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Nimona: A New Monster

Noelle Stevenson's debut graphic novel, *Nimona*, has become an international sensation, beloved by young girls everywhere. It mixes fantasy and science fiction to tell the story of its titular character's joining forces with a renowned super villain to expose the corruption of those who rule their world. However, what makes this work most appealing is not the plot, but the female protagonist: Nimona is a self-proclaimed monster.

The term "monster" is used very casually in contemporary culture (from Monster Trucks to serial killers), but scholars have spent centuries debating various ideas of what actually makes an individual "monstrous." Some have asserted that a monster is anything that produces fear or harm, and others have looked to psychology, concluding that monsters represent our most secret fears and desires. In the twenty-first century, critics have considered monsters in the context of our evolving technologically-infused world. Elaine L. Graham writes that the monster is "a hybrid or liminal being, and thus [has] no stable or secure identity beyond its opposition to a pre-eminent alter ego . . . [it] carries a terrible threat to expose the fragility of its defining categories and thus the fiction of normality itself" (54).

This definition applies to Nimona both literally and figuratively. She has "has no stable or secure identity" because she has the ability to shapeshift and become anyone or anything. She determines for herself whether she will be a harmless fox, a comical semi-mammalian shark, or a terrifying dragon. She is also a hybrid of monstrous savagery and typically child-like behavior. She is often depicted killing any soldier who gets in her way, and has no qualms about robbing banks or lying to those she loves. At the same time, she is also depicted hiding under a blanket during a scary movie, playing pranks on her boss, and spending a whole day doing something she hates because her friend wants to do it. Nimona is a monster, but she is also a child. It is incredibly rare in literature aimed at young readers to have an endearing anti-hero, someone who lacks traditional heroic qualities and does the right things for the wrong reasons. Nimona is a flawed hero, who is at once ruthless and childish, and this complexity of character is what makes her a liminal element in a genre that has been traditionally didactic in its depiction of right and wrong. Nimona's very existence threatens the "defining categories" that define traditional children's fantasy literature. Ultimately, this ability to break down the "normal" definitions of morality is the root of her appeal.

Instead of the cliché ending where the all-powerful girl must be conquered and controlled, Nimona breaks free from her captors and continues to exist in the way she always had: both fear-inducing and laugh-inducing, a mixture of monstrosity and generosity, simultaneously evil and innocent. She sends young girls the important message that they do not have to be kind and perfect all the time, encouraging them to mix a little napalm into their "sugar and spice, and everything nice." This book and the monster-girl at its heart gives girls permission to be themselves.

Work Cited

Graham, Elaine L. *Representations of the Post/Human*. Rutgers University Press, 2002.