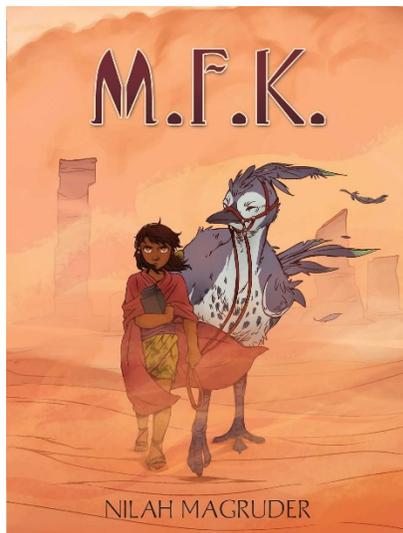




Themes of Ace, Aro, and Agency in Nilah Magruder's *M.F.K.*

Review by Edcel Javier Cintron Gonzalez

Nilah Magruder. *M.F.K.* Insight Comics, 2017.



The above image depicts the cover of Nilah Magruder's graphic novel *M.F.K.* The main title is written in a purplish black color at the top, and Magruder's name is written in smaller black letters at the bottom. The cover is an illustration of a determined-looking, brown-skinned younger person in a red robe walking beside a harnessed large bird through a windy desert landscape.

Nilah Magruder is a cartoonist, illustrator, and writer of graphic novels, comics, and children's books, whose topics touch on her own lived experience as an ace identifying person. Her work also addresses the importance of representation and disabilities such as in her graphic novel *M.F.K.* The graphic novel *M.F.K.* (2017), published by Insight Comics, was originally a webcomic series and now has its first three chapters published in print as a graphic novel. This first part of the graphic novel takes place in a small town that is located in the middle of a desert wasteland where our Young Adult (YA) protagonist, Abbie, displays different emotional levels of grievance, agency, and desire to finish her journey. The world of *M.F.K.* is structured around people who have magic powers named "the Parasai." These are warriors who are sworn to use their magical abilities to protect and help people. However, many rogue Parasai use their power to threaten people to give them their food and supplies. This forces non-magic people to survive in a world where those with magic abilities hold power over others. *M.F.K.* is not the standard adolescent romance story in which the two main characters fall in love in the first few instances of the series. The series itself emphasizes the importance of friendship and agency, giving each

character the opportunity to develop themselves through the story.

M.F.K. is about Abbie's journey to travel to the mountain range called the Potter's Spine and scatter her mother's ashes. The story starts when Abbie is found injured in the desert wasteland by the villager Jamie and his grandfather. They take her to their village, Little Marigold, where her wounds are treated by Nifrain, the town doctor and Jamie's aunt. Jamie, his grandfather, and Nifrain find out that Abbie is deaf and uses a hearing aid and that she has black blood, which only Parasai have. During her time in Little Marigold, Abbie recovers from her injuries and develops a friendship with Jamie. The two talk about how they did not grow up with their parents and want to leave the village to explore the world. Abbie also learns that the



village is running low on resources because rogue Parasai use their powers to cause fear in people and force them to give them all their supplies. After the rogue Parasai break the urn containing the ashes of Abbie's late mother, she uses her magical ability to reclaim her own powers to fight back.

M.F.K. opens the space to celebrate ace and aro themes by pushing against heteronormative standards of romance, developing the theme of working together with a community, and developing trust as an emotion related to friendship rather than romance. Abbie is introduced as a strong character right from the beginning of *M.F.K.*, where the reader sees her as a heroine whose focus is to fight for her own survival and complete her journey to deliver her mother's ashes. While Abbie is recovering from her injuries, she uses her time to learn more about the current socio-economic state of the village and to understand what is happening to the community. Regarding the interactions between Jamie and Abbie, while readers could interpret Jamie's interest in Abbie as romantic interest, the story challenges the reader to think outside of amatonormative tropes of teen love and romance. Jamie does admit to Abbie that she is "the most interesting thing that's ever happen around here," (Magruder 2017, 52), but he also talks about how he is tired of staying in the same location for the rest of his life and wants a change. In response, Abbie feels she can trust Jamie and tells him her name, something she was hesitant on doing before. Moreover, Jamie and Abbie's friendship can be described as a sort of Alterous attraction, something not quite romantic nor platonic but the closeness to each other is still there (TAAAP 2020). In this case, their desire for adventure and the loss of their parents is what keeps them close as friends.

Another instance of how the story is pushing against amatonormativity is near the ending of the graphic novel where Jamie pleads to Abbie to let him join her on her journey. Abbie makes a point in saying that they just met and questions if Jamie is abandoning his family to go on a journey with her. Jamie then explains how he wants to better himself and that he can offer his skills for survival when traveling to the dangers of the desert wasteland. This part is fascinating because it acknowledges companionship as a survival tactic rather than a love interest, which offers an opportunity for a different read on ace and aro themes. Here, romance and sexuality are not forced on Abbie and Jamie, rather for a change, Abbie and Jamie are presented as characters with their own autonomy.

Works Cited

TAAAP. 2020. "Identity Terminology." [https://taaap.org/learn/identity-terminology/#:~:text=\(Ace%2FAro\)%20%2Dflux,with%20allo\(ro\)s](https://taaap.org/learn/identity-terminology/#:~:text=(Ace%2FAro)%20%2Dflux,with%20allo(ro)s). (Accessed March 12, 2020).



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