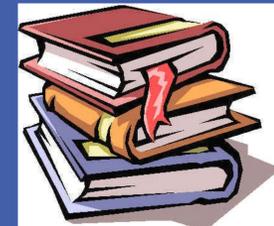


The Ethical and Moral Responsibility of Producing Queer Young Adult Literature



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Abstract

Queer Young Adult fiction has an ethical and moral responsibility to produce works that accurately portray their selected marginalized groups. The producers of this genre which is fairly new, have a responsibility to do so because these youth groups are at a higher risk for suicide, substance abuse, homelessness and unemployment. When the risk factors of being queer intersect with their racial and/or ethnic identity they are even more likely to experience these problems.

I set out to read popular novels in this genre using queer and feminist theory I have learned over the years. There are not very many to pick from though in recent years, the number of queer young adult literature available has grown. I chose three in each category, excluding asexuality because at this point in time - I could only find one fictional work depicting an actual asexual character.

I will highlight what each book has done well and what it has failed in terms of its responsibilities. I will also try to show a direction to take the genre in the future to help queer youth see themselves positively in the literature they read.

Terms Used:

Heteronormativity is "The presumption that the most legitimate form of sexual identity, desire and behavior is heterosexuality." (Cover, 120)

Homonormativity is "A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (Duggan 2002: 179)." (Cover, 122) These novels display safe representations of queer people. They show the majority that to be queer means to be "affluent", fit, "aesthetically competent", white, and following along with "other narrow depictions." (Cover, 119)

My Reading List

Lesbian

- Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden
- Keeping You a Secret* by Julie Ann Peters
- Kissing Kate* by Lauren Myracle

Gay

- Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez
- I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip* by John Donovan
- David Inside Out* by Lee Bantle

Bisexual

- The Bermudez Triangle* by Maureen Johnson
- Boyfriends with Girlfriends* by Alex Sanchez
- Empress of The World* by Sara Ryan

Asexual

- No Touching* by Aileen Deng

Transgender

- Parrotfish* by Ellen Wittlinger
- Almost Perfect* by Brian Katcher
- I Am J* by Kris Beam

Analyzing the Texts

Annie on My Mind (1982)

- "Don't let Ignorance win. Let Love." (232)
- First Queer YA novel to end "well." but forcibly outed
- Good representation of two young girls falling in love
- Not sexualized
- Realistic scenes where Liza and Annie question their sexuality.
- Older Lesbian mentors
- More positive message about being a lesbian

Keeping You a Secret (2003)

- Good representation, not written as well as *Annie*
- Two main characters: Holland and Cece (out lesbian)
- Sexual Harassment directed toward Cece
 - "Come on, one kiss. Try it, you'll like it." (69)
- Holland forcibly outed to her family
 - Kicked out of her home, loses all college money, thinks about dropping out of school to support herself with two jobs
- A system of support: Cece's Family and the LGBTQ Youth Center
- Deals with women's lives and how their sexuality impacts their lives
- This is the "horror story" narrative

Kissing Kate (2003)

- Realistic Portrayal of teenage girls' lives
- A shared kiss split up Lissa and Kate's long term friendship (internalized homophobia)
- Lissa is being set up on a date with a boy by her friend:
 - "Even me, I guess, pressuring you to be someone you weren't. That's the horrific fate you've been marching off toward all this time, even though deep inside you knew you shouldn't." (197-198)
- Never really "comes out" one way or the other, the implication of her being a lesbian is heavy, however

I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip. (1969)

- First YA novel to deal with queer themes
- It did not do a whole lot of representation
- Davy develops a crush on and kisses his friend from school
- Davy blames kissing his friend for the death of his beloved dog
- Davy wants to never do it again but his friend says:
 - "I don't care. If you think it's dirty or something like that, I wouldn't do it again. If I were you." (197)
- Good for its time, perhaps

David Inside Out (2009)

- Operates from a (physical) homonormative perspective and heteronormative sexual perspective
- David self harms snapping a rubber band
- Sean (the crush of David) attempts to force him to have oral sex
- David's friend brushes it off as David complains about it
- Misogyny: "'Besides, I don't put it in my mouth.'" (73)
- Male sexuality is also portrayed to be criticized: Sean's not gay he just "likes getting off" (73)

Rainbow Boys (2001)

- Three different boys' perspective, Nelson, Jason and Kyle
- Deals heavily with sexual education, HIV, questioning one's sexuality
- Character of color - Jason. Also bisexual
- Current teen dating trends: online dating/hook ups
- "Gay bashing" -> Physical attacks against Nelson
- Supportive parents
- Clinical novel

Boyfriends With Girlfriends (2011)

- Tackles Bisexuality well, uses characters to demonstrate the point: "cop out" "But why didn't he just take the next step and say he was gay?" (23)
- Two people of color: Sergio and Kimiko
- Fetishization: "'Kimiko? Really? That's Japanese!'" Allie was totally into anything Japanese." (4). "'Yeah, I'm so psyched she's Japanese.'" (11)
- Operates from a physical homonormative stand point

The Bermudez Triangle (2004)

- Two girls fall in love over the summer while friend is away
- The straight friend is a woman of color and operates as a function to progress the plot and help the reader understand what is going on between the two girls and offer acceptance
- Accidentally outed, mixed reactions from parents
- We have one girl who refuses to be labeled as bisexual or lesbian. She could be interpreted **demisexual** or **bisexual** but ultimately it's up her to define herself
- One character comes out as a lesbian and assimilates into gay culture
- While the other who doesn't have a label, does not
- Not a very positive representation, but realistic and relatable.

Empress of The World (2001)

- Mostly deals with the sexuality of two girls at summer camp
- Neither is condemned, it's a safe and controlled environment
- Friends care but there is bi-phobia and Nicola responds to it well:
 - "I've liked boys before, I probably will again, so I believe that the appropriate word is bisexual, since you're so desperate to give me a label." (139)
- By the end of the novel there are no labels given, they just are
- Good Representation but no parental reaction

Parrotfish (2007)

- Grady, white heterosexual transgender teen
- Operates from the heteronormative perspective
- Encourages gender exploration
- Faces adversity in school system
- Relatively accepting family
- Does not address bisexuality in a book all about "grey" areas

I Am J (2011)

- Mixed Character, Puerto Rican: J
- Internalized homophobia
- Heteronormative perspective on relationships
- Unaccepting parents
- Kicked out of home with a supportive LGBTQ shelter for teens
- Becomes obsessed with transitioning/hormones
- Obtains hormones legally

Almost Perfect (2010)

- Main character: Logan, a white, heterosexual, cisgender male
- Sage uses illegally obtained hormones
- Violence due to transmisogyny
- "Sage is a guy. A boy. A MAN! I had never been so disgusted. How could I not have known? Her large hands. Her height. Christ, her husky voice. And I'd fallen for it. Jesus, I'd fallen for it completely. I'd kissed a boy. That made me a fag, didn't it?" (Loc.1357.)
- The idea that trans people "deceive"
- She is suicidal, ends up living as a man again but is unsure
- Bad representation.

No Touching (2009)

- Main character: *Chinese woman in her 20s*
- Good clinical information about asexuality
- Race was talked about quite a lot
- Character is somewhat flushed out
- Character persuaded into sex by best friend

Our Youth Deserve Better

• While reading, I came to the correct conclusion that there are homonormative values and they are mostly in the novels featuring gay males while transgender novels had both homonormative and heteronormative values weighing the texts down. We don't see particularly favorable representations in these transgender novels.

• In the novels featuring lesbians, the theme was handled quite well. They particularly showed how sexuality impacts their lives as young women. They also faced implications of sexual violence. I found it interesting that *David Inside Out* broached the topic but never seemed to follow through. Male sexuality is also very one sided and seems to be obsessed with physical looks and less emotional closeness unless we look at *Rainbow Boys*.

• All of the novels except for *Boyfriends With Girlfriends* didn't seem to keep their queer characters isolated, either. They were friends with each other while in all the others, lesbians stuck with lesbians, gay boys stuck with other gay boys, girls stuck with girls, boys stuck with boys. There was not a whole lot of intermingling between the groups.

• The lack of asexual representation is disconcerting. There appeared to be only one fictional attempt at describing the lives of asexual individuals and the writing in the book was very, very poor. The representation was also muddled down with unimportant sex scenes where she was badgered by her best friend to the point she gave in even though he *knew* she was asexual but it didn't "matter." The book was and seemed like asexual 101 that never seemed to follow up on helping her find a relationship like she wanted. The book, while trying to give us asexual 101, managed not to talk about different romantic orientations, of which, there are many. There are also many ways to *be* asexual and that it is okay not to want to have sex and no one should make you and the book missed this opportunity when the asexual community became relevant in the text.

Our Queer Youth of Color Deserve Better

• We also do not see very many characters of color starring in these novels. Thirteen books and we have four that have significant roles and three were queer. While we must celebrate these characters exist period, I would argue we need more versatile characters of color who are queer.

• Queer teenagers of color need to be able to see themselves in literature as well. This is because our race and/or ethnicity impacts how we experience our sexual and gender identity.

• Being able to see themselves in the books they read will enable queer teenagers of color to succeed and feel even less alone. Having novels about white people, albeit queer people can only go so far.

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