



Vanilla

Billy Merrell

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A bold, groundbreaking novel about coming out, coming into your own, and coming apart.

Hunter and Van become boyfriends before they're even teenagers, and stay a couple even when adolescence intervenes. But in high school, conflict arises -- mostly because Hunter is much more comfortable with the sex part of sexual identity. As the two boys start to realize that loving someone doesn't guarantee they will always be with you, they find out more about their own identities -- with Hunter striking out on his own while Van begins to understand his own asexuality.

In poems that are romantic and poems that are heartbreaking, Vanilla explores all the flavors of the spectrum -- and how romance and love aren't always the same thing.

Vanilla Details

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From Reader Review Vanilla for online ebook

Dylan says

DNF at 70ish%.

Acephobic, confusing, boring, the entire book is about sex, no thanks.

Noora says

loved this book. it played with my emotions and i loved it

as for the "its aphobic" comments, all i can say it that they literally, LITERALLY, judged the book by its cover. this is an amazing book that shines a light on asexuality and gender fluidity in ways I've never seen before. I'm very glad i read this and if you're interested in some one-shot lgbtq+ lit, this is a good one.

Melanie says

Turns out this book is aphobic, this review explains it thoroughly: <https://stayonthepage.wordpress.com/2...>

Ariel says

I'm not the best at writing reviews but I can say honestly that this book was incredibly moving. As someone who identifies as asexual, I remember being constantly confused on why I wasn't feeling what everyone else seemed to. Finally finding a label -- which I know isn't necessary for everyone but that I wanted desperately - - was like reaching a stage of clarity I'd been grasping for since I was 14. 'Vanilla' evoked all these same feelings in me as I was reading. It was like meeting a confused past version of myself that I wanted to hug and say "Everything will be alright."

Every part of Vanilla's, Hunter's and Clown/Angel's character development was beautiful and heartbreaking to see. Because discovering who you are can be difficult, especially when you're a teenager. From beginning to end, 'Vanilla' had me hooked and I'm so glad it exists.

Michelle Schultze says

Hi, I'm Michelle, an teenaged asexual girl, who's struggling with being so.

Asexuality is the state of being unable to feel sexual attraction. It is not a choice (which is the most frustrating thing about it). It can be quite difficult for one to know if they're asexual, due mainly to the lack of ace representation in today's media. I thought something was wrong with me for the longest time. While my friends talked about turn-ons, abs, body parts, people being hot, etc., I found myself blindly agreeing with them. I assumed that what I had felt before—an aesthetic love of people, the curiosity of romantic

actions—I assumed that THAT was what they were talking about. It wasn't until I grew more active in the LGBT community and started questioning my own sexuality that I began to realize that there was a gap in my perspective of the world.

While other labels like bi, pan, or omni had been good for me in the past, after the novelty wore off, the labels didn't seem to fit anymore. But when it came to the idea of asexuality, it fit exactly right. Scarily so. And it felt like a limitation rather than some mythical doorway to happiness. Because I could imagine my future, and all the things I wouldn't be able to feel, and all the space that would grow between me and others. Due to this singular label that fit entirely too well.

I can count on two fingers the amount of asexual characters I know: Jughead Jones and Charlie Weasley. There are videos on youtube (Simply_Kenna is a good one, she has a couple videos about being aroace) but they all seem to have come to terms with their asexuality. I didn't know how to feel, mainly because nobody else seemed to be going through exactly what I was going through.

And then, there was this book.

I got it for free at a library giveaway activity, and it immediately caught my eye. The cover, the colors, and of course the fact that it was gay. I had read a lot of LGBT books in the first place, and the fact that this one was written in poetry made my little writer heart sing. So that night, I picked it up and started reading.

It wasn't until the next night that (view spoiler). It is later revealed that a certain character was asexual. I suspected so for the longest time, but having it there, physically inked in the book, was... insane.

My first thought was, *is this what gay people feel when they read books with gay relationships?*

Of course, I cried a lot that night. It was such a perfect depiction of what I was feeling, even though I wasn't in a relationship myself. But he was feeling that barrier, that grim limitation in the back of his mind, just as I was. He referred to it as the "stillness," which was perfect, which was perfectly optimistic, which made me cry even harder.

After I finished the book, I flipped back to a poem that had caught my eye. It was called Territory (on page 242-243 on my copy of the book). And I couldn't stop rereading it, and crying all over again, and rereading it and bringing on a new flood of tears. And there I was, at 2 in the morning, writing the poem out again and again on post-it notes and scrap paper.

Specifically two stanzas stuck out to me:

**If there is a word
for this stillness
then I'm not trapped**

**sitting alone somewhere
making a life of waiting**

That night was the first step towards me accepting my asexuality, which I haven't reached quite yet, but am much closer than I was before. The fact that (view spoiler) that made me so hopeful for my own future.

And for one moment, my asexuality didn't feel like a wall. It felt like a floor.

This book means so much to me, probably way more than the average person. Non-binary people are probably feeling similar, due to there being a non-binary person in the story. Which is just as exciting, honestly. Non-binary don't get much representation either, if any.

I can't wait for this book to finally come out (haha) so that more ace/NB people can read this, and feel what I felt, and feel a little less alone. And be able to hold up three fingers for the amount of asexual characters they know.

Maybe a couple years down the line, there can be even more representation for the smaller parts of the LGBT community, and this won't even have to be a problem anymore.

So thank you, from a teenaged ace girl, who's struggling with being so.

Stacy Fetters says

"How can you do that to a person, fill them so up with love that they're full. And then let them go?"

I absolutely adore books that are written in verse. It makes you appreciate the flow and love that it brings into your life.

A lot of people were talking about this book and it's one of the most anticipated books coming out in October. I had to get my hands on this.

From the cover to the synopsis, I already knew that I was going to fall in love with Vanilla and Hunter. The love that they share and the hardships their relationship will face. It reminds you of when you were young and in love. Relationships aren't perfect but we all want them to be.

Any young relationship has the stress of pressure. One wants something and the other is still unsure. It happens with a lot of relationships. It usually ends in one giving up and letting the pressure win. I love Vanilla for sticking to his gut feeling and not letting anyone pressure him into something he wasn't comfortable/ready to do.

There were a few problems that sprang up a few times, but it doesn't make this story unbearable. If you're a sucker for love and finding yourself, then this is the book for you.

Don't ever let anyone change you. ❤️?

Roth says

If you're an ace person looking for a validating book, then steer clear of this one. This review excerpts some passages that are really troubling and offensive, as they reaffirm harmful stereotypes and attitudes towards ace people.

Caidyn (SEMI-HIATUS; BW Reviews; he/him/his) says

This review and others can be found on BW Book Reviews.

DNF at 9%

Hedwig disapproves.

I'm reviewing this book so quickly after DNFing because I want it off of my currently reading shelf. I don't want it there and I'm getting rid of it as fast as possible. So, this book is currently unpublished, however, I don't have an author or publisher to thank. I was sent this book by a blogger who read it, found it aphobic, and now her review got blasted around as proof of its insensitivity by people who didn't read it. So, thank you, Taylor, for sending this to me.

Basically, I saw controversy like with *The Black Witch* and I wanted to give it a try. I reached out to her and she actually sent it to me. Like *The Black Witch*, this isn't my usual sort of book. I rarely read poetry and I'm not a huge YA fan. Unlike *The Black Witch*, this book deserves people to call it out for what it is.

The general plot is that Vanilla and Hunter (which are nicknames for them and they never get called anything else) have been dating since middle school and haven't had sex yet. Hunter doesn't like that and wants to do it. Vanilla doesn't and is asexual... without (as far as I read) saying he is. It has lots of stereotypes and common beliefs tossed in about asexuality.

That's not inherently bad. I'm all for people exposing those issues and even showing reader's why they're wrong. I'm also not averse to people not in the community writing in that voice. The thing is, you just have to do more research and sensitivity reading to find out if you're portraying voices correctly.

Books need to expose and confront issues that they handle. This book did exposure well. Confrontation? Not so much.

My biggest issue with this book was that the author's intent was confused. Was it okay for Vanilla to be an ace? Is it valid that he is? Is Vanilla unsure? Are their names supposed to confront how sexual people view aces and how some aces view sexual people? None of those questions were answered. What I was left with was feeling a touch triggered by the aphobia, especially since it wasn't confronted. It felt as if the author didn't have an opinion and sort of let it slide. Maybe he was trying to let the reader make up their mind about it... which isn't fair or right since aphobia is rampant and not many people understand asexuality.

I didn't read all of this book. I knew I couldn't because of the way the topic was handled. Aphobia was presented and let slide and basically, it seemed like the author was saying it was fine by not addressing it. I don't get the high rating for this book. It's higher than *The Black Witch* as of writing this review. (Which doesn't surprise me. Homophobia = bad. Aphobia = meh.)

Personally, I say give this book a hard pass. There are other books that confront aphobia and the reality of being a romantic ace better than this one.

Melissa says

Many YA authors are tackling the issues, emotions, and journeys of teens as they discover their identity but asexuality is still rare in any character, let alone a protagonist. I was excited, nay, thrilled to hear there would

be representation in the form of an ace teenager who is still figuring himself out with bumps in road, as with any LGBT+ experience. Overall, I hoped it could lead to a inspiring moment for readers who had never had someone to identify with in literature and were seeking validation.

Vanilla slapped me in the face and called me names. As the book progresses, it becomes evident that Vanilla is in an abusive relationship with Hunter and needs to defend himself to nearly everyone he encounters. This was an emotionally difficult book to read as it calls into question everything being ace means and offers no counterpoints.

How would an ace teen feel after having their fears laid out in front of them with no one to turn to? As teens are certainly the target audience, this is a damaging work that would do more harm than good. Yes, we want ace representation, but not like that. **This would not strike so hard if there were more resources to look to, but... this is it. This is the first major look at asexuality in YA lit and it invalidates ace persons whenever it gets the chance.**

After I realized things were not getting better, I set the book aside and turned to the much discussed blog review from Stay on the Page. As suspected, the book continues to delve more deeply into its aphobia and offers only a small exchange of understanding by the conclusion (which the blog entry author rightly refers to as "adding more insult to injury" due to its lack of page time).

We can do better.

Jennifer says

Full disclosure: I initially picked up this book because of the beautiful cover. I'm so glad that I did, because it was such an interesting read. It's told in verse, from multiple perspectives, and the primary focus is a young gay couple experiencing some growing pains in their long-term relationship. Loved the perspective I gained in reading about Vanilla, Hunter, and their friends... and I also loved how often I saw aspects of my own experience in their journey, even though they aren't similar at all on paper. Some aspects of the human experience are universal; other aspects, we can understand more by listening/reading. It was powerful to see both in this novel.

Sonja ✧ Badass Wanderer ✧ says

Vanilla is severely **aphobic**. An #ownvoices asexual reviewer read *Vanilla* in its entirety, and she has detailed all the problematic aspects of the book in the review I've linked below. **Trigger warning for aphobia and rape culture.**

"Review: Vanilla by Billy Merrell" by Taylor (Stay on the Page)

Bárbara says

This was not an easy book for me to read. First of all, it was really, really hard for me to get into it at first- to

the point where I DNF-ed initially, picking it up only after about three months. I'd been toying with the idea of picking it back up for a few days before I actually plucked up the courage to do it. It was tiresome at first, a chore. I didn't care for the characters, I wasn't invested in the story, everything seemed bleak and awful.

Fortunately, as the pages flew, I found myself slowly starting to "get the gist" of it all. There were times I was still left deeply uncomfortable because, if there's something I don't like, it's reading a book where I can't feel anything purely positive for any of the characters. This was the case for me, and it sucked.

The topic of the story is growing up, growing apart, moving on. And once we've made peace with the fact that this is how life goes, this is a natural process in a person's life, then maybe try to build something new, different, but maybe stronger in its authenticity.

Hunter and Vanilla have been together forever, after a small eternity of being friends, but it feels like, initially, they got together for the wrong reasons, and it's taken them both too long to figure out. But they have to (and they do) if they want any chance at happiness, at peace with themselves, with each other. If I had to use only one word to describe what this book deals with is (re)definition. Hunter and Vanilla have to look at the consequences of their failed relationship - a relationship that's gone for so long that both characters admit they don't really know who they are outside of it once it's over, so that's what they have to figure out to start with- and then, from the debris of what once was, they have to discover what they want to build instead.

Honestly, the way this story is built is pretty brilliant. What needs to be taken into account here is this: Vanilla wasn't wrong, but he wasn't right. Hunter wasn't wrong, but he wasn't right either. I may have a lot to say about how I found it hard to connect with the characters (even when I saw the point in both sides of the story, I never really bought into either side), but I can appreciate how complex and blurry and gray it all was. That was really interesting, in this kind of story.

So, even though the start made for a bumpy ride, and ultimately I was never 100% behind this, I have to say that some of my faith in humanity is restored, cause this ended up being more complex and interesting than I was expecting (I'm still low-key bummed cause I had a lot of hope and expectations and while not everything was bad, I was left a bit let down after all).

3.5 stars, but it deserves the round up.

ORIGINAL REVIEW (READ FROM MARCH 15TH TO MARCH 23RD)

DNF (for now, at least) @ page 63. It took me 5 days to read 60 pages, guys. It should be obvious something isn't working here. I'm undecided whether I'll be picking this up eventually or if it's goodbye, that's why I'm not rating it. But I just don't have the energy to do this. So far, It's all running in circles never going anywhere so... Yeah.

Lily says

I'm marking this as want to read for now, but have concerns about the wording in the blurb.

Kate says

I AM A DEMISEXUAL/ACE-SPECTRUM FEMALE REVIEWING THIS BOOK. PLEASE READ THE ENTIRE REVIEW BEFORE COMMENTING ON IT

4/5stars

Okay, I picked this book up because I heard it was about a teen struggling with their identity as an asexual person, and it was told in verse. After I added it to my "want to read" shelf I heard many things about this book about the aphobia and problematic themes of it, which definitely had me concerned, but I decided to give the book a full chance - and I think people need to read the ENTIRE book before discussing it.

This BOOK is not aphobic - the CHARACTERS are for sure, but there's a very big distinction in that. Billy Merrell, to ME, represented a very realistic asexual character in high school, and I was able to relate 100% to our character Vanilla, but, I also do see the problematic nature of this book especially at the beginning of the book.

Our main character's boyfriend, Hunter, is definitely aphobic. He's constantly trying to push Vanilla into sex, convince him and guilt him into having sex with him, sending him nudes, getting him naked, etc. even when Vanilla is always saying he's not ready or not interested. Our "gang" of gay boys at their school are also aphobic, definitely, at the beginning of this book.

But, by the end of it, when Vanilla has come to understand his sexuality and is able to come out as such and explain it to everyone - some people definitely react in a very aphobic way, but people begin to understand it by the end of the book.

We also get a gender fluid/non-binary character by the end which I thought was WONDERFUL.

But this story was horrifyingly similar to my own. I have honestly always hated my asexuality - I tell people I'm pansexual way before I admit to being on the ace-spectrum BECAUSE MOST PEOPLE REACT THE WAY THESE CHARACTERS DID TO VANILLA. The amount of boys who I liked or dated and immediately didn't like me anymore, didn't understand, or simply didnt CARE when i explained my asexuality is almost every single one of them. I had always been someone whose incredibly uncomfortable with my asexuality, and always been someone who, like Vanilla, tries to shove it down and shove past it to make the people I'm with happy. Vanilla was a character I related to on a level I've never experienced before in a fictional novel.

That being said, I ENJOYED seeing this part of my story - the shitty, aphobic part of being asexual - represented in this book. BUT if YOU are an asexual person who doesn't want to be reminded of this and just wants a cute asexual relationship YOU AREN'T GOING TO LIKE THIS.

but the majority of the reviews I've seen hating this book DNFed it - because this book takes almost the entire time for Vanilla to come to terms with his asexuality and explain it to others, and for those others to understand it. I was over 230 pages into the book that we actually get the word "ASEXUAL." but, again, to me, this made it realistic since most people dont know what asexuality is - and at least for me and several of my asexual friends, it takes AGES to firstly hear the word, and then even longer to finally come to terms with that being your sexuality.

To me this book was wonderful simply because I personally related to it with MY own personal story - my

story of boyfriends being assholes about me being on the ace-spectrum, friends never understanding it, and always feeling alone and hating myself because of my sexuality. Other people who haven't experienced that or don't want to re-experience it, aren't going to like this book.

but that is personally how I felt about this book. not all asexual people are going to feel this way, and I'm not speaking for all asexual people, but this is how //I// felt about this book.

Evil Little Chocolate Chip says

Second book of 2018, second one-star review of 2018! We're off to a great start.

A one-star rating typically means one of two things: either the book was not for me or the book sucked.

Vanilla was not for me.

And it also happens to suck.

Before I get to my actual review, I would like to clear something up. With countless negative reviews calling out the aphobia, why, pray tell, did I decide to read this? For one, I was just damn curious. This review has been blasted around quite a bit, and, reading it, I was certain that I didn't want to get anywhere near this book; then I stumbled upon this review and curiosity overtook me. I wanted to read it and form my own opinion, see what I saw the message to be, and I've done just that. Took me three months to finish, but I did it.

For another, I was encouraged to say fuck you. My friend received an ARC and made the decision to DNF because this book triggered him. So, some asshole guy went into the comment section of his review and started an argument about whether or not the book was actually offensive. I wanted to defend him, and I became even more curious in the process. For those reasons, I read the book.

So, now that we have that out of the way, let's get to this. I have a lot of thoughts on this and I think the easiest way for me to write this review would be to break it down.

Vanilla has three main characters: Vanilla, Hunter, and Clown/Angel (do not even get me started on those nicknames). Vanilla and Hunter are a couple, of sorts, and they haven't had sex yet; Hunter wants nothing more than to cross that line, whereas Vanilla has no desire to do so and doesn't understand why they can't be in love without sex being a part of their relationship.

Vanilla is asexual. The book is 305 pages long. The word "asexual" is not even used until page 237. Until that point, Vanilla had been telling Hunter that he simply wasn't ready, that he was afraid, which is a common misconception with asexuality. They aren't afraid, they simply feel no sexual attraction to someone.

Here's what I took away from the book: Vanilla was afraid. Not because he was asexual, but because Hunter was extremely abusive. To me, it didn't always seem like he was saying "I don't want to have sex", he was saying "I don't want to have sex with you". This is a classic abusive relationship, with one person constantly judging and mistreating, while the other is submissive and takes every last criticism to heart.

I think of Vanilla and how vanilla he is,

**and I want to hold him and tell him
it's okay if he says he isn't ready,
even if I don't believe him
or that if he isn't ready,
it's for all the wrong reasons.**

If you had someone constantly saying things like that^^ to you, wouldn't you be intimidated and somewhat afraid of them? I know I would. Vanilla stayed because he truly loved Hunter (as most victims of abuse do love their abusers), and Hunter refused to let him go because he truly believed he was in the right and Vanilla was wrong, and he saw nothing cruel about pressuring Vanilla into something that he was clearly not comfortable with.

Onto Hunter. He's an asshole. I could try to be articulate about this fact, but there's no two ways about it: he is a grade-A asshole. He is selfish, he is myopic, he is cruel, and he is abusive. He is constantly thinking of ways to make Vanilla upset/angry, be it by pressuring him, by picking fights, etc. He cheats on Vanilla as well, and blames Vanilla for it.

See what I mean? Asshole?

**"I'm sex-positive, too," Vanilla says,
like he's chasing me. When all I wanted
was a boyfriend who wouldn't need to.
"You're sex-phobic," I say,
because it's what I believe.
What he's all but called himself,
claiming not to be ready.
Even though he masturbates.
Even though he knows how he feels.
Even though he loves me.**

Um... Hunter, what's your point? Yeah, he masturbates. So what? And, perhaps, when you're saying "he knows how he feels", you mean "I believe he feels this way and I'll be angry if he shows me otherwise"? And, yeah, he loves you, because you're all he knows.

**All my life I've been the one
watching people fall in love.
I wanted it to be me this time,**

**no matter who else
may have gotten hurt
in the process.**

I understand that love can make you selfish, love can make you do irrational things, love can be everything and nothing. Believe me, I understand. That doesn't mean I can justify Hunter's actions. He is cold to almost everyone in this book for most of the story, and, when he finally pulls the stick from his ass, it's just over? No consequences, no hard feelings, no explaining? Just "I'm sorry" and everything's fine?

**I used to calm Vanilla down,
promising to warn him
if I ever wanted to cheat.**

**Now I want to rile him up.
I say, "This is that warning"
and "I'm serious this time."**

**It's gotten to the point
that I fantasize more about snapping
than about not having to.**

[...]

**It breaks my heart to think
he's as serious as I am,
that he's so afraid of sex
that he'd toss our love to the wolves.**

Do you see *anything* wrong with that^^? Anything?

I haven't even gotten to the worse part. When Vanilla tells Hunter that he is asexual, this is his reaction.

**But immediately, Vanilla takes charge. "I figured it out,"
he says,
then tells me about a blankness he feels,**

**a silence where he's sure there should be music.
As if it wouldn't hurt anyone to hear such a thing.
"I don't know what I'm supposed to say," I tell him.**

**"You're not supposed to say anything. You're supposed
to listen." Strike one.**

Strike one? What the fuck, Hunter? It's as if he thinks Vanilla *chose* to be asexual, just to hurt him and piss him off. Hunter completely ignores the fact that Vanilla is finally happy, is finally feeling free for a change, is finally coming to a place of accepting himself.

**Vanilla asks if I could love like that.
Making it my choice again, to love him
through his blankness for me.**

**"How could you ask that of a person," I say. "Of me,
or anyone?"
And then it becomes a fight about theoretical people,
about theoretical love.**

**Then, "I thought you'd be grateful, knowing the problem
wasn't you."
"In which case, you never really knew me," I say,
and when that doesn't hurt him, I tell him I have
to go.**

My eye is twitching. #FuckHunter

Okay, onto the final protagonist: Clown/Angel. They are gender-fluid - they can feel very feminine or masculine on any given day, or they could be both, or they could be neither. I, personally, didn't like them. I usually don't enjoy reading about high school gangs like the one they ran, so it makes sense. In the beginning, they came off as condescending, disrespectful, and mean, and, even though their character did grow as the story progressed, Angel's character was already ruined for me.

However, I want to comment about the representation of gender-fluidity. It seems as though Merrell got that confused with transgender? Angel is biologically male, and, to me, they seemed to not be happy with their body at all - ashamed of it, in a way. They wore makeup to appear more feminine, they wore wigs, they painted their nails, they dressed in sparkly/flash-y clothing, and they even admit to feeling a pull to feminine undergarments in a store. To me, Angel was desperately trying to express the fact that they felt very feminine, especially in the beginning. That's how I read it, anyway.

All in all, this is just a bad book. Merrell obviously doesn't care to comment about this, and he obviously didn't do any research or sensitivity reading. As someone who is currently writing a book with an asexual heroine, I want to be sure that I get it right. I want to do my research, I want to read up, and I want to write it out accurately. Merrell obviously didn't.

I won't be picking up anything else by this author, I know that much. I'll be looking for other, better books on asexuality, and I encourage you to do the same. *Vanilla* is offensive, potentially triggering, insensitive, and just plain cruel. I'm honestly shocked that it even got published in the first place.
