

# “I’ll Call it Platonic Magic”: Queer Joy, Metafiction, and Aro-Ace Autofictional Selves in Alice Oseman’s *Loveless*

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## Abstract

This article examines how Alice Oseman’s novel *Loveless* employs both metafiction and autofiction in its narration to establish queer joy. Metafiction hereby connects to romance tropes that are both employed by and reflected on by the protagonist, while the presence of autofictional selves of Oseman relates to asexuality and aromanticism. The analysis considers the struggles, confusion, and pain as depicted in the protagonist’s story, specifically in (autofictional) connection to Oseman and their statements about their own journey as an aromantic and asexual (shortened as aro-ace) person. Most centrally however, both the self-awareness of metafiction and the authenticity of autofiction are read in close connection to queer joy. Ultimately, this article argues that *Loveless* functions as an alternative love story to the heteronormative script, furthering aro-ace representation and offering hope to any reader seeking love beyond heteronormative romance.

## Keywords

Autofiction – Metafiction – Asexuality – Romance Fiction – Queer Joy – YA Novel

## Introduction

*“Georgia ...” Tommy leant in close, and then it bit me.  
The disgust.  
A wave of absolute, unbridled disgust.  
– Oseman, Loveless (25-26)*

*Loveless* (2020), Alice Oseman’s fourth young adult novel, focuses on its protagonist Georgia’s quest for romance and love. In the second chapter of the novel, readers already learn that Georgia “love[s] romance” and she reveals an almost obsessive interest in the romantic love she finds in fanfiction and movies (8). Despite being a ‘late bloomer,’ Georgia starts her first-person narrative on an optimistic note, certain that her “big love story would come” (9). In the end, this turns out to be true, but not in the way she imagined. The plot mostly details her first year at Durham University, during which she slowly befriends her new roommate Rooney, stumbles through self-discoveries and navigates changing friendship dynamics with her two best friends from school, Pippa and Jason. In a desperate attempt to find love, Georgia dates Jason, despite not being in love



with him. By later testing out whether she might be gay through kissing Rooney, she also derails a blossoming romance between Rooney and Pip. In the last chapters of *Loveless*, Georgia realizes not only that she is asexual and aromantic but also that her confusion has caused harm to all of her closest friends. Her big love story is ultimately about recognizing that Rooney is her platonic soulmate and “acknowledging and celebrating the love she already has in her life: the love between her and her friends” (Henderson, “Alice Oseman and”). Georgia’s story is also about coming to terms with her queer identity as aro-ace (aromantic and asexual) and the people and university groups who help her along the way. Oseman herself<sup>1</sup> describes the book as having a narrative that does not “shy away from the dark stuff” (“An Interview”), specifically when Georgia struggles with accepting herself and ends up damaging others along the way. However, *Loveless* ultimately ends with a rom-com style happy ending and a notion of queer joy for her.

In the novel, Georgia frequently references romance tropes and different kinds of romantic texts she consumes, an aspect that invites an investigation of how the novel employs forms of metafiction through the use of a “genre-savvy protagonist” who possesses extensive knowledge about the exact literary genre they themselves are part of (Henderson, “Genre-savvy Protagonists”). Georgia is thus a fictional character/narrator in this young adult novel – yet Oseman specifically wrote *Loveless* as “a book that reflect[s] [their] own experiences and feelings about being aro-ace” (“An Interview”). Oseman also names Georgia as one of their characters they see themselves most in and admit to working through “a lot of really dark feelings and things [they]’d gone through,” pointing towards the autofictional elements in the novel. I argue that the metafictional employment of romance and the autofictional construction of aro-ace identity in *Loveless* create a balance between (genre-) self-aware fiction and authenticity, joining in a narrative that constructs identifying as aro-ace as an ultimately joyful queer experience. Hereby, the book offers an authentic, yet dreamy, reading that is full of hope for aro-ace readers, subverts heteronormative romance tropes and broadens notions of love and joy for all its readers.

To develop this complex argument around the novel’s use of narrational tools in its representation of asexuality and aromanticism and portrayal of queer joy, I will firstly define metafiction and autofiction. Next, another theoretical chapter will introduce asexuality, aromanticism, and my understanding of queer joy. After having established the terminology, the first part of my analysis will focus on the interplay of metafiction, genre-awareness, and romance tropes in *Loveless*. The following section then aims to extrapolate and analyze the construction of Georgia and her older cousin Ellis as asexual autofictional selves of Oseman by drawing comparisons between the author and the two characters. Lastly, the analysis will connect all observed aspects to an overarching theme of queer joy in the novel.

## Metafiction and Autofiction

Before analyzing the terms metafiction, autofictional narration, asexuality, and queer joy in *Loveless*, they need to be defined. Following the definition of metafiction as brought forward by *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, I will consider the novel as metafictional in the ways in which it “seems preoccupied by its own fictionality or with the nature of fiction generally” (“Metafiction” 431). Similarly, Monika Fludernik defines metafiction as “self-reflexive statements about the inventedness of the story” (28), and Svend Erik Larsen speaks of “semiotic self-reference” that “enables us ... to question how the text is anchored and produced as a subjectivized

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Oseman uses both she/her and they/them pronouns. To honor their identity, this paper will alternate between both sets of pronouns while maintaining the use of one form to one sentence to avoid unnecessary confusion.

semiotic system in a historical and material world” (25). In other words, metafiction refers to formal elements in a fictional narrative that point towards the fact that the narrative is indeed fictional. There are some ‘typical’ techniques that metafictional texts often employ, e.g., letting the authors themselves appear as characters that write the novel or having characters realize that they are in a novel (“Metafiction” 431). While *Loveless* does not employ any of these techniques, the novel has metafictional elements, instances where it “disrupts the illusion” of accessing a real world (“Metafiction” 431) and points towards its own fictionality – moments which will be elaborated on in the upcoming analysis.

However, the novel employs not only metafictional elements but can also be understood as autofiction. Related to autobiography, the term autofiction was coined by French author and critic Serge Doubrovsky to describe his own novels (see Ferreira-Meyers, “Autobiography and Autofiction”; “Does Autofiction”). Karen Ferreira-Meyers rephrases his definition of autofiction as “the term used to describe a narrative which has a strictly autobiographical subject matter . . . , but whose manner, that is the narrative organization and stylistic craft, is novel-like” (“Does Autofiction” 28). Autofiction can thus be understood as a blend of fiction and autobiography – a narrative based on real people that is not bound to the need of recounting true events like an autobiography would be (Ferreira-Meyers, “Does Autofiction” 31; see also Spear 358). However, there are different definitions, among both scholars and authors, of what exactly autofiction is (Ferreira-Meyers, “Autobiography and Autofiction” 203). Thomas Spear argues that the term generally encompasses a broad spectrum of “fictive distortions of documentable ‘reality’” (357) and is applicable to “many novels where the author’s personal history and identity is associated with that of a clearly fictional persona” (358). As will be further elaborated, *Loveless* does not fulfill all of the typical characteristics often listed for autofiction, but incorporates one central element of autofiction, namely “multiple identities” (Ferreira-Meyers, “Does Autofiction” 36). An autobiography claims to portray reality, conveyed by a completely honest author and their reliable narration (Gronemann 240). However, while both autobiography and autofiction aim to convey the truth (Ferreira-Meyers, “Autobiography and Autofiction” 210), only autobiography requires accuracy. Authors of autofiction often deviate from recounting events in their lives exactly how they remember them (213). Ferreira-Meyers formulates this distinction as the autofictional pact “that articulates to the reader that the author is not honest, but sincere; s/he will lie, but in an attempt to reflect the world with justice” (“Does Autofiction” 28). Thus, autofiction is more authentic than plain fiction and aims to portray truths about life. In contrast to autobiography and fiction, it is a highly ambiguous genre (or mode of writing) that mixes its textual and paratextual signals about fiction and reality (Ferreira-Meyers, “Autobiography and Autofiction” 212), but it also allows for sincerity and for inserting the self into writing without exposing private information of others (208-209). The autofictional pact and inherent ambiguity of autofictional writing also ensures that it is not always clear what is an autobiographical fact and what is fiction (or what lies in between); simultaneously, it still ensures the reader that the text is essentially authentic and contains truth. Autofiction also does not strive to cover a whole life and the life in question does not necessarily have to be that of a famous person or one marked by extraordinary circumstances (Ferreira Meyers, “Autobiography and Autofiction” 214). This allows autofiction to tell previously unheard stories and convey fragments of the, perhaps astoundingly ordinary, lives of all kinds of authors (“Does Autofiction” 32). *Loveless*, centering on the asexual self in a heteronormative environment, adds another facet to this already diverse mode of life writing beyond autobiography.

## Asexuality, Aromanticism, and Queer Joy

Since asexuality and aromanticism are the central themes of Oseman's novel, as well as two of the main aspects that tie the author and their autofictional selves together, it is important to understand what those terms entail and how the aro-ace label functions in defining a distinct sexual identity. While there are many competing definitions of asexuality (Cerankowski and Milks 658), I will work with Anthony Bogaert's, which holds that "that asexuality is construable as a lack of sexual attraction or a lack of interest in others" (363). It is important to distinguish between sexual and romantic attraction, as some asexual people identify as heteroromantic/homoromantic/biromantic, while others also identify as aromantic (4; see also Chasin 407). Additionally, not all asexual people completely abstain from sexual activity (Brunning and McKeever 497) and decisions to enter romantic (and/or sexual) relationships vary among asexual people (Chasin 407). Thus, the term 'asexual' refers to a broader range of people than it might at first appear.

For some time, asexuality has been overlooked or seen as pathological (Cerankowski and Milks 653). However, recent research stresses that asexuality should not be seen as a medical condition (Chasin 405). Instead, asexuality is now considered a distinct sexual identity or sexuality that is defined by the absence of sexual desire (Cerankowski and Milks 650). As such, asexuality (and aromanticism) fall under the umbrella term "queer," when the term is used to signal something other than the heteronormative norm (660). Julie Decker, who writes from a perspective within the asexual community, vehemently stresses this understanding of asexuality as a sexual identity:

Asexuality isn't a complex. It's not a sickness. It's not an automatic sign of trauma. It's not a behavior. It's not the result of a decision. It's not a chastity vow or an expression that we are 'saving ourselves.' ... We aren't calling ourselves asexual because we failed to find a suitable partner. We aren't necessarily afraid of intimacy. And we aren't asking for anyone to 'fix' us. (3)

For members of the asexual community (Chasin 405; Bogaert 364) it is a matter of identity and sense of belonging to a community – like other queer labels.

This does not mean that asexual people do not struggle with their lack of sexual desire. Yet, as CJ DeLuzio Chasin convincingly argues, "if a person is upset about being asexual because ze lives in a world that is inhospitable to asexual people, we need to change the world, not the person"<sup>2</sup> (412). This is connected to compulsory sexuality – a concept that is related to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality (Grupta 133). Kristina Grupta argues that there is convincing evidence that societal norms go beyond pressuring people into heterosexuality, especially as the pressure to engage in sexual activity can be witnessed in sexual minority groups as well as heterosexual spaces (136). She uses compulsory sexuality to "describe the assumption that all people are sexual and to describe the social norms and practices" that implement these assumptions (132). As asexual (and aromantic) people diverge from the prevalent social norms surrounding sexuality, they are faced with discrimination, stigma, and pathologization (see Grupta 137-83; Bogaert 368; Chasin 405; Decker 3; Cerankowski and Milks 661).

As previously mentioned, aromanticism can correlate with asexuality (Cerankowski and Milks 651), and it remains important to keep aro-ace individuals in mind as a specific subsection of asexual people (Chasin 407). Yet, the term describes a separate queer identity and refers to another dimension of attraction, namely romantic feelings as opposed to sexual ones (see Tessler 2). As Hannah Tessler stresses, aromantic people might still experience sexual attraction to others,

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<sup>2</sup> Chasin uses "ze," a gender neutral neo-pronoun, here to refer to asexual people of all genders.

yet aromanticism is often conceptually closely connected with asexuality (4). Centrally, aromantic people “experience low to no romantic attraction” (3) and thus they often defy societal expectations by focusing on platonic relationships instead of romantic connections (5). In this, scholars like Tessler see a “radical potential” to redefine and open up our understanding of relationships, family, and love (19).

Since they both defy societal norms of a monogamous, romantic, and heterosexual relationship as the ideal form of human connection, asexuality and aromanticism are widely considered part of the LGBTQIA+ community, with the letter ‘A’ representing asexuality. I understand the term queer as a similar umbrella term that encompasses all kinds of identities that diverge from the norm (Somerville 2). Literature in general can be a fruitful source of information and validation to all queer people, especially young adults, as they finally see their experiences represented (Town 15). However, portrayals that focus on violent encounters or discrimination similarly have the potential to “normalize ... homophobia and violence against [queer] individuals” (15). Therefore, I agree with Caren Town who argues for moving away from narratives centered solely around the violence, struggles, and otherness of queer protagonists (16-17). Acknowledging the ongoing relevance of suffering as part of an authentic portrayal of queer experiences for queer audiences, Heather Love brings forward a nuanced argument about queer joy (55). Yet, she concedes that striving for queer happiness and joy remains a worthy goal, partly because the idea that being queer inherently leads to suffering and sadness is a part of anti-queer sentiments (62). I argue that both Town’s and Love’s arguments should be considered, and that neither a sole focus on queer suffering nor a forced narrative of happiness are favorable in representations of queerness. In the following analysis, I will therefore explore both the presence of pain and of queer – or more precisely aromantic asexual – joy, and how they relate to the metafictional and autofictional elements present in the narration.

## Metafiction and Romance Tropes in *Loveless*

In *Loveless*, metafiction enters the narrative in the form of genre and genre awareness. Henderson observes this self-awareness about genre in this book and similar novels, focusing their argument on protagonists who intertextually reference “classic rom-coms” and display an intense awareness about romance “tropes and genre conventions” (“Genre-savvy Protagonists”). This awareness about genre that *Loveless*’s protagonist and first-person narrator Georgia displays is a form of metafiction because it signals to readers that the text is a fictional romance narrative that exists in a broad context of genre and conventions. Henderson observes something similar, as she argues that queer protagonists in romance novels have a potential to initiate “metatextual conversations” (“Genre-savvy Protagonists”). One of the most poignant instances of metafiction occurs at the very start of *Loveless*. The novel’s second chapter, titled “Romance,” interrupts the narrative and pace of the first chapter – which starts in medias res at Georgia’s prom afterparty. The chapter does not continue with narrating the events of this night, but instead reflects on Georgia’s obsession with romance. This chapter cannot be placed properly in terms of story time – instead, it operates outside of the novel’s mostly chronological narrative. In a string of parallelisms, the chapter introduces all the things Georgia obsesses over: “I loved romance. I loved Disney .... I loved fanfiction” (Oseman 8) ending this list with making one thing clear: “[she] just. Loved. Love” (8). The parallelism and repetition of “love” mark Georgia’s obsession with the concept of love, and the insistent presence of the word stands in contrast to the novel’s title. Linguistically, *Loveless* is indeed full of love from the beginning.

While Georgia dreams of finding romantic love herself, she also shows metafictional awareness of the constructedness of romance tropes, for example when she justifies her relative inexperience in those sectors with the assertion that “teen romances only work [...] out in movies anyway” (Oseman 9). In another chapter, Georgia makes a similar observation, as she states that “if [their] lives were in a movie, at least two of [her and her two best friends] would have got together” (12). Instances like these are metafictional because they serve as reminders that this novel, too, is fiction (“Metafiction” 431; Fludernik 28; Larsen 25) and employs the same tropes that its protagonist frequently references and judges as the stuff of fiction. Georgia’s “Romance” reflection ends with her strong belief in “finding the one” and having a “happily ever after” (Oseman 9), indicating how the metafictional romance tropes become part of the novel’s narrative as well. This allows for two opposing readings regarding the novel’s ending. Firstly, it can be seen as a sad foreshadowing of the fact that Georgia will never be able to have what she imagines a love story should be. However, if one follows the novel’s premise, “*Loveless* ... rejects the very idea that there is no love in a story without a romance plot” (Henderson, “Alice Oseman and”), and thus Georgia’s internal monologue in fact teases the unconventional fulfillment of her wishes for romance.

The novel sets up genre tropes early on and lets its protagonist/narrator reflect on them throughout the novel. Towards its ending, *Loveless* implements two romance tropes: an over-the-top romantic gesture and an elaborate love declaration, both of which are expressions of platonic love. Georgia’s big romantic gesture is directed towards one of her long-time best friends, Pip, and serves as both an apology and a proposal for her to be her ‘college wife’ – a tradition at Durham University where older students form a (in most cases platonic) couple that will mentor incoming younger students together. For this, she enlists the help of other friends to perform “Your Song” from the film *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) – while standing on a rented boat, surprising Pip as she crosses a bridge. Georgia reflects on the elaborateness of the gesture, stating that “there was absolutely no need to do this from a boat other than for dramatic effect” (Oseman 369). She also calls this an “elaborate platonic gesture” (369), employing an obvious word play on “romantic gestures.” Additionally, Georgia does not develop this plan on her own; instead, she simply re-enacts what Pip describes herself at the very beginning of the book:

“You know what I want?” Pip said, as we stumbled into Hattie’s conservatory and collapses on a sofa.  
“What?” I said.  
“I want someone to spontaneously perform a song to declare their love for me.”  
“What song?”  
She gave this some thought.  
“‘Your Song’ from *Moulin Rouge*.” (6)

Georgia deliberately creates a moment for Pip that is based on Pip’s fantasies – which are influenced by romance tropes. By including the conversation between Pip and Georgia, the novel acknowledges the deliberateness of the gesture, and metafictionally points towards *Loveless* being fictional and full of romance tropes as well.

The other trope, a declaration of love, is a counterpart to Georgia’s gesture, this time with her on the receiving end as her college roommate Rooney confesses her – strictly platonic but deep – feelings for her. This happens in a chapter titled “Grand Gesture” – which shows self-awareness of the tropes it employs. Right before the declaration, Georgia confesses how afraid she is to lose her friends as “[she is] never going to have that one special person” (Oseman 412) – a romantic

partner. In a pivotal moment, it is Rooney who questions societal norms about love, as she insists that she can and wants to be “that person” for Georgia. Georgia then insists that this “is not how the world works” as “people always put romance over friendship” – too which Rooney boldly replies: “Says who? ... The heteronormative rulebook? Fuck that, Georgia. Fuck that” (412-13). This moment portrays again that *Loveless* is indeed “preoccupied by its own fictionality” (“Metafiction” 431) as it employs the tropes of romance narratives – in the form of a dramatic conversation at the end of the narrative in which two people confess their feelings to each other – while openly addressing how these tropes are part of heteronormativity. *Loveless* continues to employ tropes and typical wordings from romance fiction and films. Rooney delivers a long speech to Georgia, during which she tells her that she “feel[s] at home around [Georgia]” and that Georgia “changed [her] ... fucking saved [her]” (Oseman 413) – altogether combining many of romance’s most exaggerated ways to declare one’s romantic feelings. One very metafictional sentence in her monologue declares that “this is a fucking love story!” (413).

Overall, the metafictional awareness of genre in *Loveless* has the effect of pointing to the fictionality of the novel and destroying the illusion that reading the novel is a ‘door to reality.’ In combination with Georgia’s obsession with exactly these romance tropes in the very beginning of the novel, the two moments at the end of *Loveless* are metafictional as they remind readers of the constructedness of the whole narrative. As a result, *Loveless* caters to the same fantasy that romance always creates, yet the book still reminds readers of the tropes that construct these fantasies in the first place. By using the tropes, pointing actively to the constructedness of these ‘romantic’ moments, but then also applying them to atypical situations, namely friendships, the novel spotlights the heteronormativity of classic romance tropes to then subvert them. This subversion is connected to the asexuality and aromanticism portrayed in the novel, since the ending shows a “revised, queered love story formula” (Henderson, “Genre-savvy Protagonists”) – by spotlighting platonic love.

## Aro-Ace Autofictional Selves in *Loveless*

Georgia’s aro-ace identity not only informs the revised romance tropes in *Loveless*, it is also one of the central aspects that ties her to Oseman and thus establishes the autofictional relationship between author and protagonist in this novel. Oseman talks about this connection in an interview, stating that “one of the reasons I wanted to write *Loveless* was because although I’d read several books that featured aro and ace characters, the feelings and experiences in those books weren’t things [they] could particularly relate to” (“An Interview”). She wrote the book to “reflect [...] [her] own experiences and feelings about being aro-ace” – meaning that while Georgia and Oseman do not share a name, Georgia can still be constructed as an autofictional self of Oseman, especially when following Spear’s understanding of autofiction as books in which the “author’s personal history and identity is associated with that of a clearly fictional persona” (358). Additionally, there are biographical facts about Oseman that can be found within *Loveless*’ story. For example, Oseman studied at Durham University, and learned about asexuality at the university (“An Interview”) – both striking parallels to Georgia’s story. Another connection to Georgia can be found in what Oseman says about her own struggles with accepting her asexuality. She was also wondering if she was, in fact, gay or growing up with the belief she “would find ‘the one’ and get married some day” (“Alice Oseman on”).

Georgia’s autofictional connection to Oseman thus relies heavily on both of them being aro-ace. Following the idea of the autofictional pact, there is no bulletproof way to distinguish what

is fact and what is fiction in *Loveless*. However, based on what Oseman says about their experiences and their motivation for writing the book, moments of explicit aro-ace experiences can be assumed to be largely based on autobiographical facts. One of those moments occurs when Georgia tries to kiss Tommy, whom she has fabricated a crush on. When he leans in, she is “hit” with “a wave of absolute, unbridled disgust” (Oseman 25-26). Georgia also reports exactly what kind of affects go through her in this situation, detailing how “[she] want[s] to smash a glass and throw up at the same time” and that Tommy’s proximity “feel[s] horrific” (26). In this vulnerable and confusing moment, the protagonist also questions her own reaction, concisely formulated in the careful question: “that wasn’t normal, was it?” (26). Here, protagonist and author clearly merge, as this questioning resonates completely with what Oseman writes about herself, namely that “I felt very alone and wondered whether there was something wrong with me” (“Alice Oseman on”). It is impossible for readers, and me, to know whether this exact scenario ever happened in Oseman’s life – but it does not matter, as it is the essence of feeling repelled by romantic/sexual proximity that marks Georgia as an autofictional self here. Indeed, Oseman can be “not honest, but sincere” and “lie, but in an attempt to reflect the world with justice” (Ferreira-Meyers, “Does Autofiction” 28), and this short moment in *Loveless* is a sincere attempt to reflect the ‘world’ of internal struggles of an aro-ace person. The passage and many others in *Loveless* also exemplify the effects of compulsory sexuality (Grupta 133). Aro-ace people like Oseman and Georgia clearly suffer because they grew up with the assumption that only a life with sexuality is normal – and therefore valuable and desirable.

Georgia is not the only version of Oseman to be found in *Loveless*. Towards the end of the book, Georgia spends Christmas with her family, including her older cousin Ellis. Not only is Ellis also clearly marked as an aro-ace character, but she even shares her first name with Alice Oseman, at least phonetically. Additionally, she is an artist, a profession not far away from Oseman’s, who works as an author and comic book illustrator. This arguably turns her into an even more typical autofictional person than Georgia, as a shared first name is often cited as one of the markers of autofiction (Ferreira-Meyers, “Does Autofiction” 36). Rather than dismissing the autofictional link between Georgia and Oseman in favor of Ellis, however, I read the cousins as split selves of Oseman, and consequently their conversation as a younger and older version of Oseman talking to each other. Yet, before Georgia and Ellis discuss their shared (sexual) identity, Georgia is witness to Ellis’s suffering under the total lack of understanding by her parents. During this fight, Ellis’s parents make use of ideas rooted in compulsory sexuality and pathologize their daughter. Georgia witnesses Auntie Sal asking Ellis a series of questions about the future: “What will your life be like when you’re Gran’s age, without a partner, without children? Who is going to be there to support you? You’ll have no one” (Oseman 309). Through the repetition of ‘without’ and the stressing of ‘no one,’ it becomes evident that Sal operates under the assumption – formed under the ideals of compulsory sexuality – that only a partner and children can bring long lasting happiness and companionship. Although Ellis defends her life choices – for example, by rightfully asserting that “[she] can still do amazing things with [her] life” (309) – her parents resort to pathologizing her lack of interest in dating, marriage, and motherhood by suggesting “trying therapy again” (309). This mirrors assumptions often made about asexual and/or aromantic people, namely that their lack of interest in those kinds of connections is a disorder (Grupta 132).

The conversation Georgia and Ellis have about their shared aro-ace identity tackles the pain and confusion they both experience due to being different to most of the other people in their lives. Interestingly, they both help each other by offering two different parts of acceptance: one personal lived experience of happiness and the other understanding of aro-ace identities and the



community. Although Ellis confesses that she sometimes believes her parents and wonders if her life indeed is worth less because she will never have a romantic life partner (Oseman 313), she ultimately offers Georgia a positive outlook into the future. Ellis recounts her long journey to self-acceptance, in words that closely mirror Georgia's – another hint pointing to their construction as split selves of Oseman. For example, Ellis describes “this underlying feeling of wrongness[, a]lmost disgust” (315), that always came up whenever she tried to experience romance or sex – the same disgust that Georgia feels when she forces herself to kissing Tommy at the beginning of the book. However, like Oseman herself, Ellis “[is] older now” and explains to Georgia that “friendship can be just as intense, beautiful and endless as romance” and that “there's love everywhere around [her]” (316). Ellis has already accepted what Georgia still has to learn: she is far from being loveless and does not have to be hopeless. What Georgia then offers to Ellis is both the terminology and a sense of community when she tells her older cousin that “it's a real sexuality” that many people identify with (317). It becomes apparent that this is news for Ellis who tells her younger cousin that “[she's] ... very lucky to know all of this” (317; ellipsis in original). When reading Georgia and Ellis as two versions of Oseman, this means that accepting her sexuality needs both parts – learning about the terms and community in college and finding contentedness in an unusual lifestyle over years. In fact, Oseman details similar steps in their own journey: first finding out about the terms, taking time to accept that they apply to them, and lastly “imagining another path for [their] future” (“Alice Oseman on”). Ellis' final advice to Georgia consequently reads like Oseman giving out the advice she wishes she could give her younger self: “Give your friendships the magic you would give a romance” (Oseman 318).

While the metafictional elements in *Loveless* point to the tropes employed and the fictional nature of the book, the autofictional selves found in both Georgia and Ellis testify how sincere the text is about Oseman and their very real experiences as an aro-ace young adult and adult. Of course, exactly which parts of the narrative are narrating autobiographical facts remains uncertain, yet it is clear to readers who also engage with Oseman as a person and know of their own aro-ace identity that the author is sincere about their experiences and tries to tell truths about life as an aro-ace person in a heteronormative world (Ferreira-Meyers, “Does Autofiction” 28). This includes Georgia and Ellis facing self-doubt and ignorance – experiences that are detailed as common among asexual people (Grupta 137-83; Bogaert 367-68; Chasin 405; Decker 3; Cerankowski and Milks 661) and are closely connected to notions of compulsory asexuality (Grupta). As autofictional selves of Oseman, both characters function as sincere representations of aro-ace individuals. This means that if there is truth in the pain, there is also truth in the joy and hope that Ellis represents and Georgia begins to find.

## Hope, Queer Joy, and Love Beyond Romance

The presence of this joy, especially after also showing lack of acceptance and pain, counters the normalization of anti-queer violence and is thus important for young adult readers (see Town 16-17). In *Loveless*, queer joy enters the narrative in many forms, as Georgia and Ellis both find happiness in their aro-ace identity and other characters are shown to be happy with being pansexual or lesbian. Queer joy is also expressed through both metafiction and autofiction.

The romance tropes that are metafictionally reflected on and then used in the book culminate in a happy ending for Georgia. Romance is not entirely abandoned in *Loveless*, rather it is transformed for Georgia's needs, as the book insists on the presence of love even in the absence of a romance plot (Henderson, “Alice Oseman and”). This sentiment is also expressed within the

book when Rooney declares to Georgia that their friendship “is a fucking love story” (Oseman 413). Georgia is seemingly overwhelmed by the long speech about the love Rooney has for her, yet her flowing tears also express her happiness and she accepts Rooney’s love (14-15). Both the speech itself and Georgia’s very emotional reaction obviously feed into the romance tropes that Georgia is familiar with – making this one of the novel’s strong metafictional moments. Furthermore, the love declaration realizes the kind of fantasy that Georgia, inspired by romance fiction, speculates on in the beginning of *Loveless*, sure that “[her] big love story would come” and “[she] would find the one” (9). Yet, it is completely different to what she imagined, as romantic love is superseded by platonic love. Henderson argues something similar when they state that “Georgia’s quest shifts from ‘finding love’ to acknowledging and celebrating the love she already has in her life: the love between her and her friends” (“Alice Oseman and”). One could argue that the metafictional aspect of the happy ending diminishes the joy as shallow and unbelievable, but the twisting of the tropes renders the ending less fantastic while still retaining the joyful spark of a rom-com happy ending.

Additionally, the (queer) joy in *Loveless* is not only present in moments of metafiction, but also deeply rooted in autofiction. On a general level, the autofictional connection between Oseman and Georgia renders the happy ending more authentic and believable to readers. While it is unclear whether a love declaration like Rooney’s ever took place in Oseman’s life, the overall authenticity of Georgia’s and Ellis’ struggles renders the joy and abundance of platonic love more probable as well. More specifically, the conversation between Georgia and Ellis constitutes both a highly autofictional moment – with both of Oseman’s selves in conversation – and a point in the book that offers a first glance at aro-ace joy. In the chapter, “Platonic Magic,” Ellis tells Georgia that she is “not hopeless any more” (Oseman 316) after struggling with being different from her peers for years, and ensures her younger cousin that “[she has] a lot more love than some other people in the world” (316). This sends a clear message to Georgia and *Loveless*’ readers: Life as an aro-ace person can be full of love and joy. When reading Ellis as an older version of Oseman, this is an assertion by the author that she herself is “not hopeless anymore.” Ellis also reminds Georgia that her friendships are the key to finding joy and love in her life (318). When Georgia playfully tells her to put this sentiment into one of her paintings, Ellis agrees that she might – and she would “call it Platonic Magic” (318).

While Oseman wrote a book called *Loveless*, instead of painting an artwork called Platonic Magic, they created something that speaks of the joy and love found in friendships, arguably not only for aro-ace people. This message of hope and joy is also spread among different characters within *Loveless*. When Georgia attends an event of the Pride Society at her university, she is the one that reminds her friend Sunil, who also identifies as asexual, that “[he] deserve[s] joy” (332). Sunil, as president of the Pride Society, then delivers a speech to the gathered queer students during which he picks up that sentiment. He reminds everyone that the most important asset of their meetings is not overtly engaging with their queerness or using the community as a pool for dating, but “the relationships [they] form” – “friendship, love and support while [they’re] all trying to survive and thrive in a world that often doesn’t feel like it was made for [them]” (335). At the end of his speech, everyone toasts to his last sentence which is the crucial reminder Georgia gave him before: “And we all deserve joy.” The whole speech, though directed at the other fictional characters within the novel, reads like it is addressed to the readers as well, reminding them that they, too, deserve joy – whoever they are and however they identify. This joy is not tied to romantic relationships in any way – on the contrary, it lives in other connections like friendship. Henderson argues that this is an overarching theme of Oseman’s books, which share the philosophy “that

friendships deserve the same narrative attention and the same emotional weight as a romantic plotline would” (“Alice Oseman and”).

For Georgia, the journey to accepting this alternative way of love and joy is painful and full of mistakes. In fact, the speech by Sunil is one of the pivotal moments that changes her perspective on love. Yet it is not his words, but the joy and love she witnesses between him and his best friend Jess, that sparks something in her. When Sunil smiles at Jess, Georgia observes “genuine love in that gaze” and “fe[els] dazzled by it” (Oseman 335). After the end of the speech, Sunil and Jess embrace each other and Georgia realizes what she actually wants from life instead of the romance she thought she craved:

That was it. That was what everything was about.  
The love in that hug. The knowing look between them.  
They had their own love story.  
That was what I wanted. ... I used to dream of spellbinding,  
endless, forever romance. ...  
But now, I realised, friendship could be that too. (335)

This moment occurs after Ellis gives her the advice to cherish her friendships, yet before Rooney assures her that they have “a fucking love story” (413). The hope offered to readers here is that one can look for – and find – different kinds of love. Moreover, this is another highly autofictional moment and echoes what Oseman says about her own journey of giving up on heteronormative assumptions about romantic love and how she “was able to start imagining ... [a] future filled with platonic love instead” (“Alice Oseman on”). Especially for aro-ace readers, having this hope for a joyful future is important and offers perspectives beyond the ongoing suffering that any queer person experiences in a heteronormative society influenced by compulsory sexuality (Town 15; Love 62).

*Loveless* ends with Georgia looking for a shared flat with her childhood best friends Pip and Jason, and her new close friends Rooney and Sunil (Oseman 428-29). The last chapter details the friends finding the house, touring it, and planning how to set it up. Standing there in her new home, Georgia begins to imagine her future and the happiness she will find in living with her best friends (432-33). This happy ending, portraying a realistic scenario of founding a shared flat, is astoundingly ordinary and unspectacular and thus grounds Georgia’s story in a quiet kind of joy, especially after the extraordinary romantic gestures that border on unbelievable and superficial. The book’s conclusion stands in total opposition to its title: instead of being loveless, Georgia finds herself in the middle of a life that is full of hope, joy, and love. And these friends, who are the source of an abundance of love in her life, are also shown to understand and accept her sexuality once she has figured it out and found the words to describe her experiences.

## Conclusion

*Loveless* depicts and acknowledges the pain and confusion of asexual people, who “stand in contrast to a heterosexual majority” (Bogaert 7) in a society shaped by compulsory sexuality (Grupta). Georgia and Ellis – both autofictional selves of the author Alice Oseman – are shown to struggle internally with accepting themselves and finding contentment in the different kinds of lives they lead. Especially Ellis is also shown to face external obstacles on her journey to happiness as her parents pressure and pathologize her. Oseman themselves speak out about inserting “the dark

stuff” into the book because it reflects their own painful journey as an aro-ace person (“An Interview”). This can be linked to “the alienation that comes from lacking sexual desire in a world that presumes sexual desire and that attaches great power to sexuality” (Cerankowski and Milks 661), an alienation that asexual people experience on a regular basis, as well as to various forms of more direct oppression (Cerankowski and Milks 661; Decker 3; Chasin 418; Bogaert 368; Gupta 136-38).

Following Love’s arguments on queer happiness, it remains important to acknowledge this kind of suffering in queer stories (55). However, *Loveless* does not dwell on suffering but progresses to joy and hope. As my analysis has shown, this queer joy is closely connected to both the metafictional insertion (and transformation) of romance tropes and the presence of autofictional selves. Some of the most overtly joyful moments are those in which Georgia functions as a “genre-savvy LGBTQIA+ rom-com [heroine]” who inspires “metatextual conversations” (Henderson, “Genre-Savvy Protagonists”). Other moments of joy occur in the form of autofiction: When both autofictional selves discuss their shared experiences, for example, or when Ellis offers a hopeful and joyful outlook on the future to the younger Georgia in a moment of autofictional sincerity.

This book, and its authentic and optimistic outlook on life as an aro-ace person, offers crucial hope to asexual and/or aromantic readers as it depicts more than the discrimination and hurt associated with being queer (Town 16-17). As Henderson details, *Loveless* and other works by Oseman are widely appreciated by aro-ace readers for their relatability and hopefulness (“Alice Oseman and”). Additionally, authentic representations of asexuality add to asexual visibility on a broader scale and counters “everyday erasure and denigration which continues to harm asexual people” (Bunning and McKeever 498); along similar lines, Gupta argues for adding “sympathetic [...] representations” of asexual people to various media (148). Even when looking beyond asexuality and aromanticism, the book can offer something personal to its readers. The platonic love that Georgia experiences is, after all, not one sided but also brings joy to her friends, who are not asexual. All of *Loveless*’ central characters “end up all the happier for their acknowledgment that there are many different types of love, not dependent on the usual expectations of romantic and sexual relationships” (Henderson, “Alice Oseman and”). Ultimately, the queer love in *Loveless*, albeit especially important for addressing aro-ace readers and for furthering asexual representation, can offer joy and hope for anyone willing to seek out “Platonic Magic” (Oseman 318) in their lives.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the editorial team and peer reviewers of *In Progress* for their productive feedback and encouragement. Additional thanks are owed to Lujain Youssef and Virginia Wartusch for their feedback on earlier versions of this article.

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