
“IT’S OKAY TO BE SCARED”: FINDING HOPE AMID THE HORROR IN *HELL FOLLOWED WITH US*

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Abstract

The author reviews Andrew Joseph White’s novel *Hell Followed with Us* (2022), including a summary, potential for classroom relevance, and reflections on the importance of diverse queer stories for youth in turbulent and marginalizing times.

Keywords: Andrew Joseph White, young adult horror literature, facing adversity, queer stories, gender diversity, trans identities

“That’s what you’ll find here. Terrible things, survival, love, and a future worth fighting for.” These words close off the preceding Letter from the Author of Andrew Joseph White’s 2022 fantasy novel *Hell Followed with Us*. They are also a promise that White keeps steadfast throughout his novel, and never lets the audience forget about, even in the bleakest moments.

Hell Followed with Us is the story of 16-year-old Benji, a trans boy raised in the fundamentalist religious cult that unleashed their bioweapon, the Flood, which nearly ended Earth’s population. In the midst of artificial Armageddon, Benji has to not only survive the violence of wars, but also the violence of existence as a queer kid in a culture that does not welcome him. Thankfully, he is able to find fellow queer and marginalized teens, and learn about their journeys through the same challenges. Horror surrounds Benji and his newfound community, but they fight tooth and nail to survive and love through it all in a story that refuses to let these kids’ fire burn out.

At times, the pro-trans messages of *Hell Followed with Us* can read as loud as a neon sign flashing inches from the reader’s face. This lack of subtlety might be a detriment to many other books, but it is practically necessary for this one. When marginalized voices are silenced—both in the novel and in the world in which it was published—there is no room for stifling those voices in the spaces where they *can* speak. The novel screams its queerness at the top of its lungs, taking the approach that if it is to speak, it must speak *loud*. Benji never lets the reader forget that his trans identity exists, or that transness cannot be separated from who he is. Perhaps, in this case, an “inside voice” is the exact opposite of what is needed.

In his own words, Andrew Joseph White “writes about trans kids with claws and fangs, and what happens when they bite back.” As readers move through *Hell Followed with Us*, there is no question about whether his words hold true. Benji’s story is one of unflinching authenticity, and the refusal to stay quiet in a world that wants nothing more than to see him dead. As full of fantasy and grandiose fiction Benji’s story is, the horror of it is, unfortunately, all too real. Queer kids are living in increasingly fearful times, surrounded by rhetoric and policies that place a target on their backs. It’s not difficult to see the fear shrouding Benji and his friends in kids just like them all across the country, where marginalized kids must live in constant fear for their lives. Rather than write a world

where that fear is nonexistent fantasy, White makes the fantasy entirely revolve around that real fear. This is a horror story.

But it is also a hope story. Partway through the novel, Benji picks up a mantra that follows him to the very end: “It’s okay to be scared.” Each time he says it, the words sound as if they are just as much for the reader as they are for the characters. Queer and marginalized kids do not live fear-free. Nothing is gained from platitudes of “don’t worry” or “everything will turn out fine” when for many queer kids, things do not, in fact, turn out “fine.” In 2025 alone, the American Civil Liberties Union tracked 616 anti-LGBT+ bills proposed across the United States (ACLU, 2025). Queer youth know that the world around them is hostile, and they cannot afford to forget that fact and drop their vigilance. Benji reminds kids that they can be scared when the world *is* scary. Yet, he also reminds them, they need to survive that world.

A novel such as *Hell Followed with Us* is a ripe opportunity to put the simultaneous hope-horror of marginalization into the spotlight in a classroom. There is often a fine line between acknowledging marginalization and reducing identities to nothing more than their oppression. White carefully keeps his novel from crossing this line, and teachers can follow his direction in conversations with their students. Excerpts from throughout the novel— even including forewords by the author— can provide students with the opportunity to study how marginalization affects the queer community. More importantly, though, students can tackle the ongoing fight for life and liberty unfolding in their own lifetime. This novel provides a view into another perspective for cisgender students and a realistic catharsis for transgender students. Then, it goes a step further, and challenges students to act courageously in response, challenges them to be brave while afraid.

Hell Followed with Us does not ask queer kids to pretend hate and horror do not exist. Instead, it tells queer kids that it is okay to be scared in what feels like Hell itself. It tells them that the fight for survival is scary, but that it’s also worth fighting for. It tells them that there is hope, even among the horror. It tells kids who are beaten down by the world to spit out the blood, stand up despite the weight of terror, and speak their names with teeth bared, heart pounding, and love persisting. It tells kid that— even in the terror and violence and confusion— there is still a future worth fighting for.

References

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Author Biography

Alice Huelskamp is a 2026 graduate of the secondary English education program at Wichita State University (WSU). In August, she will begin her teaching career at Kingman Middle-High School in Kingman, KS, while pursuing a master’s degree in English at WSU. She looks forward to teaching the strengths and diversity of literature to middle and high school students in rural Kansas, and she is extremely excited to build the biggest classroom library she possibly can. Alice can be contacted at aphuelskamp@gmail.com.