Exploring the Evolution of LGBTQ+ Representation in YA Literature

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LGBTQ+ representation in YA literature has seen many changes since the publication of the first widely reviewed YA novel with a possibly LGBTQ+ main character was published in 1969 (*I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, by John Donovan) (Jenkins & Cart, 2018). While there is now more diversity in YA content than ever before, LGBTQ+ representation in fiction and nonfiction geared toward young adults has still been slow to grow, full of problematic representation, and often subject to censorship and banning for biased reasons such as "'immoral' gay content" or "promoting a homosexual agenda" (National Coalition Against Censorship [NCAC], 2019, entries 3 and 20).

Prior to 1969, while books in the newly burgeoning young adult genre may have included incidental and often stereotypical mentions of homosexuality, the books' main characters were not LGBTQ+ and mentions were at best brief and at worst openly homophobic and derogatory. LGBTQ+ characters, especially those who were gender nonconforming, were sometimes dehumanized and called "it," as in Madeline L'Engle's 1945 novel *The Small Rain.* In 1942, Maureen Daly's young adult novel *Seventeenth Summer* uses the small-town main character's shock and surprise at encountering a stereotypically gay musician in a Chicago club to emphasize her "innocence" and inexperience with the big city (Jenkins & Cart, 2018, p. 6). Even as LGBTQ+ content and characters slowly began to appear in mainstream YA fiction, they were still largely invisible. In Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, for example, even simple physical contact and kissing occurs "off-screen" between chapters and is never directly addressed by the main characters (Jenkins & Cart, 2018; Wickens, 2011). The book then ends on a very ambiguous note with the main character telling the other boy "I guess the important thing is not to do it again" and the two characters "agree[ing] to 'respect' each other" (Jenkins & Cart, 2018, p. 12)

Publishers have been slow to allow diverse representation of gender and sexuality, especially in books meant for teens (Jenkins & Cart, 2018). Early novels for young adults tended to depict homosexuality and nonconforming gender expression as a "passing phase," one that would doom those characters to isolated, sad lives filled with ostracism, guilt, violence, tragedy, and death if they did not return to following heteronormal conventions (Wickens, 2011). The price to remain true to oneself was often depicted as too high; characters were victims whose communities turned against them, and the only way to regain acceptance was to closet oneself, as happened to Jeff in Sandra Scoppettone's *Trying Hard to Hear You* (1974) (Jenkins & Cart, 2018). By and large, homosexuality was treated as an "otherness" that was "both unnatural and transient" (Jenkins & Cart, 2018, p. 13).

Problematic representation of LGBTQ+ characters remained prominent well throughout the next several decades. Very few YA books with LGBTQ+ characters were published in the 1970s, and it was not until 1979, with the English publication of David Rees's *In the Tent*, that any mention of a gay or lesbian community was even made in YA fiction (in the U.S., *In the Tent* was not published until 1985). It was not

until the 1980s and 1990s that a representation began to very gradually shift toward more progressive representation of LGBTQ+ characters. However, isolation and hardship were still common themes and *if* novels mentioned fictional queer or gay communities, it was either in the past or off-page (Jenkins & Cart, 2018; Wickens, 2011). Jenkins & Cart (2018) note that authors often continued to show a kind of "cause-and-effect relationship" between queerness, physical violence, and death:

> As late as 1997, for example, Jack Gantos's *Desire Lines* eerily echoes *Happy Endings* [1978, by Sandra Scoppettone] with its story of two teenage lesbians who, when discovered by a boy in the act of making love, instantly enter into a murder-suicide pact as if this were an entirely normal and natural response to being outed. (p. 28)

By 1992, only around 60 YA novels prominently featuring queer characters had been published. Of these, only three featured queer characters of color (the first YA novel featuring a queer teen of color was *Ruby* by Rosa Guy in 1976) and nearly all faced problems ranging from misrepresentation to a heavy-handed focus on the negative experiences faced by LGBTQ+ youth. Letters beyond the L and G in the LGBTQ+ acronym also continued to suffer from lack of representation. The first YA novel with bisexual content (M.E. Kerr's *"Hello," I Lied*) was not published until 1997. It was not until 2004 that the first YA novel to feature a transgender main character, Julie Ann Peters's *Luna*, was published. In 2007, Ellen Wittlinger's novel *Parrotfish* became the first YA novel to feature a transgender female-to-male character. The first intersex character in YA fiction did not appear until 2014, with the publication of Bridget Birdsall's *Double Exposure* (Jenkins & Cart, 2018).

Today, mainstream publishing companies are gradually becoming more willing to include LGBTQ+ content. Some LGBTQ+ YA novels have received widespread praise and become longstanding best-sellers, such as Benjamin Sáenz's 2012 YA novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Books featuring bisexual characters are on the rise, but as of the publication of Jenkins & Cart's book in 2018, only 21 YA books in total had been published featuring bisexual content. Transgender and intersex representation are also finally seeing a slight upsurge since the Netflix show *Orange is the New Black* showed the transition of Laverne Cox's character; in 2016 alone, twelve YA titles featuring transgender characters were published (Jenkins & Cart, 2018).

Authors are also less constrained by traditional publishing formats than they used to be. With the advent of online self-publishing on global platforms like Amazon Kindle, e-commerce sites such as Gumroad where anyone can sell their work, and online crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo, ever more diverse authors are finding ways to spread their voices. Writing and posting both fanfiction and original fiction on sites such as Fanfiction.net, ArchiveOfOurOwn.org, and FictionPress.com allows anyone with internet access to write and share their ideas and experiences. NaNoWriMo.org ("National Novel Writing Month") encourages anyone to write a novel in 30 days each November and provides encouragement, resources for budding authors of all ages, and support through

online forums, locally hosted events, and free workshops (Nanowrimo, 2019).

LGBTQ+ characters have slowly become more visible, and YA books featuring queer characters grow in number each year. However, published YA novels are still overwhelmingly about white, male, cisgender, closeted teens, and many still show the faded reflections of earlier problematic representation. In 2017 and 2018, only 18 YA books were published by LGBTQ+ authors of color, and in 2016, 81% of LGBTQ+ YA fiction featured cisgender boys or girls as the main character (Aviles, 2019). Books with asexual, genderqueer, and two-spirit representation are few and far between. There is also a notable lack of LGBTQ+ representation in genre fiction such as fantasy, mystery, and science fiction. LGBTQ+ stories still overwhelmingly feature "coming out" narratives and realistic fiction that focuses on the difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ teens (e.g. bullying, rejection, and self-harm) (Aviles, 2019; Jenkins & Cart, 2018).

While queer representation in YA fiction has improved considerably since its first appearances, it still has a long way to go. Queer YA literature needs to expand beyond coming out stories; we need more stories about queer people that aren't *just* about their queerness. LGBTQ+ teens need to know that life has more to offer them than hardship, and they need to be able to see themselves in stories and be able to empathize with characters. It is important for queer teens and their heterosexual and cisgender peers to read good books featuring LGBTQ+ characters. Showing both the great diversity of human experience and the commonalities between queer youth and their peers helps cull the fear, hatred, and demonization so often born of ignorance (Jenkins & Cart, 2018).

As educators and information professionals, we have a duty to best serve all who come to us for help finding needed resources. By reading queer stories, advocating for better representation, and being willing to listen, learn, and share, we can support better literary representation for underrepresented or misrepresented communities and create a better world in which to live.

References

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