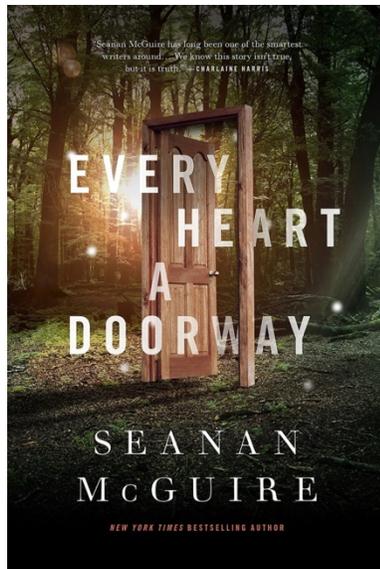




Doorways to Belonging: Seanan McGuire's Portal Fantasy and Neuroqueer Freedoms

Review by Emery Hajek

Seanan McGuire. 2016. *Every Heart a Doorway*. Tom Doherty Associates.



To the left is an image of the cover for Seanan McGuire's *Every Heart a Doorway*. It depicts a wooden door standing in the middle of a forest. The door is open, but there is nothing behind it but the same forest as its surroundings. The forest is dark, with a bright yellow orange light shining behind the door. At the top of the cover is small white text that reads: "Seanan McGuire has long been one of the smartest writers around... We know this story isn't true, but it is truth." — Charlaine Harris." Below, in large and semi-transparent white text, is the title, *Every Heart a Doorway*. Each word is arranged in a zigzag downward, overlaid on the open door. The words "heart" and "doorway" are positioned slightly behind the portion of the doorframe that is angled forward. Below is the author's name, Seanan McGuire, in slightly smaller text. Below that, in smaller orange text, is the label "New York Times Bestselling Author." All of the text aside from the first quote by Charlaine Harris is fully capitalized.

As the first book of the *Wayward Children* series, Seanan McGuire's *Every Heart a Doorway* explores the meaning of "home" for those who don't belong. It is an ultimately hopeful, if somewhat dark, portal fantasy narrative; McGuire describes a world where children who do not belong in their current lives find doorways to fantastical

other realms, places they come to consider home. The story follows what happens to those who are forced to leave these alternative realms and to return to the mundane world they were born into, alienated by their experiences and by the understanding that their origins are not where they have ever belonged. The protagonist of *Every Heart a Doorway*, Nancy Whitman, is a girl recently returned from the Halls of the Dead and sent by her parents to Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children—a boarding school for returned children whose families assume their stories of other worlds are imagined and hope to return them to "normalcy." Everyone at the school wants to get back to the worlds they call home, and should that not be possible, the school provides a support system and ways to move on. When people at the school start turning up dead, with Nancy a suspect as both the newest arrival and a traveler from an Underworld known as the Halls of the Dead, she works to uncover the killer while never giving up her search for her door home.

Nancy is asexual, something the book makes an explicit point of, beginning in the second chapter. McGuire never shies away from the word or its meaning, clearly differentiating it from celibacy and aromanticism. Nancy explains to her roommate, "I'm asexual. I don't get



[sexual desire] ... I can appreciate how beautiful someone is, and I can be attracted to them romantically, but that's as far as it goes with me" (McGuire 2016, 38). Early on, Nancy does experience romantic attraction toward one of her fellow students and flirts with him later, though they don't end up developing a romantic relationship. As an asexual representation, Nancy's character plays around with stereotypes rather than avoiding them entirely. Her association with death after her travels to an Underworld, for example, could be seen as falling into the acephobic relation of ace people with corpses or of being less than living. However, this is not so, because in the world she calls home, the dead are largely allosexual. She never met another asexual person in the Halls of the Dead, or at least, none that she knew of. Her asexuality, though important to her identity, is not caused or even influenced by her ties to the Halls of the Dead. While not asexual herself, McGuire made the decision to write Nancy as ace on behalf of an ace friend who "never got to see herself in fiction." McGuire stated, "she never got to be the one going out and having the amazing adventures. So, I gave those adventures to her . . . People deserve to see themselves in story, always" (Lowrey 2019, n.p.).

Every Heart a Doorway also utilizes its portal fantasy in a way that can be read as a neuroqueer allegory. Neuroqueer, though not easily defined, can be understood as a framework that "embraces a plurality of queer/crip experiences, personas, and performances" and "is that which is in continuous, teleporting motion; it is a rhetoricity that defies location and measure, in spite of others' attempts to pin it" (Yergeau 2018, 66 – 73). *Every Heart a Doorway* is just such a book that defies strict categorization, moving between light-hearted fantasy, mystery, and horror. Its characters know all about plurality and performance—many have been performing their whole lives, save for their time in other realms, and must now learn to do so again. McGuire wrote this neuroqueerness into the structure of the novella, as explained in an interview for *Nerdist*: "As anyone with autism or ADHD or OCD will tell you, if we stop masking for a while—if we're allowed to just be our natural weird gremlin selves, whatever that looks like—then putting a mask back on is 10 times more energy-wasting than having it on in the first place" (Knight 2022, n.p.). Nancy's story is about moving through a world which requires her to mask, and in the end finding her way home again to where she is liberated.

Important to note is the book's acknowledgement that in many cases, even people with good intentions can be incapable of meeting loved ones' needs if they do not look beyond their own perspectives of normality and appropriateness. This is evident in Nancy's own words when narrating her need to remain in the school when it faces the risk of closing: "She couldn't go back. Her parents loved her, there was no question of that, but their love was the sort that filled her suitcase with colors and kept trying to set her up on dates with local boys. Their love wanted to fix her and refused to see that she wasn't broken" (McGuire 2016, 83). The narrative of needing to be fixed is one that many neurodivergent and queer people can relate to, and "broken" is a word which the asexual community is faced with all too often. This is why it was amazing to discover that the narrative wasn't going to force Nancy to "move on" and learn to live as a "normal person." She never lets go of the lessons she learned in the Halls of the Dead and the community she found there, and that allows her portal door to open for her in the end and welcome her home.

Every Heart a Doorway isn't perfect in its representations, of course. Its queer representations were in some places a bit overly educational, and more focused on how being queer leads to struggle than on the capacity for joy in queerness. I certainly never wanted to learn the transgender character's deadname or hear about how he was rejected by his



communities more often than I heard about him being accepted. From my own transgender and asexual perspective, however, I found McGuire's portrayals to be decently accurate and certainly worth her exploration of them, if lacking some sensitivity. Additionally, the focus on queer struggles is offset by the positive direction taken by the book in its mode as a neuroqueer allegory wherein the goal was not to conform to societal standards but to find community and be true to oneself—it just might not be as comfortable to some audiences as a result of the frequent references to queerphobia and queer struggle.

Through allegory as well as through explicitly denouncing queerphobia and embracing queer identity, *Every Heart a Doorway* denies the ableist, hetero-, allo- and amatonormative “standard” by weaving a narrative of hope, freedom, and community for the neuroqueer. It assures its readers that there is a place for them out there and other people with whom they belong. In terms of asexuality studies, the book encourages the exploration of relationalities between the asexual and the neurodivergent. It can also be placed in context with the broader “ace movement,” to borrow Angela Chen's words, as an experiment to “bring together people to create a social movement and a new culture, one that pushes against the societal obsession with sex and makes room for everyone—ace, allo, or questioning—who wants the freedom to find pleasure in a different way” (Chen 2020, 87). Through McGuire's portal fantasy, societal norms and obsessions are revealed to be arbitrary markers of an oppressive culture—but they are never the only option. For the asexual and the neuroqueer who feel isolated and unusual, there is a world out there (be it a place, a community, or a person) where they belong. All in all, Seanan McGuire's *Every Heart a Doorway* is a door well worth opening, and a good book to feel at home in.

Works Cited

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