Arts · May 31 · 3 min read

# Autistic and LGBTQIA+ Representation in Netflix's Heartbreak High

©2024 The Gaudie, All Rights Reserved

A nuanced yet occasionally troubling depiction of autistic rage and asexuality.

**By Theo Pieczka-Garner**

Ranking: 3.5/5

*Contains Mild Spoilers for Heartbreak High Seasons 1 & 2.*

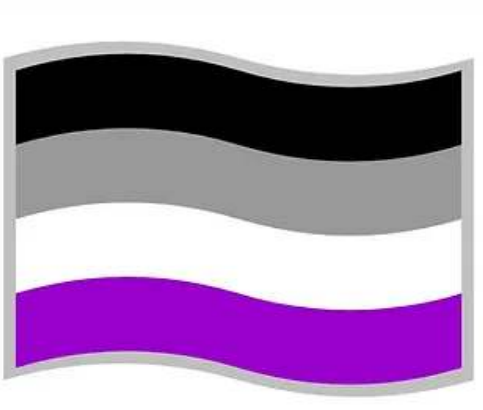
When I first sat down to watch season one of *Heartbreak High* (a soft reboot of the 1994 Australian series of the same name) back in September 2022, I couldn't make it further than the second episode. Try as I might, I simply couldn't get past the incessant teenage stupidity and angst. I felt truly, for the first time, like I was just too old to be watching a show. I was disappointed by this realisation, as I knew there was a prominent autistic character named Quinni, played by Chloé Hayden. As an autistic person, I wanted to see how it was handled. It is so rare that autistic characters, especially female ones, are portrayed in media—and even rarer that they are played by an autistic actor. I had heard good things, and desperately wanted to support the show to prove that such storylines are important and valuable. However, it turns out there was another reason that I was initially unable to finish the first season.

I had seen clips online of Quinni's storyline, particularly episode six, in which she has an argument on the bus with her then-girlfriend Sasha (played by Gemma Chua-Tran). Over the course of the episode, Sasha grows increasingly frustrated with Quinni's need to stick to a strict schedule and expresses (quite rudely, in my opinion) her firm disinterest in the book launch they attend together—part of Quinni's special interest in the fictitious *Angeline of the Underworld* book series. This culminates in a scene in which Sasha stresses how *hard* it is to be in a relationship with Quinni, and ends with the cutting blow: "Don't pull the f*cking autism card on me right now."

> **This scene was incredibly painful to watch, as it is a sentiment which is all too familiar for so many autistic people, including me. The first few times the clip came up on my TikTok, I had to scroll away. I knew what was coming, and I couldn't face it.**

After the highly anticipated release of the second season on April 11th, though, I wanted to try again. This time, I readied myself for the second-hand stress of watching teenagers be, well, teenagers. I found myself actually getting absorbed in the story. I was delighted to find not only an apt (and at times, upsettingly honest) portrayal of what it is like to be an autistic teenager, but also the best and most nuanced depiction of asexuality that I have ever seen on TV.

Ca$h (played by Will McDonald) is an "eshay", the Australian equivalent to the derogatory Scottish term "ned", who is asexual and struggling to distance himself from his difficult past. When Ca$h falls in love with Darren (played by James Majoos), nonbinary icon and best friend to Quinni, the two must figure out how to navigate a relationship where one person experiences a lot of sexual desire and the other doesn't. Although it is hard to watch Darren initially misunderstand and negate Ca$h's asexuality as something he can "get over" or something they can solve by taking a vow of celibacy, this is part of something really interesting that *Heartbreak High* does.



> **This show doesn't baby its audience. It allows us to experience harsh reality and nuance, without telling us how to feel about it.**

We see autistic joy in Quinni, but also rage. In season two, when Darren tells Quinni the world can't always "play by her rules", she stops trying to mask her autism and people react badly to her. While this is troubling, and I do wish Darren's thoughtless comments had been addressed rather than brushed over, it is ultimately a heartbreakingly (pun intended) accurate depiction of being autistic. I recommend watching *Heartbreak High* if you can handle the teenage melodrama, and I hope to see a third season greenlit. Hopefully, it's one in which Quinni's unmasking journey can be explored further.

review · autism · Theo Pieczka-Garner · asexuality · heartbreak high

Arts

©2024 The Gaudie, All Rights Reserved