

Review

Sexuality in Literature for Children and Young Adults.

**Edited by Paul Venzo and Kristine Moruzi.
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Amidst controversy about the definition of young adult fiction as a form or genre independent from children's literature, this volume wisely unifies those audiences with a variety of essays that explore sexuality not only as fully fledged desire but also a matter of the education children receive even before experiencing such emotions. Therefore, while the protagonist's age is usually a divide, here it is understood as a transient state, as a voyage into adult age is typically marked by an awakening or an understanding of desire. This volume highlights existing representation bias, as portrayals "of sex and sexuality in these texts are caught in the interstices between young people's experiences and desires and how adult authors choose to imagine and present these phenomena" (1). Through the 11 essays in this edition, the authors explore the prevailing representation of sexuality in children and YA literature through the lens of aetnormativity (Nikolajeva), arguing that adult privilege hampers minors' access to knowledge on desire. Furthermore, they discuss postfeminist representations of powerful heroines' sexuality and extant prejudices and stereotypes in YA

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fiction with non-heteronormative and non-binary characters or plots. In this review, I focus mostly on the contributions that deal with YA literature.

Auba Llompart Pons explores a series that confronts the taboo of sexuality in literature for young people through Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* book series (1995-2000), which shows puberty and the awakening of one's sexuality not as a disgrace but acquired independence from external powers; in his novels, sexuality represents a challenge to adult efforts to keep children away from desire. Llompart Pons argues that Pullman's representation shows that preventing children from developing sexually implies their subjection to adults insofar as they cannot become intellectually mature either. Pullman's take on sexuality challenges heteronormativity and grants his young characters the agency that they are denied socially to explore their feelings. Furthermore, Llompart Pons stresses Pullman's claim that stories for young people should offer them knowledge that helps them develop, not indoctrinate and preserve them in a child-like state for as long as possible. This adult control over children's access to knowledge is also highlighted by Paul Venzo, who explores how non-fiction picture books may use different techniques to avert traditional censorship on sexuality and young age, such as drawings and humour.

Lack of diversity is discussed by Robert Bittner in his chapter, "Trans and Nonbinary Teen Voices and Memoir". The author argues that limiting the publication of memoirs and biographies to adults means that views on the adolescent world are offered by adults through the mediation of time, which renders them less reliable. This is even more problematic when we consider trans and nonbinary fiction, which is most of the time written by cisgender authors. YA trans memoirs offer a view into the life processes experienced by non-cis teens, including their perceptions of sex and the role of genitalia in having comfortable sexual experiences, particularly with cis-heterosexual partners. As such, they serve as useful guides for readers. Bittner acknowledges an important point, however, which is that "the majority of mainstream instances of trans representation, including [...] trans youth memoir, relies on a binary male-to-female or female-to-male transition. This is a very specific type of transgender existence that is easier for non-transgender audiences to understand" (55). Bittner asks important questions: are publishers mediating the trans experience and, therefore, the general public's perception of trans people? Are readers selecting the texts that represent norms they feel comfortable with?

Monogamy, one such norm, appears to be one of the lenses that is hardest to shatter. In his chapter, Adam Kealley addresses the normativity of monogamy in Australian YA fiction through the analysis of the negative portrayal of its alternatives: non-monogamic and non-traditional relationships involving queer characters. Kealley shows how sporadic and lust-driven relationships are often equated with immorality, dissatisfaction and mental and physical health issues, such as AIDS, while homonormativity is praised. The othering of non-normative sexualities may also occur in fiction with gay protagonists, as Troy Potter explains in "Can Gay Boys Have Bromances?" Potter explores the subgenre of gay bromances in YA

fiction where close friendship between a gay and a straight male character is the norm and shows how the survival of this friendship depends on the gay character's ability to modify his masculinity to reassure his heterosexual friend that there is no sexual attraction on his part or to hide his homosexuality altogether. While bromances promote alternative masculinities by allowing men to rely on each other, Potter discusses "the way in which the expansion of straight masculine subjectivities is contingent on the repression of gay masculine subjectivities" (70) that are perceived as a threat to the bromance's asexuality.

On positive examples of queer sexuality, Lara Hedberg and Rebecca Hutton highlight how graphic novels offer authors different tools, such as panels, colour palettes, and transitions, through which they may ensure the reader's experience of emotional empathy and connection with queer girl protagonists' exploration of their desire and sexuality, while offering readers a certain degree of freedom to explore the story at their own pace. By analysing three different approaches to queer subjectivities in this medium in their discussion of Tillie Walden's *On a Sunbeam* (2018), the authors touch on adolescent sexual agency but also make useful comparisons with previous explorations of female utopia.

Heterosexual relationships in YA fiction with a female lead are also discussed with a critical eye for portraying exuberant sexuality within the confines of patriarchal systems of power by Elizabeth Little and Kristine Moruzi, who examine the fiction of Sarah J. Maas. In their chapter, Little and Moruzi argue that, while the protagonists in Maas' YA fantasy novels, Feyre and Aelin/Celaena, represent some female agency in their assertiveness with regard to their sexuality, their actions are nonetheless constrained by the patriarchal social structures and power imbalance present in their sexual relationships, which the novels fail to acknowledge. On the opposite side of the spectrum is Debra Dudek's analysis of liminality and sexual binaries in the TV series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-20), where the teenager lives between a patriarchal witch world that allows sexual flexibility but prohibits love, and the heteronormative world of humans. Dudek shows that Sabrina constantly resists binaries and patriarchal powers, albeit at the expense of satisfying her sexual needs. This chapter highlights once again teenage agency against the role-preserving attitude of adults.

Amber Moore and Elizabeth Marshall explore the inevitability of prejudices against women with agency. In the case of YA rape novels, the good/bad girl dichotomy is related to alcohol intake, whereby drinking is equated with reinforced masculinity and inappropriate femininity and serves to justify sexual crimes against the female characters. Furthermore, economically poor victims endure added stigma and lack strong female friends. In contrast, Moore and Marshall show how queer female characters become powerful allies and defend the rape victims from the mob. Queer girl bonds are also key for Cathy Yue Wang, who uses 'Qiyue and Ansheng' (2000), a YA novella, to discuss the trope of female doubles in Chinese contemporary fiction. The two protagonists in this story enact the traditional opposites of the angel in the house and the fallen angel, resulting in a traditional punishing death of the

wayward girl; however, Wang points out that the strong bond between the two women suggests a possible queer relationship that sidelines the women's heterosexual relationships.

Sexuality in Literature for Children and Young Adults offers readers an essential approach to this topic and the editors show a true care for diversity. It also addresses pressing concerns by deconstructing titles from different genres while offering examples of positive representation. Equally informative and educational, the book makes an appeal for adult and young readers of the twenty-first century to recognise sexuality as an innate aspect of humanity while showing that cultural products are always mediated by the views of their authors. The scope of the volume is admittedly limited to a majority of anglophone titles, but it paves the way for further research on sexuality in children's and YA fiction in other languages.

REFERENCES

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Theory, post-theory, and aetnonormative theory." *Neohelicon*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2009, pp. 13-24.