

# THE QUEER AND FEMINIST WORLDS OF WITCHES & MAGICAL BEINGS IN FEMINIST YA GRAPHIC NOVELS

by: Shana MacDonald, March 30, 2023

The cultural figure of the witch is steeped in histories of resistance and revolt. In our current moment, the witch offers a compelling manifestation of our desires and anxieties, particularly around gender. In recent years, feminism has revisited the witch as an image of patriarchal refusal (Yin Q. 2020). The connection between feminism and witches articulates a clear ‘support of gender equality’ that confirms ‘the witch’s continued role in feminist activism’ (Sollée 2017: 62). Starting in late 2016, for example, social media users began circulating calls to hex Donald Trump. In 2018, *Teen Vogue* heralded a popular culture ‘resurgence of witches’ with contemporary reboots of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Charmed* (Stahler 2018). Popular hashtags #witchesofinstagram and #witchtok have spurred grassroots community building spaces in the aftermath of social movements like #metoo (with its own cries of ‘witch hunt’ on all sides of the divide). Even capitalist consumerism has pushed the witch-core aesthetic well beyond the month of October. Despite the tilt to consumerism, witches and their links to magical worlds stand for a space of possibility outside the constraints of a hetero-patriarchal, colonial, white-supremacist capitalist landscape. Through repudiations of the sexist and conservative cultures that have always persecuted them, the witch becomes aligned with a feminist queering of dominant space. In this refusal witches reimagine how to be in (or in-between) the world that *is* and the world that *could be*. Witches thus exist in a queer time and space that is not commensurate with a heteronormativity of nuclear families and rule-abiding women. This realm of possibility to be *otherwise* is what gives the figure of the witch power and desirability for feminist and queer communities.

This article explores how witchy worlds are used in young adult (YA) graphic novels as a site of feminist and queer representation. To do so, I have chosen to focus on two recent graphic novel series, *Lumberjanes* (2014-2020) and *The Witch Boy Trilogy* (2017-2019) both of which provide queer main characters and non-heteronormative community formations as the crux of their stories and encourage a queer and feminist ethos. Visually, each series reimagines what witches and magic can look like for younger audiences. These are colourful and stylistically fluid worlds where anything is

possible. Both series include nostalgic references to queer iconography, especially through older figures who act as models for the younger characters and, by extension, readers. In what follows I analyse these texts for the ways in which the central characters rely on their friendships and otherworldly, or non-normative, everyday spaces to develop a more queer and feminist existence.

The current re-emergence of the witch figure in popular culture includes a notable presence in the increasingly popular genre of young adult graphic novels. YA graphic novels have become a leading genre that has been 'outselling adult and direct market-driven comic books with increasing growth' in the last decade and a half (Cynthia & Wibowo 2021). Between 2020 and 2021 alone, the sales of YA graphic novels increased by one-hundred and twenty-three percent (Yung 2021). A key outcome of this expanding genre and readership is how it has 'opened gateways for marginalised creators to tell diverse stories' (Cynthia & Wibowo 2021). As a significant site of current popular culture, YA graphic novels offer an important imaginative space for exploring feminist and queer identities. This is equally so for YA graphic novels that combine queer and feminist characters with the fantasy elements of witches and magic. The magical life-worlds of *Witch Boy* and *Lumberjanes* are important sites of queerness and intersectional feminist politics for younger audiences. I situate these two works in what Jennifer Miller calls "'new" queer children's literature' (2019). As an emergent genre it offers 'transformative queer worldmaking' that 'refuses hierarchical distinctions between straightness and queerness,' instead producing coexistent 'imaginative spaces' where these identity formations are 'in flux' (2019: 1646-47). What sets these and similar graphic novels apart is their use of magical beings and witches to undo heteronormative hierarchies and ways of being. Through their fantastical life-worlds, *Lumberjanes* and *Witch Boy* aptly imbue their narratives with inter-generational dialogues around notions of identity, agency, and resistance. These narratives map well onto the non-diegetic realities taking place in our current culture around feminism, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and trans-inclusive activisms. This paper considers how the magical realms of each series do not rely on queerness or feminism as a point of tragedy or shame. Instead, they centre queerness and feminism as everyday, *de facto* realities and ways of being in the world that produce different forms of relationality through queer kinships (Haraway 2016 & Butler 1997). As

such, the paper suggests that together they offer a counterpoint to heteronormative comic figures (de Dauw 2018), providing us instead with supernatural worlds full of queer potentialities (Salcedo Gonzalez 2021).

### ***Lumberjanes & The Witch Boy***

The *Lumberjanes* comic series was developed by Shannon Watters, ND Stevenson, and Grace Ellis, and published by Boom! Studios, starting in 2014. It ran for seventy-five regular issues plus a summer special, finally ending in 2020. These issues are collected into twenty 'trade paperback' volumes. The series is centred around a group of summer campers at 'Miss Qiunzella Thiskwin Penniquil Thistle Crumpet's Camp for Hardcore Lady Types' where the attendees are called Lumberjanes. The main characters: Jo, April, Molly, Mal, and Ripley, are a close group of friends who never follow their counsellor Jen's rules, and are always encountering mythical creatures and magical landscapes in their daily explorations. They often rely on collaborative thinking and each camper's unique skills to get them out of weird and sometimes dangerous adventures that have them meeting punk rock merpeople, shapeshifters, a Yeti commune, dinosaurs, goddesses, time travel portals, and magical holy kittens. Their negotiations with otherworldly environments serve as the background for a meta-arc about each camper's identity development within the narrative that spans across the twenty volumes. Visually, the camp includes both a nostalgic 'summer camp' aesthetic and a campy queer one. For instance, the camp director Rosie is a queer-coded, tattooed version of Rosie the Riveter with a larger-than-life persona, shape-shifting abilities, and a lumberjack wardrobe. The Yetis, who partake in an enemies-to-friends trajectory with the Lumberjanes, are hyper colourful and stylishly accessorised, and have playfully diva-like personalities to match. The series makes its feminism equally explicit. Whenever a camper exclaims an enthusiastic expletive, instead of swearing they invoke a feminist historical figure. These include—in the first six issues alone—Joan Jett, Elizabeth Coleman, Mae Carol Jamison, Phillis Wheatley, bell hooks, ancient Greek figure Agnodice, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Annie Smith Peck, and Mary Anning (Marcotte 2015). This repeated naming of historic women throughout the series confirms an intersectional canon of feminist key players for some readers. For others who are just learning about feminist histories, these exclamations offer a set of references to follow up on. This merging of different nostalgic aesthetics and histories makes the queer and feminist imagery of the series

so compelling. The series has won Eisner Awards (2015), a GLAAD award for Outstanding Comic Book (2016, nominated 2015, 2018, 2019), and is being turned into an animated series for HBO Max.

*The Witch Boy Trilogy* was written and illustrated by Molly Know Ostertag, and includes *Witch Boy* (2017), *The Hidden Witch* (2018), and *The Midwinter Witch* (2019). The main character Aster Vanissen is part of a large and long-standing magical family, where boys become shapeshifters and girls are trained as witches. This poses a problem for Aster who, while born a boy, has not yet shifted, and is instead drawn to witchcraft despite his family's lack of support. As Jessica Cynthia and Jacinta Pricilla Wibowo note, the trilogy 'employs fantasy elements as metaphors to communicate the stigma surrounding gender identity' (2021). Visually, the series makes clear distinctions between the world of magic—where Aster and his family live—and the outside world, which he often visits. Signalling these as distinct spaces gives Ostertag the freedom to represent magical acts and witchy bodies as both everyday and extraordinary. This is seen in the way in which the artwork tends towards a middle ground in the scale between objective and subjective. Taken together with a comforting and warm colour palette, the series draws readers in with accessible imagery that easily transforms into more iconic representations of magic at key points. Similar to *Lumberjanes*, the world of *Witch Boy* also incorporates diverse racial, gender, and queer characters whose distinct lived experiences productively outline a plurality of perspectives for the central characters to consider and learn from. The series' narrative follows Aster, a mixed-race boy with shaggy red hair, as he comes into his power both personally and magically. He does so with the help of a supportive non-magical friend Charlie, who is Black, queer, has two dads, and models productive ways for Aster to resist conformity. The three books function as a metaphorical journey for gender exploration as we follow Aster's growing acceptance of his witch powers and see him negotiating his place within the sometimes-unaccepting larger witch community. The first book won a Prism Award (for 'Best Mainstream Comic,') and a Cyblis Award, and was featured in the *New York Times*' 2018 list of top books for feminist boys and girls.

In what follows, these two graphic novel series are considered both for their narrative arcs as well as for the aesthetic features that reimagine YA worlds that speak back to dominant tropes of gender and normativity through magic. The analysis will follow a

set of queries around the ways in which the texts employ forms of queer worldmaking and kinships to represent intimate reckonings with inter-generational experiences of feminist and queer resistance.

### **Fantastical Queer Worldmaking**

In the 1998 special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on intimacy, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner note that queer worldmaking requires us to develop different ‘kinds of intimacy’ that move away from the heteronormative domains of the domestic and the nation (558). These intimacies of queer worldmaking instead offer ‘a counterpublic’ that is both ‘indefinitely accessible’ and ‘conscious of its subordinate relation’ (Berlant & Warner 1998: 558). That consciousness is what allows queer communities to collectively ‘work toward creating a different world’ (Nakayama & Morris 2015: v). For Berlant and Warner, these ‘radical aspirations of queer culture building’ include ‘the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex’ (1998: 548). These possibilities come into being when heteronormativity is displaced as the dominant site of reference. Queer worldmaking thus commits to enabling and building worlds via the concepts of ‘belonging, transformation, memory, mobility’ (Nakayama & Morris 2013: vi). Importantly, queer practices of worldmaking work through ‘relations and narratives’ that develop sexual and non-sexual intimacies which offer ‘a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation’ (Berlant & Warner 1998: 558).

The concept of queer worldmaking outlined by Berlant, Warner, and others is useful for understanding YA graphic novels that seek queer potentialities through magic and magical beings. Both series considered here model strong relationships and a sense of belonging that form the foundation for important character transformations. This is reflected in the visual styles of both graphic novels, which tend towards an expressive representational form that emphasises the emotional states and expressions of the characters in their interactions with each other through graphic weight and framing. *Witch Boy* and *Lumberjanes*’ careful rendering of magical worlds allows for a translation of affect, intimacy, and a queering of identity and daily life. Together, each series’ magical worlds and supportive intimacies become compelling examples of queer worldmaking in a genre form that has not always offered such perspectives. The inviting use of bright punchy, campy colours in *Lumberjanes* and the comforting, muted, nostalgic hues of *Witch Boy* draw readers differently but equally into these

worlds. As such, the magical, extra-ordinary spaces of these novels become an important canvas for displacing heteronormativity as a dominant visual and narrative site of reference.

Most notable is how these worlds are set apart from normative everyday life. Their proximity to magic separates them from dominant spaces structured through heteronormative rules. In the case of *Lumberjanes*, the entire series takes place in one summer at a sleep-away camp where scouts are protected from the pressures of the outside world. However, what they find in addition to a nature-filled getaway is a world of unexpected wonders and magical beings that are not readily recognised in the non-camp world as anything other than fantasy and myth. Like the 'betwixt and between' space of summer camps in general, the other-worldly space of the *Lumberjanes* camp is a utopian one for the campers to explore who they are with the support and modelling of these magical characters who live their lives freely outside external, dominant constraints. The campers are often drawn beyond the camp's boundaries and immediately encounter mythical creatures that simply do not conform. Visually these encounters quickly break through the standard image of summer camp with some form of strangeness, or a queering of normative space. This proximity to a queer-er world shows both them and the readers that another way is possible.

This lends well to the diverse ways in which the five main campers engage with their gender identity and sexuality which do not on the whole entirely uphold normative gender cues. Within the group, queer identities have the time and space to take shape in ways that—for some characters—they cannot outside the camp. While Jo, a transgender Navajo girl raised in a queer household with two fathers, can live her identity in both spaces, it is April, her best friend and fellow camper, to whom she first came out as trans. Molly, who develops a romantic relationship with Mal during the camp, cannot inhabit her queerness with her family and is thus reluctant to leave camp at the end of summer. Molly, like Jo, has a practical, tomboy aesthetic and wears what everyone thinks is a racoon hat—which turns out actually to be a pet racoon she adopted at the camp. Mal Yoo, is Korean-American and has a riot grrrl punk aesthetic with a shaved under cut, lumberjack plaid shirt, ripped jeans, and denim vest with band pins. Ripley Rodriguez-O'Shannasy is the smallest camper at the Rokanoe cabin, whose short brown hair with blue bangs is an indicator of her energetic and

adventurous personality. Ripley is of Afro-Mexican and Irish decent and is motivated by an unstoppable drive and a love of candy, kittens, and glitter. She is very sporty, often wearing shorts, with a long-sleeve shirt under a t-shirt and a rolled up red bandana headband. April is the most femme-presenting character, with well-styled long red hair, and wearing black leggings under pink shorts with ballet flats. April embodies her femme identity as a space of empowerment, while also grappling with the pressures of the toxic femininity she can sometimes enact. Barney, who we first meet as a scouting lad from the neighbouring boys camp, ends up becoming a Lumberjane mid-summer, allowing them to comfortably start using they/them pronouns (Issue 28). What the Lumberjanes camp offers Barney is the freedom to explore a non-binary identity that they did not feel was possible at the boys' camp (Lumberjanes Wikia).

Even the camp's welcome sign visually indexes the feminist queering of the space. The original dark wooden sign has cursive writing that says 'Miss Qiunzella Thiskwin Penniquil Thistle Crumpet's Camp for Girls' with ornate flower woodwork around the edges. A piece of rough wood plank with the phrase 'Hardcore Lady Types' carved into it has been hammered over the word 'Girls.' This switches who the camp is for by pointedly allowing a broader, queerer world of possibilities for the campers. A second wooden plank has been added to the bottom of the original sign with the motto 'FRIENDSHIP TO MAX' engraved on it. The sign sets the borderline to entering the camp and is usually positioned at the top of the visual frame so that it towers over characters and the reader, reinforcing it as an orienting force. The addition of 'hardcore lady types' and 'friendship to the max' asserts as the guiding ethos of the camp the prioritisation of the vast diversity of 'lady types' over simply 'girls,' as well as the collective intimacies of friendship as being paramount to daily life at the camp.

One additional point of interest is how the volumes are framed as 'Lumberjane Field Manuals.' This sets the tone for each volume as a nostalgic twentieth century camp manual, reinforced through colour tones and layout, and in doing so already transports readers into the mindset of summer camp. Visually, each volume has a title page in a neutral beige colour with the large black all-caps title 'Lumberjanes Field Manual' and smaller italic writing below 'For the Intermediate Program' with an edition and year date underneath. The rest of the page contains a simple line drawing of a Lumberjane in white with green accessories (skirt, socks, hat, backpack). The

green shading makes these camp specific uniform objects stand out. Underneath the drawing of the camper is much smaller print that says 'Prepared for the Miss Qiunzella Thiskwin Penniquiquil Thistle Crumpet's Camp for Girls' with the 'Girls' also scratched out and 'Hardcore Lady Types' written in on the side. At the lowest and smallest line of text is written 'Friendship to the Max!' The title page becomes an additional opportunity to impart a feminist message of solidarity for young readers that orients them across the twenty volumes.

This is made even more explicit on the next page of each volume, each of which carries on this initial title page's aesthetic. It has the same beige background colour with green accents and black text. This second page includes at the top a framed drawing of the camp sign from a lower-than-normal angle, making it tower over the panel in which it is framed. The drawing is positioned under a heading that trumpets a 'Message from the Lumberjane High Council.' The messages that follow under the picture change throughout the twenty volumes. Each offers lessons or insights that are pertinent to the narrative arc that follows it. The opening message addresses campers (both the Lumberjanes who attend the camp, and by extension the readers) as being able to find their place whether we be 'dancers ... misfits, a career girl, or the social elite' and promises to 'guide you on your path' (Vol. 1). The opening message seen in both Vol. 1 and 2 also states 'it will show you a different side of life that will help you guide your future journeys' (Vol. 1, Vol. 2). Underneath the message is another simple line drawing of a camper in the green accessories standing with hand on chest, as if speaking the pledge. The messages in the pledge and the written portion above it are very feminist in tone, and set out a coda of sorts that centres community, collaboration, and care. At the start of early issues contained in the volumes are chapters that set out badges that need to be earned (a different one per chapter), and these are usually earned through tasks that must be achieved to advance the narrative arc in that issue. These tasks require campers to learn valuable life lessons that impact one or several of the campers' own journeys.

The final message at the start of Vol. 20 offers a metatextual goodbye from the authors to their readers, encouraging them to take the lessons from camp into their own communities. Here, the authors create kinship networks with readers and fans, and encourage acts of friendship and hard-core lady ethos to all who have engaged



with the five main characters and their narrative arcs. This extends the queer and feminist worldmaking of the magic within the book into the outside world (where it is very much needed).

Worldmaking happens differently in *The Witch Boy*, where the protagonist, Aster, lives in a rambling, multi-generational family home where everyone is in some way magical. Here the tension is less with an outside world where Aster cannot be his full self, more with the magic-filled world in which he lives—one that cannot accept his particular form of magic because of his gender. It is a more subtle book in terms of queer visual referencing, where the experience of difference within the gendered roles of magic takes the forms of non-normative resistance and tension. The colour tone is more muted but still colourful, albeit with a more subdued palette than that of *Lumberjanes*. The home that centres Aster's magical world is a white three-story build with a large front porch, stretching back almost endlessly to the dark growth of trees behind it. The house as a visual grounding point for the family's life and magical training is welcoming, comfortable, well-worn, and well loved. The family space has large lands surrounding it, including a lush forest and a river at its farthest edge that separates the family from the main town. There is a protection spell around the area marked by two large stones with magical etchings at the entrance to the property, to keep out evil spirits but also to mark the border of separation from the non-magical life outside. This is visually supported by the use of shadows and the expressive style of the trees and landscape which look always to be in movement or charged with energy, in contrast to the static representations of suburban town life on the other side of the boundary.

The family includes queer and mixed-race members within its larger structure. Their identities are normalised parts of the family's life and identity. All the school-aged family members are home-schooled by their aunts (in witchcraft) or by their uncles (in shapeshifting). The grandmother is the matriarch of the Vanissen clan, and her narrative becomes crucial later in the story arc because she herself is not only a witch but also a shifter.

*Witch Boy* opens up a tension within this protected world, as the rigid views around the limits of which sexes can interact with which types of magic make it less a liberating space than one with constraints. It is when Aster leaves this space of constraint that he finds new kinds of supportive intimacies with a non-magical friend

from the outside world named Charlie. Early in the first book Aster is admonished for spying on the girls' magic lesson. He runs off and tries out the spell he learned beyond the boundaries of his family land. He successfully grows a bush full of berries on the edges of a suburb and is seen by Charlie. She is not scared but instead enthusiastic, and they quickly become friends. It is in this space of Charlie's world that Aster can explore his gifts more freely, even though for most of his family the opposite is true.

Through the three books, Aster ultimately relies on the support of Charlie, his sister Juniper, his cousin Sedge (who leaves shifting behind for a 'normal' high school experience with Charlie), and an orphaned witch named Ariel, to help confront the magical world's presuppositions about who can practice what kinds of magic. This culminates in a witch world tournament where Aster is ultimately crowned the 'Mid-Winter Witch,' the first boy to be recognised as such in his community. In the context of this world set apart from our own, the author of the series shows the queer potentialities of embodying non-normative gendered expression in ways that can positively impact future generations for young readers. Notably, in both books friendship as a form of intimacy, both within and outside contexts of magic, becomes a valuable site of worldmaking and possibility. This is a form of queer kinship that I wish now to consider more closely.

### **Queer & Feminist Kinship**

For Berlant, intimacy is central to a queer politics as it 'builds worlds' and 'creates spaces ... meant for other kinds of relation' (Berlant 1998: 282). A reconsidering of intimacy beyond heteronormative romance, one that includes the strong bonds of friendship, asks us to reconsider how normative social spaces 'enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive' (Berlant 1998: 285). And in such questioning, we are better able to 'appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living' (Berlant 1998: 285). The kinds of queer intimacies outlined by Berlant describe a form of kinship that exists 'beyond patrilineality, compulsory heterosexuality, and the symbolic overdetermination of biology' (Butler 1997: 14). This situates 'kinship [as] a kind of doing, a practice that enacts that assemblage of significations as it takes place' (Butler 2002: 36). The doing of kinship brings a disruption of heteronormative boundaries 'that call into question the distinguishability of kinship from community, or that call for a different conception of friendship,' thus allowing lifelong and life sustaining intimate bonds that

link 'kinship to a set of community ties that are irreducible to family' (Butler 2002: 37-38). The building of kinships beyond both family and normative boundaries are central forces within the narrative arcs of both *Lumberjanes* and *Witch Boy*. A major task set to the main characters of both novels is an assertion of their chosen kinships as necessary for coming into their own as distinct from their families. What clearly also ties the novels together is how this process happens in the context of magical spaces that set out the boundary between normative constraints and queer potentialities. Within these narratives there are points where main characters need to face different kinds of trials, and it is how they approach these trials (within the context of supportive relationships with friends) that shape and define them for the better.

In *Lumberjanes*, as in the motto of the camp itself, friendship is central to all aspects of the narrative. Through friendship the Lumberjanes collectively make a queer feminist world, one that is utopian and exists outside of the pressures they face in their non-camp lives. It becomes for them a template for how to live when they leave. This template for living a queer, feminist life is developed through their everyday errors, their camp skill-building, the various trials they face together, and their reflections on what they learn once they have succeeded. Notably, these trials are largely tied to fantastical experiences, thus reaching their imaginaries beyond the bounds of dominant norms.

For example, in the opening issue the girls have snuck out to the woods and are attacked by three-eyed magical foxes. On Mal's prompt they quickly move into a 'Little Red Formation' and fight back. Ripley catapults into the pack recklessly, and while punching a fox she is riding it vanishes into smoke. The foxes then gather and howl together 'BEWARE THE KITTEN HOLY' before departing. In this opening incident we learn everyone's personalities through the role they take when the group faces a crisis. The visual style is fluid and mixes different visual frames of the action to create a sense of dynamic movement. The colour contrast between a dark purple-black night forest and the bright colours of both the demon foxes and the cabin members' signature outfits adds to this dynamic effect. The switch between shot and reverse-shot perspectives, and the framing of bodies in close-up movement contrasted with wider frames of full body action heightens the tension and excitement building across several pages of this opening. When they return to camp, their counsellor Jen

hauls them in front of Rosie, the head of the camp's office, because they have broken 'at least eight camp rules.' When the group explains that they followed a bear woman into the forest and encountered magical foxes, Rosie does not punish them, but instead notes that they will see a lot of unusual stuff over the summer and face many challenges, but she knows they are made of tough stuff and reminds them to remember their pledge, and to stick together no matter what.

Rosie is correct in her assessment. In the second issue they encounter a many-tentacled river monster, and in the third a cave full of angry, talking stone god statues that they must best in feats of skill to escape. This gives everyone an early chance to show their skills (April strength and will, Mal strategy, Jo mathematical equations, Ripley daredevil feats of bravery, Molly linguistic patterns and riddles), and together they crack the codes and find a way out. The background of issue three is Mal and Molly's developing relationship. In the fourth issue they encounter a Yeti commune on a hike that starts them on the 'enemies to friends' trajectory with the Yetis. Similar encounters occur across the series, with a vast range of magical beings making the forest around the camp their home. This magic forest is the space the scouts continue to explore (despite Jen's protests) to better understand the queer world surrounding them, and their place in it.

In volume 10, *Parent's Day* (Issues 37-40), several connected issues are explored when each camper's families come to visit and get sucked into a magical timeline of events, despite the Lumberjanes' attempts to avoid the camp's strange happenings. The storyline also shows how different campers negotiate their identities within their family structures, and how vital friendship becomes in supporting them. While Jo, April, Ripley, and Mal are excited to connect with their parents, Molly evasively notes that her parents could not make it. The four scouts' parent-child relationships are supportive and loving. This is reflected in the colour scheme for this issue, which is full of shades of green which form not only the trees and greenery surrounding the family gatherings, but also become a background for different frames on each page, adding to the visual sense of fullness, comfort, and liveliness. The bodies of family members are drawn close together and are prominent in the foreground of the frames as if the reader is part of the conversation. This framing offers a comfortable proximity and intimacy. Importantly, these familial kinships all offer non-normative and diverse identities, exemplifying intersectional solidarities. Jo has gay dads, Mal

and April have single parent families, Ripley's family includes her Irish American mom, Afro-Mexican dad, and abuela. While Molly feels out of place, Mal's mom (conscious of Mal's feelings for Molly) ensures that she is included, literally embracing her throughout the day and bringing her into their family circle.

In this storyline, Rosie sets families up with a scavenger hunt that she hopes will keep them close to camp and away from the forest filled with magical creatures. A trickster fox intervenes, and the scouts and their families are taken on a wild adventure which ends up with Ripley's abuela (Senora Rodriguez) missing in the forest. The scouts confess to their families that the forest is a strange place and then hatch a plan to get Senora Rodriguez back. They send their parents back to camp with their counsellor Jen and head into the forest alone to seek help from the Bear Woman. In the end, they discover that Senora Rodriguez has bested the Bear Woman by slapping her with a *Teen Vogue* magazine and is having tea at her place. This is represented with comic relief on a full page with the one long horizontal panel on the far left of the page, and two horizontal panels showing the encounter with the bear in a grey-scale colour palette with the bear's growling in red. In the long panel Senora Rodriguez is shown in full body scale being stared down by the bear. In the next panel there is a close-up of the bear growling in her face. In the next panel just below it the framing stays the same, but Senora Rodriguez calmly but forcefully smacks the bear in the face. Just below this panel is a full colour one of the two of them sipping tea nonchalantly as they retell the story with the bear back in her woman form. The shift in colour and frame shape adds a strong element of pacing to this key point in the story that sets off the narrative to the final resolution.

Significant to this storyline is that the four sets of supportive families encounter the queer strangeness of the scouts' camp world, but also are not the driving force in it: the campers' friendships and collective identity are. This again models a positive familial relationship where the campers can both be themselves and be separate, recognising that they are the ones who can best navigate their magical world.

This becomes most apparent through contrast, when at the end of the volume Molly's parents arrive. We learn from their conversation that Molly gave them the wrong directions as she clearly did not want them to see her within her place of queer utopia. At an earlier point in the issue she cries while talking about her pet racoon's encounter with other racoons from the forest, who were under a spell from the fox.

When Mal says to her 'If only all those other animals would just think for themselves! Like Bubbles!' Molly responds while tearing up 'I'm sure he tried. But you can't MAKE people listen to you...or understand you' (Vol 10, Issue 40). Mal then hugs Molly and tells her 'he did find people who understand him' and Jo comes in and finishes the thought with 'his friends' (Vol 10, issue 40). It is clear no one is talking about Molly's racoon as opposed to Molly's own pain about being misunderstood by her family as a result of her queerness. It is her supportive kinship network of other campers who have let her feel understood for the first time. When we finally meet her parents at the end of the storyline, her mother comes across as very critical and controlling. The encounter looks very different from when other campers met their parents. The framing has less green and more stark blue sky. Her mother's face and expressions are more iconic than realistic, which better communicates her blunt emotions of disapproval and harshness. Molly looks both ashamed of her mother's behaviour in front of the more caring families of her campmates and wary of her mother's wrath. Molly's body is represented in positions of discomfort that are zeroed in on with closer framing as her mother rubs dirt off her face and drags her away from her friends by her arm. Rosie and Jen quickly step in and direct Molly's mother away from her, thus shielding Molly from more emotional distress. This swift, protective gesture shows another form of kinship based on friendship, intimate knowledge of the campers, and solidarity across generations of characters operating outside the boundaries of dominant culture.

In *The Witch Boy* trilogy, Aster's journey into his magical power relies not on family but also the support of friends in accepting his magical (genderqueer) self. Aster's magic is a form of queerness in so far as it exceeds the boundaries of what is expected of his sex; it exists outside of magical society's norms, and thus in the normative spaces of his world it is something to hide. This is both explicitly and implicitly rendered in the narrative through different members of his family. In the first book, he is chastised by his sister for sneaking around and eavesdropping on the girls at dinner. His dad makes a special effort to help him prepare for an upcoming shifting ritual. His Aunt who teaches witchcraft lessons is very hard on him in book two when he is finally able to attend class, giving him extra homework so he can catch up on what he has missed. In book three his mom actively discourages him from participating in the Mid-Winter Witch competition. It is his friend Charlie who continues to encourage his growing abilities in various contexts where he can be of help to others who are

suffering in various ways. As in *Lumberjanes*, Aster relies on Charlie's championing of his witch-ness to really explore and embrace it. Unlike *Lumberjanes*, Aster must start by leaving the magical world that is tied into his family system to begin that exploration in earnest. It is only on Charlie's prompting that he returns to his family and the world of magic to help save his shapeshifting cousins, who are being kidnapped by his estranged uncle Mikasi. Across the trilogy readers discover the family's lack of support for his great-uncle, whose attempt to deviate from the gendered forms of magic led to his downfall and banishment from the family. Due to this lack of acceptance, Mikasi used a more malevolent form of magic to transform himself into a beast, enabled in part by the pain of his family's rejection. It poisoned him and kept him trapped in the monstrous form of a large and violent red serpent-like dragon. This transformation cut him off from the human world and prevented him from returning to his family and his twin sister, Aster's grandmother. Part of Aster's journey, then, becomes the attempt to heal the divisions of his family's past through his own magical abilities.

In book one it is Aster, with Charlie's help, who figures out where his cousins are, and devises a trap to contain Mikasi. His bravery and skills in magic force his family to finally accept who he is and prompt his grandmother to reveal that she is both shifter and witch. In book two, Aster agrees to help heal his great-uncle, who then becomes central to saving his new friend Ariel. This friend is an orphan witch living with a foster family, who has no formal training but attracts a malevolent shadowy spirit called a Fetch. This is a corporealisation of a witch's curse, and it takes possession of Ariel and begins hurting people. In an attempt to redeem himself, Mikasi takes on the evil spirit, but it kills him, freeing Ariel to live. Visually, the battle Mikasi fights with the Fetch occurs in a closed space, giving the reader a sense of constraint and how past struggles and pain personified can imprison a person. In contrast, Mikasi's funeral is depicted in a bright and airy space, with pale blue skies and wisps of cloud, with bright trees of orange and yellow autumn leaves in the background. This colourful and open space frames the family as it mourns. The visual contrast from the site of where Mikasi battled both his and Ariel's demons shows a more peaceful space going forward. It is a generational healing. Indeed, Ariel is adopted by the Vanassian family and taught to work with her powers. Had the family accepted Mikasi for who

he was, all this tragedy could have been avoided. As Sedge, Aster's cousin who opts to not live as a shifter argues, Aster cannot be the only person with magical powers who does not want to follow the prescribed gender roles of magic.

This key insight becomes the catalyst for the final book where Aster competes for and wins the Mid-Winter Witch competition. While the milestone is met with mixed reactions from those outside his family, it becomes a point of solidifying support within it as he heals rifts with his parents. Both the crowning and the competition itself happen in a vast snowy space surrounded by mountains and a starry sky, outside both the family home and the suburban town that borders it. To be crowned, Aster has to stand beside (and up to) his bully, Flint, who is the crown shifter for the year. The panels framing their terse conversation are placed within a full-page image of the mountainous backdrop. This offers some visual expansiveness to otherwise emotionally tense and constraining moments in the plot. Between the close-up images of Aster and Flint's faces as the conversation unfolds is a panel of three frames in the middle of the page. The centre frame is a reverse shot to his friends and family cheering him on for support. This support helps Aster to stand taller and ask Flint why it is such a bad thing not to be normal. The following two-page spread, where Aster is given the flower crown by his grandmother, includes a panel at the bottom on the left-hand page where the crowd is grumbling and looking at the scene suspiciously. Once the crown is on Aster—shown in a long pale blue background horizontal panel at the top of the right-hand page—we see a reverse shot of three panels of supportive crowd members cheering. The bottom largest horizontal panel is a close-up of Aster beaming and surrounded by a warm orange background with cheers surrounding him. This final image shows the potential joy that can be found in finding the truth of yourself with the support of your chosen kin-networks.

Most importantly, this plot line opens conversations in the witch world for others who do not quite fit the normal rules for shifters and witches. At the end of the series, Aster is hugged by a young girl who thanks him and reveals she wants to be a shifter when she grows up. Here it is most clear how magic operates as 'a site of agency in contemporary children's and adolescent fantasy writing' wherein Aster's world of magic 'is both constrained by gender norms beyond the text, while simultaneously allowing for the possibility of gender insubordination (and gender variance) within the text' (Battis 2006).



## Conclusion

In this article, themes of intimate kinships and relationality, world-making, and generational negotiations are considered within the visual backdrop of the YA graphic novels, *The Witch Boy* and *Lumberjanes*. It is the aim of this article to take seriously the productive ways in which witches, witchcraft, and magical, other-worldly spaces act as avatars for young readers seeking more queer ways of being in the world. Even if not always explicitly stated, these graphic novels expand the edges of what is possible in our imaginative landscapes and everyday realities. They offer stridently feminist and queer characters who wish to live and be in the world differently from what neoliberal cis-hetero-patriarchal values expect of them.

In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) Donna Haraway suggests that as feminists we need to outline differing forms of kinship beyond heteronormative and reproductive models. She states that ‘we need to make kin symchtonically, sympoetically’ (102). Straying from the crux of Haraway’s focus in her text, I want to think about kinship in symchtonic and sympoetic ways for the graphic novels I consider here. Ultimately these connected terms can be understood as forms of collaborative, underground, worldmaking. This is a useful frame for recognising how *Witch Boy* and *Lumberjanes* work with underground feminist and queer spaces; worlds of magic and fantasy largely dismissed in dominant culture. This not to say that contexts and content of queer and feminist principles are hidden in the texts, but suggests instead that this genre of YA graphic novels emerges from mainstream middle school novel spaces to move through the shadows of other, queerer paths. These novels then are also poetic; they imagine into being alternative modes of relating, letting magic be the tie that binds the chosen families of the queer characters in these stories. The series also create kinships of readers seeking their own community and, in this way, we can think not only about kin as queer and feminist worldmaking in the texts, but also in the world of the audience.

Allowing kin to mean ‘something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy’ offers a ‘gently defamiliarising’ approach that suggests making kin can be instead about ‘making care’ to ‘stretch the imagination’ thus ultimately to ‘change the story’ (Haraway 2016: 102-103). The kinships of *Witch Boy* and *Lumberjanes* use magical worlds as a means of gently defamiliarising heteronormative tropes for middle-school and young adult readers. Their fantastical spaces change the coming-of-

age story in new and productive ways. In the magical contexts provided by both narratives, relational modes of queer and feminist existence emerge that amplify an aesthetic practice tied to pleasure and an everyday queer existence (Berlant 1998: 285). In *Lumberjanes*, the closeness and resourcefulness of Jo, Mal, Molly, Ripley, April, Bernie, and their lead counsellor Jen truly lend credence to the camp's motto of 'FRIENDSHIP TO THE MAX!' While none of them hold explicit magical powers, they move readily through strange and magical worlds together. The larger narrative follows the legacies of the camp itself, and how the former leaders of the camp often become imbued with magical powers of shapeshifting and greater sets of magical knowledge to become both protectors of the surrounding forests but also the new sets of campers. These women are a bridge between longer historical sets of feminist knowledge, and mediate between the mundane and the magical for the campers as they explore their own identities and emergent worldviews in the context of non-normative spaces.

In *Witch Boy*, Aster develops kinship networks that span magical and non-magical, as well as intergenerational, spaces, in order to build a stronger community space for witchcraft to occur. The books do not shy away from the struggles for acceptance that Aster continues to face as a boy witch, but it also models strategies for resistance that include, at the end of the series, he and his friends walking away from his bully to go dance and celebrate together. This emulates a long-standing motto of queer living that the best revenge is living well. The *Lumberjanes* series ends on a similarly celebratory note, as the campers have an end of summer party before saying goodbye. At the end, Mal, Jo, April, and Ripley, conscious of how reluctant Molly is to return to her non-magical life, give her a going away present: a pet raccoon to replace the one she gave back to the camp forest. In offering her a new raccoon companion, they ensure she will be reminded of the queer spaces she thrived in all summer.

Both *Witch Boy* and *Lumberjanes* fill a representational absence by imagining fully formed queer worlds for middle-school counterpublics. As part of new queer children's literature, they productively disrupt 'dominant cultural expectations about gender' refusing 'to accept restrictive social worlds' (Miller 2019: 1654). Jes Battis suggests that within children's fantasy literature '[g]ender and sexuality are inseparable from magic' because they 'emerge the same spaces of wonderment and confusion, and the same uncertain borderlands between body and mind, male and female, queer and

straight' (2006). Pointedly, as the two novels considered here show, '[m]agic is, after all, a queer force—a force that makes one “not normal” ... but which can also paradoxically make you fit in' (Battis 2006). What makes fitting in possible is the development of queer kinship and worldmaking with others who are misfits from the normative universe. Finding your fantastic universe and your magical people is what keeps our queer worlds alive and thriving.

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