

S O C I A L F I C T I O N S S E R I E S

Homecoming Queens

J. E. Sumerau



SensePublishers

Homecoming Queens

Social Fictions Series

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The *Social Fictions* series emerges out of the arts-based research movement. The series includes full-length fiction books that are informed by social research but written in a literary/artistic form (novels, plays, and short story collections). Believing there is much to learn through fiction, the series only includes works written entirely in the literary medium adapted. Each book includes an academic introduction that explains the research and teaching that informs the book as well as how the book can be used in college courses. The books are underscored with social science or other scholarly perspectives and intended to be relevant to the lives of college students—to tap into important issues in the unique ways that artistic or literary forms can.

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *HOMECOMING QUEENS*

“Homecoming Queens is a fascinating window onto rural queer life. Through the experiences of the novel’s protagonist, Jackson, a bisexual, polyamorous man who leaves Tampa to support his spouses in moving back to their hometown in rural Georgia to run a family business, Sumerau addresses complex issues related to identities, families, and relationships among people across a diverse range of gender identifications and sexual and relationship orientations. Grounded in extensive ethnographic research on religion, gender, and sexuality in the American South, *Homecoming Queens* presents an intimate, compelling depiction of how polyamorous people live and love.”

– **Brandy Simula, Ph.D., Emory University**

“J.E. Sumerau is an incredibly gifted writer. By the end of *Homecoming Queens*, I felt as though I personally knew Jackson, Crystal, and Lee (the three main characters) because Sumerau wrote them in such a way that they seem unique (as bisexual poly folks) but like every other human in their emotions and desires. *Homecoming Queens* educates you about being queer, trans, and poly in the South while also entertaining you with a captivating story from start to finish. Seriously, this story should be turned into a play or movie – or both!”

– **Eric Anthony Grollman, Ph.D., University of Richmond and Editor of Conditionallyaccepted.com**

“Homecoming Queens immediately draws you into the lives of characters that are faced with decisions to make as both individuals and as part of a committed union. The past, present, and future come together to set in motion a page-turning story about what it means to go home and the homes and families people build along the way as they build lives that defy gender and sexuality binaries. The characters offer a down-to-earth and insightful perspective on the multiplicity of gender and sexual identities through their

relationships and interactions with one another, especially that of bisexuality and polyamory, often not centrally situated in academic or fictional writing. *Homecoming Queens* shows that while the past may sometimes reverberate into our present, it does not necessarily have to define our present or the futures we seek. This book will keep you guessing and wondering long after you've read it."

– **Lorena Garcia, Ph.D., University of Illinois Chicago and author of *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity***

"*Homecoming Queens* is an intertwined, genuine, and hilarious story about love, compromise, and what it means to be unknowing-but willing-to follow love to wherever our *loves* can convince us to go. Sumerau is (somehow) brilliantly able to capture what it means to be *trying* for multiple people, while figuring out ourselves. Undoubtedly, this novel broadens our ideas about relationships, identity, and companionship, making us question our own boundaries and what we'd be willing to put on the line for the people we care for the most. In return, we start to recognize all of the ways in which others do the same for us. Heartfelt, genuine and just straight up fun, *Homecoming Queens* certainly, and deservedly so, takes the crown!"

– **Brittany Harder, Ph.D., University of Tampa**

"Witty, action-packed, and full of surprises, Sumerau's *Homecoming Queens* will speak to anyone who has ever tried to go home again. In a web of local color and southern charm, *Homecoming Queens* transports us from queer-friendly Tampa, Florida to the small, conservative town of Queens, Georgia – *hometown* to two of three spouses in a polyamorous relationship. Sumerau's novel is an eye-opening read that sheds light on the dynamics of polyamory and queer presence in the Deep South. Secrets and mysteries intertwine with friendships new and old as the three spouses navigate Queens as sexually non-conforming adults. When the past meets the present, rumors collide with truth and all hell breaks loose, but will Queens and her newest poly residents survive?"

– **Katie Acosta, Ph.D., Georgia State University and author of *Amigas y Amantes: Sexually Nonconforming Latinas Negotiate Family***

“In this beautifully written novel, Sumerau illustrates the passion, heartache, joy, frustration, and sheer complexity of what it means to be in a loving, committed partnership, especially when that partnership does not fit the monogamous and heterosexual standards of American society. Moreover, *Homecoming Queens* is not just a story about Queer folks navigating relationships and life in the American South. It is a story about the compromises we make to love and to be loved in return. It is a story about the lessons we learn when we take the time to examine how our own lives – and the lives of those around us – overlap and intersect across time and place. After reading this novel, I am reminded of the struggles we face when we walk paths of most resistance; yet, I am also left with a sense of optimism about the often small but impactful footprints we leave as we walk along those paths. Whether you’re interested in learning about people in Queer relationships or you’re simply looking for a short but illuminating read, *Homecoming Queens* is sure to have just what you need.”

– **Harry Barbee, M.S., Doctoral Candidate and Instructor at Florida State University**

“Sumerau’s book captures the essence embodied in and through true relationships—starting right away through the ‘hate’ that can only come from love. Sumerau successfully offers insights into the core of relationships, no matter the package they may come in, through immediately drawing the reader in through the loving yet complex matters the book’s trio must face. Through the conversational writing style, the book creates a welcoming environment where the reader connects with the narrator’s (lack of) conundrum, as they enter down a life path they promised they never would, and yet within five minutes are swept away because of love—messages and accessible examples of love even more needed in the current social context. The book captures local details without distraction or feeling forced, helping to uplift the importance of space, place, and context to lived experience. As with classic novels, the timelessness that comes from the time and space-specific writing quickly transports the reader to a new place. The details help the reader to see the shared humanity of

hopes, dreams, and hobbies that drives each of us, no matter our age, sexuality, race, or career (or lack thereof). The book offers a bridge across stereotypes, relationships and places, along with another much-needed outlet to help people see the continued, if not increasing, power of words.”

– **Amanda Koontz, Ph.D., University of Central Florida**

“J.E. Sumerau brings us another rich, complex, and hilarious novel about people navigating relationships, sexuality, and friendships in the deep South. Exploring bisexual, trans, and polyamorous experience along the way, *Homecoming Queens* feels both familiar and fresh as Sumerau unpacks the tensions between tradition and the transformative power of love. *Homecoming Queens* shines a light on the deep desire for and limits to community building across social divides and gifts us with characters who remind us that “home” can be as fluid as love.”

– **Katherine McCabe, M.A., Doctoral Candidate and Instructor at University of Illinois Chicago**

Previous Novels by J. E. Sumerau

Cigarettes & Wine

Essence

To Lain, for so many reasons

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PREFACE

“It’s hard for me to keep a straight face at the thought of living in a place called Queens with my husband and former homecoming queen wife,” Jackson thinks when his spouses inform him of their desire to move back to their hometown following the death of one of their parents. In *Homecoming Queens*, this death and decision set in motion a series of events that will dramatically transform the three spouses, their understanding of the past, and the town itself.

As lifelong city dweller Jackson Garner leaves behind his comfy life in Tampa, his “favorite” casual lover who visits every year to see him, and the first place he’s ever felt at home, he introduces us to Queens, a small town in Georgia situated between Atlanta and Augusta. While the spouses – Jackson, Crystal and Lee – adjust to small town life, they encounter supportive regulars at the diner they take over from Crystal’s father Chuck, hostile locals who find bisexuality, polyamory, and other “alternative” lifestyles unsavory, and the traumatic event that led Crystal and Lee to leave town after high school in the first place. Along the way, they encounter the history and ghosts of the town, the tension between an LGBT friendly pastor and some of his anti-LGBT congregants, the struggles of a teen seeking gender transition against the beliefs of their family, and the ongoing battle between progress and tradition in the American south. Through Jackson’s eyes, we walk with the spouses as they navigate tensions about sexuality, gender, family, race, and religion brought to the surface by their arrival.

Although written as a first-person narrative that allows readers to imagine themselves in Jackson’s situation and experience the town and tensions first hand with him, *Homecoming Queens* is a novel about relationships; the ways our past often shapes our present whether we notice it or not, and how the people we become often relies heavily upon the other people, places, narratives, and cultures we encounter. As in life, the ways individuals are intertwined within various relationships permeate the events captured in the following pages. *Homecoming Queens* offers a view into the ways various types

PREFACE

of relationships and cultural norms play out in the experiences of a given romantic, geographic and familial context as well as the ways people adjust to unexpected events in the course of their lives. It also provides a first-person view of the ways families, hometowns, friends, lovers, spouses, local histories, places, religions, and broader social norms influence relationships.

Homecoming Queens also presents explorations of bisexual and poly relationships all too rarely available in contemporary media or academic materials. Alongside academic and media portrayals of the world that generally only focus on monosexual and monogamous options (i.e., what scholars call mononormativity), *Homecoming Queens* allows readers to imagine what such norms look like from the perspective of a bisexual, poly person as well as the ways Americans often react to these realities when they come into view. Especially at a time when these subjects are often difficult for even college professors to talk about and generally missing from social scientific scholarship, *Homecoming Queens* supplies readers with an opportunity to view the world, society, the American south, families, marriage, and small towns through a bisexual and poly lens. Readers seeking more information on these subjects may also want to check out, for example, <https://bisexual.org/home/> for information on the bisexuality spectrum, and <http://www.lovemore.com> for information on poly sexualities and relationships.

While entirely fictional, *Homecoming Queens* is grounded in my own experience as a bisexual (on the pansexual end of the spectrum), genderqueer (formerly identified as a crossdresser and still considering potential transition), and historically poly person raised in the American south. It is also built upon years of ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, historical and statistical research I have done concerning intersections of sexualities, gender, religion, and health, and hundreds of formal and informal interviews I have conducted – professionally and for personal interest – with bisexual (across the spectrum), transgender and non-binary (across the spectrum), lesbian, gay, asexual, heterosexual, intersex, poly, kink, cisgender and Queer identified people who span the religious-nonreligious spectrum and were raised all over the world. Since stories – both fictional and non-fictional – are often powerful

pedagogical tools for stimulating reflection and discussion about even the most challenging topics, I crafted this novel as a way for readers to see the world experienced by some bi and poly people, and in so doing, hopefully acquire a starting point for discussion and understanding of sexual complexity in contemporary society.

For me, *Homecoming Queens* is a pedagogical text blending my artistic and research endeavors in a manner that has, throughout my career thus far, been incredibly effective in classrooms. In fact, the novel itself developed from my own recognition of the ways such stories could have been useful to people like me growing up in a world where explaining bisexual, poly, and transgender experience – even to fellow Ph.D. holders – remains an exhausting necessity. Further, the novel developed in a social context where many monogamous Americans suggest everyone can now get married legally even though this is not yet true for poly people. As such, *Homecoming Queens* may be used as an educational tool for people seeking to better understand growing numbers of openly bi and poly people; in relation to debates concerning extending marital rights to poly unions; as a supplemental reading for courses dealing with gender, sexualities, relationships, families, religions, narratives, the American south, identities, culture, or intersectionality; or it can, of course, be read entirely for pleasure.

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Thank you to Patricia Leavy, Peter de Liefde, Jolanda Karada, Paul Chambers, Robert van Gameren, Edwin Bakker, and everyone else at Sense Publishers and the *Social Fictions* series for your faith in me, your willingness to support creativity, and your invaluable guidance. I would also like to especially thank Shalen Lowell for your considerable assistance and support. I cannot overstate how much the efforts and support of all you means to me.

Thank you especially to my life partner Xan Nowakowski for giving me the courage to write novels in the first place, and walking by my side as I completed them and sent them out for consideration. My books would not exist without your inspiration, guidance, and faith, and I will never be able to thank you enough for what your support and encouragement means to me.

I would also like to thank Lain Mathers, Kate McCabe, Shay Phillips, and Eric Anthony Grollman for providing constructive comments and insights throughout this process. There is no way for me to express how important your efforts have been to me.

I would also like to thank someone I have never met. This novel was written while I was listening to the works of Brandy Clark nonstop, and her records provided a soundtrack for the writing, editing, and revision of the work.

Finally, this novel would not be possible without the years of research I have done on sexualities, gender, religion, and health. I have had the privilege of interviewing and observing so many wonderful bisexual, transgender, non-binary, lesbian, gay, intersex, poly, kink, asexual, and otherwise Queer people formally and informally over the years, and many of their experiences find voice throughout this novel. I would thus like to thank all of them both for sharing their stories with researchers like me, and for being role models to many of us navigating gender, sexualities and relationships throughout contemporary society.

CHAPTER 1

“Please tell me you’re kidding,” I say on the phone with Crystal. It’s hard for me to keep a straight face at the thought of living in a place called Queens, Georgia with my husband and former homecoming queen wife, but she is serious.

“We need to be here. Daddy’s place is too important to the town to just disappear and become a Sonic or something. There is no one else to take it, and I don’t want to sell it. I grew up in this building. It’s sad enough that it’s closed right now. I don’t want to think about it being closed forever as long as it can be saved.”

“You can’t be serious, look, I know I’m a jerk sometimes, but this prank is too far. Do you really expect me to move to the middle of nowhere so some small-town folk can eat the hamburgers they’ve been eating since the 1960’s? This is not funny Crystal.” I’m hoping this is another one of her pranks. I’m hoping it’s like the time she locked me out of the house when I fell asleep naked on the upstairs front porch at night. I’m hoping it’s like the time she set a hidden alarm to go off every night at 2 am after I kept accidentally waking her up. I’m hoping it’s like the time she – with Lee’s help because she paid him off with designer chocolate – convinced me she had decided she just had to have a kid after all and watched me freak out for two weeks. In many ways, Crystal made a kind of second career of messing with me over the years, but this might be her masterwork. Please, let this be her masterwork.

“I’m not kidding at all, Jackson,” oh shit, there is the curse word version of my name, and it hits me that Lee – always the easier one to win an argument with, always the peacemaker in our family – is not on this call. This is an ambush, and I’m outgunned. She really wants me to be the queen that moves to queens with his two loving queens, what the hell is happening to my life. This is all because stupid Chuck had to go and die the night of Lee and Crystal’s high school reunion. I want to dig up Chuck and make him pay for this.