



Until It Gets Better: A Review of Cigarettes & Wine, J. E. Sumerau (Sense Publishers, 2017)

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BI BOOK REVIEW

**Until It Gets Better: A Review of *Cigarettes & Wine*, J. E. Sumerau
(Sense Publishers, 2017)**

“To those who embody sexual and gender fluidity in a world that seeks to erase us...”
(*Cigarettes & Wine*, dedication page)

Cigarettes & Wine evokes mind-altering and relaxing substances teens often sample when first navigating the uncertain shoals of sexual intimacy. The sensations and memories of sharing smokes and sipping alcohol are so intertwined with the early sexual memories of many of us that it is impossible to separate them from the experience. I put my aversion to tobacco smoke aside to read this absorbing novel, remembering how romanticized smoking was when as, as a youth, I first encountered the sensory inhalation as a sign of freedom and independence of beginning adulthood, “We drank wine, she smoked cigarettes, and we began the process of saying goodbye to our time as childhood neighbors without a care in the world” (p. 21).

This book about young love, identity development, friendships among young people with curiosity, and questions about human nature, but very little guidance from the adults around them. The adults are mostly beaten down and focused on mere survival, the kids a bit sheltered from the full brutality of that, though the gay bashing and murder of one of the elder gay members of their small community makes it clear from the start that issues of sexuality and identity will foreground:

There was only a small mention of Daniel in the paper in the morning. There was a story about a fight that turned deadline at the store, but there were no details about the victim – his name, his hobbies, his sexuality, his loved ones, none of that was mentioned.... It was like he disappeared in the parking lot that night, no details on the assailants in any of the papers. Who were they? Did they get caught? Were they still out there somewhere just waiting for the next one of us to become visible? I didn’t know, but I thought about it every day for years to come. (p. 53)

The main character knows he’s attracted to more than one gender and wonders if you can “love more than one person at a time.” Set in the rural and isolated South a few years ago, his personal odyssey unfolds without the terminology of nonbinary gender identity or any angst concerning pansexual or polysexual. One of my favorite things about this book is how much it debunks the harmful views that bi and pan people distrust each other, or that bi and trans experiences are separate and opposed. The author, J. E. Sumerau, reveals in the preface that he himself identifies toward the pan end of the bi spectrum, but he never imposes nor introduces tension between those factions within the queer community into the narrative of the plot. Basically we enter into the world of southern working-class teenagers who are quite sheltered by their families, the society, and the church—none of which have any interest in outlining the facets of these arcane contradictions.

The novel has wide appeal to conservative and traditionally schooled youth and their adult minders, people more concerned with what Jesus might do, what the Bible teaches, and what is expected of people in morally conflictual situations. The story opens with

teenagers' quest to find privacy, places in their church to be alone and hide from adults. The depiction of the comfortable and inviting nook behind the altar where the baptisms took place reminded me of my own youthful fantasies about wanting to jump into the aisle and dance naked when I got restless during the sermons. The teens in the book live much more in fear of getting caught doing something "wrong," in the eyes of their adult guardians, rather than defying them.

Right on the lips, right there at the park, right out of the blue, he kissed me! I could have killed him, but I wanted him to do it again. It was a new feeling, I mean, I felt like I was melting so I did the only thing I could think of – I punched him in the face and told him never to do that again. It made sense at the time, I promise. He just laughed and held his jaw for a few minutes in the grass. After a few minutes he leaned in again and this time I kissed him too, and I didn't stop for years. Neither did he. (p. 9)

Why do grown folks read young adult novels? Either to remember back to a time when we ourselves were young, and/or to scout out good literature for beloved young ones. Harry Potter fans notwithstanding, there are many elders who enjoy young people's fiction today. I count myself as one. Especially this Social Fiction series by Sense Publishers in the Netherlands, dedicated to "arts-based research and fiction informed by social research" that comes complete with book club or classroom discussion questions at the end.

This novel was penned by a southern U.S. professor who shares the same angst, questions, and experiences his young characters express. *Cigarettes & Wine* is set in a small conservative South Carolina town. Its main characters attend church and go to Christian-oriented schools. The book centers on the angst of the closet in a mainstream heterosexual culture and how to sort out one's desires and identity in a social atmosphere where sexuality education is absent and teenagers find the answers to their questions as best they can.

The novel involves a tragic instance with one of the main characters that all of them are affected by, involved in, and learn from. This plot reminds me of the current dialogue going on in social media right now about another young adult novel turned into a Netflix series, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, which concerns bullying, suicide, consent, and depression. *Thirteen Reasons Why* is criticized for what some call "romanticizing" suicide, and being unrealistic about teen depression. What is clear from the Netflix series is the obliviousness of the adults in the story to the suffering of the teens around them. It is not quite so stark in *Cigarettes & Wine*, perhaps because the story is told from a survivor who loved and cared about everyone involved, someone who is still seeking to make sense out of the meanings of relationships and people's needs and hopes and desires in the small town. This young man is clear about his attraction for more than one gender and about his own interest in cross-dressing and exploring what he describes as his female side.

"I got the message that being interested in girly stuff was not something to advertise, and, like my love for Jordan, I learned to hide it just in case" (p. 29). The main character has Lena, an older female mentor who guides him in all things queer:

... she had already trained me pretty well for the many people I would meet throughout my life that could not understand that I liked boys, girls, and everyone in between rather than only boys or only girls and especially only girls. (p. 14)

Lena teaches the main character a lot about sexual activities and desires but always from the basis of agreement and mutual consent, "it only took a little bit before I began to convulse the same way what's his name had. It scared me, but it felt good. Lena stopped, and asked, 'Do you want me to stop?'" (p. 19.)

Another strength of this novel is that it shows that cross-gendered friendships don't have to be sexualized and that people can be loyal and supportive without having sexual ties. One of the character's friends is Rachel. "Rachel also goes to Jordan's church sometimes, but she has had problems there with lesbian and gay people who don't believe bisexuality is real" (p. 115). In this sentence the author introduces biphobia from the queer community. In hearing that comment the main character reflects, "I don't really understand this, and I haven't seen it myself at that point, but it seems to bother her a lot."

As the book builds to its tragic and emotional climax, which involves the main character making the momentous decision to leave his hometown, it becomes more complex. Young people don't often understand emotional crisis or the high stakes of life decisions they set in motion and certainly not how to help themselves and the adults in their lives cope with the consequences when these events become tragic. Sumereau does his best to show how teenagers deal with loss and coming of age and make their peace with moving on. Something we can use these days as we move into the next events of our own lives, wherever we are in our life's journey and process.

Notes on contributor

Loraine Hutchins, PhD, coedited two anthologies on bisexuality: *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out*, with Lani Ka'ahumanu in 1991 and *Sexuality, Religion and The Sacred: Bisexual, Pansexual and Polysexual Perspectives*, with H. Sharif Williams (Herukhuti) in 2011. She cofounded BiNet USA, and AMBi—the Alliance of Multicultural Bisexuals of Wash., DC. Her 2001 doctoral dissertation *Erotic Rites: A Cultural Analysis of Contemporary U. S. Sacred Sexuality Traditions and Trends* continues to influence her development of a queer feminist view of sexual healing. She teaches multidisciplinary sexuality studies at her local community college in Maryland and loves all kinds of literature—from haiku to sci-fi, memoirs to bodice-rippers, critical theories to biographies.

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