GLBTQ characterization in young adult novels, 1998-2004

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ABSTRACT

Debra I. LeCates
GLBTQ CHARACTERIZATION IN
YOUNG ADULT NOVELS, 1998-2004
2004-2005
Dr. Marilyn Shontz
Master of Arts in School and Public Librarianship

Since the first young adult (YA) novel with gay content appeared in 1969, the number of gay-themed novels available for teens has increased significantly. However, research has shown that the long-awaited movement away from stereotyped characters and conservative storylines and into more realistic portrayals has been slow in materializing. This study utilized a content analysis of 22 YA novels with homosexual content to investigate whether changes have occurred in the portrayal of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) characters and themes between earlier studies and 1998-2004. A total of 26 characterization and plot elements in each novel were analyzed in order to answer the following questions: What images and messages about gays and lesbians do these books present to teenagers? How do the images and messages portrayed in the novels published between 1998 and 2004 compare with those published prior to 1998? It was found that, although certain demographic elements have remained relatively static, these 22 novels presented a more realistic and authentic portrayal of GLBTQ characters than those of previous years.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Marilyn Shontz for her continual positive reinforcement, even when I ignored her suggestions, and thereby caused myself more stress than necessary. Without your gentle prodding, this study would never have been completed.

A special thanks also, goes to Dr. Christine Jenkins, both for her extensive earlier research on the topic that provided a base for my own study, and for her willingness to share her own content analysis categories. You were a great impetus in getting my thesis off the ground.

Finally, to my immediate family and close friends, especially Kathy and Josh, thank you for your ongoing support and encouragement throughout this difficult nine-month gestation period. Congratulations, it’s a thesis! Now you can have me back.
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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Significance of the Topic

Since the first young adult novel with GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning) content appeared in 1969, the number of gay-themed novels available for teens has increased significantly. However, research has shown that the long-awaited movement away from stereotyped characters and conservative storylines and into more realistic portrayals has been slow in materializing. Traditionally, young adult (YA) novels have been didactic in nature, portraying life the way adults want teenagers to view it rather than the way it was in reality. Writers, editors and publishers of gay-themed novels for youth have always had to perform a balancing act: providing books that hook teen readers but without offending the parents, educators, and librarians who purchase them. Thus, gay characters, as recently as 1997, were often still isolated, "invisible," and suffering from internalized homophobia, or at least still portrayed as "outsiders" living within the heterosexual mainstream (Jenkins, 1998, p. 320). Lacking in these novels were lesbians in any type of relationship with male teen protagonists, and any types of gay community settings; very few novels have featured lesbian characters or gay people of color, and rarely has a gay character been seen in normal family and friends settings. Most stories have not even been told from a gay/lesbian perspective but have employed a heterosexual narrator. According to Rictor Norton,
in an article for *College English*, "Most students read literature not for art's sake but for life's sake, because they are seeking vicarious experience which offers insight into their own experience" (Norton, 1974, p. 677). With research showing that one in ten teens is gay or questioning, our libraries and classrooms serving teens have an obligation to provide gay students with resources to enable them to see themselves in their literature.

**Purpose of the Study**

Earlier researchers have examined the body of YA literature with respect to its literary quality and use of homosexual characters (Cuseo, 1982) and its content, gender, and narrative distance (Jenkins, 1993, 1998). In addition, the two Jenkins studies (1993, 1998) traced content changes over time. However, since the publishing date of the latest young adult novel examined in those studies was 1997, it would seem that an update was needed. The purpose of this study was to analyze the portrayal of homosexual characters in selected young adult literature published from 1998 to 2004 in order to determine whether progress has been made in creating realistic, authentic GLBTQ characters in the YA fiction of that period.

**Research Questions**

This study examined the characters of selected YA novels in an attempt to answer the following questions. What images and messages about GLBTQ people do these books present to teenagers? How do the images and messages portrayed in the novels published between 1998 and 2004 compare with those published prior to 1998?
Definition of Terms

**Content analysis:** Close analysis of a work or body of communicated information to determine its meaning and account for the effect it has on its audience (Reitz, 2004).

**Fiction:** Literary works in prose, portraying characters and events created in the imagination of the writer, intended to entertain and vicariously expand the reader's experience of life (Reitz, 2004).

**Gay:** "Of, relating to, or having a sexual orientation to persons of the same sex". In this study, the word is used to describe persons of either gender and is used interchangeably with GLBTQ. "Usage note: The word gay is now standard in its use to refer to homosexuals, in large part because it is the term that most gay people prefer in referring to themselves. Gay is distinguished from homosexual primarily by the emphasis it places on the cultural and social aspects of homosexuality as opposed to sexual practice" (Dictionary.com, 2004).

**Gay character:** In this study, an imaginary person who is self-described as GLBTQ and is represented in a work of fiction.

**Gay content:** GLBTQ subject matter in a novel (adapted from Reitz, 2004).

**Gay themed:** In this study, containing an implicit gay or recurrent gay idea; containing a gay motif.

**GLBTQ:** Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning; a range of sexualities on the spectrum of human sexuality outside what is considered heterosexual or straight (Linville, 2004); used interchangeably with gay for this study.
Problem novel: A subset of YA literature "characterized by candor, unidealized characters and settings, colloquial and realistic language, and plots that portrayed realistic problems faced by contemporary young adults that did not necessarily find resolution in a happy ending" (Donelson and Nilsen, 1986, p. 84).

Realistic fiction: Composed of characters, settings, or occurrences that might possibly exist in the actual world (Cuseo, 1992).

School library: An institutional library, organized to facilitate access by a specific clientele, namely students in grades K-12 (adapted from Reitz, 2004).

Sexual orientation: "an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to another person. It is easily distinguished from other components of sexuality including biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female) and the social gender role (adherence to cultural norms for feminine and masculine behavior). Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept. Persons may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors" (Answers..., 2004).

Straight: For the purpose of this study, heterosexual.

Teen/young adult: For the purpose of this study, a person between the ages of 13 and 19; an adolescent (adapted from Dictionary.com, 2004).

YA: Young adult: For the purpose of this paper, the label is applied to "fiction with a young adult protagonist that is centered on the developmental and life phase issues associated with adolescence and is created for and marketed to a teenage readership" (Jenkins, 1998).
Assumptions and Limitations

There were a few assumptions affecting the results of this project. First, the assumption was made that the chosen YA novels were an adequate representation of those published between 1998 and 2004. In addition, the researcher assumed that GLBTQ teens will actively seek out titles of realistic fiction in which they can relate to the novels' characters, and that these books were available to them in school and public libraries. In order to focus on authentic novels specifically aimed at American teen audiences, the study was limited to realistic novels labeled for young adults that had at least one major GLBTQ character and were published in the United States between 1998 and 2004. Because of the time limitations of this study, only YA novels that had been reviewed by two or more professional journals, and which were available through Follett Library Resources, a major supplier to school libraries, were examined.
References


CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

"Through reading nondiscursive works, the adolescent...meets himself/herself and notices the similarities and differences in his/her own life through fictional experiences" (Cuseo (1992, p.23). Reading is one way in which teens can begin to understand and accept that they are not truly unique or alone, that others share their thoughts, feelings and experiences. But can today's gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) teen identify with the literature written for him/her? Can non-gay youth find in this literature an authentic picture of GLBTQ people? Several previous research studies have focused on young adult (YA) fiction titles with gay themes in an attempt to determine whether the characters and stories authentically reflect the real lives of contemporary GLBTQ adolescents.

Evaluation Guidelines

In 1976, the "Social Responsibilities Round Table's Task Force on Gay Liberation" (SRRT Gay Task Force), now renamed the "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table of the American Library Association" (GLBTRT), drew up guidelines aimed at assisting librarians in evaluating the treatment of gay themes in children's and YA literature. Although these guidelines were written almost 30 years ago, they were still considered to be applicable today and were considered credible as evaluation criteria in this study. Relevant categories from
these guidelines included: Central gay characters (positively portrayed), Minor roles (inclusion of gay characters in minor or incidental roles), and Degree of explicitness (in same-sex relationships), Impact on readers (accurate and sympathetic portrayal of gay characters), and Author's attitudes (degree of stereotyping of homosexual characters).

1969-1984

The first YA novel with a major homosexual theme was John Donovan's, *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, published by Harper & Row in 1969. By 1976, only three others had been published, all of them categorized as "problem" novels. These pioneering works all had literary merit, but they also contained very negative pictures of homosexuality. Being gay had no lasting significance, and numerous harmful stereotypes abounded. Taken as a whole, the novels were anti-female, and not one had a happy ending (Hanckel and Cunningham, 1976; Jenkins, 1993). In the novelists' didactic viewpoints, homosexuality was still caused by a dysfunctional household and was largely a punishable offense. In fact, while admitting that YA novels as a whole leaned toward the melodramatic, Hanckel and Cunningham wondered whether any random selection of four YA novels could produce eight central characters with five sets of divorced parents (two of whom are alcoholic) and have plots with three natural deaths and one by violence--plus four car crashes resulting in one mutilation, one head injury and five fatalities! (Hanckel & Cunningham, 1976, p. 534).
Yet, all of this should not be surprising, because although the American Psychological Association (A.P.A.) removed homosexuality from its mental illness category in 1973 (APAOnline, 2004), the social climate of the times was still quite antigay, and even the available non-fiction works on homosexuality were still largely negative and even inaccurate by 2005 standards. In fact, in their 1976 article, even Hanckel and Cunningham referred to being gay as a choice, and mentioned teens who "want to be gay" (Hanckel & Cunningham, 1976, p. 533).

Two major studies that analyzed YA gay/lesbian novels between 1969 and 1984 were examined for this research paper. Jenkins (1993) performed a content analysis that traced content changes over time, focusing on information about the gay and lesbian people portrayed--both as individuals and in relationships, as well as on gender representation and narrative distance. Cuseo (1992) reworked his doctoral dissertation for publication, focusing mostly on the literary quality of YA novels with homosexual characters but also on the positive or negative portrayal of these characters.

According to Jenkins (1993), 31 titles with major gay/lesbian characters or themes were published for the young adult in the 16-year period between 1969 and 1984. Cuseo (1992) counted 69 titles between the years of 1969 and 1982. However, Cuseo’s count included story collections, foreign published novels, and those with only very minor homosexual characters, thus allowing for the discrepancy in numbers.

Jenkins' (1993) findings indicated that the vast majority of the 31 books portrayed gay/lesbian people who were white and middle class. Only two books
portrayed people of color as gay/lesbian--both of them African-American, and only two portrayed the protagonists in a working class community. Settings for many of these early novels generally featured rural areas and small towns, while others took place in camps and boarding schools. Commonly portrayed in these novels was a gay character’s stereotypical interest in some sort of creative art, either as a vocation or as a hobby. Of adults with identifiable jobs, the most common was teaching, often with the character shown losing his/her job. Books published between 1969-1984 showed a slight predominance of gay male characters, claimed Jenkins, with 19 out of 31 novels (61%) portraying males; yet, of the teens shown in same-sex relationships, there were equal numbers, seven of each gender. Any physical or sexual contact was portrayed in un-explicit or symbolic language, although descriptions of violent events abounded.

Cuseo (1992) concluded that the majority of YA literature with homosexual characters published between 1969 and 1982 presented a negative view of the homosexual’s life, with almost no positive references to homosexuality. Not only were gay characters "flat" characters, but their only reason for inclusion in the stories was their sexual orientation. They were used as "representatives of homosexuality" (Cuseo, 1992, p. 393). Most characters were not individuals, but in fact stereotypes, negatively recognized by their appearance and/or behavior; they often were the problem of the novel, and retribution for their homosexuality was often the plot’s resolution. Gay characters often were rejected by their heterosexual peers, had no community support, and were portrayed as despondent and guilt-ridden. Many authors relied on societal myths, such as those relating to family
upbringing, to weak and effeminate males, and even to the very destructive myth of
the male homosexual as predator, rather than using research findings available at
the time, to create their homosexual characters. Cuseo, unlike Jenkins (1993), found
the novels' settings to be evenly distributed between urban areas and small towns,
with those novels set in cities tending to portray more positive and socially accepted
characters than those in rural and small town settings. Cuseo, like Jenkins (1993),
found that same-sex physical or sexual contact was handled through symbolic
language, and long-term relationships were infrequent.

1985-1992

The publishing of YA novels with gay themes increased, with
approximately 30 more appearing in the eight years between 1985 and 1992.
Jenkins' (1993) study continued her analysis to 1992 and described changes in the
literature of this period. She found that the portrayal of gay/lesbian people as white
and middle class continued through 1992; only three novels through this time
included characters of color, all of them African-Americans. Settings changed
somewhat from rural and small town to urban and suburban locations, with none of
this period set in camps or boarding schools. Teaching was still a common
profession, but rarely did a teacher lose his or her job due to sexual orientation. In
the 30 novels from 1985-1992, the noted predominance of males grew even more
distinct, with 86% of books featuring male characters and only 14% including
female characters. She also found that portrayals of teen same-sex couples became
both less common and more stable (Jenkins, 1993, p. 47), but with physical and
sexual interaction continuing to be very inexplicit compared to that portrayed in
heterosexual YA novels. Like Cuseo (1992) found in the earlier novels, Jenkins (1993) reported that gay and lesbian characters of this time period were usually presented as lonely individuals living a difficult life which often ended in violent death; very few novels presented dynamic gay/lesbian characters who developed survival skills and grew in their understanding of self and others. One striking change that Jenkins found though, was in the narrative distance: during this time period gay issues were more often treated as a subplot or a simply stated fact about a secondary character rather than as the novel's main problem. Fewer protagonists were homosexual during this period, and any interaction between the mostly male protagonists and lesbians was virtually nonexistent.

1993-1997

Jenkins (1998) extended her previous research with a second study that analyzed gay/lesbian content in YA novels through 1997 and also applied four theoretical models to provide interdisciplinary insight into this literature. From these five years, she selected 34 more titles, bringing the total of novels she analyzed to about 100. Somewhat more diversity in characters was noted, with eight titles including gay/lesbian people of color: four African-Americans, three Latinos, and one somewhat undistinguished multicultural teen group. However, Jenkins found far more continuity than change in her content analysis (1998, p. 302) Trends that continued during this period included: white, male and middle class still predominated; gay males outnumbered lesbians three to one; narrative distance continued, with gay/lesbian characters playing secondary roles in two-thirds of the novels; and, in all but a few novels, gender segregation also continued. Plot
elements continued to place gay/lesbian characters outside of the heterosexual mainstream, although they became more "comfortably visible" to the books' heterosexual characters (Jenkins, 1998, p. 320). YA literature continued to portray the estrangement caused by the coming out process, yet infrequently showed life afterward. Still lacking in this genre were portrayals of positively-portrayed "queer" (defined in Jenkins' study as those whose appearance and behavior call attention to themselves and who flaunt their sexual orientation) characters (Jenkins, 1998, p. 323) along with portrayals of bisexual, transgendered, or other sexually identified characters.

Other literature 1969-1997

Other writers generally concurred with the above findings. St. Clair (1995) identified three broad categories of YA novels that represented homosexuality. Those that depicted homosexuality as a "tragic flaw" tended to promote negative stereotypes, The "coming out" novels of the mid-1970s through the mid 1980s tended to represented adolescent homosexuality as less moralistic and more complex. Those in the third category tended to depict gay characters and issues sympathetically, but the characters were very often "off-stage" or secondary characters. Although she saw the trend as somewhat positive, St. Clair pointed out the implications of secondary importance given to gay characters and issues (St. Clair, 1995). Yet, "when the gay/lesbian protagonists take center stage, they were often portrayed as unhappy, tortured individuals who, in a sadly predictable pattern, inevitably meet an unhappy end" (Ford, 1994, p. 24).
Mitchell (1982) examined adolescent literature with homosexual motifs published before and after the 1973 American Psychological Association's decision to delete homosexuality as an illness, in order to see if changes had occurred in the genre. In general, she found that very few changes had occurred. She saw some shift in the receptiveness of the social context, the percent of positive self-conflict, and the degree to which homosexuality was rewarded or punished, along with homosexuality itself having more permanence in the story's resolution. However, Mitchell found no difference in the importance of home background as an influence on homosexuality, in the degree of plot manipulation, on the influence of an older gay character, or on the amount of graphic detail provided.

Summary

Generally, researchers and reviewers through 1997 lamented the lack of good YA fiction that presented a positive, realistic, and hopeful picture of GLBTQ people, not only to provide role models to GLBTQ adolescents, but also to help shatter stereotypes and to humanize GLBTQ people for heterosexual readers. Researchers identified the need for more diverse novels that presented gay and lesbian characters with various demographics, portrayals of people on all points of the sexual orientation continuum, and more life-affirming literature with authentic characters, shown not only struggling with their realization of homosexuality, but living, nourished, growing, and supported in all areas of their lives, not just the sexual.
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CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to analyze the portrayal of homosexual characters in selected young adult literature published from 1998 to 2004 in order to determine whether progress has been made in creating realistic, authentic GLBTQ characters in the YA fiction of that period. This chapter presents the design and justification of the research method used, the procedure for determining the population and selecting the books to be analyzed, the development of the instrument, and the techniques used in the data collection and analysis processes.

Research Method

This study employed simple conceptual content analysis to analyze a total of 22 YA titles with gay or lesbian content. Content analysis was defined by Powell as "a systematic occurrence of words, phrases, concepts, etc. in books, films, and other kinds of materials" (Powell, 1997, p. 50). ODLIS (The Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science) expanded the definition as follows:

Close analysis of a work or body of communicated information to determine its meaning and account for the effect it has on its audience. Researchers classify, quantify, analyze, and evaluate the important words, concepts, symbols, and themes in a text (or set of texts) as a basis for inferences about
the explicit and implicit messages it contains, the writer(s), the audience, and the culture and time period of which it is a part (Reitz, 2004).

Content analysis provided a way to unobtrusively examine text for characterization of GLBTQ people in young adult novels; therefore, it was the most appropriate method to use for this research. In addition, because this study was intended to be a continuation of Jenkins' research which analyzed YA titles with publication dates up to and including 1997 (Jenkins, 1993, Jenkins, 1998), it was decided to utilize a research method similar to and compatible with hers.

Research Questions

Two primary research questions were formulated for this study:

What images and messages about gays and lesbians do these books present to teenagers?

How do the images and messages portrayed in the novels published between 1998 and 2004 compare with those published prior to 1998?

Selection of Sample

The total number of young adult novels with homosexual content published between 1998 and 2004 was too large for a study of this type. In order to reduce the number of titles to a manageable level, a decision was made to utilize Titlewave©, an online service of Follett Library Resources. Follett Library Resources was the school library arm of the Follett Corporation. According to their website (http://www.flr.follett.com/intro/guthist.html), Follett Library Resources was “currently the largest supplier of books, eBooks, and audiovisual materials to K-12 schools”. In addition, its Titlewave© service, which provided
advanced searching capability, was used by a great many school librarians as a collection development tool. For this research, a collection development search of the Titlewave© database was made using the keywords: "homosexuality," "gay," and "lesbian," and narrowed with the following criteria: copyright years, 1998-2004; interest level: young adult, language: English; classification: fiction, and number of reviews: two. Multiple review and award sources options were selected, with an emphasis on starred reviews (books singled out by reviewers for positive qualities) from Book Report, Booklist, Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, Horn Book, Kirkus, Kliatt, Library Journal, Library Media Connection, Publishers Weekly, and School Library Journal. After all hits were thoroughly checked based on the search criteria, and professional reviews were determined to be generally positive, a total of 22 appropriate titles (see Appendix B) were selected to analyze in this study.

Instrument Design

Because only one researcher was coding the novels, a data collection instrument was needed that would collect simple factual information from each title. In a review of the literature, no such instrument was found. Therefore, instead of using a Likert scale requiring a subjective choice on a continuum, the researcher created a simple chart that required either a yes/no response to a datum or a simple factual piece of information about each character. The instrument (see Appendix A) was divided into two major categories, Characterization and Plot/Setting Elements, each with its own set of data to collect. The Characterization category collected information about the protagonist/narrator and
up to three other GLBTQ characters in each novel. Characteristics collected included gender; age; social class; race/culture; sexual orientation; major or minor character status; connection of character to the protagonist; appearance; permanence of sexual orientation; a character's connection to the arts; partnered status; family of origin characteristics, and any positive or negative change in the character by the end of the novel. The Plot and Setting category collected information on the number of GLBTQ characters in the novel; evidence of any type of a gay community; whether homosexuality was a main or secondary plot; categorization of the plot as a coming out story, a life after coming out story, a melting pot of issues, and/or a romance; evidence of any same sex physical or sexual contact; evidence of antigay sentiment; characters' response to antigay sentiment; evidence of stereotyping, and setting location. Space was also allotted for comments or other notes about the novel.

Data Collection

The researcher twice read each of the 22 young adult novels selected (see Appendix B) and recorded data for each on a separate copy of the coding worksheet. Bibliographic information such as title, author, publisher and year published were recorded at the top of each form.

Reliability and Validity

Inter-rater reliability was established by having two other raters read one of the novels and complete the coding worksheet. Based on the agreement between the raters and the researcher, the coding sheet was determined to be a reliable and valid tool for this study.
References


CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Procedures and Methods Used

This study originally identified, using Follett Corporation's Titlewave service, 25 young adult novels with homosexual characters and themes that were published between 1998 and 2004. All novels were selected on the basis of reviews from professional sources, but three titles were subsequently eliminated from the study for reasons relating to place of publication and content. Neither Dare, Truth or Promise, by Paula Boock nor Pulling Princes, by Tyne O'Connell was originally published in the United States. Keesha's House, by Helen Frost contained only very minimal homosexual content. A final total of 22 novels were read and coded by the researcher, using a researcher-created coding sheet (see Appendix A) and the statistical software package, SPSS, version 11.5.

Variables Studied

Variables extracted from each novel were divided into two categories: those related to characters, and those related to plot or setting. Thirteen characterization variables were recorded for up to three characters from each novel in addition to the protagonist or narrator and included:

Gender
Age
Social class
Race or culture

Sexual orientation

Major or minor character status,

Connection to protagonist or narrative distance

Appearance

Permanence of sexual orientation

Connection to the arts (interest in fine art, music, dance or theater)

Relationship status (single, partnered or looking)

Family of origin demographics

Change in character

The twelve plot or setting variables collected from each novel included:

Number of GLBTQ characters

Evidence of any type of gay community

Main or secondary plot status of homosexual content,

Characterization of homosexual content as

- a coming out story
- a life afterward story
- a melting pot story
- a romance

Depiction of homosexual physical or sexual activity

Evidence of antigay sentiment

Evidence that any antigay sentiment was answered in a useful fashion
Evidence of stereotyping

Setting location type

Statistical Analysis

In order to properly analyze statistics, since most novels contained multiple characterization statistics while plot/setting statistics were limited to one set per novel, variables were entered into SPSS in two separate databases, one for the characterization elements and another for the plot/setting elements. Any heterosexual narrators or protagonists were exempted from all statistics. Frequency and percentage tables were generated for each characterization variable and for each plot and setting variable. In addition, separate frequency tables were generated to segregate all characterization variables by gender, and another table listed the gender of characters with the sexual orientation of “questioning.”

Results: Characterization Elements

Sexual Orientation and Gender

Of the 56 major or secondary characters analyzed in 22 selected young adult novels, 48 were considered GLBTQ, with 22 considered gay (46%), ten lesbian (21%), three bisexual (6%), one transgendered (2%), 11 questioning (23%) and one androgynous character of undetermined sexual orientation (2%). Eight characters were heterosexual narrators or protagonists. The GLBTQ characters were male 60% of the time (29 characters) and female 40% of the time (19 characters). Bisexual characters included two males and one female; the single transgendered character was biologically male, and the questioning characters included four males and seven females.
Demographics

Basic character demographics considered in the study included Age, Race or culture, Social class and Family of origin. While Age and Race/culture of characters was usually stated within the novel, Social class and Family of origin demographics often had to be assumed from context, making these statistics somewhat subjective.

The GLBTQ characters analyzed ranged almost exclusively in age from 15-21, with only two assumed to be middle aged, and one of an undetermined age. The vast majority (90%) of all characters were either ages 15-16 (54%) or 17-18 (35%) years old; only one character in the 22 novels was younger than 15, a heterosexual narrator who was 12 years old.

The Race or culture of GLBTQ characters was overwhelmingly Caucasian, numbering 41 characters out of 48 (85%). Two characters were African American (4%), two were of Hispanic origin (4%), two were of mixed heritage (4%), and one (2%) was Jewish.

All Social classes were represented in these novels, but almost half (23 characters or 48%) of the GLBTQ characters could be considered middle class. Five characters (10%) were considered part of the lower class, nine (19%) were considered working class, six (13%) seemed to fit into the upper middle class, and one (2%) was situated in an upper class lifestyle. The social class of four characters (8%) could not be determined from information in the novels.

Family of origin was a bit more difficult to determine, and nine characters (19%) made no mention of family background within their novel. Of the others, the researcher considered 16 characters (33%) to come from typical two-parent families.
and 12 (25%) to come from dysfunctional two-parent families. Only one character (2%) was raised by a single parent, while six others (13%) were either adopted or raised by a related guardian. Four characters (8%) came from families that strongly supported their sexual orientation.

Appearance

Other characterization elements studied include the GLBTQ character’s Appearance, his or her Connection to the arts, and his or her Relationship status. Appearance was classified as exceptionally attractive, average, and plain: a character’s appearance was judged by statements made by other characters and/or by the book’s narrator. In the 22 novels studied, 12 characters (25%) were considered exceptionally attractive, and 36 (75%) were considered of average attractiveness. None of the characters was considered plain. Slightly more females (26%) than males (24%) were considered exceptionally attractive in appearance.

Relationship Status

Relationship status was labeled as single, partnered or looking for a partner. Those labeled as partnered were considered so even if the relationship ended before the novel’s conclusion. A total of 17 characters (11 male and 6 female) were considered single (35%), 22 (13 male and nine female) were considered partnered (46%), and nine (five male and four female) were considered to be looking for a partner (19%).

Connection to the Arts

For the purpose of this study, Connection to the arts included all forms of art, music, dance, theater and cooking. Some connection to the arts was noted for a
total of 20 characters (11 males and nine females) out of the 48 total characters, a percentage of 42%.

Permanence of Sexual Orientation

Permanence of sexual orientation and a positive change in a GLBTQ character by the end of the novel were previously almost nonexistent in early YA novels with homosexual themes. In the novels studied, however, GLBTQ characters' sexual orientation could be considered permanent or probably permanent 79% of the time (38 characters out of 48). Of the ten remaining GLBTQ characters, 8% (four characters) decided they were not gay, and for 13% (six characters), the permanence of their sexual orientation could not be determined.

Change in Character

Fifty-eight percent (28) of the GLBTQ characters could be considered dynamic, that is, they effected a positive change in themselves, usually in attitude, by the end of the novel. Only four characters (8%) changed negatively, and thirty-three percent (16 characters) were considered flat characters and effected no personality change by the novel's end.

Major/Minor Status

The final two characterization elements examined in this study were the Major or minor status of characters and the characters’ Connection to the protagonist (narrative distance). In the 22 novels included in this study, 75% of the GLBTQ characters (21 males and 15 females) could be considered major characters, while 25% (eight males and four females) could be considered minor characters.
Connection to the Protagonist

Of the 22 novels studied, 16 were written in the first person narrative form, with nine (three male and six female) of those first person narrators identifying as GLBTQ, and all of those nine also functioning as the novel’s protagonist. In the other seven first-person novels, the narrator was heterosexual (one male and six females) and, in all but one case, was also the protagonist. In the lone case where the heterosexual narrator was not the protagonist, the lone male heterosexual narrator told his gay brother’s story. In six novels, the story was told in third person narration, two of which provided an omniscient narrator. The four third person narrations all had male protagonists, two of whom were gay, one was bisexual, and one was questioning. Both omniscient narrations had female protagonists, one lesbian and one heterosexual. In the 22 novels studied, there were eight male and 14 female protagonists. Nine books contained mixed gender characters within the main three characters studied, but only one of those (Geography Club) paired a male protagonist (in this case a gay male) with a female character (in this case, a minor bisexual character). Three additional novels with male protagonists made a brief mention of lesbian characters, but none had more than a fleeting presence in the book. All of the eight other mixed gender novels contained female protagonists (three lesbians and five heterosexuals) that coexisted with male characters (five gay, one transgendered, one questioning, and one undetermined.)
Results: Plot and Setting Elements

Crucial elements of the plot and setting analyzed by the researcher included evidence of stereotyping of gay characters, evidence of antigay sentiment (homophobia, both external and internalized), and evidence that any antigay sentiment was answered in a useful fashion by GLBTQ characters.

Stereotyping

The researcher found little or no evidence of gay stereotyping in nine of the 22 novels and, in the 13 novels in which stereotyping existed, it seemed rather equally divided between gay and non-gay characters. *Target* contained a “token” gay character along with a protagonist who worried he might be gay because he was raped by two men, *Gravel Queen*’s Fred was portrayed as somewhat of a drama queen, *November Ever After* perpetuated the idea of hating the sin while loving the sinner, and *Alt Ed* contained the proverbial friendship between the fat girl and the gay boy (along with other stock characters). *Boy Meets Boy* contained somewhat stereotypical drag queens, but they were used simply as part of the very gay-inclusive and humorous plot. In *Whatever Happened to Lani Garver*, Lani was stereotyped as gay because of his effeminate mannerisms and androgynous appearance, but it was the other characters who stereotype him in a negative way as part of the plot, not inadvertent stereotyping by the author. Several other novels stereotyped not the GLBTQ characters but the heterosexual ones, and therefore contained images of spoiled and shallow cheerleaders, macho teen boys, religious fanatics, skinheads, and violently homophobic characters, both teen and adult.
Antigay Sentiment

Antigay sentiment existed in some form in most of the novels, but was not generally unrealistic. Five novels appeared to contain little or no character or societal homophobia, while four portrayed some form of violent physical or emotional homophobia and 12 showed characters exhibiting verbal or attitudinal antigay sentiment. In only one novel, though, *What Happened to Lani Garver*, was other characters’ homophobia so extreme as to cause a perceived gay character’s presumed death.

Answering of Antigay Sentiment

In ten of the sixteen novels that illustrated some form of antigay harassment, the GLBTQ character was considered by the researcher to have dealt with the homophobia in an acceptable or appropriate and realistic manner. In several cases, verbal comments were simply ignored and the character went on with his or her life; in other novels the affected character moved out of a homophobic home and was shown to succeed on his or her own. One gay character chose to make friends with an outcast character who was harassed for being gay although he was not, and one lesbian character chose to create humor out of the situation by making a movie showing her reaction to antigay graffiti on her locker. There were, though, several inappropriate reactions by characters to antigay sentiment. In one case, the offended gay student took revenge on the truck of the offender but was caught and required to make restitution for his deed. There were two disheartening instances, however. In one novel the gay character unsuccessfully attempted suicide; in another, the protagonist continued to propagate the relationship between his rape by two males
and the concern that he might be gay because of it. In the remaining novels, homophobia by other characters was not dealt with at all, positively or negatively. Many of the novels’ GLBTQ characters showed evidence of varying amounts of internalized homophobia, shown by their closeted status and their internal struggles with their sexuality, but in most cases this was minor and simply a realistic part of their coming out process. They realistically worried about how others would react to their sexual orientation. Only two cases of serious internalized homophobia stood out: the one in which the gay character attempts suicide (Rainbow Kite), and the one in which the protagonist, who is probably heterosexual, internalized his homophobia after his rape to the point where he became virtually uncommunicative (Target).

Evidence of Gay Community

GLBTQ teens were not always isolated in the novels published between 1998 and 2004. In eight of the 22 novels, some evidence of a gay community was shown to exist. Three of the novels: Rainbow Boys, Rainbow High, and Keeping You a Secret contain a youth meeting or center for gay teens, and in The Bermudez Triangle, the girls attend a gay dance. The characters in Finding H.F. come across a gay oriented Metropolitan Community Church, and the Geography Club characters create their own gay community. The protagonist in Luna finds community on the Internet, and in Boy Meets Boy almost their entire high school comprises their gay community.
Other Plot Elements

Homosexuality was considered to be the novel’s main theme and much of the plot revolved around the characters’ sexual orientation in ten of the titles, while the homosexual theme was secondary in 12. Fourteen of the 22 novels were considered to be a coming out story for at least one of the characters, while 13 were considered to be a life afterward story for at least one of the characters. In three of the novels, there was a melting pot of issues, both homosexual and non-homosexual. Homosexual romance was a major theme in more than half of the novels (13), but sexual activity of any type was very limited. Sexual activity was either implied or not explicit in nine novels, and consisted only of kisses and hugs in two more. In only one novel was sexual activity somewhat steamy, but even this was not as explicit as in many heterosexually themed YA novels. One novel contained romance but no sexual activity, and one contained inexplicit sex with no romance.

Setting

Setting location varied among the novels, with six taking place in a city, eight in a suburb, five in a small town setting, one in a rural area, and two primarily in a closed community (one in an academic summer camp, and one in a rodeo camp.) Within these more generalized settings, seven of the 22 novels had much of their action occur in a high school setting.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Previous studies on the topic of homosexual characters and themes in young adult novels have shown that, while portrayals became both more numerous and more authentic through the years, some problems still remained. As recently as 1997, many of these novels continued to be somewhat didactic in nature, containing stereotyped and conservative characters and storylines. Characters were still considerably isolated and invisible and were often filled with internalized homophobia: they continued to be characterized as outsiders to the heterosexual mainstream, although more comfortably visible to the usually heterosexual protagonists than previously. Jenkins (1998) found that the early novels still lacked characters of color, portrayals of sexual orientations other than simply gay or straight, and any reference to a larger gay community. Coming out stories were prevalent, but lacking was a view of life after coming out, and so there continued to be a mostly oppositional relationship between traditional families and GLBTQ people. There were no positively portrayed "queer" characters, those who proudly displayed their homosexuality. Characters tended to be white, male and middle class, with gay males outnumbering lesbians three to one. Narrative distance continued to be the trend, with two-thirds of gay and lesbian characters playing secondary roles.
Using content analysis, this research investigated whether changes have occurred in the portrayal of GLBTQ characters and themes in 22 YA novels during the years from 1998 to 2004. A total of 22 novels were analyzed for this study, using a researcher-created coding sheet.

Conclusions

Characterization Elements

Although there is certainly continued room for growth, this researcher found that in general, the reviewer-recommended YA novels published in the United States between 1998 and 2004 did portray a more realistic, positive and hopeful picture of GLBTQ life than those of previous years. The trend seemed to be that these novels were finally breaking away from the didactically conservative, stereotyped portrayals of the past. For example, no longer were gay males always immersed in fine arts: in fact, as many females as males had connections to some form of art in these novels, as did several heterosexual protagonists. Female homosexuals were no longer stereotypically partnered; only about half of them were in any type of partnered relationship with another female. Today's YA novels were portraying GLBTQ characters as of either average or exceptional attractiveness, but their homosexuality was not always shown by their appearance; they were generally individuals who happen to be gay rather than stock gay characters whose homosexuality was determined by their appearance and behavior.

In fact, some novels went so far as to counteract these appearance and behavior stereotypes. In Eight Seconds, the gay male characters were athletically fit young bull riders. Jason in Rainbow Boys and Rainbow High was a respected jock,
as was Kevin in *Geography Club*; Bennett, in *The Rainbow Kite* and Kyle in Sanchez' two novels were both swimmers, while Edmond and Alex in *The Shell House* were decorated soldiers. In the most extreme example, the school's star quarterback in *Boy Meets Boy* was also a drag queen. Female GLBTQ characters were also frequently portrayed in non-stereotypical roles: Kate in *Kissing Kate* was a beautiful cheerleader, along with Sara and Anita in *November Ever After*; Battle Hall in *Empress of the World* was a long-haired Southern Belle; Mel in *The Bermudez Triangle* was described as shy, sweet and attractive, and Wendy from *Finding H. F.* was a beautiful girl who wears flowered dresses. Some stereotyping of characters by authors did occur, but it was directed as much to the heterosexual, most often to the religious right and the macho type of teen boy, as to the homosexual characters.

Another major stereotype that seems to have been broken somewhat in these novels was that of sexual orientation being defined as gay, lesbian or straight only. Although it is just a beginning, these 22 novels contained three characters who identified as bisexual and eleven who were considered to be still questioning their sexuality at the end of their novels. One breakthrough novel, *Luna*, told the story of a biologically male but transgendered character who longed to be female and who, at the novel's end, was actively pursuing that goal. In addition, there was no discernable pattern of homosexuality being caused by a dysfunctional family of origin: all types of families were represented within the novels, from a single guardian to conventional two parent households, all of them in various points on the normalcy/dysfunctional continuum. In only one novel was a parent gay, and in that
case the daughter was heterosexual; yet, there were also four sets of parental figures who were highly supportive of their GLBTQ son or daughter, and several others who eventually expressed an acceptance.

Homophobia, both from external sources and internalized by GLBTQ characters, was a realistic issue in this selection of novels. Most characters dealt with some form of antigay sentiment in their daily lives, but the vast majority (approximately 82%) of it was mostly verbal and usually minimal. When the amount of homophobic name-calling and peer torment among today’s high school students was considered, this number seems reasonably realistic, although unfortunate. Four novels did include more vicious attacks on GLBTQ characters, the worst being the presumed drowning of Lani in *What Happened to Lani Garver*. Two other characters were thrown out of their homes (Holland in *Keeping You a Secret*, and Orphea in *Orphea Proud*), and the final vicious attack involved hate mail, a near riot, and a book bonfire in *The Year They Burned the Books*, but these acts were perpetuated not at an individual but at homosexuality in general. Again, these attacks, although unacceptable to most reasonable people, still show the novels’ realism, as these things continue to occur in today’s society.

Characters in the selected novels were in all stages of acceptance of their sexual orientation; therefore, they were also at various points with their internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia was judged by a character’s degree of being “out” or closeted, by comments made within the novel, and by the extent that their sexual orientation was considered permanent. Several characters were extremely open to others about their homosexuality. Orphea, in *Orphea Proud*, told her story
on stage as a performance piece; Nelson, in both *Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow High* was a flamboyant gay male who could be defined as “queer”; Liam/Luna, in *Luna*, was willing to visit the mall wearing female attire; CeCe, in *Keeping You a Secret* wore t-shirts proclaiming her homosexuality; and in *Boy Meets Boy*, a revolutionary and idealistic YA novel in which the star quarterback was also the homecoming queen and the cheerleaders were biker girls, there is no need for closeting because “everybody knows who is gay and nobody cares” (Levithan, 2003).

Other characters were not quite so open about their sexuality but were working toward it, as partly judged by the fact that over 79% of the characters in these novels were considered permanent in their orientation. Aside from the idealistic outrageousness of *Boy Meets Boy*, character authenticity and a positive outlook for GLBTQ teen readers was evident in the fact that more and more GLBTQ characters were emerging from the proverbial closet in today’s YA novels, yet they were doing so in their own time, without pressure to conform to a heterosexual norm.

Although other changes in character were evident, the demographics of GLBTQ characters in the novels studied changed only slightly since 1997. Males still dominated, although currently only by 60% to 40%. People of color were still lacking, with 41 Caucasians out of 48 GLBTQ characters. In this selection of 22 novels, two characters were African-American, two were Hispanic, two were of mixed race and one was of Jewish heritage. More than half of the characters were of middle class status, although the others were spread through all of the other classes. There did, however, appear to be a trend toward teen, as opposed to adult, GLBTQ
characters. In only one novel were the major homosexual characters beyond 21 years of age: In *One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies*, Ruby found out that her Hollywood star father, with whom she must now take up residence, was gay.

In previous novels, it was found that the trend was toward homosexuals as secondary characters; a heterosexual narrator and protagonist was the rule (Jenkins, 1998). In the 22 novels selected, however, this trend was seen as reversing. In only eight of the 22 novels were the narrator and/or protagonist heterosexual; the GLBTQ narrator was also the major protagonist in 21 of 48 cases. In addition, a full 75% of the major characters were classified as GLBTQ. The gendered pattern of narrative distance discussed by Jenkins (1998) did however, still seem to apply. A total of nine books contained characters of mixed gender; however, in only one novel with a male protagonist, in this case a gay male (*Geography Club*), was a female cast in a major role, and the female was a bisexual rather than a lesbian character. Yet, in eight novels with female protagonists (five of the protagonists were heterosexual), at least one gay male played a major role.

**Crucial Plot Elements**

In the novels that Jenkins (1998) studied, she found none with evidence of any type of gay community. In the 22 novels used in this study, however, the trend seemed to be to include at least one scene with a gay community, as eight of the 22 recent novels contained some type of teen center or club, gay dance, or church, as well as a mention of the gay Internet community. This involvement in a gay community, along with more GLBTQ characters coming out of the closet, will
hopefully begin to dissipate the long-held view and portrayal of homosexual characters as isolated and invisible.

In view of the current inclusion of gay community, it should be noted that more YA novels seemed to be progressing further than the simple coming-out story. Although there were 14 instances of a character struggling with his/her sexual orientation in these 22 novels, there were also 13 occasions where the character had already revealed his or her sexual orientation to himself and others, and the story took on more of a life afterward theme, portraying instead the ordinary life struggles and issues common to any teen, gay or straight. For example, the normal excitement and devastation of teen romance played a part in more than half of these recent novels; the only difference was that these were homosexual romances.

One major difference in these homosexual romances, however, was that sexual activity continued to be limited. At least some mention of physical and sexual contact was made in 14 of the novels, yet very infrequently was anything more explicit than kissing described, even in the outrageously gay-themed *Boy Meets Boy*. In three of the books, the only evidence of sexual activity was kissing, hugging, and hand-holding; in the others, sex was much more implied than portrayed. Nelson, the flamboyant gay teen in both *Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow High* was the only character who even spoke somewhat explicitly about sex, but even here it was simply explicit talk, not action.

**Setting Elements**

In the beginning, gay themed novels were often set in either a rural or small town area or took place in a closed community such as a boarding school.
Somewhat later novels showed characters interacting in rural and suburban locations. In the 22 selected novels, though, the setting seemed rather equally spread throughout city, suburb, and small town. The setting of only one novel was a rural area, and a reverting back to a closed community setting was evident in two others. If YA novels with homosexual characters and themes are indeed progressing and becoming more authentic, this is a good sign. With diversity of settings, authors are portraying GLBTQ characters as existing everywhere rather than only in limited locations.

Significance of the Results

If the goal in producing homosexual-themed fiction for young adults is to create more authentic portrayals of GLBTQ characters and to produce more realistic storylines that both empower young GLBTQ people and encourage heterosexual teens to be less homophobic, that goal seems to have been partly achieved in the 22 novels, published between 1998 and 2004, that were analyzed for this study. If the novels selected for this study were a good indication of trends in the literature, many elements currently existed that were not apparent just six years ago.

In these novels, there was far less stereotyping of GLBTQ characters. Isolation and invisibility was rapidly becoming a thing of the past, and all points on the continuum of sexual orientation were finally being portrayed. More characters were already out of their proverbial closets, and some were even proudly identifying as queer; some even had supportive families.
While coming out novels will always have a place in this literature, more plotlines took this a step further by portraying GLBTQ teens simply as normal adolescents who happen to be gay, and were even creating stories containing a melting pot of teen issues including but not limited to sexual orientation. No longer must homosexuality always be the main problem of the novel; it can simply be one piece of the adolescent puzzle.

Certainly all is not perfect in this subgenre, though. If YA novels with GLBTQ content are to be truly realistic, more characters of color must be added, and the notion that the majority of GLBTQ people are male, white, and middle class must be abandoned. However, in the short time since Jenkins’ 1998 study, more elements have changed than have not, and if the trends continue, most GLBTQ teens will finally be able to see themselves in their literature, while non-gay readers will be able to find an authentic picture of GLBTQ youth.
References


## Coding Worksheet
### YA Novels with Homosexual Characters

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### Protagonist/Narrator

### GLBTQ character

### GLBTQ character

### GLBTQ character

### Plot & Setting Elements

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**Comments:**
APPENDIX B: List of Novels
List of Novels


