



Varghese, Varsha, 'Inventing the perfect crush: Arguing for middle-grade narratives with aromantic leads'

Leaf Journal, Volume 3, Issue 1, Jul 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58091/adbv-gh86>

URL: <https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index>

Inventing the Perfect Crush: Arguing for Middle-Grade Narratives with Aromantic Leads

Varsha Varghese

Abstract

In this article, I set out some of the concerns and issues I faced while planning and writing a middle-grade novel. The novel, *Ash's Infallible Guide for the Perfect Crush*, set in an Indian middle school, stars an aromantic protagonist. I argue that, while Young Adult (YA) fiction is seeing an increase in the number of asexual and aromantic characters as part of a wider increase in LGBTQA+ fiction, these portrayals tend to be of white or American characters. Often they are 'out' when the story begins. This meant that these YA counterparts couldn't serve as exemplars for my own work-in-progress. Other compounding difficulties were the issues of *when* someone might know they are aromantic or asexual (limited studies suggest that these identities are somewhat less stable than other minority sexualities), and the more conservative nature of Indian children's publishing. These issues have all affected my decision-making as an author and the personality of Ash, at the heart of the novel.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, growing up, aromanticism, Indian KidLit*

Something shifted in the girls-only school I attended in the summer between seventh and eighth grade. Suddenly, there were crushes, unending enthusiasm for boy-talk, and street cred based on how many boys you knew, the latter was a significant challenge in the fairly gender-segregated environment we lived in. I had taken my popularity for granted till then, and what followed was a desperate attempt to continue being relevant.

Before I get to the details of my fairly elaborate plan to be popular again, now that I've piqued your curiosity, I want to share the definitions of the terms that I will be using frequently in this article. Aromanticism means having little or no romantic attraction to others. Aromantic individuals may or may not feel sexual attraction. An aromantic person can fall into one of two groups: aromantic sexual people or aromantic asexual people (ace).¹ An asexual person does not experience sexual attraction toward individuals of any gender. Asexuality is a sexual orientation and is different from celibacy, which is the choice to refrain from engaging in sexual behaviours.

Back to my story. I wasted many hours reading tabloids and gossip magazines to substitute the lack of romance in my real life with detailed chronologies of celebrity relationships and breakups. Somehow, that didn't feel enough; I quizzed a lot in school, so knowing random trivia was nothing new or special. That's when I invented a crush on Cristiano Ronaldo. Of course, I thought he was an excellent football player, but I hadn't thought much about his looks. I was so convincing in my fictional infatuation that classmates whose households took *Khaleej Times* (one of the two leading newspapers in the UAE at the time) would cut out pictures of Ronaldo from the Sports section so that I, as someone with parents who subscribed to the *Gulf News* (the other leading newspaper) would not miss out.

I grew up in Sharjah (UAE), and attended an Indian school there, with most of my classmates and teachers being Indian and a small minority from other South Asian countries. Because of this, I do believe that while I had an expat experience, most of my worldview as a young person broadly aligned with young Indians of similar social locations growing up in Tier One Indian cities. I moved to India for university and I have shared the Cristiano Ronaldo story with acquaintances and friends made in adulthood as a funny anecdote about the many ways I thought my adolescence was a bit odd. I wanted to capture some of these experiences in my creative writing. Sometime last year, I began work on a middle-grade novel tentatively titled *Ash's Infallible Guide for the Perfect Crush* for readers between eleven and fourteen years.

¹ WebMD, "What Does Aromantic Mean?", August 8, 2019, <https://www.webmd.com/sex/what-does-aromantic-mean>

Ash (short for Ashwini) is all set for a fantastic school year, except she is faced with changing tides of popularity – like I did many years ago – only worse, as she occupies a space in a coeducational environment. The male crushes spoken about by her friends are not safely tucked away in rival school sports teams, remedial classes or after-school activities, but are right there alongside the girls. I wanted Ash to approach the problem of her drop in popularity as a project, and she soon invents the biggest crush on a child superstar. The romance craze is just one of Ash's big problems in eighth grade. She now has to dance in the annual school production, something she is notoriously bad at. She also can't shake off the feeling that her friend Adi is acting weirdly around her. Still, things seem to be under control till news spreads that the child superstar is to be the chief guest at the school's annual function. Everyone in school is preparing for the grand meet-cute between Ash and the child superstar. The rest of the plot follows whether she can keep up with the deception, or will everything end in a grand mess?

I hope the final product is a simple and fun novel, including many tropes found in popular teen romance novels and movies. I deliberately made this choice in order to play with amatonormativity, the idea that everyone wants to be in a romantic relationship and that romantic relationships are essential to well-being. We are constantly shown images of happy romantic relationships through social media content by friends and influencers, advertisements and movies. For this reason, as a teen, I skipped reading the Young Adult (YA) category. I jumped to general fiction because it was so hard to find YA titles where romance was not in some way essential to the plot, even if the blurb promised other themes. Through Ash's story, I will be using the familiar tropes to challenge these ideas.

Children's books have gotten more diverse, and as an adult, while working with young people, I read a few children's books with LGBTQIA+ characters. I wondered if books for young people also showed characters who might not want romance in their lives. The novels I found when researching the topic all had asexual teen protagonists, and – except for one of these titles – all were published within the last five years. These titles are: *Loveless* by Alice Oseman (2020), *Elatsoe* by Darcie Little Badger (2020), *Love Letters for Joy* by Melissa See (2023) and *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* by Kathryn Ormsbee (2017).

All the protagonists were white, female-identifying characters, except for *Elatsoe*, who identifies as Lipan Apache, like the book's author. A 2010 study found that there were approximately three times as many available depictions of gay males as there were of all other LGBTQ people combined.² Also interestingly, three of the leads from the four novels I had read already knew about their ace identities and had come out to some close friends at a point before the beginning of the novel.

² Thomas, P. L., Thomas Crisp, and Suzanne M. Knezek. "Challenging Texts: 'Just Don't See Myself Here': Challenging Conversations about LGBTQ Adolescent Literature." *The English Journal* 99, no. 3 (2010): 76–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40503487>.

Totally Joe by James Howe (2007) is an older LGBTQI novel. One of the criticisms leveled against it is Joe's character at twelve years is seen as too young to know that he is gay³. When we consider that Joe is a product of American culture, where primary grade classrooms are saturated with speculation of crushes between classmates, there is an assumption in this criticism that children may be born heterosexual, but gay children don't become gay until they are adults.⁴ This idea is perpetuated by teachers often selecting for instructional purposes queer adolescent literature devoid of sexual encounters.⁵

Joe – and boys like him – may know they are gay at an early age. But, if aromantic or asexual identities are defined by a *lack* of attraction, then how old might a young person need to be before they might identify as such? A longitudinal study found that indicating no sexual attraction at one point in time was a statistically significant predictor of indicating no sexual attraction in the future for the respondents, as was refusing to answer or indicating the “don't know” option, yet the consistency was lower among this group than other sexual minorities.⁶ A frustrating finding in my research was how often aromanticism and asexuality were clubbed together, though they are entirely different categories of being.

Part of the reason for this ‘clubbing’ could be that only an estimated 1.7% of sexual minority adults (defined as LGB/queer/asexual people) identify as asexual, according to a 2019 study by the Williams Institute.⁷ To find more members of this minority within a minority, I also turned to Reddit, to the message boards of Asexuality and Visibility Education Network and similar organizations in India, and personal blogs or essays. There seemed to be an agreement that how sexuality and romance and desire and intimacy intersect and intertwine is complex, perhaps even more so for those who don't fall into a part of the spectrum that's more commonly understood.⁸

Since most people consider aromantic/romantic tags only in the context of asexuality, it probably isn't seen as a viable enough population size to encourage studies or surveys. Popular culture has convinced us that if a sexual person displays aromantic tendencies, it is just because they have not met the right person for whom they would make a long-term commitment. It even made me question whether I was self-indulgent with my thematic interest. But even if being aromatic is a temporary lived experience for some (like me as a teenager), there is still value in representation. And as Rudine Sims Bishop says, when readers “cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Logan, Stephanie R., Terri A. Lasswell, Yolanda Hood, and Dwight C. Watson. “Criteria for the Selection of Young Adult Queer Literature.” *The English Journal* 103, no. 5 (2014): 30–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484242>.

⁶ Cranney, S. The Temporal Stability of Lack of Sexual Attraction Across Young Adulthood. *Arch Sex Behav* 45, 743–749 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0583-4>

⁷ UCLA School of Law Williams Institute, “1.7% of sexual minority adults identify as asexual [Press Release]”, August 8, 2019, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/sm-asexuals-press-release/>

⁸ McCrory, K, “Why Aren't There More Books About Asexuals?” *Electric Literature*, September 21, 2020, <https://electricliterature.com/why-arent-there-more-books-about-asexuals/>

they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.”⁹

So, portrayals of aromantic and asexual teens are present in YA in increasing, but still small numbers; research about these communities is happening, but is still limited, and the wider perception is that the identities might be unstable over a longer period of time. How then should I represent this identity in my own work-in-progress for younger readers, set in India? I searched for comparative titles.

The closest comparative title I could find was *Rick* by Alex Gino (2020). I had read the novel *George* (2015, now titled *Melissa*) by the same author some years back, a story about a character who the world sees as a boy, and who uses the class play, 'Charlotte's Web' to show she is a girl by switching roles with her best friend and playing the part of Charlotte. Both the author and publishing house had faced criticism from the trans community for choosing to title the book using the name the main character does not like to use for herself, and so Gino is likely to be attuned to sensitive portrayals of the LGBTQA+ community in their sophomore novel, *Rick*. In the book, Rick is starting middle school in the United States and is increasingly concerned by his best friend's bullying and homophobic comments. Rick's father, while well-meaning, often jokes about the hot girls he might date, which makes Rick uncomfortable. He joins the school's Rainbow Spectrum Club, which supports LGBTQ students and allies. He becomes familiar with various gender and sexuality identity terms. Towards the end of the novel, Rick identifies as aromantic asexual.

Somehow, asexuality does not seem like a question that a thirteen-year-old like Ashwini or her friends would think about. Unlike Rick, they do not occupy a hypersexual environment – which is why I want to delineate sexuality and romance – and only deal with the latter in this novel. Rick is an excellent comp title in many ways, but Rick's world is not Ashwini's.

Studies have shown that adolescents in collectivist societies such as India are more conservative about sexual decision-making.¹⁰ Other factors like lack of access to private spaces, limited autonomy in all decision making should also be considered alongside the fact that young Indians might be more conforming to prevalent sexual norms. It is also seen that in conservative societies, parents hesitate to provide proper sex education to their children for various reasons, including the lack of education in the parents, parent-child relationship, parental negative attitude toward sexuality, anxiety about the safety of their children, or feelings of awkwardness about discussing sex with their kids.¹¹

These academic papers also made me consider that a big reason such a book does not already exist in the Indian KidLit landscape is that authors are self-censoring

⁹ Bishop, R. S.: (1990). "Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi

¹⁰ Hegde A, Chandran S, Pattnaik JI. Understanding Adolescent Sexuality: A Developmental Perspective. *Journal of Psychosexual Health*. 2022;4(4):237-242. doi:10.1177/26318318221107598

¹¹ Ferreira M, Nelas P, Duarte J, Albuquerque C, Grilo C, Nave F. Family culture and adolescent sexuality. *Aten Primaria*. 2013 May;45 Suppl 2(Suppl 2):216-22. doi: 10.1016/S0212-6567(13)70025-8. PMID: 23735567; PMCID: PMC8171414

and avoiding writing on topics that might be seen as controversial. Unfortunately, not many academic studies dive into what decisions inform what is written for children in India or the responses of the many gatekeepers of childhood reading in the school system, from librarians to teachers.

It is encouraging that a 2016 Scholastic India report found that an overwhelming majority of kids (87%) say they would read more if they could find more books that they like, and the books they are most likely to finish are the ones they pick out themselves.¹² However, in India, surveys, including one in 2022 by Oxford University Press that gathered views of over 4000 parents across India, the UK, Australia, Hong Kong and China, found that parents prefer to read books they enjoyed in their own childhood to their children, rather than choosing newer titles.¹³

In the process of writing this article, I have found enough literature that warns me that publishing and marketing this book in India will be challenging. I am also writing for an age group where 'age-appropriate content' is a big concern for parents and adults in the K-12 system, who try to shield/postpone at what age they are exposed to certain materials.

But it has also helped me rethink some aspects of the story. Ashwini grapples with the fact that she has no crush on peers, celebrities, or even someone fictional of any gender. At thirteen, she is too young to conclude that she might never romantically like someone or that she might even identify as asexual when older. Those are possibilities for her future, as easily she could have a crush or fall in love in college. Resolution is not essential to the story. But it is important that Ash is comfortable in her skin and feels it is okay to not feel certain things at this point. I also want her to not have guilt for not reciprocating any romantic advances (spoiler: Adi has a huge crush on her!). I do not want her to be in any hurry to investigate what all this could mean.

In my conversations with some women (all living in India), as I plotted the story, I realised some had their first crush only in high school and sometimes were bullied for being 'a baby' in middle school. So, in many ways, the story is relevant for any child who feels out of place when comparing themselves to their peers and offers a reminder that they do not need to 'grow up' in a timeline dictated by others. For now, the story can end with Ash being pleased that the school dance did not end in total disaster and the superstar seems someone she could be friends with if their paths cross again (and she is grateful he did not blow her cover). Adi learns to take rejection on the chin (something many Indian men struggle with) and Ash looks forward to being a prefect the next year.

Ash's story deserves normalisation and recognition and is particularly important in India, where these conversations are scarce. I also hope that the story speaks to any young reader who feels out of place.

¹² Scholastic India, "Kids and Family Reading Report" (India: Scholastic India, 2016)

¹³ Press Trust of India, "Many Indian parents prefer to read out to kids books they liked in childhood: OUP study," The Week, April 16, 2022,

<https://www.theweek.in/news/sci-tech/2022/04/16/many-indian-parents-prefer-to-read-out-to-kids-books-they-liked-.html>

Works Cited

- Bishop, R. S. (1990). "Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi
- Cranney, S. (2016). "The Temporal Stability of Lack of Sexual Attraction Across Young Adulthood". *Arch Sex Behav* 45, 743–749.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0583-4>
- Ferreira M, Nelas P, Duarte J, Albuquerque C, Grilo C, Nave F. (2013). "Family culture and adolescent sexuality". *Aten Primaria*. May, 45 Suppl 2(Suppl 2):216-22.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0212-6567\(13\)70025-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0212-6567(13)70025-8). PMID: 23735567; PMCID: PMC8171414
- Gino, Alex. (2015) *George* (now *Melissa*). United States: Scholastic.
- Gino, Alex. (2020) *Rick*. United States: Scholastic.
- Hegde A, Chandran S, Pattnaik JI.(2022). "Understanding Adolescent Sexuality: A Developmental Perspective". *Journal of Psychosexual Health*. 4(4):237-242.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/26318318221107598>
- Howe, James. (2007). *Totally Joe*. United States: Athenaeum.
- Logan, Stephanie R., Terri A. Lasswell, Yolanda Hood, and Dwight C. Watson. (2014). "Criteria for the Selection of Young Adult Queer Literature." *The English Journal* 103, no. 5: 30–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484242>.
- McCrory, K. (2020). "Why Aren't There More Books About Asexuals?" *Electric Literature*, September 21,
<https://electricliterature.com/why-arent-there-more-books-about-asexuals/>
- Little Badger, Darcie. (2020). *Elatsoe*. United States: Levine Querido.
- Ormsbee, Kathryn. (2017). *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*. United States: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Oseman, Alice. (2020) *Loveless*. United Kingdom: HarperCollins.
- Phillips, K. (2023) "National LGBTQ+ Survey Finds Many Teens Out to Family, Hopeful for Future; Problem Areas Remain," *UConn Today*, September 11.
<https://today.uconn.edu/2023/09/national-lgbtq-survey-finds-many-teens-out-to-family-hopeful-for-future-problem-areas-remain/#>
- Press Trust of India. (2022). "Many Indian parents prefer to read out to kids books they liked in childhood: OUP study," *The Week*, April 16.
<https://www.theweek.in/news/sci-tech/2022/04/16/many-indian-parents-prefer-to-read-out-to-kids-books-they-liked.html>
- Scholastic India. (2016). "Kids and Family Reading Report". India: Scholastic India.
- See, Melissa. (2023). *Love Letters for Joy*. United States: Scholastic Press.
- Thomas, P. L., Thomas Crisp, and Suzanne M. Knezek. (2010). "Challenging Texts: 'Just Don't See Myself Here': Challenging Conversations about LGBTQ Adolescent Literature." *The English Journal* 99, no. 3: 76–79.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40503487>
- UCLA School of Law Williams Institute. (2019). "1.7% of sexual minority adults identify as asexual [Press Release]", August 8.
<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/sm-asexuals-press-release/>
- WebMD Editorial Contributor. (2023). "What Does Aromantic Mean?," *WebMD*, July 5.
<https://www.webmd.com/sex/what-does-aromantic-mean>

Yurcaba, J. (2023). "Over 30 new LGBTQ education laws are in effect as students go back to school," *NBC News*, August 31.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/30-new-lgbtq-education-laws-are-effect-students-go-back-school-rcna101897>

Author Biography

Varsha Varghese is a part-time children's writer based in Bangalore, India. She has a Master of Arts in Development Studies and has previously run a volunteer-led reading project, working with children from under-resourced communities in Delhi. Her writing includes two picturebooks for an independent gender project and a self-published children's chapter book. She won the Scholastic Asian Book Award 2023, and the book *Dear Author, You are Wrong!* was published in May 2025. Her work-in-progress, a middle-grade historical fiction, was shortlisted for the 2023 NLF (Neev Literature Festival) Fellowship for Children's Book Creators, shortlisted for the 2024 Himalayan Emerging Writers Residency and was a Finalist for the 2025 WNDB (We Need Diverse Books) Mentorship Program. She has been commissioned by Juggernaut Books for three children's non-fiction titles (forthcoming in 2026). She regularly shares her recommendations for diverse Indian KidLit on her Substack newsletter [Oh, the Pages You'll Read](#).