

Genre-savvy Protagonists in Queer YA Rom-coms

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LGBTQIA+ characters (and their quests for love) are increasingly appearing in YA fiction, and more specifically in YA romantic comedies. The rom-com, particularly in its most mainstream and familiar Hollywood form, has long been rooted in heteronormativity, in so far as it rarely deviates from or offers any substantive variation of the boy-meets-girl model of romantic love. This is something that adolescent readers will surely be aware of. Likewise, many marginalised young adult protagonists are characterised by an awareness of these same conventions, thus placed by their authors in a metatextual conversation with the very genre they inhabit.

In the first chapter of Emery Lee's 2021 YA novel, *Meet Cute Diary*, the protagonist, Noah, laments the state of his love life. He's frustrated with his lack of a boyfriend, but also resigned to this being *just the way that things are*. He narrates:

But then, I also know how this works. I'm a gay, triracial trans guy who only passes when the sun aligns with the moon just right and the earth tilts upside down. Dudes like me don't just get to stumble into the perfect little meet cute. No, if we want meet cutes, we have to make them ourselves. (Lee, 2021, p.13)

Meet Cute Diary is an excellent example of how contemporary queer YA writers may use intertextuality for genre commentary. These authors show their characters directly

referencing classic rom-coms or demonstrating encyclopaedic knowledge of tropes and genre conventions, including—importantly—the fact that queer love often does not exist within this framework. As the above quotation emphasises, these characters “know how this works”. The tension between desiring to conform to romantic tropes and patterns, versus the risk of being “shut out” of a Happily Ever After for not fitting its popular model, is an anxiety that underlines these novels, leading to both comedy and drama.

Tropes and conventions may function as a sort of shared language: as Farah Mendlesohn writes in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, “In one sense, this is almost the definition of genre, the building of that common bible of expectations” (2008, p.99). These novels use this “bible of expectations”, shared by their fictional characters and their implied readers, to underpin both a critique and a celebration of the rom-com formula.

Meet Cute Diary follows self-described romance nerd Noah, who has distilled his knowledge of rom-com tropes into a twelve-step guide to the ultimate relationship. These steps, also used as section titles in the novel, are the meet cute, the hand of destiny, the invitation, the consultation (a.k.a. the first date), the trip (a.k.a. the fall, part 1), the hesitation, the tether, the fall, the catch, the release, the gesture, and the happily ever after. Noah uses this formula to write fictional “meet cutes” on his blog, and intends to follow it when he enters a fake romance with a boy named Drew. Noah, applying his familiarity with the rom-com formula to his real life, is assured that his fake relationship with Drew will inevitably, adorably unfold into something real. When mapped against the twelve steps, their relationship appears to be progressing just perfectly.

Yet Noah is paying such close attention to the fulfilment of these twelve steps—i.e., the ways in which his life is finally fitting into the expected pattern of a rom-com—that he misses emerging red flags in his relationship. Drew is emotionally manipulative, controlling, and even leverages the romance formula against Noah. It also means that, simultaneously, Noah is oblivious to his growing feelings for a different, much more awkward and less picture-perfect love interest, named Devin.

In the end, Noah breaks up with Drew, and after some trials and tribulations, achieves a happy ending with Devin, instead. In the breakup with Drew, the rom-com formula is taken apart and critiqued. Noah’s reliance on it and insistence on forcing himself into a normative vision of romantic happiness made him miserable. Yet, the rom-com formula also remains intact in Noah’s relationship with Devin—complete with meet cutes, interventions of fate, grand gestures, and the promise of a happy future against all odds. Arguably, *Meet Cute Diary* queers the formula; it does so not just by having this romance occur between queer and trans characters, but by injecting some queer critique into the very formula in which it exists.

Similarly, but taking a different tact, Alice Oseman’s 2020 YA novel *Loveless* stars a protagonist in love with love in a narrative that interrogates those familiar romance codes through a queer lens. Georgia is, like Noah, attuned to the tropes of the good old fashioned rom-com. Fiction is the frame of reference used to express Georgia’s romantic idealism at the beginning of *Loveless*:

I just. Loved. *Love* [...] I was a dreamer, maybe, who liked to yearn and believed in the magic of love. Like the main guy from *Moulin Rouge*, who runs away to Paris to write stories about truth, freedom, beauty and love, even though he should probably be thinking about getting a job so he can actually afford to buy food. Yeah. Definitely me. (Oseman, 2020, p.8)

Georgia, however, has never dated nor fallen in love, and is determined to change this as she heads into her first year of university. But what Georgia discovers is that she is aromantic and asexual—she experiences little to no romantic or sexual attraction. For someone who equates maturity, fitting in, and happiness with the familiar “bible of expectations” of the romance plot, not being able to fall in love sounds like a curse.

Throughout the novel, Georgia must reckon with this. Romance is central and crucial to much of the media she enjoys, from Shakespeare plays to contemporary fanfiction, and thus is assumed to be central and crucial to a satisfying narrative. Likewise, entering a real-life romantic and sexual relationship has been framed as a marker of maturity and success throughout her adolescence. Unmarried family members are assumed to be deeply unhappy, and Georgia’s classmates are baffled and amused that she has graduated high school without ever kissing anyone. Georgia simply cannot fit herself into the pattern of meet cute, relationship, happy ever after, that she has come to equate with normalcy and success. At first, she feels as though she has failed. Oseman’s narrative, however, suggests that this character still deserves happiness; she must simply reframe her expectations.

Georgia’s story, like Noah’s, ends up deconstructing the rom-com formula, but ultimately putting it back together. The climax of *Loveless* has Georgia completing grand gestures to prove her *platonic* love to her friends, in the exact manner that she would if they were her romantic love interests. Georgia even gets her wish of receiving an emotional, poetic, climactic love confession... but this confession comes from her new friend, using the tools of the romance to convey how much Georgia means to her on a platonic level. These scenes are given the same weight they would be in a romance format, albeit with its component parts switched out and rearranged to prioritise friendship and found family.

Katelyn R. Browne writes that “Queer YA has, for its entire existence, wrestled with the tension between depicting the queerphobic world as we know it and offering more optimistic roadmaps to both queer and nonqueer readers” (Browne, 2020, p.20). These two novels provide a platform to explore this sort of intertextual tension, and exemplify many more such texts that are doing similar work. Texts that, like Ciara Smyth’s *The Falling in Love Montage* or Amy Spalding’s *The Summer of Jordi Perez*, imbue their protagonists with an awareness of the genre they inhabit, but pair this awareness with an anxiety that they, themselves, as queer teenagers, surely have no part in it. Yet, as Noah also expressed in my opening quote, “if we want meet cutes, we have to make them ourselves”. And indeed, many queer authors are engaged in this work, taking these tropes into their own hands to make something new from this familiar genre fabric.

These texts acknowledge the heteronormative history of the rom-com and the way romance narratives are placed ideologically “above” other kinships, and they offer critique of these conventions. But they also celebrate these narratives and affirm their protagonists—and any readers who might feel the same way—by offering happy endings in a revised, queered love story formula.

Works Cited

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