

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

Belatte'd Belonging: A Guide to Making Coffee and a Home

Review of *Legends & Lattes* by Ksenia Shcherbino

Vol 7 Issue 2 - Queering Fantastika

<https://www.fantastikajournal.com/volume-7-issue-2>

ISSN: 2514-8915

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

BELATTE'D BELONGING: A GUIDE TO MAKING COFFEE AND A HOME

Review by Ksenia Shcherbino

Baldree, Travis. *Legends & Lattes. A Novel of High Fantasy...and Low Stakes.* Cryptid Press, 2022. Novel. 316 pp.

A few cups of gnomish coffee, a rare outlandish drink, and Viv, a be-tusked and be-sworded orc who spent her life in suspicious swashbuckler enterprises, decides to settle down and start her own coffee business. She arrives at the magical (but very provincial) city of Thune equipped with an amulet of dubious provenance that is supposed to “draw a ring of fortune” and sets about making her dream come true (9). She finds friends (and foes) and settles down, but a fire turns her coffee-house into ashes, and she must rebuild from scratch. With the talisman lost, is she doomed to be alone again, or are the relationships she formed thicker than magic?

Legends & Lattes is a moreish book. Baldree reserves the most lyrical language for pastries and drinks. Every page is imbued with tantalising aromas and mouth-watering tastes of such richness that even a staunch tea-lover like me would dream about a cup of coffee. In this sense, it reminds me of Joanne Harris' *Chocolat* (1999), another narrative about fitting into a neighbourhood, confronting stereotypes, finding love, and embracing what you truly are – with or without a sprinkle of magic. Even the protagonists' names are similar – *Chocolat*'s Vianne and *Legends & Lattes*' Viv, both taking their root in Latin 'vivus' (alive) and alerting us to the transformative powers of their bearers. But where *Chocolat* challenges the provincial mindset with new worldly trends, *Legends & Lattes* is cosy, uplifting and inclusive – just as its coffee or a Dungeons and Dragons (DnD) session with old friends.

The relationship between identity and food is an essential one. “We are what we eat,” proclaims Jehanne Dubrow in her *Taste: A Book of Small Bites* (2022), “because the things we consume become part of our cells, the movement of our thoughts...” (3). In *Legends & Lattes*, it is the foundation of both personal and collective identity. Viv's choice of coffee as her “food of identity” is laden with meanings. Coffee is a foreign (gnomish) drink, so her obsession with it shows her willingness to step outside her boundaries and choose a different identity for herself: “[The sword] is what I know, what I've always known. I just want to know something else, now. To be something else” (51). Through coffee, she gains voice and visibility, and from a figure of fear, she becomes a figure of hospitality, the transformation that is symbolically sealed by the destruction of the tool of her old trade – her sword. As the story progresses, coffee acquires an almost sacred meaning as drinking coffee becomes an initiation rite that converts strangers into regular customers and creates a family with a shared purpose. And coffee is a love potion that brings together Viv and

her first employee – and first love, Tandri, a willowy succubus who defies being defined by her looks and is almost immediately converted to the cult of freshly brewed coffee. Her passionate reaction to things that bring her pleasure would be a good barometer of the success of the coffeeshop business.

Through shared coffee rituals Baldree makes a solid attempt at character building around the concept of belonging.¹ “Things don’t have to stay as what they started out as,” says Viv about her coffee house, but this could have been the book’s motto (16). Tuuli Lähdesmäki and others in “Fluidity and Flexibility of ‘Belonging’: Uses of the Concept in Contemporary Research” (2016) define five topoi of contemporary research on belonging – spatiality, intersectionality, multiplicity, materiality and non-belonging – and *Legends & Lattes* touches upon each one of them. Viv’s coffee house becomes a shared space of exchange, a festival where participants redefine their identities and construct a code of inclusivity and communal belonging. Viv’s conflict with the Madrigal, the head of local racketeers, reflects this negotiation of boundaries as their relationship transforms through the narrative from fight to (almost) friendship. This power struggle that leads to the build-up of collective identity is not dissimilar to the rivalry between Vianne and Father Reynaud in *Chocolat*. Yet Viv’s bid for inclusivity goes further than Vianne’s: she makes her shop a shared space by giving equal shares of ownership to those who supported her.

The spatiality of belonging is linked to its materiality: as Viv repeats throughout the book, what makes her dream so tenacious is that it is “something that she built, rather than cut down” (18). Tandri and others invest in it by constructing and reconstructing the place after the fire: belonging is the act of making a home a space of comfort and emotional attachment. It becomes a safe space, blurring the boundaries between public and private space as it cultivates a sense of community.

Yet Viv’s newly fledged sense of belonging makes her vulnerable to doubts. As her emotional transformation unfolds, she shifts from a marauder’s marginality to a coffeemaker’s embodied sociability. She attributes her success to the amulet’s influence and starts crumbling under pressure. This struggle that makes her a relatable character to read: “if it truly was the root of everything she had grown, then if it were cut away, would the plant wither and die, or could it continue on?” (175). When the catastrophe strikes, she collapses under the feeling of non-belonging: what saves her, in the end, is her attachment to Tandri: her new ability to feel love and trust is the culmination of her identity transformation.

The romance between Viv and Tandri is both obvious and low-key. There are no dramatic scenes or romantic gestures. However, Viv’s awkward realisation of her feelings is sweet and touching, and the neighbours’ teasing is good-natured. “Good to see you settlin’ in. All that t’was needed was a partner,” says Laney, Viv’s elderly neighbour, as they confirm that partners “fill each other’s gaps” (141).

As any game player would tell you, orcs and succubi are two sides of a spectrum and the least likely allies: one embodies brute power, the other sensuality and manipulation. Yet these

opposites, brought together, create a new strength. Both Viv and Tandri are fighting the limitations of their perceived identities, their false 'belonging,' and imposed stereotypes. As Tandri puts it, "I was fleeing... the trap of what I am... But it seems I take that with me wherever I go" (159). Yet gender and sexuality are not among these limitations. While Baldree does not make an explicit statement about queer identity, this feel-good and natural development of feelings between two female-presenting characters is most precious. It is tempting to read it as a dialogue with queer diaspora scholars. Notably, Johanna Garvey, who uses the concept of "queer (un)belonging" to refer to spaces of habitation that "undo belonging while not leading to the destructive behaviour of not-belonging" (757), and suggests that it allows for negotiating inclusive community spaces on new terms.² For Viv and Tandree there is no experience of marginalisation, exclusion or self-determination. There is no edge of "coming out" either; the simplicity of their sexuality is refreshing and hopeful. Their falling together is as welcoming as a latte with a croissant.

Lattes & Legends is appealing to all the senses. Sensual with detailed descriptions of coffee and bakery, humorous and warm in reiterating the daily troubles of a first-time restaurateur, Baldree imbues the narrative with compassion for those who want to find a place where they belong. One would think that an orc in a coffee house is not much better than an elephant in a china shop. Yet, despite its seeming lightness, Travis Baldree's novel makes you re-evaluate everything you believe about identity and belonging. It makes you feel good, but behind this intrinsic 'goodness' there is a staunch believe in inclusive community and self-esteem. This humorous and low-key story about an orc and a succubus running a coffee shop might make you smile, yawn, or leave you yearning for a cup of coffee. Yet the community it envisions also makes you want to reach out to your neighbours, a simple action that, as Viv and Tandree show, can make a world of difference.

NOTES

1. For discussion of the concept of belonging in contemporary research see Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Tuija Saresma, Kaisa Hiltunen, Saara Jäntti, Nina Sääskilähti, Antti Vallius, and Kaisa Ahvenjärvi's "Fluidity and Flexibility of 'Belonging'" (2016).

2. For more on Garvey's concept see Farhan Rouhani's "Queer Political Geographies of Migration and Diaspora," in Brown, Gavin, Browne, Kath eds. *The Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities*. Routledge, 2016, pp. 229-236

WORKS CITED

Dubrow, Jehanne, *Taste: A Book of Small Bites*. Columbia University Press, 2022.

Eleftheriadis, Konstantinos. "'Not Yet Queer Enough': Constructing Identity through Culture." *Queer Festivals*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018, pp. 99-142.

Garvey, Johanna. "Spaces of Violence, Desire, and Queer (Un)belonging: Dionne Brand's urban diasporas." *Textual Practice*, vol 25, no. 4, 2011, pp. 757-777.

Lähdesmäki, Tuuli, Tuija Saresma, Kaisa Hiltunen, Saara Jäntti, Nina Sääskilahti, Antti Vallius, and Kaisa Ahvenjärvi. "Fluidity and Flexibility of 'Belonging': Uses of the Concept in Contemporary Research." *Acta Sociologica*, vol 59, no. 3, 2016, pp. 233-247-47.

BIONOTE

Ksenia Shcherbino is a short story writer, illustrator, dancer, and researcher. Her PhD focused on liminal spaces in Victorian poetry and now her research is extended into liminality, memory, and belonging in Speculative Fiction. She lives in London, UK.