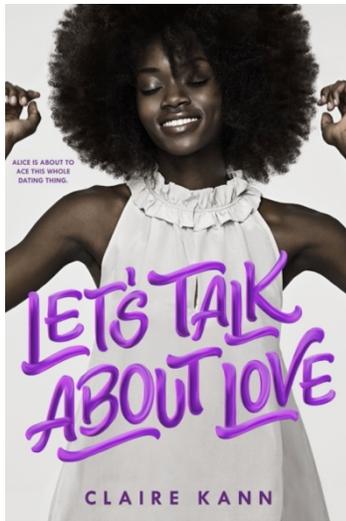




Let's Talk About Asexuality and Intersectionality: A Review of *Let's Talk About Love* by Claire Kann

Review by Margaret McCarthy

Claire Kann. *Let's Talk About Love*. Swoon Reads, 2019.



Above is the cover of Claire Kann's *Let's Talk About Love*. Against a light gray background, a Black woman with an afro (Alice) stands in a white dress cut off at the shoulders and with a ruffle around the neck, smiling with arms raised. The title is centered slightly below center, and is rendered in a large, purple font, reading *Let's Talk About Love*, with author Claire Kann's name below in all caps, also in purple. On the left side of Alice, above her shoulder, there is small text that reads, "Alice is about to ace this whole dating thing" in all caps.

Claire Kann's YA novel, *Let's Talk About Love*, centers around Alice, a Black asexual, biromantic young woman, whose world shifts after her girlfriend Margot breaks up with her. Alice does not want sexual acts reciprocated from Margot because she does not experience sexual attraction, although Alice is willing to satisfy her partner's needs. From there, Alice's perspectives on love and relationships start to shift; she worries that perhaps there isn't a way for her to be in any relationship, that maybe she'll never find a partner that could truly love her while being in a partnership that isn't sex-centered. However, Alice soon finds herself falling for the new hire at her job, a young man named Takumi, who is allosexual, meaning he experiences sexual attraction. Now, Alice is between a rock and a hard place: Is it possible that Takumi could be interested in being in a relationship that isn't sex centered? If so, could he fully accept and love her for who she is?

We experience *Let's Talk About Love* through Alice's perspective, following along as she navigates family, friendship, and love. The first scene of the book opens us up to Alice and Margot's breakup. Margot is written as an acephobic character who demonstrates to readers all of the common misunderstandings around asexuality. She tells Alice that Alice's asexuality is unnatural and suggests that she should see a doctor, insinuating that a lack of sexual desire is a physical ailment. Further, through a hurtful and racist comment, Margot also hypersexualizes Alice:

"I don't see the point," Alice said. "I don't need it. I don't think about it."

"Sex?" Margot laughed—a tiny giggle, as if Alice had told a mildly funny joke.

"But you're Black." (Kann 2018, 8)



The intersection of acephobia and anti-Black racism is at play in this scene: the common racist stereotype that because Alice is Black, she must be sexual. This ignorance from Margot reveals to the readers how intersectionality impacts one's very ability to identify and be perceived by others as asexual. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a way of analyzing social inequality by the way in which people's lives are shaped in relation to power, not just by a single level of social classification or identity, like race or gender, but by the many ways that these levels of identity collaborate and how they influence one another (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016, 11). Therefore, Margot's comments were formulated with false societal expectations and understandings of Black asexuality. Margot's understanding of Alice's identity is not accidental or coincidental, but motivated by racist and acephobic viewpoints that fail to challenge compulsory sexuality and anti-Blackness.

The importance of Margot's misunderstandings highlight common struggles throughout the asexual community at their intersections with Blackness. The novel works to untangle some of these misconceptions. Angela Chen writes: "But for people who come from more vulnerable communities and are weighed down by extra layers of social conditioning, figuring out whether one's asexuality is human variation or externally imposed is fraught with cultural and historical baggage" (Chen 2020, 114). We can see through Alice's conversation with Margot, how racist and acephobic thinking is used as a tool of attempted control.

Let's Talk About Love works to highlight the importance of Alice's experiences as a queer Black woman, while refusing to tolerate a white version of asexuality and white readings of Blackness. Through the perspective of Ianna Hawkins Owen's writing, we can identify the ideas Margot has about Black asexuality, which she forces onto Alice, as what Patricia Hill Collins terms "controlling images," which are used to hypersexualize Black folks, or in turn, desexualize them— both tactics of dehumanization.

Owen writes about the comparison between the "Mammy" (as a desexualized trope) and the "Jezebel" (a hypersexualized trope), and how both ideas have promoted racial violence against Black folks (Owen 2014, 256). Through this, we are also able to understand how despite Alice owning her sexuality in an honest conversation with Margot, Margot's racist and acephobic assumptions were put to work to undermine Alice. Brittney Miles, writing about the novel, states that Alice's ownership of her sexuality is a threat to a type of "sexual politics" that are working towards the erasure of Black queerness. By asserting her right to claim her sexuality, Alice threatens the very discriminative frameworks that work against queer Black folks, which is evident in the ways Margot has hypersexualized Alice based on her Blackness (Miles 2019, 8).

Furthermore, the novel celebrates asexuality in its push against toxic compulsory sexuality. Kann's two characters, Takumi and Alice, are navigating a relationship that is not sex-centered. While Takumi is not asexual, there is an open line of communication between the two about how they will navigate their relationship together. Takumi, while unsure about what the relationship will look like for him, challenges compulsory sexuality by asking respectful questions about asexuality, being honest, and being committed to discussing the aspects of their relationship that are new to him. In a conversation with Alice about the dynamics of their relationship, Takumi is open about where he stands with his own needs:

"I'm not asexual," he said immediately.

"I know that." She managed to not roll her eyes.

"Do you? I never said I wasn't and I think I need to because I'm not," he said. "It



took me awhile but I think I figured it out. The reason why I hesitated wasn't because of sex itself. You were spot on before. Sex is like jogging. Either you enjoy doing it or you don't. To me, and this is just me, it's the feeling that I care about—what sex is supposed to represent.” (Kann 2018, 203)

The novel also pushes back against compulsory sexuality in the relationship dynamic between Alice and her closest friends. Alice, Feenie, and Ryan are roommates, as well as Alice's best friends. Together, their friendship exists outside of the expectations of amatonormativity, and challenges the societal assumption that only strictly romantic relationships should be the center of one's life. Alice, Feenie, and Ryan have a relationship that provides care and platonic intimacy, while being each other's main support system. More specifically, Feenie and Alice, from a nonromantic perspective, consider each other their soul mates. Alice states,

“Ryan is the literal light of my life. I don't think I've ever met someone as considerate and driven as him. He's all-around amazing. And Feenie, well, she's my oldest friend and soulmate. Her word, not mine, but I believe it.” (Kann 2018, 105)

Furthermore, Alice finds security and joy in the established relationships she has with Feenie and Ryan. They form a support system that allows her to be herself, a system that acts as a safe space for Alice. As readers, we come to know Alice as a character that lives a fulfilling and joyful life. Claire Kann writes Alice as somebody whose fictional existence is not solely defined by their sexuality. Alice is a real, rounded character that readers can relate to. We are able to see the pride and happiness Alice takes in her identity, including in her journey from being nervous to tell Margot about her identity to telling Takumi, “I don't want you to apologize. That would be like me saying I'm sorry I'm ace when I'm not” (Kann 2018, 204).

The book exemplifies a real understanding of the struggles and joys that come with being an asexual, biromantic, Black woman. The book acknowledges complex ace realities through conversations about the fluidity of asexuality and how this plays into different types of attraction. Overall, *Let's Talk About Love* is a novel that is definitely worth a read, and celebrates asexuality through Alice's perspective of all of the ways we can love and be loved, while staying true to one's identity and self.

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