

“It’s How They Decide Where You Go”: *Sky High* as a Coming Out Narrative

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“This highly derivative superhero coming-of-age flick is moderately entertaining, family-friendly fluff.” This is the *Rotten Tomatoes* Critics Consensus for Mike Mitchell’s *Sky High* (2005), a Disney film that garnered reasonably favorable reviews from critics and audiences alike (“Sky High”), ultimately reaching a loyal fanbase far beyond its theatrical run (Drum). In contrast to 2005’s *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), *Sky High* was the family-friendly alternative for superhero films of the summer, as it promotes themes of friendship, anti-bullying, and self-confidence (Lyon). However, upon re-watching the film and subsequently reading discussions surrounding the film, I would propose that an active, critical reception of *Sky High* would be reading the film as a coming out narrative.

This is not the way the film was encoded. Stuart Hall defines encoding as the process of message production, in which the sender must understand how the audience comprehends the world in order to create a system of coded meanings (3). Director Mike Mitchell stated in a DVD bonus feature that *Sky High* operates on two premises: “the adults are all insane” and “the girls are all smarter than the boys” (2005). Considering that the screenwriters for *Sky High* were actually the creators of *Kim Possible* (Disney, 2002-2007), this falls in line with the rhetoric Disney was pushing in their tween programming at the time. *Sky High* implemented similar visual and verbal cues as *Kim Possible*, poking fun at the hapless adults as they get outsmarted (and subsequently rescued) by a group of high school students, and creating female characters who must save the day while their male counterparts come up short.

When considering encoding/decoding, Stuart Hall explains that there are different encoding/decoding relationships that a viewer can have with televisual messaging (14). One can have three different kinds of readings: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. One who reads a

text dominantly would decode the message as it was intended, while a negotiated reading requires (as the term would imply) some negotiating on the reader's part. They understand, perhaps, that parts of the narrative do not apply to their specific life experience, or maybe were not intended for them at all, but agree with other parts of the narrative. An oppositional reader, however, understands what was encoded in the message, and disagrees with it entirely, and can propose a different interpretation altogether.

The dominant reading, in *Sky High*'s case, would be interpreting the film in the innocuous way it was intended. Reviewers such as *Variety* declared the film "a family-friendly coming-of-age drama," and praised its smart writing and performances, decoding the message exactly as it was encoded (Leydon). "Good fans," then, as per Emily Nussbaum, would interpret this film as intended (7). "Bad fans" would read the narrative in any other way, such as the most recent narrative trending in the *Sky High* fandom (on Tumblr and YouTube), asserting that the film serves as fascist eugenics propaganda (Saint).

Alternative readings of superhero narratives are not uncommon, however. The same year *Sky High* came out, Anne Kustritz wrote an article entitled "*Smallville*'s Sexual Symbolism," which she revisited again in her 2019 article, "Everyone has a secret: Closeting and secrecy from *Smallville* to *The Flash*, and from shame to algorithmic risk." As she focuses on the role of closeting in superhero narratives, initially this kind of reading seems far removed from *Sky High*, a film about pretending to have superpowers when one has none, instead of the other way around. It is important context, though, that the world around the character is comprised of superheroes; that is the status quo. Therefore, I would propose that reading *Sky High* as a coming out narrative, is not only exploring subtext already in the film, but drastically changes its mass appeal to appealing to a more specific, marginalized audience.

The implication of this reading serves fandom as resistance, as reading Will Stronghold's story arc as a coming out narrative falls under Henry Jenkins' definition of textual poaching. Taken from Michel de Certeau's theory of readers as poachers, Jenkins applies this to fans as they take what they want (or need) from a narrative, and not necessarily the full text as it was intended (86). The fandom provides a "vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups...to pry space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations" (87). Reading it in this way allows fans to reclaim a narrative that for all intents and purposes was not actually written for them at all.

*Sky High*'s dominant reading is a tale of the watered-down American dream: you can do anything if you work hard enough - and conform to the pre-established standards of power and success. Will Stronghold is a white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual male, so in our dominant culture, he is the least likely to be othered by society. However, *Sky High* establishes Will as an other from the onset of the film, as he does not have superpowers, despite him being the son of the two most powerful superheroes in a superpowered community. Lying to please his parents, Will ultimately enters the titular Sky High, where he and his friends find out that it is not even enough to have powers. One must have powers that are arbitrarily deemed better than everyone else's to be assigned to the hero track; everyone else is doomed to be a sidekick. They also must be powers that can be displayed visibly, as Will's friend Zach cannot show his glowing ability and is assigned to the sidekick track the same as Will.

The subtext surrounding Will and his sidekick friends is sprinkled throughout the film, but never fully explored (both in the film and in the surrounding fandom). The fans exhibit plenty of agency, as there is actual productivity activity on social media sites and fanfiction sites that repurpose the characters for their own Alternative Universes, or simply their own personal

uses. Although some slash fanfiction does exist concerning Will (“Sky High”), and some Tumblr users have appropriated characters from *Sky High* to represent queer identities (see Figures 1 and 2 for example), there is not much reading into the narrative itself. Will begins the film performing as a superpowered person, as he understands that anything other is to be seen as less than. When Will’s father meets Will’s sidekick peers, he becomes visibly uncomfortable and leaves the room, only to later applaud Will with his progressive attitude toward associating with sidekicks. After Will explains to his father that he in fact is also a sidekick, Will’s mother and father talk about how disappointed they are, as their hopes for Will’s future are all but dashed in their minds. This causes them to briefly consider actually forcing a change in his identity, which in its darkest interpretation has been considered to be an allusion to conversion therapy (Saint).

The fandom around *Sky High* (which in the context of this paper I am choosing to define as those who are active on Tumblr and/or Twitter and fanfiction sites, as opposed to all those who are fans of the film) actually for the most part rejects Will Stronghold as the central lead. Only recently have some fans started defending Will’s character arc, but this part of the fandom has become extremely vocal within the last year (ronwilsonbusdriver). Most of the defense of Will Stronghold comes from the personal identification from fans in Will’s struggles with labels and his identity, pointing out the many scenes that allude to a coming out storyline (ronwilsonbusdriver). He must eventually come out to his family, despite having lied to them at the beginning of the film. Beyond that, he says that he is proud to be a sidekick, as he has found a group of friends who accepts him as he is. This is a recognizable arc for anyone who has found a place in a marginalized community or subculture, as the dominant culture is not designed for them.

It is only when Will gets reassigned to the superhero track after realizing his powers that fan sentiments behind the character change: instead of ending his arc in the middle of the film, wherein he is gradually growing into his identity as a sidekick without powers (the “other,” so to speak), he ultimately develops *two* powers, making him the most powerful hero in his school. While this makes sense in the context of the film, this is the moment in which many can no longer relate to Will, as in real life, people do not suddenly become straight, or white, or any other aspect of the hegemony after all. When Will develops superpowers, all of his struggles in finding acceptance with his peers as himself disappear, and he becomes a part of the dominant culture, therefore becoming less attainable to marginalized viewers.

This is why I argue that in order to fulfill this reading entirely, aspects of *Sky High* must be rewritten. While it is arguable that Will developing powers was inevitable considering his role as the protagonist, and it still serves as a frankly dark coming out-assimilation story, in order to keep it as a celebratory narrative of acceptance, Will must never develop powers. When Will comes out to his parents as non-powered, there is a sense of accomplishment there. Yes, his life might be harder in some ways, but he eventually earns his parents’ acceptance and a loyal group of friends like himself. When he gains powers and is switched to the hero track, he struggles to maintain his former friendships and previously solidified marginalized identity. Instead of dismantling the system at the end, the select few sidekicks are accepted by the heroes after they save the school (the primary sense of worth in a superpowered community being heroism, after all). They conform to the status quo, and Will’s former identity gives way to his new identity: an accepted part of the rigid hegemony. Changing the ending to a scenario in which Will never develops would change the narrative arc of the film, and while potentially less interesting, I

would argue that it would redeem Will Stronghold as a relatable protagonist with whom this specific audience can identify.

*Sky High* was not written with the intent to provide a narrative context of coming out and existing in a marginalized community. However, the fan community has only grown since its inception, with now older fans returning to this movie for nostalgia (Drum). It is through this process that the fandom reclaims this text as something that can serve their needs, as opposed to the mainstream dominant reading. Will, as it is written, is the embodiment of our societal insider status, but per the rules of his own society, represents the many struggles and triumphs faced by those in marginalized communities, such as the LGBT+ community.



Figure 1: distributed via Tumblr (96 notes, which is average for original *Sky High* content) Origins unknown, found on ronwilsonbusdriver.tumblr.com



Figure 2: Taken from l-g-bee-tea.tumblr.com, a page dedicated to repurposing straight characters and orient them in an LGBT+ way (per their blog description).



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