'Out, but not so Proud?': The Representation of Gay Boyhoods in Contemporary British Young Adult Fiction

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Background

In my PhD thesis I looked at how boyhood was portrayed in young adult fiction published in the UK, Australia and the USA around the new millennium. The social context at the time was very much a narrative of 'boyhood in crisis', with newspaper headlines about boys falling behind in school, being emotionally illiterate, violent and involved in gangs. I wanted to know how young adult literature related to this idea of crisis, if at all. As part of the analysis I considered how boys who identified as gay were portrayed and found that there was a pattern to the novels which I will discuss in more detail later.

In the intervening years the subject hasn't really been a focus in my research. I am currently working on a book that examines the mediation of boyhood in England since 2000, which means that once again I have begun to consider how boys and young men who identify as gay are portrayed in various media – television, film, online, and in printed media such as newspapers and magazines. This has also been an opportunity to return to young adult fiction and consider if there has been shifts in the portrayal of gay boyhoods, both in terms of the range of novels that are being published and the way in which they represent gay characters.

Purpose

In this workshop paper I wanted to look at the social landscape in which authors have been working since the beginning of the new millennium, questioning whether there has been a significant change in attitudes towards homosexuality.

I do this by analysing research that has been carried out with boys and young men, focusing on their attitudes to sexuality. I then consider if this has any correlation with representations of gay boyhoods in young adult fiction and speculate on why there may be some disconnection between how the subject is addressed in fiction and the attitudes and behaviours of young men.

Ultimately I conclude that in relation to young adult publishing, changes have taken place in terms of the number of works being published that include gay characters, which is a positive development, but the ways in which the characters are presented hasn't necessarily shifted significantly in the majority of books.

Men's and boyhood studies: Theoretical frameworks and social landscapes

When I was working on my PhD, I used research material coming out of men's and boyhood studies to interpret the idea of 'boyhood in crisis'. The main model for understanding men's and boys' lives at the time came from Connell and her seminal work *Masculinities*, published in 1995.

Connell was the first researcher to develop a sustained argument that highlighted the significance of the power relations which exist among men, resulting in what has become known as 'hegemonic masculinity theory':

> 'Hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable. (Connell, 1995: 76)

Nevertheless, hegemonic masculinity in Western societies has become identified with white, middle and upper class, heterosexual men, and, as such, women and men outside this group share unequally in what Connell terms 'the patriarchal dividend'

(p.79). Connell's model works well in identifying inequalities between men, or, in the case of my own research, discussing the relationships between boys when some boys are privileged over others. However, it doesn't work so well in capturing positive experiences, something I acknowledged in my own research and, more significantly, something that has been identified by more recent researchers.

In 2009, Eric Anderson published an ethnographic study that he carried out with team athletes in both the USA and the UK in order to analyse levels of homophobia still in existence in sport. In his work he acknowledges the debt owed to Connell, but also highlights the fact that her work came out of a social landscape where the AIDS crisis had raised levels of homophobia significantly during the 1980s and '90s, and therefore this became a key feature in creating hegemony. Anderson defines this climate as 'homohysteria':

> Homophobia has been used as an ordering principle of valued or subjugated individuals in western cultures. Homophobia made hyper-masculinity compulsory for boys, and it made the expression of femininity among boys taboo. When one combines a culture of homophobia, femphobia, and compulsory heterosexuality, one has the makeup of what I call 'homohysteria'. Homophobic discourse has therefore been used as a weapon for boys and men to deride one another in establishing this hierarchy. (p.7)

While acknowledging that homosexuality is still viewed negatively by some individuals and groups within society, and consequently can still result in stigma and abuse for some boys and men, Anderson does suggest that there has been a shift in attitudes, especially among young people, that has been gathering momentum through the new millennium and which Connell's theory of hegemony, with its vertical trajectory of power relations, cannot account for.

Anderson cites the rise in digital technologies as a significant factor in changing attitudes to sexuality overall, with young people being exposed to multiple sexualities and lifestyles online, and consequently creating a more inclusive attitude to sexuality:

> The internet, I propose, has therefore been instrumental in exposing the forbidden fruit of homosexual sex, comodifying and normalizing it in the process. This, combined with a strategic and political bombardment of positive cultural messages about homosexuality through youth media, MTV, reality television, and other popular venues, has sent a message that while homosexuality is okay, homophobia is not. (p.6)

This shift in behaviours and attitudes, Anderson has termed 'inclusive masculinity theory', where, he contends, different ways of being male exist alongside each other without the privileging of one specific form of masculinity.

Anderson's research has been developed further in the UK by Mark McCormack (2012), who in 2011 carried out ethnographic research with boys in secondary schools over the course of a year to assess levels of homophobia and found that it was absent. He acknowledges that his findings may be received with scepticism due to the significant and extensive body of earlier research that describes the experiences of gay students being subjected to bullying and ostracism (Frosh, 2002; O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000) However, while acknowledging that some boys are still living with homophobic abuse, he also suggests that the earlier research findings came out of a different cultural climate that captured the experiences of the 1980s and '90s, but are no longer an accurate reflection of the majority of school environments.

While there is certainly more research needed to shore up the work of Anderson and McCormack and the implications of their findings for the lives of boys and young men in the broader cultural arena, their work does raise questions about the narratives that frequently surround gay youth and begs the question whether youth cultures with

their focus on digital communities have created a new, flexible landscape that isn't yet fully recognised in the wider community.

This potential disconnection was recognised by Ritch Savin-Williams in *The New Gay Teenager*, published in 2005, where he describes young people as 'not embarrassed by gayness, don't consider it deviant, and see it all around them – on television, in movies, in songs, in cultural icons, among their friends' (p.ix). He goes on to suggest that adult 'gatekeepers' do not recognise the cultural shifts taking place, with the consequence that homosexuality is still being discussed through a lens of gay equating to problematic, while, at the same time, with a strong focus on condemning homophobia. He suggests that contrary to adult opinion, for the majority of young people, labelling their sexuality is no longer a priority and certainly not a cause for anxiety.

While I would stress that for some boys and young men growing up in the UK, homophobia remains a serious issue and can have devastating consequences, new research is beginning to indicate that for many young people, issues around homosexuality are now less significant than in previous generations and sexuality has possibly become more fluid.

Gay boyhoods in young adult fiction

Returning to the subject of young adult fiction, then, I do think that GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer) literature overall has become more visible. In May of this year (2014), *The Guardian* Children's Books website had a week of articles about GLBTQ literature for young people, and encouraged authors and young bloggers to send in their favourite books with LGBT characters – which resulted in an interesting and wide-ranging discussion. Some of this discussion can be read at www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/may/12/best-lgbt-books-children-teenagers-yas.

However, in making any assessment of changes to the inclusion of gay characters in young adult fiction it is important to be aware that (1) it belongs to a field of literature that historically has been regulated closely by adult gatekeepers and (2) as literature, many novels are formulaic and have an ideological purpose whether this is overt or more embedded within the story.

An example of how the question of suitability registers, can be seen in a review by Tony Bradman of Patrick Ness's then new novel, *More Than This* (2013), which appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper in September 2013. The review is very positive, focusing on Ness's ability to simultaneously create a strong, complex plot alongside multidimensional characters. However, at the end of the review, we are suddenly told: 'I have a feeling *More Than This* might cause a few collywobbles among some grown-ups because it features a gay relationship'. While I am not suggesting this in any way reflects the reviewer's own opinions, the fact that he highlights the sexual relationship signals the continued unease that exists around sexuality. The fact that this is a gay relationship appears to add to the anxiety, and begs the question of why such a relationship still merits being singled out.

The reviewer clearly references 'grown-ups' as the people who will potentially find the inclusion of this relationship problematic, which isn't surprising. As I suggested earlier, literature written for young people has a long history of adult intervention in relation to suitability, and sexuality has, and continues to be, viewed as a challenging subject area. Although changing attitudes to sex in society at large has meant that its portrayal in young adult fiction has generally shifted from something with negative consequences, to be avoided, to something that now needs to be safe, it remains contentious and closely scrutinised. As Peter Hunt (2009) astutely observes:

> Does reading about teenage sexual activity for example, encourage such activity, or is ignorance of such activity actually more dangerous? Very often, it seems that it is

adults who are protecting themselves, or their idea of childhood. (p.24)

I would suggest, then, that novels within young adult fiction have a certain level of censure attached to them, albeit what is considered suitable is constantly changing and shifting. Further, the subject of homosexuality continues to be problematic among some gatekeepers.

At the outset I suggested that while there has been an increase in the number of books with gay protagonists, the way that they are represented is still somewhat ambivalent. This is the result of the concentrated focus on sexuality and the overt ideological 'message' that homophobia is wrong in many of these texts, turning the books into 'issue' novels. As Thomas Crisp (2011) suggests in discussing the Rainbow Boys series by Alex Sanchez, 'As gay adolescent "problem novels", we may expect these books to didactically work against homophobic discourse. Problem novels as a genre rely upon intrusions that are clearly written to educate and inform readers' (p.239).

The nature of young adult fiction, especially novels defined as 'realistic', frequently places them in the model of bildungsroman, the novel of maturation and growth through experience, or, in twenty-first century terminology, the 'journey'. This results in emphasis being placed on maturation, overcoming obstacles in a trajectory towards adulthood. In fictional worlds, the path towards adulthood is frequently ignited by the need to overcome a personal problem through which the young protagonist will come to a better understanding of him/herself and the world in which he/she lives.

While recognising this as a plot device to drive the narrative, when this is applied to novels that feature gay characters, the 'problem' is generally around the acceptance of the protagonist's sexuality both by himself and those around him, coming out to friends and family. As such, being gay remains linked to being problematic; it is an 'issue'.

In discussing the development of young adult literature with gay, lesbian and queer content between 1969 and 2004 in the USA, Cart and Jenkins (2006) acknowledge the growth in the number and range of titles being published in terms of genre and crossover literature. However, they also point out that:

> Even though there is clearly more visible support for GLBTQ teens in the twenty-first century than previously, discovering one's sexual identity, agonizing over whether or not to come out and suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous homophobia remain as central to current young adult fiction as they have been from the earliest days of the genre. (p.134)

Three novels that have been published in the UK since the beginning of the new millennium and feature male teenage characters grappling with questions about their sexuality, illustrate the points made by Cart and Jenkins. Eddie de Oliveira's realistic novel, *Lucky* (2004), introduces football playing, college-student Sam coming to terms with being bisexual. Humorous and rather melodramatic, Sam is attracted to Toby, another bisexual boy he meets at college. But when Toby is only interested in friendship, Sam has to come to terms with rejection, and after much bad behaviour he is finally able to be more honest about himself, essentially coming out to friends and the football team. All ends well and homophobic characters are suitably shamed; a theme in these novels. However, while Sam is an interesting character, not one dimensional, he is ultimately defined by his sexuality.

Another novel that uses humour is Will Davis's realistic, crossover fiction, *My Side of the Story* (2007). Protagonist Jaz is in turn a funny, sarcastic, unlikable, vulnerable schoolboy, who pretends that he doesn't care about the homophobia at school and the fights with his parents who try to stop him from going to a local gay club. However, after running away to stay with a young man he meets at the club, he begins to realise that he is out of his depth and returns home, somewhat chastened. Davis's novel is not

entirely a coming-out story, but it does again centre on Jaz's sexuality and how this impacts on his relationship with his family, as well as the homophobic bullying at school. Ultimately there is some resolution to the situation and he begins to move forward, coming to terms with who he is; and the chief bully realises his mistake, stopping the homophobic bullying.

A more recent novel, again in the realistic tradition, is Hayley Long's *What's up with Jody Barton?* (2012) which describes Jody's coming out after falling for his twin sister's boyfriend who rejects him and, for good measure, turns out to be extremely homophobic. Like Sam and Jaz before him, Jody's homosexuality is a cause of anxiety for him and initially makes his life more stressful, although, again, there is resolution with Jody's family and friends accepting him and the homophobic Liam being condemned all round. In the novel, Long uses a narrative technique reminiscent of Gene Kemp in *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* (1977); the protagonist's gender is initially hidden. In discussing the novel, BJ Epstein (2013) makes the point that 'this perhaps is meant to challenge the reader's assumptions, but it has the effect of making homosexuality seem surprising or weird' (p.84). In this instance the narrative structure reduces Jody and his experiences, turning him into a narrative device.
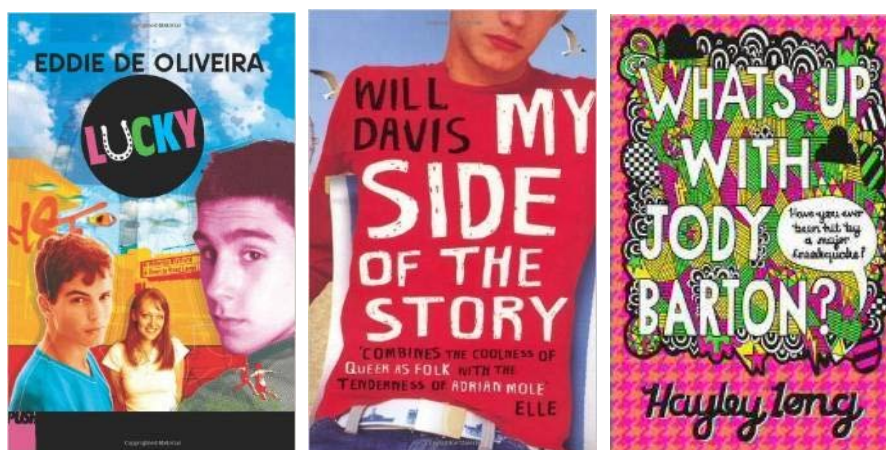
While these novels represent a very small percentage of titles published since the beginning of the new millennium, they do demonstrate a pattern that focuses on coming out and therefore makes sexuality the all-consuming focus. There is certainly a place for these novels, all enjoyable and significant in their own right, but if the research discussed earlier is correct in assessing changing attitudes to sexuality, then GLBTQ characters need to be more multidimensional; in fact, they simply need 'to be'. As David Levithan has pointed out, 'being gay is not an *issue* it is an *identity*. It is not something that you can agree or disagree with. It is a fact, and must be defended and represented as a fact' (2013: 28).

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