

# Review

## *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Young Adults.*

**Edited by B. J. Epstein and Elizabeth Chapman.  
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In their Introduction to *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Young Adults*, editors B.J. Epstein and Elizabeth Chapman ask: “What messages do *we* want to offer the next generations about being queer and how can we ensure the messages are positive, accurate and inclusive?” (emphasis added, 8). Although there is no obvious answer to this question, the authors of the chapters collected in this remarkable volume examine what *we* – authors, scholars, and educators – have done so far to provide young LGBTQ+ people with positive and inclusive representation.

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The visibility of LGBTQ+ children and teenagers in Anglophone popular culture has increased in the last few decades, especially with the rising popularity of openly LGBTQ+ celebrities and films and teen series with major LGBTQ+ characters (most recently Netflix's *Heartstopper* [2022], based on Alice Oseman's webcomic of the same name), and the ever-increasing number of English-language LGBTQ+ books for all age groups. Young readers – mostly LGBTQ+ children and teenagers – have used social media and review sites to criticize the enduring predominance of didactic narratives with White, male, cisgender, and middle-class protagonists for failing to reflect the present-day reality and experiences of a significant proportion of the LGBTQ+ community (Leary; Welsh), but publications from the last several years have demonstrated a willingness amongst children's and YA literature publishers to promote authors with diverse identities and backgrounds. Fictional works by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé, Kacen Callender, Adiba Jaigirdar, Aiden Thomas, and Leah Johnson, for example, represent a shift towards more inclusive LGBTQ+ texts in the mainstream market.

While LGBTQ+ topics have gained prominence in Anglophone children's and young adult literature and its studies, the focus of most monographs and edited collections available in English has been limited to the Anglophone world (Abate and Kidd; Cart and Jenkins; Epstein; Mason). Though several articles centring non-English books and contexts have been published, international voices have undoubtedly been marginalized in academia. The chapters collected in *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Young Adults* shed new light (for English-speaking scholars) on a range of national literatures and demonstrate that positive changes in Anglophone LGBTQ+ publishing are not necessarily replicated elsewhere in the world. First, we learn that, in many cases, any representation of non-heteronormativity in literature is limited to a handful of books with LGBTQ+ characters, often translated from English. Second, sometimes even a single mention of non-heterosexuality can be met with socio-political backlash. Third, in many countries books with LGBTQ+ themes and characters simply do not exist. The interdisciplinary and transnational scope of *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Young Adults* therefore solidifies it as a collection of great importance.

The chapters vary in focus, length, and style, yet they are coherent and complement one another. Most authors write about young adult novels, but some focus on texts directed at younger readers, for example picture books about coming-out (Bernat Cormand's "Stories Out of the Closet: LGBTQ+ Picturebooks in Spain") and those featuring same-sex couples (Dalila Forni's "LGBTQ+ Families and Picturebooks: New Perspectives in Italian Children's Literature"). Some authors apply a cross-sectional and multinational perspective in their reading of books about particular topics, such as donor insemination (Patricia Sarles' "Heather Has a Donor: 30 Years of International Lesbian-Themed Children's Picture Books about Donor Insemination, 1989-2019"), the lack of LGBTQ+ themes in the Arab world (Anonymous' "Morals, Society and Distribution: LGBTQ+ Literature for Young Readers in the Arab World"), and the representation of same-sex couples in the visual narratives of

picturebooks (Jamie Campbell Naidoo and Mercedes Zabawa's "Sameness and Difference in Visual Representation of Same-Sex Couples in International Children's Picture Books"). Others concentrate on LGBTQ+ literature for young people from a particular country, language, or tradition: Anton Hur examines queer narratives in South Korean children's literature; Rosa Maria Hessel Silveira, Luiz Felipe Zago and Daniela Ripoll investigate Brazilian YA fiction; Thaddeus Andracki writes about Indigenous LGBTQ+/Two-Spirit literature and introduces several terms necessary in the study of Indigenous literature; and Cheeno Marlo M. Sayuno studies the depictions of queerness in Philippine texts. Issues of translation and transculturalism are also given consideration in multiple provocative chapters. Writing about Greenland, Mette Laustsen examines the case of a local queer novel, which was translated into other languages, including English. Though many contributions point to the importance of translations from English, which consequently lead to the appearance of local books, in their study of LGBTQ+ literature in India, Bharat Mehra and Chris Barrett investigate the problems stemming from the lack of accurate representation of local experiences.

A great strength of *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Young Adults* is that several of the chapters illustrate that LGBTQ+ literature for young people in Western countries, like Germany, Sweden, Austria, and France, is not as liberal as it may be believed considering their socio-political situation and the status of LGBTQ+ rights. For instance, Katrin Waldhart examines the surprising binaries in German-Language books for young adults featuring trans characters, and Chapman investigates the erasure of bisexual people in French books for young readers. In the closing chapters, Warnqvist and Epstein point to challenging representations found in Swedish texts, which are generally believed to be very progressive. Most European contributions deal with Western/Northern Europe, with the exception of Andrej Zavrl's chapter, which studies the entanglements between literature, ideology, and pedagogy in Slovenian literature.

Though expansive, the scope and geographical coverage of the chapters may lead a reader to wonder: Why is there no representation of Africa among the studied texts? Why do most of the authors focus on Europe? Why are South America, Asia, and the Middle East represented only by individual countries? Epstein and Chapman address these concerns directly in their Introduction, highlighting a significant problem facing the study of LGBTQ+ literature around the world. That is, "in a number of countries/cultures, no one was able or willing to put their name to a text about LGBTQ+ for young readers" (3-4) due to an absence of such texts and/or a lack of LGBTQ+ rights more generally, meaning "there would be little that they [prospective chapter authors] could comfortably and safely write about" (4).

In their Introduction, Epstein and Chapman also clarify why each contribution is so different when it comes to style, length, and the terminology used. What is usually seen as a disadvantage and a sign of editorial clumsiness here has a different meaning – by giving individual authors more agency, the editors wanted the volume to be as diverse and inclusive

as possible. This decision is outstanding considering the history of classist bias in academia, the frequent gatekeeping of scholars from non-Western (especially non-Anglophone) countries, as well as the beliefs that scholars working on lesser-known books should publish in ‘ethnic’ journals and texts not translated into English are of no interest to global researchers.

The diverse contributions collected in *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Young Adults* may encourage scholars to reexamine the place of LGBTQ+ narratives in their own national literatures. I can only hope that it is the first of many collections representing international voices, as I am sure there is enough material for another volume exploring LGBTQ+ literature in other countries where I know it exists, for example Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, but also in places about which I know less. I am also left wondering about the role of LGBTQ+-themed fanfiction, blog entries, and other texts independently published by young people online. Thus, I believe any subsequent collections focused on international LGBTQ+ voices should include interdisciplinary and cross-sectional analyses of literature and other multimodal cultural texts produced for and by children and young adults. Considering the necessary generational and structural changes happening in academia, I expect other publishers and editors will follow the path laid by Epstein and Chapman, giving underrepresented scholars a long-overdue opportunity to be heard.

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