

Homosexuality in Young Adult Novels

I chose to study the theme of homosexuality in young adult novels because LGBTQ-themed writing is often forgotten in the face of popular and beautiful heterosexual couples. From the love triangle between Katniss, Peeta, and Gale to the shipping arguments over Harry and Hermione or Ron and Hermione, well-known adolescent literature rarely glances at homosexuality, sometimes skipped entirely to avoid controversy or handled so poorly that it merely reiterates painful queer stereotypes. When I was a teenaged reader, I was under the impression I would only find homosexual couples in fanfiction; imagine my surprise when I discovered David Levithan, a gay author writing about gay relationships, in the bookstore. In 2015, the United States legally declared love is as equal between a man and a man or a woman and a woman as it is between a man and a woman, and as a result, literature has grown braver with illustrating LGBTQ-themed stories. From lesbianism to bisexuality to transgenderism, I chose to explore the lesser known corners of young adult books in order to discover gems of queer writing, with the optimism that these novels only continue to rise in conception and reputation, and are not merely celebrated as an afterthought. One day, I genuinely hope no such belated announcements are made relating to a character's sexuality (re: Dumbledore is gay!) or no such stupidly common tropes continue to exist (re: "Bury Your Gays," or immediately kill off the homosexuals), instead sharing stories based purely on a human character or a relationship between human beings—gay, straight, or whatever. But, admittedly, I am a romantic.

Annotated Bibliography

Farizan, Sara. *If You Could Be Mine*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Young Readers, 2013.

As a young woman in Iran, seventeen-year-old Sahar is expected to dutifully obey her culture's customs, following in the footsteps of her late mother's domesticity and tending to her

widowed father. Although she struggles against how she is rapidly transitioning into adulthood, Sahar admires her Iranian roots, shown to be just a normal teenaged girl who is trying to figure out her life. However, Sahar does harbor a secret, one that greatly conflicts with her culture: Sahar has been in love with her best friend Nasrin since girlhood, and Iran does *not* look kindly upon homosexuality. Beneath her everyday routines of going to school and doing her chores, Sahar is constantly reminded of how, were her love for Nasrin exposed, both girls could be publicly humiliated, beaten, imprisoned for indecency, and even executed. Yet, Sahar and Nasrin continue to kiss in secret, promising each other romance and companionship, even in the face of danger. It is only when Nasrin's parents announce they have arranged a husband for her to marry that Sahar realizes she can no longer keep her sexual identity and her love for Nasrin a secret. When Sahar delves into Iranian beliefs for a solution that could protect her relationship with Nasrin, she discovers that, while homosexuality is a crime in her country, gender reassignment surgery is acceptable, on the grounds she can prove she suffers from a mistake of nature—that she is a man trapped in a woman's body. As a man, Sahar realizes she would be able to marry Nasrin, yet as a man, her change in physical gender could come at the great cost of her emotional identity as a woman, her relationship with her family members, and her connection to her homeland.

As Farizan's debut novel, *If You Could Be Mine* is a startlingly raw and refreshing illustration of homosexuality in adolescent literature. While the story contains the familiar elements of a coming-of-age narrative, with Sahar's naiveté meshing sweetly with the extreme emotions she feels for Nasrin, the trope is equally challenged by offering a painfully realistic look into homosexuality within a culture that condemns it to the point of being punishable by death. The immersion into Iranian customs and characteristics genuinely stands *If You Could Be*

Mine out as unique LGBTQ-themed novel; then, in addition to Sahar and Nasrin's lesbianism, Sahar's exploration into transgenderism and gender reassignment surgery further establishes the story as pushing the boundaries of queer writing, touching on sexual identities often skewered by misconceptions within a culture also stereotyped as purely chauvinistic. Although Farizan's writing style has room for growth, her personal knowledge as an Iranian female author illustrates *If You Could Be Mine* as an excellent opportunity to experience new intricacies of LGBTQ subjects in adolescent literature. Unfortunately, in contrast to the romantic relationships from David Levithan or the positive family dynamics from Benjamin Sáenz, I would warn readers to not anticipate on a happy ending.

---. *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Young Readers, 2014.

Leila considers it an accomplishment to have made it to her junior year of high school without developing a crush on anyone. This is doubly significant for her because, were she to get a crush, it would definitely be on a girl—something that goes against her Persian heritage and would only further separate her as an outcast from the rest of her school peers. Of course, everything changes for Leila when she meets Saskia, a beautiful and sophisticated new arrival, and the two quickly realize an attraction for each other. Yet, beneath Saskia's sensuality, Leila suffers from her mixed signals, confusing comments, and often painful judgments in order to maintain a heterosexual appearance; unable to understand what she is feeling for Saskia, let alone what Saskia feels for her, Leila confides in her friends Lisa and Tomas—only to endure their homophobic reactions as well. As Leila struggles to identify herself and her sexuality, she also comes to realize how the others around her have secrets of their own, and regardless of the attraction she feels for Saskia, emotional abuse is just as painful and serious as physical abuse.

As Farizan's second novel, her writing ability has matured and she continues to incorporate different perspectives on homosexuality to provide a revitalizing young adult read. Although Leila's narrative can strain against its naïve tone (as though Farizan herself grows self-conscious when writing in the voice of a teenager), Farizan once again tackles the unkind elements that can crop up in relationships, whether gay or straight; the emotional manipulation Saskia pushes upon Leila is a grave reality of abuse that young adults are often completely unaware of, as the term *abuse* implies there has to be physical proof, ignoring cases of intimidation, stalking, and bullying. Additionally, Farizan reiterates that such emotional abuse can occur in homosexual relationships, like with Leila and Saskia, rejecting the idea that only heterosexuality contains problematic areas. Overall, Leila's experience with Saskia is an unfortunate truth that can happen with any relationship, and it is significant how Farizan takes the time to illustrate its seriousness. Again, I would warn readers to not expect a happy ending, but *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* does serve as a cautionary tale and an important staple in LGBTQ-themed adolescent literature.

Kuklin, Susan. *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2014.

Amid the romantic and fictitious portrayals of LGBTQ writing, I wanted to take the time to also emphasize queer nonfiction and memoirs present in adolescent literature. *Beyond Magenta* compiles six stories, replete with personal experiences and struggles, to illustrate the lives of transgender teenagers, recognizing their transitions in emotional, sexual, and physical identity. As author and photographer, Kuklin's interviews and artistic portrayals of transgender or gender-neutral young adults are thoroughly sensitive, curious, and heartwarming; although she

poses the questions, the teenagers act as the storytellers, taking an opportunity—for some of them, it being the first chance they have had—to speak about who they are and how they wish the world to acknowledge them. Kuklin states that "the basic plan for *Beyond Magenta* was to write and photograph a narrative nonfiction book about sex and alienation, two universal themes that have interacted in life, literature, and art since forever," but by exploring these themes outside a fictional realm and articulating the reality young adults endure against their sexual identities, *Beyond Magenta* stands out as both a story *by* voices from the LGBTQ community and a story *for* readers from the LGBTQ community (165). Furthermore, the enlightening aspect of *Beyond Magenta* is an excellent way for any reader, of whatever gender or sexuality, to discover the genuineness of searching for one's sexual identity with an open mind.

Levithan, David. *Boy Meets Boy*. New York: Knopf for Young Readers, 2003. Print.

In a gay-friendly town of New Jersey, narrator Paul meets newcomer Noah and the two begin a relationship over their shared love for music, books, and art. However, Paul's circle of friends begin to face new challenges: Joni, his best friend from childhood, begins dating a cruel football player who orders her around; Kyle, his ex-boyfriend, confesses he still loves Paul, even as he remains confused and resentful about his bisexuality; and Tony, a shy friend of Paul's, has to remain closeted due to the strict religious beliefs of his parents. Compassionate to a fault, Paul wishes to help every one of his friends with their struggles, even when they cannot seem to help themselves, yet as Paul goes above and beyond to make things better, he starts to lose himself and almost loses his companions as a result of denying his inner conflicts. Determined to win back his friends and lover, Paul overcomes his personal hardships and reconnects his circle, resonating the thematic significance of loving yourself in order to love others.

The positive illustrations of homosexuality, transgenderism, lesbianism, bisexuality, and even heterosexuality emphasizes the coming-of-age narrative of *Boy Meets Boy*. However, even amidst the poetic language and artistic expression of romantic Paul, Levithan does not shy away from the crueler realities of closeted teenagers or teenagers in emotionally-abusive relationships; Levithan simultaneously creates sweet and heartbreaking bonds between boy and girl, girl and girl, boy and boy, child and parent, and—more importantly—between human and human. *Boy Meets Boy* was the first LGBTQ-themed young adult book I came across, shocked and nervous by its presence in Barnes and Noble, yet years later, it remains with me as a poignant story for readers of any age, gender, or sexuality.

---. *Wide Awake*. New York: Knopf for Young Readers, 2006. Print.

Following *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan's *Wide Awake* actually steps back from a coming-of-age romance and creatively combines adolescent literature with a political narrative. In a fictitious future, the United States has survived a second Great Depression (known as "the Debt, Deficit, and Fuel Depression") and a series of tyrannical politicians, bloody wars, and tragic natural disasters; from this survival, a new wave of peace and prosperity begins with "the Jesus Revolution," revitalizing the Christian message of love and forgiveness, and the newly-elected President Abe Stein, openly gay and proud of his Jewish faith. However, the newfound liberalism of America still faces off against remnants of homophobia, racism, and bigotry, as the governor of Kansas demands a recount for the presidential election, actively trying to sabotage Stein's success. Herein, we are introduced to how the wide-scale country politics personally hit home for narrator Duncan, also openly gay and Jewish, and his circle of friends: Jimmy, his African-American boyfriend, whose rage against Stein protestors and other judgmental

characters conflicts against Duncan's peaceful nature; girlfriends Mira and Keisha, upheld by Duncan as an ideal relationship until Keisha falls for another girl during Stein's campaign trail; and Janna, Mandy, and Gus, known as "Jesus Freaks," supporters of the rejuvenated Christian beliefs.

Although Duncan and a majority of his friends were legally unable to vote, they enthusiastically contributed to Stein's campaign by organizing events and calling voters. Thus, when Stein beckons his supporters to come with him to Kansas and face the governor's demands for a recount, Duncan happily joins his friends in traveling to Kansas to support Stein's presidency; not only does Duncan then physically transition from the safe and accepting bubble of his hometown, but he also undergoes an emotional transformation in his adolescence, exposed to and embroiled in protests, prejudice, and heartbreak. Yet, as Levithan has beautifully shown in his previous texts, love is a powerful force, where an open heart begets an open mind. Although *Wide Awake* forces the reader, like the characters, to exit their comfort zone and defend themselves against intolerance, the story ultimately emphasizes the importance of being confident in one's identity, standing up for what one believes in, and how a person—regardless of age, gender, race, faith, or sexuality—can make a difference in the world, through voting, political activism, and providing genuine support for one's friends and family.

Lo, Malinda. *Ash*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009. Print.

After her father dies and she is left in the care of a violent stepmother, Ash finds solace in reading fairytales. Come night, she begins to dream of fairies, imagining being whisked away by magical beings and waking in a new land of fantasy. Then, one night, her dreams come true—Ash meets the fairy prince Sidhean and he offers to save her from the cruel realities of her mortal

realm. Yet, there is something suspicious about this dream figure who has suddenly come into existence; as Ash is debating about what to do, she meets the noblewoman Kaisa, fabled as the King's Huntress, a woman of great bravery, and Kaisa knowingly offers to protect Ash from growing rumors of evil. Under Kaisa's care, Ash comes to realize Sidhean is not all that he seems to be and her dreams of a fantasy land grow dim in comparison to her time spent with Kaisa. As the two women grow to know one another, their bond evolves into love, conflicting the moment when the fairy prince arrives for Ash, claiming she belongs to him. On the surface, Ash can come across as merely a lesbian version of Cinderella. The fact that there have been so many retellings and revisions of classic fairytales, from the Grimm brothers to Disney, may initially turn readers away from *Ash*, but the creative usage of familiar young adult elements—like sexuality, identity, and maturity—while capitalizing on themes from the fantasy genre—like magic and mystery—result in a refreshing story about a young woman coming into her own, establishing this Cinderella retelling as a unique presence with several areas of appeal to readers.

Ryan, Sara. *Empress of the World*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.

As a budding archaeologist, narrator Nicola arrives excitedly at the Siegel Summer Institute for Gifted Youth, a type of camp/college program that offers a wide array of advanced and specialized subjects for skilled students. From art to photography to music to anthropology, the students of Siegel are promised an opportunity to maximize their potential in a positive environment, filled with teenagers who are alike in interests, commitment, and knowledge. However, Nicola does not expect to make friends, determined to focus on whether or not archaeology is what she truly wishes to pursue, and she certainly does not anticipate on hooking up with anyone, despite her keen observations showing a lot of students doing so instead of

studying. Yet, when she meets Battle Hall Davies—a girl—Nicola is immediately thrown off guard, captivated and confused by what she feels; she also gets to know rambunctious Katrina and awkward Isaac, who notice and support Nicola and Battle's attraction for one another from the start, and the four friends bounce back and forth between awkwardness and bonding over the course of the summer. From confused emotions regarding her feelings for Battle to struggling to understand what she wishes to do with her life, Nicola's story unfolds poignantly, so subtly crafted that the reader does not even realize they are invested in an LGBTQ-themed novel. It contains the beautiful and poetic elements of a coming-of-age piece, echoic of David Levithan, but it also does not stress sexuality too hard, simultaneously refuting the idea that sex is all that matters to a growing teenager while also exploring the complex emotions that come with sexual attraction and affection.

Notably, *Empress of the World* is one of the few LGBTQ-themed novels that follows a character who comes into bisexuality or pansexuality, fluid areas of sexuality, but still does not make any demands for Nicola to define herself. While exploring sexualities beyond homosexuality can come across as a gray area of queer writing, often avoided in fear of the queer community being criticized as "flighty" (as though sexuality is a choice), *Empress of the World* instead gently confronts such judgments, like when homophobic bullies claim Nicola needs to strictly adhere to one sexuality—straight or lesbian, and nothing in between—and Nicola adamantly rejects categorizing herself to appease others when her sexuality is her personal business. Furthermore, Nicola and Battle's relationship, replete with curiosity and laughter and kisses and heartbreak, altogether negates the stereotype that a maturing girl gets to "experiment" sexually without consequence or meaning when transitioning out into college, an unfortunate label painted against queer women.

Ultimately, Nicola and Battle, as well as the other teenagers in camp, are given genuine characterization, not just as kids curious about sex but as kids growing into adults, dealing with the reality of sexuality conflicting against one's religion, the stressful demands of education, and future opportunities and uncertainties in employment. To this day, I still go back and read through *Empress of the World* with great care and affection and, while Nicola and Battle's story suffers from sequel deterioration in Ryan's follow-up *The Rules for Hearts*, Ryan remains one of my favorite authors and always a top recommendation, especially for female or queer readers.

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2012. Print.

In the summer of 1987, Aristotle Mendoza decides to go swimming at the local pool to break up the boredom of the Arizonian heat. He also goes to escape the deafening silence that straddles his household; although Ari's relationship with his parents is shown to be fairly positive and lighthearted, his father's time in the Vietnam War and his mother's turmoil over their oldest son, Bernado, being locked away in prison leaves a puncturing rift between the three as a family, as Ari just cannot seem to connect with his father or reach out to his mother to learn more about his elusive brother. Yet, when he arrives at the pool, Ari happens to meet someone with as curious a name as his own: Dante Quintana offers to teach Ari how to improve his swimming, and the two become fast friends. Thus, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* unfolds over the course of the next three years, charting Ari and Dante's friendship, how they each grow close with the other's family, and the conflicts that arise when Dante comes out as gay and Ari struggles to voice his own feelings after being silent for so long.

Winner of the Stonewall Book Award for LGBT fiction, Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* combines coming-of-age with romance with familial drama, bringing together familiar elements of adolescent literature that are still breathtakingly refreshing and powerful to read; Ari's voice as narrator is astoundingly unique, able to be poetic and profound even when completely unable to grasp what he is feeling or how he is changing as he matures. Additionally, the amount of emotion that the male characters portray—from Dante's crying to Ari's nightmares to the kisses Dante's father drops on Ari's cheeks—cements the novel as genuinely breaking the mold, exploring feelings and homosexuality in regards to men in a society that traditionally dictates men must convey nothing and feel nothing except for women. As a result, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* diminishes the significance of gender or race or sexuality in favor of emphasizing the importance of being human, embracing how one feels regardless of what others think. This was the first novel I read by Sáenz, but it will certainly not be the last, as his ability to craft a beautiful narrative and develop amazing characters has stuck with me since finishing the last page. I would highly recommend this book to any adolescent reader, because even though I praise its classification as an LGBTQ-themed novel, it goes even further, resonating on several levels of literature and emotion.