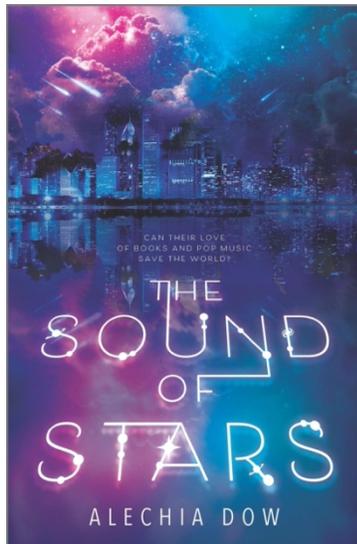




Love, Intersectionality, and Aliens

Review by Ellen Pearson

Alechia Dow. *The Sound of Stars*. Inkyard Press, 2020. (E-book).



The cover featured above is pink and blue, with a city that looks like it's on the edge of a body of water burning in the background, clouds rising up into the top of the page. The title is written towards the bottom half of the page, hovering over the water in a font that looks like a neon sign. The lights from the city are reflecting on the water.

library. After their takeover, the Ilori banned all “human paraphernalia” such as books, art, and music, but Ellie continues to run her secret library, even though the consequence if she’s caught would be death by execution. “Why even have a library?” The answer is simple. ‘I love books,’ Ellie says, ‘and I want to help people. The Ilori don’t get to tell us how we can live before we die’” (Dow 2020, chap. 3 in e-book).

It’s not long before Ellie meets MORRIS, or in other words, Morris. He is a lab-made Ilori, and commander of Ellie’s quadrant of the Upper East Side. He also loves music. As an Ilori, he’s not meant to feel, yet music makes him feel something, so when he comes across Ellie’s secret library while searching for music, he decides to cut a deal instead of turning her in. It’s quite simple really: if she gathers music for him, he’ll save her and her family from the Ilori-

The Sound of Stars is Alechia Dow’s debut novel, a young adult (YA) Science Fiction book which begins two years after a species of alien called Ilori takes over the world. The main character is Janelle Quicia Baker—or Ellie, as she prefers to be called—a queer demisexual Black teenage girl, whose intersectionality is especially important to the author as someone who has also lived her life along this intersection. In an interview with Xiaolong from “The Quiet Pond: A Book Blog,” Alechia Dow talks about how important including this representation of demisexuality is to her: “When I was a teen, this wasn’t really seen, especially not for Black main characters. So getting this chance to write my own experiences... it made me feel valid, and it made me feel hopeful that this representation would resonate with readers who are still finding their identity” (“Our Friend is Here!” 2020, n.p.).

After a brief overview of how earth fell to the Ilori, the reader is introduced to a musical band called the Starry Eyed, who we will later find out is Ellie’s favorite band. In the format of a podcast interview transcript, the reader is introduced to their album, entitled “The Sound of Stars.” The album, the lead singer says, “is about love during conflict. Bridges during division. It’s our present, our past and, we believe, our future” (Dow 2020, introduction in e-book). The story begins with Ellie cataloging the books in her secret



made “vaccine” that would turn them into husks for the True Ilori waiting to take over the Earth. Ellie agrees and gathers music for him, but they’re too late. The secret library is found, sentencing Ellie to execution, and Morris to the biggest decision of his life—to save her and forgo his current life, or to face the possibility of losing music. In case you’re wondering, he saves her, and they run.

Alechia Dow creates a hierarchy of Ilori races to draw a parallel between them and human racial inequity, leaving an open conversation between Ellie and Morris about their shared experiences. In one conversation, while Ellie is talking about books and why she loves them, she tells Morris that “human stories have parallels to our way of life” (Dow 2020, chap. 4). Referencing the young adult novel by Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (2017), Ellie says “the book was about a human with brown skin, which meant they were viewed as lesser than those with pale skin. Similar to how the labmades are viewed by the true Ilori” (Dow 2020, chap. 4). Dow also utilizes theories of what Brittney Miles terms “Conscious Black Asexuality” in her creation of Ellie’s character. “Conscious Black Asexuality” involves, according to Miles, acknowledging intersectionality, celebrating ace existence, and “an expanded lexicon and geography of Black love and intimacy” (Miles 2019, 4). Miles also “interrogates sexual politics as they intersect with race” (Miles 2019, 5). Ellie’s best friend, Alice, convinces her to attend a party with her, although she promptly disappears to make out with her boyfriend. Ellie is approached by a boy who introduces himself as Dallas. “His eyes take in my curves and hair, my breasts. Before the invasion, I remember Alice telling me that Dallas had a thing for black girls. Gross” (Dow 2020, chap. 5). In her essay, Brittney Miles brings up similar ideas made towards another Black asexual character, saying “These statements work to invalidate Black women’s sexual agency and power, which become part of the burdens they must bear” (Miles 2019, 5).

It is at the above-mentioned party that Ellie sneaks out to with her best friend and former crush, Alice, that we are also initially introduced to Ellie’s sexuality. When Dallas tries to hit on her, she thinks, “the idea of doing something intimate, of being naked, being touched, held... by a stranger like Dallas, gives me goose bumps and turns my stomach. I know I’m ace, or at least on the spectrum of that, but still, a voice in me whispers: *You’re going to die anyway, why not try something new?*” (Dow 2020, chap. 5). Don’t worry, she ignores that voice.

Alechia Dow thus also offers a perspective on queer demisexuality throughout the novel. In true YA Science fiction fashion, Morris and Ellie embark on a road trip involving a half-baked plan to save the world by shutting down the Ilori-made vaccine from within. Due to the nature of the distance from New York to California, the book offers the opportunity for conversation and for slow burning romance. While on the road, Morris and Ellie have their first conversation about her demisexuality. It is a misconception that demisexuality is a label that fits everyone or that it is not a sexual orientation at all, and Alechia Dow addresses that misconception. Ellie explains her sexuality by saying, “I’m attracted to people, but I wouldn’t want to date them or do anything else unless, until, I feel like I know them, and trust them. That we’ve bonded” (Dow 2020, chap. 12). At this point in the story, Morris already likes Ellie, and wants to take things further, but she isn’t ready. Their friendship hasn’t been built yet, there is not yet a bridge of trust between them, and love is nothing more than a whisper on the horizon. And yet, after Ellie shares this with Morris, and he agrees that he feels similarly in that having a bond with someone is important to him, not thirty seconds later Morris starts telling Ellie he likes her, to which her only response is, “I know” (Dow 2020, chap. 12). “Do you like me?” he



asks in return, and in the silence, all he can hear is the sound of her heartbeat (Dow 2020, chap. 12). She bypasses the question, and he changes the subject to books, one Ellie finds more comfortable, and yet with Ellie's silence, Alechia Dow highlights the difference between the two's personal definition of the word "bond." *The Sound of Stars* is powerful in many ways, especially in its demonstration of intersectionality and its effect on lived experiences. Throughout the book, each of Ellie's identities come into play in a way that doesn't feel manipulated or forced. It's also clear that *The Sound of Stars* is all about love, in its various forms, and Alechia Dow gives the reader many chances to explore this in creative ways that challenge romantic and sexual assumptions about love. This book is a stunning story of resistance, the love that binds us, and of course—aliens.

Works Cited

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