

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

Sisterhood, Diversity, and Witchcraft in Juno Dawson's *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*

Review of *Her Majesty's Royal Coven* by Angela Carmela Fantone

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

SISTERHOOD, DIVERSITY, AND WITCHCRAFT IN JUNO DAWSON'S *HER MAJESTY'S ROYAL COVEN*

Review by Angela Fantone

Dawson, Juno. *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*. Penguin, May 31, 2022. Novel, 448 pages.

The first book of Juno Dawson's rising Fantasy trilogy, *Her Majesty's Royal Coven* (2022), is set in an alternate England where witchcraft and magic exist and are the thread of everyday life, unbeknownst to humans. In this world, there is an official government bureau of witches called Her Majesty's Royal Coven (HMRC) that was set up by Queen Elizabeth I and has continued its work to the present. It is a coven of powerful witches who are meant to serve the government in ways other agencies and organisations could not. As the events of the novel are being introduced, HMRC is reeling from decades of a civil war that has cracked the coven from within. This book follows four witches who were the best of friends and shared a bond that was no less than sisterhood: Helena, Niamh, Elle, and Leonie. After growing up in the coven together and experiencing the aftermath of the magical civil war, the friends grow apart and have their own separate lives. Helena is the only one to stay within the coven and becomes the High Priestess. Elle tries to live an ordinary life as a wife and mother. Niamh becomes a country veterinarian. Leonie leaves Her Majesty's Royal Coven to start her own more diverse, inclusive coven called Diaspora. Their paths cross again when an ancient prophecy emerges of a Sullied Child that threatens to destroy not just the coven but all of witch and warlock-kind. But now, these friends must decide where their loyalties and beliefs lie and how the choices they make can either make or break their sisterly bond.

Her Majesty's Royal Coven shows how sisterly and womanly bonds can be strengthened or threatened and what makes or breaks these bonds. It also focuses on women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, showing that even a world of magic still must address the fact that women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and other minorities have a long fight to battle for equality and representation. The battle for magic, power, and rights will test these women's friendships as they decide where they stand. Helena, for example, has chosen to uphold more traditional values, while Leonie, being both Black and lesbian, left the coven to form Diaspora because she wanted to give others the representation and space that she was never granted as a witch. Niamh aims to make sense of a confusing prophecy and protect an adolescent named Theo who is targeted for being the Sullied Child. Meanwhile, Elle watches her teenage daughter discover her magical powers though she has kept her identity a secret from her husband and children. Loyalty is meant to be the foundation of their bonds because Helena, Leonie, Niamh, and Elle know that "If you betray your coven, and break that very simple oath, the sentence is fire" (56). But the events that follow test that loyalty and make each one of them question whether personal friendship or coven matters more.

Dawson employs rich worldbuilding and creates tangible systems and hierarchies that foreground the power imbalances and affect the characters' relationships. She adds in important

notes of the history of witchcraft, including how HMRC was founded and how it has survived through the oppressions that witches faced. The role of the coven's internal workings and the outside powers show the tug between patriarchal, masculine versus matriarchal, feminine religions. The novel weaves in real-world history and points out times when women everywhere, within and without the context of witchcraft, were targeted in a society that oppressed womanhood and femininity. The hierarchies that rule over HMRC prove that, although it claims to be a haven for witches and the divine femininity that has been oppressed for so long, the coven still fails to practice an intersectionality that helps more communities, not just one. Thus, the central challenge for the main characters is to see the coven's flaws, addressing the often-intangible nature of institutionalised discrimination, and survive a world that "loves the sound of women bickering amongst themselves" (315).

The use of magic to explore the themes of femininity and sisterhood creates a dual world that a realist novel would not have provided. Witchcraft is something associated with women. It was considered a divine feminine power but also the very thing that society wished to eradicate through witch hunts and burnings. Dawson uses witchcraft to show women reclaiming the fantastical power that was once a death sentence for their kind while also showing how misogyny and discrimination can still seep into a world that witches have attempted to reclaim as a safe haven from those injustices. HMRC was founded to protect witches from the abuse and discrimination they faced throughout history and yet, as time moved on, the bureaucracy the coven developed became no better than the systems that used to harm witches. Theo, the targeted Sullied Child, exemplifies this. Her true identity makes her a target of the coven's internalised sexism and she becomes subject to different kinds of rhetoric that was used against witches in the past. The central cast must decide whether to agree with the coven in the name of tradition or realise that the coven must change before it becomes the very thing that it was meant to stand against. These Fantasy elements tie in with the real world and how the fight for justice must remain fair and intersectional. The magic serves as a mirror to the environment readers live in today where those who fight for justice should be wary not to become like the oppressive systems they stand against. It also stands as a reminder that all voices must be heard in the cause, not just one, to form and restore sisterly bonds. While a work of Fantasy, Dawson's manifesto of inclusive feminism reads clear using the overall metaphor of witchcraft.

Dawson's rich writing and structure creates a deeply intimate narrative which embodies the diversity of voices advocated for within HMRC. She employs multiple perspectives that allow readers to spend time with each main character, fleshing out their unique voices and using flashback to provide important history on coven's religious and political systems, the civil war, and each characters' backstory. With their pasts haunting their present, these characters come back together so changed from who they were when they first entered the coven together and each intimate chapter gives a glimpse into how those factors tangle together. As the narrative investigates their friendship, sisterhood, and allyship, Dawson's entanglement of the women's voices and histories develop a complex web of what it means to be a witch.

One of the strong points of Dawson's prose in this novel is the fact that the worldbuilding is combined with fast-paced action. The multiple viewpoints, all written in third person, show the characters acting and reacting to the events around them and the turmoil within them. Most chapters even in micro-cliff-hangers that pique the hunger to know what happens next. This is reminiscent of the author's experience as a screenwriter, granting her prose a cinematic aesthetic. At the same time, there are points throughout the novel where the action might get too fast paced, particularly towards the end. Dawson's fast-paced writing drives the action forward but might also overlap too much and jump around a lot more. That also leaves the tendency to tell more than show, especially since each character's viewpoint is a gateway to their inner thoughts and monologues. Nonetheless, readers may find themselves relishing in the surprising twists and revelations that chase one after the other, especially in the second half of the novel.

Her Majesty's Royal Coven adds diversity to already existing literature on witches and witchcraft. It sets the message clear for representation with well-written and fleshed out women and LGBTQIA+ characters. As a work of adult literature, it is refreshing to see characters, especially women, who are aged over thirty. Where Young Adult literature often gives the magical adventures to adolescents and characters only up to their early twenties, if ever, this book shows readers that magic and adventure have no age limit, especially for women. Aging the characters up makes Helena, Leonie, Niamh, and Elle more fully formed and challenges the patriarchal viewpoint that a woman's life ends at thirty years old. Although this is Dawson's first Fantasy book series, Dawson already has titles under her belt that focus on feminism, intersectionality, and LGBTQIA+ rights, including *This Book Is Gay* (2014, a nonfiction book for young adults that acts as a guidebook for navigating life, love, and sexuality) and *Meat Market* (2019, a Young Adult novel navigating womanhood and the dark side of the fashion industry). Thus, Dawson already has the upper hand in writing diverse, representative literature in various contexts. While she has mostly written for a younger audience, her first attempt at an adult fantasy is true to her brand of writing and a celebratory new venture for the author.

Femininity, inclusivity, sisterhood, and magic come together in *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*. This is a book for those who want to find a more aged-up Fantasy adventure that also stays true to the things worth fighting for in the real world. The characters Dawson introduces have stories that readers would be eager to follow in the next two books of the trilogy. Until then, the first book leaves behind a trail of newly built hope, rekindled sisterhood, and fragile threads of an unknown future for this coven of witches.

BIONOTE

Angela Fantone is a master's degree student at Weber State University, USA, focusing on literary studies and rhetoric. She also has interests in global literature, Fantasy genre studies, Young Adult and women's literature, historical fiction, creative writing, and memory studies.