

12-15-2023

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Recommended Citation

Murray, Ash (2023) "Hunted: A tale of identity, self-discovery, mourning, and acceptance," *The Crown: Syracuse Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1, Article 14.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/thecrown/vol1/iss1/14>

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Hunted

A tale of identity, self-discovery, mourning, and acceptance

Ash Murray
English and psychology, 2023

Abstract

What do you do when you are young and queer (and maybe you don't know it yet), but none of the narratives that you are raised on ever tell the stories that you need to hear? We raise our children on fairy tales—on stories where the only available or acceptable “happily ever after” is a cisgender, heterosexual one. And as we get older, that trend never truly changes. The majority of the world's entertainment media is created *by* cishet people, *for* cishet people, leaving queers to either create their own representation or search through subtexts and subtle characterizations to find representation where it is not apparent.

Fairy tales exist as some of the most foundational stories of childhood, but they also serve as one of the primary ways children are socialized to believe that being cishet is the default. Yet, because many of these stories contain themes like transformation, identity discovery, and coming-of-age, it is no surprise that queer people—who often experience great struggles in these areas—are so drawn to them. “Hunted” is a short story belonging to a larger anthology, *Once Upon Another Time: Queer Retellings of Classic Tales*, that explores the common queer trope of ‘found family’—demonstrating how and why so many queer people can look at these traditionally non-representative stories and see pieces of themselves and their stories reflected back at them.

Introduction

“Hunted” is a story loosely based on the Grimms’ tale “Little Snow-White,” that demonstrates the common queer trope of ‘found family’ by depicting young queer people across the country journeying to find each other and their community. This tale is just one of seven housed within

my anthology *Once Upon Another Time: Queer Retellings of Classic Tales*, which derives its name from Sappho's fragment 147, “someone will remember us / I say / even in another time” (trans. Anne Carson 2003).

This project is a collection of retellings, reworkings, and revisions of some of society's most popular fairy tales. Though many of these tales have a very long and dark history, today they are most commonly known as children's stories due to the prominence of Disney's animated adaptations. And with fairy and folk tales existing as potentially the most prominent genre of media, it is no surprise that members of the queer community have developed such a strong collective connection to them.

In the words of prominent queer theorists and folklore scholars Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill (2012), “Queer people survive by learning to read implicitly coded messages—where even the presence of coding can be disputed, so that both senders and receivers can be protected from the consequences of their decodings. Queer readers learn to read signals that others cannot read” (14). These codes, regardless of authorial intention, are an essential part of the process through which queer people learn to understand their relationships with the world—particularly in the case of children, who may find themselves drawn to queer-coded storylines before they even understand why. This tendency, which Kathryn Bond Stockton (2004) terms *growing sideways*, is a well-documented phenomenon: “Especially in relation to the children our law courts don't believe in—overtly same-sex oriented children—the tendency of metaphor to reconfigure relations and time will prove why fictions ... uniquely nurture ideas of queer children. ... We are going to see that concepts of the queer child demand that we talk in terms of growing sideways” (279). It is this tendency which I highlight in “Hunted” and my other works.

Long before queer people know that they are queer, they may find themselves drawn to stories featuring themes like otherness, transformation, and coming-of-age. Often, queer children befriend each other without knowing or understanding their own queerness, or that of their friends. On a purely subconscious level, we are drawn to each other and to our stories. This connection serves as an act of survival and solidarity, fostering an early sense of belonging. By applying and adapting popular fairy tales to real-world, fictional queer stories, I attempt to shed light on this phenomenon and validate the common sense of understanding that queer people feel within the fairy tale genre. Especially now, given the recent slew of anti-trans and anti-queer laws being introduced across the United States, it is essential that queer individuals—and queer children in particular—find sources of love, acceptance, and understanding wherever they can.

Hunted

Under the pitch black of night, you come into this world beet red—the very cord that has kept you alive for nine months now threatening to steal the gift of life from your lungs before you’ve even had a chance to enjoy it. Once you’ve been saved, the whole world marvels at you in the stark white hospital room and—when your mother smiles down at you with tired, glassy eyes—she calls you beautiful. You know nothing except for the choked feeling of your first desperate breath of air and her teary smile.

As a child, you spend sunny days playing in the flowerbeds of your front yard, and when you finally come inside—your smile sticky with orange juice and your skin coated in a thin layer of grime—your father spins you around and sings softly to himself as he helps you clean yourself up. He and your mother teach you to paint and sing and dance and love. All you know is the joy that they’ve shown you.

They raise you, as all parents should, to follow your heart—to be kind and generous and to remain steadfast in what you know to be right. The world, though, is a cruel stepfather who wriggles his way into your consciousness. As you get older, men on the street turn your beauty against you, calling out in unconsenting admiration as your still-budding body passes them by. Videos on the internet share more stories than you can even begin to count of people like you being rejected by

their parents. For the first time, doubt and fear creep into your mind. What if their love isn’t as unconditional as you’ve always thought?

You grow silent as you age, withdrawn. Your friends know the truth, but you’re not sure they’ll ever really understand it. You watch as they giggle after boys in the hallway and go on dates and have their first kisses, all while you sit stuck in the shadows, frozen in time. There is no one here for you.

On the news, people whose hearts you’re sure must be tinged yellow with hatred shout for the murder of people like you.

*“These people should be put to death... They should be convicted in a lawful trial—they should be sentenced with death. They should be lined up against the wall and **shot in the back of the head.**”¹*

You wonder how many people agree, how much danger you face just by existing. You wish for a world where you can look at a pastor or politician and see anything other than a huntsman.

When a boy at school shows up one day painted in purples and blues, backpack full of clothes rather than books, he comes to you, knowing that you’re safe. Wishing you could stain the world in the same colors, you do the only thing you can think of—what you were always told to do if you needed help.

Your parents welcome him into the spare bedroom with open arms and a promise to help however they can. That night, they turn sad eyes on you and tell you that you’re a good friend. You wonder if they know, but you don’t dare to ask. Sometimes, you remember, it’s different when it’s your own kid.

Two years later, when you’re applying for colleges, you remember the words of the man on the radio, spat from just two towns over, and you’re faced with an impossible decision: fight or flight. You think of the boy, who stayed with you for a month before leaving one day and never coming back, a short note folded on top of the neatly-made bed. Three days later, his face was plastered on screens across the state, confirming what you already knew—the world had killed his heart and left him to do the rest. You wonder what might’ve happened if he’d had the chance to run. Then, though, you think of bricks thrown at police and the flags that fly today because of them, and you

¹ This is a direct quote from a Texas pastor in June 2022, uttered in response to Pride Month celebrations (Burke 2022).

wonder how much darker the world would be if *they* had run instead of fought.

But you're just one person. The weight of the world shouldn't sit on the shoulders of your college decision.

You run. You pack your bags and load up the car and sit quietly in the backseat while your parents drive to a little town two states over. You try to ignore the guilt eating a hole in your stomach.

The campus is *so much bigger* in person than it looked online, and even with your parents right there next to you, you feel so small—so alone. The buildings tower over you, and the wind howls as it comes flying across the lake. There are more people than you've probably ever seen in one place before, all running across campus and looking at maps and arguing with parents, carrying boxes and suitcases and backpacks.

The dorm is an explosion of noise, more likely filled with wild animals than with students, and when the three of you finally make it to your room, all you want to do is lie down and sleep. But instead, you begin the long and arduous process of unpacking and putting away and decorating. You make more trips to the store in one day than you ever thought possible, and you take your parents to the dining hall, and you walk around to find all your classes; and by the end of it all, you understand in perfect clarity how a deer must feel when it's frozen in the headlights of an oncoming car.

The next day, after a tearful goodbye to your parents, you sit in your room, lost. Maybe, you think, you should've stayed near home. There are different grocery stores here, and you don't know where anything is, and you don't know *anyone*. You take a nap, too overwhelmed to do anything else, and when you awake later that day it's to the sound of your door opening.

"Oh, hello! I wasn't sure if you'd be here yet," says someone whose hair is very red.

They introduce themselves to you as your roommate, and then promptly begin to make themselves at home. You wonder if their unbridled confidence is real or an act. But before you can dwell on it for too long, you notice a spot of color on their desk: a small rainbow flag poking out of a cup otherwise filled with pens.

Warmth swells in your chest and, quite immediately, you feel much less alone than you had the day before. But then, your heart begins to race. Should you say something? Should you *not* say something?

"I like your flag," you blurt out before you can work yourself into an anxious spiral.

"Thanks, I got it at pride over the summer!"

Pride. You've always been too scared to go, but have looked longingly at other people's pictures for years. Your excitement must show on your face, because they immediately launch into the story, and you find yourself talking with them until they've finished unpacking.

That night, the two of you attend new-student events and eat dinner together and promise to hang out all the time. As the semester goes on, your duo grows into a larger and larger group until—the night before Thanksgiving break—you find yourself squished into the dorm lounge with seven other laughing, happy people just like you. Together, you're a sea of colorful hair and strange tattoos and queer personalities. Together, you're not alone. Probably you were *never* really alone.

The world is still so scary, and there are still people hunting you, and there are so many who are not as lucky, but you're happy. And for the first time, you feel ready to fight for that.

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