

q opinion: with AMY MORISON

Her, His or Them: A Privation For New Pronouns

Seven pages into a work of fiction by an author I've recently become acquainted with, I was faced with an awkward and somewhat political dilemma. I love words. I love weaving them into stories. And with that, comes certain grammatical rules that admittedly can – and in certain cases – need to be broken, depending on the intent of the author. Cause and effect, if you will. So the use of the pronoun 'them' for a character that identifies in G. Benson's book *Who'd Have Thought* as non-binary (meaning they don't identify with either male or female gender) had me in a quandary as a reader and as a writer.



Faced with sentences that repeatedly use 'them' and 'they' such as "they propped themselves on the sofa and folded their legs under themselves", my inner-writer/editorial grammar groan sounded out. Except, of course, I understand that the author has no choice but to use these pronouns in order to be true to the character. Moreover, surely non-binary characters and others who don't subscribe to conventional pronouns will begin to appear more frequently in storylines. Well, they certainly should in my opinion – especially if we want a better and more widespread understanding of diversity in gender and sexual identification. At the moment, these communities are categorized into the offensive 'other' box on official documents – including the most recent Australian census questionnaire. Seriously, is the best we can do for them in writing? That it literally comes down to identifying in terms that highlight the divide between us and them in the most basic written word? A pronoun. How ironic for the author who is attempting to include, not exclude.

On a personal level, I identify as lesbian. It did take me quite a number of years to figure (or as I have oft been cringingly heard to say, finger) out that this was my true identity. I originally came out as bisexual, misunderstanding my occasional attraction to men. I would sleep with men I was attracted to and not understand why I felt differently compared to when I slept with women. I would wonder why I wanted a man out of the bed and bedroom – my most personal of spaces – immediately post-coitus when I had been undoubtedly attracted enough to let him in there in the beginning. It came down to basics in the end. I began to ask myself, with whom do I want to wake up in a bed with romantically? A man or a woman? The answer is always woman for me. Hence, I identify as lesbian. I also identify as a writer and although I don't necessarily write lesbian fiction, I do find myself writing about characters that are very real to me, so lesbians are a given. As an avid reader too, it's pleasing to be able to say that there are a growing number of lesbian fiction authors that write books about characters I and other lesbians can identify with. G Benson is one of those authors. I particularly like her work, however, because she doesn't just represent a lesbian view of our colourful spectrum in the Q community. She's also inclusive of characters that are gender diverse. Notwithstanding, her stories are engrossing and well-written.

As most people are well aware of these days, no thanks to that fifty shades of shit book, sexual identity is certainly not black and white. Fortunately, we are now living in a world where this is being seen as normal. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, queer, andro, pansexual, asexual... there are a myriad of terms to help define our sexuality. A diverse list of terms. And I embrace all my brothers and sisters on the sexual rainbow. But this begs the next question: What if they don't identify as either brother or sister?

Gender identification is still a subject that we, as a society, are not so well-versed in. I certainly feel my knowledge is inadequate. I'm hoping to rectify this as soon as possible through further research and reading. Where do we stand with the pronouns though? I used to joke with other lesbian friends about the 'pronoun game' – when a woman would refer to her date as a 'they' or 'them', it usually meant she was 'family' (i.e. dating another woman) – but when we are talking about people's lives and their identities, it isn't a game, is it? It's very real and can cause very real offense and hurt. Perhaps we need to, collectively, think about how we address those within our communities who do not identify in a binary manner. Personally, I don't think that 'they' and 'them' is adequate. It doesn't read right to me. But then again, I'm not the one who identifies this way and so I should merely be asking the questions, not answering. The brilliant Taylor Mac – whose play 'Hir' was recently staged in Melbourne as part of Midsumma festival – uses Judy as their pronoun in written form. Using this pronoun certainly makes a point. Interestingly, after a while, your brain becomes used to it – it's quite adaptive like that.

So, is there room for new pronouns that reflect the person and not the gender? If so, what could they be? What combinations or variations? All I could come up with was a variation of person such as *Perself*. Or *People*. But when I think of *Peep* or *Perp* it sounds either casual, comical or clinical. *Human* doesn't work unless you take the 'man' out and start with the prefix 'Hu'. But perhaps this is a very valid start. After all, there are many hues in a rainbow. To answer the question, yes definitely there is a case of supporting new pronouns in the written form. But their creation and adoption needs to be driven by the very people who identify this way. However, the rest of us readers and writers could be more aware and supportive of pronouns that are gender inclusive, right?

For more information on G Benson and her books: <http://www.g-benson.com/>

About Taylor Mac: <http://www.taylormac.org/about/>

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