

From Painters to Pirates:

A Study of Non-Binary Protagonists in Young Adult Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Non-binary gender is a marginalised queer identity increasingly receiving mainstream media representation, a subject that warrants investigation. Non-binary is an umbrella term under which many experiences of gender fall, a factor that necessitates a nuanced variety of narrative representations to avoid perpetuating or creating static and singular archetypes. This article examines a sample of young adult novels with non-binary protagonists published between 2017 and 2020, exploring the various ways these texts express and explore their central characters' gender identity. My findings reveal thematic commonalities between these novels, with particular focus on the language used to describe these characters' felt sense of gender, their experiences with dysphoria/euphoria, their relationships to broader queer communities within their story worlds, and the intersections of queer gender and speculative elements. I argue that this subset we might call 'non-binary YA' serves as an emblem of the development of queer YA overall, its rapid expansion through various genres and narrative types providing a microcosm of the growth of the literary field and pointing to its future.

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INTRODUCTION

In their essay in *Growing Up Queer in Australia*, Oliver Reeson ponders: “How could I have grown up as a non-binary person when it was not a story I had ever heard?” (37). When Reeson writes of their (in retrospect) queer adolescence, they return constantly to the motif of narrative: how the identity they were assigned at birth was built from the stories that “accumulated on” them, only some of which turned out to be correct (39); about “the feeling of being adrift, isolated, because you don’t have the language to articulate your life” (37); and how they “never came out because [they] didn’t have any words, no story yet” (35). For the generation coming of age in the 2020s, non-binary words and stories are increasingly present and available in scholarship, writing, queer community discourses, and fictional media. The increased visibility of this marginalised queer identity warrants investigation, for how various artworks reflect contemporary scholarship and activism and for how they represent this group: the stories they tell, and the stories that their readers encounter.

While, at time of writing, there are non-binary characters appearing in television shows, video games, and children’s animation, this article examines the field of young adult literature specifically. YA has seen a notable uptick in the presence of non-binary representation in recent years, something that invites investigation both in context of queer YA as a broader field, and in treating ‘non-binary YA’ as its own distinct subcategory. The presence of queer protagonists in YA has been growing rapidly over the past decade and shows no sign of slowing down, continuing to evolve from early roots in ‘issue novels’ to a broader and more nuanced variety of story frameworks, including ventures into genre fiction (Henderson). As the field expands, publishers are also acquiring texts that expand the notion of queer representation and who that includes, adding identities such as asexual, aromantic, intersex, and non-binary to a canon that historically focused on the first few (and often, simply the first two) letters of the LGBTQIA+ acronym. This article takes a qualitative approach to this growth in representation, examining the ways in which non-binary identity is constructed and expressed within these texts as a distinct identity under the queer and trans¹ umbrella – asking what narrative aspects it draws from these encompassing categories, and what might be considered aspects unique to non-binary narratives. I argue that studying this early wave of non-binary YA holds significance for what it can reveal about the growth of queer YA overall: the rapid expansion of tropes and genres within non-binary YA across only a few years provides a microcosm of the development of queer YA more broadly, and looking specifically at the way queer experiences are articulated within these texts provides a view of the complexity of queer narrative currently on shelves. While not a comprehensive catalogue of all non-binary depictions in YA, this article provides a detailed

1 This study specifically concerns non-binary as a subset of the transgender experience with its own unique intersections and issues; for studies on various aspects of binary trans representation in YA see Bowden, Bulla, and Corbett.

snapshot that demonstrates and argues for the potential and growth of this evolving field, both concerning queer YA literature more broadly and the presence of non-binary identity in popular media.

NON-BINARY IDENTIFICATIONS

Given that this article explores non-binary representation, it seems logical to begin with a definition of what exactly it means to be non-binary. However, this question of definition is one without a singular, static answer. ‘Non-binary’ is an umbrella term (overlapping definitionally with ‘genderqueer’²) under which many experiences and expressions of gender fall, indicating identity outside of, beyond, or in between the categories of woman and man. While non-binary is sometimes considered a “‘new’ gender identity” (Vijlbrief et al. 91) due to its relatively recent recognition in mainstream media culture, and due to the increased and rapid growth of non-binary communities over the Internet (McNabb xvi), it is by no means a modern invention. The binary gender system is largely a Western, colonial paradigm, and should by no means be considered universal (Barker and Iantaffi; Barker and Scheele; McNabb; Twist et al.; Vaid-Menon; Yeadon-Lee). Contemporary discourse regarding non-binary gender identity draws on a rich pre-colonial history, as well as specific motions and theories within the queer and transgender activism of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Modern writings on non-binary identity often explore the premise that gender may be a unique experience for each person, made of an interconnecting “snowflake” of identity formations (Iantaffi and Barker 46). Thus, a definition is difficult, as there are potentially as many answers to “what it means to be non-binary” as there are non-binary people (Talusán n.p.). Lucy Nicholas even argues that “[t]here is certainly not consensus on what [non-binary and genderqueer] mean, which can be seen as a strength” (3). Much non-binary scholarship, writing, and community discourse places emphasis not on rigid categorisation but on self-

2 Trans activist Rikki Wilchins is credited with coining the term ‘genderqueer’ in 1995 “in an attempt to describe those who were both queer with respect to their sexuality and ‘the kind of gendertrash society rejected’ with respect to their gender intelligibility in public spaces” (Dembroff 3). The explicitly political origins of this terminology are often cited as the key difference between genderqueer and non-binary, and perhaps why non-binary – which rose into common use in the 2010s – is currently the more popular of the two. McNabb suggests the fact that “some people do not identify their gender as being inherently political” (19) as one possible reason for this preference. Of course, it may be argued that “non-binary and genderqueer are political, they cannot help but be so in a world in which they lack power, where gender is so imbued with power” (Nicholas 5). The matter is complex, and, as is a recurring theme in writings on non-binary identity, there is no singular ‘correct’ conclusion. This paper uses non-binary as an umbrella phrase encompassing and communicating these ideas.

identification, and the importance of personal agency over how a person defines and expresses their own felt sense of queer gender (Iantaffi and Barker; McNabb; Vaid-Menon). Talia Mae Bettcher's concept of "first-person authority" is a useful framework for unpacking this approach. While, in her own words, gender is not necessarily so simple as "because I say I am" (99), Bettcher's concept places ethical weight on the "avowal of existential self-identity" (115). She emphasises that a person's articulation of their own gender is the most authentic expression of it: the authoritative voice on any individual's gender is the individual themselves. This crucially shifts the narrative of gender to "a result of self-evaluation" (Jas 73) rather than external classification (from doctors, psychologists, or peers), centring the trans (binary or non-binary) individual's felt sense of gender and the way they choose to articulate this. Language is important to these expressions and within non-binary community spaces is an ever-evolving, flexible lexicon of terminology as "people [coin] new terms that capture the individuality of their experiences" (Twist et al. 19).³ The use of labels (likewise the use of pronouns) hinges on personal affirmation rather than any sort of clinical classification (Barker and Iantaffi; Twist et al).

The fact that non-binary identity encompasses so many experiences of gender may appear to make the process of trying to codify it with identity labels seem reductive or even "redundant" (Reilly-Cooper n.p.). However, acknowledging and articulating non-binary as a category is important precisely because "once fluidity is named, it becomes a space which people can inhabit" (Monro 37). Giving language and narrative to non-binary identity renders it visible and possible, and for marginalised groups, feeling possible is no small matter. As Judith Butler argues: "Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent" (29). Representing marginalised experiences in fiction is widely acknowledged as a way of making them "possible". As well as the validation and affirmation marginalised readers may experience by seeing "their own faces reflected in the pages of a book" (Jenkins and Cart 3), novels with marginalised protagonists may also serve to educate about, and encourage empathy with, identities and experiences the reader does not personally share. This ethos underlines much of the scholarship of diversity in children's and young adult literature (Booth and Narayan; Corbett; Henderson), and becomes particularly important when considering the depiction of queer minority identities such as

3 Under the non-binary umbrella are many more specific (or 'micro') identities, including genderfluid (having different genders at different times), agender (having no gender at all), bigender (having multiple genders), demiboy and demigirl (identifying strongly with being male or female the majority of the time, but sometimes feeling otherwise). It is also important to note that being non-binary is not the same thing as being intersex, though some intersex people may use the non-binary label if they feel it suits them, in the same way that they may or may not choose to identify as transgender. Conversely, while non-binary is considered to fall under the trans umbrella (represented in the pride flag's white stripe from as early as the 1990s), an individual may feel comfortable naming themselves as non-binary but not as trans.

non-binary gender – identities that, while increasing in visibility, remain relatively misunderstood in mainstream media, and are consistently the target of systemic discriminatory practice (for example, anti-trans laws) and ‘gender critical’ ridicule and dismissal (see Nicholas and Clark). This makes the industry presence of the texts in this study significant and valuable for how they bring this underrepresented identity to the page.

If non-binary identity contains so many multitudes, the question of whether it can be accurately represented rears its head. Fortunately, alongside an increasing variety of novels that explore binary transgender identity in a range of narratives and genres, there is an increasing variety of novels that specifically involve non-binary identity. Variety is crucial to a nuanced depiction of this identity within the publishing landscape: just as there is no single way to be non-binary, there can be no single ‘non-binary book’, and the more that reach bookshelves the more possibilities are articulated.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

This article is the result of doctoral research examining non-binary identifications within YA. One section of the thesis was initially intended as a field overview cataloguing non-binary characters that appeared in YA novels published after 2016. However, this field grew rapidly around me as I completed the project, until I realised that there were too many novels and characters to discuss with appropriate depth and clarity. Many of the novels significant to the following analysis entered the market as the project progressed, enabling and necessitating a narrowed focus to a sample of texts with non-binary protagonists. I have therefore imposed a 2020 publication date as a scope-limiting measure, though more novels that fit the criteria have been published and announced since then.⁴ I allude to other texts where they are relevant, but the core works examined in this article are: Linsey Miller’s *Mask of Shadows* (2017) and *Ruin of Stars* (2018); A.R. Capetta’s *The Brilliant Death* (2018) and *The Storm of Life* (2020); Mason Deaver’s *I Wish You All the Best* (2019); Mackenzi Lee’s *Loki: Where Mischievous Lies* (2019); Hal Schriever’s *Out of Salem* (2019); Kacen Callender’s *Felix Ever After* (2020); Alison Evans’ *Euphoria Kids* (2020); Alexandra Latos’ *Under Shifting Stars* (2020); Mia Siegert’s *Somebody Told Me* (2020); and Maggie Tokuda-Hall’s *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* (2020). This selection covers a variety of genres including high fantasy, contemporary fantasy, and contemporary realism, allowing for a varied exploration of the different ways these protagonists’ gender identities are expressed and explored within the texts. This range of genres also provides a spectrum of narratives, drawing on realist tropes such as the

4 YA novels with non-binary protagonists released or scheduled for release beyond 2020 include Steven Salvatore’s contemporary coming-of-age story *Can’t Take That Away* (2021), A.R. Capetta’s contemporary fantasy *The Heartbreak Bakery* (2021), Anna-Marie McLemore’s magical realist *Lakelore* (2022), and Remi K. England’s romance *The One True Me and You* (2022).

coming-out story as well as more escapist stories less anchored in the harsh realities of transphobia and queerphobia (and in some cases, entirely removed from them). The range available within this sample of texts highlights the multitude of perspectives from which writers of queer YA can construct their narratives of queer adolescence.

ARTICULATION OF IDENTITY

If, as established above, there is no singular way to look or to be non-binary, how does a reader tell that they are in the presence of a non-binary character? Most commonly, the character tells us. The author finds ways to have their protagonists articulate their identity in their own voice, whether in dialogue or in internal narration, or both. First-person narration here becomes intertwined with first-person authority, echoing the sentiment that self-definition is crucial to non-binary identifications as well as demonstrating how agency over one's sense and description of self is an important part of the adolescent narrative.

While not every queer YA novel outlines and explicitly states its characters' identity using clear contemporary labels and, as Derritt Mason argues, there remains room for "invisible, subtle, latent, and sideways queernesses" in YA (6), in modern books it is typically more common to have said queerness addressed and articulated directly in the text rather than left open for interpretation. In some of the cases outlined below, contemporary terminology is used to unambiguously locate the character's identity, yet in others – some set in speculative worlds where such terminology does not exist – the characters still find ways to articulate their sense of gender. In all cases, language is crucial for communicating the characters' feelings, developing a sense of self-knowability, and expressing this to other characters.

Contemporary Language of Self-identification

Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best* is narrated in first person, and the protagonist, Ben, articulates their non-binary identity through this narrative voice as well as through dialogue. The novel's first chapter is a tense buildup to Ben coming out to their conservative parents, who evict Ben from the house afterwards. The nature of Ben's confession is obscured at first by a time-skip, but as they flash back to the traumatic event later the reader hears the articulation of identity in Ben's own voice: "[...] I said those three little words. *I am nonbinary*" (Deaver 14). The reader learns of Ben's pronouns (which are otherwise obscured by the first-person narration – see below) when their sister asks about them (20). Siegert's thriller *Somebody Told Me* is also narrated in first person, and the protagonist self-identifies as bigender in the opening passage of the novel. The protagonist alternates between the

names Alexis (she/her) and Aleks (he/him), even referring to these facets of identity as “boy-me” and “girl-me” (Siegert 2). While Deaver’s and Siegert’s narrative voices differ, they have the common trait of using first-person narration to have their characters convey their preferred gender language to the reader early in the text, giving them agency over their own self-expression in both internal narration and speech.

I Wish You All the Best and *Somebody Told Me* feature protagonists who are already certain of their gender identity and can announce it within the opening chapters. Callender’s *Felix Ever After* and Latos’ *Under Shifting Stars* feature protagonists still in the midst of exploring their non-binary identity, which adds a different dynamic to its articulation in the text. At the beginning of the novel, the titular Felix is a boy who has happily begun transitioning, but is troubled by “this feeling [...] that something still isn’t right” (Callender 26) when it comes to his male identity. Whilst exploring what this may mean, Felix comes across a resource of gender identity labels and discovers one that fits. Here the reader can see him claim and articulate his identity in his own voice, both in internal narration and dialogue:

I keep reading, scrolling, eyes becoming glazed, when one word catches my eye. *Demiboy*. A person who identifies as mostly or partly male – I sit up, moving my computer to my lap – but may also identify as nonbinary some of the time, or even as a girl. The niggling in me spreads from the back of my head, down my neck, and into my chest. Most of the time, there’s no question – I’m a guy, I have no doubt about that. But other times... being called a boy doesn’t feel quite right, almost in the way that being called a girl feels so completely wrong.

I try saying it out loud. “Demiboy.” Demiboy, demiboy, demiboy.

I smile a little. I smile, and then outright laugh, and I might even begin to cry a little. (Callender 278)

In this scene the reader receives the dictionary definition of “demiboy” as well as what it personally means to Felix – a technique that cements the meaning of the phrase in context, providing a window for both contemporary readers who happen to be unfamiliar with it and potential future readers who may, based on the constant evolution of language highlighted by Twist et al., be using different terminology. Latos’ protagonist, Clare, has a similar journey of online self-discovery to Felix, starting with a haphazard “Am I a Lesbian?” quiz (57-58) and going down a research rabbit hole to eventually land in an encouraging online trans community. However, in contrast to Felix’s delight at discovering a name for his specific identity, Clare is much more hesitant, even admitting that she is “terrified of labels” (Latos 191-192). Clare first explains her situation to Taylor, a non-binary classmate, and articulates

her sense of gender: “Sometimes I feel like a girl and sometimes I feel like a boy. I don’t know what to call myself yet” (105). Clare feels the pressure to define herself throughout the novel, but is encouraged by Taylor simply to do what is comfortable and continue with her self-exploration. Taylor’s guidance reflects the emphasis on self-definition detailed above, and even without a distinct label, the reader is still led to understand how Clare feels and identifies based on dialogue.

Beyond/Outside of/Around Contemporary Language

In speculative or historical settings, the narration and the narrators may not have access to the same contemporary language and terminology that non-binary people use to self-identify today. In these cases, authors play with language to convey and express their characters’ identity, using the same techniques and first-person authority outlined above. Miller’s fantasy duology (*Mask of Shadows* and *Ruin of Stars*) features a genderfluid protagonist, and though this terminology is present in some marketing copy (Corbett 9), it is not used in the text itself. Protagonist Sal instead expresses to other characters that Sal alternates between pronouns and gender presentation, explaining that “I dress how I like to be addressed – he, she, or they. It’s simple enough” (Miller, *Mask of Shadows* 38). While modern terminology is absent, the description of Sal’s identity as something that “ebbed and flowed” (50) implies genderfluidity to a reader familiar with the concept (and may serve to explain it, in the abstract, to an unfamiliar reader). In a similar vein, Capetta’s duology (*The Brilliant Death* and *The Storm of Life*) stars two non-binary protagonists in a fantasy setting that seems to lack contemporary language around queer identity. Narrator Teodora (or Teo) describes their experience with gender in ways that imply an identity outside of the binary, an example being this reflection:

I’d often felt as though I didn’t quite fit inside the boundaries of the word *girl*. It reminded me of a country I knew I could happily visit, but the longer I stayed, the more I knew I couldn’t live there all the time [...] It helped when the magic arrived. It wasn’t male or female. It simply *was*. (Capetta, *The Brilliant Death* 75)

Similar language is used in Lee’s *Loki: Where Mischief Lies*, a tie-in novel to the Marvel Cinematic Universe.⁵ An adolescent Loki narrates in first person and is referred to by he/him

5 While Rick Riordan’s *Magnus Chase* series may have beaten Marvel to the punch in terms of featuring a genderfluid Loki in a novel with a young target demographic, the market presence of a book that so overtly queers a very mainstream character is worthy of note. *Where Mischief Lies* draws on previous iterations of the Marvel comics, in which Loki is depicted as genderfluid and queer. While the background lore of Lee’s novel is vague enough that it can be read as a standalone, there are enough references to tie it subtly to the 2010s superhero films, making it a

pronouns throughout the book; however, he transforms into female forms multiple times for the purpose of disguise and trickery. When asked about his shapeshifting between male and female presentation, Loki clarifies aloud: “I don’t change my gender. I exist as both” (Lee 265). It is this self-identification that elevates the character from simply being playful and gender non-conforming to explicitly identifying himself outside of the binary, even if, as in these other fantasy examples, contemporary labels are not used.

“INVISIBLE” PRONOUNS AND PERSPECTIVE

Given their ties to ideas of first-person authority, methods of narration – and what these methods leave visible or implied – are worth considering. A key area to examine is the use of pronouns in these texts. While not all non-binary people use neutral or neo-pronouns (e.g. they/them, ae/aer, e/em), the use of pronouns is an expression of gender. In narration where pronouns are visible, this can be an easy signification of a character’s non-binary identity. For example, in M.K. England’s *Spellhacker* (2020), the main character/first-person narrator is not non-binary, but her love interest, Remi, is, and goes by they/them pronouns throughout the novel. As Remi’s gender is never discussed in detail, these visible pronouns are the reader’s key indicator that Remi is non-binary. However, many of the novels in my selection have non-binary protagonists that narrate in first person, rendering their pronouns (whatever they may be) invisible within the text itself.

This is not universally the case: Schriever’s *Out of Salem* is narrated in close third person, meaning the protagonist’s chosen name, Z, and their they/them pronouns, are present on the page. This enables a clever method of affirming Z’s gender: often third person is understood by readers to be objective, omnipotent, and presenting the truth. Z’s non-binary identity is thus cemented as objective narrative reality, creating dissonance when other characters refer to Z as “she” or by their deadname – actions rendered obviously incorrect in contrast to the truth conveyed by the narration. Tokuda-Hall’s *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* is also narrated in close third person and alternates between perspectives. The non-binary protagonist alternates between being referred to as Flora (with she/her pronouns on the page) and Florian (he/him) depending upon which character is positioned as point-of-view within the scene. Flora’s chapters use “she”, but a character observing the “Florian” persona – a masculine disguise in the tradition of crossdressing female pirates – and reading the

tangential but still significant instance of LGBTQIA+ representation in a franchise that has notoriously been empty of it throughout the majority of its run. In the 2021 television series *LOKI*, a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it frame of the trickster god’s identity papers confirm his gender as “fluid”. While this technical confirmation is noteworthy, arguably Lee’s novel is a much more concrete instance of ‘canonising’ MCU Loki’s queer gender, especially when considering the ethical weight of “first-person authority”.

sailor as male will use “he”. The sight-based assumptions about Flora/Florian’s gender create a cast full of unreliable narrators and playfully highlight the fact that non-binary bodies have gendered expectations projected onto them by every observer (see Vaid-Menon). Following from the emphasis on self-identification outlined above, the only person who can truly define Flora/Florian’s gender is Flora/Florian herself. The reader can therefore take she/her to be the correct and true pronouns, as those are the ones used to self-describe in Flora/Florian’s own narration, even after she concludes she is “a girl, and also a boy [...] herself, or himself. Both were equally true to her. Neither told the whole story” (Tokuda-Hall 256).

Several other characters in this sample of novels use alternating pronouns, and the narrative voice must work not to misgender them. If the non-binary character is not the first-person narrator, often this is achieved through observation or empathy on the narrator’s part. Cielo’s pronouns, as narrated by Teo in *The Brilliant Death*, change between he/him and she/her with Cielo’s current presentation; the change in gendered markers signalled by the observed character and respected by the observing narrator. In a technique that is surprisingly rare, in several instances the prose of Evans’ *Euphoria Kids* defaults to they/them when describing a character whose pronouns the narrator is unsure of, adjusting to the appropriate pronouns when they are discovered. For example, when protagonist Iris first meets their friend Babs, Iris describes her as “they” and “the new person” (6) until spotting the “SHE/HER” patch on Babs’ jacket, at which point Babs becomes “she” and “this girl” (9) instead. This method is repeated in the chapters narrated by both Iris and Babs; an understated aspect of the writing that ensures no character is misgendered in-text, and normalises the value of neutral pronouns and the importance of not assuming the gender of strangers.

While having neutral or shifting pronouns visible in-text is an exciting step forward in non-binary representation, first-person perspective and ‘invisible’ pronouns are not necessarily an opposing negative. As well as keeping the narrative close and the expression of identity within the realms of first-person authority, it could be argued that first-person narration opens up playful possibilities for the protagonist’s pronoun use without having to factor them into the prose itself. Detractors of non-binary identity often argue that neutral or alternating pronouns are “confusing” or “poor grammar” (Waters n.p.); first-person narration may not only serve as an empathetic window into the non-binary experience, but may also remove potential concerns about young readers losing track of a character if the descriptor for them changes or uses unfamiliar terminology. For example, a character who changes pronouns throughout the story does not have to change the prose construction if they remain as the story’s “I”. Siegert’s protagonist, for example, remains the “I” of the story despite alternating between “he” and “she” and “Aleks” and “Alexis”. The chapter titles are named “Aleks” or “Alexis” to signify which the protagonist is most identifying with at that moment, and several climactic chapters are titled “No one” to demonstrate the protagonist’s

muddled sense of self during the harrowing events of the finale. The concluding chapter is titled “Us” to signify a newfound sense of self-love and internal cohesion, rendering Alexis/Aleks’ non-binary identity inseparable from both the story and the construction of the narrative even without pronouns needing to be present. As non-binary YA continues to grow as a field, I predict that we will see more visible neutral pronouns, but first-person narration serves multiple clever purposes and can be a way for non-binary identity to find its way onto the page, speaking with its own voice.⁶

DYSPHORIA, EUPHORIA, AND GENDER PLAY

Dysphoria is often regarded as a crucial part of the trans experience, to the degree that a diagnosis of “distress arising from conflicts between a person’s gender identity or expression and their assigned gender/sex” (Beischel et al. 2021) is required in many places for transgender status to be medically and legally recognised (Barker and Iantaffi; Bettcher; Johnson; Serano). While all trans people do experience varying degrees of dysphoria (Badgely), “a deeply felt sense of being in the wrong flesh bag” (Halberstam, *Trans** 29) is not necessarily universal, and many trans scholars and activists critique the medicalist narrative that requires it. Likewise, many non-binary voices point out how this perceived roadmap of medical diagnosis and linear transition can be extremely alienating to trans experiences outside of the gender binary, and can in some cases sabotage or prevent much-needed healthcare intervention (Verman). Bettcher also writes on this topic, codifying the “Wrong-Body Model” in 2014; and Austin Johnson describes the “hegemonic ideology that structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon a binary medical model and its accompanying standards” as “transnormativity”(466). Not only does the umbrella nature of non-binary identification ideologically run counter to transnormative models in many ways, but the emphasis on the comfort of labels, pronouns, and the articulations one uses, leads much non-binary literature and discourse to discuss gender euphoria rather than the historic focus on dysphoria. As these adolescent protagonists explore how their gender feels – often playfully – their narratives explore both dysphoria and euphoria to varying degrees, with euphoria and comfort with their self-actualisation often emphasised, both during their journeys and in their happy resolutions.

6 This is a device that authors continue to experiment with beyond the scope of this study, with the protagonist of Capetta’s *The Heartbreak Bakery* (2021) using no pronouns. Writing the novel in first person elegantly avoids the logistics of writing prose around that fact, playing with and into narrative convention, giving the protagonist a voice while not having said protagonist beholden to the familiar rules of grammar. The protagonist is introduced as “Syd (no pronouns, please)” in the novel’s marketing copy, bringing articulation of identity and preferred expression directly to the reader’s attention before they have even opened the book.

Kylee Auten notes that play and experimentation with different personas that embody different adult expectations are important parts of the adolescent narrative, and this manifests for many of these characters. In *Under Shifting Stars*, Clare's gender journey begins when she finds herself identifying strongly with her deceased brother and the masculine roles and traits he embodied. She tries on his clothes, uses his ID to get into a bar, and has a temporary crush on his girlfriend before Clare's relationship with Taylor solidifies. This play with gender and presentation begins with Clare trying to mimic her brother, but unfurls into a deeper discovery about, and comfort in, a genderfluidity that is uniquely hers. This narrative arc plays with, and ultimately rejects, the notion that young trans people are simply performing a confused pantomime of gender and provides a more nuanced view of identity experimentation and 'gender envy'.

Many other characters similarly play in the space between the cisnormative expectations of their assigned genders, with their narratives exploring a nuanced blend of dysphoria and euphoria. Ben of *I Wish You All the Best* describes their annoyance at having to shave, since facial hair codes them as masculine (dysphoria); and takes a small, rebellious foray by painting their fingernails (small but significant euphoria). In *Somebody Told Me*, Aleks explores gender possibilities by cosplaying as handsome fictional characters and (literally) performing recognisable masculinity. Aleks/Alexis' is perhaps the bluntest and most harrowing depiction of dysphoria, spending multiple scenes glaring at mirror reflections and reminiscing about past crash diets to eliminate feminine curves and better fit the "beautiful boy" (Siegert 68) persona. In *Felix Ever After*, Felix's dysphoria is presented not as pain – as it is often conceptualised – but as a lingering feeling that male gender is mostly, but not quite, correct. This notion is echoed in *The Brilliant Death* with Teo's quiet realisation that girlhood feels like a country they can visit but not live in (Capetta 75). Lee's Loki happily uses masculine pronouns but tends towards the conventionally feminine in his presentation through fashion (high-heeled boots, painted fingernails) and through titles, identifying with female-coded markers such as enchantress or witch. Notably, he experiments more once he is out of his homeworld, Asgard, and out from under the eye of adult authority.

Many characters express frustration, internal or external, with the binarist expectations placed upon them by authority figures such as parents and guardians, as well as their peers – who, in many cases, do great harm to the protagonists through their embodiment of cisnormative and transnormative expectations of what is acceptable and desirable in terms of gender presentation. These characters serve as stand-ins for the very real pressures inflicted on young non-binary people and their relationships with their own bodies. While the trope of the transphobic parent or partner may feel at times like a harrowing hangover from the trend of issue novels that emphasise the misery of being queer and trans (Bowden; Bulla), placing these figures (Ben's parents, Felix's classmates, Aleks/Alexis' ex-partner, Clare's friends) explicitly as antagonists frames these worldviews as explicitly harmful and unjust, something to be escaped from (e.g., Ben moving out of home; Aleks/Alexis cutting off

contact with the ex and the toxic fan community) or defeated (Clare ending her friendship with the normative bully; Felix standing up to his transphobic classmate). Placing transphobic and transnormative rhetoric in the mouth of obvious antagonists also serves to highlight that it is these external, social pressures, rather than any internal failing in the non-binary protagonists, that cause the dysphoria and discomfort.

In contrast is the centrality of trans joy in (the appropriately titled) *Euphoria Kids*. The novel lacks any transphobic bullies or characters who enforce or represent transnormative ideals, leaving the three trans protagonists to experiment playfully with their gender presentations without fear of social repercussions. Gender euphoria is discussed and defined explicitly in-text: non-binary Iris explains it to their transmasculine friend after they attend a medical appointment together. The boy – as he is called throughout most of the novel, until he ‘finds’ his true, male name – freezes at having to sign paperwork with his legal name, but Iris suggests he just write down his surname instead, something that fills the boy with relief and delight. After which, Iris asks him,

“Do you know about gender euphoria?”

He shakes his head.

“I think, when you smiled after realising you could just use your last name, that might’ve been it.”

“It’s just like, good feelings? About gender?”

“It’s like... the opposite of dysphoria.”

He stares out the window, watching the shops go past. “I’ve only heard of gender dysphoria before.”

“I found out about it a while ago, but yeah. I thought I should let you know.”

He smiles, lost in thought. (Evans 200-201)

This exchange highlights, and rejects, the transnormative reliance on dysphoria as the one-and-only gender signifier. That Evans has their characters address this concept so directly speaks to a shifting conversation surrounding queer gender: not away from dysphoria entirely, as it is still a crucial aspect of trans experience to address and problematise, but towards a more complicated construction of gender that goes beyond the ‘wrong-body model’ and narratives of transness that rely on tropes of misery and discomfort. Complex

interplays of dysphoria and euphoria are expressed in each of these novels, with these protagonists each playing with and expressing their uniquely non-binary gender joy in a variety of ways.

COMMUNITY AND WORLD-MAKING

As well as a tectonic shift away from the framework of issue novels, across its history queer YA has gradually moved towards including more queer characters per book and showing them “in the context of a community” (Jenkins and Cart xv) rather than as solitary figures in a heteronormative world. This section will address how these non-binary protagonists fit into communities of their own: how queer community is celebrated (or in some cases, critiqued) and the metatextual importance of having a variety of non-binary individuals to better represent the identity. Non-binary (and broader queer) solidarity is highlighted in many of these novels, as is the potential power of community spaces (online and physical) for finding self-actualisation.

Online Landscapes

Many of the protagonists in the contemporary novels in my corpus use the Internet as an avenue of self-exploration and community-building. Felix discovers the term “demiboy” in a list online and feels immediate joy, Clare finds solace and support in a trans forum, and Ben’s best friend is a slightly older non-binary activist who they met online and who serves as something of a mentor. Though the online landscape is different in the period in which the novel is set (an alternate, magical 1997), even *Out of Salem* emphasises the importance of the Internet for both finding information about non-binary identity and the ways it can be expressed⁷ and finding like-minded communities to help one feel less alone.

While there are also physical support spaces – Felix meets a non-binary mentor at a trans support group, and Clare’s arc culminates in her attending an in-person meeting for a local LGBTQIA+ society – the importance of the Internet as a space of queer community and world-making cannot be overstated. As Charlie McNabb notes, “[s]ince the introduction of participatory social media, nonbinary culture has exploded, with the creation and evolution of identity terms and ways of communicating about these identities” (xvi). Many queer teenagers use online resources and communities to explore and express their ‘true selves’ in ways they cannot in offline life. Online space, which “operates under different rules and

7 Z uses ‘genderqueer’, a neat historical detail as the phrase would have only been coined by Wilchins two years before (presuming that Wilchins exists in this alternate history of werewolf anarchists and queer witches) and would have been the key terminology available at the time.

exists outside the established order of things” (Wilkinson 114), is potentially ideal for Auten’s concept of identity-formation through play, performance, and trying on different identities and personas. This process has helped many queer youth (and older users) find their way to a sense of self that feels correct, as reflected in many of these contemporary novels. These Internet spaces can almost be considered secondary worlds in their own right: transient, liminal, and hand-crafted outside of the structure of normative society, making them ideal stages for identity-formation to play out and bonds of alternative kinship to form.

However, non-binary gender’s association with youth culture, the complex language of self-identification, and online community functions as a marker of its instability and artificiality for those who seek to dismiss it. Quoting selectively from online non-binary resources, Rebecca Reilly-Cooper emphasises the silliness of the self-identification model, highlighting that under it “your gender can be frost or the Sun or music or the sea or Jupiter or pure darkness. Your gender can be pizza” (n.p.). Reilly-Cooper’s criticisms, and the many others that echo them, frame non-binary identifications as “whimsical, ad-hoc, self-indulgent choices, placed in opposition to real ‘stable’ gender identities” (Nicholas and Clark 41), reinforcing a narrative “that being genderqueer is just a bunch of trendy Tumblr teens going through a phase” (Vynn 47).⁸ These dismissals of online community, evolving language, and adolescent gender exploration (and the infantilising of older non-binary people) only make the positive and nuanced depictions of non-binary experience in my sample texts more important. These texts also become, in multiple cases, spaces in which these exclusionary discourses can be explored in a way that grants narrative power back to the non-binary characters.

Queer Community: Solidarity vs Discrimination

In many of these novels, queer community (online or otherwise) is presented as a force for good, yet some of these works highlight the discrimination that can occur within supposedly

8 In a similar vein, journalist Katie Herzog metaphorically shrugs when she notes that non-binary activism “might look good on Instagram” but is ultimately not progressive, positioning non-binary identifications as a stylish choice rather than an earnest expression of a felt sense of gender. Herzog and Reilly-Cooper are also among those who position non-binary identification as a pragmatic but misguided attempt of women to “self-identify’ their way out of oppression” (Nicholas and Clark 44). This rhetoric, which echoes many ‘gender critical’ dismissals of the transmasculine experience (Abigail Shrier’s 2020 book *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* being a recent high-profile example), erases the complexity of queer gender and dismisses the agency of trans people, binary and non. This line of critique is beyond the scope of this article (and certainly this footnote) and is not directly addressed within any of my selected texts, but it is worth acknowledging as a common line of critique present in these discursive spaces.

inclusive spaces. While Felix finds a sense of welcome on the Internet, *Felix Ever After* also explores the normative biases in some queer communities, and non-binary's outsider status as "a minority within a minority" (Vijlbrief et al. 91). The plot of *Felix* centres on the mystery of an anonymous transphobic macroaggression: photographs of Felix, pre-transition, hung on the walls of the school lobby, followed by a slew of untraceable hate messages on Felix's social media accounts. Not only does the novel include a lesbian character who paints her transphobia as part of her feminism, but the overall villain of the piece is also revealed to be a cis, White, gay classmate irritated that "now we have to deal with people like you taking our identity, taking our space" (Callender 321). This theme is also explored in Alice Oseman's *Loveless* (2020), in which the protagonist overhears an argument between members of the university Pride Society. The former chair, a cisgender gay man, expresses distaste that identities such as "asexual and bigender or whatever" are being invited to join the Society under its new management, asking the current chair – a non-binary asexual man – if he is "just gonna let in anyone who thinks they're some sort of made-up internet identity?" (Oseman 193). This quip invalidates the role of online networks in the formation of non-binary identity, and echoes how the dismissive arguments highlighted above may play out in a supposedly inclusive space.

Somebody Told Me explores casual and insidious transphobia and the Othering and fetishization of the trans body, even in superficially accepting communities. Many members of the queer fan community invalidated Alexis/Aleks' bigender identity:

The girls dated me because I was boy enough for them to "not really be a lesbian" but didn't have a dick so I wasn't threatening. The boys either strayed when they encountered female anatomy or refused to use my male pronouns even if they were the ones all over me when I was in male cosplay. (Siegert 81-82)

Aleks, seen as the "beautiful boy" (68), is fetishised, whereas "ugly girl" (41) Alexis is ignored, even when Alexis expresses how she wants to be seen as feminine at that moment. This polarised external perception of Aleks versus Alexis is part of what heightens the internal split within the character, which is finally resolved after cutting ties with this community and refusing to forgive them for the abuse they inflicted. These examples demonstrate that the conversations about queer gatekeeping and non-binary erasure that have been occurring in community spaces and in academia (see Nicholson and Clark) are manifesting as plot points and sites of emotional conflict in queer YA – serving as validating representations for young readers who may have experienced such aggressions as well as demonstrating these issues to readers who may be unaware.

The Importance of a Spectrum

Alongside the idea that non-binary gender is ‘made-up’, there remains a stereotype that non-binary people are outliers, and there surely cannot be more than one in the same place/family/peer group. The presence of multiple non-binary characters in a text helps to dislodge the perception of non-binary people as “really rare, really weird, and somewhere else” (Effinger-Weintraub 124). Multiple characters also provide multiple versions of non-binary experience, gender articulation, presentation, and personality within a single text, helping to prevent the perception of a singular non-binary archetype – something particularly relevant given the multitudinous ways of being non-binary.

Older mentor characters like Ben’s and Felix’s are important, as they emphasise a sense of generational community and disrupt the stereotype that non-binary gender is exclusive to “trendy Tumblr teens” (Vynn 47). *Under Shifting Stars* and *The Brilliant Death* are both significant in that they feature romances between non-binary characters; not only demonstrating that more than one non-binary person may exist in the same space, but that they may be desirable to each other. In both cases, the protagonist (Clare, Teo) learns more about non-binary possibility from their love interest (Taylor, Cielo) and is encouraged to explore their sense of self in the company of someone who understands their situation and can act as a guide. Z is the only non-binary character in *Out of Salem*, but they have a trans boy penpal and, later, a protector and mentor figure in the form of an older trans woman. *Euphoria Kids* is significant for having three trans protagonists, with the sense of kinship between them the focal point of the novel and with each offering a different experience and different advice in solidarity – as well as Iris’ genderless mentors in the form of the dryads, fairies, and other supernatural creatures.

NON-BINARY MAGIC

While many of the texts in this sample deal in contemporary realism and thus with modern issues, it is also intriguing to note the presence of non-binary protagonists in speculative genre fiction published contemporaneously or even prior to 2016. The evolution of queer YA at large has typically been rooted in realism but has gradually expanded to include more genre fiction, with the recent popularity of queer YA fantasy and science fiction a notable and exciting development (Henderson). With this in mind, the niche of non-binary YA is of particular interest: arguably an accelerated microcosm of the development of queer YA as a whole, already balancing realistic narratives with fantastical ones. However, approached through a different framework, it may be the presence of contemporary realism that is historically noteworthy. The history of speculative fiction contains many instances where what we might now consider non-binary identity is depicted on the page, albeit without the

use of our current language and discourse – often and most famously in the form of aliens or otherworldly beings, such as the androgynous race in Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1969 science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* or the shapeshifting entity The Fool in Robin Hobb’s high fantasy saga (1995-present) *Realm of the Elderlings* (Prater; Räsänen). More recently, speculative fiction has also yielded characters who defy binary gender, for instance the cosmic AI Janet from *The Good Place* (2016-2020) (Osworth) or the magical, interplanetary Gems in *Steven Universe* (2013-2019) (Dunn). Speculative fiction presents a space of potentiality for playing with dominant conceptions of gender, and in some cases the fantastical trappings of a narrative may be “able to magically lift the material constraints that often serve to block genderqueer and agender representation in realist media” (Dunn 45). One advantage of speculative fiction “is that it does not need to take cultural conventions and limitations into account” and can be a space “in which the authors are free to perform thought experiments and introduce new societal norms” (Šporčič 53). However, while fantastical experiments with gender and the playful power fantasies of otherworldly bodies hold value, it is also vital to recognise the potential harm in the continuous imagery of non-binary gender as otherworldly, alien, and beyond the realm of humanity and realism. Again, this concerns the concept of a spectrum of representation: problems arise when non-binary people are only represented in fiction as inhuman creatures, and only presented as a possibility in alternate or speculative worlds. As this has historically been the case (Osworth n.p.), the increasing number of human non-binary protagonists in these study texts becomes significant, and the intersections of queer gender and the fantastic within them becomes further worthy of examination. With the concerns of the ‘aliens and robots’ trope acknowledged, it would be remiss not to also mention the queer resonance found in narratives of magic, Otherness, and non-normative (supernatural) bodies and self-expressions. From discussion of the speculative novels in this sample, I argue that combining queerness (and in this case, specifically non-binary identity) with magic can be a freeing and playful opportunity for authors to explore these themes and create uniquely queer engagements with the fantastic; drawing on the past interplay of SFF and queer gender as well as forging new ground.

The Social Other and the Otherworldly

Euphoria Kids melds a narrative of gender discovery with its speculative elements. Iris is an otherworldly body, a child who grew out of a seed in their mothers’ garden rather than being conceived biologically. This grants them the ability to speak with local fae and forest spirits, and Iris can see their deuteragonist Babs even when she is cursed to be invisible. However, Iris’ non-binary identity is never tied to their magical origin in a way that suggests cause-and-effect between them. Iris is not non-binary because of this connection to magic; rather the

magic provides a non-normative space with unconventional avenues to explore and affirm their identity. Early in the novel, Iris reflects on first learning of non-binary possibility from a local forest spirit named Vada:

Dryads don't have the same gender system as humans. [Vada] had laughed for a long time before choking out, *Why on the mother's earth would we?* And then I asked if I could not be a girl too. They nodded." (Evans 34)

Iris and the dryads provide an interesting middle ground wherein non-binary possibility is opened via the magical, but not universally associated with it. Otherworldly creatures outside of the gender binary exist in the story world, but they are not the sole depiction of non-binary identity in the novel nor the sole place that Iris gets their information and their articulations of possibility.

This theme of liminal magic resonating with a liminal experience of gender is echoed in the above-quoted line from *The Brilliant Death*, wherein the protagonist's gender uncertainty is eased "when the magic arrived. It wasn't male or female. It simply *was*" (Capetta 75). Magic marks Teo and Cielo as otherworldly and marginal, but in unconflicted – yet still intersecting – ways to their non-binary gender. They find solace in one another for their shared magic and their shared identity, with the two coexisting and suggesting the queer resonance often found in stories of outcast witches and otherworldly beings, but also while featuring queerness directly in the text. They are not non-binary because they are magic, but the two facets of their Othered identity speak to one another and intersect. Similarly, but framed by a much darker tone, *Out of Salem* plays with the intersections of Otherness and Otherworldliness without ever conflating the two. Z begins the novel freshly reanimated as a zombie; their liminal state between life and death makes a quirky, yet neat, allegory for their in-between gender identity and how they must hide it socially to avoid being ostracised (not to mention a neat pun on the concept of a 'deadname'). However, their identity as a member of the living dead and an individual under the genderqueer umbrella are never connected. Early chapters establish that Z was exploring their gender identity before their death/rebirth, and likewise other 'monster' characters have queer identities that intersect with, but are explicitly not caused by, their monstrosity (e.g., werewolf activism overlaps with queer and trans activism, but lycanthropy is not an allegory for being trans – many of the trans characters are also werewolves, allowing the story to intersect textual representation with its fantasy metaphor to create something more complex). Z is rendered otherworldly, but the narrative expresses that their otherworldliness does not stem directly from their genderqueerness, and expresses that they have the right to exist safely without being preyed on for any aspect of their perceived Otherness. These examples draw upon the rich history of writers using speculative fiction to explore queer gender possibilities, but also draw upon more contemporary sensibilities that call for human non-binary characters. With

magic-touched characters such as Z, Teo, and Iris, writers work to reclaim and evolve the idea of the non-binary non-human, paving an intriguing path for the future of non-binary fiction.

Fantasy Worldbuilding and Queer World-(re)making

Speculative works are frequently set in speculative worlds, and fantasy worldbuilding means that each author has the power to create the stage on which their characters' gender troubles will occur, decide how the setting will respond to them, and explore what obstacles the protagonists must navigate to assert those themes of agency and self-actualisation so key to both non-binary identifications and the YA narrative. The characters in many of these fantastical stories perform their own world-making practices: sometimes socially, as discussed in the above section about Internet community-building, and sometimes – with the aid of magic – more literally.

Settings that lean towards realism (the contemporary-set novels in this sample, as well as *Mask of Shadows*' somewhat gritty fantasy setting) are often hostile towards their queer characters, leaving the protagonist Othered and having to overcome (or escape from) this as part of the plot. This need not be the default, however, and fantasy provides an opportunity for writers to “challenge and disrupt received notions and allow and encourage their audiences to imagine ways of being outside the constitutive constraints of socialized gender and sexual identity” (Roberts and McCallum-Stewart 1). For instance, Lee's *Loki* uses its speculative trappings to suggest a queer utopia: Loki's dialogue describes his home, Asgard, as a sort of queer paradise where queer genders and sexualities are not the issue they are on Earth (Lee 218). However, while this description offers some solace to the gay Earth-dweller who hears it, the sense of paradise is not sufficiently demonstrated in the scenes in Asgard, leaving Loki somewhat lonesome as the only non-cisgender character in the text, and setting a contradictory tone. The most truly utopic setting in this selection is *Euphoria Kids*, wherein an enchanted forest becomes a haven for the trans teenagers, separated both spatially and temporally from the suburbs (a literal sense of Halberstam's queer time [*A Queer Time and Place*] comes into play when the trio discover that time flows differently in the witch's woods). Perhaps the most dystopic is *Out of Salem*, where the harsh realities of police brutality and homophobia intersect with anti-monster sentiment to create an overarching metaphor about society's violent fear of the Other. Both methods are potentially valuable, each providing the author with different tools with which to critique the normative social structures their stories are either escaping from or addressing directly as an antagonistic force.

The notion of escaping from or remaking the cruel world is a relevant one: just as the realist protagonists may carve their own space and make their own worlds online or in chosen peer groups, a more literal escapism and world-making may take place in fantasy.

Much adolescent literature deals with the liminal position of its protagonists, in otherworlds and borderlands, but the coming-of-age journey still most often involves coming back 'home'. These novels, however, may take a different tack:

In contrast with ritual liminality, which anticipates the reincorporation of the liminal being into social structure (Alice steps back [from Wonderland]; Dorothy and Wendy fly back [from Oz and Neverland], Willow Rosenberg turns back—from witch to girl), outsiderhood and marginality defy reincorporation. (Joseph 140)

Because these are stories of “outsiderhood and marginality”, the relationship between the protagonists and their settings – and what those settings represent – takes on a different meaning and necessitates a certain kind of conclusion. *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* permanently removes its two leads from the world by having the Sea turn them into mermaids, solidifying their outsider status and the non-normative status of their bodies, yet presenting this as a blessing and a freedom. *Out of Salem* resolves with the town of Salem itself, and its bigoted inhabitants, being engulfed in plant matter; Z and their friends are transported elsewhere with the chance to make a fresh start. These characters “defy reincorporation” and instead find new ways to navigate or reshape their worlds. There is a sense of rebellion in each of these methods: creating a safe, alternate space like the forest in *Euphoria Kids*; framing transformation and transportation outside of the world as the ultimate freedom as in *Mermaid*; and in destroying/remaking the broken, bigoted world and beginning anew as in *Salem*. Queer engagements with fantasy allow for playful explorations of these themes and for unique explorations of non-binary identity and non-binary heroism: a heroism that hinges on agency over the self and over one’s surroundings, whether that means leaving the world or making a new one.

CONCLUSION

Just as there are a multitude of possibilities for the experience and expression of non-binary gender, there is a multitude of possibilities for non-binary embodiment in contemporary YA literature. Though each coming-of-age story is different, there are common threads present in these texts: identity articulated through first-person authority (either through dialogue or narration), the importance of specific language in expressing this, narratives that explore social Otherness and in-betweenness in both contemporary and magical settings, an emphasis on solidarity and a critique of gatekeeping ideology and transnormative expectations, and, perhaps most importantly, an emphasis on agency over oneself and the world. A non-binary protagonist may present androgynously, or masculine, or feminine, or alternating between; they may be an art student or a swashbuckling pirate, on a quest for

revenge or falling in love, exploring their sense of self online or trying to figure out their zombified body. Even with their common themes taken into account, no non-binary archetype emerges from this selection of novels and they each present slightly different explorations and expressions of queer gender, creating an expanding spectrum of representation for this group.

The surge in non-binary protagonists in recent years is significant to the industry and to the overall social visibility of non-binary identity, and a glance at forthcoming publications (including more work from several of the novelists listed here) suggests that the varied presence of this identity in YA is only going to increase exponentially. This article captures a snapshot of the field at this early tipping point of non-binary representation in traditional publishing, reflecting contemporary conceptions of what life is like for young non-binary people, the affirming language they have available, and the joys and troubles that they may face. I also argue that observing this subcategory within the broader context of queer YA provides a blueprint for the field's growth: encompassing narratives with familiar elements to historical issue novels yet growing rapidly beyond those comparisons to create nuanced texts clearly in conversation with past tropes, both those linked to realism and those linked to speculative fiction. In years to come I recommend returning to this topic, as both YA as a field and non-binary identifications and their place in mainstream media will no doubt continue to evolve.

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