

**Essay #9 – Genevieve Baske**  
**Third Place - \$1,000 prize**  
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## The True Impact of *Nimona*

As a human race, we are quick to fear the unfamiliar. After all, it is easiest to label those who live unconventionally as the “other”, and to view ourselves as the norm. It fulfills our need for acceptance; the need to feel like we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. A common enemy can function as an unifying force, and in this odd way, fear can function as a comfort. But what happens to the victims of this fear?

On the surface, 2023’s *Nimona* presents itself as upbeat and even lighthearted. The animated story follows a mistakenly exiled knight and his outcast, bright pink, shapeshifting sidekick Nimona on their journey to proving their innocence and earning the kingdom’s respect. However, these characters’ experiences quickly reveal deeper themes of the harmful impacts that exclusionary, fear-filled societies can have on outcasted groups – especially the LGBTQ+ community.

Like many societies, the kingdom in which Nimona and exiled knight Ballister reside is built on fear. It thrives on the tradition of isolation, protecting itself from the monster said to be living outside the surrounding walls. This is how Ballister was trained, told that he was to be the first commoner to protect the kingdom as a knight. That is, until he was framed to have murdered the queen, and thus wrongfully exiled. This plot line is a representation of the broken promises made to so many oppressed groups. These communities are commonly told that they have all the same opportunities as others, or that they just need to work harder, only to find that the cards have been unfairly stacked against them the whole time.

This similarly relates to Nimona’s story – that of a hurt, misunderstood shapeshifter labeled as a monster simply for being different. She was made the common enemy of an entire society, a unifying force for the kingdom from which she was ostracized. Throughout the film, she not only faces “small-minded questions” and pressure to “just be normal” instead of being herself, but also direct threats to her safety. Later in the film, she opens up to Ballister that it’s uncomfortable for her to suppress her shapeshifting, and that doing so would make her feel like she wasn’t living a full life. In this way, there are parallels to queerness and the experiences of people with nontraditional gender identities.

Nimona struggles deeply with the hate she faces, reflecting at the height of the film that she didn't know what was scarier, "the fact everyone in [the] kingdom wanted to drive a sword through [her] heart", or that "sometimes [she] just wanted to let them". This heart-wrenching moment sadly reflects the experience of many members of the LGBTQ+ community, finding it hard not to lose themselves in others' demonization of them. These moments of despair are easy to see as hopeless, and are something I had once viewed as beyond the scope of our control. In the face of hate and homophobia, it has been difficult for me to feel anything but alone. However, this film changed my point of view.

By standing at the center of the kingdom and holding Nimona back from the stab of a large spear, Ballister shows the inspiring impact that one person can make on another's life. Despite an entire kingdom filled with prejudice, one person's action of support and care kept Nimona alive. This has been a deeply impactful reminder of the people in my life that are supportive, and who see and love me for who I am.

I had not expected this film – complete with its pink breakdancing sharks and punk rock giant dragons – to have me feeling warm, fuzzy, and teary-eyed. But as it turns out, many other queer viewers have had a similar adoration for the film. Representation is present in Nimona's experiences, as well as Ballister's gay romance beautifully woven throughout the plot and the queer identities of the voice actors themselves. By this means, viewers like myself are reminded that they are not alone in their identities and struggles, and that there is hope for a future filled with acceptance and understanding.