

An Unexpected Party: Queer Speculative YA Fiction

EDITED BY
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RECOMMENDED FOR: Upper Secondary
(Violence, Language, Sexual Content)

SYNOPSIS

From fantastical realms to real-world struggles, this anthology champions queer identity by challenging stereotypes and exploring the many facets of identity. Written with wit, heart and honesty, these stories take queer protagonists outside the box of young adult romance and centre them at the heart of stories that involve magic, paranormal beings and adventure.

Featuring trans and gender-diverse voices—asexual, aromantic, bisexual and more—the stories in *An Unexpected Party* are as diverse as their writers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Malacari (he/they) is an award-winning writer and member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Their work has appeared in *Underdog: LoveOzYA Short Stories* (2019). He is the founder of Get YA Words Out, has a Master of Arts (Writing and Literature) from Deakin University specialising in Queer YA and was the former chair of LoveOzYA.

THEMES

- Queer, trans and LGBTQIA+ identities
- Intersectionality within the queer community
- Self-love and acceptance
- Internalised homophobia and transphobia
- Connection within community, friends, family or chosen family
- Transitioning
- The link between queer identity and unusual/extraordinary
- Technological advancement and invention
- Possible futures

STUDY NOTES

- Editor Seth Malacari writes in their introduction that ‘most of us [queer people] live in the in between.’ Why is it important to have this in between experience represented in fiction?
- Consider the cover art by Sarah Winifred Searle. Which elements connect to queer identity, speculative fiction and Australian iconography? Why has Searle chosen various shades of purple as the primary colour?
- In *Queering the Book Club*, academics Betts and Herb argue that reading Queer YA fiction can help develop empathy

in readers. Why is it important for all readers, not just those in the queer community, to develop this skill? Why is it important to read diverse voices?

- Many of the stories in *An Unexpected Party* feature a diverse range of pronouns and characters using pronoun pins or badges to signal their own pronouns. Why is this a common occurrence?

Sixteen Candles (but with demons)

- Berry references the 1984 film *Sixteen Candles* in this short story. Read a synopsis of the film and see what similarities and differences you can find between both plots.
- The demon in this story grants wishes, but unlike other representations of this in media, they are unable to grant them properly due to a lack of understanding. Why do you think Berry chose to have an ineffective demon in this story?

Shellshocked

- ‘Shellshocked’ explores the character of Nancy transitioning from one Shell to another following an unfortunate incident on a space mission. How does this concept connect to themes of transitioning and queer/trans identity?
- What are the multiple ways that trans identity is presented in the story?
- Nancy struggles to accept Jana’s romantic feelings towards her once Jana has seen the real her: ‘I don’t know if I can accept you knowing . . . what I am. I don’t think I can stand it.’ Explain how this is an example of internalised homophobia/transphobia. Is this common for young queer/trans youth?

The Excursion

- ‘The Excursion’ opens to a crime scene. How does this create tension as the story unfolds?
- The protagonist, Giacomo, is a transgender man. What opportunities and barriers do we see Giacomo face as he lives as his true self?
- The speculative element of ‘The Excursion’ is merpeople. List three of the merpeople’s characteristics and/or physical features.
- What connection does this have to other merpeople in literature or mythology, eg. sirens in Greek mythology?
- Why do you think Giacomo and his group of friends cover for the merpeople’s actions? How does this relate to allyship?

Harmless

- Cove’s superpower is discovered when they release the anger they have been holding in. Why is anger an important emotion to recognise?
- Cove tells Ethan, ‘I need someone to be on my side, and I want that someone to be you.’ Why is friendship important in the LGBTQIA+ community?
- This story is about how as queer people often have to be ‘palatable’ to be accepted. Why is it hard for those within the community, and also those outside it, to celebrate the broad diversity of the queer community?

Violet Grim and the In-Between Place

- This short story features ghosts as a normal part of life. List three characteristics of ghosts within this story.
- The house Violet lives in is falling apart and can only be fixed when Layla goes with Death. What deeper meaning can we draw from this?
- Compare the character Darcy to other personifications of Death in literature/media. Is Darcy one of the first queer representations of Death as a character?

Thicker than Water

- What is Evie anxious about? How does this manifest physically during the short story?
- Why is it important to have a supportive adult in the life of a queer young person?
- By the end of the story, Evie does not find a resolution or control about trauma or identity. Why do you think the author chose to end the story this way?

Negara

- Sammy is a queer Malaysian-Australian person looking for connection to queer Malaysian culture. Why is the intersection and understanding of cultural and queer identities important?
- Research the events which inspired the story—the raid at Tasty in Melbourne, 1994 and arrests during queer events in Kuala Lumpur in 2018. What is the significance of these two events? Do they parallel each other?

Tasseography

- Like many of the short stories in *An Unexpected Party*, 'Tasseography' is a story of friendship between two queer and/or gender diverse people. Why are so few representations of queer people focused on friendship? Why is romance the common focus?
- The protagonist Luna experiences chronic pelvic pain with no concrete diagnosis or management. How does this make Luna feel?
- Why is it significant to have characters with disabilities in stories that are not just about their disability?

Figment

- Draw or create an artistic representation of what Petra sees in her Aug display at the beginning of the story and/or of the Figment she creates.
- Why does Petra create a Figment girl?
- How does Petra feel at the end of the story having moved on from her reality with Halley?
- The relationship breakdown is mirrored by the destruction of the grove. What message do you think the author wants to convey?

The Graveyard Shift

- 'The Graveyard Shift' takes place during 'the witching hour', early in the morning. Why does this time of day give a sense of unease and eeriness?
- Author, Jes Layton, introduces the concept of the salt line keeping something out early in the story. How does this contribute to the sense of unease?
- How does Layton humanise the character of Friday as Theo gets to know him?
- 'The Graveyard Shift' features an aromantic character, which is still rare even within LGBTQIA+ literature. Why is it important to have this diverse representation?

The Boy and The Witch

- The main character must complete the witches' task in order to transition. How does this connect to the real-life transitioning process for young people?
- This story ends with the main character, Rowan, beginning their new life with their true name. Consider how this subverts the ideas of endings/beginnings.

The Parade of the Weeds

- Consider the story's theme of nature taking back the earth from humans. Write an argument as to whether you see this as utopian or dystopian.
- Elly was spared from the violence and was able to live on. What message does this story have about transitioning?

The Swan King

- Create a mind map of all the fantasy elements (characterisation, costuming, setting) found in this story.
- What is the in-text and broader symbolism of white freesias?
- How does this short story subvert tropes of conventional fantasy romance?

Transmission Scars

- Calvin possesses a unique magic power. Make a pros-and-cons list of this power.
- How does Calvin deal with his grief?
- At the end of the short story, Calvin learns his father tried to accept him, even though it didn't come across perfectly. List five words to describe Calvin's emotions in the final scene.

Our Time, Our Home

- Crow tells Sleep, 'You had your own path to follow.' What did Sleep learn on their journey?
- Ott uses descriptive language to paint an intricate picture of two opposing settings: the cold, rainy night in the real world versus the sunny Dreamtime. Write a paragraph analysing the techniques Ott has used to create such vivid imagery.
- Research the importance and symbolism of crows, particularly for Wiradjuri people.

Salt in Her Pockets

- Research and write a summary of a Dybbuk in Jewish mythology.
- Fradel is advised to go on a long journey to rid herself of the Dybbuk. Describe this journey—physically and emotionally.

- Fradel consults her women's circle which includes queer elders. Why are elders significant in both queer communities and within queer literature as a means of diverse representation?

Surge

- Sacha and Jude argue over the pros and cons of wearing a tight binder. Why is it important for Sacha to wear it despite the health risks?
- Explain the sibling relationship between Sacha and Jude.
- 'Surge' presents an Australia setting transformed by climate change. List the features of the setting (place, weather, etc.) that are hint at this change.

Hostel Nights Like These

- 'Hostel Nights Like These' mixes fantasy and horror elements. Create a Venn diagram of each genre's elements as presented in the story.
- Write a response examining the gory imagery of skin liquefying in this short story.
- Research the literary history of the mythological creature Perotyn. Why did Farnan choose to use this creature and how does it link to the idea of gender identity and/or transitioning?

The Vampire and the Aunty

- Blythe has chosen a unique time, setting and genre for a vampire character to appear in. List the traits of a vampire as represented in 'The Vampire and the Aunty'.
- Kif is an asexual character. How is their asexuality represented and responded to by other characters?
- Can you compare this to any other examples of asexual characters in queer literature?
- Write an imaginative response, imagining many years on from the end of the story, from the perspective of Aunty Ovee's descendants as Kif enacts her Thousand Year Plan.