

Enough with the Tropes: Issues with LGBTQ+ Representation in YA Fantasy

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The representation of LGBTQ+ characters in YA fantasy has undeniably evolved over time, as the genre has gradually become more diverse and inclusive. However, there are still some notable issues regarding the fair representation of LGBTQ+ characters in YA fantasy novels.

First and foremost, YA fantasy books that feature queer characters can sometimes be difficult to find. Under the umbrella of YA fiction, the science fiction genre often buries fantasy, despite these genres having their own distinct features. Within this less-represented YA fantasy genre, LGBTQ+ fantasy* is often eclipsed by the more prevalent heterosexual, cisgender plots (Stepaniuk, 2018). Over the past few decades, there has been a substantial increase of queer representation in many areas of our North American society, so ideally this growing awareness, acceptance and celebration of diversity will be positively reflected the YA fantasy genre in the years to come.

While any book that represents LGBTQ+ characters is a step in the right direction, YA fantasy has unfortunately developed some bad habits in its representation of this group. The main slip-up is its repetition of tropes (Presnell, 2018). Most of us are familiar with classic literature tropes or

clichés, such as damsels in distress, evil monsters, brave knights, and living happily ever after. In YA fantasy, however, there is so much freedom to create non-conventional storylines—so why is there so much repetition when it comes to queer characters’ plotlines?

Finding LGBTQ+ characters in YA fantasy is rare enough as it is, and tracking down storylines with queer main characters who get to survive is even rarer. As bisexual blogger and author April Presnell puts it, “...yes, in fantasy a lot of characters die, but queer characters die a lot and it has created an association between queerness and tragedy” (2018). This is a trope that should be avoided for many reasons, primarily because teens who read fantasy—whether they are queer or not—ought to feel proud and empowered when they find relatable characters on the page, rather than sad or discouraged by constant, seemingly inevitable deaths.

Another YA fantasy trope that is arguably valuable, but still overused, is the “coming out” storyline for LGBTQ+ characters (Aderhold, 2018). April Presnell also discussed this in her blog, noting that she would love to find YA fantasy “...where sexuality simply is. There are plenty of books out there about coming out, and that’s great, but we need more books where being gay isn’t a plot point. Our entire existence isn’t about being queer, and we need characters that reflect that” (2018). LGBTQ+ people are just people, after all, and so their characters ought to be given storylines that focus on more diverse plotlines, rather than always focusing on their coming out journeys. Fortunately, there is evidently a new trend in YA fantasy in which “plotlines aren’t solely about the characters’ sexuality or coming out. Most of the time, it’s interwoven within an already full storyline and plot progression” (Aderhold, 2018). Avoiding this trope would not devalue coming out storylines, but rather offer a more well-rounded exploration of queer fantastical characters and their capabilities.

Trends and tropes have existed in literature for centuries, and are not likely to disappear anytime soon. They are not always detrimental to plotlines or representation, though in LGBTQ+ YA fantasy, the common recurring queer storylines ought to be reexamined. In the event that a YA fantasy collection is being established, consider evaluating LGBTQ+ content and selecting materials with queer protagonists who get to survive and conquer epic, diverse storylines.

*Fortunately, many book bloggers and fantasy enthusiasts have dedicated their time to combing through this limited genre and compiling lists of exceptional LGBTQ+ YA fantasy books, some of which can be found in the book list following this article.

References:

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