

# FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

---

"I'm Super Trans. Like, an Honestly Heretical amount of Trans."

Review of *Hell followed with Us* by Jamie MacGregor

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](mailto:editors@fantastikajournal.com)



[www.fantastikajournal.com](http://www.fantastikajournal.com)

## **“I’M SUPER TRANS. LIKE, AN HONESTLY HERETICAL AMOUNT OF TRANS.”**

Review by Jamie MacGregor

---

**White, Andrew Joseph. *Hell Followed with Us*. Peachtree Teen, 2022, 398 pp.**

Released in June 2022, Andrew Joseph White’s debut novel, *Hell Followed with Us*, invites readers to imagine queerness as monstrous in empowering ways. The novel feels particularly timely as America faces wave after wave of anti-trans legislation, targeted primarily at trans youth – the Human Rights Campaign issued a travel advisory for Florida due to overwhelming levels of anti-LGBTQ sentiment. However, they are by no means alone in this blatant systematic transphobia. The UK has been nicknamed ‘TERF island’ online, understandably so, as Rishi Sunak blocked Scotland’s attempt to reform the gender recognition system. New examples of transphobia are reported daily and this is where books like *Hell Followed with Us* come in to offer a solution for current times. What should we do in the face of rampant transphobia? We should get angry and we should be loud about it.

The story follows a sixteen-year-old transgender boy, Benji, as he escapes the evangelical fundamentalist cult he was forced into as a young child by his mother. This group, known as the Angels, brought about the end of the world by unleashing a virus that killed millions. Before he could escape, the Angels infected Benji with a bioweapon they plan to use to finish the job. After a group of teens save him, Benji finds shelter in the Acheson LGBTQ+ Centre, also known as the ALC, where he meets other trans people for the first time. Benji decides to stay with the group of queer teens in exchange for his help defending the ALC and using the Angels’ weapon against them.

While the novel is intended for a Young Adult (YA) audience, being published by Peachtree Teen, it contends with numerous challenging themes. White identifies content warnings for the reader in their “Letter from the Author” prior to the beginning of the book, a welcome consideration as the novel includes depictions of: graphic violence; transphobia; domestic and religious abuse; self-injury; and attempted suicide. While this is undoubtedly a heavy read with some of the subject matter, it is simultaneously an empowering one, especially for trans communities. White expands on their motivations for writing the book, saying:

Because I was angry. Because I still am. But mainly I wanted to show queer kids that they could walk through hell and come out alive. Maybe not in one piece, maybe forever changed, but alive and worthy of love all the same. (ii)

The choice for White to write for a YA audience is crucial to understanding the novel, as it intends to

speak to teenagers rather than about them. This framing of the narrative's graphic and adult content becomes empowering, opening conversations about difficult topics within the communities they impact. Along with the waves of anti LGBTQIA+ legislation, PEN America has noted an increase in recent years of attempts to ban books in schools. From July to December 2022, PEN found 1477 instances of books being banned. This was an increase of twenty-eight percent from the previous six months. These bans occur primarily in southern states and cover all number of topics including: books about racism, race, or that feature characters of colour; LGBTQIA+ characters or themes; violence and abuse; discussions of health and wellbeing; death and grief (Meehan and Friedman, 2023). The majority of these bans affect YA books and given that *Hell Followed with Us* covers all of these, it would not be a surprise for it to be included in the next report. This begs the question, if young adults are not able to learn about these topics through books, then where can they?

The story is primarily told in first person with Benji as the narrator; however, there are a few sections focalised through Nick, and Benji's fiancé, Theo. Focussing mainly on Benji though means the reader is more likely to be invested in his story as it brings them closer to the character, making them privy to private thoughts and feelings. This approach arguably promotes empathy because it allows a closer look at a perspective that may differ to the reader's own, a crucial learning point of YA literature. Additionally, it may provide comfort to those reading who have similar feelings or experiences to Benji and have never seen themselves represented before. There is a great deal of positive queer representation in the novel, with multiple trans characters and non-binary characters, some of whom even use neo-pronouns (xe/xem/xyr). Not content with only that, there is some neurodiverse representation in the form of Nick, who is autistic. Crucially, the characters are not queer to serve a plot point, nor is their identity a constant source of pain, which makes a refreshing read.

A core concern of the novel is the relationship between monstrosity and queerness. White asks the reader to embrace their inner monster and turn it on their oppressors, a sentiment that reminded me of Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" (1994), in which she argues that rage can be empowering, and embracing monstrosity means it cannot be used against us. In other words, we take their weapon and use it against them, a sentiment which Benji embodies in the novel. At the beginning of one chapter, when talking about the ALC, he says:

it gets easier for me to forget the *pain* of being trans. Being transgender is who you are, and the pain is what the outside does to you. The pain is what happens when you and the world go for each other's throats. (126, original emphasis)

Indeed, despite the novel's graphic gore, an especially horrifying and visceral part is when Benji goes back to the cult and is repeatedly deadnamed and misgendered. More terrifying than the sometimes gruesome depictions of Benji's transformation is the moral corruption of the transphobic cult, for whom mass murder is acceptable but queerness is a sin. The Angels recalls real-world

examples of Heaven's Gate, Unification Church, and the People's Temple. However, Benji finds empowerment in his transformation, saying that "it hurts, but it hurts like *growing*" (94, original emphasis) and "It's harder for someone to pin you down as a girl when they need a moment to pin you down as human" (208). The transgressive nature of Benji's monstrosity and transness combined works against the exclusionary cult, turning their own weapon against them.

White uses Benji's transformation into Seraph as a metaphor for medical transition, which was very effective for me and particularly interesting because as one of the characters reveals medical transition is not an option in this world, saying: "At least it's easier to transition when the rest of the world is gone?...I mean, all the hormones are either expired or spoiled, but at least there are no transphobic relatives to worry about anymore" (47). This effectively positions Benji's transformation into Seraph as one of the few methods of physical transition left in this world.

*Hell Followed with Us* draws on Horror and Science Fiction elements within the sub-genre of post-apocalyptic setting in distinctive ways compared to existing YA fiction. The publisher recommends *Hell Followed with Us* to fans of *Annihilation* (2014) by Jeff VanderMeer and *Gideon the Ninth* (2019) by Tamsyn Muir, though I would somewhat disagree with the comparison to *Annihilation* as it feels like a very different book to me – *Annihilation*, which keeps the reader at a distance and feels more withdrawn, the opposite of *Hell Followed with Us* which involves the reader deeply and urges them to get angry, to react to the gore. We are repeatedly reminded that the 'Graces' are people who were affected by the Flood and that they have been transformed into twisted versions of themselves with organs in the wrong place and who are often fused together. I would say it is more comparable to *The Last of Us* (2013, 2023) and *Manhunt* (2022) by Gretchen Felker-Martin, though both are aimed at adult audiences. *Hell Followed with Us* is relatively unique in the YA genre primarily because of the visceral descriptions of body horror. It is particularly in these descriptions that the novel excels.

White's debut novel is a gritty, gory, and visceral read making it a great addition to YA Horror. Having already received nominations for several prizes, *Hell Followed with Us* foregrounds a growing demand for books that speak to rather than about YA audiences and that refashion monstrous queerness to be empowering. While White leaves room for a prequel narrative to explore the socio-political conditions that lead to Benji's infection and expand the post-apocalyptic world this character-centred novel creates, this open-ended framing is part of the novel's charm. *Hell Followed with Us* leaves the reader questioning what makes a (queer) monster and what possibilities a monstrous empowerment could contain.

## WORKS CITED

Meehan, Kasey and Jonathan Friedman. "Banned in the USA: State Laws Supercharge Book Suppression in Schools." *PEN America*. 20 April 2023. <<https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>>.

**BIONOTE**

**Jamie MacGregor** (they/he) is an independent scholar based in Scotland, UK. They completed their MLitt at University of Glasgow in 2021 and are hoping to go on to complete their PhD. Jamie has varied research interests depending on when you ask them, but they are primarily interested in the Horror genre across media, queer and trans theory as well as representation in media and fan studies. They can be found often talking about *Hannibal* on twitter @jamiemacg\_