

A REVIEW OF J. E. SUMERAU'S "PALMETTO ROSE"

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Article abstract

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A REVIEW OF J. E. SUMERAU'S "PALMETTO ROSE"

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Abstract: J. E. Sumerau's latest fiction novel *Palmetto Rose* tells the story of Kid, a bi+, gender fluid twenty-something, living with grief for their romantic partner, alongside their chosen family of LGBTQIA+ friends. This review looks at how Sumerau's writing presents complex concepts, research, and lived experience for an academic and wider audience.

Keywords: arts-based research; social fiction; grief; gender; sexualities

Palmetto Rose by J. E. Sumerau follows the early adulthood of protagonist Kid as they return to their feelings after years of grief made them numb. While the novel begins with Kid facing sexual intimacy for the first time since the loss of their partner, Jordan, it encounters love and intimacy in many forms; from spiritual and platonic to romantic and self-love. The greatest intimacy throughout the story is the kinship Kid has formed with their friends as their chosen family.

Kid's friends all identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community because of their sexual and romantic attraction, non-monogamous relationships, and/or gender identity. The group of friends always communicate openly and honestly with themselves and each other about their identities and relationships. Their friend Greg, a gay cisman often in monogamous relationships, provides an outside eye for the reader curious about what Lucy and Lena's poly relationship looks like, while still being within their community and circle of friends enough to avoid projecting a heteronormative gaze. Their interaction shows how fluid and unique LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships can be:

"I've always wondered, do you both go pick up guys and girls and non-binary folk or how does that work?"

"Well, I pick up whoever is interesting, but Lucy is only attracted to cis and trans and other women."

"Really," Greg says, and I nod along with Lena. "Huh, shoot, I always thought she was bi like you two, why did I think that?"

"I don't know," Lena says smiling, "But nope, women only, not even non-binary people, just cis and trans and others who identify and live as women mostly or just plain full time."

"So, she's a lesbian?"

"Yep," Lena says laughing. "And has identified that way the whole time I've known her..." (Sumerau, 2019, p. 100)

Kid is similarly supportive when their friend Clarke tells them his new name and pronouns (p. 37). The author seamlessly transitions the character's name and gendered language through Kid's thoughts and their conversation together. The strength of shared community and understanding as LGBTQIA+ friends from the American South helps the characters grow together, despite moving to different cities.

Many of the characters in this novel originally appeared in Sumerau's books *Cigarettes & Wine* and *Homecoming Queens* that could be categorised as Young Adult fiction, but with the characters now in their twenties they shift into New Adult fiction territory, especially since the novel is aimed at a university audience. New Adult is an emerging genre and concept for fiction aimed at an early adult audience featuring characters aged 18 to 25 (Pattee 2017). This group of youth enjoy the rights and privileges of adulthood, such as medically transitioning and legally changing names for some characters in *Palmetto Rose*, while establishing themselves in the adult world through formally entering the workforce or attending university (Pattee, 2017, p. 219-220). In *Palmetto Rose*, Kid feels their identity formation is delayed due to grief and attending college later than their peers. Kid's friend Abs, who had a transformative college experience, tells them they'll probably never be the same again after Jordan's death as their persona "kind of bleeds what you were with who you are now as you experience different things" (Sumerau, 2019, p. 5). The characters continuously support each other in figuring out who they are and where they fit in the world.

A marked difference of this novel from many other coming-of-age novels is how many of the characters are self-aware and secure in their identities. I attribute their strong sense of self to openly exploring their gender and sexualities with a trusted community while being resilient to homo/transphobic attitudes and experiences growing up in the American South. *Palmetto Rose* offers readers an insight into early adulthood and the world through the eyes of a bi+, gender fluid narrator.

The novel delicately addresses the violence experienced frequently by queer people, especially those who are visibly gender non-confirming. The first instance of overt homo/transphobia is verbal harassment from strangers in a passing car. Kid and Lucy laugh together at the harassment, demonstrating the resilience they have built to queer slurs over time and the solidarity of challenging prejudice by existing as themselves. Kid remarks:

It felt odd that simply wearing a nice skirt and walking down the road with a woman could change my gender and sexuality in the eyes of other people. It always made me wonder just how fragile such concepts were if they could so easily be mistaken in the midst of guessing games. (Sumerau, 2019, p. 41)

Sumerau waits until the last third of the book to depict the violent death of a trans person and its subsequent poor portrayal in the media. A distressed Lena yells at Kid when they return home because they did not answer their phone while they were out. The increased reporting of trans violence in the media and an incident towards their mutual friend builds the emotional suspense followed by a quick relief as the dialogue reveals it was not a known character. However, this is short-lived as the reader feels

Lena's stress as she is saddened for the loss of another trans life and the fear she felt at the thought the subject of the news could have been Kid. Transphobic violence can be an everyday reality for trans people to a varying degree, from deadnaming to assault, individual to systemic. Sumerau, a trans author herself, walks the tightrope of exposing her main character to realistic transphobic violence without causing unnecessary pain to Kid or the reader.

Grief is at the forefront of this novel as Kid copes with the loss of Jordan and, to an extent, a version of themselves before his tragic accident. After slowly easing into discussing their pain, Kid tries to be sexually intimate with someone for the first time since Jordan, but it results in an emotional outburst. A few chapters later when a year has passed in the story, Kid drives to the places they had planned to visit with Jordan and realises what it means to make a future without someone they meant to share their life with. Although Kid has been neglecting their emotions, they are self-aware of their mental health and use writing as a tool to help manage their grief. In Chapter 10 Kid is hit by a depressive episode that leaves them incapacitated. Sumerau describes the physical effects of depression:

I woke up feeling like my body was heavier than it usually was, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake this feeling of impending doom and catastrophe. I stayed in bed most of the day even though I had things to do – things I wanted to do before that day. I barely ate, and I broke the no smoking in the apartment rule many times over the next 72 hours. I wasn't, best I could tell, physically ill, and yet, my entire body hurt the whole time as if being attacked by some unseen predator. I barely spoke, I didn't write, I just stayed in bed repeatedly telling myself to get up and do something without being able to make that happen. (Sumerau, 2019, p. 61)

Her portrayal of grief and its effect on Kid's ongoing mental health is honest and comforting.

Palmetto Rose presents complex themes of identity, gender, sexuality, grief, relationships, and family in a clear narrative suitable for any adult reader. Sumerau uses fiction as a tool to portray the life of a bi+, gender fluid character and their relationships while examining identities, emotion, intimacy, relationships, college access and experience, healthcare, and broader social norms of life and early adulthood. The author demonstrates how research can be communicated and disseminated as narrative by drawing on years of her ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, historical, and statistical research on the intersections of sexualities, gender, religion, and health as well as her lived experiences. She uses fictional writing techniques, like characterisation; plot; and dialogue, to convey the more emotional and other intricate

aspects of human life. While the *Palmetto Rose* characters may not be “real,” Sumerau’s research and lived experiences informs the characters and their experiences, creating authenticity for readers.

Sumerau disrupts dominant ideas around gender and sexualities in a language more accessible than academic publications, thus students can more easily connect and engage with this fictional work. Using this novel in teaching and learning provides opportunities for students to foster critical thinking by drawing meanings from the text. The novel, and its supplementary classroom activities, would be effective for communicating complex ideas in undergraduate courses dealing with gender, sexualities, and identities. This novel could also be valuable to arts and humanities scholars seeking to experiment with different ways of telling research narratives. Researchers who fictionalise their academic writing find it helps them think about the process of writing and reflexivity (Kara, 2013). Sumerau illustrates a socially engaged artistic research practice by combining art, research, and social life in *Palmetto Rose*.

Palmetto Rose treats “the bi stuff, the grieving stuff, [and] the non-binary stuff” (p. 18) with openness and compassion that can hopefully be transferred to readers within and out of the academy.

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This work was produced on Kaurna land. I pay my respects to Kaurna elders past, present and emerging, and to the importance of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledges.

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