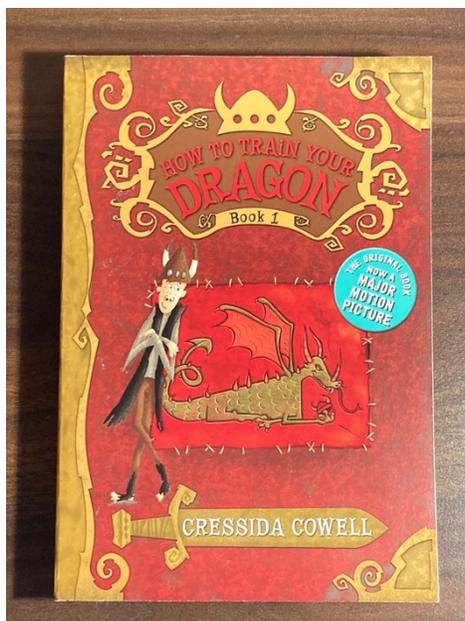




“The Most Dangerous Viking Undertaking:” Asexuality and Aromanticism in *How to Train Your Dragon*

Review by Luna Fortner

Cressida Cowell. *How to Train Your Dragon*. Little, Brown and Company, 2003 – 2015.



A copy of *How to Train Your Dragon: Book 1* by Cressida Cowell on a wooden surface. The book is red with gold accents along the sides and around the title, and an image of a small green dragon is on the cover. Beside the dragon is a skinny boy with pale skin and a Viking helmet—Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third.

Love in this sense has a meaning distinct from our modern understanding. In modern English-speaking societies, “love” can refer to a variety of different connections and feelings, including familial and platonic affection. However, the capitalized “Love” of *How to Train Your Dragon* refers specifically to the combination of alloromantic-allosexual attraction to an individual that would spur one to court the individual. The *How to Train Your Dragon* concept of Love could be considered analogous to a “crush” in some cases, such as Fishlegs’ infatuation with Princess Tantrum and later Barbara, but often it is used in the stronger sense of a deep affection and loyalty to someone, such as Humungously Hotshot the Hero’s feelings for Valhallarama and

Before the DreamWorks series of animated films, *How to Train Your Dragon* originated as a series of illustrated middle grade children’s books by Cressida Cowell. Over the course of the twelve-book series, the main character, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, and his friends, Fishlegs and Camicazi, go on epic quests, encounter deadly enemies, and meet a stunning variety of species of dragons. They also grow up, which means in the case of at least one character, love becomes an eminent concern. In the case of the eventual King Hiccup the Third, however, the story is quite different.

Set in the distant past on a group of islands called the Barbaric Archipelago, *How to Train Your Dragon* is a tale of Vikings and dragons and what author Cressida Cowell terms on multiple occasions “becoming a Hero the hard way” (Cowell 2011, 278), which really means it’s a coming-of-age story centered around characters who are a bit odd by the standards of their society. As per this setting and its intended audience of middle grades readers, sexuality and romance are conflated into one concept, referred to as “Love” in the context of the story (Cowell 2007, 105), but



again to Tantrum. Love in the books therefore encompasses the full range of romantic and sexual feelings, from a teenage crush to a marriage of many years, but generally the Vikings of *How to Train Your Dragon* consider it a preamble to marriage. This makes Love “one of the most dangerous things you could possibly do” because to receive permission to marry someone, Vikings have to complete a dangerous “impossible task” set by the parent or guardian of the person they wish to marry (Cowell 2009, 38).

Love as defined here features most heavily in the fifth and eighth books of the series, but there are some allusions to it in the final book as well that are important to understanding exactly how Hiccup stands out against the amatonormativity of his setting. Amatonormativity, as coined by Elizabeth Brake, refers to the “assumption that everyone is better off in an exclusive, romantic, long-term coupled relationship, and that everyone is seeking such a relationship” (Brake 2021, n.p.). While Hiccup’s best friend, Fishlegs, exhibits attraction to two Viking princesses to a comic degree, and even their mutual friend Camicazi is implied to feel some attraction toward Hiccup himself, Hiccup shows no sign of attraction whatsoever, actually being at times repulsed or confused by the societal obsession with Love. When Humungously Hotshot tries to tell him his tale in *How to Twist a Dragon’s Tale* (2007), the narration states that Hiccup “wasn’t very interested in stories about Love” and he asks Humungous to “get on with it” when the hero is waxing poetic about his ex-lover (Cowell 2007, 105). Similarly, Hiccup “stared at Fishlegs as if he were crazy” in response to his friend’s theatrical sighing and rapturous comments over the “spectacularly beautiful and spectacularly cross,” Tantrum O’Ugerly (Cowell 2009, 36-37), and he spends much of that book, *How to Break a Dragon’s Heart* (2009), exasperated with Fishlegs for the trouble caused by Fishlegs’ infatuation with Tantrum.

The final book, *How to Fight a Dragon’s Fury* (2015), solidifies the reading of Hiccup as aromantic asexual—aroace—by putting him in direct contrast to both of his friends. At the end of the book, after the main plot has finished and there is peace, Fishlegs is writing a love poem to Barbara the Barbarian (Cowell 2015, 441), and several moments imply Camicazi has feelings for Hiccup. She blushes “red as a beetroot” at his touch, is annoyed at the advances of a group of her friends toward Hiccup, reasserting her own claim to him, and she subsequently remarks that it’s “a bad business, this ‘love’ business” (Cowell 2015, 438, 446). Hiccup, however, shares none of their interest or concern with matters of Love, focusing instead on his new role as King of the Wilderwest and on keeping Fishlegs out of trouble while seemingly oblivious to Camicazi’s romantic interest in him (Cowell 2015, 447, 453). This is consistent with who Hiccup is throughout the series, someone who cares deeply for his friends and has a great interest in dragons, but no interest in Love.

Overall, *How to Train Your Dragon* offers a perspective on romance that is especially valuable to its intended readership—namely, that it is okay to be uninterested in romance, even if everyone around you is. For middle schoolers and young teenagers such as the main characters at the end of the series, it can be isolating to still be interested in dragons and bored by romance while your peers talk about love, but Hiccup shows how it is possible and even beneficial to be uninterested in Love. Not only is he the main character and hero, but he serves as an important voice of reason for his lovesick friends. The one downside is that Hiccup cannot actively claim the labels of asexual and aromantic due to the historical setting of the story where these terms would be anachronistic. It is also unclear if the author wrote the character with these labels in mind. Nonetheless, *How to Train Your Dragon* still offers an excellent escape



from the amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality of many stories, focusing instead on the importance of friends, family, and dragons. I cannot recommend the series highly enough.

Works Cited

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LUNA FORTNER is an undergraduate English major at Illinois State University. A lover of middle grade fiction since before and after their middle grade years, Luna loves stories about dragons, space, and found family. When they’re not reading or writing, they often play video games or *Dungeons and Dragons* as a way to keep exploring other worlds. You can find them on **Twitter** @LuxMythical yelling about something nerdy like *Doctor Who* or *Star Trek*.