

Sexual Boundary-Setting in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*

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CONTENT WARNING: mention of non-consensual sexual interactions and r***

Sexual boundary-setting is under-studied in the field of Psychology. This lack of research is even starker when considering the experiences of people on the asexual spectrum. Given this gap, Ferguson's *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (2022) provides a compelling opportunity to combine my research interests as a Psychology and Gender studies student taking an English literature course. Though I am allosexual, the conversations that Lou has regarding her asexuality are interesting to compare to my own experiences with boundary-setting. This paper is thus an amalgamation of existing research on first sexual encounters, the boundary-setting conversations that occur in our heteronormative society, and an analysis of Lou's demisexual experience in relation to these normative experiences. Demisexual literature examples like Ferguson's, which thoroughly examine healthy sexual boundary-setting conversations, will only benefit young asexual readers who search for representation.

In a psychological study conducted by Morgan and Zurbriggen, most women reported that their first expressions of disinterest in sex were met with a range of negative reactions. Many women felt manipulated or pressured to engage in sexual acts based on their partner's interests. According to the study participants, men should be the ones initiating sexual interactions, and men may have to pressure their female partners to get what they want. Most participants "believe the male sex drive is constant, active, and strong, that it is difficult for young men to constrain their sex drive" (517). Sometimes, the pressure that women received went as far as constituting rape, but, almost universally, women expected a certain level of pressure. They often "held a low standard concerning what kind of pressure was unacceptable" in sexual situations (526). Some women even accepted men's threats that they would leave the relationship if a specific "sexual activity did not occur" (526).

This kind of pressure is present in Lou's sexual scenes with Wyatt. Though he never rapes her, he does not respect her boundaries and consistently pressures her to do more than she wants. Wyatt tells her that she does not "have to like giving BJs for you to, you know, go to town" (Ferguson 18), but her disinterest in sexual activities extends beyond disliking oral sex. At the very beginning of *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, she laments about kissing Wyatt forty-six times and not feeling a spark once (16). In an internal monologue, she specifies that she does not "want to have [his] dick in [her] hand at all" (18), though she does not have the words to tell Wyatt this. She is not interested in anything remotely sexual with Wyatt and is even surprised when his next girlfriend appears to enjoy his sexual advances. Long after they break up, Wyatt confesses that he knew Lou was never enjoying herself when they engaged in sexual activity. He "knew there was something wrong with [Lou]" because she was always "frigid" (136). Wyatt pressured her, despite knowing that Lou did not want to be sexual with him, prioritizing his own desire over her comfort. In viewing Lou's sexuality as a problem, or something "wrong" with her (136), he diminishes his own responsibility to explore it with her, ask her questions about it, and respect her boundaries. He tries to remove himself from the equation, and he claims no responsibility for his own harmful behaviour.

There are consistencies between Lou's later experience with King and some of the Morgan and Zurbriggen study's participants: "several women discussed partners" who "were careful to make sexual experiences consensual and comfortable, suggesting that these women were given greater spaces for sexual agency" (534). Some women's first sexual encounters involved accepting and accommodating male partners who were happy to abstain from sex in accordance with their wishes. Some women had partners like King.

When Lou tells King that "[she] like[s] kissing [him] a lot" but is not sure that she wants anything more from him sexually, King accepts that (238). Though Lou does not yet have the language to describe her sexuality, once she is honest about her position, things begin to fall into place. King offers demisexuality as an option—a word he is familiar with through his friend Yana. This identity resonates with Lou and allows her to begin discussing her sexual boundaries with King more explicitly. Together, they "try other things" as if doing "an experiment" to determine what Lou is comfortable with (238). Sometimes Lou verbalizes her boundaries, but other times King recognizes them without her needing to say them aloud. When she asks King how he knows whether he likes a sexual activity, for example, he takes that as a sign to stop. If she is not sure that she is enjoying an activity, King takes it off the sexual menu. This same practice is

recommended in real life for a variety of sexual challenges. For example, people with provoked vestibulodynia (a medical condition that can make penetrative sex painful for people who have vulvas) are encouraged to communicate what feels good, what does not, and what they are unsure about (Basson et al. 77). As they begin therapy (either cognitive behavioural therapy or mindfulness-based cognitive behavioural therapy), therapists will instruct patients to refrain from anything that does not feel good or that they are not sure about (80). Instinctively, King follows this protocol. He practices good consent by treating anything besides an enthusiastic “yes” as a “no.” He checks in with Lou frequently, allows her to change her mind, and tries not to take things personally. In the afterword to the novel, Ferguson writes that King is her “favorite character” because of his “goodness, his kindness,” and “his heart” (270). Some of Ferguson’s early readers however, critiqued King for being “too good for a teenage boy,” which is probably because he is (Ferguson 270). King’s approach to respecting Lou’s boundaries is unfortunately, non-normative. Often, as demonstrated by the psychological literature, male partners react like Wyatt when their female partners decline sexual advances.

Lou views Wyatt’s actions and behaviours as sexual advances even when he requests oral sex. It is worth noting that the definition of “sex” is not as clear as many might believe. It is contestable, and the term “sexual activity” has even more debated boundaries. Though oral sex and anal sex both have the word “sex” within their names, it is very common for people to think of sex strictly as vaginal penetration. For many, a person with a penis and a person with a vagina are the only two who can engage in “sex.” Among younger people, such as Lou, however, sometimes sex is defined more broadly. Michels et al. asked adolescents about their first sexual decisions and conversations, and how they felt about choices they had made in the past—whether to accept or decline sexual advances. One girl who had the opportunity but had declined sexual contact, considered oral sex to fall within the larger category of sex, “because you’re still more intimate” (Michels et al. 590). Though none of the teenagers in the study considered either kissing or intimate touch to be sex, Lou’s discomfort with sexual activity is not limited to activities and definitions that other teens agree upon, as is clear in her hesitancy surrounding kissing. Her interactions with Wyatt appear to be mostly of a sexual, rather than romantic nature, whereas her experiences with King are primarily romantic and platonic, with a slow introduction to sexuality. The definitions that we use for sexual activity are varied and fluid, but Lou’s discomfort also does not need to be boxed nor defined to be valid.

Despite their differing definitions, many participants in psychological studies report similar hesitation to Lou when it comes to engaging in sexual activity. It is difficult to tease apart demisexuality from normative beliefs in this case, though. Sexuality incurs a great deal of shame in Western culture. While Lou is afraid of backlash for not participating in sexual activities, others are concerned about the consequences of being sexual. Fears surrounding pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and social judgment are rampant. These fears can be at least partially explained by the education that students receive. As Kokkola explains, “the nuts and bolts of what might go where and what might happen as a result are easy to explain, but describing how to produce sexual pleasure and/or intimacy is embarrassing, in part, because it reveals so much about one’s own preferences” (16). There is shame surrounding sexuality. Even Lou’s mother, Louise, tries to shame Lou for having sex. She insists that Lou use condoms but does not take time to ask Lou what is going on between her and King, nor explain why condoms are important (Ferguson 240). She automatically assumes that they must be having penetrative sex but avoids furthering the conversation to explore Lou’s experience. Louise’s own experience with her sexuality is complicated and warrants its own in-depth analysis, but for the purpose of this paper it is only important to know that the kind of sexual education she provides Lou in this scene is reminiscent of the one that many American adolescents experience. Young people are terrified of STIs (Michels et al.), but they are rarely taught about transmission, detection, or prevention methods besides abstinence and sometimes condoms (Torres; Bittner 359). Teens can turn to other sources, such as pornography, but these depictions are not necessarily accurate and are intentionally dramatic (Bittner 364). Porn also rarely focuses on concerns such as STI transmission. Perhaps to combat their unanswered fears, many people turn to exclusive relationships for exploring their sexuality, at least initially.

Though monogamy does not guarantee protection against sexually transmitted infections, many students in one psychological study admitted that they preferred to wait before engaging in sexual activity. They felt safer to engage sexually once a sense of trust and closeness had been established with the other person. They wanted to be in dedicated monogamous partnerships. One boy explained that before having sex, “you have to be in a relationship with the person [for] a long time, and you have to really trust them” (Michels et al. 591). Another girl insisted that “you should love the person” you have sex with, and that she did not yet love anyone, so she had refrained from having sex (591). Still, another stated that she was “comfortable with [the person whom she had the opportunity to have sex with], but not to that extent” where she would have been willing to do anything

sexual with him (591). Another study posited that women especially “are more likely to indicate that sexual intercourse is only appropriate in relationships in which there is some degree of commitment, affection, and/or love” (Cohen and Shotland 291; citing a variety of sources). It is unclear whether these kinds of views come from the social scripts we have been indoctrinated with, or whether the participants were personally uninterested in sex without first establishing a relationship. Truthfully, demisexuality may be impossible to tease apart from cultural narratives with this specific reported data. The data seem to insinuate that many people who are first approached with the opportunity for sexuality outside of the confines of a romantic relationship respond negatively. Whether due to demisexuality or cultural narratives, many people expect that their first sexual encounter with a person will be after establishing a connection of at least five dates (often more like eight to ten), and that it will occur weeks after initially meeting the person (Cohen and Shotland 297).

With this discussion, I do not intend to imply that demisexual individuals will eventually mature out of their need for romantic connection, nor do I wish to conflate demisexuality with immaturity. These experiences are undoubtedly distinct, but the comparison is useful for several reasons. Unfortunately for my analysis, there is far more existing research on first sexual experiences than there is on demisexuality. External factors such as shame and fear may influence first sexual interactions more, whereas demisexuality may be more internally influenced. Without research to back this claim, however, I can only use the data available. While it is unlikely that more than a small minority of Michels et al.’s study participants were demisexual, that data was not reported. However, as Lou is both demisexual *and* sexually inexperienced, her story is relevant and intrinsically connected with the psychological study participants. Her experience of demisexuality is not universal, but it is not unique, either. I cannot make such claims until further research has been conducted. Lou’s fictional life cannot be used to represent every person’s asexual experience. Lou only feels comfortable navigating her sexuality with King, following a platonic and blossoming romantic connection. Other people on the asexual spectrum may find themselves more, or less, interested in sexual activity than Lou, following the development of more, or less, of a connection than the one between King and Lou. The experiences of asexuality and demisexuality are varied, and different for every person. Lou’s sexual inexperience is also entirely unrelated to her demisexuality, and I do not wish to confuse the two. Many demisexual people have a sexual history. Many others do not. Lou’s specific experience is captivating for readers, though, and I think her sexual boundary-setting conversations are particularly compelling when

we consider their educational potential for young readers who turn to literature to learn how to conduct themselves in similar situations.

Like many others, Lou is initially hesitant to share her sexual boundaries with King. King asks her about them explicitly before she is finally honest with him. He prompts her many times, claiming that her “excuses” for not going on a date with him “are exhausting” and that he wants a “real answer” (Ferguson 209). He knows there is something going on deeper within her, and he is open to discussing it, but Lou still hides from him because she does not want to admit that she “can’t have sex with him” (209). She tells readers that “it’s always a good idea not to talk about sex with someone you literally ran away from when he asked you on a date” (109). When she finally tells him that she does not want to have sex with him, it is less of a set boundary, and more a means to halt his interest in her. It is not until she finally sits down with King and uncomfortably squirms through a conversation about sexuality, that they make any progress. When she admits that she does not think she wants, or “can want sex,” the characters make headway (234). She finally lets King know what has been bothering her, gives him an idea of how he can support her, and sets a boundary. She requests that they move “real slow,” and she admits that she does not “know if [she] want[s] to have sex ever” but that she does want to “try other things” with him (238). It is this boundary conversation that finally opens the door for King and which allows their relationship to progress. Though boundary discussions can be uncomfortable, they are effective in ensuring that all parties are comfortable with whatever actions follow.

One possible route for navigating uncomfortable boundary discussions is a tool known as the Relationship Anarchy Smorgasbord. Though Relationship Anarchy at its core focuses on dismantling the traditional relationship structure and its associated norms, the smorgasbord itself could be useful in Lou and King’s relationship. According to the Multiamory podcast, the Relationship Anarchy Smorgasbord is a “chart” laid out in a specific way to facilitate boundary discussions (00:07:45–00:08:10). People in any kind of relationship can discuss sexual, financial, and familial boundaries, along with many other types that are on the board, in addition to topics the individuals raise themselves (00:14:00–00:14:30). The smorgasbord is intended to be personalized, and it allows boundary conversations to come up early in relationships, with the intention of defining the role that people will play in their relationship partnering life. The smorgasbord also does not require any degree of finality (00:13:00–00:13:30). People are encouraged to return to the smorgasbord to re-assess their relationships and their

comfort with the boundaries they have previously set. Though Lou and King are far from bringing such a tool into their relationship, it could have helped Lou bring up the topic of sexuality with King, in a less stressful way. Upcoming Young Adult novels might consider applying the smorgasbord or other boundary-setting tools to help introduce the concept of healthy boundary discussions to young readers.

Regardless of how she does it, Lou's navigation of her demisexuality serves as representation for young readers. Ferguson's depiction of sexual boundary-setting discussions is important and "validating" for young folks on the asexual spectrum who are finally beginning to see "representations of [themselves] in literature" (Bittner 368–369). Young Adult literature is just one possible avenue for sexual education, but novels may be particularly comforting within a greater education system primarily focused on "abstinence, condom use, and HIV prevention" (Bittner 359). Young Adult literature can complement the especially sparse Queer sexual education that adolescents receive. Ferguson's description of Lou's (dis)comfort with sexual acts may be a particularly important example for asexual teens who are unsure of how to communicate their experiences with partners, and who have turned to Young Adult fiction for answers. The approachability and accessibility of Young Adult literature is exciting in its potential to educate a growing group of asexual adolescents who do not see or find themselves in traditional sex education classes. Young Adult literature provides "a space in which explorations of danger and desire outside of heterosexist expectations occur" (Bittner 361), and where adolescents can look for inspiration about how to navigate their own discussions regarding sexuality. As Lou explores her own sexuality, readers can be encouraged to consider their own relationships with their bodies, and others, and how to openly communicate their boundaries.

The Summer of Bitter and Sweet provides a compelling entry to the sexual boundary-setting conversations that people have every day. Ferguson's novel is a strong representation of healthy, albeit uncomfortable, boundary-setting conversations, and could be interesting to sexually inexperienced folks, demisexual people, anyone questioning their level of sexual interest, desire, and/or arousal, and others who are interested in learning more about one demisexual person's experience. Though the novel should not be considered the be-all-end-all for demisexual literature, it does add to a growing body of Queer Young Adult fiction that people will ultimately use to educate themselves. It is important that more works such as these are published, so that adolescents know their experiences are normal and perfectly acceptable. If someone finds comfort or familiarity in Lou's story, I

think it is a testament to the writer, who has contributed to the representation of demisexual teens' experiences. Ferguson has excelled at introducing a likeable, relatable character, whom asexual readers might be able to see themselves in. Given their reduced or fluctuating interest in sexuality, many asexual people are bound to have sexual boundary-setting conversations, and they should have a plethora of representations to turn to, to help determine how they might behave in their own situations.

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