



# Old Fashioned

K. A. Cook

# imprint

*Old Fashioned*, © 2017, K. A. Cook.

This story was previously published, in substantially different form, in the collection **Crooked Words**, 2013.

Produced in Geelong, Australia.

This publication is under copyright. No part of this book may be copied, reproduced or distributed in print or electronic form without written consent from the copyright holder.

*Old Fashioned* is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living, elfish or undead is unintentional. Any references to persons living, elfish or undead do not necessarily espouse the views of the author.

Layout and cover design: K. A. Cook

Credits: Cover typeset in **V A G-HandWritten**. Assorted stock images from **Open-ClipartVectors**. PDF text typeset in **V A G-HandWritten** by VAGDesign, **Nymphette** by Nymphont and Adobe Garamond Pro.

# blurb

Amelia March is tired of suitors breaking into her house after dark to express their undying love. Sure, it might be the fashion, but whatever happened to getting to know someone first? Why won't they listen to her when she says she isn't interested? And what does it mean that her cousin Kit thinks there's a word for her approach to romantic relationships?

*Old Fashioned* is a story about finding words and the importance of fake cobwebs in the windows.

# contents

content advisory	5
author's note	6
old fashioned	8
additional works	17
about the author	18

## content advisory

This short story depicts a woman somewhat enthusiastically wounding a home invader, despite awareness of the fact that said invader isn't there to kill her. It also depicts this love interest engaged in the creepy but traditional (at least in literature) act of invading her house, unasked and uninvited, as a sexual/romantic gesture towards a woman who doesn't want it and is explicit about this. The protagonist also threatens and imagines violence and murder on several occasions as a form of bluster.

It also includes the obligatory witch's cat and any number of absurd and unexplained references to magical village life.

## author's note

This is also an entry in rewrite territory: another rewrite of the same story in **Crooked Words**. While I do feel Amelia to be another autistic character written by an unknowing author, the reason for this rewrite lies more in my unknowing aromanticism.

This story was written several years ago—when I was a queer reader and writer feeling stifled by queer genre fiction's heavy tendency to romance and romantic tropes, unable to recognise the cause of my frustration. It wasn't until long after *Crooked Words* that I came across aromanticism as a concept separate from asexuality and realised that my being aromantic (aro) makes much greater sense of my feelings as a creative in an amatonormative universe where romantic love is considered universal. I don't fall in love—not in romantic love, anyway—and it was a relief to find a word for this particular shade of queer.

In hindsight, the original version of this story tried to represent the romance tropes that struck me as absurd or even dangerous in a slightly humorous way. It ended up being a story, however, by an aromantic person lacking the language or concepts to do the narrative or my accidentally aro-spectrum character justice.

This new version, then, is more about a demiromantic and demisexual character being nudged towards understanding why she feels the way she does.

Additionally, in the last year I started developing the setting for this story as the universe for **The Unnatural Philosophy of Kit March**, to the extent that this story can stand as something of a prequel. Some of the added content may seem unnecessary in the context of the original story, but makes much greater sense when viewed as one piece of a larger narrative.

## old fashioned

When Amelia March, upon waking from a sound sleep, hears the second rustle, she reaches beside her bed and rests her fingers on the smooth wood of her favourite staff. In her old life, as a student in Siya, having a weapon by one's mattress borders on the absurd; here, in a rural Greenstone village, anyone who doesn't sleep within reach of a weapon—a broomstick, a knife, a furious cat—lacks something in the sense department. True, she's an indifferent witch at best, but after dealing with ghosts, injured villagers, possessed chickens and *That Time With The Parsnips*, she's learnt to be armed at all times. The bloodstained grimoire in her kitchen, after all, doesn't frighten people nearly as much as a good clip over the ear.

She sits and raises the staff so that she can swing out with the knobbly end, listening to the soft brush of feet over stone. It isn't Kit; she hears no tap of wood. It isn't Midnight: no cat will rustle and risk being mistaken for an intruder. No mice or spiders dare her house, between her ward spells, her cleaning and the cat; even the local moths know better than to find shelter within her walls. Anyone with legitimate business, of the sort that involves accidents or illness of human and beast, will beat on her front door and bellow.

She hopes, prays, that it's the Jackson twins trying to attempt another demon-summoning by stealing the requisite texts.

After the parsnips, though, Amelia fears the noise can only mean one thing.

The lovelorn.

Nighttime stalking has become all the rage amongst the lovesick, impressionable, young and downright foolish—a fashion worse than unnecessarily-constricting corsetry and wide-legged breeches. Worse than last summer, even, when everyone went about quoting romantic poetry in lieu of just asking someone to the town hall dance. Goddess save her, what's so wrong with just asking? Now, though, love is all about climbing through second-storey windows and watching their lover sleep; roses are passé. Romance, these days, is about being new and innovative and showing to the world just how far one will go—even if it means proclaiming their star-crossed interest from the damp, oft-neglected village lock-up the next morning. Bruises, trellises bearing briar brambles, irate parents armed with brooms and even magic seem no deterrent.

The problem isn't the trend: Amelia admits to a certain satisfaction when she wakes up in the morning to discover a forlorn youth on her doorstep bearing a sprained ankle or hideous scratches. Calling them five different ways of brainless is moderately entertaining and more than makes up for the waste of her time—if they plague someone else.

Amelia, curse the Goddess, is still young enough to be *interesting*.

A faint grunt echoes from the open door, as if muffled by a hand. In daylight, Amelia knows nothing more about fighting than the next person—save for a doctor's knowledge of where she might best apply a blade or staff for agony or death. In the dark—and in a room with most breakable objects on the shelf above her head, because Amelia knows her aim to be atrocious with any tool larger than a scalpel—her lack of training doesn't matter. She waits a moment longer, listening for the distinctive gasp as the intruder stubs their toe on the raised stone slab just before her bed, before aiming at what she guesses to be collarbone height and swinging.

The crack of the staff landing on bone is followed, immediately, by an ear-splitting shriek.

Amelia swings again. A thud sounds, followed by a series of thumps, something clattering, and then vicious swearing—not the words one uses to address the village witch—and a snuffle before several soft sobs.

“I just had to get another bloody weeper, didn’t I?” Amelia places the staff on the bed—right where she can grab it in her left hand if needed—and reaches up to tap the jar of dozing sprites into wakefulness before leaning over to fumble at the lamp sitting on her chest of drawers. “Do none of you ever think how much this is costing me in kerosene and matches and sprites?”

It takes a moment for the lamp to catch and light the room, which is just as well, for half the sprites sink to the bottom of the jar with only the faintest of yellow glows. Amelia sits back down in bed, pulls up the covers and stares at her intruder.

A young woman—one of the village shopgirls, although Amelia can’t remember her name—sits huddled on the floor, one hand wrapped around her opposite elbow. She is gorgeous, Amelia admits: round and curvy, with a mane of curly chestnut hair tumbling down her back and falling in her eyes. Big, beautiful, green eyes, paired with the kind of pouty lips Amelia enjoys pressed against her own when the kissing happens to be mutually agreed upon.

Well, she liked Lyra’s lips pressed against her own, even if she’s yet to meet another woman who makes her feel that kind of want.

The shopgirl is beautiful, but all Amelia feels is irritation. She should be asleep with a cat at her feet! She shouldn’t be staring at a girl who, for some incomprehensible reason, forgot to wear a few useful things like shoes, underwear and clothing! Amelia sighs, grinding her teeth. Perhaps something is wrong with her—her fellow students in Siya surely implied it when they didn’t state it outright. Some people, she knows, are less annoyed by the discovery of a naked person of the correct gender and age in their bedroom—especially if the intruder shows a willing intent of getting under the covers and beginning a seduction.

She doubts that the girl meant to touch her without waking her; this is misguided romance, not assault.

Assault she can handle.

Refusing the attentions of a sobbing girl, though, wasn't covered in the university curriculum.

Everyone does this nowadays. Lovers skip the whole tradition of meeting, dating, getting to know each other over a meal or two, the nervous small-talk where two people try to figure out where the other stands with regards common interests and how soon they can talk of bedding without being offensive. They don't become friends first and then wait to see if that spark of interest flares. No, everyone in the village sighs over the love and romance of a mysterious stalker. How else can someone prove their love for another, if they aren't willing to take the risk of creeping into their love-interest's house after dark?

Lyra didn't do that. Lyra sat down beside her in the library, a pile of books between them, and they spent weeks talking about the best way to drain a corpse and the benefits of mattress stitch before anyone attempted even chaste kissing. They knew they were medical students bonding over their dabbling in witchcraft and shared belief in gnome voting equality before anything as messy as love entered the discussion.

Amelia suppresses a groan and looks down at the woman.

The shopgirl—Goddess, what is her *name*?—flutters her damp eyelashes but doesn't answer. Amelia has read enough romance novels to know this as some attempt to look alluring, but she just looks like a near-stranger with an eyelash stuck in her eye. A pretty stranger, but a stranger. They've exchanged a bare handful of words at the shop, mostly requests for a pound of sugar, more tea-tree oil and can Amelia order in a selection of mandrake roots—none of the conversations leading to the kind of friendship needed for a midnight tryst. How does the girl know they're compatible in bed? How does the girl know if Amelia is even interested in bedding? What if Amelia doesn't have the required breakfast foods in the house for the next morning? Why would anyone risk such an act based on so little information?

“Well?” Amelia resists the urge to grab the stick and thump the intruder over the ear. She asked a question, a perfectly reasonable question. Social custom dictates that the girl answer. “Do you think

about how much all this is costing me? Don't you think it's bloody inconsiderate?"

The shopgirl blinks and says nothing.

Just how are they all getting in? Amelia fastened the windows and bolted the front door before going to bed, checking every lock twice; she made sure that nobody can open the catches from the outside after the last debacle, and she won't sleep through a window breaking—if anyone wants to annoy a witch by breaking her windows. Perhaps the intruder decided to risk the nesting devil in the cellar and entered by the cellar door? Just what has the world come to when not even a *devil* keeps out the lovelorn?

Why *are* these villagers are interested in her? She wears plain dresses and aprons for a reason! She doesn't try not to bore people with talk about the best ways to disinfect a worktable! She wears the bloody black broad-brimmed hat and leaves a bloodstained grimoire—one with purification spells worked on the cover, of course, because a bloodstained grimoire isn't all that sanitary—out on her kitchen bench! She named her cat Midnight! She's an awkward, divergent witch who doesn't try to be more approachable and friendly! She doesn't get anyone to fix the crooked walls or floors, she keeps seasoning herbs in bubbled glass vials and she recites fake spells when cleaning wounds just to make her patients feel more comfortable with the efficacy of her work! Short of building an altar in the yard and sacrificing chickens to some dread demon every Sunday, she can't be more witchy!

"If you're not going to refund me for my swiving matches, get up, stop crying and go home. Try asking someone else out the proper way. Tell them your name first."

The woman peers up at Amelia, now trying a wobbly sort of smile. "You're the most beautiful woman I ever saw, and I love—"

Some tiny part of her, the part of her that looks in the mirror and sees late-afternoon shadow and square shoulders and a chest that requires padding to properly fill out a gown or dress, relents—but that's silly. She's a woman. The Goddess made her. Being a woman in a less-conventional way doesn't mean she shouldn't have standards. She

doesn't want someone who invades her privacy; she wants someone who takes the time to befriend her first. Lyra did. Why should anything else matter?

"And you're a swiving stranger invading my house." Amelia folds her arms, positioning her gaze above the girl's head. Isn't she cold, with only the rug between her feet and the uneven stone floor? If Amelia's feet are freezing despite her knobbly-knitted bed socks and her patchwork quilt, why isn't the girl shivering? "Now get out before I throw my cat at you."

A soft thump sounds like Midnight streaking for the hallway, even though her cat should know better.

The woman's smile fades as she struggles to her feet with her fingers still cupping her elbow. "But ... I did all this for you. I love you."

Amelia rolls her eyes and grabs her staff, staring at the girl and trying to look witchy despite her floral-print nightgown. No, Amelia isn't a good witch in some ways, but in many ways being divergent makes her as much a witch as the real thing. The village doesn't question her post because she is good at pretending to be magical, because she does know a little script magic and studied with the Sanguarian in addition to her years in Siya. The latter makes her seem just as magical as if she does know how to summon zombies—and a good sight more useful.

Has it occurred to the girl that she'll have to return tomorrow to ask the witch who wounded her to do something about it?

Of course, working as a village witch instead of as a village doctor is its own gaping wound, because Amelia can't forget that words matter, behaviour matters: that witches, not doctors, are permitted to be strange. This isn't the job she wanted; this isn't the job for which she spent ten years in Siya. It gives her a crooked house, a monthly income and a purpose, though, and all she needs do is decorate her curtains with embroidered cobwebs, resist the need to dust her crooked bottle collection and block a few glowing spells.

"If you don't get out of my house in two minutes, I'll turn you and your family into toads. Dead toads. They'll have to bury you all in a shoebox."

“But...”

“What has ‘but’ got to do with it?” Amelia slides out of bed, sure to place her feet on the rug, and reaches for the phial she keeps on the shelf above her head. Damn the girl, getting her up out of bed after midnight—the floor is freezing! “I hope this works properly, this time. Last time I attempted a cross-species transfiguration, the target ended up with the head and body of a toad and seven legs best described as belonging to an oversized tarantula...”

The shopgirl turns for the door, yelps as she snags her toe on the crooked stone in the hallway, and thunders her way down the stairs.

“Tell everyone that if they wish to romance me, they can send a request in writing!” Amelia sighs and returns the bottle—filled with nothing more ominous than dyed water—to its place on the shelf. “*With references!*”

The front door, with its ominous-but-useful-for-scaring-people creak, slams shut, followed by the crunch of the woman’s footsteps as she runs down the gravel path towards the village. Amelia waits until the noise fades before sliding her feet into her old boots, taking the lamp and following the girl downstairs. She chews her lip, grumbling, as she checks the windows, pets the devil, jams the cellar door shut with a sliver of wood, and sets down lines of pepper and dried basil leaves in the hope that the villagers think them a magical protection. Tomorrow, she’ll have to do something about the cellar. A dangerous-looking creature that likes the dark and doesn’t make too much noise will do nicely, although Amelia never imagined that the nesting devil won’t be threatening enough. Something must be done; no more having her sleep interrupted by the desperate whims of people thinking themselves in love!

She stomps back up the stairs and stops only to greet Midnight, now sitting on the topmost step with his long, black tail swishing back and forth. “Goddess! I wasn’t really going to throw you!” She sits back down beside her cat, rests the lamp on one step and holds out one hand for him to sniff; only when he starts rubbing the side of his face against her hand does Amelia offer an apologetic scratch under the chin. “Do they

think that because they're pretty, I'm not going to care if they invade my house? Do they think that because they're naked, I'm going to tear my clothes off and ravish them? Why is this the fashion? Why don't they want to get to know people first? Why?"

Midnight just tilts his head so that Amelia can shift her fingers into his favourite scratchy place behind his ear.

"I'm just too old fashioned," she says, and even though Midnight doesn't answer her, that's the benefit of a cat: no contradicting, no arguing, just a quiet, tactile presence in return for food and petting.

"She is gorgeous. Well, if you're into women, so my appreciation is aesthetic, but you are. You know you don't have to kick these people out because I'm here? I don't mind if you want to take some lovely woman and ravish away. Or just kiss. Or sit by the fire and stare into each other's eyes while the stars whirl overhead..."

People, on the other hand!

Amelia jerks and turns her head. At the top of the landing sits two doors: one leading to her room, one leading to the guest room. Kit, Amelia's cousin and professional annoyance, stands in the guest room doorway, wobbling, on two crutches. Even as she watches, he leans against the door frame, his nightshirt rumpled. His left foot rests square against the floor, bare despite the cold; his right leg, ending halfway below his knee and swathed in a bundle of bandages, just hangs. They'll need to work, she thinks, on the way his upper body twists to balance himself, a way that will be a problem if allowed to become a habit.

He beams at her, though, a short man with pillow-flattened hair sticking out at a variety of angles, and that's the most frustrating thing. Tears she can deal with. Misery and grief are expected. This insufferable good cheer, as though this is no more inconvenient to him—despite the ashy undertone to his dark skin and the weight he's lost—than losing a fingernail, makes her want to beat him upside the head. Several times.

"What the swiving hell do you think you're bloody doing? Get back to bed!" Amelia grabs the lamp and leaps to her feet as fast as is possible without slopping kerosene. She knew it was a bad idea to leave crutches within Kit's reach after the horror of teaching him how to use them, but

the fear of what happens if she's called out and cannot get someone to sit with him made it seem the safest decision. Still a terrible idea, given his propensity to escapades and inability to consider the consequences. "Now! If you tear a stitch I'm going to punch you so hard you won't have any teeth left!"

Kit just grins, showing most of those same teeth. He doesn't move, leaving Amelia to wonder if it's because he's feeling good enough to annoy her or if it's because he's too worn out to do anything but lean. "No, you won't. You won't take the risk of my falling over. Of course, not wanting sex or romance is a valid option. Do you know that it's an option, Amelia? Or—no, I think you don't feel that kind of attraction until you befriend them first, based on the letters you sent Grandmother while in Siya—"

She doesn't speak so much as give a rattling scream of frustration. Every time she thinks he's reached a new degree of interfering, he always, *always*, finds a way to surpass it. Maybe she should make him walk past a basilisk guarding every entrance, even though Kit told the tale of his neighbour's pets, a miscalculated step and Plumeria's surprise axe-wielding skills with an uncharacteristic and sobering quiet.

No. Amelia sighs, catches herself grinding her teeth and starts chewing on her nails instead. Even she knows that's meaner a thought than is warranted. She can fantasise, though. Given that Kit spent most of their childhood coming up with new ways to poke his nose into Amelia's life, she's earned the right to imagine how she might best torture him.

Besides, they both know that she's a master of bluster.

It occurs to her that might have something to do with why the villagers don't fear her.

"Once you became friends with Lyra, good friends, everything took a distinct turn for the romantic, I remember. Maybe you didn't notice? I mean, she's the only woman you ever kissed, yes? There's a word for it, now, although referring to someone as 'demi' is rather confusing, since demigods tend to do that, too."

Amelia draws a breath and points towards the spare room doorway. What is he doing? “Get back to your bloody bed!”

“Demiomantic. Maybe demisexual, too?” Kit sounds not even slightly perturbed, and he makes no attempt to turn around. “Surely, it’s in your medical books, somewhere? Anyway, did I ever tell you how I found out about it? I was sitting in a taproom in Raugue with a swordsman I picked up in Arsh. I don’t recall how I got on the subject of listing previous lovers, mind you—probably had something to do with the unexpectedly good whiskey—but he nodded and asked if I’d considered the fact that there might be a word for the truth that I’m chronically uninterested in keeping a partner—”

The only thing to do is stalk past him, enter her bedroom, give Midnight time to join her and then slam the door shut loudly enough to make Kit stop talking.

“Demiomantic!” he yells, just as Amelia curses the too-wide crack between door and floor. “We know our own, Amelia!”

She chews her smallest fingernail down to the quick, straining to hear the creaking, tapping noise of a man on crutches crossing the less-than-flat floor. One thud, a grasping or dragging noise too light to be that of a body hitting the floor, silence.

“Amelia? I promise I won’t say anything if you’ll, well, help me...”

She opens the door and glares across the landing.

“Please?” Kit doesn’t so much as lean against the doorframe as clutch it like a drowning sailor clinging to a spar. “I tried to turn and it got *dizzy*.”

She doesn’t have to tell him he deserves it: Amelia just grins.

He doesn’t speak as they inch their way through the door and over four stone slabs of varying heights, and he still doesn’t speak once they reach the narrow bed, one taking up the entire length of the room. He must be tired, she thinks, because by the time he lowers himself down on the bed and releases his grip on her nightdress Kit still hasn’t broken this most unnatural silence—and this is the man who considers bathing a suitable time for discussing the specific usage in spell constructs for

every possible synonym of the word “red”. No, he just settles himself, his teeth pressed against his lip, and slumps against the pillow.

She wonders if getting up, crutching across the room and talking at her, however unnecessary, was his way of trying to find a shade of normality in a life that has abruptly ceased being normal.

“Trade,” Amelia says, knowing she’ll live to regret it. She stalks over to the basin beside the bed, fills it with the remainder of the water in the pitcher and scrubs her hands until the room smells of tea-tree soap. “If you let me poke at you, I’ll let you tell me about whatever word you found for your bed bouncing. As long as you don’t tell me what you did with the swordsman in Raugue.”

Kit’s sudden smile is broad enough that Amelia wonders, for a moment, on the honesty of his quiet. She can’t put him past pretending just to manipulate her into talking, after all. “Nothing, actually. I was too taken aback by the idea that it is possible to be romantically disinclined. Aromatic. It explains so much about the time I panicked and, uh, climbed out the window to escape a Malvadan merchant who wanted to introduce me to his parents. I admit it wasn’t the most well-thought-out decision I’d ever made...”

His voice softens and his smile fades, his eyes flicking up to the rafters.

Amelia dries her hands, grabs the bean bag from the dresser and tosses it onto Kit’s chest. He grunts, but he picks it up and starts teasing at the beans encased in the flannel, while she pulls her chair up to the end of the bed, folds back the covers and starts unwinding.

She’s old fashioned. Simple, uncomplicated. In a world where a divergent shift woman who trained as a doctor and works as a witch offers complication enough, it isn’t a terrible thing to want to reject something that adds an extra layer of difference to the person she is. She’s just old fashioned, and that isn’t a bad thing to be—certainly not if it means she doesn’t find herself in the village lock-up after entering someone else’s home!

Yet there’s an understanding the village shares, a feeling that doesn’t include her. She understands running away from someone wanting

something she can't return—or forcing them to run away from her. She doesn't understand running toward someone else in the hope that they too share her desire. She doesn't understand, not in the heart, the books she reads. She doesn't understand love or want at first sight, she doesn't understand love or want without prior friendship or connection, and she doesn't understand the love or want that drives shopgirls to risk it all on an irascible witch.

She doesn't understand the kind of love and want that dominates song, poem, legend, novel.

Admitting that feels strangely liberating.

“You climbed *out* someone else's window? Just to avoid meeting his parents? Because you didn't...?”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Kit jerks the bag in time with each word, sighs. “I didn't love him like that, but he thought I did. I haven't loved anyone like that. I've thought, a few times, if I just gave it longer, maybe ... but it doesn't happen. Not the way books say romance does.” Kit shrugs, raises his right hand to his ear and rattles the bag. He still doesn't look at her, her hands or the stump being revealed under layers of linen, and she can't help but wonder if he's thinking about the likelihood of his climbing out of future windows. “There's words for us too, Amelia. Fewer stories, but words nonetheless. Maybe I should write a book while I'm cooped up here...”

Amelia draws a breath and wonders. There's the love in books and songs and hope, wild and incomprehensible, but there's also the love of a cousin who knows she doesn't really mean it when she threatens to lock him in the cellar, or the love of a cousin who gets under her skin but knows her door is always open. There's the love that's history and the sharing of words with someone else, words spoken by someone who knows just how much they matter.

She isn't soft, isn't gentle, isn't kind. She tries, though, to survive this confusing world of people who behave in ways unpredictable, and maybe that, too, is a form of love. The love of a pretend witch for her people, brittle and fragile and born of exasperation, but what else keeps her rolling out of bed to deal with her village? What else makes her sit

in the evening and embroider cobwebs on her curtains? What else has her here beside a man who enjoys frustrating her? What else has her wondering that this story, this time, might be hers?

Amelia March knows she isn't an agreeable person, but she isn't void of love.

“Tell me about this, Kit. Demiromantic?”

Love isn't something she ever considered in need of categorising and labelling.

Maybe it should be.

# additional works

Marchverse

Old Fashioned

Certain Eldritch Artefacts

The Unnatural Philosophy of Kit March

The Eagle Court

Their Courts of Crows

Crooked Words

## about the author

K. A. Cook is a panalterous, aro-ace, genderless, autistic feminist who experiences chronic pain and mental illness. They write creative non-fiction, personal essays and novels about all of the above on the philosophy that if the universe is going to make life interesting, they might as well make interesting art.

When they're not writing, they design flyers, edit and administrate websites. They can also be found collecting fashion dolls and playing Magic the Gathering. They sew, glue, craft and make accessories for both in addition to handbound books and stim toys.

They blog at **Queer Without Gender** and **Eldritch Esoterica** on Tumblr. They also review and compile information on stim toys at **Stim Toy Box**.

They are the author of the in-progress web serial **The Unnatural Philosophy of Kit March** and the short fiction collection **Crooked Words**.