

The House in the Cerulean Sea
Adelaide Miller (Literary Arts 2024)

Beyond the City Limit

The sun is warm on your face. You can hear the sounds of waves crashing against a coastline. There is a salty breeze in your hair. You are *home*. Picture it.

“Don’t you wish you were here?”

The House in the Cerulean Sea by TJ Klune follows Linus Baker, a Caseworker for the Department in Charge of Magical Youth. His life is full of gray clouds and rainy days in more ways than one. But when he is assigned a case dealing with magical youth unlike anything he has ever seen before, the sun begins to peek out from behind the fog.

The worldbuilding enveloped me. The story begins in an unnamed city, where the bus is always late and the clouds are always dark. Linus Baker is your average middle-aged man. He worries about his weight, loves his job, and pretends to loathe his cat. His life as a caseworker is all he has ever known. But his world is flipped upside down when he is sent to inspect Marsyas Orphanage. Linus meets an array of strange characters, the strangest being Arthur Parnarssas, the Master of the orphanage.

This story draws on real-world parallels, including the impacts of oppressive systems and bureaucracy, to show what happens when you get a glimpse of belonging. A magical system is set up in the book and regulated by DICOMY, the Department in Charge of Magical Youth. “Magical youth” is a working metaphor for marginalized groups, and I think trying to provide exposition for how the magic world works within this book is unnecessary. The focus of the book is on the characters themselves and how they are treated by their environments.

The characters in this narrative are well-rounded. Linus seems surface level at first glance, but throughout the book the reader has the opportunity to get to know him, and you can not help but root for his development and the blossoming of relationships between the characters. As a reader, you have a level of intimacy as you watch their growth. There are nine featured characters, each one is unique and completely lovable. I found myself caring for each and every one of them as the book progressed. *The House in the Cerulean Sea* started my obsession with the found family trope. And ever since I finished it, I have been searching for a story like it.

A major theme in this book is not judging a person based on what they are expected to be, or by what they look like. It is especially prevalent for a character named Lucy, who is a six year old boy, and the literal son of satan. But as Linus puts it, “We are who we are not because of our birthright, but because of what we choose to do in this life” (Klune 358). This message reflects bias and prejudice in real life, since preconceived notions about a person (or people) is what contributes to unfair judgements and stereotypes. The structure of the plot is well-done in its integration of several themes. To start with, the antagonist throughout the narrative is DICOMY. They are representative of a harmful bureaucracy and oppressive system that has institutionalized its citizens to normalize fear and hatred. They do this by promoting the “See something, say something” slogan, which brainwashes its employees to make them believe that what they are

doing is for the good of the many. That type of fear mongering has been used by individuals and political parties alike to turn people against one another. But what happens when a few voices begin to acknowledge the wrongness of the situation?

Other than kickstarting my love for found family tropes, this novel also introduced me to a realm of representation I had never really read before. What was even more interesting was the fact that identities outside of “magical” and “non-magical,” were integrated in a way that completed the character without making it the whole focus of their journey. People just *were*. The LGBTQ+ relationships in this novel burgeoned naturally. They were normalized. That kind of diversity is exactly what is needed in the fantasy genre. Previously, fantasy was a genre written by and for straight, white, men. People who grew up reading novels such as *The Witcher* or *Game of Thrones* only knew those depictions. But books like *The House in the Cerulean Sea* present a range of people that readers can connect to or see themselves in.

Klune’s writing style is whimsical and enchanting. The novel is told in a limited third person point of view, with a focus on Linus and how he perceives the people around him. Yet, the other characters are so well-developed it feels as though the reader knows them all personally. There are several gut-punching lines in this novel that kept me hooked, one of them being, “It’s the little things, I expect. Little treasures we find without knowing their origin. And they come when we least expect them. It’s beautiful, when you think about it.” I never once wanted to put the book down.

As TJ Klune writes, “Sometimes, he thought to himself in a house in a cerulean sea, you were able to choose the life you wanted. And if you were of the lucky sort, sometimes that life chose you back” (396).

Klune, TJ. 2020. *The House in the Cerulean Sea*. Tom Doherty Associates. New York, NY.