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CRITICISM

How Far Have We Come? A Critical Look at LGBTQ Identity in Young Adult Literature

CADY LEWIS

In recent years, there has been an influx in the recognition of and interaction with YA literature that portrays LGBTQ characters. The general consensus of these discussions of representation in YA novels is that we are being offered much more realistic and positive representations of LGBTQ teens than in past decades. Still, there may be room for improvement when it comes to overall visibility and the ways in which these stories are framed—as hopeful tales of coming to terms with identity, or as scare tactics meant to guide vulnerable readers back into a “safe” lifestyle of heterosexuality. Examining three novels with LGBTQ themes published in three different decades allows us to see where the genre began and where it can still go. These works were chosen for three reasons: first, they are YA novels that have main characters who identify, or come to identify, as LGBTQ individuals; second, they were published in various decades that show the progression of the genre; and third, the main characters each have unique perspectives on their sexualities and are at varying landmarks on the road to their own self-discoveries.

First published in 1982, Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* is considered one of the pioneering works focusing on lesbian teens. It is the story of two girls, Liza and Annie, who fall in love after becoming close friends. Liza is a driven, college-bound class president who attends a private school with archaic traditions like a tattletale honesty policy. Annie attends public school in the city, and Liza later learns that she has quite a rough life. The girls spend a lot of time together, growing closer with each experience. Eventually, Annie confesses that she thinks she might be gay. Liza has never given much thought to her own sexuality but knows that she has always felt different.

It is not long before their friendship turns into a romantic relationship. Over the school year’s final break, Liza volunteers to house sit for two teachers from her school while they take a vacation. These two women live together, some people suspecting that they are lovers, though they act only in a

professional manner at work, so none of their colleagues know for sure. Liza takes the opportunity to play house with Annie. The girls are caught by another teacher and are reported to a school official, who finds it fitting to pursue a trial regarding Liza being kicked out of school for her “misconduct.” She is not banned from the school, but the two teachers whose home she and Annie stayed at are fired. Eventually, Liza and Annie go their separate ways and head to college, but the end of the novel reveals that they never stopped loving each other and rejoin each other during winter break.

Annie on My Mind was written in a time in which homosexuality was less understood and less tolerated, which very well could have contributed to the fact that Liza and Annie are met with such fear and trepidation from nearly every supporting character. The AIDS crisis was officially recognized in 1981, and the decade following seemed characterized by ignorance and misinformation about being gay. This might explain why Liza is subjected to Salem-like inquisitions of her sexuality and her lifestyle, though even with taking the history surrounding the time period into consideration, the trials seem particularly ridiculous. Garden is sympathetic to LGBT teens, however, and several characters express disbelief that the girls’ sexualities are put on trial. Nevertheless, the mere fact that this novel featuring lesbian teenagers was published and available to teen readers in the early 1980s is reason for recognition, and it certainly paved the way for other young adult novels addressing LGBTQ issues and characters.

One such novel is David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). This novel is set in a utopia in which queerness is not treated as a disability or as the incorrect alternative to straightness. Rather, it is celebrated. The protagonist is Paul, a gay high school student who has known since kindergarten that he was gay, ever since his teacher wrote that he was on his report card: “Paul is definitely gay and has a very good sense of self” (Levithan, 2003, p. 8). Paul is a popular student with many diverse friends, and he is completely happy with who he is. A new student, Noah, catches Paul’s eye at the

beginning of the story, and the two immediately feel comfortable with each other. Noah comes from a town in which being gay is considered abnormal, so Noah is not as open about who he is as is Paul. Paul has had many boyfriends, but for him, Noah is different.

As soon as Paul and Noah strike up a friendship, one of Paul's exes takes a renewed interest in Paul, which becomes the novel's main conflict: a form of a love triangle, though Paul is only interested in one of the boys who is interested in him. The remainder of the novel consists of Paul trying to win Noah back. Filled with many diverse characters, like the transgender cheerleader and quarterback Infinite Darlene, and Paul's best friend Tony, who lives one town over with religious and homophobic parents, several realities faced by LGBTQ characters are explored in a unique utopian setting. The novel ends with Paul winning back Noah's affection, and with Tony's friends helping him stand up to his parents once and for all.

Often called a modern fairytale, this novel takes a unique approach to representing LGBTQ teens. Here, adolescents are allowed to be secure in their identities and make their own decisions about who they are and who they love in a way that is so often denied to teenagers, whether they identify as gay or not. An interesting contrast to the novels that came before it, including the much more grim landscape of *Annie on My Mind*, *Boy Meets Boy* is a novel that explores what is still possible for our society when it comes to the treatment, acceptance, and celebration of the gay community.

Another recent young adult novel that explores LGBTQ themes is *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz. Though published in 2012, the novel takes place in the 1980s, a couple of years later than the time in which the story of Liza and Annie unfolds. The main character is Ari, short for Aristotle, who has always felt like an outsider. At the beginning of the summer, he meets Dante, and the two form a friendship based on the fact that Dante is exactly who Ari needs: someone who is completely sure of himself. One day, Dante convinces Ari to try kissing him. Ari has never kissed anyone, so he isn't sure how it was supposed to feel.

Months pass, and Dante tells Ari that he and his family are moving. Ari and Dante keep in contact through letters at first, but Ari stops responding once Dante reveals he is dating boys and experimenting with drugs. When Dante moves back the following year, the two are slow to get back into the swing of their friendship. One night, Dante is assaulted by some guys in town for being gay. When Ari finds out,

he tracks down one of the attackers and fights him. With help from his own parents and Dante's parents, who are all incredibly supportive, Ari is able to realize that his feelings for Dante are more than platonic: he is gay and he is in love with Dante.

The novel is situated somewhere in between *Annie on My Mind* and *Boy Meets Boy*. It reflects both the time period in which it is set and the one in which it was published, creating a distinct environment of acceptance from most and ignorance from some. The novel offers commentary not only about discovering one's sexuality but also simply about discovering one's identity as a whole, something left unexplored by the two previous novels.

These illustrative novels obviously vary in their content and their message. None is perfect in its representation of LGBTQ characters: Liza and Annie feel, at times, like cardboard cutouts whose identities as lesbians seem painted on; Paul's life could be described as too unrealistic; and Ari and Dante do not seem to have sufficient time for interaction upon discovering who they are. Despite their shortcomings, however, these novels indicate that the young adult genre is becoming more inclusive and is working toward more positive representation.

Lesbian Literature in History

Much of the existing research about LGBTQ YA novels focuses on the representation of a particular kind of LGBTQ individual: for example, discussing only novels about gay young men or only about lesbian young women. There are significant differences in the lifestyles of these teens, to be sure, and pretending that their narratives can be lumped into one main "queer narrative" is problematic in itself. However, that these novels are being evaluated for their positive or negative representations of LGBTQ people underscores the importance of young adult books including a wide variety of characters with a wide range of orientations. For these reasons, looking at young adult novels that discuss any and all LGBTQ identities is helpful, in that it allows us to gauge how far we have come, and how far we still need to go, in creating a genre that realistically, positively, and accurately portrays what it is like being an LGBTQ teen.

The presence of LGBTQ themes and characters in literary works is as old as literature itself. One recent genre, lesbian pulp fiction, became incredibly popular in the 1950s. According to Yvonne Keller (2005), "From 1950 to 1965, this period was flooded with lesbian fiction in the form of lesbian

pulp novels, mass-market paperbacks with explicitly lesbian themes and sensationalized covers that enjoyed widespread distribution and millions in sales” (p. 385). These pulp novels often depicted a relationship between two women as deviant or animalistic—something to be fascinated by, but not to condone or partake in. Pulp novels routinely sold over one million copies, and were “a mass cultural phenomenon that paradoxically emerged from the nation’s counter culture,” according to Michelle Ann Abate (2007, p. 231).

The 1950s were a tumultuous time for gay and lesbian Americans, and it was during this time that homosexuality was officially designated as a mental illness. According to Victoria Hesford (2005), gay and lesbian Americans were on par with Communists—as “morally degenerate” (p. 216), and as such, subject to the “Lavender Scare,” the equal to McCarthy’s Red Scare communist hunts. But pulp novels about lesbians, the subject of such national outrage, were devoured with a particular kind of irony during this time. While not especially positive, the novels seemed to spark the desire for further, more positive novels drawing on the LGBTQ experience. Keller (2005) states that “lesbian pulps were . . . coveted and treasured for their sometimes positive and sometimes awful but decidedly lesbian and decidedly available representation” (p. 386) and are therefore an important piece in the historical puzzle of literature about the LGBTQ community.

Lesbian pulp fiction certainly paved the way for YA authors in the mid- and late- twentieth century, with *Annie on My Mind* (1982) and M.E. Kerr’s *Deliver us from Evie* (1994) serving as two prominent examples. Christine Jenkins (1998) analyzes the genre of YA fiction with a historical lens, discussing the various techniques of writing about LGBTQ characters and the different types of stories that include these characters. Jenkins notes that between 1969—the year in which the first YA novel featuring a gay character was published (*I’ll Get There. It Better be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan) and her writing in 1997, approximately 100 YA novels were written that featured LGBTQ content. She notes:

From 1969 to 1997 there have been dramatic shifts in the status and visibility of gay men and lesbians in U.S. society. From 1969 to 1996, however, with the exception of the introduction of the AIDS epidemic as a plot element, there have been few changes in any aspect of gay or lesbian characters in YA novels. In a society with such volatile political and cultural attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, why is this literature so tenaciously conservative? (p. 305)

Jenkins raises a valid question. Having gay and lesbian characters appear within a YA novel is great, but it is not enough. Society has changed in the past several decades, including how we as a whole interact with the gay community, yet young adult novels have not always reflected this change. Today, with gay marriage legal in 37 states, future works should certainly strive to grow in terms of plots and conflicts in stories about gay men or lesbian women, because the same offensive or inaccurate stories can only be told so many times.

Theorizing Lesbian Literature

In *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, Terry Castle (1993) sets up a dichotomy that become a dominant critical framework for evaluating lesbian fiction. Castle argues that lesbian fiction follows one of two plotlines: a *dysphoric* plot or a *euphoric* plot. The dysphoric plot that is so commonly utilized in lesbian fiction, Castle defines as “the extent that it depicts female homosexual desire as a finite phenomenon—a temporary phase in a larger pattern of heterosexual Bildung” (p. 85). Ultimately, this is a negative way to portray the formation of, or dissent from, LGBTQ identity. Castle also points out that “the lesbian novel of adolescence is almost always dysphoric in tendency” (p. 85). The euphoric plot is one in which the “conversion to homosexual desire” is “radical and irreversible” (p. 86) and is seen as an alternative to heterosexuality. Castle’s work is quite influential in the analysis of specifically YA LGBTQ novels, as the dichotomy of lesbian plots is, while perhaps not entirely accurate, a tool to discuss the evolution of representation and visibility in young adult literature.

But pulp novels about lesbians, the subject of such national outrage, were devoured with a particular kind of irony during this time. While not especially positive, the novels seemed to spark the desire for further, more positive novels drawing on the LGBTQ experience.

In looking at *Annie on My Mind*, we see elements of both dysphoric and euphoric plots at work. For nearly everyone around Liza and Annie, perhaps save for the two teachers whose home they stay in, their attraction to and love for each other is a phase, a choice that is possible to revert from with proper guidance. We see these dysphoric elements at work in the latter part of the novel in a speech from Liza’s father, after Liza and Annie are “discovered” to be in a romantic relationship with each other:

"Liza," my father said, "I told you I'd support you and I will. ... I've never thought gay people could be very happy—no children, for one thing, no real family life. Honey, you are probably going to be a damn good architect—but I want you to be happy in other ways, too, as your mother is—to have a husband and children. I know you can do both. . . " I am happy, I tried to tell him with my eyes. I'm happy with Annie; she and my work are all I'll ever need; she's happy, too—we both were till this happened ... (p. 191)

Using Castle's language, this plotline points toward the dysphoric: their relationship is treated as a temporary phase that will only cause them to suffer. Garden could have let Liza and Annie's story end in this way—with many people against them and thinking that the two have set themselves up for a tragic life. This, of course, would have made it a very different story, and it would most likely not be heralded as a major first step in LGBTQ YA fiction. What makes *Annie on My Mind* such a great stepping stone, even with its flaws, is that Liza and Annie eventually have a happy ending, despite several missteps along the way. Elements of Castle's euphoric plot are also evident in the novel: Liza does not realize that she is a lesbian until she meets Annie and they share their first kiss on Thanksgiving. Liza did, however, take time to consider what this kiss and her feelings meant, contrasting them with the heteronormativity she has been subjected to for most of her life:

It was like a war inside me; I couldn't even recognize all of the sides. There was one that said, "No, this is wrong; you know it's wrong and bad and sinful," and there was another that said, "Nothing has ever felt so right and natural and true and good," and another that said it was happening too fast, and another that just wanted to stop thinking altogether and fling my arms around Annie and hold her forever. There were other sides, too, but I couldn't sort them out. (p. 93)

Once Liza settles things in her mind, she is quick to let Annie know what the kiss means to her, and she tells Annie that she thinks she loves her. Liza thinks, "I heard myself say it as if I were someone else, but the moment the words are out, I knew more than I'd ever known anything that they were true" (p. 94). In this sense, Liza's "conversion" is sudden and irreversible, to borrow Castle's terms, as Liza has no desire to try to "change back" into the heterosexual she may have once considered herself to be.

Taking these same characteristics into account when reading *Boy Meets Boy* and *Aristotle and Dante*, it is safe to say that not all YA LGBTQ narratives are as cut and dry as Castle's dichotomy makes it appear, though Castle was addressing only lesbian fiction. Still, neither main character appears to face as much adversity regarding their sexuality as Castle's theory suggests would occur in a dysphoric plot: Paul, Ari, and Dante all have incredibly supportive families and their sexualities are not treated as merely a phase in the larger scheme of heterosexuality. For Paul, realizing his sexuality was as natural as breathing, and he never questions it. In fact, throughout the novel being gay is never regarded as a choice or an option in comparison to anything else—it is treated as something that just is. Kindergartener Paul asks his teacher, the one who said that he was definitely gay, if what he feels about other boys is right. The teacher's response is so simple: "What you feel is absolutely right for you. Always remember that" (p. 9).

This sentence alone is a moving tribute to the fact that teens reading these novels need that reassurance and need to realize that how they identify themselves should be exactly right for them, which could very well be seen as the purpose for a novel like *Boy Meets Boy*. There are no dysphoric tendencies at work that attempt to thwart Paul's self-discovery, nor are there any conflicts arising from the fact that he identifies as gay. For Tony, the road is a little bumpier due to his parents' ignorance, though the dysphoric tendencies working against him are lessened at the end of the novel with the help of his supportive group of friends. Similarly, in *Aristotle and Dante*, Ari's quest for self-discovery stems from much more than his exploration of his sexuality, and the major conflicts within the novel are not consequences of his realization that he is gay and has feelings for his best friend.

The Possibilities of LGBTQ Narratives

Vanessa Wayne Lee (1998) provides another productive way to read LGBTQ literature. Expanding the possibilities of lesbian narratives, Lee argues that there are three types of novels about lesbian identity: those that "position lesbianism as a threat or problem," those that focus on the "formation of lesbian identities," and those that "represent lesbianism with less clarity" (p. 152). Lee looks at several novels within each of these categories she has chosen to delineate, analyzing how the representation of lesbian characters is affected by these categories of lesbian novels. Ultimately, she reaches the conclusion that previous examinations, including, to

some degree, Castle's, have been problematic solely because the goal has been to isolate these different types of narratives. Lee does, however, note that "adolescent lesbian texts have progressed to include euphoric counterplots and postmodern plots that de-center, while problematizing, issues of information and identity" (p. 158).

One example of a more accurate and postmodern portrayal of adolescent sexuality occurs in the film *Dive*, which Lee argues represents the "complex adolescent sexuality and how it cannot be cleanly extracted from the rest of a person's identity in order to be examined or depicted. To do it right, in a postmodern sense, you have to show the whole messy picture, and it will not always fit into a nice narrative form" (p. 157). Similarly, YA novels need not be so tied up in labels or titles in order to offer a positive and enlightening depiction of LGBTQ characters.

Criteria for Teachers

For teachers, it is especially important to have literature and other forms of narrative like *Dive*—stories aimed at young adults that offer positive, complex representations of LGBTQ characters and themes. The following criteria may be helpful in evaluating LGBTQ young adult literature:

- it should not relate being gay or coming out as a traumatic experience.
- it should focus on the formation of one's whole identity or portray a character who is secure in his or her identity as a member of the LGBTQ community.
- it should provide LGBTQ characters with a supportive community.
- it should provide a cathartic reading experience for teens who are struggling with or are just beginning to grasp their sexualities.

With these criteria in mind, it is safe to say that currently available LGBTQ YA literature has come a long way since the publishing of *Annie on My Mind*, though the novel remains the foundation of young adult LGBTQ literature. But there is really no limit to how inclusive and positive our literature can become. Terry L. Norton and Jonatha W. Vare (2004) point to the benefits of having positive representation in *YA books in Literature for Today's Gay and Lesbian Teens: Subverting the Culture of Silence*.

While literature may not eliminate homophobia nor alleviate the risks stemming from it, well-written books may help subvert the culture of silence still current in many school environments and offer a supportive framework for self-understanding

by gay and lesbian teens. Moreover [they] may help heterosexual students who are homophobic question their traditional assumptions in order to lead lives not bound and threatened by prejudices and fears. (p. 69)

If literature is an indicator of how our society feels about real-life issues, then the increasing visibility and positive representation in our young adult literature is an encouraging sign. Positive literature will lead to members of our society leading happier lives, and, at least from the perspective of what our YA books are telling us, we are riding an upward trend.

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