



**Horan, M. (2026) *'Thanks for listening: a novel' and 'Asexuality in Young Adult literature: How Ace/Aro YA challenges amatonormativity and expands possibilities'*. PhD thesis, Bath Spa University.**

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“Thanks For Listening: A Novel”

And

“Asexuality in Young Adult Literature: How Ace/Aro YA Challenges  
Amatonormativity and Expands Possibilities”

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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No new datasets were created during the study.

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SECTION 2

Asexuality in Young Adult Literature:

How Ace/Aro YA Challenges Amatonormativity and Expands Possibilities

## Acknowledgments

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## Abstract

This PhD submission consists of a YA novel, *Thanks for Listening*, and a supporting critical thesis, “Asexuality in Young Adult Literature: How Ace/Aro YA Challenges Amatonormativity and Expands Possibilities.” *Thanks for Listening* is a YA romantic comedy, which follows asexual teenager Mia, the stage manager of her high school drama club, who feels like no one listens to her advice. Disenchanted, she decides to start an anonymous advice account on the short-form video app Tic Tac (an app very like Tik Tok), and soon everyone around her is finally listening to her - they just don't know it. As her account takes off, Mia is also juggling her first real relationship with piano prodigy Sadie, who swears that her asexuality is not a barrier to their relationship – but Mia isn't always so sure. She must also contend with the realization her best friends might take her for granted, and that she's barely noticed.

At the start of the novel, Mia is comfortable in her own asexuality but not certain about how it will be received in the context of a romantic relationship, nor how she'll navigate a romantic relationship as someone who is ace. By the end of the novel, she no longer believes her own asexuality will be a strike against her in the context of a romantic relationship, and has learned to trust that her advice and insights are valuable and an important part of her, whether or not they are heeded. The novel is intended to tell the story of an asexual teenager who is not conflicted or traumatized by their asexual identity, as well as an ace character who is interested in pursuing romantic relationships even if that might prove complicated.

The supporting critical thesis focuses on five young adult novels with asexual protagonists and explores how young adult novels without romantic plot lines challenge amatonormativity, the prioritization of a single romantic relationship above all others. Through this critical thesis I aim to illustrate the ways these novels - through the absence of a romantic plot line - force the characters and authors to question norms and conventions around what

must be found within a successful life and a successful narrative. Questioning these norms open up a wide variety of narrative possibilities for the young adult author.

## Introduction

As I begin this critical thesis, I am approaching and examining young adult literature not just as a writer and a researcher, but as a teacher who has been helping college students create their own young adult narratives for almost a decade. A question that is often asked in my writing young adult literature classes, normally tentatively, as if even asking could be a transgression against the canon, is whether a young adult book *must* include romance. It is not a strange question. The most popular young adult books of the last twenty years, the kind that have become cultural touchstones launching not just book series but cinematic universes do not simply feature romance, they often hinge on it. *The Hunger Games* is an action-packed dystopia with constant life or death consequences, yet much of the discussion around it revolves around the love triangle between the protagonist and her two potential romantic partners. The realistic novel *The Fault in Our Stars* features a protagonist grappling with not only her own mortality but the question of what you should strive to leave behind after death, and yet the marketing focused mostly on the budding romance between the protagonist and another young cancer patient.

As I considered the asexual young adult texts that make up my bibliography, at first their differences seemed overwhelming. What did they have in common, and how could that commonality be used to help aspiring or practicing young adult authors interested in writing ace (a shortened version of asexual, meaning someone who experiences little to no sexual attraction) protagonists when they are all so different? There is an enormous range of approaches writers take when telling ace stories. Some of the texts are written in a style and difficulty level meant to appeal to younger teens, while others are sophisticated enough in both language and content that they could easily appeal to any adult reader. Some novels are told from one point of view, while others are told from multiple points of view. Some novels fall under the umbrella of fantasy or science fiction, some are historical novels, while others

would be categorized as modern contemporary. Some focus on a protagonist who is only starting to identify as asexual and come to terms with what that identity means for them, while others feature a protagonist who is already comfortable and confident with that identity. What all these texts have in common is the fact that they all shed light on the wide spectrum of what it means to walk through the world as ace. This, more than anything, gave me pause as I searched for a research question to guide my thesis—how to make an assertion about asexual characters and their narratives when each character, like every real life individual on the ace spectrum, is unique. I did not want to flatten the experience of a diverse group of characters.

And yet, something unique does bind together a select group of the texts I have assembled. In the handful of novels in which the protagonist is not only asexual, but also aromantic, meaning they are not interested in pursuing any kind of sexual or romantic relationship, the novels prioritize friendship and familial bonds. These novels show us what a young adult text looks like without a romantic plot line for the protagonist—that it can still be compelling, emotional, full of tension and high stakes. These novels showcase the fact that every young adult novel does not need a romantic plot line to be successful. Whether you as an author are interested in writing an aro/ace protagonist, or simply want to tell a story with an allosexual protagonist without a focus on romance, these ace young adult novels have a lot to teach us about how this can be achieved.

My own novel's protagonist, Mia, is not aromantic. Over the course of the narrative, she starts a relationship and explores what she wants from a romantic partnership as someone on the ace spectrum. However, though Mia does have a romantic partner, it is the relationship she has with her best friends that actually creates the core drama of the novel that brings her to a greater understanding about herself, and the resolution of that conflict is what acts as the actual final beat of the novel. While the central argument of this thesis, that aro/ace books

challenge the need for a romantic plot line in young adult novels, is not something my own novel can illustrate, it does, nevertheless, emerge from my interest in character arcs that are not dependent on romantic plot lines. The absence of a romantic plot line, on a practical level, leaves more space for other kinds of relationships and narrative arcs to be explored. On a more philosophical level, challenging the notion that a romantic plot line is a necessary element of a young adult novel can lead an author to challenge other norms and expectations around what a young adult novel needs to contain, opening up more exciting possibilities for the storyteller.

The novels that I will be focusing on share little in common beyond their ace protagonists and the way their authors prioritize non-romantic relationships. *Elatsoe* (2020) is a mystery/fantasy full of ghosts, legends, and a focus on blood bonds as well as friendships. *Loveless* (2021) is a realistic novel about finding your place in a post-high school world and creating a found family. *Before I Let Go* (2018) is a mystery steeped in magical realism about the ways a small town can foster a sense of community, as well as a culture of exclusion. *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* (2018) is a historical fantasy that shows that you can place the highest value on your work while still placing value on the connections you have with your friends and family. And finally, *This Song Is (Not) For You* (2016) is a contemporary novel that explores polyamory and the ways non-monogamous relationships can lead characters to question what they have been taught about what kind of relationships they need to prioritize as they move towards adulthood.

These books represent different genres, different tones, different styles, and even different focuses and philosophies when it comes to building bonds beyond romantic relationships. But what all these novels have in common is a focus on non-romantic relationships that still hit all the dramatic beats romantic plot lines can provide—platonic love can inspire self-sacrifice and self-doubt, it can create families and communities, its loss can

be devastating, and the threat of its loss can be terrifying. By prioritizing non-romantic relationships in their own narratives, young adult authors do not need to lose anything, and can gain so many opportunities to approach conflict and character development from new angles.

When students ask me whether they need to include romance in their YA novels, and I say no, they absolutely do not, they are often skeptical. They have absorbed the message - from the young adult books they read in school, from the ads for those books and the adaptations that seem inescapable on social media - that a young adult book is not complete and certainly could not be compelling without romantic tension (and ideally a swoon-worthy kiss). Young adult novels with asexual protagonists that omit romantic plot lines like the ones I will explore in this thesis prove that just is not true.

## A Note On Science Fiction and Fantasy Ace YA

I would like to make a brief digression before beginning the analysis of my core texts to address a personal bias that, upon reflection of my annotated bibliography, I recognized was impacting how I approached my selected texts. This reflection, and subsequent realization, allowed me to see what a specific subset of books offer in terms of insight into ace young adult fiction as a whole.

As a young adult fiction reader, writer, and educator, I have never felt compelled by YA science fiction and fantasy novels. While I can appreciate the intricate world-building often involved in writing a science fiction or fantasy text, that appreciation has rarely transformed into enjoyment. When I first compiled my list of asexual books for this thesis, I felt a sense of dread when I saw significantly more fantasy and science fiction titles than I expected. Of the thirty titles I compiled in my annotated bibliography, half were science fiction or fantasy novels.

While at first, I dismissed this large percentage as reflecting the larger young adult market's hunger for science fiction and fantasy, upon further reflection, I realized that there are many things a science fiction or fantasy novel can give an ace narrative that a realistic novel cannot, chief among them, a world free of bigotry against queer people. Though there are many realist titles on my list in which the characters have incredibly queer positive friends, families, and communities, they still live in our world, where rejection of queer people, on an interpersonal and even legislative level, exists. That threat cannot be entirely removed from how a character feels about their queer identity. Thus, it cannot be entirely removed from their journey of self-discovery and sense of self, even if the author is not interested in telling a story about bigotry against queer people.

A fantasy or science fiction novel, on the other hand, creates a new world free from our history or our current reality, where queer people can be entirely accepted, could even

have been entirely accepted throughout this new world's history. The creation, the existence of this new world means the author has the option of exploring a character's relationship with their asexual identity in a kind of pure state. The ace character's acceptance of their sexuality, or anxiety around it may not be influenced by societal prejudice. Removing the burden of dealing with societal prejudice can mean more time and space to explore different parts of their ace character's identity.

Science fiction and fantasy young adult novels are not without their potential problems. They can sometimes be a place where weak writing can flourish because certain lazy choices may seem easier to excuse within a fantastical world. In *We Awaken* (2016), one of the fantasy novels included in my annotated bibliography, for example, protagonist Victoria's love interest is able to spend every moment with her almost as soon as they meet, because she is an otherworldly creature from a dreamscape without any responsibilities, friends, or family she needs to report back to. While a character in a realist novel could also lack these things, practicalities explaining how they could survive without family, friends, or work would need to be explored. And through that exploration, the character, their hopes, dreams, strengths, and flaws would have to be laid out and examined. In the fantasy world of *We Awaken*, the love interest can simply be there for Victoria because her life outside the dream world begins with her. As a result, she remains a two-dimensional ideal throughout the novel, and that makes their relationship flat and deeply uninteresting.

Weak writing is not inevitable in fantasy and science fiction texts, however, and it would be shortsighted to overlook the new opportunities they offer to explain gender and sexuality to queer characters. For example, in *Beyond the Black Door* (2019), another text found in my annotated bibliography, protagonist Kamai is told by a religious leader that being on the ace spectrum is actually an explicit part of the way sexuality is understood under the system of gods and goddesses she was raised with and believes in. This belief system

includes a continuum of gender identity and sexual identity mapped out on a “soul chart” that expresses that spectrum with illustrations of the waxing and waning moon. Asexuality, or the lack of sexual attraction in this world, has a different word, “new soul.” Through this bit of instruction from the priestess, Kamai learns she is not alone in the way she has been feeling; that there are so many people like her there is a name for her community.

In practice, learning about this term for what Kamai has experienced bears little difference to the protagonist of the realist novel *Loveless* learning about terms connected to asexual identity on her laptop. But learning the language to further understand yourself (and to bring yourself into conversation with a larger community) is inherently more exciting when delivered by a priestess than by Google. Science fiction and fantasy novels have the opportunity to build moments of self-discovery into otherworldly world-building that can help them avoid the after-school special feel that the same moments can, at times, have in realist novels.

Thinking beyond the craft of science fiction and fantasy, these genres can provide more marketing hooks for an author interested in writing an asexual narrative in young adult fiction with the goal of someday seeing their novel on bookstore shelves. Any given young adult novel must be marketed, and though not every young adult novel needs a love story, it has become such a norm in modern YA that it is often what marketing campaigns are pinned on. Thus, for an asexual/aromantic character without a love interest, like Ellie in *Elatsoe*, another core text I will further examine in this thesis, having a fantastical world can make the novel easier to pitch to an audience of teen readers. There will be no crush, no longing, no romantic tension, but there will be an extended vampire fight and the ghost of a woolly mammoth. I believe that as authors approach a new young adult project, they should always be thinking about how they will pitch it to a potential editor and how that editor would pitch it to a potential audience. This is because creating a marketable text could spell the difference

between writing a manuscript and writing a book. Considering marketability does not need to shift focus from craft, but instead can be a way of complicating the core question of ‘Why are you telling this story,’ by adding another important question, which is ‘Who do you want to tell this story to?’ Once you answer the latter, it will seem only natural to ponder what it will take to reach that imagined reader.

Through teaching writing young adult fiction for years, including a writing LGBT YA course, I have noticed that science fiction and fantasy titles are often what my students gravitate towards. I always assumed that affinity for science fiction and fantasy could be explained by the popularity of fantasy and science fiction in young adult literature in general, but perhaps I was missing something obvious. In “The Reading Habits and Preferences of LGBTIQ+ Youth” (published in the *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion*), Rachel Wexelbaum writes,

Since the advent of paperback novels, science fiction and fantasy have been popular genres for LGBTIQ+ youth (Bittner, 2017; Foster, 2017; Smith, 2016). This is because science fiction and fantasy stories have opened up realms of possibilities for alternative modes of reproduction and non-cisgender heteronormative societies. (118)

“Possibilities” is the key word here. Created worlds have more to offer young queer readers than a lack of prejudice against queer people. They can also provide an alternative to how relationships and families are formed. They can present adult lives that are not centered around a single romantic partnership, creating narratives with none of the traditional markers of growing up that are so connected to romantic love and attraction, like homecoming and prom. There is a constant push and pull in the queer community between demands for acceptance and assimilation and demands for respect and a dismantling of existing systems. Ace narratives, perhaps more than even other queer narratives with allosexual queer people,

naturally lean towards dismantling existing systems (or looking for alternatives) as current systems almost always prioritize romantic relationships and two-person monogamous couples as a marker of stable adulthood. Because science fiction and fantasy titles open up additional ways to challenge existing systems, because they are creating these systems within new worlds, it makes sense that they would offer fertile ground for ace stories.

Throughout my two careers as an educator and writer, I have found that I will often teach a concept, a lesson to my students for years before I fully absorb it myself. When a student in one of my writing young adult classes explains they did not enjoy or connect with one of the assigned novels, I will prod them to be more specific with their criticism, prompting analysis that will almost always achieve two things—the student using examples from the text to articulate what kind of story they are *not* interested in telling, and the student finding an element of craft within the novel they actually are interested in emulating. It was important to me to include this digression within this thesis because I have, through writing this thesis, finally absorbed this lesson. I may be reluctant to pick up a young adult fantasy title for pure leisure reading, but I need to engage with them as a writer and researcher to make sure I do not miss out on learning an important lesson that could help me hone my own skills as a writer crafting asexual characters.

## Core Thesis

Because the novels I am focusing on in this thesis feature protagonists who are asexual and aromantic (with one notable exception, which I will explain further in a subsequent section), it is important to make a clear distinction between the two identities, which *can* overlap, but do not *always* overlap. The Asexual Visibility & Education Network defines an asexual individual as a person who “does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way.” (“Overview”).

To be aromantic means an individual has a lack of romantic attraction, rather than a lack of sexual attraction. It can be helpful to think of these categories in terms of a venn diagram; there may be individuals who do not experience sexual attraction (asexual individuals) in one circle, and those who do not experience romantic attraction (aromantic individuals) in another, but only those who overlap are aro/ace. As Leigh-Michil George and Lillian Lu explain in their study of queer readings of Austen:

Those who identify as ace or as ace spec (ace spectrum) may also identify as being on the aromantic (or aro) spectrum; that is, according to the split attraction model (SAM), one’s romantic attraction or lack of it may or may not align with one’s sexual orientation. For instance, one person may be asexual and aromantic, another asexual and homoromantic. (152)

Because there is still a pervasive conflation of sexuality and romantic attraction, such clarification of their differences is all the more important.

As Jessica J. Hille notes in “Beyond Sex: A Review of Recent Literature on Asexuality”:

One attempt to quantify the need for greater awareness among mental health professionals conducted a content analysis of sex therapy journals and found

that 41.5% failed to note the heterogeneity of the asexual community, 12.2% conflated aromanticism and asexuality. (3)

Some of this confusion may arise from the great number of concurrent and overlapping identities within the asexuality spectrum. Lisa Gilman included a comprehensive, but notably not exhaustive list of these identities in her paper “Cake is Better than Sex: Pride and Prejudice in the Folklore of and about Asexuality.” It is worth noting that she pulled the list from a Tumblr blog titled “Asexual-Society: You’re Valid,” and that even that collection of labels from the original post was pared down by Gilman to include “the identities that were most common in [her] fieldwork”:

Apothisexual/aposexual (“asexual who is sex repulsed”); aromantic/ arosexual (asexual who does not “feel romantic attraction to any gen-“(s)der); gray-sexual (“feeling romantic/sexual attraction weakly, rarely, only under certain conditions, or all of those”); demisexual or demiromantic asexual (“feeling romantic/sexual attraction only after an emotional bond is formed”); fraysexual (“feeling romantic/sexual attraction when less familiar with a person, but it fades as they get to know them better” [sometimes described as the opposite of demi]); cupiosexual (“not feeling romantic/sexual attraction but still desiring a relationship of that nature”); and allosexual ([allo] experiencing sexual attraction, in other words, allosexuals are not asexual). (200-201)

This list is important because it illustrates the complexity of asexuality, while also highlighting the fact that those on the spectrum of asexuality are, both through choice and necessity, often interrogating their sexual and romantic desires on a deep level. They are othered, both by straight and queer allosexuals (those who experience sexual attraction), and often told they do not fit in a world that prioritizes romantic relationships. Thus, it makes sense

that through that deep reflection they would find so many ways to describe the intricacies of their sexual and romantic desires, or lack thereof.

This wide variety of categories that make up the spectrum of asexuality reflects what I aim to illustrate throughout my thesis—that asexual/aromantic young adult protagonists, free from the constraints of a romantic plot line and told they do not fit into a society that prioritizes romantic relationships, will explore options for structuring their lives beyond the bounds of societal conventions, and this exploration creates exciting possibilities for a narrative and character development within that narrative. It also, importantly, allows the young adult author to show young readers there are endless possibilities to structure your life outside of the bounds of the allosexual-normative world.

Because this is the aim of my thesis, it is also important to clarify the difference between allonormativity and amatonormativity. Allonormativity is “the assumption that all human beings experience sexual attraction to other people” (Kennon 2) while amatonormativity is a term Megan Cole credits to Elizabeth Brake defined as “the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types.” (Cole 270) These assumptions are deeply baked into Western culture, including Western pop culture and literature. And though George and Lu allege that it is specifically “allosexual romance” that “has certain conventions: the meet cute with instantaneous attraction, obstacles to union, an attempt at a relationship, a breakup, and a reconciliation and marriage” (George and Lu 157) these conventions are also very present in young adult novels with an asexual protagonist or secondary character (with the caveat that the reconciliation does not normally end in marriage, but a solid romantic relationship looking towards the future).

What most often sets the storylines of asexual young adult protagonists apart from their allosexual counterparts is the “obstacle to the union” is most often their asexuality, or more specifically, the anxiety that a potential allosexual romantic partner will not be interested in someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Over half of the ace novels included in my annotated bibliography include the asexual character pursuing or maintaining a romantic relationship. Though they are not the focus of my thesis, I do not want to diminish the importance of young adult novels with ace protagonists that feature their ace protagonist finding romantic love. They can play an important role in helping to combat prevalent misunderstandings about asexual individuals (namely, that they are never interested in finding and maintaining romantic relationships) and can help ace young people who are interested in finding romantic love feel seen and understood.

Young adult novels are commonly viewed as tools which allow young readers to see possibilities, for themselves and for their futures. As Angel Daniel Matos writes in *The ALAN Review*:

Young adult literature offers narratives in which teenagers are able to learn from, if not overcome, the harsh realities of everyday life. Even more so, it provides readers with the potential to explore different ways of existing in the world that depart from normative thinking and values. (85)

Ace/aro young adult novels showcase futures beyond the boundaries of amatonormativity. It is important, when considering ace/aro young adult literature, to understand asexuality and aromanticism as queer identities, for two reasons.

First, the asexual spectrum has long been misunderstood, under researched, and maligned, even within the queer community. This is evident in the identity’s omission from “the most recent version of the LGBQQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual) Competencies (Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender

Issues in Counseling [ALGBTIC])” in which “the authors noted that they did not address all identities.” (Woodruff 103) Elisa M. Woodruff in her paper “The Multidimensional Nature of Asexual Identities: An Exploration of Wellness, Social Support, and Experiences of Microaggressions” goes on to explain:

While it may be unrealistic to expect such a document to address every identity within this larger group, it is important for counselors to be aware that asexuality is not a single identity, but a spectrum of identities that reflect a heterogeneous group of individuals, as Cowan and LeBlanc (2018) advised in their research. The rich data set collected in this study underlines the reality that asexual identities crosscut all other demographic identifiers, and while this may normalize asexuality in some ways for some, it may also contribute to the practice of asexual people being considered as other even in queer spaces. (103).

Second, when talking about “queering” literature, one does not simply mean the piece of literature has queer characters or even a queer author.

As Susan S. Lanser writes in “Queering Narrative Voice,” queering can be understood to mean “to transgress normative sexualities, to dismantle sexual fixities, and to dismantle all fixities.” (924). Ace/aro individuals are queer, and through their stories authors can challenge societal norms and expectations of what an engaging young adult narrative should look like and, at the same time, what a young life should look like. When you “dismantle fixities” you are left not just with an absence of that fixity, that concept which seemed inevitable, you are left with a collection of parts, narrative devices that can be used to construct something new. That is what makes looking at asexual young adult fiction so exciting as an author. As you dismantle norms, you discover possibilities you had not previously considered.

The further aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that young adult novels with aro/ace protagonists should not be defined by a lack of something, but by an abundance of possibilities. Thinking in terms of an absence is something that plagues conventional thought on asexuality, as explained in “Understanding How Asexual Individuals Navigate Identity Disclosure and Concealment.” Here, Devlin et al. points out, “Specifically, asexuality often does not manifest in observable behaviors such as sexual or romantic involvement with a person of a particular gender...” (1241-1242)

Though asexuality, is, by definition, a lack of sexual attraction, the sexuality itself is an identity rather than an absence of identity. For asexual individuals, it is a label that can help them understand themselves and help them to be understood by those around them. In the same way, young adult literature with an aro/ace protagonist and no romantic plot line should not be seen as a category with a lack of something, but rather a category full of space, full of possibility. The lack of a romantic plot line in YA novels with ace/aro protagonists should not be seen as a problem to be solved, but rather an opportunity to explore and learn from.

In reading Devlin’s paper, though qualitative and not quantitative in its methodology, I nonetheless was surprised by how small the sample size for their study was; to research and draw conclusions about the coming out process of asexual individuals, their team spoke to only fourteen participants. However, what the findings ultimately demonstrate is that to understand even one person’s journey through asexuality is to understand asexuality better. As I analyze the five ace young adult books I have chosen to focus on, I do not wish to make any pronouncements about what aro/ace characters, or novels helmed by those aro/ace characters *must* be. Instead, as this is a creative writing dissertation, I endeavor to illustrate how these novels show writers what a young adult novel *can* be, when an author is freed from the constraint of a romantic plot line and embraces the many possibilities illustrated by aro/ace storylines.

I begin my discussion of this thesis's five primary texts with Alice Oseman's *Loveless*. *Loveless* is the logical novel to begin my analysis for a number of reasons. One of the reasons it makes sense to begin with this novel is the fact that it has been such a commercial success, a *New York Times* best seller, written by a genuine celebrity of young adult queer fiction. Oseman's incredibly popular graphic novel series, *Heartstopper*, has even been made into a successful Netflix series. Though the focus of this thesis is about the craft of writing, it is hard to ignore the business of writing for young adults when discussing potential impacts of these texts on young readers—they can only have that impact if they end up in the hands of young readers. Alice Oseman's novels, including *Loveless*, will be familiar fare for many, many young adult fans.

When considering the text of *Loveless*, one can see it offers an explicit challenge to amatonormativity by introducing multiple characters who are prioritizing platonic bonds over romantic bonds. It also underlines the burden of amatonormativity. As the novel's protagonist, Georgia, comes to terms with her asexuality, she is constantly plagued with the worry that she will never have a happy, fulfilled life if she is unable to have a romantic partner. That is the message she has received over and over again through the media she has consumed and from the adults in her life.

At the end of a chapter that shares the novel's title, Georgia describes her plan for university, a moment that will be familiar to anyone who has read or watched a coming-of-age story—the teen lays out how this new life chapter, new school, new school year, will be different, because *they* will be different. And you could argue that many of Georgia's concerns, and the language used around those concerns, could be used by any queer character convinced they must fit into a heteronormative society. We see this when Georgia thinks, "I was just a late bloomer" or that she is going to make herself into someone who is comfortable in romantic relationships so she would become "someone who would fit in with my family,

with people my age.” However, the final group she is so desperate to fit into within this train of thought is “the world,” thereby underlining the universality of the importance ascribed to romantic relationships.

At this moment in the novel, Georgia truly believes she would have no place in the world without a romantic partner. She goes on to think, “I wanted forever love. I didn’t want to be loveless.” (Oseman 29). Georgia declares she wants “forever love,” a phrase she associates with romantic relationships, even though she has just had an encounter that has clarified for her that she is sex-repulsed, a term defined as a “micro-label used to signal a person’s dislike or repulsion to sexual behaviors, regardless of their sexual or romantic identity” (Valley et al. 1834) and is left cold by the idea of a romantic relationship. While you could argue this desire, or stated desire, is fueled by the pressures of allonormativity, feeling she is broken because she does not experience sexual attraction, I would argue that the pressures of amatonormativity are far stronger and more relevant. This is because she is thinking about her future ability to love and be loved (which she associates with having a romantic partner) rather than focusing on her ability to have or enjoy sex.

Even in the few chapters before this moment, the reader is introduced to Georgia’s life-long best friend, someone she loves and loves her. Although she has this platonic love in her life, she is convinced that without a romantic relationship, without checking off the list of getting “a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend, even. A partner. I’d have my first kiss. And I’d have sex.” (Oseman 29) Georgia believes she will not have any love in her life at all. This illustrates how deeply she has bought into the idea that no love can matter, can complete you as a person, if you do not have the love of a romantic partner. With the chokehold amatonormativity has on the protagonist, it makes her ultimate rejection of amatonormativity later on in the narrative even more compelling.

At times, challenging the societal hierarchy placing romantic love above all other forms of love can look like recreating a moment from any allosexual romance young adult novel. This can be seen through Georgia's friend Rooney's actions in a chapter literally titled "Grand Gesture," in which Rooney brings Georgia flowers and declares her love for her. What makes the moment unique, and representative of the possibilities aro/ace stories open up for the writer and lay out for the reader, is the fact that the declaration is of *platonic* love, as Rooney explains:

"Obviously I'm not romantically in love with you. But I realized that whatever these feelings are for you, I..." She grinned wildly. "I feel like I am in love. Me and you—this is a fucking love story! I feel like I've found something most people don't get. I feel at home around you in a way I have never felt in my fucking life. And maybe most people would look at us and think we're just friends or whatever, but I know that it's just...so much MORE than that."  
(375)

It is notable that Rooney is using phrasing normally associated with romantic love such as "in love" and "love story," even while explaining how she wants to prioritize this platonic relationship with Georgia, which could be read as reflecting the fact that she is allosexual and heteroromantic, or reflecting the language of amatonormativity is the one she has grown up with, or both. I would argue that using this language shows that even as she is imagining a different kind of future for herself, she is still unlearning the constraints she previously thought were impossible to break. The language being at odds with the content shows a kind of in-between stage of growth between letting amatonormativity guide her thoughts and actions, and breaking free of it.

In a review of *Loveless* for *The Booklist*, Christian Lash criticizes *Loveless*, writing “this novel falls a bit flat in adequately addressing just how varied the asexual and aromantic spectrums are,” before seeming to backtrack a bit by adding:

All in all, *Loveless* is a well-written piece that demonstrates one aroace experience, and a worthy addition that can serve as a step toward representation of this diverse community. (62)

Though *Loveless* does feature a secondary character who is also on the asexual spectrum, Georgia’s friend and mentor, who is not aromantic, the narrative does focus on self-discovery almost exclusively tied to the protagonist’s asexual identity, which I believe flattens the ace experience to one completely consumed by their sexual identity.

*Loveless* is an imperfect novel. The education Georgia receives about asexuality, from online research she conducts herself to information she is given by her peers, sometimes feels like it was taken from an educational pamphlet. But the narrative arc, as well as her character arc, leads to an exciting conclusion that is in clear opposition to amatonormativity.

Throughout the course of the novel, though she does not find a romantic partner, she finds a mentor, strengthens existing platonic friendships, and, most notably, cultivates a friendship with Rooney who presents concrete ways she will prioritize the bond she has with Georgia into adulthood. This bond means they will not allow society to push their platonic friendship into a lower rung even if Rooney obtains a romantic partnership. Georgia begins the story certain she knows the one and only way she can build an adult life full of love, and discovers there are ways to build that life she did not even know existed. This journey resonates with me, because it mirrors the way that I discovered new narrative possibilities through which a young adult novelist can question amatonormativity and create a narrative without a romantic plot line.

*Loveless* focuses on its protagonist's journey from someone who is confused and scared by her lack of sexual or romantic attraction to someone who has the language to describe their aro/ace identity, and has an idea of how they can lead a full, happy life without a romantic partner. The next novel I would like to consider, *Elatsoe* by Darcie Little Badger, begins with its protagonist comfortable in her aro/ace identity and what it means for her future. What this means is the novel can immediately explore the protagonist's strong ties with family and friends, and how she prioritizes those platonic and familial bonds rather than a romantic relationship. What I will endeavor to show in my reading of *Elatsoe* is that, first, the protagonist's identity as a Native young woman (I will use Native/Indigenous throughout my analysis interchangeably) predisposes her to question not just the norms of the white, settler colonialist society that surrounds her, but also to reject amatonormativity.

Second, I want to highlight the fact that, according to scholars studying Native literature, Native YA will often tell stories that prioritize a protagonist's growth alongside their community, rather than focusing on individual growth through their character arc. *Elatsoe* is thus a powerful example of an aro/ace book that showcases the possibilities that open up for a character and a narrative when amatonormativity is rejected and the character instead considers how they can live a life full of love and purpose when they do not seek out or prioritize a romantic relationship.

*Elatsoe* was published in 2020 and received starred reviews from nearly every major trade publication, including *Kirkus Review*, *Publisher's Weekly* and *Horn Book*. The same year it was published, the novel was also named one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Best Fantasy Books of all time. This highlights just how quickly it became an essential part of the young adult fantasy canon. In their description of the novel, *Time Magazine* chose to highlight the book's focus on the protagonist's connection with her family, writing, "While many fantasy stories center on a character's solo quest, Ellie's is about others'. She's buoyed by the support

of her community, whose love for her is a palpable undercurrent throughout the novel.”

(“2020 ELATSOE”)

The blurb is extremely short and has to both convey the plot and why the novel is worthy of inclusion on the list. Though it is concise I would like to make two points about the language the blurb used. First, the word “love” is used, although this is a young adult fantasy where the protagonist does not experience or seek romantic love. In a genre dominated by epic romantic love and love triangles (like the ones famously dominating popular young adult fantasy novels like *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*), *Elatsoe*’s short write up still highlighted the love present throughout the novel, not from a potential partner but from “her community.” This proves just how strong, how present that love is on the page, and how important it is to the reader’s understanding of the story and of the protagonist. Second, this description asserts that the novel is breaking a convention of the fantasy narrative, not following the protagonist’s solo quest but their journey that is “about others.”

At first glance, the implication that the protagonist’s journey in other fantasy novels is not often “about others” might seem strange. After all, Harry Potter is hunting Voldemort to rid the world of a malevolent force, to make the world safer for his entire community, rather than for his individual satisfaction. But what this statement about *Elatsoe* illuminates, is the fact that when amatonormativity is abandoned, it often leads, naturally, to prioritizing not just different kinds of relationships, but prioritizing community as a whole.

Throughout the novel Ellie, as she is informally called, develops her own supernatural powers and comes to a greater understanding of how and why she wants to use them in the future. She is solving the mystery of her cousin’s death “for others,” for her extended family to get a sense of justice and peace, but that does not mean this is not a story of personal growth and self-discovery like so many other young adult narratives. The novel’s structure seems different from other young adult fantasy novels because the story is about supporting

others rather than a “solo quest”. Another way of putting this is that the collectivism fostered by rejecting amatonormativity is still unusual in young adult novels.

This idea is backed up by an assertion Ruth Gehrman makes in her paper "Dreamscapes as Sites of Resistance: The Unconscious State, Decision-Making and Community- Formation in Indigenous Speculative Fiction for Young Adults." Citing Mandy Suhr-Sytsma, Gehrman explains:

*In Self-Determined Stories: The Indigenous Reinvention of Young Adult Literature* (2019), Mandy Suhr-Sytsma shows how said community formation interrelates with individual agency. She argues that Indigenous YA, in contrast to non-Indigenous YA, correlates individual with communal growth. Connecting with one’s community, then, benefits a sense of agency rather than taking away from it. (2)

The idea that Gehrman is referencing here, that non-indigenous YA would see a breaking from, or at least a distancing from their community as a character arc bending towards agency, can be tied to the formation of romantic relationships within young adult novels. Though in most modern young adult novels teenage characters are not getting married to their romantic partners, they are asserting themselves as young adults by forming distinct, closed connections which silo them off, at least in some ways, from their family and friends. The romantic partnership, often seen in young adult novels as a milestone of burgeoning adulthood, is an atomization (with the exception of polyamorous romantic relationships, which I will discuss further when analyzing *This Song is (Not) For You*).

It is important to note while I am approaching my analysis of *Elatsoe* as a part of my study of ace/aro YA, that I am analyzing this Indigenous novel as a white academic, and even research cannot fill all the gaps in my understanding of the lived experience of Native writers. As Eric G. Anderson et al. writes in “Indigenous Young Adult Novels: An Introduction”:

Indigenous YA helps map and sustain Indigenous-centered understandings of young people's essential role in their/our communities' vitality as well as the particular challenges that accompany such a role. In other words, Indigenous YA literature is written, first and foremost, for Indigenous readers. (267)

There is a lot to learn from *Elatsoe* in how authors can create protagonists who prioritize relationships beyond romantic relationships, but the lessons should be approached with respect. It is also important when considering a piece of Native literature not to make any broad generalizations about Native authors that could be overly simplistic or flatten that diverse community of authors and texts, in the same way I do not want to flatten the diverse experiences of the ace community.

Indigenous young adult literature, like ace/aro YA, has received increasing recognition in the past decade, but still faces great challenges from a publishing industry that remains largely white. In 2022 “the ALA for the first time presented a Newbery Medal Honor Award for ‘distinguished contribution to American literature for children’ to an Indigenous writer” (265)—to *Elatsoe* author Darcie Little Badger for her second novel, *A Snake Falls to Earth*. Indigenous young adult authors have received other notable awards in the last decade, including *The Firekeeper's Daughter* by Angeline Boulley winning the Printz Award in 2022 and *Apple (Skin to the Core)* by Eric Gansworth making the long list for the National Book Awards for Young People's Literature in 2020.

Turning back to *Elatsoe*, it is notable that its protagonist, Ellie, spends no time meditating on her asexual identity, although it is explicitly stated within the text. In *Loveless*, the words “asexual” or “asexuality” appear over forty times. In *Elatsoe*, the word “asexual” is used only once, when Ellie's best friend's sister asks her to be a bridesmaid and brings up Ellie's plus one, saying, “You can bring a guest to the wedding, but nobody too weird. I get that you're asexual so, like, it can be a friend or a zucchini or...” (Little Badger 201). Though

this moment could have inspired a crisis for Ellie, faced with not just the prospect of bringing a plus-one, a designation also traditionally called “a date,” she does not spare the interaction a moment’s thought, making jokes about her bridesmaid duties with her friend immediately after this exchange. It is her friend’s sister, someone who is both white and asexual, who seems, though completely supportive, a little at a loss for who Ellie would deem special enough to bring as her plus-one if not a date. This is showcased by the fact she follows up the reasonable (and obvious) suggestion that Ellie bring a friend, with a suggestion, even jokingly offered, that Ellie bring a vegetable. Ellie is not uncomfortable, and Ellie is not at a loss, because she already knows how she is going to build a life prioritizing bonds beyond romantic partnership. In fact, she realizes her life is already full of valuable relationships.

It is worth considering the fact that Ellie’s asexuality is mentioned directly so infrequently, and what that says about how her intersecting identities act as lenses through which she sees the world. While asexuality is, as I have mentioned before, an identity that is by definition a lack of sexual attraction, the identity in and of itself should not be thought of as a lack. However, for an ace/aro character who does not feel like she has to explain her lack of interest in a sexual or romantic relationship, it makes sense that other identities would take precedence, to the point that her asexuality, for her, would become an afterthought. One of the identities that Ellie prioritizes, as highlighted by Gehrmann, is her sense of herself as a member of her family line:

Her dreams root Ellie in family tradition, establishing her identity as part of a living community and a lineage of gifted women. The dream, then, allows for connections along two lines: It enables her to speak with Trevor, and it connects her to the eight generations of women before her who shared her ability. (9)

It is notable that Gehrman highlights two identities Ellie has, part of a “living community” and part of a “linage” that point to her deep investment in loving bonds outside a romantic relationship. It is important to note here that though “linage” could suggest a line dependent on romantic, or at least sexual heterosexual relationships that Ellie will then break, she does not limit her ideas of family, those whom she can love, connect with, and even pass on her supernatural gift to, to those in her immediate nuclear family, or someone in a nuclear family she could someday form. This is made clear when she muses about her cousin’s son, “If Gregory was already sensitive to paranormal entities, he’d make a good student when he came of age. Assuming Ellie still wanted to pass Six-Great’s secret down his line.” (Little Badger 230).

What is notable about this passage, beyond Ellie’s ability to imagine passing down a family gift, a legacy and history without ever needing to create a nuclear family of her own, is that she is so casually questioning whether she wants to pass on her sixth great-grandmother’s secret at all. That she is considering breaking, at least in some way, with her linage shows she is willing to question things that seem like absolutes. This is ultimately what ace/aro characters must do when they chose to prioritize non-romantic relationships in their lives—reject what society has taught them, explicitly or not, basically from birth. Ellie, as a Native character, is especially ready to reject what she has been told are absolutes, because she has been told, by the settler colonialist society that surrounds her, so many false “absolutes” about Native people.

It is worth noting that although Little Badger frequently explores the racism—interpersonal, systemic, and historical—that Ellie faces, her queer identity as an ace person is wholly accepted by her friends and family. This is at odds with the reality for many queer and Indigenous youth, as Autumn Asher BlackDeer points out in her paper “Wrapping a Rainbow

Around the Medicine Wheel: A Scoping Review of Social and Emotional Wellbeing for Queer, Trans, and Two Spirit Native Youth”:

Today, QT2S Native folx often face a double bind, referred to as compound colonialism, and are left to choose between experiencing racism in queer spaces or homophobia/transphobia in Native spaces (Asher BlackDeer, 2024).

Queer, trans, and Two Spirit Indigenous folx are often forced to choose between honoring their ethnic identity or their gender/sexual identity. (2)

It is impossible to ignore the continued threat of prejudice towards queer people that persists in the twenty-first century, including, specifically, acephobia.

Ellen Carter references a 2012 study by Gazzola and Morrison to make this point:

asexuals suffer exclusion from intimate relationships, friendship circles and peer groups, as well as contemporary society in general (27). MacInnis and Hodson surveyed heterosexual attitudes to sexual minorities, showing that asexuals were “evaluated more negatively, viewed as less human, and less valued as contact partners, relative to heterosexuals and [homosexuals and bisexuals]” (725) and were regarded as ‘dehumanised’, ‘machine-like’, and ‘animalistic’. (3-4)

Still, it is up to authors to explore queer identities as they wish, and there should not be any pressure or expectation to explore anti-queer bigotry if that is not ultimately what they are interested in exploring. Like the pressure to include a romantic plot line in their young adult novel because that is what they have seen before, authors telling queer stories might feel pressured to explore anti-queer bigotry because that is what has been explored in blockbuster young adult novels often turned into films (that thus loom large in the pop culture canon) like *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012).

But just as authors can challenge norms and omit a romantic plot line, they may also decide not to include anti-queer bigotry while still creating compelling, dynamic narratives.

While family, lineage, and her connection to a larger Native community are crucial to Ellie's identity and what she continuously prioritizes, it is important to note she is not the only character in *Elatsoe* who looks for alternative ways to find love and connection in a world structured around amatonormativity. Ellie's cousin's widow Lenore decides to move on with her life in a way that eschews prioritization of the nuclear family. Ellie learns of Lenore's future plans towards the end of the novel—"She had decided to move in with her good friends, a married couple. The women lived alongside the Mojave Desert and had a large guest house." (Little Badger 346) While this might seem like a choice not outside the bounds of amatonormative society, friends stepping in to help a nuclear family experiencing a loss, it is notable this move is not described or dismissed as a stop-gap; there is no inclusion of "until she got on her feet" or "until she found a space of her own." Cohabiting with, and building a life with platonic friends is showcased as a viable, valuable option for an allosexual character.

These citations from *Elatsoe* showcase the fact that it is not only ace/aro characters who can benefit from rejecting amatonormativity and looking for new and unique ways to build meaningful lives. This is reminiscent of *Loveless*' allosexual character Rooney promising Georgia to prioritize their friendship and include her in all life plans. If a major purpose of young adult literature, especially ace YA, is to broaden young readers' ideas of what their lives can look like, it is important that it is clear that those ideas can be adopted by allosexual readers, in addition to asexual readers. It is also important for authors to note that allosexual characters, not just ace characters, can be prompted to question and challenge amatonormativity, opening up new possibilities for all characters, no matter their sexual or romantic orientation.

This naturally brings me to my examination of *This Song Is (Not) For You* by Laura Nowlin, a book with two allosexual protagonists and one ace protagonist (all POV characters), which uses the rejection of amatonormativity as a springboard for its ace character to challenge other societal norms to find the life that best fits him, and inspires the allosexual characters to do the same. This book, perhaps more clearly than any of the others I have examined, spells out the rejection of amatonormativity by making its characters acutely aware of what they are being asked to prioritize, and giving them the language to explain why shaping their lives around those priorities will not work for them as they begin to build their adult lives.

To understand the points I want to make about *This Song Is (Not) For You*, it is important to return to the definition of amatonormativity as “the assumptions that a **central, exclusive**, amorous relationship is normal for humans... that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types.” (Cole 270) *This Song Is (Not) For You* may seem like an exception to the other novels I am focusing on within this thesis, because the main character, Tom, is not aromantic and he ends up with a romantic partner. What makes the novel, and Tom, worthy of inclusion in my analysis of how ace/aro characters in young adult fiction can challenge amatonormativity is the fact that Tom becomes part of a polyamorous relationship. Therefore, although he does find a romantic partner, it is not an exclusive, closed relationship society has taught him to prioritize. The author also highlights the fact, in many instances throughout the book, that Tom does not value his relationship with his romantic partner, Ramona, more than he values his platonic relationship with her other romantic partner, Sam. Challenging amatonormativity in this way still challenges what a young adult novel needs to include in a way that highlights a variety of exciting narrative possibilities for young adult authors.

Polyamory, like asexuality, can also be thought of as an umbrella term for a wide spectrum of relationships and identities, and can mean very different things to different people. Christian Klein, in his paper “Polyamory: Intimate Practice, Identity or Sexual Orientation?” acknowledges the term can mean not just multiple things, but multiple categories of things to different people, explaining:

Polyamory has been interpreted as a relationship practice (Lano and Parry Lano, 1995), philosophy (Klesse, 2007), theory (Emens, 2004), lovestyle, relationship orientation (Anapol, 2010) or identity (M Barker, 2005). There have also been suggestions that polyamory could be understood as a sexual orientation. (81-82).

In my analysis of *This Song Is (Not) For You*, I will be using the term polyamorous to describe a relationship with more than two romantic partners. In the context of my thesis, the fact that an ace character enters into a polyamorous relationship is important because it both showcases an example of an ace character challenging amatonormativity and going on to challenge other societal norms, while also showcasing how challenging societal norms can open up more possibilities for the author. Put another way, instead of feeling forced into the love triangle trap that is so pervasive in young adult literature it is often mocked, the author can try out new relationship dynamics that better suit their characters and their story.

*This Song Is (Not) For You* actually begins with a classic young adult novel love triangle in the tradition of *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games*. The reader is introduced to Sam and Ramona, best friends and bandmates who like-like each other, but are sure the other could never reciprocate their romantic feelings. When they meet Tom, he is quickly pulled into their band and their friendship. Eventually Ramona develops a crush on Tom and they start dating, leaving Sam jealous and hurt. This dynamic filled with jealousy and pain shifts when Tom suggests polyamory. It is important to note that Tom pitching the idea of a

polyamorous relationship is not simply a solution to a logistical problem—Tom does not want any kind of sexual relationship with Ramona, while that is something she is looking for in a romantic relationship. Sam *does* want a sexual relationship with Ramona, and polyamory allows her to have two partners so everyone’s needs are met. It is introduced as a way of honoring all the strong and meaningful bonds they have with each other, including platonic. After showing Sam and Ramona a piece of art he has created that features three intertwining circles meant to represent each of them, Tom reflects:

We’re all our own person. We’re all a part of each other. We are all of us together... “This isn’t just a high school thing,” I tell them. “I’d been waiting my whole life to meet you guys. You’re a part of me now, and no matter where any of us goes, I know I’m gonna know you forever.” (Nowlin 184-185)

Tom does not become the romantic partner of Sam, who is straight, but when he speaks of the bond he has with them in the same terms, with the same seriousness and depth of feeling, he is showcasing the fact that though he is forming a romantic attachment, he is not putting it above his platonic attachment.

As Lyttle points out in her paper “Challenging the Love Triangle in Twenty-First-Century Fantastic Young Adult Literature”:

...it is significant that polyamory can also confront dominant western ideas of friendship’s subordinate position to love. As Klesse explains, “within polyamory, friendships are taken seriously and can demand as much affection, attention and consideration as sexual relationships” (*The Spectre of Promiscuity* 104). In addition to eliminating the requirement to choose between two suitors, polyamory can therefore afford friendship the same status as romance in these novels, honouring and reflecting the fact that

“friendships become more important and complex during adolescence” (Jones et al. 65) and therefore are equally worthy of page space. (7-8)

The polyamorous relationship central to *This Song is (Not) For You* challenges amatonormativity by giving friendships equal weight and equal attention within the narrative.

It is notable that Lyttle, quoting Jones, calls teenage friendships increasingly “important and complex.” The importance of friendship could be seen as more of a philosophical or moral designation; authors should elevate friendship to the level of romantic relationships because friendships deserve to be valued. But I believe it is the potential complexity of adolescent friendships that is most relevant when considering the possibilities that challenging amatonormativity open up for the author. Friendships are not simply strong or weak, good or bad. They can be loving yet breed codependency, toxic yet a catalyst for the protagonist’s growth. Friendships in young adult literature should be treated with as much importance as romantic relationships because they have just as much to offer in terms of the dimensions they can add to a narrative and character arc.

Polyamory is unusual, but not unheard of in the canon of young adult literature. For example, the recent fantasy young adult title *Iron Widow* by Xiran Jay Zhao (2021) features a polyamorous relationship at its center. The lack of widespread use of polyamory in young adult novels, though it could be seen as a natural narrative tool in a landscape so filled with love triangles, can be assumed to be connected to the negativity polyamory often receives in the real world. This negativity is explained in “A Grounded Theory of Unlearning Monogamy: Polyamory and the Deconstruction of Dominant Relational Scripts.” It should be noted here that CNM stands for consensual non-monogamy, another way those in polyamorous relationships can describe their relationships:

People in CNM relationships are perceived as more promiscuous, immoral,

perverted, and untrustworthy (Balzarini et al., 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2021). Negative attitudes toward non-monogamy have been studied not only among laypersons, but also among helping professionals; for instance, healthcare workers and psychotherapists have been found to harbor prejudicial attitudes toward those who are polyamorous. Vaughan et al. (2019) found that healthcare professionals were largely ignorant of non-monogamous relationships, often assuming that individuals were in monogamous relationships instead of explicitly enquiring about relationship structure, and often giving unwarranted advice once clients' non-monogamous status was disclosed. (Gupta 1904)

Polyamory and asexuality are both often misunderstood, and those who identify with and build their relationships through the lens of polyamory and asexuality are often looked at with pity or scorn. But beyond both ace individuals and those in polyamorous relationships facing criticism for the way they live their lives, there is something else they share that is particularly relevant to my core argument—they both challenge a societal script around how to build and prioritize relationships.

Asexuality challenges amatonormativity while polyamory challenges both amatonormativity and mononormativity.

Mononormativity (also labeled monogamism, monocentrism, and couple-centrism) refers to the value system that upholds the ideological belief that monogamy is the natural, common, and morally superior way to practice relationships (Clardy, 2023; Pieper & Bauer, 2005; Schippers, 2016). Being socialized in such a mononormative society is likely to result in the internalization of bias towards monogamy and stigma towards non-monogamy. Thus, the practice of non-monogamy involves confronting the

dominant cultural script of monogamy, and potentially confronting internalized CNM. (1906)

Here, Gupta spells out the fact that challenging a societal norm like the prioritizing of romantic, monogamous relationships often involves not just advocating for yourself and your priorities but confronting your own internalized bias. To break from a societal norm, you first must name it, and suss out why you do not feel it is right for you.

*This Song Is (Not) For You*'s two allosexual protagonists, Ramona and Sam, are outsiders and outcasts, who are portrayed as confused by their classmates' conformity. In an early scene at a homecoming dance, Ramona reflects on her fear she too could be sucked into the status quo, telling Sam, "Sometimes the whole world seems like this big machine churning people out, making everyone into the sort of person they're expected to be. It scares me." Sam replies, "I think that as long as you can still see the machine, then you stand a chance of out running it." (Nowlin 70)

In their minds, at this point in the novel, "the machine" creates conformists, specifically those who conform to ideas around art, self-expression and work—from their perspective all the kids at their school look the same, dress the same, and will go on to pursue jobs they believe to be safe, rather than fulfilling. Sam and Ramona have not yet seen another machine—the machine that churns out monogamous heterosexual couples who prioritize their romantic relationship above all else. They still believe that the only romantic relationship they could have is monogamous, because they have not seen another option, cannot conceive of another option. Still, they are primed as outsiders to questions the systems around them.

It is important to note, even though the protagonists' frustration with the status quo does often extend to those who follow it, they are capable of separating the *systems* that urge people to conform and those *individuals* who conform, and focus their frustration on the

systems. For example, when Tom and Sam see a piece of protest art they hung by a fast-food place has not been taken down, Tom thinks, “I must never forget that most people are actually pretty smart and actually pretty cool.” (93). He can see the good in *people*, and focus his frustration on systems of power (that in this case are represented by the sexist fast-food ad they are critiquing). That is ultimately what they will do when they choose polyamory, choose to prioritize having a variety of important, equally valuable relationships rather than one exalted exclusive romantic partner. They are challenging the system, critiquing the system, rather than condemning the people that conform to them. This is also exemplified in the way Sam pities his father when he realizes how conforming to societal expectations has robbed his father of more opportunities to find and nurture love in his life.

Even as the characters rebel, in their actions and thoughts, they are still very much tied to the idea of monogamy and amatonormativity. As Tom begins to date Ramona, Sam looks on with jealousy, thinking:

It’s just that I want to be with her. I want to be the one, the one that gets to have her love, the one who gets to touch her face. I want to be the one she wants to have with her. The one she calls her one. (121)

The repetition here of the word “one” underlines the fact that Sam believes, so completely, that to have a romantic relationship with Ramona, to be able to “have her love” or “touch her face” he must be the only one bestowed with the mantle of romantic partner.

It is notable that it is not only Tom, the ace character, who is prompted to question the primacy of a romantic relationship in his life, but also Sam, an allosexual character. Even before Tom suggests a polyamorous relationship, Sam begins to think of Ramona and Tom as having equal importance in his life, regardless of the fact he is sexually and romantically attracted to one and not the other.

My father lives a life of neat boxes.

He chooses the people in his life by what  
expected function  
they can provide him....  
My father would want me to separate Ramona and Tom  
Have me secure Ramona in a Girlfriend Box  
and lock Tom far away from her in a Just Friends Box.  
My father has very little love in his life. (181)

It is worth noting in this passage, and throughout the novel, the author challenges formatting conventions, often breaking a line mid-sentence like a piece of poetry rather than prose. This departure from conventions increases in intensity when the characters are questioning, or even directly challenging the way they should prioritize different kinds of love in their lives. These are characters who are primed for challenging convention, who are outsiders who do not want to fit in, and it takes recognizing the power of their platonic love, and how expansive their romantic love can become, to realize the most important conventions they should be challenging are that of amatonormativity and mononormativity.

It could be argued that Tom was already questioning societal norms, or asking others to question societal norms, with his art, before he begins to question the idea that everyone should prioritize a monogamous romantic relationship. But putting glitter in odd places throughout his town, or handing out pamphlets about Darfur and other Holocausts, was about challenging *other* people to question the systems around them, to see things as he already saw them. It took realizing he was ace, realizing that a certain social script did not work for *him*, for him to begin to question and challenge how social norms would or would not dictate his life, especially his adult life.

Returning to an allosexual POV character, Sam's biggest revelation around the pitfalls of following societal norms and expectations without questioning whether they make sense to

you comes when he reflects on his strained relationship with his father. He has reflected before that time spent with his father seems perfunctory on his father's end, eventually telling his mother, "And I think I've figured it out. Dad didn't want children, did he? He just felt like he was supposed to have them." (223) His mother confirms his suspicion, explaining,

I think that if he'd listened to his intuition, he would have realized he didn't actually want to be a father. But you're right. To him it was questionable to not have a child. It's what a person is supposed to do. (224)

Sam is not troubled by this revelation, because he is now actively questioning what "a person is supposed to do" and only doing what brings him joy. It is important to note that Sam is not just imagining what his happy life will look like, but what it will look like in opposition to his father's, who has hewn closely to societal norms, especially ones pertaining to love and family, to what is owed and what is required.

Is *This Song Is (Not) For You* a romance novel, and if so, does it belong in my examination of young adult novels without romance? At the start of the novel, three young people are not in a romantic relationship, and by the end, they are. Yet, what is driving the characters, even in the pursuit of their romantic relationships, is not simply that one magical kiss, but instead an understanding of themselves, and even more importantly a declaration that they will not live by society's norms if that does not make them happy.

In "The Cultural Stakes of Intimacy in the Contemporary Young Adult Romance," Katherine Bell says of the romance genre:

Scholars such as Michele Schreiber and Dianne Negra have noted that the post-feminist logic informing the most contemporary iteration of the genre posits the choices characters make in the pursuit of romance—and thus of happiness—as decidedly individual, without social or political resonance. (242)

But the pursuit of romance and happiness cannot be separated from the social or political when the characters are pursuing romance that challenges amatonormativity and mononormativity. By breaking with societal norms they are taking a stance; the existence of their relationship underlines the fact that the status quo is not inevitable and can in fact be challenged. Therefore, their relationships become, whether they realize it or not, sociopolitical statements.

Bell goes on to assert, “Love appears a galvanizing force in great romances; it is a transformative agent, inspiring characters to become their best selves.” (247) Love in all its forms, platonic, romantic, and even familial does inspire the characters to become their best selves in *This Song is (Not) For You*, and they find that they must challenge themselves not just to reach their full potential, but question the yardstick they have been given for success by society. Because love is not just coming from multiple sources, but being valued equally and taking up equal space in the lives of the three protagonists, it has even more of a transformative effect on them than romantic love alone would have. It is not simply they who have changed, it is the world, and how they see and understand the world, in addition to how they will navigate it. They know what kind of love and relationships they seek, and will continue to seek, no matter what society tells them.

The texts I have examined thus far have focused on asexual and aromantic characters who fill their lives with love that is directed towards people—love for friends, love for family and love for community. But *The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* by Mackenzi Lee explores another kind of love—love for a vocation. The novel’s teenage protagonist, Felicity Montague, is completely consumed by passion that dictates the way she lives her life and dominates her conversations in ways that sometimes frustrate her friends and family. This description of her passion may sound as if she is involved in the kind of whirlwind romance that could drive an allosexual young adult narrative, but what she really loves is medicine. She longs to be a doctor, and although as a woman in 18th century Europe she is told there

are no opportunities for her to study or practice, she continues to learn, from texts and through practical experience, on her own.

Felicity's disinterest in sex and romance is first established when she rejects the proposal of Callum, a man she knows she could lead a quiet, not unhappy life with. Rejecting the advances of a friendly opposite gender partner, especially in a historical young adult novel where a protagonist might not have a reference point for queer romance, is often the starting point for a queer, but still allosexual awakening. So it is important that Felicity shares a kiss with another young woman to clarify her identity as asexual for the reader, musing on the experience:

...we only kissed once, and that was more an experiment to see if kissing can be an enjoyable experience for me. And the answer is no, though I'd say she's the best I've had. But the point is moot as I don't think it's ever really going to be good because I just don't seem to desire that sort of relationship with anyone the way everyone else does. (Lee 396)

It is important to note that the rather clinical way Felicity thinks about relationships, as well as her single-minded obsession with medicine and at times apparent disinterest in creating or maintaining close bonds of friendship, could be understood as playing into harmful stereotypes that asexual individuals are cold and unfeeling, that they are incapable of any kind of love because they do not experience sexual attraction. Her high intelligence and technical know-how as a student of medicine can also be read as feeding into a more modern trope of asexual characters in media.

As Gwendolyn Osterwald explains in her paper "Contradictions in the Representation of Asexuality: Fiction and Reality":

Modern asexual characters are either extremely brilliant or have some odd characteristic or personality trait that makes the viewer interested in them.

Brilliance or quirky behaviour are necessary because characters without an interest in sex are obviously not considered interesting. (40)

While Felicity *is* brilliant and passionate and often does prioritize the study of medicine over spending time with friends or family, she is never depicted as heartless. Though she is not often demonstrative in her affection, it is nonetheless present, and frequently referenced. This can be seen in the descriptions of moments like one she spent with her brother Monty's partner Percy soon after she arrived to stay with them. After keeping a kind of physical and emotional distance during their reunion, she eventually asks to lie down beside him to rest.

I roll over onto my back and let the silence settle over us like a fine layer of dust before I say, my face to the ceiling and not entirely certain Percy's still aware, "I've missed you. Both of you." I can hear the soft smile in his voice when he replies, "I won't tell Monty." (Lee 44)

Just because she is known to eschew hugs and most declarations of fondness, and more importantly just because her greatest, most consuming passion is medicine, does not mean she has no depth of feeling for friends and family.

Felicity is not the cold, emotionless asexual. While no character, and certainly no author should be held responsible for representing the reality of an entire demographic, it is important for any author writing ace characters to be aware of stereotypes that still plague the asexual community, and consider what can be done to showcase these characters as multi-faceted. As the canon of ace young adult literature is growing, the author of an ace young adult novel must consider the fact that it is very possible any one of their readers might be encountering an ace protagonist for the first time. This reality should be viewed not as a burden to constrain the author, but as a privilege and responsibility that they should continue to think about as they sit down to write.

Felicity's lack of attraction and lack of a romantic partner is not something that plagues her, makes her feel less than, because she has found something that brings her pure joy. As Julia Dielman explains in her paper "A Balance Between the Real and the Fictive: Writing Nuanced Queer Representation in Young Adult Historical Fiction":

... 'queer joy' approach used by Mackenzi Lee in her bestselling *Gentleman's Guide* series (2017-2021), which has often been praised for its representation of a wide variety of queer and racial identities. Lee believes in writing uplifting, intersectional queer stories, and while her characters aren't based on real historical people, she grounds them in historical reality and logic. (4)

While writing "uplifting" queer stories that literally portray LGBTIA+ characters leading happy full lives is important, I would argue Felicity's story hews closer to Lanser's definition of "queering" as something that "dismantle all fixities." (924). Queer joy for Felicity means finding joy from something she truly loves, in this case medicine, rather than something she has been told she should love, a romantic partner. Society has told her she will find not only her happiness, but her purpose through relationships with other people, but she has found that, for her, that is not the case. She chooses medicine, she chooses herself, over and over again.

Felicity, at first, looks at others as inherently different from herself because she watches them center their lives around romantic partners, or the pursuit of romantic partners. This feeling of otherness is examined by Felicity and Lee over the course of the novel, and it evolves. However, at the start of the book this wall between Felicity and the other people in her life leads her to labor under an idea that plagues many young adult heroines: that she is "not like other girls." This designation is described in the paper "I Bet She's 'Not like Other Girls'": Discursive Construction of the Ideal Gaming Woman on r/GirlGamers":

The sad truth is—until society stops perceiving women as incapable, stupid, weak etc. there are always going to be “not like other girls” women who are trying to avoid negative stigma by distancing themselves from women. Rather than male-seeking, most of those women assume the best way not to be harassed/associated with negative things women are portrayed as is through showing others that they are not like those weak, incapable women. It’s internalized misogyny at its best. (Ruotsalainen and Meriläinen 7).

Felicity believes her interest in medicine—in centering her life around something other than marriage, children, or even a collection of close relationships—is not just something that makes her different, but something that makes her superior, to the other people but especially the other women she encounters.

She is first called out on this idea by the pirate Sim, who Felicity has already witnessed put a knife to a man’s throat and make decisions about her life with complete autonomy.

“Girls like me do. It’s a shorthand for telling them they’re undesirable.”

“Girls like you.” She laughs outright this time. “And here I thought the spectacles were decorative.”

I twist around to face her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The only girls who talk like that are the ones who assume there are no other woman like them in the world.” (Lee 119)

Though Felicity concedes she has not met many women like Sim, the idea that her intellect, the fact that she believes choosing to pursue medicine rather than marriage makes her inherently better, smarter and more interesting than the other women in her life, is clarified

when she reunites with her childhood friend, Johanna, who explains to Felicity their friendship ended because:

You [Felicity] refused to let me—or anyone!—like books and silks. Outdoors and cosmetics. You stopped taking me seriously when I stopped being the kind of woman you thought I had to be to be considered intelligent and strong. All those things you say make men take women less seriously—I don't think it's men: it's you. (246)

Young adult texts should present young readers with exciting new possibilities, new perspectives, new ways of thinking. But young adult literature should never be moralizing or prescriptive. Felicity is absolutely presented as an inspiring character for challenging expectations of what a woman, and a person, should do with her life. But it is as important that she realizes just as she has chosen to fill her life with what makes her happy, others should be able to do the same. The character of Johanna, who is interested in science *and* silks, who loves parties *and* nurtures a passion for nature, is not Felicity's foil, but yet another example of a character challenging what society says she should prioritize, how she should order her life, and choosing to spend her time and energy on what makes her happy.

At the novel's end, Felicity continues to prioritize herself and her passion for medicine, but she has also learned to find strength in her connection to others, and perhaps more importantly, recognize the strength of other women who might want or value things she does not.

In the company of women like this—sharp-edged as raw diamonds but with soft hands and hearts, not strong in spite of everything but powerful because of everything—I feel invincible... We are mountains—or perhaps temples, with foundations that could outlast time itself. (438-439)

In this penultimate moment of reflection, Felicity thinks not only about her own emotions (that she feels invincible) but the strength she feels when united with her friends, thinking “*We are mountains.*” Just as an ace/aro novel without a romantic plot line can still be filled with love and passion, Felicity’s story of love for vocation is still full of connection, and importantly, growth. A character who begins and ends a novel with the same passion, the same priorities, and focuses on her own happiness first and foremost runs the risk of having a flat character arc that would not serve a dynamic story. But while Felicity does not learn anything new about what she wants out of life, her views of others do evolve, and this change in the way she sees others provides the needed character growth.

*The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* is part of a trilogy, with each book centered on a Montague sibling. The first, *The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue* (2017), explores a passionate romance between Monty Montague and his best friend Percy. It is a young adult romance novel with all the longing looks, sweet asides, and declarations of love and devotion a teen reader would expect from a young adult romance. *The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* does not contain the romantic plot line the first book had, and yet both novels became *New York Times* best sellers and American Booksellers Association best sellers. While the purpose of this thesis is to show that a YA novel does not need a romantic plot line to be successful from a craft standpoint, it is also important to note that ace/aro young adult novels are not simply as interesting, engaging, and full of possibilities as a young adult novel with a romantic plot line—they are also marketable, and can be commercially successful. Young readers do not require a romantic plot line to be drawn in by a narrative, or to be tempted to purchase a new novel.

The last text I want to examine, *Before I Let Go* by Marieke Nijkamp, is a mystery. I believe it is fitting to end my examination of the ways asexual young adult novels challenge amatonormativity with a question that Lisa Portelli captures within the title of her essay,

“What Would Agatha Christie Do? Exploring Escapism, Popular Culture, and Family in YA Murder Mysteries”. Because mysteries, particularly murder mysteries, have become so popular within the young adult canon, I believe it is important to consider my research question within the confines of the genre. Portelli writes:

But why is the murder mystery—and its non-fiction counterpart, true crime—so compelling? Audiences often cite its participatory nature. Dr. Alan Goldman, known for his work at the intersection of philosophy and pop culture, writes that mysteries “fully engage all our mental capacities—cognitive, emotional, imaginative, and perceptual” (264). The reader must fully and perpetually engage with the content to solve the crime, as even the smallest, most ephemeral of clues can mean the difference between a right or wrong accusation. (115)

To engage in any mystery, including a young adult mystery, readers are forced to question their preconceived notions—what indicates guilt and what implies innocence, who can be trusted, who cannot be believed. As they are already questioning these basic assumptions, readers of ace YA will be even more primed to question amatonormativity, or as Portelli goes on to clarify, “Additionally, Jennifer Schmidt-Petersen, who has a background in policing, criminology, and psychology, notes that true-crime content provides a space to question cultural values and societal norms.” (115). In a mystery, perceived societal roles and the ideas ascribed to them must be questioned—the loving spouse could be the killer, the outcast might be a protector.

The mystery presented in *Before I Let Go*, which surrounds the drowning death of a teenage small town outcast Kyra, forces readers to question who is valued and who will be protected, to look critically at a community of people and ask if what they are prioritizing is what *should* be prioritized. Just as readers must question these values and societal norms to

puzzle out who is responsible for Kyra's death, they must also question amatonormativity as the novel's asexual protagonist, Corey, continues to center Kyra in her life, though she is her platonic best friend, not a romantic partner. Though Corey has doubts throughout the novel about whether her close friendship with Kyra was as meaningful as a romantic one would have been, and the citizens of her former hometown increasingly dismiss their bond, her overwhelming grief and all-consuming desire to see justice for her friend illustrates the fact that a friendship can be just as powerful as a romantic relationship. Looked at from the perspective of an author, the text also suggests that intense platonic love can be just as an effective engine for a novel as intense romantic love. *Before I Let Go* follows Corey as she returns to her small Alaskan hometown after the apparent suicide of her best friend Kyra. Kyra has been the town pariah since she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder a few years earlier, showing Corey and the reader early on that the town is uninterested in including anyone they do not deem normal.

It is important to note that Corey's powerful love for Kyra, highlighted by the immense grief she feels in her absence, is established before Corey's asexuality is. Corey describes her relationship with Kyra in the first chapter:

She took my heart and held it safe. She promised to wait for me, with words that echo in my mind and tender touches I can still feel on my skin.

She.

Kyra.

Mine.

Let me tell you a story.

She was my best friend. She was my everything. (Nijkamp 3-4)

Their bond is described not just with intense language ("my everything"), but with language often associated with romantic love ("She took my heart"), and even sensual language

(“tender touches”). It would be easy for readers to assume this is a sapphic story, that the two teenagers were not simply best friends but lovers. The assumption that such intense love must evolve into something romantic or sexual is, in fact, played out through the narrative, because although Corey is able to clearly articulate, “Unlike most of my classmates, I never had crushes...My heart didn’t flutter at the sight of a cute guy—or girl—smiling,” (57) she still decides one afternoon before Kyra’s death to kiss her. Corey’s discomfort with the idea of kissing is juxtaposed with an idea she has absorbed about the hierarchy of affection, as she thinks:

I’d never kissed anyone or been kissed before, and I always glanced away when other people made out. But seeing her there made me want to be closer to her than the love and friendship we already shared.” (60).

They already shared their hopes and dreams, their fears and insecurities, they had shared their childhoods, their entire lives. But it was a kiss, a sign of physical and romantic love that Corey believed was needed to make them closer. The fear that their relationship might be weaker, and thus in danger of fraying or ending because they are “only friends” is something Corey worries about throughout the text in flashbacks depicting when Kyra was alive.

The idea that their bond is not as strong because they are not romantic partners, “only” best friends, is undercut with the way Corey describes her love for Kyra. As Corey explores her hometown upon her return, she thinks, “I’m homesick for a person, homesick for Kyra.” (177). Later, towards the end of the novel as her grief overwhelms her, Corey thinks of Kyra, “I cry for the girl who used to be my world” (237). The idea that her best friend is her “home” and “whole world” clearly puts Kyra at the center of Corey’s universe, makes it clear this was the relationship Corey has prioritized. But because of the strength of amatonormativity, she still wonders if their relationship could have better withstood things

like the physical distance that comes between them when she first moves away from their hometown if that relationship had been romantic.

The idea that friendship cannot be as impactful, or interesting, as a romantic relationship, is something that is pervasive throughout pop culture, and has been illustrated not only through storytelling but through fan reactions to stories that do not center on romantic relationships. Samantha Thompson and Julian Barr highlight something about television comedy shows that can also be applied to young adult novels, writing that, “The prioritization of romantic relationships in sitcoms is rooted in cishetropatriarchal norms that devalue the role of friendships, and the care they provide, in our everyday lives. (Thompson and Barr 214). No matter what Corey does to showcase the strength of her friendship with Kyra, her friendship, and thus her connection to Kyra, is constantly devalued by the people of her community. Kyra was not her girlfriend, not her “family.” Yet throughout the text the strength of their friendship is not only illustrated through Corey’s words, but through the single-mindedness with which she tries to avenge Kyra after her death, first by demanding answers about what led up to her drowning, and then by risking her life to preserve and tell her story.

Just as *This Song is (Not) For You* begins to play with form, placing its text on the page in unusual, unorthodox ways as the characters begin to question societal norms around amatonormativity, *Before I Let Go* plays with form as Corey begins to question the circumstances around Kyra’s death, with some chapters formatted as screenplays, and some titled “phone call” including only dialogue between two characters without descriptions of action or even dialogue tags. While the creative formatting in *This Song is (Not) For You* seems to illustrate the POV characters’ willingness to flout societal norms, mixing the screenplay format and dialogue-only pages with more traditional prose in *Before I Let Go* seems to illustrate Corey questioning conventions, just as the reader must do as they both

move through the mystery together. To understand Kyra's story, and her relationship to it, she must be open to different approaches to storytelling, just as the reader and author of ace/aro YA must be open to narratives that do not prioritize exclusive romantic partnerships.

By the end of the novel, Corey has solved the mystery of Kyra's death, and, more importantly, is at peace with what they meant to each other. With its elements of magical realism and constant life or death stakes, it is a compelling read, even without a romantic plot line. What I believe *Before I Let Go* illustrates is the fact that friendship, even if society does not hold it to the level of romantic relationships, can be intense enough, powerful enough, to fuel a character, and can thus fuel a narrative. Though young adult literature, and indeed literature in general is full of novels where a friendship or other platonic relationship forms the heart of the story, it is unusual for the protagonist not to have a kind of romantic sub-plot in the form of a crush, the pursuit of a romantic relationship, or even the conclusion of a romantic relationship. Corey does not have to be in love with Kyra to risk her life to find answers about her death, and she does not have to be in love with Kyra for readers to become invested, active participants in solving that mystery.

## A Note On Thanks For Listening

My young adult novel (which also acts as the creative portion of my thesis), *Thanks for Listening*, was published by HarperCollins in November 2024, into an ever-expanding landscape of young adult books with an asexual protagonist. I was delighted to find, in reviews for my book, that readers saw in the text something I have explored throughout this thesis—that asexual protagonists can prompt ace and allo readers alike to critically consider their romantic and platonic relationships, what works for them and what does not, rather than simply accepting existing social scripts around friendship and romance.

As Taylor Skorski writes in a review for *School Library Journal*:

Horan does a wonderful job of providing an authentic depiction of being ace in an allosexual world and giving realistic insight into universal conversations about consent and boundaries for all teens. (74)

Asexual characters are primed to have extensive conversations about what they want and do not want from a romantic relationship because they assume their wants are so different from the wants of an allosexual partner. But as Skorski points out, these types of talks *should* be universal. Everyone should be talking with their partners or potential partners about what they want that partnership to look like. Asexual protagonists can remind readers and authors that healthy relationships should be custom fit, and that interrogating relationship dynamics and relationship hierarchy is something allosexual and asexual individuals should be doing, to create more dynamic narratives and to live happier lives. This custom fit approach also means characters and their relationships will become more unique. Young adult literature is often maligned for being overly dependent on tropes and stock characters; having characters actively questioning norms and considering how they want to order their lives unbound by certain conventions makes authors less likely to lean into tropes.

In Cassidy Russel's review for the *Bulletin of Center for Children's Books*, the fact that these kinds of conversations about wants, needs, and levels of comfort should not be exclusive to romantic relationships is also highlighted:

While Sadie is preternaturally wise and well-adjusted (and many of the secondary characters have some manic-pixie-dream-person energy), her acceptance of Mia's sexuality (she's ace) and their honest conversations about sex both model healthy boundary-setting that Mia is able to believably parlay into her other relationships. (103)

Unlike the protagonists of the novels I analyzed within my critical thesis, Mia, the protagonist of my novel, is interested in a monogamous romantic relationship. Something I do explore in my novel, however, is how Mia learns lessons from her romantic relationship, specifically from interrogating what she wants from a romantic relationship, that she then applies to her platonic relationships. Just as she made assumptions about what a romantic relationship had to look like, that an asexual partner would always want a sexual relationship and thus would always be disappointed in a relationship with someone not interested in sex, Mia also made assumptions about what a friendship must look like, what she must accept and perform to be a worthy friend.

Once she has a conversation with her girlfriend about defining what a healthy, fulfilling romantic relationship looks like for them, she is able to articulate to her friends what a healthy, fulfilling friendship will look like for her. To return to an idea explored in *This Song Is (Not) For You*, as Sam explains the limitations of “secure[ing] Ramona in a Girlfriend box and lock[ing] Tom far away from her in a Just Friends Box.” (Nowlin 181), as an author I have learned that tools, story building tactics I have used for exploring romantic relationships can be applied to exploring platonic relationships, and vice versa.

The focus of my thesis, critical and creative, was never on representation. As an author writing queer characters, starting with my first novel *Epically Earnest*, I have been very deliberate about telling stories about queer teens who did not have to deal with homophobia, internal or external. I also was not interested in writing or examining coming out narratives, an important part of the queer young adult canon that I felt was too limiting in scope.

Yet, through my research it has been impossible to ignore the prejudice asexual individuals still deal with, and in light of this, impossible not to celebrate the increase in representation of asexual characters on the page, and the impact that can have on young readers, whether they are queer or not. As Annike Herb and David Betts note in their paper on “Queering the Book Club”:

YA literature has the capacity to develop empathy when it involves diverse identities, and when its readership engages with the content critically (Hays, 2021; Wolk, 2009; Webber and Agiro, 2019; Sherr and Beise, 2015).

Specifically, queer YA literature can develop empathy for a diverse readership by encouraging connections to characters and identities potentially outside the reader’s personal experience, highlighting the negative impacts of compulsory hetero- and cis-normativity, and drawing attention to the experiences of the queer community. (445)

Throughout my critical thesis I have argued that ace/aro young adult narratives showcase, for authors and young readers, all the possibilities that open up when you prioritize a variety of relationships, a variety of sources of love, instead of a single romantic relationship. It is important for me to also acknowledge the expansion of ace representation in young adult literature also means young (and older) readers on the ace spectrum will see themselves on the page more and more, and that is something to be celebrated.

## Conclusion

In their duoethnography examining narrative and young adults, Cammie Jo Lawton and Leia K. Cain point out that young adult fiction can be used as a tool for both individual and collective identity formation:

The second theme that we found throughout our data was the notion that YAL [young adult literature] provides a space for self-discovery and identity formation, as stories centered on adolescent life often involve expressions of self. YAL offers readers the mental space to perspective take with characters on journeys of self-discovery and identity formation. (2944)

If young adult literature is a place for young readers to explore identities and all the possibilities their future offers them, then it is imperative young adult authors showcase a wide swath of identities and possibilities. This does not just mean expanding representation for all queer identities, though that is important. It also means giving young readers the tools, the framework to question societal norms and build their own sense of self based on what makes them happy rather than what they are told will make them happy.

Cain further writes of young adult literature, "I like the notion of CHANGE. I like how possible it is within [YAL] worlds." (2942) Young adult protagonists, like young adult readers, have had time to absorb messaging around social norms like amatonormativity. But they are still in a place in their lives where they are figuring out who they are and what their life will hold. Big decisions about how to organize their lives have not yet been made. Change is a huge part of young adult narratives because of the life stage young adult protagonists find themselves in, when they stand on the border between childhood and adulthood, meaning everything from their bodies to their relationship with their parents to the responsibilities they are given will soon change. But it is also a time when your perspective, the way you see the world can change dramatically.

The focus of this thesis has been an exploration of five novels that feature aro/ace protagonists (or, in the case of *This Song Is (Not) For You*, an ace protagonist who is not seeking a monogamous romantic relationship). I have endeavored to showcase, through analyzing these texts, just how rich the world of a young adult narratives without a romantic plot line, without a protagonist bending to amatonormativity, can be. But during the course of my research, I read and analyzed thirty novels with asexual characters. Though the core argument of this thesis did not leave space for a deep dive into all of these novels, they too, showcase possibilities that might not occur to a reader or author who has only encountered allosexual characters in young adult texts.

These other novels that make up my annotated bibliography feature protagonists with intense crushes who want all the beats that make up a traditional romance plot line, but still are not interested in sex. Or a protagonist who wants to follow in her mother's footsteps as a "pleasure artist" but is repulsed by sex, and discovers an ace identity exists in her culture's mythology. Then there is the protagonist whose ace identity is weaponized against her by a former friend who assumed he would "win" her as the only one willing to overlook her lack of sexual attraction, who instead finds a partner who does not see her asexuality as something to overlook, but an essential part of her. Though the central objective of this thesis is to explore how ace young adult novels with no romantic plot line, specifically, can introduce authors and readers to a world of possibilities, it is important to note my research, and the ace texts that will introduce readers to those possibilities, goes beyond those limited parameters. Asexuality encompasses an enormous spectrum of experiences, and so does asexual young adult literature.

In her paper "The Feminist Possibilities of Heteroglossic Spaces in Contemporary Young Adult Romance Novels" Amy Noelle Parks writes:

this article argues that at least some of the feminist possibility of YA romance novels lies in the extent to which the authors' narrative choices encourage readers to grapple with questions related to love, pleasure and relationships rather than to absorb the authors' intended (or unintended) messages. This stance grows out of my engagement with feminist literary theories that argue "that women's reading is of consequence, intellectually, politically, poetically" (Rooney 4), regardless of the topic or the message of the works being read. Rooney argued that feminist readings of literature support "self-questioning and an unwillingness to settle in a single location" (7). From this perspective, the goal of reading a text is to engage in intellectual and emotional struggle not to acquire received wisdom or appropriate messages." (2)

Because young adult novels are written about and for young people, largely by adult authors, it could be easy to see them not as pieces of literature but literary lessons. Young adult literature is not a means to transmit morals to young readers. Young adult novels are, as Parks writes of young adult romance, a space where young readers "grapple with questions." Through grappling with these questions young readers will gain a greater understanding of themselves and their place in the world, or, more specifically, the place they want to take up in the world.

This idea is echoed by Gay Ivey and Peter H. Johnston in their paper "Engagement With Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes" as they explain:

Features of contemporary texts, such as multiple narrators, shifting perspectives, and multi-modalities, invite readers to consider varied viewpoints on personal and social problems, including those normally underrepresented. In the process, they "call [the] moral universe into question"

(Coats, 2011, p. 322), leaving issues of equity and identity and the tensions between stability and growth not as lessons to be learned but as points of uncertainty, thus inviting readers to construct meanings in the world of the text and to seek potential meanings with others outside of the text. (257)

When considering queer young adult novels, representation is not present solely to tell young readers it is ok to be queer. The purpose of queer representation is to give young readers a place to question and explore the world and their place in it. Young adult novels with asexual protagonists are prompting young readers to ask, is this a life that would suit me? What kind of love do I want to prioritize in my life? It is prompting them to question what they have been taught, not to absorb a new lesson, the author's lesson, without critical thought.

When I was ten, I was given the assignment to write my future biography, complete with an illustration, of my thirty-year-old self. The picture I drew, of a woman next to two children, was largely indistinguishable from a portrait I would draw of my family; I had simply written my own name under the mother figure. By the time I was given a similar assignment at thirteen, I was adopting a child. In high school I started saying I would foster children, older children, maybe teens. That was something I would repeat well into my twenties. I would not hear the term "childfree by choice" until my thirties, around the time I began admitting to friends, family, and myself, that motherhood was decidedly not for me.

It is difficult to imagine our lives past the possibilities we have been shown, not just in real life, but in the stories we are told through movies, television, and books. It is also difficult to imagine our novels past the possibilities we have been shown. Young adult literature is dominated by romantic plot lines. They are what hold up fandoms and film franchises. They represent the entire understanding of the canon for large swaths of people who only interact with young adult fiction through ad campaigns and memes. But there is a world of possibilities to discover as a young adult author when you craft a narrative helmed

by an asexual character who is not interested in finding and prioritizing a monogamous romantic relationship. Endings are hard. It is a sentiment I have heard so often I had to do a quick search just to be sure it has not been ascribed to some great early writer who first looked at their manuscript, all they had to pull together on the final page, and wearily put their head down on their desk in (temporary) defeat. In deciding how to conclude this thesis, I looked to the final chapters of the novels that informed it and found the most fitting sentiment in the last chapter of *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy*, as Felicity contemplates her future from the deck of a ship. "In this moment, this place, this perch upon the edge of the world, it feels like the view goes on forever." (Lee 439).

The canon of queer young adult fiction and asexual young adult fiction specifically is growing every day. It covers all genres, is explored through prose and poetry, through found documents and fictional diary entries. But what I hope to have illustrated through this critical thesis is just how expansive young adult literature can become for a novelist who looks beyond amatonormativity and familiar conventions they might feel young adult novels need to be marketable. I would tell a novelist as they sit down to plot, "Look beyond the meet cute, the love triangle, the 'will they or won't they' question," because if you do you will discover so many new and exciting possibilities to make your book unique, relevant, and impactful.

## Annotated Bibliography

Anderson, R. J. *Quicksilver*. Carolrhoda Books, 2013.

Niki, the protagonist of *Quicksilver*, is struggling to define what is human, and more importantly, whether she fits the criteria for being human. The fact that she feels no sexual attraction, which she sees as an essential human trait, is troubling to her for this very reason. She is a character who has had her humanity challenged through demeaning experiments and tech implanted in her body, and her otherworldly origins make her insecure about her human identity. She is able to claim her sexuality even before she is able to claim bodily autonomy, and comes to see her humanity is something she can also claim, not something that others will give her. She is also insistent throughout her adventure that friendships can be just as important as romantic relationships. The fact that this is a philosophy that she shares with others implies it is *informed* by her asexuality but she does not believe it should *only* be applied to asexual people.

Ashby, Amanda. *Demonosity*. Speak, 2013.

Nash, the only asexual character in *Demonosity* is protagonist Cassidy's best friend. Throughout the story he acts as a sidekick; Cassidy finds herself in a supernatural predicament, Nash researches the otherworldly forces at play. Though you could argue Nash fits neatly into the role of the sidekick because of his asexuality, he isn't interested in pursuing a love interest, therefore he has the time and mental capacity to help Cassidy pursue her destiny, Ashby has given Nash passions that drive him—a love of learning and discovery. Nash supports Cassidy because he platonically loves her, but his role as researcher is driven by a genuine passion, not a lack of passion. Nash is one of only a handful of characters in these collected texts who is both aromantic and asexual, but by giving him a sense of purpose completely disconnected from sex or romance, Ashby has illustrated how an aro/ace

character does not need a love interest (or even an interest in romantic love) to find the motivation to continuously move forward along with the plot.

Bowman, Akemi Dawn. *Summer Bird Blue*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.

Protagonist Rumi's asexuality is approached as just one aspect of her personality that she feels pressured to define before she is ready. Before the death of her sister, defining her sexuality, especially in relation to the sexualities of her friends and peers, is described as one more hurdle as she moves from childhood to adolescence that she does not want to jump. Her fear to define her sexuality stems from a fear of understanding herself in an incomplete way. What if she labels herself, makes choices based on that label, and it turns out she didn't have the insight, or perhaps the language to label herself correctly?

Part of adolescence is discovering who you are, and a common conflict in coming-of-age narratives is dealing with a disconnect between who you are and who you are expected to be. But Rumi does not fear rejection, she is afraid she does not know who she is. Her uncertainty is put in stark relief compared with what she perceived as the confidence, the certainty her late sister had in who she was and what she wanted out of life. Ultimately Rumi comes to the conclusion that she does not need to pick a label for her sexuality, because choosing a label would satisfy other people, not herself. This hammers home the message that labels should be used as a way for individuals to understand themselves, not as a way for them to be understood by other people.

Capetta, Amy Rose. *The Lost Coast*. Candlewick Press, 2019.

Within the world of *The Lost Coast*, queerness is both the norm and otherworldly. The teenage coven is composed of only queer members, meaning their queerness is both unremarkable to each other and what sets them apart from their classmates. A secondary character's asexuality is barely remarked on, and yet initially shared with conviction and pride. Within their coven, the teenage girls are creating their own world with their own rules and norms. Within that world, queerness in all forms, including asexuality, is accepted and respected. This suggests that teenagers can create not just moral codes for themselves, as individuals, but codes to govern smaller communities, regardless of the prejudices they might face from society at large.

Clark, Lillian. *Immoral Code*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2019.

The friend group at the center of *Immoral Code* is a group of teenagers who are demanding respect. They are declaring their independence, and even more than that, their autonomy. One of multiple POV characters, Reese declares her asexuality on the page as an act of defiance. It is introduced as just one line on a laundry list of her many identifies, and she spends more time defending it than exploring it, implying she has done the hard work to understand herself and now wants to tackle any who would doubt the validity of her sexuality. This is a constant theme for all of the characters, the war between how they define themselves and how they are perceived by others. Reese begins the novel completely comfortable with her sexuality and knowledgeable of all the ways people try to dismiss it. These reasons are all tied to the main reason her friends have essential parts of their identities dismissed as well. Because as young people, they are seen by some adults as not capable of either understanding themselves, or understanding the world enough to know where they'll fit in.

Darrows, Eva. *Belly Up*. Ink Yard Press, 2019.

*Belly Up* has a secondary character who is asexual—Devi, best friend of Sara, the novel's protagonist. The explanation of Devi's asexuality is brief, taking up only a few pages of the text, yet it manages to be surprisingly thorough. Because the novel is told from Sara's perspective, it is Sara, not Devi, who explains Devi's asexuality and dating history to the reader in a matter-of-fact way. As a pregnant teenager raised by her single mother and grandmother, Sara has been brought up to understand families can be warm and loving even if they don't resemble the nuclear family. In light of that, it makes sense that she would not balk at the idea that her friend would not fit societal expectations around sexual attraction. The novel ends with the portrait of a very happy, functional, and untraditional family unit comprised of teenaged Sara, her boyfriend, her baby, the father of her baby, his girlfriend, and various other friends and family members who will be involved in the baby's upbringing. It is a novel that embraces and celebrates a variety of ways to find love, community, and belonging in ways that make sense to you rather than in ways society would expect. This makes it the perfect narrative for a supported ace character.

DeWitt, Amanda. *Aces Wild: A Heist*. Peachtree Teen, 2022.

Jack, protagonist of *Aces Wild*, is struggling to define himself within the context of his family, who he sees as cold and calculating (though he does love them). In this way, his struggle to see himself in a romantic relationship with a friend is no different than an allosexual's struggle to see themselves in a romantic relationship when they feel they have been raised without a role model for love. Because Jack, his love interest, and all his friends are on the ace spectrum, there is less focus on his asexuality as an impediment to his potential romantic relationship, and more focus on his history. Having a cast of asexual characters *Aces Wild* is able to cover a range of ace experiences, most interestingly when the youngest teen is

momentarily questioned by an older member of the group if this is just a phase for her. This moment highlights the fact that the idea that sexual attraction is an inescapable facet of the human condition is something that is reinforced in contemporary American society so often that's it is nearly impossible not to internalize, even if you are ace yourself.

Ferguson, Jen. *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*. Heartdrum, 2022.

Much of the exploration of protagonist Lou's asexuality/demisexuality is connected to her history—she is the product of rape. Her ideas about sexuality are influenced by and entangled with the story of her conception, and the trauma her mother suffered because of it. The shame she feels about her origins inform the shame she feels about her sexuality, or what she sees for most of the novel as an unnatural lack of attraction. Because she understands sexuality as an absolute of the human condition, she sees a lack of sexual attraction as something about her that is broken. Her journey to accept her asexuality happens in parallel to her journey to being able to think about the violent circumstances of her conception without shame or fear. The importance of opening up to people, of sharing her dark emotions, is shown to be essential for both.

Healy, Karen. *Guardians of the Dead*. Little, Brown and Company, 2010.

Kevin, the best friend of protagonist Ellie, is the only asexual character in *Guardians of the Dead*. At first, his coming out moment within the first chapter of the novel seems to be fairly inconsequential. It could be read as a moment for the author to introduce the fact that Ellie's sister is gay, and thus Ellie is aware of the less than warm reception queer people sometimes receive when coming out. However, as the novel progresses, Kevin comes under the thrall of Reka, a supernatural being who has traditionally gotten humans to do her bidding by seducing them. The fact that Kevin becomes protective of and overly invested in Reka

although he is not sexually attracted to her suggests that seduction is not limited to enticement through sex. This prompts Ellie to challenge her own assumptions as she works through the fantastical mysteries she is presented with throughout the novel, which underlines the importance of challenging preconceived notions and societal norms in real life.

Kann, Claire. *Let's Talk About Love*. Swoon Reads, 2018.

Alice, the protagonist of *Let's Talk About Love*, develops a crush on a co-worker in a way that will seem completely familiar to allosexuals. She finds herself blushing and tongue-tied when they first meet, she's constantly thinking about how physically attractive he is, and once they have spent more time together, how sweet he is. Author Kann uses Alice's reactions to explore the wide range of experiences for those on the asexual spectrum. The novel opens with Alice's girlfriend ending their relationship because she is not interested in sex, but Alice's asexuality does not preclude her from developing a crush based on a surface level interest. The novel also focuses on the idea of found family, and how ace characters can create found families with friends who are allo/ looking to create more traditional nuclear families. Alice's interest in her co-worker does not mean she is not ace, and starting a relationship with him does not mean she is not deeply invested in the life she has built with her best friend and her best friend's partner. Alice, as an individual, defines who she wants and what she wants out of life.

Keplinger, Kody. *That's Not What Happened*. Scholastic Press, 2018.

Protagonist Lee's reluctance to tell Miles she is interested in him romantically because she fears rejection, and fears such a confession could ruin their friendship is part of a familiar story. She uses her asexuality as an excuse; she attempts to convince herself that because no one could want a relationship with an asexual person, she does not have to even try to put

herself out there. Allosexual characters go through these kinds of mental gymnastics all the time, replacing “asexual” with “not pretty enough” or “not smart enough” or “not in the right socioeconomic class.” When Lee finally decides to confess her romantic love, she looks to the future acknowledging that she might come to want something physical beyond kissing, but she might not. She goes on to admit neither she or Miles know the future, and she is beginning to feel more at peace with that uncertainty. Healing from the trauma she suffered as the victim of a school shooting is tied to coming to terms with her sexuality and her romantic prospects—realizing she can neither know nor control the future, and peace comes from accepting that. The protagonist’s main arc is tied to her romantic arc, which is informed by her asexuality.

Lee, C.B. *Not Your Backup*. Duet Books, 2019.

Protagonist Emma is completely surrounded by queer family and friends and has always had the language to express her asexuality, but still struggles to determine where she falls on the spectrum and what that means for how she’ll approach romantic relationships. The fact that she has so much support and validation for her asexuality, even on a societal level (in this futuristic society) and still has doubts about how to define her sexuality implies understanding oneself fully, especially as a teenager, is difficult no matter the circumstances. She eventually gives up on definitive labels and instead puts more stock in being open and direct with her romantic partner, finding what works for the two of them rather than how they fit into larger categories. This implies labels should be used to understand yourself, rather than to explain yourself to others.

Lee, Mackenzi. *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2018.

Felicity's asexuality is treated not quite as an afterthought, but certainly as something not nearly as important as her love of medicine, and her sense of adventure. She is given, within the text, multiple direct opportunities to consider romantic and sexual relationships with men and women and comes to the conclusion she has no desire for romance or sex with someone of any gender. Felicity has already completely rejected the expectations society has placed on her because of her gender, so she has no problem rejecting the exceptions society has placed on her around sexuality. She has been told that certain attributes are innate to women, as are certain deficits, and because she knows she does not have those attributes or deficits, she knows that what society has defined as absolutes are not absolutes. This allows her to challenge other things society has told her are absolutes, like the universality of sexual attraction.

Legrand, Claire. *Sawkill Girls*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2018.

Zoey, one of the POV characters, is ace and begins the novel with a lot of anxiety around her sexuality, having just ended things with her best friend turned boyfriend Grayson after realizing she never wants to have sex, sure after enough time he would become frustrated with that situation. Eventually she understands that she is using her asexuality as an excuse to avoid taking a risk that could lead to heartache. Things could end badly with Grayson if they begin a romantic relationship, but that is true of every relationship, not just a relationship made up of someone who is ace and someone who is allo. By the end of the novel she realizes that by trying to predict or control the future, she will miss out on things in the present, and that she should allow herself to trust the capability of others to enjoy romantic love without sex, just as she does.

Leno, Katrina. *Summer of Salt*. HarperCollins, 2018.

Protagonist Georgina's best friend is asexual. It is both shown throughout the story and explicitly stated that Georgina, as a queer young woman, has experienced nothing but acceptance around her sexuality, and it is implied that her friend has enjoyed a similar level of acceptance. Beyond that implied acceptance, her friend's asexuality is not explored.

Little Badger, Darcie. *Elatsoe*. Levine Querido, 2020.

Ellie, *Elatsoe's* protagonist, references her asexuality several times throughout the novel, and it is never presented as a source of conflict. She doesn't question the validity of her sexuality or face anyone trying to dismiss or invalidate her identity. *Elatsoe* is one of only five novels on this list that has a single asexual protagonist who does not have a love interest or romantic plot line. It could be argued that the space that would be filled in another young adult novel by the romantic plot line is instead filled by the quest to find her cousin's murderer, and her journey to better understand and master her powers. However, I would argue it is her commitment and connection to her family that fills that space.

Ellie receives not only love from her family, but a sense of purpose and a connection to her future. While romance in young adult fiction rarely explicitly leads to marriage (outside historical fiction and some fantasy titles), it could be argued that all romantic plot lines are informed by a societal expectation that individuals will pair off, raise children, and thus move their family line forward. Ellie sees her legacy as not passing on her biological material, but supporting the gifts of her second cousin. She has found a way to nurture the next generation, and found platonic companionship with family and friends, and thus she knows not pursuing a romantic partner will not leave holes in her life, present or future.

Lynne, Calista. *We Awaken*. Harmony Ink Press, 2016.

This slight novel often reads more like a primer on asexuality than a narrative that explores asexuality. Often taking place in a dreamworld, protagonist Victoria spends a lot of time researching asexuality, and learning about it from her love interest Ashlinn. At 182 pages the text is barely longer than a novella, and there simply is not enough room to explore Victoria's grief surrounding the loss of her father and brother, her discovery of the existence of asexuality, and her discovery that she, herself, is asexual. The entire novel feels more like fan-fiction than a published novel. The love interest is introduced in a literal dream, continuously described by the protagonist as perfect, and because she has no ties to or responsibilities in the real world, she can devote all her time and energy to the protagonist and her journey of self-discovery. The novel introduces terminology and concepts around asexuality in a dry, academic way.

Marie, Raquel. *You Don't Have a Shot*. Feiwel & Friends, 2023.

In *You Don't Have a Shot*, protagonist Valentina is comfortable with her asexuality, and the author is not afraid to show how Valentina can experience attraction once an emotional bond has been created. The scene featuring Valentina's first kiss is no different than any enjoyable first kiss scene with an allosexual character. She expresses excitement and a desire for it to continue, and maybe even escalate. Valentina's character is defined by her evolving appreciation for others, growing out of her intense individualism as she supports her teammates rather than trying to control them. Beginning a romantic relationship with a former rival succinctly represents all the ways she has grown and changed over the course of the novel—she has learned to lean on others, forgive past transgressions, and to consider her own experiences from the point of view of others.

Neil, Haley. *Planning Perfect*. Bloomsbury, 2023.

Throughout the novel, Felicity transforms from someone who believes she must live up to traditional expectations of what her life should look like to someone who wants to follow what makes her happy. This transformation makes it much easier for her to see her asexuality as a facet of her identity rather than a barrier to the life she wants. Felicity's perfectionism seems to stem from a want for stability, something she does not feel she is getting from her unconventional mother. Though her mother is completely supportive of Felicity's asexuality, her lack of interest in following social norms, from working a creative job without set work hours to choosing to raise Felicity as a single mother, makes her choices hard to predict. This unpredictability causes Felicity stress. Felicity worries that being asexual means she could never be the perfect girlfriend, and her character arc sees her realize there is no such thing as perfect, so there can be no barriers to perfection. Worrying about how her asexuality will impact her ability to find a loving partner, and thus happiness in adulthood is just a more specific way of worrying about the future more broadly. Once she accepts that she cannot control the future, it is easier to accept her sexuality and any uncertainty it might inject into her life.

Nijkamp, Marieke. *Before I Let Go*. Sourcebooks Fire, 2018.

Protagonist Corey's asexuality is a very small part of the story, used mostly to explore how the idea that romantic love is the highest form of love one can experience can be seemingly inescapable. Her insecurities around her friendship with Kyra are magnified by the fact she could not reciprocate her romantic feelings. Though there seems to be understanding and closure between the two girls, assurances on both sides that their friendship is strong enough to weather that rejection, guilt continues to occasionally plague Corey. It becomes another way, in the wake of Kyra's death, that Corey convinces herself she wasn't there for her best

friend. Her asexuality is not something she feels conflicted about in and of itself, but not being able to share romantic love with the person she cared about the most troubles her.

Nowlin, Laura. *This Song is (Not) For You*. Sourcebooks Fire, 2016.

This novel very explicitly uses POV character Tom's asexuality as a lens to look at the world. This lens is the reason he is inspired to begin to make up his own rules, creating the life he wants rather than the one society says he should have. He realizes he is not interested in sex, though society has told him everyone is interested in sex. He further realizes he actually suffers when he tries to create the kind of romantic relationship founded on sexual attraction society expects him to have. Because he has experienced one way trying to meet a societal expectation has made his life worse, he is not willing to try to meet other societal expectations simply because they are expected. He chooses to pursue a nomadic life full of self-directed learning rather than pursue college and work towards a life of static stability, because he knows being a nomadic autodidact will suit him better.

Ormsbee, Kathryn. *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*. Simon & Schuster, 2017.

This novel includes a lot of information on asexuality, as Tash, the protagonist, is on a journey to define and understand her sexuality. Sometimes that influx of information drags down the pace a little, as does multiple scenes in which she explains her asexuality to her friends. The novel presents a character who charges Tash with one of the most common stereotypes about ace individuals—that they are simply not ready for sex, or afraid of it. As Tash cuts that person out of her life and begins a romantic relationship with a friend who validates her asexuality, the novel challenges that stereotype.

Oseman, Alice. *Loveless*. Scholastic Press, 2021.

Georgia is a protagonist whose primary, almost sole character arc is to understand, and then accept herself as asexual and aromantic. The text is often doing double duty as a narrative and a kind of educational guide for readers who might not be familiar with asexuality. Terms are introduced and defined in a way that can often make reading through it a slog. The novel does, however, introduce characters who challenge the societal expectation that everyone's life should revolve around a romantic partner. Both ace and allo characters come to the conclusion that they want to build their lives around platonic relationships, suggesting this is a societal norm that can be challenged, and at the very least should be critically considered, whether or not you are asexual.

Pohl, Laura. *The Grimrose Girls*. Sourcebooks Fire, 2021.

Yuki, one of the POV characters in *The Grimrose Girls*, is asexual and aromantic, and her asexuality is connected to both a fear of abandonment and a fear that she is incapable and unworthy of love, even familial or platonic love. Her fear of abandonment is magnified by the fact that she is ace/aro. This means she does not think she will find a romantic partner to spend her life with and most of her allo friends will, leaving her the odd person out in a world of pairs. Yet, that fear of abandonment is first stirred when her best friend begins a romantic relationship and she fears she will be left behind, a fear shared by many single allo characters. This is the first book in a series, and just as the author does not reveal the answers to all of the mysteries in this text, she also seems to be saving some of the exploration of Yuki's asexuality for the second book.

Redgate, Riley. *Seven Ways We Lie*. Amulet Books, 2016.

Valentine, one of seven POV characters and the only asexual character in *Seven Ways We Lie*, is introduced as a high school hermit. He is isolated, confused and often repulsed by the social norms and values of his peers, and in many ways embodies some of the worst stereotypes of asexual individuals—that they cannot connect with anyone, that they are unable to understand any interpersonal dynamics. As the novel progresses Valentine does grow closer to a classmate, not only forming a friendship but more crucially, starting to desire that kind of relationship. When he turns down this new friend's romantic advances, the author is able to clearly illustrate the fact that an increased desire for platonic intimacy does not negate asexuality. Valentine is opening himself up to new experiences and finding he wants things he did not want before, but that does nothing to change his lack of sexual desire.

See, Melissa. *Love Letters for Joy*. Scholastic Press, 2023.

Protagonist Joy is confident and comfortable with her asexuality and knows she is interested in a romantic relationship. A lot of this confidence seems to stem from how stepped she is in the queer community; her mothers, her friends, and her love interest are all queer. The author is interested in exploring asexuality as a way to interrogate all the ways others might feel entitled to your time, your choices, and even your love. Joy's best friend becomes bitter and outright cruel when she rejects him romantically, as he felt because of his support and friendship over the years, she owed him romantic love.

Joy's friend and love interest Nathaniel's parents become enraged when he decides to pursue a college major they do not approve of, and kick him out when he reveals he is queer. After years of supporting him emotionally and financially, his parents felt he owed them the power to make decisions about his future. Asexual characters often feel or are told they *owe* people explanations about their sexuality, or that they *owe* romantic partners sex. In the end,

Joy and Nathaniel begin a romantic relationship because they choose each other, not because they feel they owe each other, implying that this is the dynamic of a healthy relationship.

Skrutskie, Emily. *Hull Metal Girls*. Delacorte Press, 2018.

POV character Aisha's asexuality is addressed briefly, as a matter-of-fact aspect of her identity that she is not very interested in exploring. Aisha has a fierce love for her siblings, and is portrayed again and again as willing to give up anything for them. Though she is often cold with her teammates, she is more driven by love than any of them, dispelling the stereotype that asexual individuals are loveless.

Soria, Destiny. *Beneath the Citadel*. Amulet Books, 2018.

Alys, one of multiple POV characters, briefly mentions she is asexual in reference to her brother Evander's budding romantic relationship with their friend Newt. She explains that just because she has never felt attraction like that does not mean she cannot understand that depth of feeling. Her asexuality does not make her less emphatic; if anything, she is the character who is most often thinking about how her friends are feeling. Though it could be argued that Alys does not linger too much on thoughts of her sexuality because she is in near-constant danger, her friends are in similar positions and have time to meditate on past romantic relationships and nurture current crushes. The fact that her asexuality is not really explored simply implies she is comfortable and confident with her asexual identity.

Steve, Ray. *Arden Grey*. Harry N. Abrams, 2022.

Arden, the protagonist of the novel who identifies as asexual but not aromantic, faces a question many allosexual teens deal with in coming-of-age narratives. How can I pursue a romantic relationship, and do I even want to, if the romantic relationships I have witnessed

are so toxic? As Arden develops a crush on a classmate, she is also watching as her father comes to terms with the fact that he has been living in an abusive relationship. She is also bearing witness to her best friend's abusive relationship. Her asexuality, and the fear that she will be rejected because of her disinterest in sex naturally lead to conversations about all the ways you can create and define a relationship that makes sense for all parties. Arden's father stays with her emotionally abusive mother because he feels he is obligated to stay with his wife and the mother of his children. Arden's best friend, who is a trans man, ignores his girlfriend's emotional abuse because he feels being in a romantic relationship will validate his gender identity. By the end of the novel, it is only Arden who is in a romantic relationship because she has decided it makes her happy, not because it is a way of meeting obligations or expectations. This highlights the importance of choosing a relationship, not settling for a relationship.

Strickland, A.M., *Beyond the Black Door*. Imprint, 2019.

Protagonist Kamai's asexuality has a practical complication in *Beyond the Black Door*. She has been raised to be a soulwalker, and soulwalkers are often sex workers, but she's sex-repulsed. She comes to understand and come to terms with her asexuality as it is explained through the world's mythology, as she sees herself and her identity as intertwined with something bigger than herself, rather than something that isolates her. In the end she comes to see her asexuality not as something to overcome, but a part of herself. As someone who had the more fantastical facets of her identity hidden from her, understanding herself is particularly important to her. Kamai's asexuality is used within the novel to challenge the idea that the best way to get close to someone is through sex and romance. Instead, the novel underlines the importance of bonds created by friendship, community, and even shared purpose.

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