

Asexual Romance in an Allosexual World: How Ace-Spectrum Characters (and Authors) Create Space for Romantic Love

By Ellen Carter

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Abstract: Recent years have seen a surge in contemporary romance novels with ace-spectrum main characters who, despite not experiencing sexual attraction, still yearn for romantic and emotional connection and their happily ever after (HEA). They must navigate as outsiders an allosexual (non-aseexual) world where sexual attraction is deemed normal, and where ace-individuals are pitied, assumed to be unwell, or suspected of having survived sexual abuse.

This corpus study of sixty-five novels explores four approaches adopted by ace characters when negotiating romantic space in an allosexual world: an open relationship with an allosexual; a closed relationship with an allosexual; a polyamorous relationship with two (or more) allosexuals; or pairing up with another ace-spectrum character. Except for ace-ace relationships, these novels therefore tread unfamiliar territory in romance fiction because the sexual desires of the main characters are not aligned. In allosexual romance novels, a libido mismatch signifies an underlying physical or emotional problem to be overcome by one or more characters. However, in asexual romance fiction, non-aligned libidos are the norm and the characters must work together to understand each other's sexual and romantic desires, and to co-create a new space in which all can thrive.

In analyzing how ace romance fiction achieves HEA and how this can inform the lenses through which allosexual romance fiction is read, I look at several factors, including the co-occurrence of other queer orientations and identities; the authors' orientation, especially those who identify as #ownvoices; how characters with different sexual desires handle consent; and discourses of romance versus intimacy.

About the Author: Ellen Carter is a Senior Lecturer in English Language and Translation at the University of Strasbourg, France and a member of the LiLPa (Linguistique, Langues, Parole) research group. Her doctorate in literary sciences was jointly awarded by the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, and the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Her research interests are in popular fiction, particularly queer – asexual and male/male –

romance novels as well as the production, translation, and reception of cross-cultural crime fiction.

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Introduction

This paper offers a snapshot of the current state of ace-spectrum romance fiction (ARF), focusing on how ace-spectrum main characters negotiate romantic relationships. In doing this, it reveals changing attitudes to one minority sexual orientation and explores how these can offer allosexuals an alternative perspective on societal and cultural issues. More broadly, it contributes to the debate within the romance industry on diversity, whether racial (for example, Beckett; Koch & Koch, '2016 Report', '2017 Report'; McCade) or other minorities (for example, Alter; Brockmann).

Defining asexuality is not easy. It has been described as a lack of sexual attraction or desire, although these terms are not synonymous (Bogaert, 'Demography' 276). Founded in 2001, the largest online asexual community, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), defines an asexual as "someone who does not experience sexual attraction" (AVEN); but Hinderliter argues this definition "even if regarded as technically accurate, is functionally problematic. People who have never felt sexual attraction do not know what sexual attraction feels like, and knowing whether or not they have ever felt it can be difficult" (620). Gazzola and Morrison note that "a general definition of asexuality remains elusive, possibly because multiple personal definitions co-exist among asexual persons" (23).

To further complicate matters, between no sexual attraction (asexuals) and sexual attraction (allosexuals[1]) a continuum extends including demisexuals, who feel sexual attraction only after forming a strong emotional bond, and gray-asexuals (gray-A, grace), who sometimes experience sexual attraction (Chasin, 'Theoretical' 717). This spectrum reveals diversity within the ace community (Haefner & Plante 281), diversity that extends to ace attitudes towards sex for themselves – from repulsed through averse, indifferent to favorable – and their attitude towards sex for others, from negative through neutral to positive. Moreover, the common conflation of sex and intimacy makes it difficult for ace individuals to find language to define and validate their relationships (Scherrer, 'Asexuality Same-Sex Marriage' 65-68). Allosexuals often assume sexual intimacy distinguishes romantic relationships from friendships and give primacy to sexual over non-sexual relationships. To counter this, the ace community has developed its own discursive tools: language as well as ways of talking about identities, relationships, and coming out (Chasin, 'Making Sense' 176-77). Perhaps because romance authors hope their audience extends beyond the ace minority, their novels translate ace experience into allosexual language, so such neologisms are rarely used and, if they appear, may be in the context of an ace character self-educating by surfing the AVEN website (for example, 'squish', Lennox *Blank* loc. 2835). Given this many-faceted diversity, in this paper I use 'ace' or 'ace-spectrum' for anyone who does not identify as allosexual.

However defined, asexuality should not be confused with the agency and choice assumed in abstinence, celibacy or chastity; cannot be ascribed to mental disorder

(American Psychiatric Association 434, 443), physical disease or sexual abuse; and cannot assume an absence of sexual behavior. Asexuality is about an absence of sexual attraction, not necessarily an absence of sexual action. Luckily for romance writers, ace individuals date, fall in love, get married, and even have sex, if that contributes to relationship goals, such as conceiving children or satisfying the needs and desires of their partner(s).

Academics have published on asexuality since the 1948 study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, where Kinsey et al. identified a group labelled X for “no socio-sexual contacts or reactions” (656), estimated at 1.5% in American men aged 16-55 (654). In their 1953 follow-up study of women, X became “do not respond erotically to either heterosexual or homosexual stimuli, and do not have overt physical contacts with individuals of either sex in which there is evidence of any response” (472), with an incidence for American women aged 20-36 of 14-19% among unmarried females, 1-3% among married females, and 5-8% among previously married females; compared to 3-4% for unmarried males, 0% for married males and 1-2% for previously married males (488). These estimates of asexuality incidence were not challenged until analysis of two British National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles reported “never having been sexually attracted to anyone” among 0.9% (0.8% men; 1.0% women) of participants in the 1990-1991 survey and 0.4% (0.3% men; 0.5% women) in 2000-2001 (Aicken et al. 125).

Among researchers studying social and psychological aspects of asexuality, Anthony Bogaert is probably the best known figure, having published his first asexuality paper in 2004 (‘Asexuality Prevalence’) followed by a 2012 book-length study (*Understanding Asexuality*). Brotto et al. surveyed asexuals through the AVEN website, finding that 80% scored highly on social withdrawal with their average score in the clinical range for social inhibition (605). They suggested that asexuality might be related to “Schizoid Personality Disorder, characterized by emotional coldness, limited capacity to express warm feelings towards others, and lacking desire for close, confiding relationships” (608), a finding bolstered during interviews with a subset of participants (611). Other research suggests asexuals are:

substantially lower in extraversion and in some facets of emotionality [dependence and sentimentality] relative to all other sexual orientation groups [...] This pattern dovetails with findings that asexual people are less likely, relative to the sexual majority, to form social and emotional connections – sexual and otherwise – with others (Bogaert et al. 9).

Despite this correlation between asexuality and lower sociality/emotionality, the authors were careful to avoid speculating on causality, noting that the study relied on self-identification of sexual orientation and self-report of personality.

Gazzola and Morrison (2012) studied discrimination among asexuals responding to a survey on the AVEN website. They found a fairly low level of discriminatory events and associated stress (32), but that family of origin could be a source of stress (34), with asexuals most likely to disclose their identity to romantic partners, old friends, and mental health professionals (33). More broadly, 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' (734). Asexual discrimination and oppression can also come from the wider queer community. When interviewed for the documentary *(A)sexual*, Dan Savage, a prominent American LGBT activist, said:

I believe that if you're asexual you shouldn't be dating someone who wants to fuck something. I believe that you have to disclose [...] you shouldn't ethically, morally, have gotten into a relationship with a sexual if you are asexual (Tucker, 47m17 – 47m38).

As we will see, some romance fiction authors do not share Savage's opinion and write allosexuals happily dating ace characters. This lack of acceptance by some members of the queer community appears in ARF:

It's difficult to maintain strong relationships with people who dismiss an integral part of your identity. I think that's why I have so few close friends. Even within the LBGTQIA+ community, there is still a lot of work to be done (Arthur, *Uniquely Us* loc. 1516).

Beyond asexuality studies, research has set human sexual desire against romantic attraction. A biobehavioral model (Diamond) identifies different physiological processes, with romantic attraction mediated by oxytocin and opioids, while sexual desire is controlled by gonadal estrogens and androgens. Brain imaging studies (Fisher et al. 60) suggest neurological distinctiveness, with different brain regions associated with sex drive compared to romantic love, which involves dopamine reward pathways. Gonzaga et al. (174) found romantic love is a commitment device binding romantic partners in long-term relations, while sexual desire is associated with short-term mating strategies.

In their survey of AVEN users Brotto et al. (603) found significantly more asexual women (20.8%) than men (7.4%) were then in relationships. Of these, 23% of women and 56% of men described their relationships in romantic (e.g. heteroromantic) rather than sexual (e.g. heterosexual) terms. ARF offers a powerful tool for unpacking human sexuality to expose the tacit conflation of sexual desire with romantic attraction. In allosexual romance fiction, characters identify as 'x-sexual', where x= a, bi, hetero,[2] homo, pan...etc, with the parallel 'x-romantic' identity taken as read. In some ARF, by contrast, characters explicitly describe themselves as x-romantic,[3] with this bifurcation allowing characters to refine their identity to, for example, biromantic asexual (Kann) or aromantic pansexual (Zabo). However, even in most ARF the ace character's romantic orientation is only implicit in the gender identity and expression of the other main character(s).

Although real-life couples face sexual desire discrepancies (Davies et al.), enduring sexual incompatibility is rare in allosexual romance fiction. Instead, novels pair characters whose sexual drives will align by the book's end, even if one person's libido was lower before meeting their one (or more) true love. If there is initial incompatibility, this can become a plot point linked to underlying physical, social, or psychological issues through which the main characters work to earn their HEA. Nonetheless, a few allosexual romance novels mention sexual incompatibility in prior failed relationships, with asexuality sometimes incorrectly blamed. For example, when a closeted gay man comes out to his fiancée, she

responds: “I suppose that explains why you never pressed for sex [...] I told myself you were either asexual or impotent” (Dean & Reed loc. 1855). Similarly, when ex-boyfriends discuss their failed relationship, one says: “I wondered if maybe you were ace” (Hassell loc 2949).

However, as we will see, an increasing number of romance novels do not write off asexual characters as doomed to a relationship-less existence but instead explore non-allonormative ways of relating.

Ace-spectrum romance fiction corpus

My corpus contains sixty-five English-language romance novels and novellas, all with at least one ace-spectrum main character and published before mid-2018. While most are contemporary, their subgenres span historical, paranormal, fantasy, sci-fi, romantic suspense, young adult/new adult (YA/NA) and even erotic with BDSM elements. I found titles through general and ace-specific blogs and book-related websites. While trying to be exhaustive, I will have missed some novels that deserve to be included so cannot be certain that this sample is truly representative of the genre. Nonetheless, ARF is a niche. Searching “asexual romance” on amazon.com on October 23, 2018 returned thirty-eight results, while “demisexual romance” generated seven and “aromantic romance” two. By contrast, “transgender romance” produced 2,731 hits, “bisexual romance” 4,104, “lesbian romance” 15,043, and “gay romance” 46,730.

In my corpus, two novels were published in each of 2012, 2013, and 2014, then fourteen in 2015, twenty-eight in 2016, twelve in 2017 and five to mid-2018. The 2016 peak may suggest that publishers, jumping on the bandwagon of male/male (MM; gay male) romance growth and looking to other queer minorities for product line extension, tested the ace market in 2015-2016 then waited to see reader response before deciding whether to commission further novels. The drop in 2017 might suggest that disappointing sales and feedback from this market test led to it being abandoned, or that the test was successful but, having emptied the pipeline of unpublished ARF novels, it will take time for more to move into print. Only time will tell.

Investigating the publishers of ARF provides further data to forecast market development. Fifty-two (80%) of my novels are from queer romance houses, chiefly Less than Three, Dreamspinner/Harmony Ink, and Riptide. Four (6%) are self-published (three in 2017), while nine (14%) are from general publishers (imprints of Harlequin, Penguin RandomHouse, Macmillan, and Kensington), all but one published in 2016 or later. Given their focus on e-publishing and reliance on author self-promotion, independent queer romance houses sink less capital into each novel (Tian & Martin 240), meaning they risk less if it sinks without a trace so can perhaps better afford to be first-movers. By contrast, given that only four of the forty-eight novels published to the end of the 2016 peak came from general imprints suggests that they were monitoring the independents and saw market signals suggesting it was worth investing. An analogy to this interplay between queer versus general publishers can be seen in 1960s gay pulp fiction, where Gunn and Harker trace “a direct line of erotic writing [...] all the way to their usurpation and reinvention as M/M romance for women readers in the present century” (15-16). Early gay pulp publishers were not mainstream but erotica houses which added a gay line to existing straight and lesbian

lines (5). Only time will tell whether ARF fades away, survives as a niche, or becomes sufficiently robust to warrant dedicated imprints.

In total, fifty-eight authors penned my sixty-five novels, with eight authors writing more than one book and three novels having two authors. Forty-two (72%) authors identify as cis women, nine (16%) as non-binary, six (10%) as cis men, and one (2%) as a trans man. Where I could determine the authors' sexual/romantic orientation (often based on their social media presence), the findings were: twelve (21%) asexual, two (3%) aromantic, one (2%) gray-asexual, one (2%) demiromantic, six (10%) bisexual, six (10%) non-binary, three (5%) homosexual, one (2%) pansexual, and one (2%) polyamorous. For the remaining twenty-five (43%) I could find no orientation. These include many female authors who mentioned their husband and/or children in biographies, but (probably because being straight is deemed 'normal') do not come out as heterosexual. Overall, thirty-three (57%) authors identify as queer, writing forty-five (69%) of the books in my corpus. Sixteen (28%) authors identify as ace-spectrum, writing twenty (31%) books, meaning that the corpus is substantially #ownvoices, with marginalized authors writing marginalized characters. However, it is worth noting that ace authors were relatively late entrants, first publishing in 2015: the six earlier books were by bisexual or 'unspecified' authors.

At this early phase of ARF development the high proportion of #ownvoices is analogous to 1960s gay pulp – written and read by gay men (Gunn & Harker) – but which morphed into modern M/M romance where most authors (and readers) are straight women (Knight). Again, ARF has too few data points to forecast how the authorial landscape may shift, but given the tiny ace-spectrum demographic, substantial ARF growth would require non-ace authors. This might call into question representation authenticity. This is not a new issue and other minority romance sub-genres, such as transgender, have found solutions including sensitivity readers.

#ownvoices authors are also diverse. For three the ARF is their only published novel (Kennedy; Lynne; O'Steen), but others are well into double or even triple digits of (non-ARF) works listed on Goodreads, and have garnered popular and critical success. One leading light in queer romance is TJ Klune, who is open about his asexuality ('Asexuality & Me'). In 2014, he won the Lambda Literary Award for best gay romance. In 2017, he was named all-time favorite M/M author by Goodreads' 24,000-plus member 'M/M Romance Group'. In 2018, he signed two separate six-figure deals with Tor Books, each for a three-book series with queer (but not asexual) characters (Deahl). For 2019 publication, he has announced two ace romances. When asked for the favorite thing he has written, Klune nominated his asexual romance *How to Be a Normal Person* ('Response'), although readers disagree: its Goodreads 'average rating' ranks it only sixteenth among his twenty-eight published books, and seventh on 'popularity'.

Many ace authors were motivated by frustration at not seeing their lived experience represented in romance fiction. Some authors make this explicit, either in a book's dedication:

To all the asexual activists out there without whom I would still be thinking of myself as merely weird, wrong, and slightly inhuman. In the hope that the more people talk about it, the fewer people there will be in the world who reach my age without knowing what they are (Beecroft loc. 35).

It is my goal to show [asexuals] that they can live a wholly satisfying, fulfilling life without ever wanting sex, and it's not something to ever be ashamed of or feel guilty over (Grey loc. 31).

Or online: "Being asexual myself, I wanted to see more accurate ace representation" (Klune, 'Response'); "My main goal was to write the representation I wish I'd seen growing up" (Lynne, cited in Alice).

The existence of ARF illustrates ever more granular facets of human experience. Just as romance fiction's one-dimensional sexual orientation axis became a plane once it intersected with gender identity allowing non-cisgender characters to get their HEA, so ARF extends this geometry into three dimensions by overlaying romantic orientation and showing that it cannot always be conflated with sexual orientation. My ARF corpus does not offer a single novel with two cisgender heteroromantic main characters. Of the six books with male and female main characters, two have trans characters, one is aromantic, one biromantic, and two are polyamorous F/M/M. All these ARF novels are therefore multiply queer, with characters identifying as ace and one or more other minorities. This prevalence is well above the current estimate of 3.5% of American adults identifying as LGB and 0.3% as transgender (Gates 6), or a meta-analysis of studies from six countries that found estimates of LGB individuals varying from 2-15% (Julien & Chartrand 240). This multiply queer identity has also been found within the ace community. When Scherrer ('Asexual Identity' 634) recruited asexual participants from AVEN, twenty-three (25%) of ninety indicated a queer romantic orientation. However, her sample may not accurately reflect the ace population: heteronormative pressure perhaps incites queer asexuals to question their romantic orientation and in the process also to examine their sexual orientation and discover asexuality, about which straight 'asexuals' remain unaware.

Scherrer ('Asexual Identity' 635) noted that "even when sex is explicitly out of the equation, identity still revolves around the gendered object choice". Fifty-five (85%) of the corpus novels depict homoromantic relationships: thirty-nine M/M, eight M/M/M+ and eight F/F. Despite recent growth in M/M romance, it still lags behind straight romance in terms of sales and visibility, so it might seem strange that ARF has coopted an already minority subgenre rather than directly infiltrating straight romance. However, I posit that authors and publishers believe straight female readers who already enjoy one aspect of queer culture will be more interested in another. A second way of easing readers into ARF comes through subgenres. There are nine (14%) paranormal romance novels, one sci-fi and one historical novel: a low figure given the appetite for M/F regency romances, but understandable given asexuality's recent recognition as an orientation. However, the largest subgenre is YA/NA with fourteen (22%) books, often featuring an ace character discovering their orientation.

Characters' ace-spectrum orientation appears on the page in forty-seven (72%) novels, compared to eleven (17%) where it is in paratextual marketing material on the publisher's website, and seven (11%) where it is only found in author comments, often on social media. Some authors regret not putting a character's ace orientation on the page. When asked whether there was anything she would change in her novel, non-ace author Laura Nowlin replied:

Because terms change meaning so quickly in our society, I chose not to use the words “Ace” or “asexual” within the book. I worried that someday they would not [sic] longer be the preferred term, or perhaps ‘Ace’ would come to mean someone who was asexual but not aromantic etc. I wish that I have put something in my Author’s note thanking Asexuality.org or other resources that I used for research, just in case [it] wasn’t 100% clear for a reader my intentions for Tom’s character (Astarlia).

Similarly, non-ace author Vanessa North tweeted: “Adam from High and Tight is demisexual, but again, word isn’t stated in text. I regret that choice” (@byVanessaNorth, “Adam”), followed by “I knew, and wrote him that way, but didn’t know how to address it without going didactic” (@byVanessaNorth, “Didactic”).

Relationship patterns forged by ace-spectrum characters

Within this corpus, ace characters find their HEA or happy for now (HFN) in one of four ways: ace character plus allosexual (47 novels; 72%); polyamorous relationship (9 novels; 14%); two ace characters (7 novels; 11%); or in an open relationship (2 novels; 3%).

The two open relationship novels handle the issue of secondary partners differently. In *Blank Spaces*, by asexual author Cass Lennox, hypersexual Jonah is paired with asexual Vaughn, who eventually suggests an open relationship:

we’ll kiss and get naked together. But I also think maybe we could work up to me giving you a handjob someday [...] but you can keep doing the usual stuff you do. Go out to clubs, use Grindr, get what you need from those places [...] Then come home and let me take care of the rest (*Blank* loc. 4444).

Although Jonah agrees, and the epilogue shows them content in their open arrangement, the publisher’s website classes the novel as HFN (Riptide) and in the next novel in the series Vaughn’s relationship status is ‘it’s complicated’ (*Finding* loc. 2754). By contrast, in *Ace of Hearts* (Sephrian), the couple find an HEA solution by which asexual Blake, the director of photography for a pornography studio, remains a passive participant in his pansexual boyfriend’s sex life by filming Felix as a porn model.

Of the nine novels with polyamorous relationships, six have triads with one ace and two allosexual characters, one has an ace with five allosexuals, and two have ‘vee relationships’ where an allosexual is the ‘pivot’ between an ace and another allosexual. There are four ways in which these arrangements develop during the novels. Firstly, in four books an ace and an allosexual are already in a relationship and find another (four) allosexual(s) to satisfy the allosexual’s needs. The pre-existing pairing can be a stable romantic relationship (Valenza, *Alexey*; Land), a romantic relationship in trouble (Arthur, *Hot Licks*), or a YA friendship (Burns & Ricci) that becomes romantic with the second allosexual. Secondly, in three books two allosexuals already in a relationship add an ace character. Again, the pre-existing pairing can be a stable romantic/sexual relationship (Ricci; Kasey), or a YA friendship (Nowlin). Thirdly, two allosexuals are in a romantic/sexual relationship before

one becomes a pivot in a vee relationship when he starts a romantic relationship with an ace character (Valenza, *Breakfire*). Finally, an ace and an allosexual are friends, then a second allosexual becomes a pivot between them, being romantically involved with the ace character and romantically/sexually involved in a BDSM arrangement with the allosexual (Burke).

In the seven novels with two ace characters, how the relationship develops depends on how characters learn about their orientation. In three novels, an ace main character introduces the other to the concept of asexuality, often explaining a prior behavior pattern. *All the Wrong Places* (Gallagher) opens with Brennan's third girlfriend in a row breaking up with him after cheating because "A woman has needs, Bren [...] He does things that you don't" (loc. 77). Seeking advice, he goes to a sex shop where he meets the clerk, Zafir, who educates Brennan about asexuality and the two slowly form a romantic relationship. A novel by asexual author A.M. Arthur (*Uniquely Us*) has demisexual Taro Ichikawa educating asexual Dell Greenwood, who struggles to accept his orientation, wondering if instead he has been broken by his past: beaten by his family for being gay, drug addiction, prostitution, homelessness and now a gay porn videographer. Also by an asexual author, *We Awaken* (Lynne) is an FF YA fantasy with a dreamspirit educating a high-school student who "didn't seem to have grown out of the kissing-is-icky phase we spent our whole youth in? People really enjoyed kissing – that was one fact of life – so obviously I believed I would enjoy it too one day" (loc. 205). In the other four novels, characters either know their orientation before finding each other or learn from secondary characters. In two of these books, the characters explicitly identify as ace from the start (Aarons-Hughes; Miller), but in the other two the identification is implicit or comes later. In *The Painted Crown*, a historical fantasy by asexual author Megan Derr, the characters allude to their demisexual/gray-asexual orientation, for example: "Rarely was Istari interested in anyone, sexually or romantically. Most of the time, he simply didn't care" (loc. 240), or Teverem saying "I have never been as inclined toward certain... amorous elements as most people, and that tends to put people off marrying me. I'm not entirely disinterested, just... there must be something built before I feel amorously inclined" (loc. 1637). In *His Quiet Agent* (Soto), demisexual Arthur is educated by an allosexual but the main couple never use labels with each other: asexual Martin:

raised his hand and touched his fingers to his forehead. 'I can give you this.' He lowered his hand and pressed the tips of his fingers to the center of his chest. 'And I can give you this. But not the rest. It's not who I am. Or what I am' (loc. 1330).

Regardless of how characters discover their asexuality, these seven ace-ace relationships represent an almost unattainable model for real-life ace individuals; Mark Carrigan found that "it was rare to find relationships between two asexual individuals but much less rare to find asexual individuals who sought such a relationship as their ideal" (12).

The largest group of forty-seven novels pair an ace character with an allosexual. These can be further partitioned by where on the ace-spectrum the character identifies: twenty-four are asexual (including one asexual-aromantic), seventeen demisexual, four gray-asexual and two aromantic. Crafting a credible path to HEA is less challenging for authors writing demisexual or gray-asexual characters since these orientations experience sexual attraction under certain circumstances. Therefore, here I focus on pairings with

asexual or aromantic characters because these require authors to challenge allosexual norms.

Two novels have aromantic-allosexual characters looking for sexual rather than romantic intimacy, and one has an asexual-aromantic looking for neither; all three were written by ace authors. In *The Trouble* (Defore), aromantic wannabe rock star Danny crushes on his accounting TA Jiyoon. Danny explains his orientation:

“I’m aromantic, you know.” Danny looked down at the table. “I don’t fall in love with people. I was gonna tell you before, but... I didn’t. I dunno if it matters, but I don’t have a hidden agenda. The other night was really fun. Not just the sex parts. I liked talking to you. So if we could do that more, that’d be cool” (loc. 665).

Jiyoon googles ‘How to date an aromantic person’ then develops a spreadsheet of things important to him in a relationship – mutual respect, compatible goals, and kindness more than romance (loc. 1842) – and they develop a committed sexual relationship. In *Syncopation* (Zabo), rock star Ray hires as his drummer aromantic pansexual and BDSM-kinky Zavier, who assumes he will never settle down because he will never find anyone accepting of his aromanticism. Zavier does not come out to Ray until late in the novel but then is astonished how well Ray takes it, and that he does not need it explained. Their relationship – built on kink and friendship – develops until they reach their HEA and marry to forestall legal/healthcare problems. In *Open Skies* (Kleinn), the only ace-aro novel and the only sci-fi, after an unwanted kiss from her business partner of seven years, Ilsa struggles to make Kai understand how she feels about him:

“Like family,” she said. “Like a partner. Like the best friend I’ve ever had. I do love you. Why do we have to sleep together for that to count?” [...] “Sex. Romance. I don’t need them, and I don’t want them. Not from you or anyone else. I’m not interested” (loc. 1608).

Ilsa runs from Kai, who pursues her across the galaxy until finding her three years later and they resume their business partnership and friendship, despite Kai still being in love with Ilsa: “But that’s my problem. I’ll get over it” (loc. 1811).

Within the twenty-four novels pairing an asexual with an allosexual, there are five paths to relationship development with increasing levels of sexual intimacy. Three books have no sexual contact: the ace-aro *Open Skies* (apart from an unwanted kiss, see above), a YA novel (Ramsey), and a paranormal novella (Rabig). Thirteen show only kissing and/or hugging on the page but some of these ace characters indicate they might be open to more later, while four have kissing/hugging plus sex-toys (Dennis), grinding (Gideon), hand-jobs (Phoenix), or oral (Grey).

Four novels move beyond foreplay, but with contrasting attitudes from the ace character. Two involve M/M anal penetration with sex-repulsed asexual characters who either negotiate the frequency of sex:

“Can we have sex again?”
“I guess, when you want to.”
“So, every night, then?”
Jake laughed, “No!”
“Every second night?”
“We don’t even live together, except on weekends!”
“Three times a week, then! Easy.”
Jake groaned. “How about once a week?” (Byrne loc. 3096).

Or need to mentally prepare, such as Aidan in *Blue Steel Chain* by asexual Alex Beecroft:

This evening, knowing sex was on the cards, he would spend half an hour beforehand putting himself into the mood, arousing himself with his own hands, and then he would be prepared, and – because James was a gentle and considerate lover – he would probably even enjoy it. He just really didn’t like the damn thing looming at him unexpectedly out of the blue (loc. 3053).

Carrigan (14) similarly found real-life relationships to be more problematic for sex-repulsed/averse rather than sex-indifferent/favorable individuals.

By contrast, two novels show sex acts in which the ace character experiences secondary sexual desire: “The desire to engage in sexual activity for the purposes other than personal pleasure, such as the happiness of the other person involved or the conception of children” (AVENwiki). In *Bender* (Gant) asexual Mace reassures allosexual Dex that:

You’re not using me, Dex. I keep telling you, that’s not how I feel. I do get something out of letting you make love to me. I get the pleasure of your pleasure. I get the pleasure of knowing that I’m special to you (loc. 1278).

Similarly, in *Thaw* by asexual Elyse Springer, asexual Abby tells allosexual Gabrielle:

But that’s not what sex is. For most people, I think it’s another level of intimacy, of trust. It’s a way to show love. For me, it’s a way that I can help you relax, and show you that I’m willing to meet you halfway in a relationship. Nothing more (Springer loc. 2720).

Secondary sexual desire also comes up in novels that do not go all the way. In *Coffee Cake* by asexual Michaela Grey, asexual Bran explains to his brother:

“It’s called secondary desire,” Bran said. “I want it because *Mal* wants it, and I love giving him pleasure. Not everything is about the trophy at the end of the race. *Running* the race can be every bit as fun as, uh... winning first place” (emphasis in original, loc. 1897).

And it is discussed as a future possibility to deepen emotional intimacy. In *Finding Your Feet* by asexual Cass Lennox, asexual Evie explains to allosexual trans man Tyler that “sex isn’t a

priority for me. At all. So I don't sleep with anyone unless they're really important to me, and I'm important to them, and they need sex to happen to show that" (*Finding* loc. 2696).

Overall, these four fictional relationship patterns mirror findings from real-life ace individuals, who report similar hopes and fears. Those in ace-ace pairings "talked about the advantage of not having to contend with 'the messiness' of relationships. They reported being able to be naked and physically close to their partners without the pressure or expectation that it would lead to intercourse" (Brotto et al. 612). Those in ace-allo pairings "face exaggerated discrepancies between each partners' level of sexual desire" (Chasin, 'Reconsidering' 407) and "talked about having to negotiate what types of sexual activities they were willing to take part in, the frequency, and the boundaries around the relationship in the event that the asexual did not engage in any sexual activity" (Brotto et al. 612). Some ace individuals accept sexual activity outside the relationship, as long as non-monogamy is at the sexual, rather than romantic, level (Brotto et al.; Van Houdenhove et al.), while others seek polyamorous relationship structures as a means to non-sexual intimacy (Copulsky; Dawson et al.; Scherrer, 'Asexual Polyamory').

What ace-spectrum romance fiction reveals about love

Having identified four ways by which fictional ace individuals find their HEA, which real-world insights does this generate? Here, I attend to two: romance versus intimacy, and consent. In analyzing stories about love and relationships, Shumway identified a shift during the twentieth century from a discourse of romance – which climaxes in the founding of a long-term relationship (or, in romance-genre-speak, an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending to a central love story) – towards a discourse of intimacy within an established relationship. Given the accusation often leveled at the romance genre of setting unrealistic expectations around HEAs, ARF could therefore be read as evolving the genre beyond the romance discourse's ideal of "adventure, intense emotion, and the possibility of finding the perfect mate [towards the discourse of intimacy in] deep communication, friendship, and sharing that will last beyond the passion of new love" (Shumway loc. 590). However, going beyond 'Reader, I married him' to portray the perpetual effort of nurturing a relationship that challenges allosexual definitions of perfection may prove to be the fundamental flaw condemning ARF to niche status. Perhaps the typical romance reader has no interest in spending her limited free time immersed in fictional relationship trials and tribulations when she could live this by closing the novel. Romance readers are no fools – they know compromise lies beyond the epilogue's proposal – but for a moment they can believe otherwise, an illusion punctured by ARF.

Additionally, in analyzing relationship advice and self-help books, Shumway found that:

whatever else constitutes intimacy, sex remains a part of it. The general assumption is that the sexual aspect of a relationship is strongly determined by its general psychological or communicative state. That is to say, the more the partners succeed in the intimacy process, the more likely they are to have satisfactory sexual relations (Shumway loc. 2748).

On the surface, the importance of ‘satisfactory sexual relations’ could be an impediment to ARF’s credibility and longevity. But, it can also be an opportunity to interrogate norms by requiring characters to externalize attitudes towards sex for themselves and others, “[calling] into question taken for granted patterns of intimate life within our predominately sexual society” (Carrigan 15), since:

given certain conditions within a relationship it is possible for some asexual individuals to appreciate sex, even though for them it doesn’t involve the satisfaction of sexual desire [...] the necessary conditions for this sort of a/sexual compromise within a relationship are a lack of aversion to sex and the active pursuit of an ideal of romantic involvement (14-15).

Nonetheless, one caveat remains: “When sexual activity ceases to be the *sine qua non* of intimacy, an otherwise stable and naturalized boundary between ‘friendship’ and ‘relationship’ becomes decidedly fuzzier” (15).

Consent is a second theme made more visible in ace than allosexual romance fiction. This can surface as a discussion of intimacy boundaries: for example, in the YA *As Autumn Leaves*, allosexual Althea asks what asexual Kayla likes:

I don’t know, I just don’t. I don’t have a lot to go on, and I don’t know how far I will and won’t like it. Sex is a no. Cuddling is a yes. Holding hands is a yes. Kissing is – mostly a yes, but maybe sometimes a no? I have no idea. (Sands loc. 1165).

Once the allosexual understands the ace’s identity, they are usually solicitous of their partner’s needs with consent becoming an ongoing discussion in which the ace character progressively agrees to kissing, then hugging, then sexual touching, then...

This checking in and seeking explicit consent perhaps differentiates ARF by departing from an adherence to normative Western (allo)sexual scripts common to romance novels in which sexual behavior naturally and unconsciously develops in the ‘correct’ order (Dana Ménard & Cabrera). In ARF, this becomes a conscious process where both parties check in with each other about how things are moving and adapt to their situation the attitudes and assumptions inculcated from allosexual norms. As a result, relationships are crafted to the specific needs of these individuals rather than borrowed from societal expectations. This ongoing conversation is a two-way process, not just reliant on the allosexual asking permission to move to the next phase. Some ace characters seek reassurance that their allosexual partner is okay with the slow pace of development in their physical intimacy: “I trust you, man. I care about you. I just hope I don’t need to sleep with you for you to believe me” (Klune, *Normal Person* loc. 2895). This ongoing consent discussion can also involve backing off from deeper physical intimacy that has already occurred. In *Thaw* (Springer), asexual Abby and allosexual Gabrielle had sex without Abby revealing her orientation. Abby later comes out and says she does not want sex in the future, making Gabrielle worry she manipulated or forced Abby, who reassures her. It should be noted that the prominence of explicit consent in ARF could simply reflect the relatively recent publication dates: it would be interesting to study how the #MeToo movement and similar cultural discussions have influenced consent in romance fiction more broadly.

Dana Ménard and Cabrera (249) found that in allosexual romance fiction the female partner is more likely to receive sexual acts initiated by the male. In ARF, roles are coded not by gender identity (not surprising, given the multiply queer corpus), but by sexual orientation: the allosexual (mostly) initiates and the ace receives. On rare occasions when these roles reverse – an asexual using Scrabble™ tiles to ask “CANIKISSYOU” (Klune, *Normal Person* loc. 2865); an asexual introducing an allosexual to sex toys (Dennis chap.16); or an aromantic giving his partner a bouquet that harks back to a meaningful moment (Zabo chap.25) – the allosexual receives with delight, as evidence of the ace character’s commitment to their relationship.

No matter how explicit the consent process, the ramping up of sexual behavior is not always seamless: the ace character can need time to adapt to new options, especially if they have only recently discovered their orientation. In the polyamorous *Crush* (Ricci), Bruce and Co-Co, two allosexuals already in a sexual relationship, add their roommate Trey. Initially Trey, knowing nothing about asexuality, is attracted to Bruce and they kiss, but Trey worries Bruce wants more: “I started getting nervous. I mean, I’d hardly even been the kissing type. And now he wanted me on the bed? I wasn’t ready for what came next” (loc. 1747). Bruce reassures him, Co-Co educates him about asexuality, and the three acknowledge their romantic attraction, leading to a more physical relationship.

In the weeks following that afternoon, I found out that Co-Co and Bryce liked to have sex a lot. And I was always invited. I sat on the bed and held Co-Co’s hand, or I kissed Bryce, or sometimes I let them be alone and made a sandwich and watched TV. But they kept the door open even when I wasn’t there, because I was still welcome to watch and to come be a part of what they had. I liked that, liked that I could be included in something that was so intimate between them, without actually having to take part (loc. 1864).

Trey’s involvement builds until Co-Co offers: “if you ever wanted to see if you liked something you saw us doing, we’d help you. We’d stop as soon as you said no, and no one’s feelings would get hurt at all” (loc. 2069). Although Trey does not take them up on the offer, he says: “That means a lot, you know. That it would be okay to say no and stop, and I could still be here with you both, and things would still be okay between us” (loc. 2071) and the novel ends without Trey taking part in penetrative sex.

Although uncommon in this corpus, sometimes an allosexual who has had their partner’s preferences explained still prioritizes their own sexual needs and pushes an ace character beyond their comfort zone, such as in the two examples discussed above (Beecroft; Byrne) of sex-repulsed asexuals talked into having sex more frequently than desired, or at inopportune times. Moreover, the concept of consent itself is equivocal: “Although asexuals rejected the notion that they were engaging in nonconsensual sexual activity with their sexual partners, their consensual sexual activity was unwanted” (Brotto et al. 612).

Before concluding, I must acknowledge two study limitations. In creating my corpus, I was as comprehensive as possible, but I will have missed works deserving inclusion (and I thank in advance any readers of this article who suggest additions). Despite this constraint, I draw solace from observing that the experiences of fictional ace characters seem to overlap those reported by scholars studying real-life ace individuals. The second disadvantage is harder to overcome: that I am an asexual aromantic. While my insider perspective was an

advantage in some ways, I may have gone too far in analyzing and extrapolating from my data, making claims for the power of ARF to challenge and illuminate norms of allosexual romance fiction that others would dispute simply because I hoped to find them.

In conclusion, having surveyed the current state of ARF a question remains: is ace-spectrum romance fiction a fad, a trend, or a necessary change? It is too early to tell, but four indicators are worth monitoring. First, how many ARF novels are published in each future year, and through which channels? Given the wealth of data available from online sales platforms, and popular romance's short production timeframes, if reader demand is more than a temporary fad already met by the existing corpus, then authors/publishers will supply. Who these authors are provides the second indicator: the proportion of #ownvoices. This will fall if allosexual authors see enduring market potential and (copying the trend of straight women writing M/M romance) invest in overcoming the knowledge barriers to entry. Third, will ARF novels continue to educate characters (and readers) about asexuality, or will it become taken as read in the same way that M/M romance does not explain homosexuality? Finally, will ace characters increasingly find their HEA in the largest romance sub-genre of cisgender heteroromantic novels, making those who identify as ace-spectrum just another love-worthy minority? After all, if sex without love is possible, why not love without sex?

[1] The term preferred to 'sexual' by many in the ace community to avoid the sense that any one identity is more normal than others.

[2] Although given heteronormative culture, few characters come out as straight.

[3] These terms have only recently entered mainstream usage. 'Aromantic', 'biromantic', 'heteroromantic', and 'homoromantic', as well as 'ace' as a shortened form of asexual, were only added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the June 2018 update. 'Panromantic' is not present, although 'pansexual' was also added in June 2018 (OED). None of 'alloromantic', 'allosexual', 'demiromantic', 'demisexual', 'grayromantic' or 'graysexual' were indexed in the *OED* as of October 2018.

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