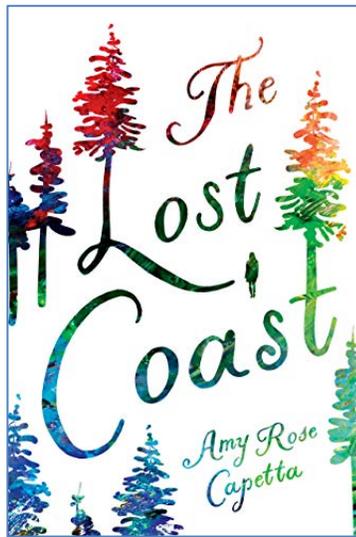




Asexual Intimacy and the Magic of Belonging in *The Lost Coast*

Review by Natalie Jipson

Amy Rose Capetta. *The Lost Coast*. Candlewick Press, 2019.



The above image depicts the cover of Amy Rose Capetta's book *The Lost Coast*. The background of the cover is a series of pine trees painted in rainbow colors over a white background starting with red orange and yellow at the top and switching to green and blue at the bottom. The title is in large script using the rainbow motif and placed in the center of the book. The author's name is in the bottom right-hand corner in small script continuing the rainbow color pattern.

Intimacy and love are about more than sex. In *The Lost Coast*, a young adult novel by Amy Rose Capetta, a group of queer witches engage in intimacies beyond the sexual throughout their exploration of the magical natural world of Tempest California. Capetta is a queer author and co-founder of Rainbow Boxes, an initiative to get LGBTQIA+ books into schools and libraries. In her new book, readers experience not just a bounty of amazing queer characters, but the trajectory of the story is also queered by jumping in and out of perspectives and shifting forward and backward in time. The meandering path that readers follow mimics the winding trails that the characters walk through in the red wood forests as part of their magical development. The story is written from two primary perspectives, Danny's (a teen who has recently relocated to the Lost Coast) and the Grays' (Leila, Rush, June, Hawthorne, and Imogen, a community of magical queer teens). One of the Grays, Imogen, has seemingly lost her soul and the rest of her coven are trying to uncover the mystery of her vanishing spirit. Danny immediately begins to bond with the Grays due to her shared experience as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, but also because she possesses magic, which the Grays help foster and develop. Throughout their quest to find Imogen's spirit, Danny and the Grays become chosen family to each other. While the novel is certainly about magic, the emotional focus of the text is built upon community, solidarity, and intimate relationships.

The Lost Coast engages in important representational work through characters who identify as nonbinary, queer, femme, asexual, and bisexual. While only one character claims asexuality as her identity, this text calls out for an asexual reading, specifically one focusing on asexual erotics as articulated by asexuality studies scholar Ela Przybylo. Asexual erotics "are about challenging the conflation of sexual desire with the erotic and thus opening up different paradigms for thinking about relating" (Przybylo 2019, 21). By understanding asexual erotics as a way of relating and forming intimate bonds, the relationships between the Grays can be understood through an asexual lens. Capetta writes, "The Grays took each other to school



dances, brought each other corsages, held each other tight on dance floors while people laughed. They ignored the whispers about orgies. They were in love with each other, and that was good” (2019, 173). Their collective bond isn’t about sex; it is about love, shared goals, trust, and physical affection. The Grays are described as having, “love flowing around them in eddies and swirls, never trapped in their hearts with nowhere to go” (227). The Grays are also at ease with physical touch, and in addition to dancing, frequently kiss each other as a part of their spell work, and practice care and show gratitude (173). Leila, who identifies as nonbinary and asexual, shares that she also enjoys kissing and sharing other types of physical touch (17). This challenges harmful stereotypes about asexuality that often depict all asexual folx as being repulsed by physical affection and as having a medical condition or pathology (Maisha 2012).

In addition to the representation of physical affection and love amongst the Grays, kinship bonds and alternative family structures also demand an asexual reading. When meeting Imogen’s parents, Danny thinks, “I’ve never thought about Imogen’s family before. In my head, the Grays are her family” (Capetta 2019, 104). The bonds amongst the Grays defy the notion that care must be centered in the familial home. Rush actually spent time living with a variety of the Grays due to conflicts with her biological family (235). Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Freeman states that “kinship is a social and not biological fact, a matter of culture rather than nature” (2007, 299). Native science and technology studies and sexuality studies scholar, Kim TallBear, also suggests broadening the definition of family to include non-normative family structures (2018, 152). The intimacy and care practices utilized amongst the Grays identify them as kin to each other, and within the novel this is family. At the end of the novel, Danny fully joins their kinship network: “That’s what Grays do,’ Imogen informs me. She’s telling me that I’m one of them. They’re all inviting me in” (Capetta 2019, 338–339). Danny also identifies them as her weirdos, claiming them as her kin and her support system (338). By claiming each other, the Grays function as a collective community of support, love, and friendship. Their bonds supersede those of their biological families through Capetta’s envisioning of their magical and spiritual connection. Even though Rush and Danny form a romantic and sexual bond, their connection never outshines the kinship bonds of the collective. Their network of chosen family challenges the amatonormative hierarchy that is often present in young adult literature.

The Lost Coast is a novel that refuses the tropes of many young adult texts. It contests ideas of biological family supremacy and amatonormativity, and creates connection through asexual erotics and kinship practices. Capetta’s text contributes a complex and dynamic set of representations of LGBTQIA+ identities and intimate relations that are sorely needed in the popular canon of young adult literature. By rethinking what we consider to be intimate and erotic, the magic of relationality can be fully appreciated.

Works Cited

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