

Episode 5: Heartstopper, Queer Pain and the Desire for Joy

And we're back! We took a little break but we're back! You know how when you're younger, you sometimes latch on to a piece of media and you're like "Well... this is IT"? And sometimes it's not clear why you're latching on to that particular thing until you're older and you have that 'ah ha!' moment. Like I have a very clear memory of lying on my back on the floor of my room and listening to Jeff Buckley's Last Goodbye after a female friend of mine left town and crying so much that my whole face was wet and not really being sure why, but being positive that it was an absolutely vital and necessary response. And it turns out as an adult I'm a depressed lesbian. So, like, that all tracks, ya know?

Where am I going with this? Great question. Netflix released a show called Heartstopper in April. I watched, thought it was fine and then was genuinely surprised to find that the response online seemed to be hailing it as the second coming of something or other. I've talked about the concept of media representation before. When you're having a moment like I had with Jeff Buckley, especially as a teen, it's usually because something about it feels relatable or relevant for you. And a lot of the discourse around Heartstopper seems to focus on that moment of recognition and then drag it out to what I think might be an extreme. So, I wanted to dig into it a little.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about Heartstopper.

In case you missed the wave of Heartstopper coverage, allow me to give you a quick rundown. Heartstopper is based on a graphic novel of the same name by Alice Oseman. The series follows Charlie Spring, an out gay teen at an all-boys school falls in love with Nick Nelson, a rugby lad who thinks he's straight at the series outset. As a side note: every single English film or movie that features a gay romance always has boy who's defining character trait is that he's huge and blonde and plays rugby but is also – plot twist – a homosexual. I'm not saying that rugby, or organised sport generally, is a bastion of progressiveness, but it's so funny to me that the best way that English writers can apparently think of to be like "Gays – they're people too" is to make one of them a rugby player. Anyway, I digress. The primary focus of the series is Charlie's budding romance with Nick, but Charlie's group of friends also play a large role. Tao, Isaac and Elle form the core group, with Elle having recently left their all-boys school following her transition and Tao covering up his growing feelings for her by pinning her absence from their lunch table. They're joined later by Tara and Darcy, two girls Elle befriends at her new school who turn out to be dating.

Together, they provide some of the show's more charming moments.

I want to say at the top of this episode, I think the series is fine. It is not my thing. There are some terrible set-dressing decisions - I'm of the opinion that if a character is into music as a thing, the best way to show that is not through a big neon sign on his wall that says 'MUSIC'. There's also a cloyingly jangly indie pop soundtrack that made me want to set my hair on fire. No one has ever successfully navigated the integration of an indie pop soundtrack as part of the skeleton of a show like *The OC* did back in 2003, and we should all stop trying. Both of those opinions also probably put me firmly outside the target age and taste demographic for this show, and that's OK. In fact, in an interview with BuzzFeed, Alice Oseman, who also adapted the screenplay and executive produced the series, said that the idea of *Heartstopper* was that it was explicitly for teens and tweens. Which I decidedly am not.

But the show would have probably flown completely under my radar if it hadn't been for the incredible and consistent reams of praise that flooded social media immediately following its release. People whose opinions I generally align with, or at the very least respect, were posting about how what an incredible show it was, and how nice it was to see queer joy represented on the screen. Which made me think "Oh, maybe I should stop being a hater and watch this cute gay romance show". So, I did. And it was fine. But the more I read the praise online the more I was like "Did we watch the same show?" The whole experience was kind

of like Hoovering down a chocolate bar in the middle of a 3pm sugar crash - feels good in the moment and then you remember you've only eaten coffee and antidepressants all day, and you're suddenly totally disoriented and your tummy hurts.

So, with that oddly specific simile that is in no way a thing that I have done before or will do again, I thought we could delve into why I'm apparently still such a hater, despite my best intentions to just enjoy the nice gay romance show.

When I say *Heartstopper*'s success was universal and instant, I mean it. At the time of writing the eight-episode season still has a 100% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes, which it has held since its release in April. It was such an instant hit that became a meme all over social media, and now when you google the series name, the little sweet pastel-coloured animations that appear in the show to illustrate bursts of feelings in the characters softly sweep across your results screen. The positive response seems to be largely driven by the fact that, as a whole, the show bucks a trend (real or perceived) in queer media where we focus on shame, sadness, or out and out tragedy. Here's a selection of the review headlines - "Young people being out and happy? It's revolutionary!", "Heartstopper depicts queer joy", "Heartstopper is a huge warm hug", "The loveliest show on TV". And look, it is lovely. There are frolics in the snow, milkshakes, dates at the arcade and a never-ending Monopoly game that is ended via temperamental board tossing. No one dies, no one's mum disowns them, and Nick and Charlie end up happily

declaring each other to be boyfriends at the series' end (spoilers... sorry, but you probably could've guessed that from the fact that people are declaring it to be the loveliest show on TV).

Brianna Lawrence, for *The Mary Sue*, praised the show's focus on diverse queer stories, where multiple queer characters exist in a single group of friends, thus pushing back on the style of "there can only be one" representation we tend to see in other mainstream shows. In the interests of attempting to lightly balance my negative tendencies, this was one of the elements of the show that I did enjoy. In one scene Elle and her new friends attend a rugby game, and one of them confesses that she's just there to get acquainted with other local gays. Which is true of all most queer kids across all of time and space – if you hear there might be other gays in the area you will attend all manner of things that don't actually interest you to try and find your people. TV and movies tend to approach diversity like a complicated math problem – you're allowed to have one black person or one gay person; if these two elements appear simultaneously they must be combined into a single person, but you are allowed to add one heterosexual Asian character; if adding a romantic interest for the black gay character one additional heterosexual white person must be added; you may make a female side-character fat, but only if she makes sassy sex jokes, and only if we never see her having sex, and so on and so forth until you achieve the utopic state of a correctly balanced diverse television cast. Which is just not how life works. Sometimes you just go to rugby game because you heard the only other gay in the village might be

there.

But the other trend I noticed in reviews was that this intense desire to focus on queer joy as a televisual concept embedded in *Heartstopper* also made a bunch of queers around my age (and older) profoundly sad. Amidst the effusive praise for the show's sweet dates and wholesome explorations of identity is this base level feeling of grief that something might be missed. Writing for the *Conversation*, Liam Casey, a clinical psychologist, notes that the show is being brought up in counselling sessions, where people are wondering how their life might've played out if they had grown up in a supportive environment like the one experienced by Nick and Charlie, rather than in one where they were scrutinised and bullied. In amongst all this sweetness and light that everyone seems so keen to latch onto and praise, is a really dark thread of pain. Manuel Betancourt, for *Vulture*, calls this a "phantom nostalgia", and offers the view that this nostalgia is actually a healing vehicle through which we can see a future previously hidden under our own trauma.

I think that's a gorgeously optimistic view, but I also think it's wrong. Homophobia exists in the universe of *Heartstopper*. When it happens on screen, it's what most reviewers have deemed to be a 'fairly mild' form of verbal bullying (interpreted as fairly mild perhaps, because some of us still remember a vicious kick to the ribs, or the looming threat of a group of boys shouting 'fag' from across the football oval). But most of it happens off-screen. Charlie doesn't mean to come out and is bullied to the point of hiding in the art room and eating lunch alone with

his art teacher every day. The audience meets him after this has happened, but it's obvious that his understanding of the world has been impacted. He starts the series in a relationship with a boy who can barely look at him in public and is cruel when he does. He watches Nick navigate his sexuality and immediately feels like he is ruining someone's life. He's so fearful people experiencing the kind of public retribution he received just out of frame that he would rather remove himself from society entirely. He even makes a brief allusion to suicide, albeit in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it way designed to avoid frightening young viewers.

That's not even touching on the way the narrative sanitised transphobia out of existence. Elle is a trans-girl who left an all-boy's school for an all-girl's school following her transition. In the UK. TERF Island, where every day I'm forced to read an opinion from some formerly beloved media personality determined to undermine any good will they previously held by repeatedly and viciously insisting that they're protecting women from the big bad harm of other women trying to piss in bathrooms. Elle's living with all of that, and she references being bullied exactly twice throughout the whole show, and only ever to let other characters know that she understands why Charlie might be having a hard time. Other than that, she's completely fine and there have been no other lasting impacts. If I'm being generous, I might say that this is because the trend away from 24-episode seasons means that what could have been an effective ensemble cast show is relegating some of the show's most important characters to a supporting role. If I'm being less generous, it feels like

an enthusiastic desire to be progressive without any substance.

I think what I find most difficult with *Heartstopper* is understanding the balance it's trying to strike. On the one hand, it's a show for kids – kids should have positive representations of queerness available to them, if not through people in their own life, then in television and books and movies. If you can't grow your own lesbian aunt, store-bought is fine. It's good to show queer kids that they can have a life that looks normal so that they can grow up and choose what normal means to them. And it's good to show straight kids that their queer classmates are kids just like them, so that they can grow up and not repeat the bigotry that might see playing out elsewhere in their life. But on the other hand, the world is on fire. There's been a huge uptick in the moral panic surrounding a variety of flavours of queerness, and especially around trans kids. Texas is trying to essentially legislate trans kids out of existence by convicting their parents of child abuse. A huge chunk of Australia's recent federal election cycle was taken up by the former Prime Minister backing a candidate who called trans children "surgically mutilated". We've already talked about what the UK looks like on most days. Obviously, these things don't need to be in a show for teens and tweens, but their presence effectively informs not only the world the characters inhabit, but also the lens through which children in the audience (and their supervising adults) see it.


Homophobia exists in the world of *Heartstopper* – the narrative tension

needs homophobia to be an active part of everyone's lives to drive the story forward. Rugby lads don't sob while googling "Am I gay?" quizzes because the world is a fine and dandy place to exist as a gay teenager. As a side note: this is old and cynical of me, and I'm definitely being petty, but is that something Gen Z still does? Nick Nelson like... knows a gay boy. They're friends. And he counts a trans-girl as part of his circle of friends. I did an "Am I gay?" quiz in 2005, but the internet was a different place and also, I didn't have any gay friends. I think if I had, I would've just been like "Hey... here's a weird checklist of every questionable thought I've had in the last 24 hours, what do you think that means?" Anyway, I'm off topic. What I'm trying to say is that the homophobia in the show has been de-fanged into a toothless prop. Fixating on sprigs of joy while still requiring a narrative to be driven by fear of homophobic retribution, and simultaneously making that rejection seem so insignificant it may as well not have happened, doesn't feel like it's actually striking the right balance between being attentive to the world as it is and giving queer kids the opportunity to still see themselves as normal. I don't know what we gain when we try to imagine the better future with this "phantom nostalgia", without acknowledging that parts of the present still look a lot like they did when we were children. And in many ways, look a lot more extreme and politically organised. I've spoken before about my complicated relationship with the idea of media representation. I feel that people, and particularly people like myself who are very invested popular culture, tend to focus on it as some sort of be-all-end-

all in overcoming racism, sexism, and homophobia. If only we all had stories, then we would be able to recognise each other as people and the utopia can begin. Obviously, I like to get that sliver of recognition as much as the next person – see my opening anecdote about being a sad lesbian who likes Jeff Buckley – but that can only carry you so far. It's good to be able to see yourself, but if that's all that's happening then what is it functionally achieving beyond staring in a mirror?

I'd like to put something forward for your consideration – if you're an older queer person who is out of high school and has been out for a while and built a comfortable gay life for yourself, and you got that twinge of grief that many other reviewers got while watching Heartstopper, I want you to consider whether it was actually about the past or whether it could also be about the present. When you look inward and you stare hard at that little spot of pain, are you only seeing a yearning for what you could've had, or are you also recognising what's been so carefully moved to the dark edges of the frame? Is your pain for yourself, or is it also based in the knowledge that the hurt that's been wiped from Heartstopper is still real for the vast majority queer kids in the world, and that it's the same hurt you experienced? And if that's the case, is having representative joy more important than having an active change? Just something to think about.

Well, that's my Heartstopper episode. I know I ended on a grumpy note, but I really did think it was fine. I'm obviously not the target demographic, and I'm sure



there are tweens for whom it will be revelatory, the same way Glee was for a bunch of kids in the 2000s. Anyway, if you also have a controversial opinion on a universally beloved piece of media that will get you labelled as a hater on Twitter, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

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