



The Expectations of Love

Review by Dillon R. Hall

Claire Kann. *Let's Talk About Love*. Swoon Reads, 2019.



Above is the cover of Claire Kann's *Let's Talk About Love*. The cover includes a photo of Alice, a young African American woman, whose arms are slightly raised in a comfortable pose, and who is shown smiling. She is wearing a white or light lavender dress, without sleeves and a ruffle at the neck. She is featured against a light gray backdrop with the title of the novel in bubble scripted letters across her torso and the author's name in sans serif and all caps centered at the bottom.

Claire Kann's YA (young adult) novel, *Let's Talk About Love*, centers around the experience of Alice, a young African American woman, who identifies as a biromantic asexual. *Let's Talk About Love* is an enriching experience of discovery and identity that explores themes of sexual orientation, romantic attraction, lack of sexual attraction (asexuality), and how relationships are diversely experienced based on one's identities. In my reading, Kann crafts this story in a manner showing the reader multiple ways in which identity and sexuality can function. The experiences that Kann portrays within this story, push back against traditional expectations of sexuality, identity, and relationships. The character of Alice is written in a way that actively portrays Black asexuality as an active representation that deconstructs whiteness – whiteness being at the core of U.S. society, promoting white privilege and values, and seeping through the expectations of how we view relationships, sexuality, and forms of identity. Kann's novel offers a spectrum of sexual and romantic attraction and the relationships that unfold, demonstrating that a character who identifies as asexual is capable of being in a loving relationship, just as anyone else is. Typically, in fiction and media, there is a common trope of amatonormativity, wherein the passionate, romantic, and sexual love between two coupled individuals is portrayed as inherently more important than any other type of relationship. While couple-based partnerships can be important, in *Let's Talk About Love*, Kann conveys the importance of all relationships through the scope of asexuality.

Immediately in the novel Alice is met with conflict, as her partner Margot wants to break up. The reason Margot wants to break up is because she feels she can't be physically intimate with Alice. When Alice affirms to Margot that they can have sex, Margot acknowledges that she enjoys being with Alice, but also says "You know exactly what I like. I can't say the same about you" (Kann 2019, 2). This dynamic is important to begin the novel with because it sets up the ongoing conflict of Alice experiencing the challenges of being in a committed relationship, while being asexual in a compulsorily sexual context.



Alice attends university and works part-time at a public library where she eventually meets a new employee, Takumi. One of the fun and personal aspects of Alice is the Cutie Code™ that she designed to affectively attribute a color towards her experience of aesthetic attraction that she feels for someone. Immediately upon Alice meeting Takumi, “Her Cutie Code™ blasted straight past the Red Zone. If it were a pressure gauge, the glass would have cracked right down the middle” (Kann 2018, 25). Although the system is fun and quirky, to Alice “...it was also a system used for critical analysis – Alice’s way of processing the different kinds of attraction everyone else seemed to experience.” (Kann 2019, 33). So, when Alice’s Cutie Code™ broke, it was jarring to her because she had never experienced an attraction like this before.

Another relationship dynamic that we experience throughout the text is Alice’s queer platonic relationship with Feenie, her best friend, and Ryan, Feenie’s partner. Alice loves them dearly, they even set aside time each week for family night during which the three of them get together and play games, watch films, just hang out and spend time with one each other. At one point in the novel, when Alice is describing the intricacies of the relationship between the three of them to Takumi, Takumi asks about Alice’s feeling towards Feenie and if the love she has is romantic and Alice replies, “I suppose it could be romantic or whatever, but she has Ryan. They’re meant to be right now, but we’re meant to be forever, if that makes sense” (Kann 2019, 136). Alice’s relationship with Feenie is a dynamic that goes against the traditional aspect of how love is viewed because the love they share is authentic and real, even though they are not typical partners as Feenie is with Ryan, the love they have is different, and is based on non-sexual and non-strictly romantic kinship, or a queer platonic relating.

Brittney Miles writes in “Theorizing Conscious Black Asexuality through Claire Kann’s *Let’s Talk about Love*,” that “Conscious Black Asexuality, as developed from the themes found in LTAL, requires (1) a commitment to acknowledging intersectional experiences, (2) an explicit claim to asexuality and understanding of what that means, (3) and an expanded lexicon and geography of Black love and intimacy” (Miles 2019, 4). This conceptualization of Conscious Black Asexuality is portrayed through Alice and is central to the innovative work *Let’s Talk about Love* is doing in centering a Black ace woman. Through her joyous portrayal of Conscious Black Asexuality, Kann creates a story that celebrates asexuality, Blackness, and the relational innovation that following one’s heart can generate. From my reading, Kann is constructing a perception that traditional expectations for how relationships should function, only hinder our experiences and endorse limited understandings of love and romance. And although Takumi and Alice do end up together as a couple, Kann conveys the message that there are many ways to build relationships and that people who identify asexual are entitled of finding the love they are seeking.

Works Cited

Miles, Brittney. 2019. “Theorizing Conscious Black Asexuality through Claire Kann’s *Let’s Talk about Love*.” *Humanities* 8, no. 4: 1–10.



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DILLON R. HALL: Hello, my name is Dillon Hall and I am a senior at Illinois State University majoring in English Creative Writing. I'm all about producing good vibes, maintaining positivity, and listening to the stories of my fellow humans. We all have experienced so much in our lifetime, as a collective and as individuals. Life is such a strange journey that no one got a chance to pack for; however, I find myself grateful at the prospect of being able to discover and experience the entirety of this enigmatic journey.
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