

This Realist is a Romantic

If you've ever had the opportunity to meet Aransas Haley, and have asked the standard college-typical questions, including but not limited to: what's your name?, what's your major?, and where are you from?, then you've been answered with somewhat normal answers. "My name is Aransas Haley"—sometimes you might even get, "I'm the really tall, long-legged redhead"—I'm a Comm Studies and Spanish double major, and I'm from Harlingen, Texas—even though she's really from Santa Rosa, Texas, but no one ever knows where it is.

Then, you might go on to see if you have any interests in common, so you'll ask about extracurriculars and learn that she's involved with the University Programming Council and the theatre department. From there, you find the conversation going in one of two directions. One, you might delve into some topic you both relate to or share an experience with, finding out you both click and then develop a relationship. Or two, the conversation dies down with no concrete direction to the interaction, and you both go your separate ways. With the latter, you've met each other, so maybe you'll see each other in classes down the line or around campus, but the relationship will never go deeper.

But what if it does? If one were to explore who Aransas Haley is, below the surface level, what would they find? Perhaps, you've shared classes with her in the Olin building or listened to her comedic stand up performance at Korova Milk Bar, but doesn't mean you know her. And how would that let you? Humans are complicated creatures and it takes more than one or two interactions to get to know someone.

What I've noticed is that to break down this barrier of the unknown, it helps to find honest similarities in each other that makes understanding easier. Getting to know Aransas, I will not say I know anything close to everything there is to know, but I found enough in common to develop an idea that shows a little of who I understand her to be.

At first, I learned the "basic things", one could say, the icebreaker-type of information that is required of an interview. She's an actor; she lives on a farm; she's a younger sister; she loves her horses; she likes to read, etc, etc. But it was there that the conversation took a turn. I found something similar in her that I myself could relate to. Books! Horses! From there, the "interview" turned more genuine and contained honest curiosity about each other.

"Have you ever seen the movie *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*?" I asked. "Not many people have, but—"

"Oh My Goodness I adore that movie!"

"It's one of the reasons why I love horses—wait, you've seen that movie??"

"Yes! That's crazy! It's so underrated."

Pure joy and excitement were on both of our faces as this unexpected tidbit of information we didn't know the other would have come to light in the first of our conversations. After this point, the nervous laughter and awkward smiles become genuine and real. The superficial questions turned curious and explorative. Who knew talking to Aransas Haley about this childhood movie could open up real-life conversation?

One of the first things I learned—the thing that stuck out to me the most as it started to show who Aransas was as a person—was how she demonstrated a connection between fantasy

and reality in a way I had not expected. This past winter she wrote, directed, and acted in a play titled, *Bad Thoughts*. In this play, Aransas wanted to “humanize the condition” of having Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, something Aransas herself has dealt with since being diagnosed at age 12.

At first, I was surprised. This calm and confident person has OCD? From the little that I’d gathered in class Google Meets and first impressions, I would not have guessed this. But as she told me this story, I saw a strength and honesty in her that left no room for doubt about her outlook of life. I saw how Aransas, encountering difficulties, is someone who wants to share them to the world so that they too can realize life, hard as it is, can still hold fantastical moments.

She recalled that so little time is spent talking about this condition as it relates to the “obsessive” side of things, the “bad thoughts” that have plagued her mind since childhood. “No one ever talks about how social anxieties mixed with personal fears can be equally just as challenging as the compulsive behaviors most are familiar with.” So Aransas wanted to share her story, a story that she “had the credibility to do so, because the personal is the most creative.”

In the play, her thoughts were personified in a fun and amusing way that brought out the irrationality of what she deals with. When I asked why she wanted to incorporate humor into this story that in another person’s directing might have been serious and dark, she said, “It is genuinely funny that I used to think Hitler would come for me if I ever messed up or made a mistake. It’s crazy and would never happen, but that was my reality.” She went on to say that making light of dark situations is the one of the only ways to cope with them. The goal is not to make fun of this condition, but to find the moments that make her laugh and smile and focus on those.

“Every joke landed,” Aransas told me. It was obvious by the pride and joy on her face that she was extremely happy with the reaction she got from the audience for her play. “It’s every writer’s dream that the story they’re portraying is the one people are receiving and understanding.” More than that, she was impressed and honored by the fact that during rehearsals, all 8 people reading the script read with conviction and belief which showed her how much they believed in the meaning behind the play and in her.

What I felt in listening to Aransas tell this story is that she was proud of how encouraging people can be when you show your true self. It reminded me of earlier conversations when we discussed how little media portrays the goodness of humanity. There is so much positivity in each of us—in real life—that sometimes reality does have a little bit of fantasy elements to it.

In the summer of 2019, Aransas studied abroad in Granada, Spain. There, she formed a friendship with a boy who understood her in every possible way. Aransas recalled times of hiking, going on long walks, and talking with this close friend in the beautiful Spanish countryside. “He was with me every step of the way, and even though I was in a new culture, wrestling with this other language, he had my back.”

“He was the kind of person who walked an extra half mile to the home I was staying at every night to make sure I made it back safely.” For all intents and purposes, this close friend seemed a dream guy. What girl wouldn’t want this connection with a guy while travelling in a foreign country? Listening to her describe her time in Spain, I was so certain that it would end in a “happily ever after.” Indeed, they’ve tried to date twice. And yet, Aransas has not returned those feelings.

Reality has a funny way of weaving itself into our lives. Aransas has read and watched all kinds of fantasy stories where guys like this always get the girl, or where girls like her get the boy they dream of. “What use is an adventure story without the love plot?” She believes that part of what makes a story great is the predictable, yet beautiful romance. Call me a cheesy romantic, but right on!

But reality strikes and we have to navigate how it works. That’s what Aransas’ point was as she told me this story. Because of what we’ve read or watched, we all think what we truly want is this fantasy world built around our real one, but that isn’t reality. In reality, she simply doesn’t have romantic feelings for this guy, but that isn’t to say it’s the end of the relationship or that he’s not a great friend. No, their friendship is wonderful and he’s someone who truly gets her. What’s neat is that there are times when fantastical plots can be found in reality, and they don’t exactly work out like they do in the books. “And that’s okay,” Aransas says. It’s finding those moments, recognizing the similarities and differences, and realizing that both pictures are still beautiful: fantasy and reality.

It’s truly fascinating how these two things connect for Aransas. Still looking at her time in Spain, she found how different expectations can be from what actually happens. You expect to go to another country, one you’ve studied and is a focal point in your major, and experience a full immersion of the Spanish culture and language. That should not be a surprise at all. However, arriving in Spain, Aransas found the language immersion part seemed more like a slap in the face than a welcoming embrace. But that was the best part, she told me. Once again, the imaginative fantasy picture she had in her head was altered by reality, and yet, Aransas had no complaints.

She went to the gym one day and failed horribly at asking the desk person for help. She realized it was only through embracing her own lack of knowledge and being honest with herself that she would be able to enjoy her time there. So if she was going to be known as the village idiot, then might as well accept it fully. After that moment, it was like the light at the end of the tunnel was finally right in front of her. People were friendlier. She accepted her own failings, and the people surrounding her accepted her for that. This romantic found that by being rooted in reality’s rules, she was finally able to have that positive outlook she’d been looking for.

After getting to know who Aransas was through our Meets, I sensed a kindred soul. I gathered, or maybe hoped, that she was who I would be like three years from now. So naturally, on the last day we met, I asked her a question I’d been wondering, but wasn’t exactly sure how to ask.

“Do you think that—even though you’re going to be a senior in college in a few months—do you think you’ll still read, or watch, or be interested in fantasy? Like since you’re technically an “adult,” do you ever feel like you can still enjoy these things?”

She paused, pondering the question. “Well considering that the other night I literally was watching *Castle in the Sky*—a super famous Miyazaki film—yeah, I would say that I definitely still appreciate this genre.”

I was relieved. There was hope for me yet! Looking back on our past conversations, I saw a thought process of Aransas’ that wrestled with a relationship between fantasy and reality that has been implemented throughout her life. Fantasy is a part of her reality in a way I had not thought of before. It may not be expected in a way one would think, but even through reality’s functioning, she is still able to find the ‘magical moments’.

In going to Spain, dealing with the relationship with her friend and her experience with the language, it turned out to not be some magical, romantic-novel plot, but the truth of each situation was just as good. She found a genuine friend and could enjoy the experience, missteps and all. That's part of who Aransas is: someone who writes a play dealing with a difficult condition and turns it into a laughable, down-to-earth presentation; someone who chooses to look at the negative things in life, draw inspiration from characters in fantasy movies, and conquer them with the aura of a goddess.

"I think of Nausicaa of *The Valley of the Wind*. These characters in these wild and fantastic stories become our role models. I think they're so cool because they remind me of the person I want to be—brave, strong, and capable." And brave, strong, and capable Aransas is because these fantasy plots have been weaved into her reality. Her positive outlook, honest persona, and realist mindset is what I believe to be Aransas' attributes as she faces whatever life throws her way.

Aransas Haley is much more than a Comm Studies and Spanish double major from Harlingen, TX—but really from Santa Rosa. She's also more than someone who studied abroad and wrote a play. Aransas, encountering challenges, is someone one who chooses to see the good in most situations. Finding fantasy in life's very real moments is the "throughline" I have seen in glimpsing at Aransas' life.

Author's Note

I wrote a decent article because I found we were alike in many ways. Like Aransas says, "The personal is the most creative." We can write about people we are trying to get to know because we see ourselves in them, then it becomes easier to write about them. I found that Aransas and I both share a love of fantasy stories and sometimes look at the world through a lens of the make-believe. We're romantics. So this connection between this genre and the tangible world that Aransas grapples with amidst day to day thoughts is a fascinating concept for me. I think that getting to understand how a person looks at the world tells a lot about who they actually are.

As soon as our first Google Meet between the two of us was over, I knew that I had found someone I would look up to. That's probably—definitely—because I see myself in her, but it's also because I see someone who has gone through life with a weight tied to her leg, dragging her down, and yet she still manages to look on the bright side. I admire her, and as I got to know her through these interviews, I realized she is someone I could take notes from her on how to "survive college."

Of course, now that I write this Author's Note, I realize it might be bordering on the "love letter" type article, Dr. Bednar doesn't want us to write. But professionally speaking, as a student learning journalistic and writing skills, I am incredibly glad that I was paired with Aransas for this assignment because she already is a phenomenal writer in my opinion. I had trouble setting scenes up as a whole while writing, so I looked to Aransas to help because she is such a descriptive writer. And then learning how she sees the world in this realist yet fantastical perspective—it's simply amazing I was able to work with someone whose mind works this way. --Summer 2020.

