

## Beetle and the Hollowbones

Eliza Layne

Simon & Schuster / Atheneum, July 2020

### Reviews

- [Booklist](#) (1 June 2020. Starred review): “Preteen goblin Beetle’s potions studies can wait: she’d much rather hang out at the ‘Allows Town mall with her best pal, Blob Ghost, a non-binary, jelly-like shape-shifter who communicates through their transformations. Beetle lives with Gran, the powerful Town Witch, but she thinks that the kind of magic passed down in their family isn’t “real magic.” Stirring up all kinds of feelings, Beetle’s former best friend, Kat Hollowbones, is back in ‘Allows Town with her aunt Marla. When Marla’s plans to return the town to its former glory threaten to harm Blob Ghost and exploit Kat’s powerful talent for sorcery, Beetle summons the magical abilities Gran knew she possessed, and Gran’s there to help. Layne, creator of the Demon Street weekly fantasy webcomic, grounds Beetle’s bighearted adventure in earthly settings like the mall and Gran’s cozy cottage, and she fills ‘Allows Town with a gleeful array of fantastic creatures: no two are alike. Her vibrant, comical, and overall super-appealing art is a good match for sometimes-scary and high-octane scenes. Beetle’s hero’s journey has the adorably vulnerable Blob Ghost at its heart; many kids will also relate to the friendship-and-more story between Beetle and Kat. A high-spirited debut about learning to trust one’s heart and instincts.”
- [Kirkus](#) (12 April 2020. Starred review): “This splashy fantasy graphic novel blends rollicking adventure with inclusive teen themes. Though bustling with goblins, witches, ghosts, and skeletons, this beautifully drawn graphic novel addresses important questions facing even mortal kids. It tells the story of Beetle, a young goblin and aspiring witch who is torn between hanging out at the mall with pal Blob Ghost and serious study. When childhood friend Kat Hollowbone returns to Beetle’s town to apprentice with her sorceress aunt, it disrupts Beetle’s friendship with Blob Ghost as well as Beetle’s ideas about identity and relationships. The story quickly develops urgency as Kat’s aunt emerges as a villain intent on demolishing the mall, thereby endangering Blob Ghost, who is bound to that location. Layne’s renderings of her paranormal cast are highly evocative. Green-skinned Beetle has large, pointy ears and a tufted tail; skeletal Aunt Hollowbones has a spindly bird skull for a head. Climactic action scenes are expertly rendered. Diversity is a strength in this female-driven text, which features a tenderly portrayed LGBTQ+ love story between Kat and Beetle. Wise older women act as mentors, body diversity is casually positive, and Blob Ghost uses they/them pronouns throughout. Amid the fantasy elements, Beetle, Kat, and Blob Ghost text, video chat, post pictures online, and look at one another’s social media feeds—and Beetle is forced, grumbling, to take the bus to the mall. This inclusive fantasy adventure passes the Bechdel test with flying colors. (Graphic fantasy. 10-14). Our Verdict: Get It”

- [Publisher's Weekly](#) (June 3, 2020. Starred review): "Though Beetle's formidable grandmother has long taught her goblin magic at home—all bones, potions, and ancient family practices—the green-eared girl yearns for and idolizes sorcery, which society deems the more powerful craft. It's also the power that Beetle's childhood best friend—skeletal, undead Kat Hollowbone—has cultivated at prestigious schools. When Kat returns to take up an apprenticeship with her emotionally abusive aunt Marla, much has changed: neither girl writes fan fiction or role-plays anymore, and Beetle's closest friend is now Blob Ghost, a nonbinary spirit haunting and bound to a local mall. As Marla seeks to demolish the mall to reclaim the Hollowbones' ancestral estate, Beetle and Kat reconnect and work together to free Blob Ghost. Solid character work by debut creator Layne slowly builds themes of outgrown childhood friendship, cultural difference, consent, and queer romance that highlight the lush world she's created. A saturated palette that changes and brightens amid strong shows of power, and resonant interpersonal elements—including Beetle's bond with her grandmother—work in harmonious tandem to deliver a stalwart story of magic, witches, and the mall. Ages 8–12."
- [School Library Journal](#) (1 June 2020. Starred Review): "Gr 4-8—Beetle, a 12-year-old goblin, lives with her grandmother, the helpful town witch. When she's not bored to tears being homeschooled on goblin magic, she's hanging out with her best friend, the teeny and adorable Blob Ghost, a floating, speechless, but incredibly expressive red orb who haunts the local mall. Though magical forces prevent Blob Ghost from leaving the mall, Beetle is certain that the two will always be pals—until Beetle's former best friend, Kat Hollowbone, arrives. Beetle and Kat don't get along quite the same as before—there might be feelings involved now—but Kat isn't here alone. Kat's a sorcerer's apprentice for her menacing aunt, Marla Hollowbone, who just happens to have bought out the mall. And unless Beetle and Kat do something, the mall will be demolished, with Blob Ghost still trapped inside. Cartoonist Layne makes a stellar debut. Simultaneously gorgeous and goofy, the artwork is reminiscent of the animated series *Bee and Puppycat* and a delicious love letter to shoujo manga. Layne's supernatural cast is fantastic, from green-skinned Beetle and her grandmother to Kat and Marla, respectively, skeletal cat and bird creatures. Characters' LGBTQ identities, such as Beetle and Kat's changing relationship, as well as the use of the they pronoun for Blob Ghost, are gently woven throughout the narrative. Relying on intersecting plotlines in lieu of a more straightforward romp, Layne conveys themes of independence, identity, and realization of one's potential. VERDICT Action-packed yet heartfelt, short and sweet yet riveting, this one is not to be missed."
- [School Library Journal](#) ("100 Scope Notes." 4 Aug. 2020, "Best New Book"): "Sometimes a debut comes along that so thoroughly shakes you out of your semi-jaded reading life malaise that you find yourself stopping mid-page to ask the universe, "What IS this?!" An absolutely fresh and winning take on the world of witchcraft, Aliza Layne's *Beetle & the Hollowbones* is as vibrant a debut as you're likely to find this year... The artwork (featuring coloring by Natalie Riess and Kristen Acampora) is bright and slick, beautifully depicting a

story where magic and fantasy meet the bedroom world of a modern tween. Character expressions nearly leap off the page, and inventive panels bring out the action in new ways. A modern and engaging debut, *Beetle & the Hollowbones* is going to please a lot of young readers.”

- [School Library Journal](#) (“Good Comics for Kids.” 11 Aug. 2020): “Like a lot of teenagers used to do, Beetle spends her time hanging out at the local mall. However, she doesn’t do so for the standard reasons, like there being nothing more exciting to do in her small town, or that her options are limited by the fact that she can’t yet drive. No, she spends so much time at the mall because her best friend, Blob Ghost, is forced to haunt the mall by supernatural circumstances they have no memory of, and can’t get past the parking lot without hitting an invisible barrier. This conflict pretty perfectly encapsulate webcomics creator Aliza Layne’s debut graphic novel *Beetle & The Hollowbones*, which is something like an urban fantasy (or, perhaps, a suburban fantasy), but turned on its head; rather than couching certain fantastical elements in a modern day city, Beetle is an entire old-school fantasy world of witches and goblins and dragons organized along the template of a modern, mundane life.... Blob Ghost’s manner of speaking is just one of the many inventive, imaginative pleasures to be found in Layne’s book. The character designs are also quite amazing, deep and rich enough to recall the settings of touchstones like *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Spirited Away*, in that there is no such thing as a boring background character, but even each of Layne’s creations are rather peculiar, defying easy categorization.... *Beetle & The Hollowbones* is a pretty much perfect middle-school graphic novel, but beyond its appeal to its target audience, it’s an extremely rewarding read for anyone interested in comics and their construction, thanks to Layne’s creative character designs, clever lettering, and innovative ways of telling the story.”

## Awards

- American Library Association. [Stonewall Honor Books in Children’s and Young Adult Literature](#), 2021
  - Additional listing for this award: [Stonewall Book Award - Mike Morgan & Larry Romans Children’s & Young Adult Literature Award, Honor](#), 2021
- Maryland Library Association. [Black Eyed Susan Book Award Nominee](#), 2021-22. See <https://www.maslmd.org/guidelines-for-participation> for information on the award.
- Children’s Book Council. [Kid’s Book Choice Awards, Third Grade to Fourth Grade Book of the Year Finalist](#), 2021.

## Lists

- *Kirkus Reviews*. [Best Middle Grades Books of the Year, 2020](#)
- *School Library Journal*. [Best Graphic Novels, 2020](#)
- American Library Association. [Rainbow Book List, Graphic Fiction](#), 2021

- Bank Street College of Education. [Best Children’s Books of the Year, Twelve to Fourteen, 2021](#)
- *Book Riot*. [Best Comics We Read, October-December 2020](#).

### Response to challenges

- Clay County District Schools (Green Cove Springs, FL) - 04 Nov, 2022. [Reported as being reviewed](#) (04 Nov. 2022). [Running district spreadsheet with decisions](#) lists “Beetle [sic] and the Hollowbones” as “Keep: JH & HS Levels”.

### References

*Beetle & the Hollowbones*. (2020, May 1). Kirkus. Retrieved March 23, 2023, from <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/aliza-layne/beetle-amp-the-hollowbones/>

*Beetle & the Hollowbones*. (2020, June 3). Publisher’s Weekly. Retrieved March 23, 2023, from <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-5344-4154-5>

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