



## Love & Other Curses

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The Weyward family has been haunted by a curse for generations—if a Weyward falls in love before their seventeenth birthday, the person they love dies. Sam doesn't plan to fall for anyone in the nine weeks before his birthday. He'll spend his time working at the Eezy-Freeze with his dad; cooking up some midsummer magic with his grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-great-grandmother (the Grands); and experimenting with drag with the help of the queens at the Shangri-La, the local gay club. But when a new guy comes to town, Sam finds himself in trouble when they strike up a friendship that might be way more than that.

As Sam's birthday approaches and he still hasn't quite fallen in love, the curse seems to get more powerful and less specific about who it targets. A mysterious girl Sam talks to on the phone late at night and a woman he's only seen in a dream might have the answers he's been looking for—but time is running out to save the people he cares about.

## Love & Other Curses Details

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## From Reader Review Love & Other Curses for online ebook

### Malanie says

#### *ARC provided by Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review*

This book is very hard for me to review, because the relationship between Tom and Sammy was SO UNHEALTHY. The plot made me sad, and never felt resolved.

There's amazing rep ((which we need more of in YA lit!)):

\*MC, Sammy, is a gay cisgender boy + does drag

\*love interest, Tom, is a straight transboy

And I assumed, okay, so the "love" mentioned in the title must be platonic and there's going to be a strong friendship.

Because romance/sex won't work for them. Tom repeatedly vocalizes and shows that he's comfortable being straight. He sets very clear boundaries and looks to Sammy for support **as his friend** as he deals with his sh\*tty family who don't support his gender identity.

But Sammy wants Tom to be gay and their relationship basically becomes bullying.

Other characters are told about Sammy's advances and his reactions when Tom resists. And everyone acts like it's not really a big deal????? AND I WAS LIKE. WHAT THE HELL? NO. I TRULY MEAN, WHAT THE HELL?

There were sweet elements to this book, like Sammy's relationship with his dad. His dad was the coolest dad ever and deserves medals for being kind and tolerant. But this was overshadowed because Sammy and Tom had such an unhealthy relationship.

Trigger warnings:

self-harm

bullying

transphobia

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### Hal Schrieve says

Content warning: this review contains spoilers and references to NSFW content+suicidal characters. I am convinced that the spoilers and content is necessary for a complete review that will be useful to readers, librarians, and to the author.

Sam is a gay boy in a small town in upstate New York, and his life—while fulfilling—is pretty full of secrets. At home, he avoids telling his three magic-practicing, pie-eating grandmothers that he spends much of his free time at the Shangri-La, his town's only gay bar. When he's at the Shangri-La, meanwhile, hanging out with drag queens Lola, Farrah and Paloma and trying on his own drag personas, he has to conceal the curse that has haunted his family for generations: whenever a Weyward child falls in love before age seventeen,

their beloved inevitably meets with disaster. The curse has stalked Sam's great-great-grandmother, his great-grandmother, his grandmother, and his father—Sam's mother has been missing since his birth, and Sam believes her to be dead. Sam has almost made it to age seventeen, but just when he thinks he is safe, a new boy, Tom, shows up for the summer, and Sam develops an unfortunate crush that he's afraid will turn into something worse. Readers of Becky Albertalli, Adam Silvera, David Levithan and Mackenzi Lee will be interested in this realistic, magic-laced coming-of-age story about friendship, grief, family, and growing up. NOW.

What this book doesn't advertise on the jacket—but what is revealed in the first page after the introduction of Tom Swift, Sam's love interest—is that Tom is a trans boy.

As a gay trans man who came out in 2010, I can say with assurance that there has not been very much widely-consumed representation of trans men in fiction in the media I grew up with, and recent years have—despite much media coverage— not much changed that fact. When we appear, we tend to either be background characters or be exploited as a source of pathos and angst (*Boys Don't Cry*, Cole on the *Fosters* in early seasons, Albert Nobbs, *3 Generations*). Representations of transmasculine spectrum people also tend to still be written by cisgender people, resulting in portrayals that are focused heavily on transition narratives, pain, suicide attempts, and voyeurism. The best representation of a teenage trans boy (and one of the only gay trans boys in any popular art that I know of) is Max, the central character in Taylor Mac's play *Hir*. Mac, who uses "judy" as a gender pronoun, is trans spectrum of some kind, so judy's detail and emotionally visceral and authentic writing in *Hir* makes sense. When I first realized that the love interest in *Love and Other Curses* was trans, I was excited that for the first time there might be a fully developed trans gay boy love interest in a YA which could provide solace and hope to closeted or recently-out trans teens (plus reassurance and excitement to the boys and others who are into them). Unfortunately, at the end of the book, I came away disappointed.

Before I talk about issues I have with Tom Swift's characterization in Ford's book, I want to name the things in Ford's book that he does well.

1. I LOVE the Practical Magic spin-off premise with a gay boy protagonist. If you could pick my subconscious for most-wanted YA novels, "17 year old weird drag queen with three generations of magic-practicing grandmas living in a rural house and working at an ice cream store and having conversations on the phone with strangers for fun" is pretty close to the top. In general I like the curse arc, and how it's resolved.
  2. I LOVE the feeling that Sam's scenes at the small-town gay bar Shangri La evoke in me. I grew up gay in a small town with one gay bar too, and I know what it feels like to need mentorship but to not be allowed into any of the spaces of revelry or solidarity that provide gay community. Unlike Sam, I had an LGBT youth group and a lot of punk friends who invited me to gay shows —and I had an annual drag show to look forward to, and a yearly Queer Rock Camp. But the loneliness was still real! I love the mentorship and love that Farrah, Paloma, and Lola provide to Sam, and I like the descriptions of Sam's own explorations of drag. These scenes are homey and touching and affirm how good gay family can be.
  3. The scene where Sam dresses up as mysterious day-glo drag queen Kandy Korn for Pride is OUTSTANDING and captures really beautifully what it feels like to be in gay community and do drag and try on new faces. It reminds me somewhat of Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's beautiful descriptions of club life, but it's accessible and teen-focused and also feels like the scene in the *Perks of Being A Wallflower* movie where the characters are dancing to "Come On Eileen". It's an authentic image of queer youth, and the music references (MIKA, Scissors Sisters, Ariana Grande) are gleefully dead-on for small-town white gays.
  4. I really like the initial meeting between Sam and Tom and the scene on the river. It's sweet and has a great captivating sense of summer and possibility.
  5. I like the fact that Tom is the first boy Sam has kissed and I like the frank sexuality of Ford's books/the reference to the mutual jack-off session that is Sam's only other point of comparison for sex.
- I believe Ford genuinely wants to write a good novel with good representation, and I think he's competent at this in the extreme—when it comes to gay boys and drag spaces. He is also good at writing about family, grief, and the eternally relatable rural feeling of driving long distances on foggy country roads for small errands.

That said, I think Ford's trans representation could use work. I don't believe he wants to be transphobic, but his laziness has resulted in transphobic tropes making their way into his book.

The issues I have with Tom, the "Love" in Love and Other Curses, are as follows:

1. Tom is obsessively focused on transition. This is the main issue I have with most trans representation written by cis people (for instance, the first season of Transparent). Cis authors seem to believe that trans people only think about our own bodies and our own identities, to the exclusion of everyone else in our lives. Tom's obsessive focus on himself and his angry, disproportionately explosive outbursts at Sam when Sam makes predictable mistakes makes him an unlikeable, unsympathetic character who comes across as boorish, idiotic, and one-dimensional. This depiction communicates to readers that trans people are irrational, abusive narcissists, which can sometimes be true but generally isn't.
2. Tom has an unrealistic lack of trans community or quality medical information. It's 2018. Tom wears Dr. Who binders (a dorky and yes, realistic touch—the Adventure Time shirt is also something that a real trans teen would definitely wear). But having access to that means he is plugged in to some kind of online trans community. Because of the Dr. Who obsession, I think Tom would probably be on Tumblr, which would expose him to reams of good and bad information on transition, gender politics, safety, and resources. If he wanted to he could reference lists of books and films related to trans content and seek out information on people like him. He would likely find Susan Stryker's Transgender History, or The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You by S. Bear Bergman or Morgan M. Page's trans history podcast One From The Vaults. He could also access many comics and a lot of art by trans people featuring their ideas and ideologies. Tumblr is a weird mix of information resource and cesspool, and it's true that there as many people trying to exploit teens as there are people providing good resources or sharing information. I think it's reasonable that Tom would make bad decisions sometimes, including trusting people unnecessarily and having hypocritical ideas about gender (particularly transmisogynistic ones, like those he hurls at Sam after Sam tries to suck his dick). However it is ALMOST CERTAIN that Tom, like the thousands (millions) of trans kids around the world who are on the internet, would have read somewhere at some point that black market hormones are a bad idea. Spoilers: It is also almost certain that NO reasonable trans adult would sell black market hormones to a teenager. Most trans adults would instead try to direct a teenager toward an informed-consent medical provider which could legally and safely connect that teenager with consistent HRT or other services. There are Planned Parenthood resources in the Upper Hudson area, near where Tom and Sam live. In New York, Planned Parenthood provides HRT at a cost which, while steep to an uninsured teen, is not more than one would pay for online hormones. The experience of going to a doctor for the first time and explaining one's needs around transition is one every closeted trans teenager will someday face. I don't know ANYONE who buys their hormones online except during manufacturer shortages. Trans people also very rarely SELL hormones to other trans people, in my experience, particularly not closeted trans people in need. We're a community and (not always, but usually) act like it. I can see an older trans man giving T to a trans kid while also referring them to a doctor, but not selling it to him.
3. Tom's dysphoria is one-dimensional and not representative of the complicated feelings trans people often have about our bodies. While some trans men, especially straight ones, have extreme dysphoria about their bodies, many of us do not, and feel comfortable sometimes or all the time with our genitalia and our chests and the rest of us. Even if we do have dysphoria, we likely still experience some level of sexual pleasure and arousal even before transition. While you aren't obligated to show Tom as comfortable with himself, I think it's realistic to show him as capable of joy and self-love. As a gay trans teenager, I only got on hormones at age 16, and had my first sexual experience after that, but I jerked off prior to getting on hormones and had lots of crushes, and I even occasionally thought of my body positively. There are lots of things online about trans men being hot these days, and plenty of online validation available to transgender teenagers that can help assuage the shame or disgust we feel with our own bodies. There's also a large amount of porn of trans men where trans men love women and men joyfully (though fetish blogs tend to prefer videos where trans men get fucked by cis men, which I imagine would make Tom, who thinks of himself as straight and has a lot of dysphoria around his genitals, fairly uncomfortable). Even if some days we wake up and hate the way we look or feel, that isn't necessarily something we would share with someone we just met.
4. Warning: spoilers and NSFW: I am down with the scene of Sam sucking Tom off while Sam is in girl drag! It's extremely corny, but it's cute and plausible. What I'm not into is the discourse that happens

immediately after where Tom yells at Sam for wearing drag and wanting to crossdress during sex. Tom would CERTAINLY know that Sam was having some kind of gender moment, and it's only a truly despicable trans person that would react in such an extremely cruel way to someone's gender experimentation, even if they were freaked out and in a sexual situation they were no longer sure about. There is bad drag discourse out there and trans mascs eat it up, but I think Tom would at least pause to ask if Sam felt like a girl—he HAS to realize that there is something complicated going on.

5. Warning: Spoilers and suicide attempts/cutting: Tom's subsequent freakout and cutting feels bad and voyeuristic and deeply upsetting to me as an adult. It would feel even worse to a gay trans teenager. I don't know if you remember when gay men of all kinds were mainly shown dying, killing themselves, or wanting to die (Ray Bradbury's "Tangerine" was one of my first encounters with gay representation). I don't like it! I don't think we need more of it. Discussing suicidal ideation is one thing; suicide attempts as plot points is something else.

6. We get no sense of Tom and his summer girlfriend Anna-Lynne's connection. This is unfair to both characters. I want to know why they get along and what she sees in him and what he sees in her! All we get is details about how it feels to kiss her, which dehumanizes her. I want to know what she likes, what she gives Tom and makes him feel, and what she wants. She also seems exceptionally chill with trans people, and I want to know how she sees herself in relation to Tom in the future.

7. We get no sense of what Sam sees in Tom. All he ever does is talk about himself and his transition and angst. Sam's a complex boy who likes a lot of music and has a lot of secrets and ideas about metaphysics—why would he be satisfied with that? The only thing left is physical attraction, which translates to voyeurism, and that feels really bad. I have had a LOT of cisgender men express attraction to me and my body for a range of reasons, but when they start waxing poetic about the novelty of my body, or the surprise of it, or whatever, I'm very frustrated and disgusted.

8. It's the Trump era, and trans people are political. Even an extremely out of touch trans person would want to talk about the fear the government inspires in us. Bathrooms and other public spaces are places people want to legislate us out of. Tom would know about this.

So that's my list. Basically: this book is not written for trans kids. It's written for people who know we exist, think we can be hot, and might be interested in fucking us, but who generally see us as angst-vortexes in need of a pity hug, or as rage-machines irrationally lashing out at people who give us said pity hug. That's no fun!

I really hope that Ford thinks about these issues with his text. I hope he has time for revision before publication and that he will consult with more trans people about the content in his book. He may have already spoken to sensitivity readers, but I am here to say that the current text remains a problem for potential trans readers who are in the target age range for this book. As someone who was a teenager not long ago, this book would have distressed and frustrated me—it paints a picture of trans people totally hemmed in by our own pain and unable to relate effectively to others. While the main character obtains freedom, the trans character is stuck in tropes. What could be a really excellent, glittering LGBT YA is consequently made into a wet blanket of a book for me.

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### **Annie (Diverse Reads) says**

Please note, according to this early review, the protagonist of this book misuses pronouns for drag queens, even after being informed, and has a transgender character - li? - who is deadnamed and misgendered by their transphobic parents.

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## Jenni Frencham says

Ford, Michael Thomas. Love & Other Curses. HarperCollins, 2019.

Sam's family is under a curse. Every person in his family who falls in love before the age of 17 sees their loved one die. This has happened as far back as anyone in the family can remember. So of course Sam is trying to do everything to stay away from romance for at least a few more weeks. This shouldn't be a problem for the openly gay teen in a small coastal tourist town, until Tom comes into town. And with Tom comes a boatload of trouble for Sam.

There's a lot to unpack in this story. There is the idea of a generational curse, similar to that in Louis Sachar's Holes, along with Sam's family's belief in the supernatural. Additionally, Sam has been sneaking out to spend time at a gay bar (which he isn't legally old enough to do), and while there he spends most of his time backstage assisting the drag queens. On top of all of that, Sam finds out that Tom is transgender and Tom's family is not supportive, deadnaming him and using female pronouns in reference to him. Furthermore, Tom is straight, so even though Sam is attracted to him, it isn't reciprocated.

The overall story arc is interesting enough. Sam's supportive family is a wonderful relief to read about in contrast to Tom's family. The issues Tom has with his family - wearing makeup and feminine clothing around them and hearing them say that obviously he would like those things now that he's tried them, them making references to his need to grow his hair out and allowing him to spend time with Sam under the guise that they are dating - ring true as I am married to a transgender man and witnessed these very types of things when we were dating.

Sam's inability to use consistent pronouns with the drag queens is irritating beyond belief, especially once he is informed that female pronouns are always okay, but male pronouns are only okay when a queen is out of drag. That, combined, with Sam's consistent use of male pronouns for Tom make things weird when he's around the queens and changes pronouns mid-thought or mid-sentence. This is one of those sad books about transgender teens who don't get support at home, and Tom does not get his happily ever after ending, and indeed falls prey to the "transgender person must harm themselves or be attacked or something" plot line that is so overused. Apart from these flaws, the story is a good one.

Recommended for: teens

Red Flags: misgendering and deadnaming of Tom and the drag queens, drug use and alcohol use, Tom and Sam fight and through homophobic and transphobic slurs at each other.

Overall Rating: 4/5 stars

Read-Alikes: Holes, Drag Teen, What If It's Us

I received a complimentary copy of this book through Edelweiss for the purpose of review.

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## Andy Winder says

This book! Features an unrequited crush! Between a gay cis man and a straight trans man! Can you tell how excited I am for this?? Even though it's not quite romance, it's still important representation. I'm still waiting for the day the YA romance between a cis and trans guy will come out like my teenage self always wanted but baby steps. Love & Other Curses also discusses drag culture and the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation.

This is something I mentioned earlier, but I appreciated the trans representation in this book! AFAB guys especially don't get much attention in gay romance books. I can think of a lot of YA fiction I've read where the trans guy expresses unrequited love but never one where he (or any other trans character, for that matter) is on the receiving end of it. It might not seem like much and maybe I'm just over-analyzing things, but this felt like a big step towards normalizing attraction between cis and trans characters.

And while Sam experiments with crossdressing and dives deep into the drag scene, he does so while remaining respectful of trans characters and noting a difference between the two— all simple but important things that really drive the novel's nuance in portraying queer culture.

The writing style also felt natural and conversational, like reading someone's journal entry recollecting a summer that they're still reeling from. Plus, the heavy musical themes almost give this book a built-in soundtrack, which was both fun and gave it a strong sense of presence.

Out of all the new YA books releasing next year, should you read *Love & Other Curses*? Well, let me ask you the following questions:

–Do you like your queer romance novels with unexpected twists and unrequited love and/or sudden death?

–Are you excited about the aesthetic of family curses, drag nights at local LGBTQ bars, and mischievous magic?

–Do you regularly say the phrase, "I wish YA authors were writing trans characters with more complexity"?

If the answer to any or all of the above is a resounding "yes," this might just be one of your most anticipated YA books for 2019!

Note: I was provided an ARC in exchange for a fair review.

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## Dahlia says

There's a lot about this book I enjoyed, especially the main character's family - both biological and found - and I read the whole thing on a flight, which definitely says a lot for its readability. But it definitely comes with a warning that it's a hotbed of misgendering (pretty much always checked on the page, but also at a point you're just like "What the fuck" because it feels like the MC is completely unwilling to commit shit that really matters to the people he loves to memory) and deadnaming. I think it's an honest and realistic perspective of a cis gay kid who's struggling to understand both what being trans is like for someone and his attraction to someone who is, but it sort of uses that to help him find his way in the drag world and turns the trans character into a tool for his own self-discovery, all while making him forgive shit he definitely would not in real life.

I think a good sign of how you feel about this book will probably be how you felt about *Looking for Group* by Rory Harrison, but I would be much less likely to give this one to trans readers. (In that I...would not, under any circumstances.)

cw (in addition to deadnaming and misgendering): (view spoiler)

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## Danielle Chambers says

3.5

This is less of a love story and more of a finding yourself story. I was drawn into this book because it's description vaguely reminded me of The Raven Cycle with the love curse. I was surprised to actually see TRC mentioned in the book.

This book wasn't what I was expecting, but it wasn't bad. I enjoyed the story. I liked it more at the end than I did throughout. I was kind of worried about where it was headed with the potential love interest for a while. Their relationship didn't seem exactly healthy.

I'm still working my feelings out completely on the book, but I would say I did enjoy it and it was worth the read,

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### **Leah says**

This was a really interesting read - the representation was incredible, but I will say it was a bit transphobic, with Sam using incorrect pronouns numerous times which I could understand if he learned his lesson the first time, but it's something he continued to do, which was disappointing. I hope this maybe gets fixed before the book comes out next year.

The magical aspect I loved, I loved Sam most of the time, but he could be fairly vicious and there was a particular exchange with Tom that left me reeling - they both were vicious.

I loved Sam's dad, the Grands, Millard Fillmore, so there was a lot to like about this book but the transphobia lets it down so much.

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### **Anita Delp says**

I love this book! Written in a comfortable style with some familiar movements and themes, it is easy to read without thinking too hard about what is actually happening. However, if you really, really read it the colors are blindingly vivid! So many issues are touched on without digging too deeply. There is something to be learned by everyone who peeks between the covers.

Sam's family knows he is gay. While they don't actively object, and they obviously love him and support him, they don't seem to really get him. He finds solace and community at the local gay bar where he finds an interest in drag. I like the way gender/pronouns are addressed. We learn along with Sam how deal with pronouns. Sam often forgets whether to use "he" or "she" when addressing some of the ladies in drag, but we are reminded along with him that a person's gender can be fluid, and that we should listen to the individual on the matter rather than making our own judgement.

In contrast to Sam, Tom Swift comes to town for the summer, and we soon learn that Tom has a serious struggle to deal with. The author takes us by the hand and guides us in understanding that even though Tom was born with a girl's body, he identifies as a boy, and likes girls. This doesn't make him a homosexual girl, but a straight transboy. The trauma for Tom is that his parents not only do not support his identity, but they refuse to accept who he is and force him to be the girl they want him to be. We are left to imagine the pain that Tom must be suffering through and he endures the remaining years of his adolescence. We can only hope that he finds freedom once he escapes into adulthood.

Music is a huge part of this book. I need a soundtrack. Lots of great classic songs are referenced as well as

some amazing original lyrics. Wrongskin in particular got under my skin and I found myself searching for a tune to sing it to so I could keep it with me.

There are so many rich characters in this book! I would love to know more about each and every one of them. There certainly needs to be a follow-up on Paloma and Farrah, as well as a back story on Lola. These are the drag queens who took Sam under their wings. I'm sure there is an entire book to be written on the lives of Sam's parents, grand parents and great-grand parents. I need to know more about Linda, the ghost Sam accidentally calls on the phone and Linda's mother who Sam first encounters in a dream. I don't know if I can go on living if I don't know what happens to Tom after he leaves town at the end of summer to go to his new school. And Millard Fillmore just needs to come home with me. That's all.

Just trust me, you need to read it.

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### **Ivy says**

This sounds completely cheesy, but I'm a big fan of the cover. That's basically my requirements for books to read in 2019:

- queer?

AND/OR

- good good cover boy?

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### **Jamie says**

This book probably has two or three too many things going on for it, but it made my heart SING. It's a smart and open look at what life for a gay kid can be these days. Sam is still questioning what his particular version of gayness is, and where he fits in the world. His grandmothers are like the witches from Hocus Pocus, so delightfully nutty and adorable. The friendship Sam creates with Tom is handled with a deftness I haven't seen in many books, much less a YA one, and I enjoy that Tom is a tough character to love even though you sympathize completely with what he's going through in his own struggle to get his parents to accept his identity. And the found family he finds with the drag queens at the local gay bar is so sweet and generous. That Sam doesn't really need more family isn't the point - it's that he finds people he belongs with and his relationship with those queens, especially Lola, made me cry. I'm still musing over the phone calls with "Linda" and how that whole plot line, though important to Sam's growth, fits in with everything else going on at home. I enjoyed that outlet for him; I don't know that it was folded in as well as I would like.

But let's be honest: I'm here for Sam and his dad. What an incredible father-son relationship. The scene about two thirds of the way through when his father finds him in a bad way in his bedroom after a disastrous night will stick with me for a while. What a gorgeous and real and aspirational relationship. (Though the fact that his dad is at least four years younger than me is really hard to get my head around - I don't know that I could be that good of a parent, especially to a kid Sam's age, when I was that young.)

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