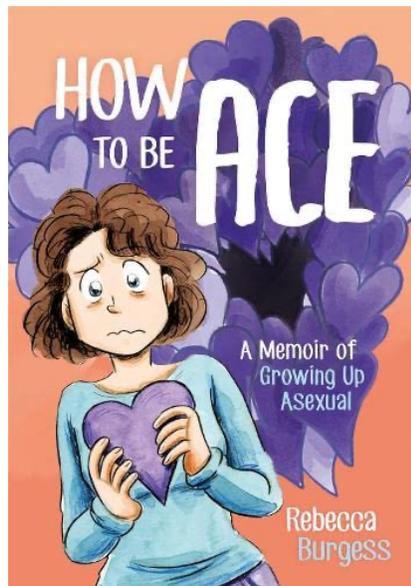




How to Read Ace: A Review of Rebecca Burgess' Graphic Memoir

Review by Charley Koenig

Rebecca Burgess. *How to Be Ace: A Memoir of Growing Up Asexual*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020.



The above image depicts the cover of Rebecca Burgess' graphic memoir, *How to Be Ace: A Memoir of Growing Up Asexual*. The main title is written in large white font. The subtitle is written below the main title in smaller font that is white and light blue. The author's name is in the bottom right corner of the image with "Rebecca" written in white and "Burgess" written in light blue. The picture placed behind the title and subtitle shows an illustration of a large heart shape made of many smaller purple hearts with a dark heart-shaped space in the center. The picture to the left of the title and subtitle shows an illustration of a brown-haired white person in a light blue shirt looking nervous and holding a purple heart. The background of the cover image is salmon pink.

expectations, eventually deciding that it's okay to just be herself. As we begin "Chapter Four," we start to see Burgess' germaphobia come to a head. She begins to go to therapy (unfortunately with an acephobic therapist), wrestles with previously held ideas about herself, and lands on the

How to Pretend to Be Like Any Other Graphic Memoir

Much more interested in talking about comics than sex, Rebecca Burgess, a full-time autistic illustrator who identifies as asexual and is based in the UK, composed her seminal memoir in graphic form. Employing illustrations, panels, frames, and onomatopoeia, Burgess takes full advantage of the typical conventions of graphic memoir to tell a specific story from an often-underrepresented perspective: that of an asexual coming to learn not just what asexuality is and can look like, but also how it bumps (chafes, scrapes, and stabs, really) up against ingrained systems and established norms like compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity. Through dynamic multimodal storytelling, Burgess offers a raw new addition to the still slim ranks of asexual representation in the media.

How to Experiment

Arranged into six chapters, "Chapter One" opens with scenes from Burgess' adolescence. In this section, Burgess depicts her teenage self feeling both unimpressed and intimidated by the idea of sex while struggling with being bullied. In "Chapter Two," Burgess describes attending art school and how she starts to come into her own while also coming up against assumed norms about sex and relationships that are laid out and reinforced everywhere she turns. "Chapter Three" is where Burgess details trying (and failing) to comfortably adhere to these cultural



conclusion that she can address her feelings of anxiety at her own pace. In “Chapter Five,” Burgess walks through her developing relationship with Sophie, someone she met in university who is also ace, as they figure out how they want their romantic partnership to operate. The sixth and final chapter portrays where Burgess stands today, happy in her relationship with Sophie and comfortable with the idea that life is never going to be what she expects. She laments the lack of asexual visibility in our Western culture and the harm this does, but wraps up the memoir optimistically with a list of ace-related resources.

How to Break Expectations and Stereotypes

Compulsory sexuality, or the assumption that everyone is sexual and “that our society’s definition of the human and the normal are tied to the sexual” (Gupta 2015, 134–135), can be seen in many instances throughout Burgess’ memoir as she struggles with sexual expectations, is held back for a long time from knowing, understanding, and accepting herself, and is confronted with acephobia. “I didn’t really *want* to have sex,” Burgess writes, “I just always felt like I *had* to” (25). For Burgess (really everyone), compulsory sexuality is also very tied up with amatonormativity, or that assumed progression of the relationship escalator that centers romantic and sexual coupledness at the expense of other relationships: “fall in love, move in together, get married, have kids, and forsake all (or at least most or many) others” (Neal 2016, n.p.). These two forces work in tandem to drive the cultural expectations and stereotypes felt by Burgess: “For the asexuals not conforming to what’s being said, the message is loud and clear: You’re not an accomplished or healthy adult if you don’t have a relationship or good sex” (26). Burgess is told what she should desire and strive for long before she’s able to even ask these questions of herself. On top of (and largely because of) these two forces, Burgess encounters a myriad of different forms of acephobia throughout the book. Some examples of these instances are compiled in one of the guides she provides at the end of each chapter—“Things People Say to Me if I Happen to Mention that I’m Asexual During a Conversation” (168)—but perhaps one of the more egregious examples of acephobia comes from her therapist, who, rather than validating her disinterest in sex, insists that she will eventually have sex and that she’s just not ready yet because of past experiences. This is a setback for Burgess for a while; she reverts to thinking of herself as broken and her anxiety intensifies. It’s not until an encouraging conversation with her mother in which she realizes that she can move forward at her own pace one step at a time, along with the important discovery of the term asexual online, that Burgess is able to see past those broken conceptions of herself and look back on that encounter with her therapist as problematic.

Burgess’ graphic work presents a specific experience of aceness, one that has had to learn to push past the limitations of powerful societal forces before being able to really figure out an ace positionality in all its glory. This sort of coming-of-age, coming-into-oneself story offers an alternative to the prescriptions of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity and gives folks the space to find, embrace, and celebrate whatever kinds of relations make sense for them. What’s more, the various guides and resources provided throughout the memoir—like “What is Asexuality?” (21) and “Sexual Attraction and Romantic Attraction,” (44) to name a few—take these alternative ways of being and being together outside of the realm of story and into the real world, offering awareness, education, community, and best of all, more books.



How to Show Others They Are Not Alone

In this visual, vulnerable, endearing graphic memoir, Burgess challenges and rails against compulsory sexuality, amatonormativity, and acephobia. Ultimately, this story lets others living under the burdens of these pressures know that they are not alone, that their struggles are legitimate and valid, and that there are ways to be outside of these prescribed norms. “Life is not a binary path where the end goal is a happy perfect ending” Burgess says in the last chapter (172). “Life can never be perfect... But I’m glad I’ve figured out how to be okay with that” (180).

How to Read Ace

Best read in full color with generous amounts of light and coffee or tea, *How to Be Ace* by Rebecca Burgess is a delight of asexual representation, visibility, and possibility.

Works Cited

- Gupta, Kristina. 2015. “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept.” *Signs* 41, no. 1 (Autumn): 131–154.
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CHARLEY KOENIG is an English Studies PhD student studying creative writing at Illinois State University. She is the author of a chapbook, *All That Unpleasantness* (PRESS 254, 2019). Her current writing and research interests include fiction and hybrid genres, life writing, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, trauma studies, film and television studies, and feminist and queer pedagogies. She can usually be found playing with her daughter and her dogs, but she also enjoys watching movies and crocheting. **Email** inquiries: cdkoen1@ilstu.edu.