



## What Good is Representation If You Can't Find It?

*Review by I. Nathan*

The AroAce Database. <https://www.aroacedatabase.com/>.

Asexual (ace) and aromantic (aro) identities are often defined by what they lack—sexual or romantic attraction, desire, or behaviors. Even the terms themselves are defined by a negative; the prefix a- means “not.” This construction automatically positions aro and ace identities as abnormal or non-normative, where they are separated from the “default” of allosexuality (not being asexual) and alloromanticism (not being aromantic) – terms that were invented by aro and ace people specifically to combat the assumption that not being ace or aro is the norm and should be assumed. The two communities are bonded together through this and known collectively as “aspec.” More than that, being ace or aro can lead to feeling an absence in your own life. Not from this difference in sexual or romantic attraction or desire, but rather due to a lack of asexuality and aromanticism in your life – a lack of aspec education, communities, peers, support, or representation.

One of the most difficult aspects of being ace or aro is the feeling of being alone; that your identities, perspectives, and experiences are inexplicable and foreign to everyone else. Not only that, but as our identities are often particularly hard to define, we can spend years or even decades confused and unsure about how to explain ourselves. If nobody introduces the concept, we may never discover it at all.

There are many people and organizations who are working to alleviate this in different ways. Some create communities where aspec people can find each other. Others create educational and informational resources for and about aspec people. Still others create representation for aspec people by reflecting their own experiences in art, most frequently fiction. All of these are different ways that aspec people can see themselves, can discover their own identities, and explore different ways they can live their lives, as well as educate and inform allosexual and alloromantic people about the ways that our identities manifest.

However, even while there are more and more representations of asexuality and aromanticism in books, this representation is still difficult to find. Many books that center aspec characters and experiences are self-published or published by independent, small publishers. Most authors who write aspec characters are not well-known, and they frequently do not have large distribution or very much publicity, so it is often difficult to know that they even exist.

The AroAce Database, created by aroace author Claudie Arsenault in 2017, gathers all books with confirmed asexual or aromantic characters. Arsenault started the project on her own website, simply cataloguing the books she knew with aro and ace characters into a spreadsheet and adding some details about the characters' identities. The database grew with the addition of more specific details about the books, including their genres and the importance of the aspec character, and many other aro and ace people added their own submissions to the list.

Eventually, the database moved over to its own website: <https://www.aroacedatabase.com/>, where it now hosts entries on hundreds of characters and works. Every character entry lists the books that feature them, as well as their orientations, gender, any relevant relationships, and notes or content warnings. Many also include reviews of the characters and their stories from aspec reviewers.

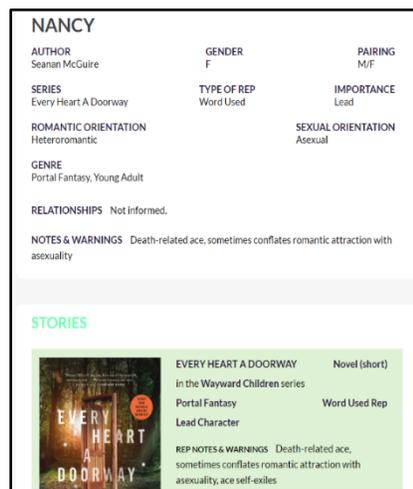
The above image depicts a screenshot of the search box from the AroAce Database. The background is light grey and the text is mostly black. A white text-box spans the top, labeled *Enter your keywords here to search*. The search categories are organized underneath this box in a 3x4 grid pattern, have drop-down boxes, and are individually labeled. These labels include, *Character Name, Importance, Author, Gender, Pairing, Series, Type of Rep, Romantic Orientation, Sexual Orientation, Genre, Relationships, and Story Length*. There are black buttons with green text on the right side of the image. The top button is labeled *Advanced Search* and the bottom button is labeled *Search*.

For example, *Every Heart a Doorway* by Seanan McGuire (2016) is a rare example of a book featuring an asexual character, Nancy, in a central role in popular fiction. When looking at the entry for this character, we can see that she appears in one book, *Every Heart a Doorway*, which is young adult and fantasy. According to the character entry, she is a heteroromantic asexual girl in a M/F pairing, and the entry provides a warning that this book contains “Death-related ace, sometimes conflates romantic attraction with asexuality.” (Character Entry: Nancy, nd). Specifically, in this book Nancy comes from and returns to a Hades-like underworld of death. This is an important content warning for two reasons. First, because some people are disturbed by books that focus on death and death-related imagery. Second, it is very common to see “descriptions of love and/or sex as a source of life” (Arsenault, 2017), which can feel alienating to asexual people – linking an ace character to death might make ace people feel dehumanized. Beyond the simple description of the character and story, the entry links to over half a dozen OwnVoices, a term referencing people writing about characters from their own marginalized or underrepresented community, from ace or aro people discussing what they thought of the book.

Anyone looking for books that feature aspec characters can use this database to find both representation generally as well as specific kinds. While most well-known books with aspec characters are either science fiction, young adult, or both, other books with ace and aro



characters exist as well and are catalogued on the AroAce Database; similarly, most aro characters are also asexual, but this database makes it easier to find examples of aro characters who are allosexual. When browsing, the advanced search function allows users to look for a specific title, character, or author, or to look for different types of characters. For example, if I were looking for allosexual aromantic characters, I could simply choose those options from the advanced dropdown menus under “sexual orientation” and “romantic orientation” and be presented with a list of characters who fit that description. It is also possible to search by genre, gender, importance of the character to the plot, and story length.



The above image depicts a screenshot of the AroAce Database character entry for asexual character from the novel *Every Heart a Doorway* by Seanan McGuire (2016). The name of the character in this example, Nancy, is in large letters at the top-right.

The top-half of the image contains text boxes labeled with category headings specific to the entry, including *Author, Gender, Pairing, Series, Type of Rep, Importance, Romantic Orientation, Sexual Orientation, Genre, Relationships, and Notes and Warnings*.

The bottom third of the image is a light-green text box with a color picture of the novel, *Every Heart a Doorway*, on the left and under the subheading *Stories*. To the right of the image are details about the novel, including *Rep Notes & Warnings*.

The database is inadequate in other respects, because of the factors it does not include. There are many other relevant intersecting identities that also impact aro and ace experiences in the world, including race, ability, age, neurodivergence, gender, and other queer identities. Of those different identities, only gender and other queer identities are catalogued on this database. This is particularly important because of the way that these other identities connect with and impact the experiences of aro and ace individuals – as just one example, romantic and sexual assumptions are often tied to race, and aspec identities are seen as primarily white identities (Jenkins and Similane, 2021). The lack of concern for this overlap can contribute to the isolation many marginalized aspec people feel – when it is already difficult to find aspec representation, how much harder is it to find more specific representation?

Some aspec people are lucky enough to find other ace and aro people in their own lives, whether in person or online, whom they can connect with and relate to. For those who are unable to find these people, representation in media can be incredibly valuable. Seeing that there are over 500 aspec characters in over 600 works of published prose can make any aromantic and asexual person feel less alone.



## Works Cited

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I. NATHAN is one of the cofounders of The Ace and Aro Advocacy Project, an organization devoted to creating a more equitable world for asexual and aromantic spectrum people. They are currently studying to get a Masters in Sex Education at Widener University, so they can more effectively advocate on aspec issues and representation. They are primarily concerned with ensuring that experts in fields connected to aspec identities, including educators, health care workers, and queer advocates, understand our identities and can help our populations. You can find their work at [www.taaap.org](http://www.taaap.org), or at [https://twitter.com/TAAAP\\_org](https://twitter.com/TAAAP_org).