

## Author



# The Wonder of a Target Audience: On the Growth of Queer Young Adult Literature

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Sarah Seville started this project as in response to an assignment in a class taught by Professor Terry. She found her work for this assignment to be so compelling that she decided to undertake a much deeper look into the topic. Sarah particularly appreciated the opportunity to research a topic of such personal interest to her; her project blended her field of study into her life in a way that felt deeply affirming and deeply fascinating all at the same time. After graduating from UC Irvine, Sarah plans to attend law school at UCLA.

## Abstract

Young adult fiction has been a slowly growing phenomenon over the past fifty years, most notable for the specificity of its coming-of-age target audience and the ways in which that audience interacts with the works. In that time, queer young adult fiction has evolved from nearly nonexistent to abundant and regularly award winning. The genre has moved through periods of limiting focus on only men, of concentrating only on issues surrounding homophobia, and of eventually moving into telling a wide variety of more diverse stories. This more abundant and varied storytelling has allowed queer young adult fiction to develop as a genre and reach a wider audience. However, queer young adult fiction has also gone through intense censorship, removal from school libraries, and regular challenges to its place in school curriculums. There is still a long way to go before queer literature, especially literature aimed at young adults, is widely accepted as eligible for literary canon. Still, the genre is growing and its representation is improving. Moreover, it is finding the audience that so desperately needs it. This project examines how queer young adult fiction has evolved over the past fifty years—including the causes of that transformation and how it has affected matters of audience.

## Faculty Mentor



Faculty Mentor statement to come.

## Key Terms

- ◆ Experience-Taking
- ◆ Queer
- ◆ Young Adult Literature (YA)
- ◆ Censorship

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## Introduction

There is a distinctive quality of children's fiction that goes beyond just a marketing distinction, and it lies in the specificity of its target audience. In books for very young children, this is most noticeably about reading levels and whether a child is interested in pirates or spaceships, dinosaurs or talking animals—but in fiction aimed at teenagers it becomes something more. There is a distinctive experience to reading something for yourself and realizing, maybe for the first time, that you are precisely the target audience (Pattee 219). Being the precise target audience means not having to morph a book for somebody else into something useful for you, and instead just seeing yourself. It is for exactly this reason that young adult fiction for queer and LGBT teenagers is so important, and why trends in the kinds of stories that are being told matter. Despite a relatively short history and frequent censorship, queer literature for teenagers and young adults has grown in number, improved in quality, and become more complex over the lifespan of the genre in the past century. This trend of ever-improving storytelling seems to be continuing, at least for the time being, leading to increasingly varied literature available to queer teenagers.

There is some disagreement in publishing spheres about where the lines between genre categories are—especially between children's and young adult literature—but for the purposes of this paper, I borrow literary critic and queer theorist Christine Jenkins' definition of young adult literature:

Since the 1960s, the label of young adult (YA) literature has been most commonly applied to fiction with a young adult protagonist that is centered on the developmental and life phase issues associated for adolescence and is created for and marketed to a teenage readership (298).

There is also some disagreement as to the definition of the word “queer,” and there is not room in this paper to explore the intricacies of that particular argument and field of study without taking too much time away from the main subject matter. For the purposes of this paper, “queer” is used as a general term to refer to non-normative romantic and sexual attraction and the identities therein, and is more or less interchangeable with the initialism LGBT<sup>1</sup>.

1. The initialism will be used infrequently. This is mostly because it is technically a noun and therefore lends itself less well to being an adjective to describe literature and readerships than “queer” does. While nouns can be repurposed into adjectives when necessary, it is my preference not to do so when there is a smoother word available.

## Methods

For this project I examined forty-nine years of queer young adult literature, from the beginnings of the genre and to the present day. I analyzed the way that it evolved over time, and read a wide variety of turning point works in the genre. I did so to get a feel for the experience of the readership and the works that resonated with audiences. I also studied the research of twenty-four literary critics and scholars from different time periods over the past half century who have conducted research in queer young adult literature—most of them queer literary theorists or experts in children's literature—and synthesized what I learned from them and from my own research into a complete picture of the genre. That complete picture did not previously exist; the field was scattered into different times and places and scholarship on individual works of literature, and I knew that scholarship on this specific genre needed to be brought together. Queer young adult literature is changing and evolving all the time, and tracking that evolution over the past half century with the ways in which it has influenced and been influenced by its audience was the key purpose of this project. I believe it is also important to note that I have come at to project from the perspective of a queer woman who was, of course, once a queer teenager. There is a distinct value in actively uncovering the underlying workings of a phenomenon that one had once experienced passively. As such, the method of my research hinged on coming at the genre from two basic angles: as an academic and as reader.

### History of Queer Young Adult Literature

Most literary historians trace queer young adult literature, as a genre and marketing distinction, back to 1969 and the publication of John Donovan's *Ill Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip* (Kidd 185–186). This was the first novel published by a mainstream publisher to portray a kiss between two teenaged boys (Kidd 185). It was also, perhaps not coincidentally, published in the same year as the Stonewall Riots (Kidd 185). Literature very frequently mirrors trends in culture—it is, after all, based on the ideas of people who live in that culture turned into writing—and queer literature is no different. However, the publication of Donovan's novel does not necessarily mark the beginning of all queer characters in young adult literature. It is rather, as literary critic Kevin Kidd describes it, “the first young adult novel to openly portray same-sex desire” (185). There were queer-coded characters in much of popular literature targeted at teenagers, but the way that queerness could be represented on the page changed in 1969.

Prior to that point, any interpretation of a teenaged character as queer had to happen in the mind of the reader, with textual evidence that mostly manifested in subtle word choice, some degree of gender nonconformity in characters, and often a character's resistance to marriage (Kidd 185). Kidd cites characters like Jo March in *Little Women*, who resists marriage and never quite conforms to norms of gender presentation or behavior, and Harriet the Spy as characters popularly interpreted as queer. It is worth noting that this does not mean that the characters were ever written as queer, but the fact that audiences interpreted them that way is not insignificant. Kids, and people in general, will create representation where none exists simply because they need it.

It took much longer for there to be significant queer representation in children's literature than it did for other literary genres, likely because of cultural conceptions of children and appropriateness. In the present day, this anxiety surrounding the "innocence" of children mostly takes place in the censorship of the kinds of books available to students, but it has historically also limited what kinds of books get published. As Kidd describes it, "Those working in children's literature know how frequent and pressing are assertions of the naturalness, innocence, and self-evidentiality of childhood in its forms" (182). There are particular ideas about childhood that make adults want to limit children's exposure to certain ideas and images. This impulse, along with general social and cultural taboos against queerness, has severely limited the publication of queer children's and young adult literature both historically and in the present day. However, 1969 was a turning point for publication. The decades that followed showed a drastic increase in the publication and availability of queer literature for teenagers and young adults.

This mostly started with queer secondary characters in fiction aimed at straight teenagers. In these works, as literary critic William P. Banks describes it:

Most of the LGBT characters in YA fiction were secondary, often dead or killed off during the narrative, or run out of town and separated from community and/or family. The message is hard to miss: LGBT characters are most useful if they're dead and gone. This is not the reality that students need (35).

This form of representation might have been worse than nothing at all because it essentially used queer characters to forward the arcs of straight characters by serving as a kind

of background tragedy. The queer characters were rarely the protagonists; Banks and others had to search out adult literature to find more central queer characters. However, that came with its own set of challenges, because it erased the target-audience value that finding queer YA literature would have held. Banks, in his essay "Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(s) of Queer Young Adult Literatures," describes an experience of seeking out queer literature in the library of his older brother's college as a teen and finding very little:

But the books you *did* find were rarely, if ever, truly meant for you, at least if you were an adolescent struggling with coming out and finding love...you were more often faced with a host of books that weren't about adolescence at all, but about coming out as adults, away from home and often in places where the protagonists could blend in or be invisible (33).

The experience of being the target audience, and finding books that are about where you are right now, is extremely important. It is especially important as a teenager, when very little of the wider world appears to be happening from your own point of view.

Representation of queer characters in young adult fiction began to improve over the next couple of decades, in the 1970s and 1980s (Jenkins 300). There were more queer characters in young adult literature, and more of them were protagonists (Jenkins 300). However, most of that representation was only for a very narrow subset of queer teenagers, and often fell into unfortunate stereotypes (Jenkins 300). Christine Jenkins describes her findings combing through that era of queer young adult literature:

Much of what I found was fairly predictable; the majority of the titles reinforced social stereotypes of the generic gay person as an urban middle-class white male who is educated, involved in the arts, and likely to encounter hardships directly related to antigay prejudice (300).

There was also a significant gender disparity in these books (Jenkins 302). Jenkins found there were more than three books featuring gay male characters for every one that featured lesbian characters, while very few books had both (302). This trend continued over Jenkins' study of 90 books over a 29-year span, from 1969 to 1998 (303). She also found that young adult books with queer main protagonists most often had no queer secondary characters—with the exception of the love interest—and therefore rendered the

protagonist somewhat isolated and eliminated any possibility of portraying a larger queer community (318). These books also featured what Jenkins describes as a “general unwillingness in this literature to represent sexual orientation as anything other than permanent and unalterable” (325). She found a significant absence of characters who experience any degree of fluidity of sexual attraction or orientation, and characters one could describe as being bisexual or attracted to multiple genders (325). A narrative persists in these stories that a character’s sexuality and experience of attraction is entirely fixed throughout their life.

A new shift in queer young adult literature happened in the 1990s. Corrine Wickens describes this shift as being “toward more progressive inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) characters” (149). Not only were more young adult novels being published with queer characters, and often even queer protagonists, but the thematic handling of queerness was changing as well. Instead of the frequently tragic narratives of previous time periods, the queer young adult literature in the 1990s was more focused on, as Wickens describes, “creating empathetic characters, villainizing homophobic behaviors and characters, and even using the narrative in part as a ‘how-to’ manual to familiarize the reader on different aspects of LGBTQ identities and conflicts” (160). This representation was perhaps over-simplistic and stereotypical, but it was also a mark of progress. It is significant that queer characters in these stories did not die at the end, and were often the unquestioned protagonists of their own narratives (Banks 35).

The persistent issue was that these stories were also what commonly get referred to in literary spheres as “issue books.” This meant, essentially, that the protagonist’s sexuality was the “issue” around which the plot was centered. As Banks describes it:

[T]hese are texts primarily about characters whose existence is a struggle; the plots are mostly about individuals trying to ‘deal with’ their sexualities, conflicts with others because of their sexualities, fears of parental reactions, etc. While these conflicts may be ‘realistic,’ they are also reductive when rendered as a canon of available literature, suggesting that the experiences of being queer are only about these personal conflicts, not about larger issues or more complex experiences with the world (35).

This criticism does not erase the value of these works. Young adult literature with queer characters, and even protagonists, holds intrinsic value in its ability to allow teenagers to see themselves who might otherwise not get that opportunity. Young adult literature that is specifically aimed at a queer audience is even more valuable, because the experience of being the target audience is such a powerful one. Additionally, allowing straight teenagers to read books about queer characters and identify with them allows for a process that literary theorists often call “experience-taking” (Lenz 142). This is, essentially, the ability of literature to contribute to a reader’s worldview in a way similar to that of lived experience. Literature does not have to be perfect to be productive. Even flawed representation can provide a mirror for the reader to see their own experience reflected on the page—even if that image is somewhat distorted.

At the same time, however, the value of things that already exist does not mean that they could not be improved upon. Young adult literature has continued to improve in its social and cultural awareness over the past century, and perhaps especially over the past few decades.

### Changing Trends and the Present Day

In past twenty years, queer young adult literature has continued its general trend of becoming more widely available, frequently published, and varied in terms of storytelling. As Mark Letcher describes it: “the publication rate is nearly double the rate from the 1990s. Obviously these books are reaching an audience” (123). There are also a number of notable literary awards that now exist specifically for queer literature, including categories that are specific to young adult literature (Johnston 5). The most notable of these is probably the Stonewall Book Award for Children’s and Young Adult Literature, which has been part of the ALA Youth Media Awards since 2011 (Johnston 5). The existence and prestige of these kinds of awards indicate that queer literature is more generally accepted in more elite circles of literature, and subsequently more likely to be considered part of the “canon” of particular regions and times.

Scholarship on recent trends in young adult literature is scarcer than that of previous periods, simply as a result of the nature of academia and the time necessary for research and publication. However, it is slightly more plentiful in the world of literary journalism. Alim Kheraj, who writes about queer content for GQ, ran an experiment over the course of 2017 in which he read exclusively queer young adult fiction for a year. As he notes, young adult fiction is pretty

popular among adults, who account for fifty-five percent of sales and very frequently buy those books for themselves (2018). His findings are summarized as follows:

A lot has changed in YA fiction, and the “kill your gays” trope, while not exclusively in the past, is speedily going out of fashion. During my 12 months, I knew that if I was reading a recently published queer teen novel, no matter how dark, desperate, or upsetting it became, one thing was certain: It wouldn’t end in death, isolation, or loneliness. Instead, YA fiction has become a place where diversity flourishes. Every novel had an ending that was, if not happy, at least hopeful (2018).

These findings are not isolated to this one experiment either. General trends in the literature, as analyzed by literary critics, recreate the result and reinforce the conclusion. Pauline Schmidt and Laura Renzi, for *The English Journal*, find that “young adult literature is moving beyond the perception that sexuality and gender are the ‘problem’ in the novel, and instead portraying LGBTQ characters as adolescents facing traditional problems rather than being identified as ‘different’” (124). It is a shift in the literature that lends itself well to hope, because it is allowing for a wider variety of stories to be told to the kids who might need them.

On the most optimistic note possible, Lisa Johnston for *Young Adult Library Services* sums up this trend as “[T]he growth of a nation is reflected in its literature, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the ever-expanding pool of children’s and young adult books reflecting GLBT experience” (5). The kind of literature that gets published, bought, and finds an audience does reflect cultural conceptions and ideas. This is especially true with children’s literature, including that for young adults, because its target audience does not have a disposable income of their own. The popularity of these books is reliant on acceptance from adults—parents, teachers, librarians, etc.—and the success of these books clearly demonstrates that that acceptance exists.

This is not to say that every problem is solved and suddenly queer young adult literature is perfect—that is not the case. A significant proportion of queer young adult literature still consists of “issue” novels, which center on the character’s queerness as the central conflict (Crisp 335). As literary critic Thomas Crisp describes it, “many gay adolescent novels use homophobia as the foil against which characters with non-normative sexual identities struggle in order to find happiness” (335–336). This does not mean that such novels should not exist or are not important, simply that

they ought not to be the only kind of story that is told about queer teenagers. There are other stories that queer kids should get to see themselves in and to integrate into their worldview of both literature and life. Seeing one’s life as only a struggle is a very limiting story. Telling more kinds of different stories fills out the landscape and broadens the universe of representation, though broadening that representation is not always easy for authors and publishers.

When queer young adult novels do not spend time dealing with homophobia as a plot point, they often face some degree of backlash from reviewers for doing so. The example Thomas Crisp points out is David Leviathan’s *Boy Meets Boy*, which was frequently labeled by reviewers as “fantasy” or “utopian” despite being a straightforward contemporary romance (340). Even Crisp falls into the same trap he criticizes, labeling these kinds of stories as a sort of “magical realism,” without ever noting that the only thing that would fit them in that genre would be the absence of one kind of prejudice present in the real world, which is not how the genre of magical realism actually works<sup>2</sup>. However, he makes an interesting point in articulating how queer characters are still somewhat othered in their own narratives:

Although queerness is not always constructed as something bad...it is still constructed as something *different* and therefore in relationship to some “norm” (there cannot be a “different” subject position unless there is some “natural” position somewhere): arguably, heterosexuality (343).

It would seem that queer literature, and specifically queer young adult literature, is not yet at the point where they can treat queerness as anything other than that which is “different.” This may be an issue in publishing, or in writing, or in what can be expected for a reader to accept. It is yet to be seen whether this is something that will change with time, like so much else has.

Additionally, the gender disparity and absence of bisexual characters within queer young adult fiction that was so evident in Christine Jenkins’s study in 1998 persists today (Keen 360). Bonnie Kneen, for *Children’s Literature in Education*, conducted research in which she attempted to find bisexual protagonists in the queer young adult literature market, and found very little. She summarizes her research as follows:

2. There is a very specific set of tropes and conventions to the Magical Realism genre, and they mostly have to do with elements of literal magic being accepted as commonplace by the characters within the story. An absence of homophobia does not qualify as magic

[M]y searches of scholarly articles, bibliographies, popular LGBT media websites, LGBT children's book websites and Amazon yielded only thirteen English language YA titles and one series published before 2012, whose protagonists arguably show sexual desire for more than one gender (361–362).

It is worth noting that this search was in 2012, and the corresponding article was published in 2015, so there may have been some changes in the half decade since, but the point still stands. In the world of queer literature, there is a comparative scarcity of represented identities outside of the categories of gay and lesbian. As Kneen articulates, this is “particularly problematic for such teenagers, since it reduces the conceivability and plausibility of bisexuality as an explanation for their plural desires” (363). There is very clearly still progress to be made.

However, queer young adult literature has been consistently moving in the direction of increased representation and increased diversity in storytelling over the past half century, a trend that appears to be continuing. Increased publication of queer literature for teenagers makes room for more, different kinds of stories to be told, and more people to be represented. The flaws that exist now may never entirely disappear, but the overall trend is almost overwhelmingly one of positive progress. As the genre grows, so does its capacity to include the stories that its audience needs to hear.

## Censorship

A major obstacle to the progress of queer young adult literature is censorship. While the rules for what can and cannot be published have loosened considerably over the past fifty or so years, the rules for what can be made available in libraries and schools are a different matter entirely (Letcher 123). The problem that keeps queer literature out of libraries and classrooms for children and teenagers has two major components: censorship by school and library districts made following complaints, and self-censorship teachers and librarians made in anticipation of complaints.

The first problem consists of school and library districts banning particular books for “inappropriate” content after parents complain or formally challenge the presence of those books (Curwood et al. 38). Three of the top ten most frequently challenged books in the United States<sup>3</sup>

include some degree of queer content and are challenged on that basis (Curwood et al. 38). Those books are *The Color Purple*, *And Tango Makes Three*, and *Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Curwood et al. 38). Those books have been challenged consistently since their publication, so this particular act of censorship may appear to be a holdover from a different time period. However, these books and to newer releases are still being challenged.

On March 1, 2018, Macmillan Publishers released a book by Jen Petro-Roy titled *P.S. I Miss You* and planned a tour for the author, but most of those tour stops were cancelled when districts deemed the book “too heavy and mature” for its middle school-aged target audience (Canfield). The book was an epistolary novel that featured a twelve-year-old protagonist writing letters to her older sister, and confessing a crush on another girl in her class (Canfield). One might expect a degree of backlash to the novel in heavily conservative parts of the United States, but the planned tour stops for Petro-Roy were in New England and the Mid-Atlantic (Canfield). Still, the book was considered to be inappropriate for its target audience, and the tour stops for the author were cancelled (Canfield). The libraries and middle schools in question have not released any information as to whether they still plan to own copies of the book. But if hearing the author speak was deemed inappropriate, one can only imagine the book will also not be available for students. In response to the cancelled tour, Petro-Roy released a statement saying:

I didn't set out to write a controversial book. I still don't think I *wrote* a controversial book.... All I know is that to me, these issues are not “mature content.” There is no sex in my book, which is aimed at children ages 9 to 13. There is no making out. There are no Satanic rituals or polemics against religion. There is simply the message that you can believe what you want to believe. You can love (or crush on) whomever you want. You can decide for yourself when authority figures are wrong (Canfield).

There is no word yet about how Macmillan Publishers does or does not plan to promote the book without the tour, or if the controversy surrounding the planned tour is enough promotion in and of itself.

The second problem actually happens before any of the challenges from parents or community members even

3. The process of challenging a book that is in a curriculum or available through a public library is different in different countries – but in the United States, it is often as simple as submitting a formal complaint that includes mention of a specific kind of content that is

occurs; it is the problem of self-censorship. Essentially, many libraries and school districts never acquire children's and young adult fiction with queer content in the first place, because they are worried about possible backlash from their communities (Curwood et al. 40). Jen Scott Curwood describes the logic behind this phenomenon as follows: "To some, including an LGBTQ book in the curriculum may seem like inviting a censor or outspoken critic to come calling (40). Under this reasoning, many school districts never update their curriculum or list of assigned books, wishing to avoid controversy by teaching the same material that has been long accepted. As Curwood describes her own experience attempting to add books to the curriculum in the school district in which she teaches, "The process to add new books to the curriculum was lengthy and detailed; the school's reading specialist couldn't remember the last time it had been done" (37–38). Because of this, newly published works are hardly ever added to school curriculums or even many libraries, and queer literature is left almost entirely out of the picture. To borrow Curwood's words yet again:

Denying the students the opportunity to read works because of what might happen turns all power over to an imagined "someone." The would-be censor doesn't necessarily have a name—may not even exist. Censorship—in the form of self-censorship—has already occurred (40).

This is not so much active censorship as it is the fear of possible censorship, causing teachers and librarians to take no risks with the material that they make available to students.

There have been efforts to solve this problem, many of which include supplying educators with lists and recommendations for books that fit particular criteria. Stephanie R. Logan's "Criteria for the Selection of Young Adult Queer Literature" for *The English Journal* ranks recommended books according to a long list of criteria<sup>4</sup> and makes recommendations that are tailored to particular kinds of communities (32–34). Logan recommends particular content to more traditionally conservative or religious communities, and different content to communities that are already likely to be accepting of queer stories. There is yet no substantive evidence of these kinds of methods of curriculum-creation being implemented in real school districts; however, the existence of the recommendation does offer some hope that it could happen.

4. Criteria Include: Curriculum Relevance, Literary Merit, Window and Mirrors (as in, stories that provide a window into a new perspective or a mirror of one's own), Social Justice and Equity, Stereotypes, and Sexual Expressiveness (Logan 32–34).

## Marketing

Outside of censorship, another challenge to getting queer young adult fiction into the hands of the actual young adults who could benefit from it is marketing. Queer fiction has been notoriously vaguely marketed—supposedly in an effort to appeal to as large an audience as possible, and to not scare off readers (Ellis). Capitalism controls the book market in the same way that it controls the market for any consumer good. Therefore, a book needs to appeal to as large an audience as possible on its face in order to increase numbers of sales. Books with queer content, especially young adult books, often do not simply state on the back-cover description that they include queer characters. Instead, there are a variety of code phrases about "identity," "scandal," and "attraction" that try to subtly indicate the content of the book (Ellis). Journalist and book reviewer Danika Ellis wrote an article for the website Book Riot titled "How to Find Queer Books" in 2016 that attempted to round up all of the subtle marketing methods for queer literature in a way that might help readers find it. Her tactics for finding queer books in libraries and bookstores, even when those books were not labeled as such, included memorizing the names of queer-friendly publishers, seeking out particularly vague cover images, and looking for code phrases in the back-cover descriptions (Ellis). That last recommendation, she acknowledges, is somewhat tricky because "these code words are intentionally vague and could mean anything" (Ellis). At the end of the article, Ellis reveals that her favorite method of finding queer literature is actually from the cover blurbs made by other authors, stating, "If Sarah Waters or Emma Donoghue is blurbbed at the front of the book, there's a good chance it's a literary lesbian novel" (Ellis). The moral of the story appears to be that finding queer literature is difficult because publishers very rarely market it as such.

In the past couple of years, there have been some changes in how queer young adult fiction is marketed, mostly through cover images. Not long ago, the cover images for lesbian fiction for young adults all featured what journalist and book reviewer Tirzah Price called the "lesbian hands" trope ("Cover Talk"). This was, essentially, a publishing trend in which every young adult novel with a lesbian protagonist featured a cover image of someone's hands (Price, "Cover Talk"). Beginning in about 2016, this trend has changed and those books now feature more typical romance covers with the two primary characters depicted in some romantic pose (Price, "Out and Proud"). However, this comes with its own host of problems, because now these books are visibly, obviously queer. Price sums up the problem as follows:

Victory for queer girl books, right? Except...I wouldn't have gone near those books if I had seen them when I was a teen, let alone read them. In fact, I seriously question whether they'd even appear on the shelves of my conservative high school library today. Despite the many victories for LGBTQ+ rights in recent years, the reality is that coming out isn't always safe for some teen readers ("Out and Proud").

The cover images are now more obviously queer, and that is in some sense a victory over a degree of censorship. But at the same time, it narrows the audience. There are plenty of kids—including plenty of queer kids—who will not pick up these books because they do not want to welcome questions from other people, particularly the adults in their lives who may not be supportive (Price, "Out and Proud"). They are not ready to be seen reading a book that is very obviously queer literature. In Price's words, "Maybe those teen readers need these books, but they can't pick them up because doing so would inadvertently out them to others, or invite unwanted questions and opinions, or even put them at emotional or physical risk" ("Out and Proud"). This is, in some ways, a no-win situation. The subtle covers and vague back-cover descriptions may keep readers from ever finding queer literature, but more obvious marketing and labeling may keep readers from openly reading the same work even though they know it exists. Time and culture will need to change, in order for this problem to resolve itself.

### The Hope and Potential of the Future

The problems that still exist do not mean that all is lost. There is still progress to be made, both in the literature itself and in culture at large. Queer fiction is becoming more mainstream and reaching wider audiences. The widespread commercial and critical success of queer young adult fiction from the past couple of years—including such award-winning books as *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue*, and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, indicate significant progress in the genre. This is highly important, because it means more representation reaches the children and teenagers who need it, and the incredible experience of being exactly the target audience of a work of literature is open to more and more people. It is happening, albeit somewhat slowly. There are obstacles in the way, including censorship and the limitations of marketing when a book is also a consumer good that needs a sales base, but there is also a clear trend of progress.

Young adult literature is one of the key places where queer stories matter and are often desperately needed by the kids who find them, and over the last half century there have been more opportunities for those stories to find the kids who need them. There have been more queer young adult books published in every decade since 1969, the stories have become more diverse and more varied, and they have been reaching broader and broader audiences (Jenkins 300). This indicates a distinctly, if perhaps tentatively, hopeful future for both queer young adult literature and the possibilities for popular literature as a whole to reach the audiences for whom these stories matter. This means that more queer teenagers will be able to see themselves in the fiction that they consume and be able to benefit from the experience-taking that is so important in children's and young adult fiction. The impactful and highly distinct experience of being the target audience is finally opening up to children for whom it never has before, and that is an incredible evolution.

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