent Agency: Do Adult Fiction Writers Experience Their Characters as Having Minds of their Own" features historical excerpts from various writers.](#) Here is one sourced from Enid Blyton:

As I look at them, the characters take on movement and life-they talk and laugh (I hear them), . . . I don'tknow what anyone is going to say or do. I don't know what is going to happen. I am in the happy position of being able to write a story and read it for the first time, at one and the same moment. . . .Sometimes a character makes a joke, a really funny one, that makes me laugh as I type it on the paper and I think, "Well, I couldn't have thought of that myself in a hundred years!" And then I think, "Well, who did think of it, then?"

And another from E. M. Foster:

The characters arrive when evoked, hut full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book. They "run away," they "get out of hand": they are creations inside of a creation, and often inharmonious towards it; if they are given complete freedom they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying, and destroy it by intestinal decay

The above study into the writers of their sample reported 92% of the sample having some level of independent characters. Interestingly, several writers had, by the measure at the time, higher DES scores close to dissociative identity disorder, but it was noted they didn't seem psychologically unhealthy nor did they have a dissociative disorder.

Meanwhile in early soulbond groups, there was also an emphasis on how this can happen with roleplayers too where they might start to experience this with their muse. Of course, this also expanded to include not just writers.

Even though the focus here is on writers, writers aren't the only ones who have this experience, even if it's the most "normalized" among them. My system has noticed with self shipping in particular, a lot of self shippers will mentally date their fictional others in a way reminiscent of soulbonding. Some age regressors will also experience imaginary caregivers of fictional characters. It's possible that soulbonding might be more common in other groups too, but it's not called that or given much other thought.

When it comes to the overlap with fictionkin, it's not that unheard of for fictionkin to actually be experiencing soulbonding, since that mental connection can make it difficult to tell. Some fictionkin already experience their fictotypes through parallel lives, which could arguably fit under soulbonding in some cases, so it's not that big of a stretch that someone feeling an intense mental connection to a fictional character can sift into soulbonding. Soulbonding did and does also overlap with fictionkin quite a lot; for example on LiveJournal, a lot of soulbonding and fictive groups also included fictionkin and vice versa.

How can I tell if I'm a soulbonder?

[There's a good article by the soulbonder Tumblr about this for fictionkin specifically](#), which I'll link to. Another article I'd like to link from the From Fiction website is [Accidental Soulbonding](#). I'll also give a few experiences of accidental soulbonding myself:

- Feeling like you're just transcribing your characters or your characters having a will of their own - they might come in at inopportune times, need to be haggled with to continue the story, or give feedback.
- Characters being "needy" or interacting with you in an unexpected way, such as asking you for advice or needing help with something, or wanting to talk with you even if you don't want to talk with them.

- Writing, roleplaying, or any creative work with a fictional character feels more like channeling them or everything comes fluidly - especially if it's only for certain characters.
- You can feel a character or fictotype almost like a ghost next to you or being able to communicate with you.
- You have an experience of simultaneously identifying and not identifying as a fictotype, like it's both you but also not quite you.
- Characters can come into your mind completely autonomously even if you're not actively trying to imagine them.
- Having an extreme sense of how a story or character should be, or "getting offended" on behalf of a character, even if it's irrational.
- Feeling like you could genuinely consider a character as being your friend.

"I might be a soulbonder, what do I do?"

Because soulbonding can be so varied, it's hard for me to say in any accurate statement what to do. Maybe this is a time to start to talk to them more like people, or maybe just keep doing what you're doing already and encourage it. For my system, we were more relieved to finally have an excuse to talk to each other.

A good rule of thumb to at least rule out imagination is to try talking to a suspected headmate, turn off your own mind as much as possible, and see what the response is. If there's still a response even when you're not actively trying to come up with one, there's a good chance that might be a headmate.

When it comes to dissociation, soulbonding doesn't come with any. While soulbonds can rarely take over a soulbonder's body, it shouldn't happen often enough to interfere with daily life, nor is it non-consensual. Soulbonding also doesn't typically result in issues with identity.

I'll still link [Healthy Multiplicity](#), which is a collection of articles geared towards other types of multiplicity, for those who feel they might want to explore the possibility of being a different type of multiple. You also don't need to figure out everything right away. There is a large spectrum of mental experiences after all, but soulbonding is typically a healthy and sometimes beneficial experience.

Why do people soulbond?

While a lot of this panel so far has focused more on involuntary experiences, soulbonding doesn't actually divide itself as much into voluntary or involuntary. Some old sources may be in disagreement and say it's never done on purpose, but for modern soulbonding, there is an acceptance that it can be done on purpose.

Here are a few reasons why someone might intentionally soulbond, or why accidental soulbonding might have happened independent to being a writer:

- Companionship or a desire for a deeper connection. Some people might soulbond for friendship. Soulbonding for a relationship also isn't that uncommon, going back into what we've observed with self shipping. Same with soulbonding just because you like a character.

- Seeking wisdom or comfort, especially through a difficult time. Soulbonding can be something like a coping mechanism for some people, especially with getting a mutual understanding of a similar trauma or condition.
- Someone to bounce ideas off of or to enhance writing or other skills. Some writers for example might soulbond on purpose and it's possible for soulbonding to come from something like a writing exercise.
- Like with other fictive-heavy forms of multiplicity, hyperfixations or special interests. Especially if it results in something or someone being constantly on your mind.

For fictionkin or different types of fictives, this might also be a way to connect with people from your canon or source. Canon being people from your exact timeline - like where your memories, past life, whatever takes place in, and source being people from the same broad fictional source. It's sometimes possible to soulbond to a canonmate, but it's not a good idea to expect it, since it's not always possible or that soulbond might be very different.

Soulbonding can be done for other alterhuman reasons too, like to establish or enhance a copinglink for example, or because of an archetope. All of these reasons can apply to non-fiction-based experiences as well, like otherkin or therianthropy with soulbonding to one of your species.

Of course, this panel isn't meant to say that you need to soulbond. However, I will be going a little into how to do it and how to do it safely.

Why not to soulbond and warnings about soulbonding

First, we also need to talk about why not to soulbond if planning to do it on purpose. Soulbonding is still gaining a presence in your mind, and while it's usually more metaphysical, there's always a chance of there being a risk of getting stuck with someone or making a thoughtform.

The biggest rule of thumb is not to force it. You shouldn't go into soulbonding with a feeling of desperation or like it's something you need to do, or with high expectations. If you are struggling to soulbond, it's a good idea to take regular breaks, and don't get upset by a lack of results. The goal isn't to *make* a character but *connect* to a character.

Soulbonding is still a two-way relationship. Especially when soulbonding to help with coping, you might need to help your soulbond in addition to helping you. On the plus side, it can create a mutually beneficial relationship, but that takes work like a real relationship.

Soulbonds might also not always get along with their soulbonder, and another thing to consider if picking a soulbond are mutual interests or compatible personalities. Sometimes in practice a soulbonder might find they don't get along with their desired soulbond. It's possible for a soulbond to be canon divergent or not what you'd expect. It's okay to drop a soulbond if it's not working out.

There's also a risk of accidentally puppeting a soulbond, or controlling them. It's more common if you go into a connection expecting something that the soulbond doesn't want to or can't give. This can be experienced a few different ways and how my system might experience it is like a "ghost thought" where we think a soulbond says something, but they don't actually. This can put a strain on the relationship too if it's not being checked for.

[There's a great post by a now defunct Tumblr blog "amxirnith" that goes into this in more detail](#). This is a much more in-depth guide about safety and etiquette with soulbonds, and I'd recommend reading it especially if thinking of intentionally soulbonding.

How do people soulbond?

So if you want to soulbond, how do you do it? The guide we'd recommend in addition to the other linked guide to soulbond etiquette and safety is [From Fiction's Soulbonding Tips](#), which I'll link to.

There's really no one specific way to connect to a soulbond. You could go the creative route of writing, roleplaying, or even art or making edits, and my system has found that self insert writing is one of the most effective methods for this. It might also involve just consuming the media of the character in question for outsourced soulbonds.

I've also heard of people who do more religious or spiritual methods to summon a soulbond, like lighting candles or incense, doing a spell or ritual, or through prayer. Though for all of that, it depends on what you follow specifically how it would work and what safety tips you need to follow. You also don't *need* to do that.

From the point of getting them in your mind, try to talk to them in your mind. Over time, you may start to experience some response, even if it's faint at first. A good way to go about this is to ask questions like "What do you want to eat?" or "What is your opinion on this movie?" Once again, taking breaks, and not trying to force anything.

Conclusion

I hope that this panel was a good introduction into the concept for those who wanted it - whether figuring out that this might apply to you, being interested in doing it yourself, or just curious about what this experience is.

Citations

Websites

- [Fictive Kin](#)
- [From Fiction](#)
- [Living Library](#): (Archive.org Link)
- [Soul Whispers](#)

Studies

- [‘I’ve learned I need to treat my characters like people’: Varieties of agency and interaction in Writers’ experiences of their Characters’ Voices](#)
- [THE ILLUSION OF INDEPENDENT AGENCY: DO ADULT FICTION WRITERS EXPERIENCE THEIR CHARACTERS AS HAVING MINDS OF THEIR OWN?](#)

Articles and Posts

- [A History of Soulbonding v2.0 by About-Soulbonding](#)(Archive.org Link)

- [Edith Wharton on Soulbonding](#) (Archive.org Link)
- [Most Authors Can Hear Their Characters Speaking to Them.](#)
- [Plural History, part 3: Usenet and its spin-offs and Soulbonders by LB Lee](#)
- [Robert E. Howard & Conan the Barbarian](#) (Archive.org Link)
- [Soulbonding 101 Etiquette and Safety](#)
- [Soulbonding vs. Being Kin](#)