# They're Here, They're Queer, Get Used to It:
## The Rise of Gay Characters in Young Adult Literature

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The past few years have seen an enormous increase in the visibility of gays and lesbians. Say what you will about television, but it deserves most of the credit for this visibility. Each week, countless people turn on their televisions to laugh with *Will and Grace* or to marvel at the style-savvy gurus on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. *The L-Word* centers on lesbian relationships, *It's All Relative* tells the story of a gay couple in Boston learning to understand and be understood by their new in-laws, and many shows have gay secondary characters. In fact, it now almost seems obligatory for a show to have a gay character or at least one episode with a gay plot line. Gay marriage is the hot button issue on the news these days. Turning off the television and opening a book reveals that many contemporary authors are following the trend television established and are starting to include more gay characters in their books. Potentially the most groundbreaking place these characters are showing up is in young adult literature.

In its 50-odd-year history young adult, or YA, literature hasn't been very welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) characters. Or, when it was welcoming, it wasn't particularly kind. If a character came out, that character would meet an unhappy ending. While discussing the emergence of YA books with gay characters, Michael Cart notes, "[They] seemed to decree that if you were gay, all you could

look forward to was a life of despair or an untimely death, though usually in a car crash instead of by suicide" (198).

Homosexuality's first appearance in YA literature is in John Donovan's 1969 *I'll Get There: It Better be Worth the Trip*. Though homosexuality is certainly not the focus of the book and is only vaguely dealt with, it nonetheless remains a significant milestone. In her examination of YA novels published from 1969 to 1997 with LGBT characters, noted scholar Christine Jenkins cites 31 titles from 1969 to 1984, 30 titles from 1985 to 1992, and 38 titles from 1993 to 1997 (301). A phenomenal amount of novels now feature LGBT characters. Instead of only alluding to homosexuality or serving as predictable "lessons," recent YA novels have more positive approaches. No longer fixated solely on the (usually) painful process of coming to terms with their sexuality, many of the recent titles show LGBT characters who have already come to terms, happily. Story lines move beyond that one single subject and embrace a variety of perspectives and plots.

The explosion of gay-friendly novels is important. Certainly LGBT young adults will breathe a sigh of relief to see themselves reflected in YA novels. Parents, teachers, librarians, and anyone else working with young adults should take an interest, too. It's no secret that LGBT teens have more difficult lives than their straight peers do. One of the most serious differences is that LGBT teenagers are more likely to commit suicide: "They are two to six times more likely than other teens to attempt suicide and they account for 30 percent of all completed suicides among young adults even though they constitute only 10 percent of the teenage population" (A.T. Cook qtd. in Vare and Norton 329). With an estimated one out of ten people homosexual, every high school is surely home to numerous LGBT-identified youth. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) states that "more than 4 out of 5 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students report being verbally, sexually, or physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation" (glsen.org). Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) reports "the average high school student hears 25 anti-gay slurs daily; 97 percent of high school students regularly hear homo-

phobic remarks" (pflag.org). Much of this homophobia can be attributed to ignorance. The visible presence of LGBT teenagers in books may help educate people unfamiliar with these experiences. Knowledge of what novels have LGBT protagonists will help parents, teachers, librarians, and teens themselves find the resources they or someone they know may desperately need. While great strides have been made to ensure that a high school curriculum is more inclusive of racial and cultural minorities, LGBT people are often still left behind. Barbara Smith says, "Homophobia is usually the last oppression to be mentioned, the last to be taken seriously, the last to go. But it is extremely serious, sometimes to the point of being fatal" (qtd. in Swartz 11).

The explosion of LGBT-friendly literature is generating much attention from educators and critics alike. "Gay and Lesbian Teenagers: A Reading Ladder for Students," a 1993 article by Robert F. Williams in *The ALAN Review*, provides a wide range of material concerning LGBT teens and young adult literature. Williams includes statistics, lists of helpful organizations, and an annotated bibliography, and he points to many nonfiction books that focus on LGBT history. Carolyn Caywood examines the importance of the availability of LGBT books in libraries in her article "Reaching out to Gay Teens." She stresses that it is not enough to have the books in the library. Librarians need to familiarize themselves with the content of LGBT books or, "if a librarian is not careful with recommendations, teen readers can wind up with an unrelieved diet of tragedy" (50). For Caywood, these books are not just helpful, but vital: "Library materials that offer support to gay and lesbian teens can save lives" (50).

In "Understanding Gay and Lesbian Youth: Sticks, Stones, and Silence," Jonatha W. Vare and Terry L. Norton explore "the developmental difficulties that gay and lesbian teens encounter and behaviors that place them at risk" (327). This well-researched and succinct article helps educators better understand what LGBT teens are up against. The article calls LGBT youth "the most alienated, rejected, and isolated youth in American schools" (328). While the focus is on statistics and developmental issues, the authors also provide an

overview of young adult literature every educator should know.

These articles help provide a good base for understanding LGBT youth and all point to the significant role YA literature plays in the lives of these teenagers. The following close examination of some recent YA novels will help illustrate the many ways LGBT youths' stories are being told.

Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* (2003) tells the story of a group of high school students who start a gay-lesbian-bisexual support group under the guise of being a club for geography enthusiasts. Hartinger's compelling dialogue and the universal setting of the hallowed/horrored halls of high school combine to create a realistic, insightful story. Russell, the main character, finds that the only place he can explore his homosexuality is in the anonymity of gay chat rooms. Here he meets a boy whose online name is GayTeen. When they meet up in real life, Russell is surprised to discover that GayTeen is actually Kevin, the star baseball jock from Russell's high school. While their relationship grows, they struggle to keep it hidden away, but manage to befriend other students in similar situations. Before the geography club's formation, Russell says, "I may not have been completely alone in life, but I was definitely lonely. My secret mission—four years in an American high school—had been an involuntary one, and now I desperately wanted to be somewhere where I could be honest about who I was and what I wanted" (11). Thanks to the club, Russell's life becomes a little more honest and much less lonely. *Geography Club* received seventeen rejections before being picked up by HarperCollins Publishers. "Editors told my agent again and again that there was no market for a book like this," says Hartinger (AfterEllen.com). The article goes on to say "sales [of *Geography Club*] were so strong the book is now in its third printing and a sequel is already in the works."

*Empress of the World* (2001) by Sara Ryan takes place at a summer program for gifted teenagers. Fifteen-year-old Nicola, who up until now assumes she is straight, surprises herself and falls for the beautiful Battle Hall Davies, a girl. Ryan's book is noteworthy not because of the writing or the plot, but because of Nicola's acceptance of her changing sexuality. The

judgment and scrutiny of their classmates bother Battle and Nic at first, but they are able to overcome this and focus on how *they* feel about being gay. Like *Geography Club*, *Empress of the World* deals with various aspects of homosexuality in a realistic, hopeful manner. Unlike so many of their predecessors, none of Hartinger's or Ryan's characters meets unhappy endings.

Ryan depicts a wide range of responses to the girls' relationship. Before officially "out" and before either girl acts on her feelings, their friend Isaac tells Nic his aunt is a lesbian. This prompts Nic to tell him that she thinks she is, too. Isaac hardly blinks at this. He says, "Remember, I'm from San Francisco. I assume everyone I meet is a bisexual pagan until proven otherwise" (102). This attitude is refreshing to see in YA literature. Today, teenagers often aren't surprised to learn a friend is gay. It's a non-issue; being gay is just another facet of who they are, but not need for shock or surprise. While people like Isaac accept Nic's coming out, others are not so open-minded. Nicola writes in her journal, "I've started to keep track of the number of times I hear someone mutter the word 'dyke' in my direction—five so far" (115).

Like with every romance, Battle and Nic hit some rough patches. They break up, Battle briefly dates a boy, and Nic is heartbroken. But the book ends on a happy note, with the girls reunited, though about to leave their summer school. Ryan's message to her readers shows that sexuality is something that can be person-specific and ever changing. Sometimes things are not just as clear as gay or straight. Nic comes a long way in the story. She begins her summer school experience bent on obsessively analyzing every detail of life, consumed with the need to compartmentalize and label everything. She leaves willing to just let things be, content to not put a name on her sexuality but instead just see where it takes her.

Perhaps the most LGBT-positive YA title to appear is David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). Set in an optimistically progressive high school, Levithan's unique characters break new ground. The protagonist, Paul, notes, "There isn't really a gay scene or a straight scene in our town. They all got mixed up a while back, which I think is for the best. . . . Most of the straight

guys try to sneak into the Queer Beer Bar. Boys who love boys flirt with girls who love girls" (1). Paul doesn't have to come to terms with being gay; he just *is*. He says, "I've always known I was gay, but it wasn't confirmed until I was in kindergarten. It was my teacher who said so. It was right there on my kindergarten report card: PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS A VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF" (8). Paul is neither lonely nor alone. Multiple love interests make Paul's life more complex, not to mention the colorful friends in his life. It's safe to say YA literature has never seen a character like Infinite Darlene (once Daryl), the star quarterback and school's most popular drag queen. In 1994, author Nancy Garden said, "Until we get to the point where gay characters just *are*, we won't be where we need to be" (qtd. in Cart 231). Levithan goes to great lengths to show LGBT characters just *being*. In her interview with Levithan on Salon.com, Sarah Wildman observes that Levithan creates "a queer main character who isn't worried about being kicked out of his house, beat up at school, or ostracized from his family. He isn't coming out. He barely knows where his closet is." Surrounded by loving and supportive friends and parents, this love story presents a fun and appealing reality so far from our own that is certain to generate productive, educational discussions.

Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (2002) is told through the eyes of Nelson, who is openly gay, Kyle, who is trying to come out, and Jason, a jock having a hard time accepting his sexuality. The boys take turns narrating chapters, providing an expansive view of what it means to be a gay teenager. Nelson's unhidden, unashamed homosexuality makes him an easy target for his narrow-minded classmates. He is repeatedly called a "faggot" and gets physically attacked more than once for being gay. Sanchez isn't afraid to examine sensitive issues. Nelson has unprotected sex with a man he meets in an Internet chat room. Readers see Nelson worry about the possibility of contracting HIV and regret not having asked his lover to wear a condom. Nelson's mother is a wonderful character. One hundred percent accepting of her son and an activist for many gay causes, she is a unique parent in YA literature. This sort of supportive

and open relationship sets a good example for readers to keep in mind and helps Kyle along in his quest to come out. Sanchez writes, "Nelson seemed to know *everything* about being gay. He told Kyle about Alexander the Great, Oscar Wilde, and Michelangelo. He explained the Stonewall Riots and defined words like *cruising* and *drag*. . . . The most amazing thing was how Nelson talked about all this in front of his own mom" (14). Nelson's relationship with his mother shows the positive effects of an accepting and loving response to having a gay child.

Kyle has no problem accepting his attraction to guys, but does have a problem with how to tell his parents. When he does come out, his mom does her best to understand him, though she admits she is scared and sad. Kyle's father blames Nelson and struggles to be okay with Kyle's sexuality. At school Kyle must face further judgement. His locker is defaced with the word "queer." He eventually adds "and proud" to this graffiti, showing that he accepts himself and won't hide from others.

Jason has the most issues to deal with. An ostensibly straight jock with a pretty girlfriend, Jason can't help but feel he might be gay. When he starts to have feelings for Kyle, any doubt is removed and he's forced to deal with the issue. His alcoholic father constantly hurls epithets like "queer" and "pansy" at Jason. Predictably, he refuses to accept that his son is gay. After being physically violent, his father moves out, disgusted with his son. Jason slowly starts to tell his friends that he is gay. By the story's end, he's still trying to deal with how he really feels about his sexuality. Sanchez masterfully illustrates the many feelings and issues involved in coming out. The end of the book provides important contact information for suicide prevention hotlines, the Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, and many other LGBT resources.

One last novel to note is *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters. High school senior Liam has always known he is a girl trapped in a boy's body. His sister, Regan, is the only person who knows that her brother, Liam, is actually Luna, her sister. Only able to be herself at night, Luna spends hours trying on clothes and make-up for Regan, dreaming of what it would be like to be Luna full time. Over the course of the novel, Liam becomes

more and more unable and unwilling to suppress Luna. He starts to appear in public as Luna. His parents and peers are confused and disgusted. Desperately unhappy with having to continue his charade as a normal teenage boy, Liam decides to choose to be Luna for good. The book ends with Luna boarding a plane to Seattle, with plans to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. The thoughtful and moving depiction of life as a transsexual teenager is the first of its kind and one not to be missed.

The books discussed here show the gamut of feelings, thoughts, reactions, and issues surrounding LGBT teens. Today's characters are allowed a full range of possibilities. From Paul's early knowledge of being gay, to Nicola's eventual refusal to label her sexuality, to Liam's decision to transition to Luna, LGBT characters have come far in the 35 years since Donovan's book. The importance of the prevalence of these books can't be overestimated. Looking back to YA's history with homosexual characters, Levithan says, "Book-inclined kids, who read to find identity in part, weren't finding anything saying it's okay, it's cool to be gay, and [the story] can be happy. It should not be such a radical thing" (Wildman). Although it often doesn't seem like it, society continues to make progress in accepting and understanding LGBT people. Given the increasing rates of YA titles featuring gay characters, more teenagers than ever will be exposed to these stories and learn from them. Michael Cart writes, "Routinely including gay characters in YA books may ultimately have the same positive, cumulative effect that their increasing visibility on television promises" (236). The future can only bring an even larger increase in YA books with gay characters. They're here, they're queer, get used to it: these books are here to stay.

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