

# Many (Ice Cream) Flavours of Queer Métis Representation

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Ferguson, J. (2022) *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* Heartdrum. 360 pages.

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## Many (Ice Cream) Flavours of Queer Métis Representation

In demisexual Métis author Jen Ferguson’s debut 2022 young adult (YA) novel *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, Lou, a demisexual Métis 18-year-old girl, navigates the complexities of familial, romantic, and unwanted biological relationships while working at her family’s ice cream shop for the summer with her best friend Florence, her former friend King, and her ex-boyfriend Wyatt. Though this novel has all the fixings of a typical YA romance—forced proximity trope, ice cream shop trope, and friends-to-lovers trope—Ferguson turns romance into the subplot, prioritizing instead Lou’s queer Métis identity and the importance of living your truth. What Lou had thought would be a summer of saving money for college turns into a summer of trying to save the family business when her biological father, recently released from prison, threatens to take the land on which the ice cream business sits. All he asks is for himself, the man who raped her mother, to be listed as her father on Lou’s birth certificate; then, and only then, will he stop his threats. With her mother away for the summer to sell her beadwork, Lou does not know where to turn for support. She is hesitant to confide in her uncles, knowing they are already at capacity trying to keep the ice cream business afloat. She does not want to burden her best friend Flo while she is struggling to manage her bipolar disorder. She is still trying to adjust to being friends with King again, navigating her confusing feelings for him after he left town for three years without a word. Her breakup with Wyatt is still too fresh to trust him with this important information. Ultimately, Lou chooses not to tell anyone about the threats until it is almost too late.

It is rare to find books with demisexual representation. It is slightly less rare to find books with Métis representation. But it is almost impossible to find books with demisexual Métis representation. In her author’s note, Ferguson cites *The Marrow Thieves* as the first novel where she “felt seen as a Métis/Michif person” and *Let’s Talk about Love* as the first novel in which “she felt seen as demi” (363). However, prior to writing her novel, she had “yet to read a book with a character who is both demi and Michif” (363). This is where her novel’s true strength lies:

in the representation of an underrepresented queer Métis identity. Crucially—and why I believe Ferguson opted for the YA genre over an adult novel—the story does not merely feature a demisexual Métis character; rather, the novel invites readers to figure out Lou’s queer identity while she does the same. For most of the novel, Lou mistakenly believes that her demisexuality is a result of intergenerational trauma from her mother’s rape. Yet, when King asks her whether she identifies as asexual “like the A in LGBTQIA2S+,” she finally realizes that her sexuality is not a trauma response and that “maybe [she’s] perfectly, totally fucking okay enough” (311). This assertion is important for non-asexual readers because it works against the common misconception that asexuality is a disorder rather than a sexuality. More importantly, Lou’s assertion is important for asexual readers, especially asexual Métis readers, because it helps them “feel seen” for exactly who they are. By depicting a member of a severely underrepresented group, Ferguson’s novel carves space for further representation of all flavours of queer Métis folks.

Though Lou is the primary focus in the novel, the fan favourite character is King, for having his shit together in ways most teenage boys do not—seriously, if I had someone as patient as King in my life as a teen, I would have sorted out my sexuality much sooner. In addition to being from Toronto and knowing all the big-city lingo, King listens and pays attention to the small details. For example, when Lou is upset that her shoulder injury will keep her out of the pool for a few weeks, King buys her “a case of KT tape” and wraps her shoulder so that she “can get back to training sooner” (152). Instead of, say, a get-well-soon card or some flowers, King’s gift demonstrates a familiarity with Lou’s goals and ambitions, that he listens to her when she speaks. However, he goes one step further in his support; he wakes up early most days and either swims or jogs with her. Though he is not without flaws, King remains a fan favourite because of his patience and willingness to show up for those he cares about.

Secrets and lies play a crucial role in the novel, impacting discussions of sexuality and indigeneity. Lou’s relationship with King throughout the first half of the novel is enveloped in secrets, most notably when Lou chose to pass “as white when [she] first moved” to Lloydminster (106). Lying about her indigeneity, preferring to have others think that she was “this basic white girl,” negatively impacts King, who cannot help but think that Lou’s desire to be white also results in viewing him, a black teenager, as “less ... human” (155). Secrets also extend to her sexuality; just as her lie of passing as white is told “to put all that trauma off to the side—at least for a little while,” so too is her hesitation to share her sexuality with King (106–107). The story’s first-person point of view reveals the internal conflict Lou works through in relation to her sexuality. Oscillating between believing that she inherited “a violence that’s seeded deep inside of [her], that’s corrupting [her] attempts at normal—at kissing and at what comes after kissing” (197) and being “hungry for this. With King” (268), Lou keeps her sexuality a secret because even she does not yet know the truth. It is not until King gifts her the language—demisexuality—that Lou begins to understand that “some people never feel attraction; some do with certain people, like the people they fall in love with” (314). King’s patience and understanding allow Lou to learn how to set boundaries, to figure out who she is and what she does and doesn’t like. By having the uncomfortable conversation she’d been avoiding, King helps Lou view her sexuality as something other than a secret. Just as Lou learns not to hide her indigeneity, so too she learns how to find acceptance with her demisexuality.

While her novel’s strength stems in its queer Métis representation, Ferguson’s story falls flat on its representation of bipolar disorder. The bipolar character Florence is introduced as Lou’s best friend and yet is absent for much of the novel. Her absence is linked to her bipolar

disorder; Lou labels her “unreliable” and “easily distracted” but ultimately does not blame her for not being there for her because “[Florence] doesn’t mean to be: it’s all symptoms” (44). Though her symptoms may indeed impact her ability to support Lou, Florence is ultimately not given enough space in the story to constitute a realistic portrayal of bipolar disorder. Because Florence is so flat, her bipolar disorder feels more like a plot device than a realistic portrayal of the disorder. In a novel with such rich representations of queerness and the complexities of Métis identity, the marginal focus on Florence’s bipolar disorder is disappointing.

Ultimately, I recommend this novel for anyone interested in learning more about Métis and asexual/demisexual experiences. Though its representation of bipolar disorder is relatively flat, the YA story faithfully details both the bitterness and the sweetness of what it means to grow up as a queer Métis person in Canada. This is not to say that all queer Métis people spend their summers slinging ice cream at the family creamery while hiding threatening letters from biological fathers recently released from prison. Indeed, I hazard a guess that almost no one has lived through that particular experience. Yet, many queer Métis youth do relate to the feeling of isolation that comes with being in the closet, not knowing who to talk to in fear of confirming feelings of brokenness. Ferguson’s novel boldly asserts that asexual/demisexual Métis people exist and their sexualities are not responses to trauma—their queerness is “perfectly, totally fucking okay enough” (311).

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[1] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines demisexual as “A person who only develops sexual feelings and attraction within the context of a close emotional relationship, and does not experience such feelings on the basis of first impressions, physical characteristics, etc.; a demisexual person” (<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1094265212>). It is also important to note that demisexual falls under the umbrella of asexual, as that sexuality is a variation of asexuality.

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## Biography

**Tianne Jensen-DesJardins** (they/she) is a Red River Métis PhD student at Simon Fraser University, studying Métis futurisms. As a Two-Spirit person, they are excited to read and think about futurist works that carve spaces, both within and beyond academia, for Indigiqueer flourishing and for Métis methodologies. Tianne is a member of the Red River Métis diaspora with family names such as Lilley, Fiddler, Simpson, Pruden, and Vandal. In addition to spending their time playing soccer and curling, they enjoy visiting with Métis kin—especially when the playing cards come out.

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