
Catherine Lachaîne

*University of Ottawa*

Sexual identity is an important matter that needs to be present in our literature and approached there in an authentic way. With this book, Jenkins and Cart offer a detailed overview of instances of LGBTQ+ content in the published young adult (YA) genre since their first occurrence in 1969. The focus of this book is on American YA literature. The authors have published substantially on the subject. Before *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, they co-authored *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004* (2006) and *Top 250 LGBTQ Books for Teens* (2015). It is safe to say that they are well versed on the topic.

The book is organized chronologically and divided into two parts. The first part is a survey of the LGBTQ+ YA literature starting with the pre-Stonewall era (going back to the ’40s), to set the topic in context. The Stonewall riots, which took place in New York in 1969, were a series of revolts and rebellion from the LGBTQ+ community against police harassment. They were pivotal events for the homosexual-rights movement and certainly influenced the increase of LGBTQ+ content in literature and culture. Through six chapters, the authors present all LGBTQ+ YA literature, beginning with the pre-Stonewall era until the late 2010s, and highlight some of the main books on the subject. The second part, divided into four chapters, comprehensively explores how the topics of bisexuality, intersexuality, and transsexuality have been included in the literature, and the different literary mediums and genres that have been prominent, such as comic books, graphic novels, and non-fiction.

In chapters one and two, the authors explore the early days of LGBTQ+ content in YA literature—pre-Stonewall era to the ’70s. The first young-adult novel they identify, John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, was published in 1969, only 50 years ago. In the ’70s, only nine books dealing with LGBTQ+ themes were published. From what we learn from Jenkins and Cart, the initial publications that
integrated these topics were not all successful. A lot of authors probably had good intentions but failed to offer a realistic and optimistic depiction of homosexuality and LGBTQ+ communities. For example, Jenkins and Cart describe the improbable number of car crashes and accidents in the first decades of YA literature that involved LGBTQ+ characters. It seems as though it was easier to kill the character rather than develop them within the story. We also learn that many books used homosexuality as a “phase,” suggesting that the character would grow out of it. Books that could have been pioneers on this topic were often filled with clichés and melodramatic events.

In chapters three and four, the authors explore the ’80s and ’90s. In the United States, HIV/AIDS was at its peak during those years, and it is no surprise that this topic is a recurring subject in the books published at that time. The authors explore the growth of young-adult publishing in chapter five, by pointing out new trends (for example, short stories, poetry, and historical fiction) that made the genre grow in popularity. Closer to our current time, chapter six covers YA literature since 2010. There has been a significant shift in LGBTQ+ content in recent years. Instead of having secondary characters that are part of the LGBTQ+ community, these more recent stories are driven by main protagonists who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. There are also stories where the “condition” of the character is not necessarily a main part of the narrative; it is the way they are, and neither the writer nor other characters in the book challenge it. Refreshing! In the 2010s, we see more and more transgender characters, intersexuality stories, and families with homosexual parents. The authors also point out that we see more humour in the YA novels of the 2010s. Being gay or part of the LGBTQ+ community is no longer a burdensome condition. The characters are assertive and their friends and families are accepting. Finally, the authors briefly mention the growing diversity of visible minorities among LGBTQ+ characters and the move away from stereotypical white LGBTQ+ characters.

In part two of the book, Jenkins and Cart explore different themes (bisexuality, intersexuality, and transsexuality) and publication types (comics, graphic novels, and non-fiction) in more detail. In chapter seven, they discuss that bisexuality is close to absent in YA literature. In the few books that touch on the subject, the word is rarely used. Most of the publications that deal with bisexuality present a bisexual character who is very confused about how they feel for a woman and for a man and does not know how to deal with it. It often ends with the character having to choose to be with one gender or the other. Jenkins and Cart hope for more bisexual characters that express that being bisexual is not a choice but rather a condition of being. Chapter eight presents how themes of transgendered and intersex people have been included in YA literature. The first novel with a transgender character only appeared in 1996, and 2014 (!) for an intersex character.
In chapter nine, they discuss how the comic-book genre is a doing a good job of depicting queer and LGBTQ+ characters: for example, Batman, Wonder Woman, Northstar, and Sailor Moon series. There are also great graphic novels that depict many sexual identities. For example, in both the acclaimed autobiographical *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006) and *Skim* (2008) by Canadians Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, the teenagers, Alison and Skim, discover their identity and desires.

In terms of non-fiction titles, addressed in the final chapter, the first publication that targeted young adults appeared only in 1979. Prior to that, there was not a lot of information available for teens. As we progress through the years, there are more publications available, with different narrative approaches (e.g., self-help books, autobiographies, memoirs).

In conclusion, the authors are pleased to report a constant progression of LGBTQ+ themes in YA literature. They confirm that there is more variety in the plots and for characters, now that the subject has developed in an informed way. There are complex characters and realistic storylines. The authors of these stories are more educated on the topic. They are often part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves, which helps in building sensible and coherent plots. However, Jenkins and Cart insist that there is still room to achieve more in the context of diversity and inclusion:

> We must redress the imbalance between gay and lesbian characters, we must acknowledge that young people are grappling with their sexual identity at younger ages than in the past... and that lesbians and gays and others from across the gender/sexuality spectrum do not live on separate planets but, instead, go to the same schools, hang out at the same LGBTQ+ centers, belong to the same Gay-Straight Alliances, and often form friendships. (221–22)

The appendices contain detailed lists and bibliographies of all the books mentioned and inventoried by the authors, with bar graphs that depict the representation of LGBTQ+ portrayal and narrative roles, the growth of YA fiction over time, and book award recipients. This section provides a condensed overview of all the content explored throughout the book, and it is of significant value.

Even though its quality is very high, the book is sometimes difficult to read due to its numerous references to titles. Not completely an analysis and not completely a reference book, it includes many quotations and book summaries, and the reader has to move from one story to another very quickly. Although this allows us to put the identified books in context and better understand how the LGBTQ+ themes are addressed, we get only a brief overview of each title and it can be tedious to read this publication in one stretch.

Written with a lot of wit and often funny, this book will serve as an indispensable resource for anyone interested in LGBTQ+ literature, as it captures in detail the development of YA literature in America. Given the many current issues and events
related to homophobia and transphobia, this book is timely and needed. Young LGBTQ+ people need to have role models and hear stories from and about people like them. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* will find its place in many libraries: it will be of interest to school libraries that want to build a collection of quality novels with LGBTQ+ topics for their students, to academic libraries specializing in gender studies, to academic education libraries adding LGBTQ+ content for their curriculum collections, and to all researchers interested in LGBTQ+ literature. After reading this book, the reader will probably be attuned to LGBTQ+ content in literature and critical of the depiction of LGBTQ+ characters. Hopefully the authors’ research will continue and will highlight more young-adult LGBTQ+ books by Canadian authors.

**References**
