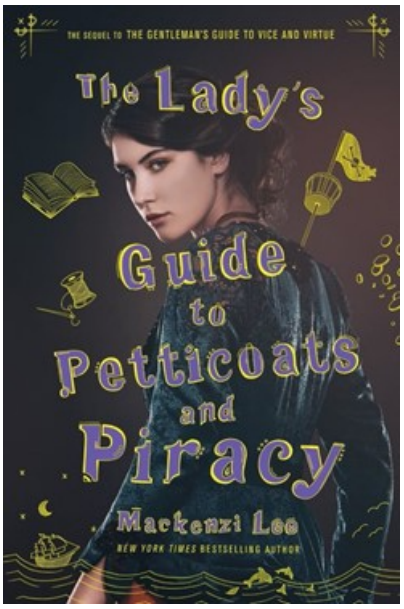
feral feminisms
Celebrating Ace and Aro: Reviews Issue
issue 10.2 · spring 2022

Feminism and Young Adult Aromantic and Asexual Representation in The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy

Review by Josie Holland

Mackenzi Lee. *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy.* First edition, Katherine Tegen Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.



The above image depicts the cover of Makenzi Lee's book, *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy.* The main title is written in large purple font. The author's name is at the bottom of the cover in purple font. There are small yellow drawings scattered around the book's title, including of an open book and thread and needle. In the center of the cover, a white woman is glancing behind herself towards the reader.

Mackenzi Lee's YA novel *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* is a refreshingly feminist historical fiction novel that passionately asserts that women deserve to take up space in any world, including in 18th century Europe. Felicity Montague, the work's protagonist, drives the plot forward with bold strides as she pursues her dream to become a doctor. Along the way, she joins forces with her childhood friend Johanna, and Sim, a Muslim pirate from Algeria. Their goals are intricately linked to their individual relationship with femininity in a masculine world, and the very real impact it can have on their futures. Lady's Guide is an action-adventure that effortlessly refutes the male-dominated, heteronormative, romance-driven standard for historical fiction, while still feeling historically grounded (though the story does take a turn to the fantastic later in the novel). Felicity and her friends might feel forward-thinking for their time, but as Lee illustrates in the author's note, their characters are each inspired by real women of the 1700s.

Lady's Guide is more than a swashbuckling feminist adventure. As a 2018 New York Times Best Seller, it is also an uncommon example of asexual and aromantic representation in mainstream media. Asexuality and aromanticism are erased in media, and even when present, they are often pathologized or portrayed through a voyeuristic lens (Cerankowski 2014, 154). Lee avoids these common representation pitfalls in her portrayal of Felicity as a headstrong sixteen-year-old who feels queerly estranged from eighteenth century European norms, while still making her asexual and aromantic experience socially legible to the novel's largely teen readership. Felicity's introduction in the novel shows that she is far more comfortable re-attaching a severed

fingertip than discussing relationships, romance, sex, or marriage. And she doesn't see anything wrong with that. In *Lady's Guide*, Felicity's asexual and aromantic identities are central to her character, she is never reduced to her lack of sexual or romantic attraction. She desperately wants to go to school to be a doctor and has the ability and knowledge to do so, despite the sexist medical institutions and individuals that tell her she cannot. Felicity is judgmental and strong-willed, but she is certainly not unfeeling, apathetic, broken, or inhuman, as many stereotypical representations of aroace people suggest (Maisha 2012). However, Felicity's driven work ethic and relative eccentricity positions her character in the vein of the "impossibly brilliant" Sherlock Holmes, who is widely regarded as aroace but also forgoes most interpersonal relationships entirely (including friendship) (Osterwald 2017, 41). At the beginning of the novel, it appears that Felicity prioritizes her dream to become a doctor over interpersonal relationships, but over time, she learns to value her friends for their own merits, thereby displacing yet another negative aroace stereotype. She is passionate, holds her friends close, and dreams of a happy future surrounded by people she loves, just not with the romantic relationship aspect that seems to be so essential to those around her.

The confidence Felicity holds in her identity is contagious. She loudly asserts her worth and value in a society that derides anyone who doesn't fit into a white heteropatriarchal ideal. As she learns to re-evaluate her perceptions of femininity, especially as they intersect with her asexuality and aromanticism, it is difficult not to root for her as she grows. When she tells herself, "You deserve to be here. You deserve to exist. You deserve to take up space in this world of men" it feels as if she is talking directly to the readers, assuring them that they have as "much a claim to this world as anyone else" (Lee 2018, 60, 340). Lee encodes messages of affirmation to her readers within her characters' narration, which at times feels heavy-handed but given that she is addressing feelings of invisibility in young adults, it is better to be overly explicit than too subtle.

Felicity is not always self-assured; at one point early in the novel, she wishes that she could want to have a "traditional" life, get married, and have a family. In her self-doubt, she feels isolated, but she doesn't want to change herself. Instead, she wishes others could learn her language, rather than expecting her to accommodate an amatonormative—or couple-centric — world. Later in the novel, her friend Sim kisses her, which Felicity describes saying, "'[kissing is] just a thing that people do.' I feel strange suddenly, the old itch of fear that I am a feral girl in a domesticated world, watched by everyone with pity and concern. … And then there's me, an island all on my own. An island that sometimes feels like a whole continent to rule, and sometimes a cramped spit of land that sailors are marooned on and left to die" (Lee 2018, 317). The kiss did not "make her hear violins and go weak at the knees," she is not just a closeted lesbian, and she is not "cured" of her asexuality or aromanticism as a result of sharing a kiss with Sim (Lee 2018, 317). In refusing the trope, Lee asserts a resounding denial of the harmful and pathologizing narrative of allosexual and alloromantic people "fixing" asexual and aromantic people by forcing sexuality and romance upon them. That doesn't mean that Felicity is always comfortable and confident in her aroace identity. In place of internalizing her self-doubt, she questions the society that makes her feel inadequate and shows that it is no barrier to her own happy ending.

Positive asexual and aromantic representation in young adult fiction can be a lifeline to young people who feel isolated in questioning their romantic or sexual orientations. As a young queer aroace person myself, having positive queer role models whose experiences reflected my

own was instrumental in learning to love myself despite the world telling me otherwise. Felicity is one of those role models: she is courageous, bold, and intelligent, and she happens to be aroace and proud of it. In her words, "I do not want easy or small or uncomplicated. I want my life to be messy and ugly and wicked and wild, and I want to feel it all. All those things that women are made to believe they are strange for harboring in their hearts. And I want to surround myself with those same strange, wicked women who throw themselves open to all the wondrous things this world has to offer" (Lee 2018, 430). *Lady's Guide* is an entertaining feel-good young adult novel featuring badass young women making (fictional) history and is well worth the read for anyone looking for a playful queer feminist coming-of-age story.

Works Cited

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