

Of Fire and Stars and Queer Desires: What a queer YA fantasy Novel represents about queer  
experiences

Savannah Munholland

04 December 2020

## **Theory Section**

### **Queer Theory**

What is queer theory? It's a good question, and one that theorists will all have slightly different answers too. Diane Raymond claims it is a marker of marginalized sexualities. Alexander Doty argues that queerness is a way to consume media. Raymond's definition is that queer is a term to reference a marginalized community whereas Doty sees queer as a reception practice, a way to interpret media.

Neither of these are wrong, nor even one more right than the other. Queer theory, since its inception, has been intentionally broad and vague. Its definition or meaning has been left up to interpretation by each theorist who studies it. The way I define it utilizes both Doty's and Raymond's ideas. Queer is a term that references a community of marginalized sexualities and gender identities. But, being a marginalized community, people within the community are going to have different experiences and desires that will be used to interpret the media presented to them. In this way, queer is also a way to receive and analyze media.

Queer theory is related to gay/lesbian studies; however, the term is fluid and many people have different perspectives on what it includes (Raymond). Doty adds on to this idea,

“I found that while I used “gay” to describe the particulars of men’s culture, and “lesbian” to describe the particulars of women’s culture, I was hard-pressed to find a term to describe cultural common ground between lesbians and gays as well as other non-straight— a term representing unity as well as suggesting diversity.”  
(Doty 2).

It's a term meant to be inclusive of bisexuals or anyone attracted to more than one gender, as well as including non-cisgender peoples in this cultural group. But being “queer” isn't reductive to sexual desires, while that plays a role in the culture, queerness is also about practices and

experience in society. When people think “queer”, often it is first thought to be focusing on the same sex desires and actions. But being queer is more than sex and sexual attraction, it is a culture and a similar shared experience amongst marginalized sexualities and gender identities.

Queer theory is meant to examine with a different framework than previously used. Society is based on heteronormativity and, on the surface, most media represented that. Queer theory and queer reading were meant to promote universality and challenges the binary of homosexual and heterosexual. Many theories stemming from queer theory are united in the desire to move marginalization to the center (Raymond). It is meant to normalize queer identities, and this was started by promoting queer readings of the media. In the early 90’s when Alexander Doty published “Making Things Perfectly Queer”, blatant queer media representation was scarce and the representation that did exist was often created and played by straight people. Today, this is not the case. While perhaps there is still not as much diversity in queer representations as there should be, the amount and quality of queer characters and queer creators has improved.

### **Queer Relationship to Media**

Most theorists argue that texts are open to interpretation by the consumer. What the author or creator intended, while not being false, may not necessarily be how consumers view the text. This ideology is important when it comes to queer readings. Cultural texts are unambiguous and open to queer readings (Raymond). The author or director or creator may have

intended a text to be read as queer, but if a reader is bringing queer experiences to the text, then it is likely that some things will read as queer to them. This is true even if a straight author did not intend it to be perceived that way. Queer readings of widely considered “straight” texts is not false or projecting queer desires on non-queer characters, rather recognizing queer practices and subtleties that exist. However, queerness is not the only position from which queer people consume and produce media. Queer people still have factors such as social class, religion, education level, race, etc. contributing to their media reception and production practices.

A common mistake in examining queerness and queer theory is to look at it in relation to racial and ethnic minority studies. Queerness cannot be likened to ethnic minorities, because ethnic minorities often learn their culture from their families and geographically defined communities. The media representation of their community is secondary in how they see their culture. This is different for queer identities in two ways. There is an age normalized by society in which people learn about and can recognize queerness, often during or after puberty. Whereas with ethnic or racial minorities, the race/ethnicity of the child is known at birth. In these communities, teaching a child it’s culture and history is as fundamental as teaching them to sleep, eat, or walk.

Secondly, race and ethnicity are things that often unite a family (presuming the family shares DNA). Queerness, however, has the potential to cause conflict within a family. Though gaining acceptance now, it was common for parents to disown or kick out queer-identifying kids. Queerness is not often something that unites a family. It is not hereditary, so it is often a factor that separates a person from their relations. Lacking familial education, shared experiences amongst family, and occasionally familial support, queer identifying people turn to the media to learn and experience what queerness is. Whereas ethnic minorities learn their culture from their

families first, queer people often gain their notion and understanding of queerness from the media first.

### **Representation Theory**

In the most basic sense, representation is the connection between meaning and language to culture (Hall). A representation is a way to express or symbolize a thing or idea using language or imagery. We use language to depict and describe physical objects, however the word(s) used to describe said object cannot act in the way the object does. As Stuart Hall explains, “You can’t speak with the actual glass, either. You can only speak with the word for glass – GLASS – which is the linguistic sign which we use in English to refer to objects out of which you drink water” (Hall 3). Representation is simply a stand-in for the real thing, but not the actual thing.

According to Hall, there are two systems of representation. The first is the use of language to describe the systems of concepts formed in our minds that allow us to interpret the world in a meaningful way. This includes physical things (i.e. buildings, people, etc.) or abstract concepts (love, friendship, peace, etc.). If we could not look at a tree and think “tree”, the world would lose meaning. The word “tree” is not the actual tree, of course, but it is the way we prescribe meaning to the actual, physical object that we call a tree. Along with the word “tree”, our mind will conjure up other ideas and things connected to it. The use of language and the representation of a tree in the word “tree” is what makes that possible.

This system of representation also allows us to also interpret and understands things that are made up, because we can relate them to things we know and see and understand. This is exemplified in fiction. A fantasy book, for example, though based in a made-up world or an

enhanced version of our world, must be based somewhat in ideas that exist in reality. Things like language, the way humans feel and interact, human desires, etc. Though it is something fictional and not real, we have learned to recognize and understand those ideas because of our representations in language and the connections it brings. We can create something, create a word to represent it, and then prescribe meaning to that word in a way that is comprehensible.

The second system of representation is in language itself. Within this system, there are three separate approaches of where meaning actually lies. The Reflective Approach argues that true meaning lies in the actual person, place, thing, or concept and language representations attempt to mirror that. That means that there is no meaning in the actual language, just that language attempts to convey the meaning that the actual thing holds.

The Intentional Approach claims the person speaking or the author or designer uses language to impose their idea of meaning on the world. With this approach, things only mean what the *person* speaking/writing/etc. decides they mean. There is no absolute meaning, since every person's idea behind meaning is different.

The Constructionist Approach says language defines the meaning of the physical world and meaning is constructed by the ways it is represented. This focuses more of the meaning on language itself, and then language constructs the meaning of the actual object.

### **Representation in the Media**

Representation in the media has more social impact than simply being a way to convey meaning. When it comes to the representation of marginalized groups, the way in which a group's representation is handled is extremely important, not only for that community but also to inform society about the identity being represented. However, marginalized groups do not

always get a say in how they are represented. Sut Jhally said in his introduction to Stuart Hall's speech, "Hall understands that communication is always linked with power and that those groups who wield power in a society influence what gets represented through the media" (Hall). The white, straight, cis-gender people have had the power for a long time, because they fall into identity categories that society has long deemed "normal". They determine what gets communicated and represented of marginalized communities. However, they may not know the best way to present these identities. This can lead to problematic and stereotypical representations that misinform society about that group's desires, actions, wants, and experiences.

Representations stand in place of the real thing, so when a marginalized identity is portrayed in the media, it is meant to stand in for the entire identity community. It is giving meaning to that community.

"People have assumed that therefore what this is doing is a powerful way of circulating in the world a very limited range of definitions of who people can be, of what they can do, what are the possibilities in life, what are the natures of the constraints on them. I mean, the image is producing not only identification, which I talked about before, it's actually producing knowledge; what we know about the world is how we see it represented. So the struggle to open up stereotypes is often a struggle to increase the diversity of things which subjects can be of – the possibilities of identities which people have not seen represented before – it is very important; that is "the politics of the image" (Hall).

Representations inform society about identities. If representations are stand in for a whole community, one representation can be assumed to represent the whole community.

Stereotypes are detrimental because they restrict who a person can be and how they can act and spread this information to the rest of society.

### **Queer Theory and Representation**

Queer theory connects to representation theory naturally. It is hard to talk about queer theory without representation theory because most queer studies focus on the way queerness is seen in the media, whether it be through open representation or subtle queer readings. The way queerness is represented defines many aspects of queer theory.

Society is based in heteronormativity. It is what, for a very long time, was seen as the norm. Anything else was not normal, or queer. Because of this, the media tends to portray heterosexuality as normalcy. It has become the standard. However, heterosexuality only appears natural because it was constructed that way. If you take away the naturalization and institutions that normalize it, it is as fragile as any other identity (Raymond). There is no science or objective fact that places heterosexuality as the norm and queerness as the other. Society created that ideology.

Representations often work to normalize forms of queerness, rather than show it as the abnormal opposite of heterosexuality (Raymond). The goal of positive representation is to move away from the othering of queerness and for the media representations to inform viewers that queerness is not against straightness, just other forms of identity. However, the media often portrays hetero-centric depictions of sexuality, meaning that representations of queerness are often portrayed with likeness to heterosexuality. That is to say that it is “straight” experiences and desires are placed on to gay characters. This is often an issue because, up until recently, most queer representations were created by non-queer people. How does media created by queer producers affect these ideas? Not only does queer created content create representations to help normalize queer identities, but it creates representations that are not hetero-centric. A queer author is going to be more likely to showcase queer culture and desire.



The idea of identity, especially as it pertains to sexuality, is a fluid one. Heterosexuality and homosexuality have always been placed against each other. The meaning of queer or straight has been placed in what is it not. Basically, queer is anything not straight, and straight is anything not queer.

“Such a perspective would suggest that what is at stake is less the question how many gay/queer characters populate television or even how sympathetically they are portrayed but rather about the ways desire and meaning are structured, even in the absence of such images. Thus, identity must be thought of as always in relation, never fixed or stable” (Raymond 7).

Because of this culture of homosexuality vs. heterosexuality, identity cannot be fixed. It is only in relation of what it isn't. This is the other issue seen with queer representations, that their whole character is based in being not straight without any other layers.

The other danger in this is that representation is not always give for the right reasons. Difference sells, and queerness has been commodified to make producers money and has been tied to things and not practices (Raymond). When creating diverse media for the profit, not because it is the ethical thing to do, the representations created will be thin. They will be done well enough to get money, but that is it.

Queer representation is not always diverse, and this is often due to the homo vs. hetero thinking. Rob Cover writes, “By positing 'homosexuality' as non-heteronormativity's only possible articulation, it marginalizes alternative ~truths' of sexuality, maintains the hetero/homo dyad and interpellates the non-heteronormative resource-seeker as lesbian or gay” (Cover). By thinking only in terms of homosexuality and heterosexuality, it reinforces placing the two against each other and erases the room for representations of other sexualities. Bisexuality, pansexuality, and other sexualities where people are attracted to two or more genders isn't often seen in the media because of “hetero/homo” dyad. Similarly, when queer is only used to discuss

marginalized sexualities, transgender and other marginalized gender identities get left out. Therefore, the representations that do exist are narrow and do not reflect the full queer community.

Queer reception of queer media is important. Often, people know their sexualities before coming into contact with a resource (or media) that reflects their identity. Once they discover that media or representation, they then re-think that identity so that it fits within the representation given. (Cover). The importance of queer representations and how it relates to construction of identity links back to the point I made earlier about how queer people often first find the queer community through media. Queer representation is imperative because it can often lead non-heterosexual people to learning how to process and articulate those queer desires.

### **Queer Theory, Representation Theory, and Queer Authorship**

While examining the work of Arzner and Cukor, Doty suggests that, at the time they were created, their films were popular amongst the queer community, not because the directors were gay/lesbian, but because the stars themselves (though some straight) had a cult queer following. They found queer pleasure and representation amongst the actual actors and actresses, rather than the actual text created by queer identifying people. This is what he refers to “star as auteur” (Doty 20) While Doty recognizes that, now, if queer people were to come to these works, it would most likely be because they are created by queer people, not for these individual actors or actresses.

I would argue that the attitude around queer authors is much different now. Within the queer community, there is an appreciation for works created by queer authors/directors/creators.

For example, most lesbians and other sapphic people I know appreciate the work of Celine Sciamma because she is lesbian. And though Doty is writing mostly about film, I think these ideas of queer authorship apply to text as well. Up until recently, a queer book was hard to find. A queer book written by a queer author was even harder to find. That's why many queer people relied on queer readings of "straight" texts. Many books could be read as queer where maybe that wasn't the intention. This does not make them wrong, or false readings. The idea of "death of the author" tells us that the interpretation of a text is in the hands of the reader/consumer. Therefore, any text will be informed by the readers own experiences, so, if those experiences are that of a queer-identifying person, it is likely there will be something queer in that interpretation.

However, I would argue that queer created content is extremely valuable to our community. Finding the queer subtleties in "straight" media is satisfying, but to have a queer identity blatantly and openly represented is a positive and affirming experience. This is heightened when that queer representation is created by someone who has experienced the same struggles, joys, and cultures of the representation. Society is much different than when Doty wrote his book, and now it is much more acceptable to be openly queer and telling queer stories.

### **Critical Analysis**

*Of Fire and Stars* by Audrey Coulthurst is a sapphic fantasy romance revolving two princesses, Dennaleia and Amaranthine (referred to as Denna and Mare). Denna is a princess from another kingdom, who comes to the kingdom of Mynaria because she is betrothed to the prince, instead she falls for his sister, Mare. However, the main conflict is not rooted in the characters queerness. Coulthurst uses issues like falling for the wrong person and restricting social expectations to show aspects of the queer experience and queer desires. Coulthurst herself

is queer, and her experiences clearly inform this novel to create relatable struggles and desires to other queer readers.

### **Juxtaposition of Magic and Queerness**

Queer desires are innate and natural, and the book often correlates the idea of being true to oneself to queer desires. One of the main sources of conflict for Denna is that she possesses an affinity, essentially, she has magic powers bestowed on her from the gods of the novel. It normally manifests as fire. In the novel, it is not uncommon for there to be magic users, however they are often from a different kingdom, and magic is illegal in the kingdom Denna is meant to be future queen of. Denna struggles to hide her magic because she knows it will not be accepted, however she longs to learn more about it because it is part of who she is. The author seems to juxtapose this idea of magic and queerness, as we often see her magic flair up when she is confronted with the main object of her queer desire, Mare. When Mare arrives and is knocked over by a horse, it is Mare that calms her. This is the first time we see Denna almost lose control of her magic. When there is an assassin attempt on the king, Mare steps forward and is cut by a knife. After this, Denna loses control again and burns the assassin. This is a frequent reoccurrence throughout the book. It seems that her magic and her queerness are linked, to be open and liberated about both would be true freedom.

In Chapter 29, Denna reveals her Affinity to Mare. Despite being raised in a kingdom that hates magic, Mare accepts it and her immediately. If magic and queerness are linked, this is Mare accepting and realizing Denna's queerness. Later in the chapter, Mare asks what it feels like to use magic. Denna says, "Using it makes me feel like I'm giving away pieces of myself, but there's a thrill in it too. Sometimes it feels dangerous and out of control and like I have no idea what I'm doing" (Coulthurst 271) to which Mare responds, "Sounds kind of like the

moment right before you kiss someone” (Coulthurst 271). Both magic and queer desires are thrilling and potentially dangerous because if her magic, or her feelings for Mare, are found out Denna is put at risk.

Denna’s Affinity has always been something hard for her to accept. Because it would upset her life and ruin her status, she would rather get rid of it completely rather than celebrate it. Sound familiar? Its how many queer people feel about their queerness. Another magic user says to Denna, “An Affinity, much like a heart, cannot be changed” (Coulthurst 327). If magic and queerness are linked in the novel, then this is a nod to the fact that queerness, like magic in the story, is natural. It is not something people can choose or get rid of. It is a part of people and must be accepted and embraced to be happy.

At the end of the novel, we see the culmination and peak of her magical power as she chooses freedom and her love for Mare over anything else. She runs away from the castle, finally choosing her desire and longing for freedom over her duty and the life she was meant to live. The true strength of her magic comes out as she saves Mare from her kidnappers

### **Longing for Freedom**

From the very beginning of the novel, it is clear that Denna’s main desire is for freedom and the chance to be herself. A reader can assume that means a chance to act on her queerness as well. The prologue ends with these lines, “But some things are stronger than years of lessons. The draw of fire. A longing for freedom. Or a girl on a red horse” (Coulthurst 4). Denna is reflecting on how she spends her whole life in lessons, training to be the queen of Mynaria. However, that is not enough to diminish her individuality and her own desires. This it is not enough to change her queer desires.

Mare is very different from Denna. She is older than her brother, but she is not betrothed or holds any real position in the castle. There are expectations placed on her, but she defies them. The more she acts on her own independence; the more pressure is placed on her from her brother and father. Mare wants to escape her family, but marriage seems to be the only way to do that. That is not a viable solution for her. Either way she loses her freedom and independence. Either way she is compromising her happiness and want she wants. There is seemingly no possible future that ends with her own desires coming to fruition. All Mare wants is to do what she loves (train horses) and lead a simple life. This is important because it is what most queer people want. To be unbothered, to not be told what to do or how to be, just to live their life as they see fit.

Denna says, “Besides being useless, being trapped in a loveless marriage with someone who didn’t respect me was my greatest fear” (Coulthurst 69). This seems to be a hint at her queerness. It would really be impossible to love her betrothed, because she is not attracted to men. It is unclear whether at this point she recognizes her attraction to women, but this fear echoes the concerns many queer people struggle with. It is a concern centered around being able to be yourself, and to live openly in a way that would allow for a queer relationship to blossom.

As soon as they meet, Denna often finds herself being jealous of Mare and what seems to be her freedom. Reflecting on that, Denna thinks, “Someone as proud as Amaranthine would never bow to anyone, whether it was her brother, her father or her husband. It wasn’t in her. And with everything that had gone wrong since my arrival, I was starting to wonder if it was in me, either” (Coulthurst 94). It is mentally exhausting to try and be someone you’re not, and both characters are too independent and strong to put themselves into a position of inferiority. They are too strong to put themselves into a relationship that isn’t true to their desires. There is a correlation drawn here but the characters are different. Denna, readers assume, is a lesbian and

this is why her betrothal to Thandi is so hard, other than the fact she was given no choice in the matter. Denna wants to fall in love and marry for love, but she does not love Thandi. It is not marriage she hates; it is a loveless marriage. Denna even wants children, she acknowledges this on page 149, but she does not want them with her betrothed.

Mare is a different situation because she is attracted to men and has had a meaningful relationship with a man, her ex and current best friend, Nils. For her, it *is* the marriage aspect that she is skeptical of. She sees it as a restriction of her freedom to tie herself to another person, to change her life for another person. The connection between Mare and Denna's situations lies in the fact that they both want to have the right to choose. Denna wants to choose who she marries, what her role is. Mare wants to choose her life's path, whether or not she marries. Queer people *can* want a traditional style family, but with a partner of their choosing (like Denna), or they can not want that, or they can still be deciding (like Mare). The idea of freedom and the liberation of being queer lies in the power to choose and not be restricted by what society or your family wants.

### **Duty vs Desire**

Another theme seen throughout the story is the conflict between the character's duty and what they desire. The life that seems set in stone for the characters almost always gets in the way of the character's following their heart. In the case of Denna and Mare, their heart's desire is their queer feelings for each other which is in direct conflict with duty to the kingdom and their families. In chapter 19, Denna is meant to go meet Mare but gets stopped by Thandi. This represents her first real choice where she has to choose between her duty to Thandi as his betrothed, or Denna's desire to go see Mare. She chooses duty. "It should have been easy to overthrow my plans with Mare for my future husband. The prince came first, and my duty was to

him” (Coulthurst 181). In this first instance, she chooses her duty and the life that was laid out for her.

After Denna expresses her opinion that Mare should be more involved in court business as Denna’s confidant and advisor, that king says, “Amarathine still has things to learn. She must accept that her kingdom first. She is eighteen and already past the age when she should have been betrothed. I had hoped you would be an example to her rather than the other way around” (Coulthurst 250). This again shows that the king only sees Mare as fulfilling her purpose if she gets married, but also shows that he only sees Mare fulfilling her duty to the kingdom if she puts her own desires aside. This is why the King fear’s Mare’s influence, because she acts on her own self-interest and happiness first and he does not want Denna to follow suit. After this interaction, Thandi and the king work to keep Denna’s days full so she will not have time with Mare. Denna arranges a secret meeting with Mare, during which she says to her, “I have to see you again- I don’t care what Thandi plans” (Coulthurst 262). This is the first time Denna chooses desire over duty, but it’s in secret. She knows Thandi doesn’t want her to see Mare, but she does anyway without regard for what he wants. This show progress, however, she is still trying to balance the duty she has to the kingdom versus what she really wants, though the two seem to be mutually exclusive.

This theme is important to note because, though most people in the real world don’t have to pick between their royal duties and what their hearts want, the sentiment reflects a social struggle many queer people face. In a hetero-normative society, many people grow up thinking they will marry someone of the opposite sex, have kids, and live what is deemed a “normal” life. In the course of accepting one’s queer identity, this notion of a heteronormative life has to be left



behind. It is a struggle to actively accept an identity that is deemed non normative, even if it leads to true happiness.

Denna reflects this sentiment when she explains to Mare why it is so hard for her to choose her over her duty to marry Thandi and become queen. “‘Serving the kingdom as a monarch is the only thing I know how to do. It’s the only way I have power to help stop the war,’ she said, ‘But I want to find a way to make things work for us. I want to make you happy. And I can’t bear the idea of going on without you. Tell me what I have to do to change your mind’” (Coulthurst 344). Denna was raised and trained to one day be queen. It was what her whole life was dedicated too. Similarly, in the real world, historically society has pushed the norm of heteronormativity. Young queer people often do not know how to accept their identity that counters everything society seems to accept. Though they know it would be miserable to try and lead a life that is not authentic to their true selves, it is still hard to deny the life that society tries to force on everyone.

Denna has Ellaeni as an example. Ellaeni’s parents don’t approve of her partner, not because she is a girl, but because she is of a lower status. Still, Ellaeni chooses her girlfriend Claera despite her parent’s protests. She follows what she feels in her heart. Though the conflict of this situation is not rooted because Ellaeni loves a girl, but the idea of parents not approving of a girl’s female partner echoes the struggles of many queer people. And for Denna, Ellaeni serves as an example of how happy she could be if she also accepts what her heart wants.

At the end of the novel, Denna finally chooses desire over duty. “For my entire life, duty had come first. Today, it was time to stand by my heart and my kingdom. I stood up straight and faced him head on” (Coulthurst 356). She goes after Mare and chooses to be with her, rather than follow through on her marriage to Thandi. Though she has to give up her status and almost everything that was set for her, she still knows it was the right decision. She reflects, “Next time

I would follow my heart from the beginning (Coulthurst 388). It's a good lesson, and one that applies to everyone, especially queer people. The only way to true peace and happiness is through accepting the innate and authentic parts of yourself, even when it is hard and when it goes against everything you think you should want.

### **Challenging Societal Expectations**

After their first meeting, Prince Thandilimon says to Denna about Mare "I assure you she is not an accurate reflection of our people or the royal family" (Coulthurst 11). He says this because Mare would rather train and tend to the horses than take on societally dictated princess duties. He also says Mare "should be married". He, a patriarchal figure, is angry that his sister cannot be subdued into doing what he and the rest of his family expects her to.

In the prologue, readers are introduced to a young Denna. Even at an early age, Denna wants more than the life she has. She longs for a world of magic, not the strict routine she is kept to. This can be interpreted as she wants more than a world of heteronormativity. Her engagement was decided when she was very young, trapping her into a future heterosexual life without any thought to what she wants. It was assumed that she would just go along with it and be happy and it was her duty. While real-life is not as extreme as to trap people into engagements at a young age, the feeling of expectation from family to live a heterosexual lifestyle is experienced by many queer people.

Denna desires purpose, which is something that is being denied to her. She is expected to attend parties and do "womanly" things, but she wants to be involved in the politics. In chapter nine, Denna is forced to attend her wedding bazaar and she thinks to herself, "I wasn't in the mood to put on my manners for a party and court my future ladies-in-waiting, even with my

sister by my side. I wanted to do something useful” (Coulthurst 86). She sees parties and entertaining as pointless, especially when there are more important things to be focused on. In this same scene we see the character Hilara, a member of the Directorate (the royal governing board), attending the party. Denna resents that this woman of power is wasting her time and not doing something useful. “She had power. She could have been with the directorate, helping find Casmiel’s killer or dealing with the Recusants. Instead, she was parading around setting fashions” (Coulthurst 87). She is jealous that Hilara has power and influence and feels like she is wasting it by spending time at a frivolous event instead of investigating the death of a member of the royal family.

Denna had hoped that the positive aspect of her betrothal would be that it would give her power to better the world and the lives of the citizens. However, her future husband keeps her separate. “Thandi had shown no inclination so far to help prepare me to sit on the Directorate or contribute to political discourse in a meaningful way. If wearing a crown gave me power, I wanted to use it to make the world a better place, not to plan garden parties and poetry readings and write letters” (Coulthurst 107). Denna is extremely smart and clever, and yet not many people acknowledge this. They place her in a box, making assumptions based on what society expects of a future queen. She is never given the chance to prove how influential and helpful she can be. She is ever given the chance to be herself. Everyone thinks they know her.

Also, everyone expects something of Denna or builds a relationship with her because they want something, except for two queer characters Mare has no expectations from Denna, they became close on their own terms. Denna even recognizes on page 150 that Mare has no real reason for being her friend, other than simple enjoyment of each other’s company. Yes, Denna is helping Mare, but that is because Mare recognizes Denna’s real potential. The other queer character we

see is Ellaeni, who is the only noblewoman Denna builds a genuine friendship with. It seems only queer characters, or characters that accept queerness, truly understand queer characters for who they are.

### **Queer Characters Recognizing True Potential**

Throughout the book, the two main characters are constantly being put in a box and treated as if they are unnecessary or incapable of helping with the major investigation that drives the plot of the novel. Mare is treated as a screw-up because she does not want to get involved with court business. She prefers to spend her time with the horses. However, when she does try to help, her father says to her, “If you wanted to be useful, you’d get married and learn to run an estate like a proper daughter!” (Coulthurst 224). The only way he sees her as being useful is getting married and running an estate, not helping in court business or being her own person.

As stated before, Denna desires purpose. She is extremely smart and observant and loves to read. She has the ability to be a great asset to the Directorate, but she is treated by Thandi as just a princess who is too frivolous and would be uninterested in politics. He does not even try to get to know her before making this assumption. This bothers Mare, because she does see how useful and smart Denna is. Mare thinks to herself, “He didn’t deserve Denna; she would never reach her full potential with him. He’d have her writing letters and doing cresthaven tours and embroidering thrice-damned baby blankets her whole life when she could be researching for the Directorate and learning to be a true monarch rather instead of just a pretty face” (Coulthurst 253). Mare recognizes what Thandi thinks of Denna and recognizes how stupid it is. Mare says to her best friend about Thandi, “I’m talking about Denna. It’s like she’s an object, another thing he gets to have because he’s going to be king someday.’ [...] ‘She’s worth so much more than that,

but he doesn't see it. There's so much more she can do for this kingdom, and no one is giving her any opportunity" (Coulthurst 285).

It is Mare, another queer character, who sees Denna for who she really is, and what she is really capable of. Denna sees the same about Mare. Thandi and the king see Mare as useless because she is not married. They do not appreciate how much Mare does for the castle's horses (horses are extremely important to the kingdom) and when Mare tries to aid them, they cast her aside. Denna and Mare, together, start their own investigation, both seeing the importance and capabilities of the other. This seems to be implying that only other queer characters, or characters that know and accept queerness are able to recognize and appreciate the true potential of queer characters. Nils, Mare's best friend, knows and accepts Mare's queerness and therefore is a supportive character. It is important to note that homophobia does not seem to exist in this world, however characters like Thandi and the king place restricting expectations on the characters that would restrict their queerness, like wanting Mare to get married to a man and Denna to marry Thandi.

The other prominent queer character, Ellaeni, becomes the one friend Denna gains from the other noblewomen. Other than Ellaeni, Denna does not seem to connect with the other girls of the court. She and Ellaeni almost instantly relate to each other, and it's important to note that Ellaeni is also queer, in a relationship with another girl. Denna said about the contents of a letter she wrote to her mother, "the first time I had experienced confidence in my future in Mynaria- all because of Mare and Ellaeni" (Coulthurst 338). Denna felt confident because of her friendship with the two other queer prominent characters. This seems to be because queer people often understand each other and their struggles and experiences.

### **Challenging Gender Roles**

Mare is seen constantly defying the stereotypical, societally mandated gender roles. As the chapters alternate POVs between Denna and Mare, readers see the stark difference between the two. Mare is unconventional and not “lady-like”. She wears pants where most of the women, or at least the noble women and women in position similar to her, wear dresses. Compared to herself, Mare thinks Denna is “the kind of delicate girl who made me feel like a dirty, lumbering oaf” (Coulthurst 15). Mare does not see herself as very feminine, at least not in the way society dictates. She challenges what femininity is. Many queer women have a complicated relationship with femininity and how being a woman does not necessarily mean expressing as one. In chapter 6 we see Mare dress as a boy to sneak into the city. She is cross-dressing, playing with gender norms, a thing many queer people do. When Denna sneaks out of the castle walls with Mare, she wears clothes similar to what Mare normally wears (which are more masculine) to blend in and disguise herself. She finds this liberating. “As skeptical as I had been about wearing peasant clothes, I had to admit it was liberating. I didn’t have to perform my role as a princess, and I understood now why Mare valued her freedom and anonymity in town” (Coulthurst 217). As a princess, Denna never really had a choice of what to wear, she was always put in dresses. While most people aren’t forced to wear extravagant gowns, many people, especially queer people, find that gendering clothes is restrictive. Queer people often find freedom and expression is trying different clothes and styles and not being boxed in by clothes considered “feminine” or “masculine”.

### **Conclusion**

Somehow Audrey Coulthurst managed to create a world where homophobia does not exist, and yet still echoes the struggles, desires, and experiences that queer people face in society. With the representation in her novel, she shows that what queer people really want is acceptance,

the allowance to live authentically, and to not be put in a box and told they can only be one thing. Coulthurst's own queerness clearly informs this novel, as she represents these experiences authentically and delicately in a way that resonates deeply with queer audiences.

## Sources:

*Constructing (Non-)Normative Identities in Written Lesbian Discourse: A Diachronic Study* -

Veronika Koller, 2013. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0957926513486166>.

Accessed 22 Sept. 2020.

Blackburn, Mollie V., et al. "Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature: What Queer Literature Can Offer Young Adult Readers." *Journal of Literacy Research*, vol. 47, no. 1, SAGE Publications Inc, Mar. 2015, pp. 11–48. *SAGE Journals*, doi:[10.1177/1086296X15568930](https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X15568930).

Butler, Judith. "More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2–3, Duke University Press, 1994 Summer-Fall 1994. *EBSCOhost*, <https://arcadia.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=1995031057&site=ehost-live>.

Cover, Rob. "Re-Sourcing Queer Subjectivities: Sexual Identity and Lesbian/Gay Print Media." *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, vol. 103, no. 1, SAGE Publications, May 2002, pp. 109–23. *SAGE Journals*, doi:[10.1177/1329878X0210300114](https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0210300114).

"There's Something Queer Here." *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, by Alexander Doty, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 1–16.

"Whose Text Is It Anyway: Queer Cultures, Queer Auteurs, and Queer Authorship." *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, by Alexander Doty, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 17–38.



Keeling, K. *Queer OS / Kopernio*.

<https://kopernio.com/viewer?doi=10.1353%2Fcj.2014.0004&token=WzIwMjE0MzEsIjEwLjEzNTMvY2ouMjAxNC4wMDA0II0.T6KTMK-OWokOXtruGmTxBbKvik4>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2020.

Hall, Stuart. “The Work of Representation.” *The Applied Theatre Reader*, edited by Tim Prentki and Nicola Abraham, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2020, pp. 74–76. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:[10.4324/9780429355363-15](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355363-15).

Hall, Stuart. “Representation and the Media.” Media Education Foundation Transcript.  
[www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Representation-and-the-Media-Transcript.pdf](http://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Representation-and-the-Media-Transcript.pdf).

Raymond, Diane. *POPULAR CULTURE AND QUEER REPRESENTATION*. p. 13.