

” WRITING

Check, Please!, Drop-out, and Happy Endings

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TYPE
NARRATIVE

I was initially frustrated by the romance between Jack Zimmermann and Eric “Bitty” Bittle in the comic *Check, Please!* by Ngozi Ukazu, a webcomic that has experienced remarkable financial success and enjoys a dedicated, if relatively small, fanbase. It’s usually understood as a great example of gay representation, and in many ways, it is. It certainly has an edge over the dominant cultural narrative of familial rejection and dying of AIDS, which have been documented with a noticeable straight-gaze glee to the extent where these stories have eclipsed the work of actual queer artists on those topics. And therein lies the caveat, which is as follows: the way that the suffering of queer people has been discussed in pop culture up until now is in bad taste, but *Check, Please!* has almost sidestepped it entirely thus far.

The thing about Jack and Bitty is that they meet very little resistance on their journey to finding each other. Jack has his insecurities, and the couple don’t initially tell their beloved gang of frat bros about their relationship. This is altogether understandable given the way things work in reality, but what happens next

is about the exact opposite of that: not only is every one, to a one, of Jack and Bitty's friends accepting, they actually already knew.

It's sweet, it's empowering, and there's nary a grain of truth in it. It looks nothing like my experiences. It's good, for sure, to have positive stories that gay people can see themselves in, but not everyone (in fact, very few people) can realistically see themselves in this one. Escapism is okay, but given the world we live in, it's not my bag. I couldn't relate.

After I read *Check, Please!*, however, I found another LGBT webcomic. The characters in it were far from role models, and the subject matter was far from fantastical. But they were certainly the heroes of their own story, and it was a story I often recognized in my own life. This was the comic *Drop-Out*, by gray Folie. *Drop-Out*'s hero is Sugar Kysley, a mentally ill Master's student taking a road trip where the intended destination is the end of her life. She's traveling with her significant other Lola, a nonbinary lesbian with a difficult past and no place to stay besides Sugar's apartment. The subject matter seems pitch-black on its face, a far cry from the college sports comedy of *Check, Please!* Despite that, I would never describe it as nasty or cynical. Lola and Sugar are two essentially good people trying to care for each other in an uncaring world. Sugar and Lola's naturalistic, often simple musings on gender have stuck with me and influenced me as a nonbinary person, and they represented the way I felt when nothing else really did.

Sugar tries to deny that she is transgender, but starts to come to the understanding that she may be wrong. "My whole life," she says, "I've been saying 'girls can love girls', 'girls can go into STEM'! And now, if I say that some part of me's not, I'm afraid that everyone's going to take all the good and put it on that one tiny part." When Sugar asks Lola how she should choose to present herself, Lola's proffered answer is elegantly simple. "You look at who you used to be, you look at who you want to be, and you let one go." And more importantly, the story agrees that it isn't easy. In a stormier moment, Lola is less a voice of wisdom and rationality than a suffering human being (despite the rendering of the comic, which depicts her as an anthropomorphic animal). What she

says in this moment encapsulates a darker part of the genderqueer experience: “I wish I was nothing. I wish I was gone.” The understanding of gender present in *Drop-Out* is at a level often not present even in independent media, without the comic ever coming across as academic or educational.

Check, Please! and *Drop-Out* are obviously different in almost every possible way, from their thematic content to their art. Where *Drop-Out* is rough and expressive, *Check, Please!* is friendly and borders on cutesy. Despite that, both of them are still valid responses to the fetishization of queer suffering by the mainstream. *Check, Please!* didn't speak in my voice, but it resonated with thousands of LGBT youth who wanted to see a syrupy romance that contained people with any resemblance at all to them. Its comforting, accessible approach is evident in its creation. While the series has a predominantly white, male cast (including its two heroes), Ngozi Ukazu is a black bisexual woman whose parents are Nigerian immigrants. She has never been to Canada, where the story is set, and she initially knew little about hockey, the sport in her sports comic.

She wasn't attempting to tell her own story, but instead set out to subvert the traditional structure of the romantic comedy, or that of as well as the drama, where this story would be tragically steeped in the consequences of toxic masculinity. *Check, Please!* exists in the same reality warping zone as any movie where the end result is the two lovers strolling into the sunset, and that's a shock of its own. Bitty doesn't struggle with schoolwork, he overcomes the problems with his hockey game when Jack is by his side.

He's friendly with everyone, and he bakes great pies. Maybe it's okay for him to not suffer. On the other hand, *Drop-Out* tells a deeply personal story. Sugar is schizophrenic, transgender, and intersex, like her creator Gray Folie. She feels freakish and impossible, and she discusses her issues with an air of frankness and disappointment. What's truly revolutionary about Sugar's story is that her queerness is not her downfall, but her redemption. She and Lola stand together, even in the face of personal ruin. It's not a straightforward "love conquers all" situation, but it's not unadulterated tragedy.

Neither comic was written to appeal to cis-heterosexual people, and neither one even really acknowledges them as an audience. Bitty and Sugar are gay and proud of it at the outset of their stories, and they both set about finding themselves as unapologetically queer people. *Check, Please!* and *Drop-Out* are both radical stories in their own respects because of the ways that they do and don't depict the world we live in. Even if *Check, Please!* isn't revolutionary from a storytelling perspective, it still provided me with a personal wake-up call. Why should two men happy and in love, accepted by their chosen group of friends, be unrealistic?