

LGBTQ Young Adult Literature:

How It Began, How It Grew, and Where It Is Now

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the birth of LGBTQ YA literature, for it was in 1969 that our genre began with the publication of its first book, the late John Donovan's novel, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (Harper & Row, 1969). Its very brief, minimally described sexual incidents between two young boys must have seemed shocking to many people, but *I'll Get There* enjoyed a primarily positive reception with only a few detractors. However, despite that and its being a Newbery honor book, it was followed by only a cautious trickle of YA books dealing with LGQ (lesbian, gay, and questioning) characters and/or issues. ("B" [bisexual] and "T" [transgender] characters didn't appear in our books till much later.) In fact, I've found only 11 LGBTQ YAs for the entire decade of the 70s (see sidebar).

In 1970, Atheneum published Barbara Wersba's *Run Softly, Go Fast*, whose teenage protagonist, David, recalls a pivotal scene in which his father "accused" his straight best friend, Rick, of being gay. The boys' relationship dete-

riorated after that; afterward, Rick joined the army and was killed in action.

Homosexuality per se isn't important in *Run Softly*. Instead, it's the idea that being gay is so terrible that "accusing" someone of it can have tragic results. The consequences of spreading false rumors of homosexuality appeared in a number of LGQ early books for both YAs and adults.

In Isabelle Holland's *The Man without a Face* (Lippincott, 1972), Chuck, a straight, fatherless teenage boy, worries guiltily about his attraction to Justin McLeod, a reclusive, facially scarred man who is preparing him for a school entrance exam. McLeod tries to reassure Chuck that his feelings are normal, but when, after an unspecified minor sexual incident, Chuck asks McLeod about his own feelings, McLeod implies that yes, he himself is gay. Soon afterward, Chuck passes his exam, but later, when he tries to see McLeod again, he learns that the man has died of a heart attack, leaving Chuck's questions—and perhaps the reader's—about himself and their relationship unresolved. More

positive is a historical novel about two young 19th-century lesbians, *Patience and Sarah* by Isabelle Miller (McGraw-Hill, 1972). It was published for adults, although Miller has been quoted as saying she wrote it for adolescents. It's an unmistakable love story with a happy ending, one that would have been the first for YAs had it been published as Miller seems to have intended.

As the 1970s progressed, specific approaches to writing about LGQ characters emerged. In three '70s books, for example, teen characters act on homosexual feelings, but ultimately emerge as straight, thereby perhaps implying that teenage LG relationships are just "phases" or "crushes." But one of those books, *Ruby* by Rosa Guy (Viking, 1976), was also the first (and unfortunately for many years the last) LGQ YA featuring characters of color.

A continuing prevalent message in the 1970s was the idea that LG people are doomed to be "punished" with tragic results if they act on their feelings. McLeod's death (and perhaps his scars) in *The Man without a Face* seem to

buy into that, as does Rick's death in *Run Softly*—even though Rick wasn't gay. More obvious punishment also appears in Sandra Scoppetone's *Trying Hard to Hear You* (Harper & Row, 1974), in which the straight female protagonist learns that her best male friend and a boy she likes are lovers. The boys are mercilessly teased, and in the end, trying to prove he's straight, one of them gets drunk with a girl, takes her out in a car, and they both are killed in an auto accident. Car crashes were perhaps the most popular punishment endings, but suicide runs them a close second, along with commitment to a mental hospital or forced psychiatric treatment.

In a later Scoppetone book, *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (Harper & Row, 1978), the punishment is rape. The main character, Jaret, and her lover are both clearly lesbian and in love—a hugely important first in LGQ books published for YAs. Jaret is raped by a homophobic boy who discovers the two girls *in flagrante*. And although Jaret's lover breaks up with her when Jaret decides to press charges, the book ends on a hopeful note—another first—with a hint that the girls may eventually reconcile.

Although punishment in LGBTQ books is usually seen as a warning that being LGBTQ has tragic consequences, some authors used it to show that ignorance and cruelty from heterosexuals can lead to tragic endings for LGBTQ people.

There's no punishment, though, for Charlie Gilhooley, a secondary character in M. E. Kerr's *I'll Love You When You're More*

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Like Me (Harper & Row, 1977). He's an openly gay teen, best friend of the straight protagonist. Even though Charlie's parents don't accept his homosexuality, Charlie remains cheerful, humorous, and firmly out—another huge first step.

Donovan, plus the authors of LGQ YAs of the 1970s, laid the thematic foundations from which our literature grew—hesitantly at first, but that initial trickle led to nearly 40 new titles in the 1980s!

Why the increase? What made it possible?

I suspect one important factor was the major event in US LGBTQ history that occurred in the same year as Donovan's book: the Stonewall riots. That's when gays and lesbians, led by drag queens, fought back against the police that regularly raided one of NY's favorite gay bars, the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. The riots continued for several days, and are commonly thought to have transformed the growing LGBT rights movement into its more demanding, more public modern version. That encouraged many LGBT people to become more visible in a variety of ways, including literary.

There weren't very many genuine LGBTQ books before Stonewall, and none, of course, for kids before Donovan. Most tradi-

tional publishers, fearing limited sales and charges of obscenity, refused to consider most manuscripts depicting gay life, especially for kids. But as the gay rights movement grew, and gay issues and people became more public, more LGBTQ titles appeared. Writers of books for children and teens, long silenced on LGBT issues, began trying—or trying again—to write and sell for those markets.

Like myself, many “bookish” LGBTQ kids growing up before Stonewall had searched in vain for books for and about people like us. When it appeared that it might at last be possible for us to provide the books we had wanted as teens to the post-Stonewall teens who were still searching, we leapt at the chance. I felt enormously encouraged by the LGQ YAs I finally saw being published in the 1970s, and I'm sure that many other YA authors, both LGBT and straight, felt the same. Stories, after all, both our own and those of other people, are among the most important ways through which we learn to understand and value both ourselves and others.

A few 1980s books were coming-out stories, in which the protagonist suspects he or she is LGBT, realizes it, and finally accepts it—and/or accepting it, faces the difficult task of coming out to a friend, parent, or another important person. In my first LGQ book, *Annie on My Mind* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982), the protagonist, Liza, falls in love with Annie, who returns her love and who has suspected that she herself might be gay. Liza is conflicted about being gay, but after a struggle, she accepts both herself and her love

for Annie; the two girls end up happily together. In B. A. Ecker's *Independence Day* (Avon/Flare, 1983), a gay boy comes out to his straight best friend, with whom he's in love—and although his love isn't requited, the two boys remain friends. In *Act Well Your Part* by Don Sakers (Alyson, 1986), a high school junior, Keith, in love with a senior, Brian, comes out to his mother, who is accepting. After various complications, he finds that his love for Brian is returned.

But more books of this decade were those that focused on a straight teen's struggle to accept or reject a LGBT friend, relative, or other important adult. The late and very prolific author Norma Klein wrote four LG YAs in the 1980s in which a straight boy or girl already has or learns that he or she has a gay or lesbian parent or friend: *Breaking Up* (Random House, 1980), *My Life as a Body* (Knopf/Borzoi, 1987), *Now That I Know* (Bantam, 1988), and *Learning How to Fall* (Bantam, 1989). In an interesting variation of this pattern, in *Come Out Smiling*, by Elizabeth Levy (Delacote, 1981), a straight 14-year-old girl who finds out and accepts that her favorite camp counselors are gay decides that she herself doesn't want to be gay. Barbara Wersba (*Run Softly, Go Fast*) published two LGQ YAs in the '80s; in one of them, *Crazy Vanilla* (Harper & Row, 1986), a boy adjusts to the fact that his older brother is gay. And M. E. Kerr (*I'll Love You When You're More Like Me*) gave us the first AIDS book for LGQ teens, *Night Kites* (Harper & Row/Zolotow, 1986). Its straight teenage boy protagonist must not only deal with the fact that his

older brother is gay but that he also has AIDS.

As the 1980s gradually morphed into the 1990s, it began to seem that what we most wanted to tell were LGQ stories through the eyes of young LGQ characters themselves. But did that mean concentrating primarily on coming-out stories? Coming out is indeed a pivotal part of all LGBTQ people's lives, but some books of the '80s had already begun to suggest that it isn't the only part. Should LGQ YAs include bisexual and transgender teens? More teens of color? Other minorities? Stories that

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include more universal issues than the basic LGBT rite of passage and coming out?

Even though in the 1990s there were still coming-out stories and straights-adjusting-to-gays stories, it was then that LGBTQ YA literature increasingly addressed other issues as well. Some of the authors from earlier decades produced books in the '90s that did just that. In 1994, for example, HarperCollins published M. E. Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie*, the first LGQ novel to feature a very butch lesbian character. Evie is the older sister of Parr, the straight protagonist. Although the book is Parr's story,

much of it concentrates on Evie and her determination to dress and act as befits the strong, self-assured lesbian she truly is. Then in 1997, Kerr's "*Hello, I Lied*" (HarperCollins) was the first, as far as I know, to introduce the subject of bisexuality; its gay teen protagonist struggles with feeling attracted to a girl. *My Lark in the Morning* (FSG, 1991) shows how a young lesbian with a steady girlfriend helps two young runaways, and *The Year They Burned the Books* (FSG, 1999) is about a young lesbian, her gay best friend, and a few other kids who try to use their school newspaper to counter the censorship attempts of their local school board.

The 1990s also introduced Jacquelyn Woodson, whose LGQ books feature the first characters of color in our genre since Rose Guy's *Ruby*. *The Dear One* (Delacorte, 1991) shows how a probably straight 12-year-old girl is helped by two lesbian friends of her mother's to accept the pregnant teenage daughter of her mother's best friend. Woodson's *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Scholastic/Blue Sky, 1995) is about a boy who learns that his mother is a lesbian and in love with a white woman, and *The House You Pass on the Way* (Delacorte, 1997) shows how a mixed-race girl of 14, Staggerlee, wrestles with her feelings for her adopted cousin. Later, after her cousin gets a boyfriend, she wonders what she herself will become as she gets older.

The 1990s also brought us more from Francesca Lia Block, who produced three books following her earlier popular YA novel *Weetzie Bat* (Harper & Row, 1989). Two of them, *Baby Be-Bop* (Harp-

erCollins/Cotler, 1995) and *Witch Baby* (HarperCollins/Zolotow, 1991) are a prequel and sequel, respectively, to *Weetzie Bat*. In the third, *I Was a Teenage Fairy* (HarperCollins/Cotler, 1998), two child-to-teen models, a girl and a gay boy, are molested by a pedophile photographer, but ultimately healed by a fairy. Like *Weetzie Bat*, these books are peopled with counter-culture characters, some gay, some straight, who coexist happily—and for the most part lovingly—in a fairytale-like atmosphere of their own making.

The 1990s saw at least eight books about AIDS, mostly stories like Kerr's earlier one in which a teen learns that an older brother, father, or uncle is both gay and has HIV or AIDS. *Earthshine*, by Theresa Nelson (Orchard/Richard Jackson, 1994), is unique in that it's often humorous despite its sad subject matter. It is distinguished by the deep and loving relationship between 12-year-old Slim and her father, who has AIDS, and the additional relationships they forge with a group of AIDS patients and their families.

Another 1990s book that stands out for being unusual is

Babylon Boyz by Jess Mowry (Simon and Schuster, 1997), a story about life on the streets with three homeboys of color, one of whom is gay and all of whom must decide what to do with a discarded bag of cocaine and the gun that was thrown away with it. Into the '90s, too, came the first LGBTQ YA series—short-lived, but nonetheless a milestone to be continued in the next decade. The *Pride Pack* mystery series (Alyson, 1995; Cheyenne, 2011) was written by Ruth Sims writing as R. J. Hamilton. It consisted of three books featuring a multicultural group of teenage sleuths from their town's Gay and Lesbian Community Center.

But it's been in the first years of the twenty-first century that LGBTQ YA literature has really matured and expanded. Our output has also increased enormously—I've counted 108 new books between 2000 and 2013, and there are already more I haven't yet read. Traditional publishing is still harder than ever for anyone, LGBTQ or otherwise, to break into, but the new respectability and increased opportunities for self-publishing and the rise of small independent presses have provided

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new options for writers, even as traditional publishing has wrestled with adjusting to the digital age and giants like Amazon. That has certainly helped the growth of LGBTQ YA books!

So—what's new in the 2000s?

I wish I had space to list and describe in detail all the exciting new books I've been reading! But I'll just have to give a few examples of the trends I'm seeing. I wish I could do more! So far, there have been at least 8 new YAs about transpeople. The very first appeared in 2004: *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters (Little, Brown/Tingley), whose straight girl protagonist's older brother is transitioning to female. A couple of others are *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Kirstin Cronn-Mills, Flux, 2012), in which Gabe, a female-to-male transboy DJ courageously comes through the violence and hate that threaten him, and *FreakBoy*, a verse novel by Kristin Elizabeth Clark (FSG, 2013), which explores variations in basic gender itself.

There have been about the same number of YAs dealing with or hinting at bisexuality, one of which, *Ash* (Malinda Lo, Little Brown, 2009), is a variation on

Additional Resources

In writing this article, I've drawn extensively on an informal list of LGBTQ fiction to which I've been adding over the years. To verify some of my information and remind myself of the details of books I haven't read for a long time, I've also referred to *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004* by Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins (The Scarecrow Press, 2006), and, to a lesser extent, *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults* by Frances Ann Day (Greenwood Press, 2000), to which I wrote the foreword.

the Cinderella story, and two more of Lo's, *Adaptation* and its sequel *Inheritance* (Little, Brown, 2012 and 2013, respectively), which perhaps can also be best classified as speculative sci fi. Two more speculative/dystopic books are *Proxy* by Alex London (Philomel, 2013) and *The Culling* by Steven dos Santos (Flux, 2013).

Unfortunately, there have still been very few LGBTQ YAs featuring African American characters: *Breathe* (Blair Poole, Burrow, 2005) and *Finlater* (Shawn Stewart Ruff, Quote "Editions," 2008); or Hispanic characters: *Down to the Bone* (Myra Lazara Dole, HarperTeen, 2008), *What Night Brings* (Carla Trujillo, Curbstone, 2003), and *Chulito* (Charles Rice-González, Magnus, 2011).

There's a new series or two in the offing, and an established series by Alex Sanchez that follows the lives of three gay boys as they mature: *Rainbow Boys*, *Rainbow High*, and *Rainbow Road* (Simon & Schuster, 2001, 2003, and 2005).

Here are a few more:

Tough Love: High School Confidential, Abby Denson (Manic D, 2006)—graphic novel.

Wildthorn, Jane Eagland (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt/Graphia, 2009)—historical novel set in Victorian England.

Openly Straight, Bill Konigsberg (Scholastic/Levine, 2013)—humor.

Hero, Perry Moore (Hyperion, 2007)—gay superhero adventure and mystery story.

Boy Meets Boy, David Levithan (Knopf, 2003)—love story, with elements of fantasy, humor.

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe, Benjamin Alire Sáenz (Simon & Schuster/BFYR, 2012)—deep, loving friendship between two boys, one gay and one straight.

Freak Show, James St. James (Dutton, 2007)—teenage drag queen deals with bullying.

Almost Perfect, Brian Katcher (Delacorte, 2009)—straight

boy falls in love with a girl who turns out to be a transgirl.

But there are many more, and if these first 13 years are any indication, they're bound to keep on coming and, more important, bringing more LGBTQ kids and their straight friends ever closer in understanding and respect, and while they're at it, providing them with many hours of enjoyable, thought-provoking reading.

Nancy Garden is the author of around 35 books for children and teens, and one for adults. Among her awards are the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement, the Katahdin Award for Lifetime Achievement, and the Robert B. Downs Award for Intellectual Freedom. Nancy is now a full-time writer, but earlier she worked in theater primarily as an actress and lighting designer, and in publishing as an editor and magazine writer; she has also been a teacher and a gay activist. Nancy's best-known book is *Annie on My Mind*, about two teen girls who fall in love with each other.

Young adult fiction (YA) is a category of fiction written for readers from 12 to 18 years of age. While the genre is targeted to teenagers, approximately half of YA readers are adults. The subject matter and genres of YA correlate with the age and experience of the protagonist. The genres available in YA are expansive and include most of those found in adult fiction. Common themes related to YA include friendship, first love, relationships, and identity. Stories that focus on the specific challenges A growing canon of children and young adultsâ€™ literature is LGBT-inclusive. Some of the demand is driven by the growing number of families with same-sex parents, while heterosexual couples are also opting for the books to show solidarity and introduce their children to more diverse family structures. [Read more.](#) James has been vocal about her conscious decision to open more young adult fiction to more diverse characters, writing in a recent blog post: “When I started writing, it was immediately clear to me that I needed to do things with my writing beyond telling a story. The right book can shape a childhood, and if I was going to have even the smallest chance (and honour) of writing that book, I needed to live up to the responsibility I was being given.” [Buy now.](#)