



**Inclusive Magic: The Evolution of LGBTQ+
Representation in Young Adult and Adult Fantasy Novels**

by

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Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Bachelor of Communication

in the

School of Communication

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Approval

Name: **Robyn McCullough**

Degree: **Bachelor of Communication**

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Representation in Young Adult and Adult Fantasy
Novels**

Examining Committee: **Faculty Supervisor: Kym Stewart**

School of Communication

Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, Human Research Ethics approval from Capilano University Office of Research Ethics.

A copy of the approval letter is attached.

Subject: 2022-003-CAPS-MCCULLOUGH: REB Approval



Hello Robyn McCullough,

The Capilano University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed your revised application for Ethical Review for the project entitled "*Inclusive Magic: The Evolution of LGBTQ+ Representation in Young Adult and Adult Fantasy Novels.*" Thank you for your close attention to the concerns raised by REB reviewers.

I am pleased to relay that your application is approved.

For your records:

REB Protocol ID:	2022-003-CAPS-MCCULLOUGH
Date of Approval:	February 16, 2022
Expiry Date:	February 15, 2023

Throughout the duration of this REB approval, all requests for modifications to the approved ethical protocol must be submitted to reb@capilanu.ca.

We wish you the very best with your project.

Sincerely,
Capilano University Research Ethics Board

Chris Turner, PhD
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Abstract

This research paper will examine the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation in the fantasy book genre over the last two decades. In particular, the investigation will examine the shift in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters from tragic and two-dimensional to complex and relatable individuals. The fantasy genre is known to subvert social norms through its suspension of reality and has been at the forefront of the shift in diversity and representation; however, there is a lack of scholarly research on the impact of the fantasy book genre and LGBTQ+ representation. To examine this shift, four methods will be employed: an autoethnography (as I am an avid reader and have recognized this shift); a discourse analysis of fourteen fantasy books; an online survey of reader experience, and finally interviews with six members of the reading community. I anticipate that other readers will have noticed this shift in representation as I did as well as create an open conversation into where the fantasy genre still needs work. This study will contribute to the extensive research into the trends of LGBTQ+ representation within media as well as fill in the gaps of research when it comes to the fantasy genre's involvement in this area.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ representation; fantasy book genre; YA fantasy literature; diversity; character study

Dedication

To all the readers who yearned to see themselves as the hero.

Table of Contents

Approval	iii
Ethics Statement.....	iv
Abstract.....	vi
Dedication	vii
Table of Contents	viii
List of Acronyms.....	x
Introduction	1
Review of the Literature.....	8
History and Definition of Fantasy	8
Fantasy and the Subversion of Societal Norms	10
LGBTQ+ Representation in YA and Adult Fiction.....	12
Methods.....	16
The Autoethnographic Approach	16
Qualitative Research	18
Discourse Analysis.....	18
Interviews	20
Quantitative Research	21
Survey	21
Discussion.....	22
THEME 1: NORMALITY	23
THEME 2: ESCAPISM	38
THEME 3: DIVERSITY OF LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS	43
Limitations	51
Conclusion.....	52
References	53
Appendix A.....	60
Appendix B.....	62
Appendix C.....	63
Appendix D.....	64
Appendix E.....	69

List of Acronyms

YA

Young Adult

LGBTQ+

Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer +

INTRODUCTION

“Novels aren’t just happy escapes; they are slivers of people’s souls, nailed to the pages, dripping ink from veins of wood pulp. Reading the right one at the right time can make all the difference.”

Brandon Sanderson

The fantasy genre is a treasure trove of stories that depict strange lands and even stranger people. Oftentimes, it creates an escape that leaves us yearning for something better, a world where we can be ourselves without the pressure that comes with living in the confines of the real world. While fantasy is best known for its magical elements and suspension of reality, it has played a tremendous role in the rise, and acknowledgment, of diverse representation, including representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

It is important to note that the acronym for the community has changed over the years as more inclusion is achieved. When researching, I came across articles using terms like queer, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQ2+, and LGBTQIA2S+. For the purpose of this study, I will use the acronym LGBTQ+.

I grew up in a Christian home, where the LGBTQ+ community was not often discussed. This lack of discussion of this community led me to believe that Christianity did not support them. But years later, I began to consider that: 1) we have more than a few friends and relatives who are gay and we wholly accepted, and 2) my grandmother, a devout

Christian lady, sympathized with transgendered people's journey trying to be themselves within an intolerant society. To have such a devoutly Christian woman stress that it was not our place to judge, and who acknowledged the trials that the LGBTQ+ community has faced, was one of the reasons that I became so accepting of the LGBTQ+ community.

As a white, cis-gendered, straight woman, I knew that I was at an advantage when it came to representation. If I were to pick up a book, the chances were that the main character would be of the same race and sexuality as me. I was lucky in that the fantasy genre has always been at the forefront of adding diversity to their books. While the fantasy book genre was dominated by male leads, and many of my favourite childhood books had male protagonists, I did not have to wait long before female leads became popular. I was thrilled when people started pushing for more diversity within media, particularly within literature. It was about time that my fellow bookworms felt represented as I did. Although my home did not provide me with much information (until years later), I gathered much of my knowledge of the LGBTQ+ community from the online world and quickly became aware of the lack of representation within the literary world.

As a child of the internet, I followed many voices on Tumblr and other social medias that called for more LGBTQ+ representation; particularly for more variation so that the community was not just represented by gay and lesbian characters or those characters whose story seemed to follow one path—that of the tragic pasts or those who had died young.

When I started to write my own fantasy novels, I wanted to be sure that I was accurately representing any group that ended up in my novels. As all writers can relate to, sometimes characters write themselves into being, and, if—and when—I encountered one of my own LGBTQ+ characters, I wanted to be sure that I was portraying them in a way that both realistic and respectful. And as a writer, I often look to how other authors to hone my craft.

Two years ago, I picked up *Crown of Feathers* by Nicki Pau Preto and discovered, to my delight, that there was a gay character who did not follow the typical archetype associated with LGBTQ+ characters.

Archetype: “the core traits, values, and decision-making patterns of a particular type of person” (8 Character Archetypes, 2021).

For LGBTQ+ characters, these typically include the jester, the rebel, the tragic archetype, or more stereotypically, the “gay best friend.” For anyone unfamiliar with the concept, the “gay best friend,” is a trope in which an LGBTQ+ character is often depicted as an overly flamboyant, often male, individual who serves as comic relief for the protagonist. The gay character in *Crown of Feathers*, however, while having a dry sense of humour, was focused more on their goals of not dying while undercover among enemy soldiers; so, as a reader, the fact that he was gay was quite inconsequential—much like the fact of him being straight would have been. After this book, I began reading more books with LGBTQ+ characters to see if they displayed the same non-stereotypical traits. What I found was that there seemed to be this shift toward an increasingly complex LGBTQ+ character—authors were moving away from using old tropes or archetypes. I had seen the sexuality of the characters move from the forefront—determining who they were—to

a less important defining characteristic. LGBTQ+ characters were written with more nuance and it was their adventures in the fantastical world that was highlighted; many writers were even making LGBTQ+ characters the main characters of their stories.

This was so interesting to me so when it came time to choose a topic for my thesis, I took the opportunity to fully investigate the phenomena.

I quickly discovered there was a surplus of research on LGBTQ+ representation and the overall fiction genre, however, there seemed to be little research on the fantasy novel genre. In fact, when using the terms “fantasy” and “LGBTQ+ literature” on the Capilano University library search only a few articles turned up and, of those that have been published, many focus on the fetishization of LGBTQ+ characters.

It is difficult to fully understand why researchers haven’t examined fantasy novels and LGBTQ+ representation. Perhaps the lack of literature is because the fantasy genre is well-known for its ability to suspend reality; due to its use of magical elements.

In the past, fantasy has been used to subvert social norms and has provided a space to discuss issues such as racism, discrimination, and gender inequality—so maybe may researchers assumed the genre would be at the forefront of LGBTQ+ positive representation.

I often feel fantasy can portray worlds that, to the untrained eye, are completely different from our reality, fantasy has often turned the metaphorical mirror back on us and reflected our own societal shortcomings.

Whatever the case of this genre being ignore is, I feel that my research is well positioned to deepen this area of study and provide a glimpse into how the genre has aided in LGBTQ+ positive and nuanced representation in novels.

This research paper aims to examine the shift in LGBTQ+ representation in the fantasy genre over the last two decades. In particular, I will be investigating the shift in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters from tragic and two-dimensional (simple character) to nuanced and relatable characters (complex character) whose sexual orientation does not define them.

So, basically a look at a **simple** character to a **complex** character. While the simple/complex dichotomy is something I saw for myself in my past-time readings, I aim to define these terms, and this shift, based on research into diversity and representation to date.

The Big Shift

A **simple** LGBTQ+ character typically fits into the comic relief or tragic character mould that leaves little room for them to grow. Their sexuality is overt, and their main feature, and they are regarded as an anomaly within the story.

A **complex** LGBTQ+ character is one that is part of the queer community but has other attributes and interests that do not involve their sexuality unless their sexuality is integral to the plot. For complex characters, their sexuality is normalized within the plot. Essentially, I am looking at a *queer character* versus a *character who is queer*.

SIMPLE LGBTQ+ CHARACTER	COMPLEX LGBTQ+ CHARACTER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tragic for the sake of tragic - Ostracized for no reason - Gay best friend and usually sarcastic - Portrayed as evil (Queer as Tropes, n.d.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is gay but has other personality traits - Sexuality is not the whole story unless it's a coming-out story - Being gay is normal in the world in which they are in - Contributes to the plot and is not just there to be tragic

This shift toward complex LGBTQ+ characters has been noted in television and film. For example, Tara Shivkumar (2016) of GLAAD Media, compares *How To Get Away With Murder's* Annalise Keating's bisexual and amoral character to her villain predecessors within media. Shivkumar also examined *Halt and Catch Fire's* Joe Macmillan and *Mr. Robot's* Tyrell Wellick as an example of a dangerous bisexual stereotype in which the characters use their sexuality as a means to an end rather than as part of their identity. On this, Shivkumar says:

While many shows have made a stab at the queer villain or anti-hero, most of them lack nuance. More often than not, these characters are seen as dangerous or corrupt *because* of their identity as LGBTQ. That isn't the making of a complex and original villain; that's harmful fearmongering based on outdated tropes and stereotypes that damage the community. (Para. 4)

While their example does not involve the fantasy genre or literature in general, I can see how their notion of the complex character, and the archetypes that they typically fall into, transfers into other forms of media.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

History and Definition of Fantasy

The fantasy genre is a sub-category of the broader fiction genre and finds its origin deeply entrenched in the social climate of 18th Century Europe and the Romantic Movement (Bal, 2021). Initially categorized as imaginative fiction, in that the story told is not based on reality (Oxford Reference, n.d.), it soon found its name ‘fantasy’ back in the Enlightenment Movement, a moment in time when as society was moving away from traditional ways of living, that relied on religion, towards a more scientific ways of thought. At the time, there was a division between enlightenment, comprising of a heavy focus on science, politics, and philosophy (History.com, 2009), and the supernatural, which was for many seen as “primitive” (Bal, 2021). This meant that literature that diverged from reality, and into the fantastical form, was not seen as a serious art form; not like the new scientific or philosophical books. Originally marketed to children, due to the lack of the “serious mainstream realist” tone (Bal, 2021, p. 1285), the fantasy genre finally became popular among adults during the early twentieth century, partially due to the release of Tolkien’s *Middle Earth Saga*. Tolkien’s work paved the way for other fantasy novels because it was the first to break into mainstream media, in the 1930s, due to the series’ powerful writing style and realistic character development (Pettinger, n.d.). **Even today, Tolkien’s work is heralded as one of the greats of fantasy literature, along with George R.R. Martin, Terry Pratchett, and Robert Jordan.**

As seen, the fantasy genre has a complex lineage, so it’s no wonder the definition is also widely discussed. Scholars agree up on the idea that the genre is the *opposite* of

realism (Vu, 2017; Esberk, 2014; Bal, 2021); though the broad nature of *realism* means that defining the genre can be difficult. In many cases, fantasy has been used to describe *any* sort of literature that diverges from reality in *any* way (Esberk, 2014).

Vu (2017) describes the fantasy genre as “the clearest descendant of romance and adventure fiction” (p. 295) that “relies on the kind of associative logic commonly criticized as ‘magical thinking,’ in which connections are drawn via analogy, emotion, and desire, collapsing temporal sequence into a vague yet immediate present” (p. 288). Esberk (2014), on the other hand, sees fantasy as a combination of the fairy tale and the heroic epic, though they agree with Vu’s statement that fantasy becomes a reflection of one’s desire.

In examining work by literary critic David Pringle and other historians in the field, Esberk (2014) outlines the subcategories of fantasy fiction: science fiction, horror, magic realism, and pure fantasy. As fantasy is often represented as the supernatural side of fiction, science fiction, or sci-fi, is seen as the more logically grounded, despite its fantastic elements. While fantasy and science fiction are often seen as opposing forces, the latter is really an offshoot of the fantasy genre, as is horror (Vu, 2017; Esberk, 2014).

It is Pringle’s (Via Esberk) definition of pure fantasy that reflects what scholars believe is the core message of the fantasy genre:

The sense of the yearning heart for a kinder world, a better self, a wholer experience, a sense of true belonging. (2014, p. 140, as quoted by Pringle, p. 8)

Scholars also have pointed out that this less than agreed on definition of the fantasy genre is seen as a limitation in literature analysis studies, due to the fact that it has evolved over

time and a certainty of a definition has yet to be developed (Stern, Robbins, Black & Barnes, 2019; Esberk, 2014).

Fantasy and the Subversion of Societal Norms

Fantasy thus disrupts the reason/nature binary, subverting the contemporary culture of putting man at the centre [sic.] with nature as his commodity and consequently offers alternative ways of being and living (Bal, 2021, p. 1289).

The fantasy genre has become a safe space for individuals who are considered outcasts in many social settings due to its ability to subvert social norms. For someone unfamiliar with the depth and complexity of the fantasy genre, it can seem to have little influence on the real world; some may assume that the lack of realism makes the story and characters unrelatable. However, scholars have found that this is not the case. The fantastical nature of the genre allows for the subversion of societal norms (Fong, Mullin & Mar, 2015; Miller & Blackburn, 2015; Stern, et al., 2019; Bal, 2021) and this writing has been used as social commentary. Bal (2021) investigates the potential for fantasy to create an ecocritical conversation (Ecocriticism is an area of study that focuses on the natural world, particularly environmental concerns, and how it is portrayed in literacy worlds) by examining novels by acclaimed fantasy authors J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula Le Guin. Bal suggested that readers would help redefine their relationships with nature using these books and connect with a discourse of recovering man's relationship with the natural world. Tolkien described his novels, and the development of a storyline of war and a fantasy place—Middle Earth—as a way to escape the real world (noting he was writing for an audience how had just experienced the First World War); Le Guin's world of *Earthsea* is one in which humans are in exile and have lost their connection with nature

and investigates life in a post-industrial world. Bal argues that both highlight the need to take care of the earth and warn us about the repercussions of not doing so. The idea of using fantasy, to reflect an understanding of our reality, has according to many researchers the opportunity to teach readers about real-world problems (Bal, 2021; Fong et al., 2015; Stern, et al., 2019; Garcia, 2017).

In their study, Esberk (2014) investigates the function of fantasy as a subverting genre. Esberk (2014) claims that not only does fantasy succeed at going against social norms, but that the genre “aims at subverting, rewriting, and re-evaluating what has already been written” (p. 139), allowing for another perspective to be brought forth. They argue that the genre can do so due to it being free from the norms and constraints that other genres are confined to. For example, Robin Hobb’s bestseller *Farseer* trilogy is a prime example of fantasy’s subversion of norms as it does not shy away from LGBTQ+ characters (Melville, 2018), thus subverting the norm of not adequately addressing sexualities that diverge from heteronormality.

As fantasy continues to subvert social norms and address less discussed topics, it allows the reader to gain a new perspective on what is being subverted. In their investigation into the lack of discussion about sexual identity in schools, Moje & MuQaribu (2003) stressed that what we read influences how we form our identity and our perception of the world. A 2019 study on the impacts of genres on romantic relationships showed that those who were exposed to the sci-fi/fantasy genre had a more realistic belief about romantic relationships in the real world (Stern et al, 2019). Those who read fantasy, not only had a higher belief in the impossible but were also more tolerating of perceived moral taboos, including sexual identity (Stern et al. 2019). Another study (Fong et al.,

2015) found that there was a correlation between individuals who had a lifetime of exposure to fiction, and their views on gender role stereotypes, gender quality, and egalitarian thinking. They also note that those who read fantasy novels have a higher tolerance and increased levels of empathy. These findings correlate with Esberk's (2014) claim that the fantasy genre aids in re-evaluating norms that would otherwise not be questioned.

LGBTQ+ Representation in YA and Adult Fiction

As fantasy is a subcategory of the broader fiction genre, scholars tend to investigate trends or shifts within the context of fiction as a whole. One of the most popular trends in the last two decades is to investigate is the rise in representation and diversity novels, particularly YA fiction. LGBTQ+ entered the world of literature in 1969, with its young adult LGBTQ+ counterpart emerging shortly after (Garden, 2014). Since then, it has been the subject of both positive and negative trends. In Garden's (2014) investigation into the origin and trends of YA LGBTQ+ literature, they identify a "continuing prevalent message in the 1970s was the idea that LG people are doomed to be "punished" with tragic results if they act on their feelings" (para. 6), one of the many stereotypes placed on LGBTQ+ characters both at the time and in the years to follow. This idea of punishing LGBTQ+ characters for acting on their feelings, can have a negative impact on individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Additional research on LGBTQ+ representation trends in the 2000s, by Banks (2009) emphasized that many readers turned to books to find solace and to have burning questions, about the self, finally answered. However, much of the advice given in earlier books were not positive. They revealed that characters in popular (and accepted) gay literature from the 1960s to

the 1990s “taught [them and other members of the LGBTQ+ community] to disconnect and move on” (p. 34), instead of having a conversation about their sexuality. Banks argued that there was a need for a shift in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters and how society views them.

LGBTQ+ representation in YA and Adult fiction has progressed since the 1970s, the major change taking place in the late 2000s. However, Banks stressed that there was still work to be done. Banks proposed a shift from solely sympathy toward the LGBTQ+ community, to having empathy for characters in the community, allowing for more relatable characters. Essentially, Banks was searching for a shift from simple, tragic LGBTQ+ characters, to characters that had a life outside of the “issue” of their sexuality.

More recently [as of 2009 when Banks published his article], LGBT characters get to live, and because these characters are often the protagonists of the stories, readers are challenged to understand them as fuller human beings with thoughts, desires, and interests that may mirror their own and that are not necessarily silenced by novel's end” (p. 35)

Banks was writing at the cusp of the phenomenon of empathetic LGBTQ+ characters as studies of representation in YA literature (Garcia, 2017; Colborne & Howard, 2018) show that this shift was still in its infancy. **The rise in LGBTQ+ representation in media coincides with pressure placed on publishing houses and with Obama’s public support of gay marriage in 2012 (Kessock, 2012), which explains why it was difficult to find popular fantasy books with LGBTQ+ representation before then.**

While scholars are pleased with the shift in LGBTQ+ representation, they stressed that there is still work to be done; particularly in the representation of bisexual characters (Jiménez, 2015; Colborne & Howard, 2018; Corbett, 2019; Miller, & Blackburn, 2015; Bittner, 2019). Colborne and Howard (2018) studied the shift in representation in YA

books published from 2009 to 2017 and noted that there is an increase in diversity in terms of race, religion, and sexuality. They stated that this increase in sexual representation is “reflective of societal attitudes toward homosexuality in general at that time, and as social attitudes began to change, so did literary representations” (p. 3). Their study of 22 books revealed that 2015 to 2017 had the most LGBTQ+ representation, with 2016 having the most diversity. While Colborne and Howard (2018) saw a rise in diversity and LGBTQ+ representation, they found that there was a lack of sexual diversity within sexual representation. Many of the books in the 2010s featured white, able-bodied, middle-aged teens, though they concede that the study’s book choice was limited by the time they had to complete the study. Similarly, Bittner (2019) did a critique of the book, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* by Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart, and claimed that the book fails to address the complexities of intersectional approaches that scholars take when looking at the field. These intersectional approaches include race, class, and sexuality in other cultural contexts (Bittner, 2019). Scholars were also concerned with the importance of the quality of the books, namely the prominent themes of “accepted” LGBTQ+ books (Banks, 2009, Garcia, 2017, Bittner, 2019) and critiqued the fact that books chosen for studies are done so due to their popularity despite being problematic in other areas. In his critique, Bittner noted that *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* failed to consider the role of intersectionality within representation. For example, while a popular book with LGBTQ+ representation is used in a study, it might not accurately portray the issues of race and class.

It is evident that there is still room for improvement when it comes to representation in the fiction genre, but what progress has been made has aided in creating a sense of community for LGBTQ+ readers.

METHODS

As an avid fantasy reader and writer, I've read a lot of books. A few years ago, I noticed a shift from the simple portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters to ones that are more complex and whose character does not revolve around their sexuality. Curious, I wanted to see whether anyone else had noticed this shift. I wanted to investigate this shift in representation in a more holistic way and chose to use both qualitative and quantitative methods of gathering data. I decided on a discourse analysis of the books I had read, interviews with individuals who were also avid readers, and an online survey for look at a wider audience perspective on fantasy novels and LGBTQ+ representation.

I also wanted to use my own experience, my own shift in understanding and opening up myself to recognizing and empathizing with the LGBTQ+ community via the fantasy novels I was reading. To do this, I chose a qualitative method that allows my voice to be woven in the voices of academics in the field; autoethnography. This allowed me to reflect on what I read and how the portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters have shifted.

The Autoethnographic Approach

“Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement—between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged movements of clarity, connection, and change.”

Stacy Holman Jones

Autoethnography is a qualitative approach that diverges from the rigid structure of academic research. The approach emerged from the critique of objectivity within academic research (Banks & Banks, 2000) and became a “method for circumventing the colonizing and exoticizing action of ethnographer upon the cultural other” (Banks & Banks, 2000, p. 234). Autoethnography takes an insider’s perspective as it looks both inward at the self and one’s experiences as well as taking an outward look to see how the subject of investigation fits into the cultural context. Autoethnography “challenges our assumptions of normalcy” (Banks & Banks, 2000, p. 235), something that is crucial when investigating a topic that was *once* seen as inappropriate to discuss in detail within popular books.

It certainly challenged my assumptions about what is normal for the LGBTQ+ community. As I learn more about the community, I realize that there is a lot that I still don’t know. For example, when discussing some of the stereotypes with my interviewees, I discovered that many young LGBTQ+ individuals entering their first relationship have little context and are more tolerant of toxic behaviour due to how the relationships are portrayed in media.

I found it fitting to use this method of self-reflection when investigating representation within the fantasy genre as it allowed me to discuss how what I had learned impacted me as both a reader and a person. The format of autoethnography as a methodology allows for a more nuanced investigation and the opportunity to explore my own thoughts, experiences, and ah-ha! moments while investigating how the fantasy genre evolved in its representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

In a way, autoethnography is reminiscent of a story’s narrator as it allows for hindsight and self-reflection to colour the narrative as the story unfolds.

As a fantasy writer, I believe that it is crucial to have a solid understanding of how one’s work can impact the reader. If I am to reach a broader audience with the stories I tell, I want to ensure that any reader, no matter their background, can walk away with something positive.

Qualitative Research

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a popular method within the literary field of research (Jiménez, 2015) as it allows for a more in-depth discussion of the literature. As I chose to take an autoethnographic approach, to structure the thesis overall, discourse analysis seemed to

A Note on YA reader demographics and the New Adult Category

Aside from marketing and target audience, the lines between YA and Adult fiction are blurred. While YA books are marketed toward 12-19 years of age, adults read the majority of YA literature. An article explaining the marketing and style differences between YA Fiction and Adult fiction states that “Adult fiction is more likely to be told in the style of a reflection on the past, mostly using third person narration, sometimes presenting an omniscient perspective. Reflective, more ‘lyrical’ prose is often favoured over the more action/plot-focused style of many YA books” (Bradshaw, n.d. para. 26) New adult fiction, also referred to as NA fiction, is another category that aims to reach readers in that limbo between young adult and adult, targeting ages between 18 and 25. (Kieffer, 2017). However, NA has yet to gain much traction.

provide me with a method of to help me reflect of what I was reading read. The discourse analysis sample was fourteen popular YA and adult fantasy books (See Appendix A for the list of books that I selected). Initially, I read sixteen books, including *Carry On* by Rainbow Rowell and *Crier's War* by Nina Varela as it they are both very popular LGBTQ+ YA novels, but eventually swapped them out for *Vintage: A Ghost Story* by Steve Berman and *Wolfcry* by Amelia Atwater-Rhodes since they were written in the early 2000s rather than in the 2010s. While scholars have classified sci-fi and horror as subcategories of fantasy (Vu, 2017; Esberk, 2014), I looked at the fantasy genre as a separate entity and did not include sci-fi novels in my study. The books were selected according to the year that they were published and according to their popularity among the reading community. I drew from my previous knowledge of books with LGBTQ+ characters as well as from book lists from Goodreads and Book Riot (Stepaniuk, 2018). As I read each book, I took control notes in a research journal to document how the characters were portrayed.

I decided to combine the results section with the discussion in order to integrate the survey and interview results into the discourse analysis. The discussion was split into three themes that allowed me to analyze how the representation of LGBTQ+ characters evolved.

Interviews

Interviews, as a method in research, are often used to generate an in-depth discussion about the topic and allow for different opinions to be expressed (Tracy, 2013). Drawing

INTERVIEW

PARTICIPANTS:

Syve

Viridian

Jurassic

Kaizen

Raven

Piper

from Garcia's (2017) study of LGBTQ+ representation in YA fiction, my interviews were created to elicit experiences of fantasy novels from members of the reading community. The interviews were conducted with members of the LGBTQ+ community, and those who were not, who read books within the fantasy genre. Two of the interview participants, Raven and Piper, were librarians while the other four participants were university students. The librarians were found through a mutual friend. The four university

students were friend of mine who were gracious enough to be part of my thesis and who I knew enjoyed reading fantasy books. In total, six individuals participated in 40-minute interviews which were then transcribed in a word processor for further analysis. Two sets of questions were used: one for readers and one for the librarians. (For list of questions, see Appendix A and Appendix B). The questions were open-ended and focused on diversity, the interviewee's experiences with LGBTQ+ representation in the fantasy genre, and what they wished to see in the future.

The interviews served as a third-party commentary in order to tie information together and highlight certain themes that appeared within the research. It also allowed an in-depth perspective from readers who are part of the LGBTQ+ community as well as those who are not.

Quantitative Research

Survey

In terms of quantitative research, I used an online survey to add to the qualitative data collected via the interviews. As with the interviews, the data from the survey was used to highlight themes within the research. (See Appendix B for survey results and graphs.) The questions focused on reader experience with LGBTQ+ characters in fantasy books, particularly focusing on the number of LGBTQ+ characters they had encountered and whether the survey participants felt represented in the fantasy book genre. Participants of the survey were between the ages of 19 and 35 who read fantasy novels that were marketed as YA or adult fantasy. These books must have been written with English as the first language. The survey was posted to r/fantasy on Reddit and was open for fourteen days. In all, I received 133 responses.

DISCUSSION

Based on my research of the LGBTQ+ social movement I wasn't surprised to find, in my discourse analysis, that each year showed a rise in representation, whether in the way that the author chose to describe the character, the reactions of other characters, or the diversity of LGBTQ+ representation. There was also an increase of main characters that identified as part of the community, and as we see in *The Shadows Between Us*, background characters are more fleshed out and have their moments to shine.

There are a number of themes within the books chosen for the study. I have chosen three themes that I believe are the most important:

1) Normality

- Normality investigates how LGBTQ+ relationships are portrayed in the select books and whether they are normalized within the story. I selected this theme because many of the books within my list chose to integrate LGBTQ+ relationships into their worlds.

2) Escapism

- Escapism investigates the tendency to use fantasy novels as a way to escape reality (Bal, 2021). I selected this escapism as a theme as it gives homage to the fantasy genre's ability to create divergent worlds.

3) Diversity of LGBTQ+ Characters

- Diversity of LGBTQ+ Characters looks at who in the community receives the most representation by looking at the number of LGBTQ+ characters in the books as well as the types of LGBTQ+ representation is present, and how it changed over the last twenty years. I chose to look at this theme as not only is the increase in number of LGBTQ+ characters important, but also the different sectors of the LGBTQ+ community.

Because of the complexity of stories, there will be books that cross over into more than one theme and some that do not show up in all the themes.

Before I begin, I feel that it's important, and quite obvious, to state that there will be major spoilers ahead.

THEME 1: NORMALITY

Most of the books I read for this study normalized same-sex relationships. Whether due to fantasy's use of subverting social norms or through the cultural context of a particular book setting, the authors' choice to normalize something that was once—and still is in some spaces—so stigmatized lent itself well to the growth of the complex character.

In our interview, Kaizen found that the issue that a lot of readers and scholars (Corbett, 2019; Banks, 2009) had with past LGBTQ+ characters was that they seemed to be put in as “token characters.” LGBTQ+ characters' arcs followed their tragic lives, promiscuous lifestyles, or didn't have any growth as characters at all. They were not

interesting, nor did they reflect reality, a strange word to use when talking about fantasy books. But for the reader to really connect with the characters, they have to have something going for them. They must feel real.

In our interview, Jurassic talks about the importance of looking at the person as a whole being first before characterizing elements of them:

It's the person first, the whatever later. You are not defined by your sexuality, by your disability, by your colour. It's the person and this. And when a writer can nail that, I think it shows me that they understand how humans work. That this is how life is. That they're not doing it for the sake of doing it or for adding a thing into the plot. For representation...This is life.

The individual is not defined by one element. They have dimensions to them, layers that fall away the more you get to know them. And it is a mistake to assume you know everything about them simply because you encountered one aspect. Like people, characters should have dimensions to them. And like people, a good character cannot rely on one element. Showing complexity in a character opens up the opportunity for many people to relate to their circumstances and events they find themselves in. We, as readers, can empathize with a wider variety of people when they are written in a complex manner versus a simple gay/straight description. By normalizing same-sex relationships, an entire community can see itself represented in the literature and relate to the characters in the same way that others have been able to.

***Wolfcry* by Amelia Atwater-Rhodes (2006)**

An earlier example of LGBTQ+ representation, *Wolfcry* follows a lesbian main character who falls in love with another woman. Rather than dwelling on the uniqueness of their love story, the book focuses on other issues including trauma from attempted rape, PTSD,

and the long journey to healing and falling in love again. The theme of the book is love and belonging, a theme I would think all humans, no matter their sexual orientation, could relate to. The characters embody a journey of knowing oneself and being accepted the way you are by those you care about.

While the author delves into other relationship issues, outside of the same-sex nature of the love story, they do compare the trials of the LGBTQ+ community with that of the speciest nature of the novel's world. More specifically, it touches on the homophobic nature that many LGBTQ+ people face. In this world, humans can transform into animal forms, the animosity between the avians and the serpente leads to the severe beating of one of the characters; after only a perceived slight. Later in the book, another avian character is kicked out of his home for helping a serpente character. These two instances could be seen as a parallel to LGBTQ+ children who have been kicked out of their homes or individuals who have been physically assaulted because of their sexuality. While the parallel is quite overt, it is a product of its time. Novels written in the 2000s, both in the fantasy and general fiction genres, followed a trend of homophobia or coming out as a plot device (Clements, 2020). This meant that LGBTQ+ characters faced homophobia as a main conflict point rather than having a conflict that non-LGBTQ+ characters would have. As we will see with *Ash*, written in 2009, books that did not include a coming-out story were seen as unrealistic. While *Wolfcry* does not have a coming-out storyline, it does touch on that underlying homophobic arc of an LGBTQ+ book written in the 2000s.

Seville, (n.d.) found that books featuring LGBTQ+ characters, that did not use homophobia as a foil, received negative backlash from readers and the general public. As

more LGBTQ+ fiction became popular, there became less of an insistence to have homophobia as a plot device and allow for more interesting stories to be told.

***Vintage: A Ghost Story* by Steve Berman (2007)**

Vintage had the typical tragic LGBTQ+ character: an unnamed teenage boy who ran away from his home after being outed as gay. It follows his journey, after an attempted suicide, to befriend the ghost of a gay teenager who was killed in a hit-and-run in the 1950s, who he consequentially falls in love with upon first sight. The novella has a lot of stereotypes, including a main character who is written as a male, gay, fashion-savvy teenager who works at a vintage clothing store. The main character can never seem to catch a break, from being outed as gay in a homophobic society, attempting suicide, and then being haunted by ghosts. When things finally start going his way, the ghost that he's in love with almost kills him. The issue of the tragic and angsty LGBTQ+

"I'm just sick and tired of having something so great happen to me and then it all falls apart" (Berman, 2007, p. 23).

character was reflected in Bank's (2009) article as they critique the lack of sympathy for LGBTQ+ characters. On Bank's (2009) work, Seville (n.d.) says that:

Most of the LGBT characters in YA fiction were secondary, often dead or killed off during the narrative, or run out of town and separated from community and/or family. The message is hard to miss: LGBT characters are most useful if they're dead and gone. (p. 45)

This was, and is, a dangerous mentality and has been a point of tension for many LGBTQ+ readers. "I feel like I'm never going to ever be happy at the end of my life," Syve said in our interview, "because [in] all the books I'm reading, the characters end up dead. It's like if I ever want to be happy at the end of my life, which is most people's goal, I might as well give up being bi now."

The attraction between the main character and his love interests is solely physical, leaning heavily on the trope that homosexual men are constantly wanting sex (Queer as Tropes, n.d.). One of the lesbian relationships is portrayed as toxic, as one cheats on the other, during to a rocky period in their relationship. The toxic lesbian trope and the idea of a purely physical attraction was a problematic trend that scholars Cook, Rostosky, and Riggle, (2013), and Jiménez (2015) encountered in early depictions of LGBTQ+ characters.

***Ash* by Malinda Lo (2009)**

Ash is a staple when discussing LGBTQ+ fantasy and is often heralded as the first of its kind due to its popularity and was a finalist in a variety of awards including the Andre Norton Award for YA Science Fiction and Fantasy, and the Lambda Literary Award in 2009 (Lo, 2019). When *Ash* was published “it was one of 27 books about LGBTQ main characters or issues published by mainstream American publishers” (Lo, 2019). This list did not just include fantasy books. This was in overall YA literature at the time. The author, Malinda Lo, is an outspoken voice in LGBTQ+ representation and has a blog dedicated to tracking the trends of LGBTQ+ representation in literature (Lo, 2019) in order to showcase how far the YA literacy world has come.

Ash (Lo, 2009) is a lesbian retelling of the classic Cinderella fairy tale where same-sex marriage is as normal as heterosexual relationships. On her blog, Lo describes the backlash she received while on a panel at the World Fantasy Convention in San Jose in 2009 (Lo, 2019). For many, having a lesbian main character was less realistic than the fairies featured in the book. When I mentioned this in my interview with Syve, an avid

fantasy reader and part of the LGBTQ+ community, they were incredulous. “So, you're okay with the thousand-year-old murderer that has black goo coming out of his hands but you're not okay with the fifteen-year-old gay girl. Pardon?”

For a genre that is known for its suspension of reality, such an argument seems ridiculous. Why was it that people were more accepting of fantastical creatures than they were of the community that is undoubtably present in the real world? Why was it that, like Syve says, people were more tolerant of the idea of a mass murderer than they were of a gay teenager? Was it because one could be sure that such mythical creatures were confined to the realm of fantasy? Or was it because of Lo's creation of a world that did not condemn same-sex relationships? One survey participant shared this sentiment, saying that it was “jarring to [them] that these elaborately built worlds with mystical creatures and made-up powers didn't have a single gay person.”

In their article, Lo also noted that readers found it unrealistic that *Ash* was not a coming-out story, something that was against the norm of LGBTQ+ stories at the time (Banks, 2009). However, as *Ash* takes place in a world where coming out is not necessarily a big deal, the lack of such a storyline would have been shocking to the reading community. While this would have been shocking the lack of lack of homophobia and coming-out as plot points in *Ash* and in the books that followed, opened the LGBTQ+ fantasy genre up to much more interesting stories. \

***The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller (2011)**

The Song of Achilles is an outlier in my list as it is based on Homer's *Iliad* and thus is not an original work. However, the romance between Achilles and Patroclus is a classic.

While *The Song of Achilles* is based on mythology, it is a nod toward the fact that the LGBTQ+ community, and sexual expression by extension, is not a new phenomenon and has been around for hundreds of years. Miller notes that there were gay relationships between boys in Ancient Greece and that they would later grow out of this as they aged. She addresses the "abnormality" of Achilles' and Patroclus' intimate relationship by having Odysseus comment on the fact that the two men are still together which upsets Achilles. However, when another character, Briseis, proclaims her love for Patroclus, she states that it is fine if he were to still have Achilles as a lover.

On her blog, Miller state that she did not write the novel as a gay love story. Rather she "was deeply moved by the love between these two characters—whose respect and affection for each other, despite the horrors around them, model the kind of relationship we all can aspire to" (Miller, n.d., para. 2). This idea of focusing on the connection between the characters and not their sexuality is a crucial part of normalizing.

***The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin (2015)**

The Fifth Season has a powerful discussion about sexuality and discrimination. This intersectionality between sexuality and discrimination is what made this book stand out. As the main character's name changes throughout the story, I will refer to them as Syenite/Essun.

The context of sex and sexuality is critical to understand when analyzing *The Fifth Season*. The world in which this is set has Breeders who reproduce to ensure that the strongest survive the Seasons, apocalyptic periods of time. This is why Alabaster, as a strong teenager, has a sexual relationship with Syenite even though neither of them feels any attraction. This mindset could also be due to the treatment of the Orogenes (those with magic) as they are seen, and consider themselves, as less than human and weapons to be put down if they do not cooperate.

The normality of LGBTQ+ individuals also varies by location as the outer islands readily accept a gay character and a polyamorous relationship between Syenite/Essun, Alabaster, and Innon. The relationship between the three characters is healthy, and Innon readily becomes a second father to the other two character's child. The downside is that Innon is killed later in the book, straying dangerously close to the tragic character trope.

Syenite/Essun's acceptance of Tonkee's gender identity could be because she is part of the LGBTQ+ community. When Syenite/Essun, discovers that Tonkee is a trans woman, she is surprised but makes no comment, quick to move on to the next topic at hand:

Fortunately, it turns out that Tonkee did indeed bring all that water with her for a bath. She does this in front of you, shamelessly stripping down and squatting by a wooden basin to scrub at her pits and crotch and the rest. You're a little surprised to notice a penis somewhere amid the process, but well, not like any comm's going to make her a Breeder. She finishes up by rinsing her clothes and hair with a murky green solution that she claims is antifungal. (You have your doubts.) (p. 73)

I was struck by how nonchalant the author approached the topic, giving it no more than a couple words before moving on. Syenite/Essun does not dwell on it until

later when she discovers that she met Tonkee when she was a child. Tonkee's own family, however, disowned her, claiming that it was "Not Done [*sic.*] for a child who is born a boy to be a girl" (2015, p. 284).

While the opinions on same-sex relationships vary, the tension comes from the racial discrimination within the book which gives the story a more realistic dimension. This intersectionality is a popular field of study when investigating diversity and representation. Both Colborne and Howard (2018) and Jiménez (2015) found that where one type of representation is present, others are not. For instance, if sexual identity is represented, diversity of religion or race is not. However, *The Fifth Season* touches on both sexuality, race, and discrimination.

In my survey, one of the participants shared these words of wisdom: "I think the more inclusive about these issues you are the less prejudiced people will be against these groups. Not only sexual orientation but race, religion, all of it. Knowledge is the antithesis of hate."

***Mask of Shadows* by Lindsay Miller (2017)**

The approach to *Mask of Shadow's* genderfluid main character differs from the other books in my study as it hints at a more realistic and relatable experience that the

community and allies face. Sallot has had difficulty explaining their state of being to the point that they have come up with ways to make it easier for people to recognize their current pronouns—dressing in skirts when wanting to be addressed as she/her or dressing in loose clothing and pants if wanting to be addressed as he/him.

Sal also hints at previous negative reactions to their identity, including a character who pointedly misgenders them throughout the book. As the book progresses, the reaction of other characters takes a positive turn. After an initial inquiry, the other characters don't seem bothered by the fact that Sal uses different pronouns and adapted. On one occasion, a character makes a point of asking to be corrected if they misgender Sal.

In their interview, Viridian shared that having books that give readers the language to use when talking to an LGBTQ+ person is helpful. For them, they're used to people assuming their gender and they understand that people make mistakes. "I feel like [it] could also be healthy [to] give people language to know it's okay to mess up and try again."

As someone who is unfamiliar with genderfluidity, I am still grappling with the use of they/them pronouns. Genderfluidity is still strange to me. When discussing with Viridian, who identifies as non-binary and is very open about the subject, I expressed that

Rath had asked once, a while after we'd met and been living together and I'd not known how to explain it yet. I didn't have the words. He always felt like Rath, and I always felt like Sal except it was like watching a river flow past, the river was always the same, but you never glimpsed the same water. I ebbed and flowed, and that was my always. Rath not understanding that had hurt the most, but at least he accepted it.
(Miller, 2017, p. 41)

while the neutrality of non-binary makes sense to me, the idea of switching between genders seemed so foreign. This book, however, uses a river metaphor that made it just a little clearer for me. Having a visual of a river with a constant stream of water gave me the imagery that allowed me to better understand that, no, a genderfluid person isn't trying to be two separate entities. Instead, they, like a river, are in a constant state of change. The river may swell and shrink but it is still a river. Just as a genderfluid person is still the same person, their gender is like water, always moving, always shifting.

***Girls of Paper and Fire* by Natasha Ngan (2018)**

Girls of Paper and Fire is an odd one as the disdain for the two character's love is due to their positions as the king's concubines, or Paper Girls. Lai, the main character, states that "everyone's [emphasis added] assumption is for women and men to be together, and yet," she continues, "here we are, human girls, the Demon King's concubines. Surely love between two women wouldn't be so strange?"

"Everyone's assumption is for women and men to be together, and yet here we are, human girls, the Demon King's concubines. Surely love between two women wouldn't be so strange?"
(Girls of Paper and Fire, p. 78)

(Ngan, 2018, p. 78). There is also a double standard among the other castes in the book even though there are male courtesans for male court members.

***Crown of Feathers* by Nicki Pau Preto (2019)**

[Kade] was like a bronze statue of some ancient hero in a temple garden, gathering droplets of morning dew.

Sev inhaled sharply and cleared his throat, heat crawling up his neck. Since when did Sev care about temple statues? He realized with dismay that he'd been admiring more than Kade's magic recently. He glanced up at the

bondservant's still-scowling face, and a bitter feeling settled in his stomach. Clearly the admiration was one-way. (p. 144)

This is the book that started it all, and the quote above is the first inclination I had that the

character wasn't straight. And it took me a few paragraphs for it to sink in. The book is not marketed as an LGBTQ+ read, otherwise, there would have been a chance that I would not have picked it up. I will admit that I was drawn to the concept of phoenix riders and a girl going undercover as a boy to become one. The reactions of the characters, both internal and external, were why the idea of the shift toward the complex character stuck with me. Sev is more annoyed because he's supposed to be hiding among soldiers, not staring at Kade, the bondservant he is forced to work undercover with.

The budding romance between the other two main characters was one of the most powerful among the books that I analyzed. In order to join the phoenix riders, Veronyka disguises herself as a boy called Nyk. One of the other boys, Tristan, becomes good friends and starts to fall in love with Nyk, not realizing until later that the boy he's falling for is not a boy at all. Tristan doesn't worry that he is falling in love with a boy. He's more concerned with the fact that he's falling in love. When Veronyka's identity is revealed, Tristan's reaction is telling:

But then he'd looked at Nyk, and his endless hope would make Tristan want to hope too, just like Nyk's faith in Tristan made Tristan want to have faith in himself. He wanted to be the person Nyk seemed to think he could be, and he needed Nyk by his side to remind him that. He needed Nyk by his side because he never felt more himself than when they were together (Pau Preto, 2019, p. 393).

"It doesn't change for me, you know," [Tristan] said, still not looking at [Veronyka]. "Boy, girl—whatever. You're you and that's all I care about." (p. 461)

From this, we can gather that Tristan is indeed bisexual. It's never stated; rather, his attraction to "Nyk" is evident in his point of view, as seen in this excerpt when Tristan notices that his friend has fallen asleep in the Phoenix nest:

Everything about him was bright and vivid, as if Nyk didn't do anything by half—couldn't, even if he wanted to. When he ran, no matter how tired, he pushed until his legs buckled beneath him. When he talked about phoenixes and Riders and animal magic, his whole face lit up.

And even when he slept, he did so with reckless abandon—his shock of messy black hair standing on end and his mouth slightly open. (p. 264)

***Master of One* by Jaida Jones and Danielle Bennett (2020)**

I might be a little biased on this one since it's one of my favourite books. I read this book a few months after it came out and was smitten with the slow-burn romance between Rags, the human thief, and Shining Talon, the fae prince. So enamored that I completely missed the trans character. It was a little embarrassing when I was scrolling through lists of LGBTQ+ books to read for this thesis. More so when I realized it was one of the main characters, an actress named Einan.

I blame the pretty fae prince.

With the knowledge in mind, the second read revealed the character's sexuality in the subtle nuances, such as when another character accidentally catches sight of Einan's flat chest or notices that her hands are larger than most women's. It isn't until much later in the book when we get Einan's point of view that the reader's suspicions are confirmed:

For a time, Cathair Remington thought he had a son who'd inherit his name—and the centuries-old family trade of barrel making. Until shortly after her tenth birthday, Einan told him differently. She was no son but his

daughter. This he could understand and accept. What he couldn't bear was that she loved the theatre and not barrels. (p. 497)

But let's get back to the stars of the show, so to speak.

The relationship between Rags and Shining Talon is as normalized as one can expect when it comes to falling in love with a fae creature. It is the way that the authors cultivate the romance that makes the book such a powerful part of the LGBTQ+ fantasy genre.

As a fae, one can expect that Shining Talon has no concept of what is typically normal to human standards. Rather, he is devoted to Rags through fate, or misplaced loyalty, as Rags calls it. Rags' aversion to Shining Talon's devotion is nestled in the idea that he is nobody. It doesn't stop him from describing the fae's looks in a begrudging way every chapter. When the characters interact, there is a heavy focus on emotion, whether it's Shining Talon's searching looks or the way that Rags slowly allows himself to open up:

"Something about his expression made Rags feel like an intruder just by watching. It should have made Rags tremble. Instead, he couldn't help but notice the sharp, wolfish beauty in the golden planes of Shining Talon's face. Looking at him, Rags got the same feeling he'd get when he caught the glimmer of untended coin. An excited twist in his gut. Pleasure so unexpected it was almost pain." (Jones & Bennett, 2020, p. 132)

Shining Talon had a presence, a gravity, that glowed with trustworthy brightness.

Rags didn't trust it, or he couldn't. Safer to burn out the part of him that wanted to than to let it take root and flourish" (p. 280).

And later:

Everything shifted as they faced each other. Rags felt like all the pieces of him had been there all along, but he'd been waiting for something else, a big lug who had perfect shoulders, to bring those pieces together the way they were meant to be. To feel so damn right. (pp. 528-529).

Looking at how the authors portrayed Rags' and Shining Talon's relationship, I am reminded of what Kaizen said in their interview when discussing positive depictions of

LGBTQ+ relationships. Kaizen stressed the importance of “talking about the emotional nuances of the relationship between two people who care about each other” rather than focusing on biological sex. “[F]ocusing on that aspect of it, I think, is the most true to life. And it respects the characters the most.”

THEME 2: ESCAPISM

Escapism is one of fantasy's claims to fame. "I think everyone wants to see themselves as a heroic person or a super-smart wizard,"

Viridian said in our interview. "They want to be able to imagine themselves being that."

"Reality can be exhausting," Jurassic notes.

When discussing the importance of escapism through fantasy, Kaizen, who identifies as straight, pointed out that escapism is needed "so other people can have that opportunity...to escape reality."

I have to agree. I have seen my fair share of straight and cisgender representation in the fantasy genre, and since the rise in female protagonists, I can relate to many of the mainstream characters in a new way, even if

some of the male protagonists from my childhood remain my favourite characters. But even as someone who has the ability to relate to the majority of protagonists in fantasy, it has been interesting to see other perspectives and characters, whether it is race, social class, gender, or sexuality. Esberk (2014) suggests fantasy is a subverting genre that allows us to question what we know about our world and experience it differently.

Like *Wolfcry*, *The Fifth Season* has a shocking parallel between their world elements and our reality. In their discussion of the humanity of the oregenes, the magic wielders in their world, Alabaster's words parallel the idea that those part of the LGBTQ+ community are seen as less than human.

"We aren't human."

"Yes. We. Are." [Alabaster's] voice turns fierce. "I don't give a shit what the something-something council of big important farts decreed, or how the geomests classify things, or any of that. that we're not human is just the lie they Tell themselves so that the don't have to feel bad about how they treat us." (p. 298)

Escapism for those who are not often able to see themselves represented gives me, and other readers, the opportunity to, metaphorically, walk a mile in someone else's shoes.

***Ash* (2009), *The Song of Achilles* (2011), and *Sweet and Bitter Magic* (2021)**

Piper, a teen librarian, noted that there was a rise in fairytale and classic retellings. This rewriting of history and fairy tales through what they call a “queer lens” gives LGBTQ+ individuals a chance to see themselves represented in the tales they grew up with.

There were three books on my list that fell into this category. *Ash* takes place in a world where same-sex relationships are normalized. *Sweet and Bitter Magic* takes the same approach as *Ash*, although it also light-heartedly pokes fun at fairy tale tropes such as willingly kissing a frog on the lips or the idea of love potions solving all our problems.

Again, *The Song of Achilles* took the classic *Iliad* and, while some argue that Homer's depiction of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles was canon, Miller puts an emphasis on the unique love between two iconic heroes of Greek mythology.

***The Black Tides of Heaven* by J.Y. Yang (2017)**

The Black Tides of Heaven takes a completely different approach to gender. Everyone is born gender-neutral and uses they/them pronouns until they choose a gender and are confirmed through alchemical means:

“Sonami had just turned fifteen, yet still wore the genderfree tunic of a child, their hair cropped to a small square at the top of their head and gathered into a bun.” (p. 11)

Published in 2017, the novella takes something so fundamental as assigning gender at birth and gives us a world where the individual's gender is decided through time and consideration. For some characters, deciding on their gender takes years. Perhaps this is a nod to the snap judgements people make when meeting someone for the first time and assuming their gender, or perhaps it's a nod to the fear that some feel when teenagers choose to begin transitioning.

In his investigation into fantasy as a subverting genre, Esberk (2014) stressed that the genre's ability to challenge and re-evaluate social and theoretical assumptions is because it is free from norms and constraints that other genres are confined to. *The Black Tides of Heaven* is a prime example of this. The book's approach to gender and sexuality is so different from our world. I can scarcely imagine what a nonbinary or gender-neutral reader must have felt when reading *Black Tides*. Did they feel that same sense of freedom as I did? Did they, like I, do a double-take when faced with all gender-neutral pronouns. Did they find comfort in that?

The only nod to our notions of gender comes from the alchemic confirming ceremony that takes place once a gender is decided. Those who do not get confirmed are looked down upon.

Akeha, the man character, expressed an attraction to two men, one when he was unconfirmed, and again when he had chosen to become a man. The latter became his lover, an action that was not noted as any different from any other relationship. In fact, the only disapproval comes from the fact that the main character's lover is unconfirmed.

A Gathering of Shadows by V.E. Schwab (2016)

I could argue that the whole premise of V.E. Schwab’s *Shades of Magic* trilogy is about escapism. With four dimensions of Georgian era London stacked on top of each other, each land offers something different. And a bisexual prince of London who seems relatively lucky in life is something that one would never imagine in our world at that time.

Having read the series before conducting this study, I will admit that I was not enamoured with Rhy, the prince of Red London. He seemed like a token LGBTQ+ character dropped into the story as a tragic lynchpin for the main character. This opinion would change once I got to the second book and found that Rhy had all the components of not only a complex LGBTQ+ character but a complex character in his own right.

However, Rhy’s ex—and eventual—partner shows us a more realistic reaction to an LGBTQ+ character, not just in the Georgian time period, but for some of the LGBTQ+ community today. Alucard’s family is less accepting of his sexuality. His brother, Berras, is “disgusted with Alucard for loving the prince, and nearly killed him for it, getting him banished from London and inadvertently breaking Rhy's heart” (“Alucard Emery”, n.d.).

Creating complexity in the characters and letting them have personalities and interests aside from whoever they are romantically interested in [is important] Like, actually letting them be real people instead of just some little token of diversity that they last-minute threw in there. You know, like an actually well-thought-out character. It's been a really nice change.

(Viridian)

I was struck by the polar opposites of the two characters' treatment. Rhy embodies that acceptance that the LGBTQ+ community yearns for: to be who they are and to love who they want. This is what they could have. But for Alucard, his sexuality almost cost him his life and did cost him his reputation. Alucard's treatment reminded me that while I was exploring worlds where the LGBTQ+ community was more or less welcomed, the real world is not so kind.

THEME 3: DIVERSITY OF LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS

While there was definitely a rise in diversity of queer characters among the books analyzed, most of my interview participants confessed how difficult it was for them to see themselves represented in, not just fantasy books, but books in general.

“I read very few queer books as a teenager,” Piper explained. “...I was looking for that character that could reflect me.”

Raven, a librarian, described how difficult it was to find books that they could relate to.

There were some classics like *Tales of the City*, but it was with male characters. But there wasn't a lot for, you know, teenage girls who liked girls, and so one of the first books that I found relatable was not even LGBT, it was a book called *Violet and Claire* by Francesca Lia Block. And it was about two friends who have a very close and at times confusing friendship, and that to me was really what we had to go on. [...] Like books where it's not even text. It's subtext. And it's kind of all about that confusing period where you're trying to figure it out.

The survey conducted on Reddit revealed that, even as LGBTQ+ diversity has progressed, there were still members of the LGBTQ+ community who did not feel adequately represented. When asked how often they relate to the main character of a fantasy novel in terms of gender identity or sexual orientation, 7.6% of participants said they have never related to a main character. (For more information on the percentage of readership, see Appendix D.)

Of the 133 survey responses:
51.1% identified as heterosexual
42.1% identified as bisexual
5% identified as asexual

Interestingly, 15.8% of the survey participants identified as asexual. There was also a higher number of readers who had read a fantasy book with an asexual or aromantic character, or a variation on the aro/ace spectrum.

As Banks noted in 2009, and later noted by Jiménez (2015), gay main characters still dominate the majority of representation, followed by lesbian characters both in the survey results and my discourse analysis. Nevertheless, I was pleased to see that there were some bisexual characters represented in *Wolfcry*, *Captive Prince*, *A Gathering of Shadows*, *Mask of Shadows* and *Crown of Feathers*. This was a community that scholars (Banks, 2009) hoped would be more featured.

Colborne and Howard (2018) critique the lack of diversity in sexuality in books. However, when comparing that lack of diversity that they discovered with my list, I discovered a good variety of diversity, especially in the later books which featured more bisexual characters. I have selected the books on my list that show the most amount of LGBTQ+ diversity in terms of number and type LGBTQ+ representation. (For a more complete list of LGBTQ+ representation per book, see Appendix E.)

***Wolfcry* by Amelia Atwater-Rhodes (2006)**

There are four overtly queer characters in this book: the main character and her partner, and, to my pleasant surprise, two of the legendary figures after which *The Kiesha'ra* series is named after. Three of these characters are lesbian and one is bisexual, given that she also had a male lover. Given that this was the oldest book on my list, I was pleasantly surprised by the number of LGBTQ+ characters.

***Vintage: A Ghost Story* by Steve Berman (2007)**

Vintage had the least amount of diversity. The main character is a white, male, cis-gendered, gay teenager. It features both gay and lesbian characters, though the lesbian characters are not protagonists. Having only gay and lesbian characters was a popular trend at the time as they were the most accepted (though to what degree is debatable) (Banks, 2009; Bittner, 2019).

Jiménez (2015) found that characters and authors in underrepresented communities were not present in book awards. However, Berman, who identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community, is widely acclaimed for his involvement in LGBTQ+ representation in literature and has been nominated for literary awards such as the Lambda Literacy Award, the Gaylactic Spectrum Award, and the Norton Nebula Award for *Vintage*, and his other books (Berman, n.d.; Klehr, 2016).

***Captive Prince* by C.S. Pacat (2013)**

Anyone who has found themselves down the rabbit hole that is LGBTQ+ fantasy has encountered this book, either due to its notorious nature and fanbase or due to its

popularity among smut readers. In the kingdom of Vere, it is considered taboo for men to take women as mistresses due to the risk of bastards. Because of this, only married couples can have a sexual relationship. The main character, a bisexual man, is forced to become a slave for the prince of Vere. While some picking up the book without context might view it as a vulgar addition to the stereotype that all LGBTQ+ individuals, especially gay men, are driven by sex, *Captive Prince* “was one of the tipping points for this rise of queer-normative fantasy universe” (Clements, 2020, p. 3).

Captive Prince was originally self-published before being picked up by Penguin House in 2015 and was written for the original slash community, slash being “fanfiction depicting a sexual and/or romantic relationship or situation between two characters of the same gender” (spillingvelvet, 2005).

Fan fiction (noun):
stories involving popular fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted on the Internet.
(Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Fanfiction holds a tremendous place in the LGBTQ+ community as many young LGBTQ+ individuals turned to fanfiction in order to express themselves or see themselves represented. While Raven and Piper made it clear that library accounts are kept private, the online nature of fanfiction makes it extremely accessible and easy to curate for readers. When inquiring into what year survey participants discovered a fantasy book with an LGBTQ+ character, a few pointed to fanfiction as their first introduction to LGBTQ+ stories. It’s certainly where I first encountered stories about the LGBTQ+ community. Another survey participant wanted to highlight the fact that “fanfiction [is] a place where queerness is often the default [and that] finding fanfic as a preteen definitely normalised/humanised [*sic.*] queerness for [them].”

***The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin (2015)**

There are a number of LGBTQ+ characters in *The Fifth Season*, including Alabaster, a gay man, Innon, a bisexual man, and Tonkee, a trans woman. Three of the characters, including the main character, Syenite/Essun, were also in a polyamorous relationship, the only one among the fourteen books analyzed.

***Mask of Shadows* by Lindsay Miller (2016)**

Mask of Shadows features both a genderfluid protagonist and a bisexual love interest, which is a huge step in the right direction as both were, and still are, considered to be underrepresented by scholars (Banks, 2009; Jiménez, 2015).

This book was a point of tension for me. I came across it back in 2017 and chose not to pick it up simply because of how the synopsis was written. Take a look below:

Salot Leon is a thief, and a good one at that. But gender fluid Sal wants nothing more than to escape the drudgery of life as a highway robber and get closer to the upper-class—and the nobles who destroyed their home.

I assumed from the synopsis that this book would have a token queer character. Instead, as discussed previously, this book's approach to genderfluidity was fascinating. While I don't agree with the way the author chose to write the synopsis, her word choice made a great conversational point in my interviews.

My reader interviewees agreed that there was a better, more subtle way to describe Sal's genderfluidity. "I feel like pointing it out like that kind of detracts away from the fact that it is a natural thing and is just part of who someone is," Viridian said. "It doesn't define them."

Kaizen saw the reasoning behind the explicit nod to a genderfluid character being because our society needed it. “We’re not there yet,” they said. There is more to be done before our society will readily accept a gender-fluid main character. Syve pointed to the backlash and negative reviews that authors get if they do not explicitly state that the book features an LGBTQ+ main character. I certainly came across this when reading reviews for *Wolfcry* where one particular reader stated that the series was ruined due to the “immoral situations” the author added to the book (Stevens, 2011).

Or, like me, they would avoid the book at all costs.

However, when interviewing Jurassic, I was sidelined by their opinion of the synopsis. When I explained how I had first come across *Mask of Shadows* in 2017 and my hesitance to read it, they countered that I was not ready to read it. And they were right. If I had picked it up back in 2017, I would have felt an enormous amount of discomfort. But for someone who identified as genderfluid, finding such a book would be like finding treasure. While Jurassic agreed that there might have been a more subtle way of writing the synopsis, they stress that sometimes one needs to be overt to attract the right audience:

I think that when people who aren't accepting pick up the book and are surprised by it, [the author] tends to face a lot of backlash. And throwing [genderfluidity] in the synopsis which everyone—most people—reads before they buy a book, it weeds out the people already who won't like it...who are bigoted or who don't want to read about that or don't want that representation. So, it already makes sure that the audience, the targeted audience is reached.

***Crown of Feathers* by Nick Pau Preto (2019)**

There are seven LGBTQ+ characters in this book who are a mix between gay, bisexual, and lesbian, and while their sexuality is never stated, there are two male characters who

are dating. As with *Wolfcry*, two of the legendary queens and Phoenix riders are a lesbian couple.

In addition, the book references trans characters:

Veronyka didn't feel like a boy on the inside—she wasn't like some of the children she'd known growing up who might be born as boys or girls but didn't feel like they fit that category, and so they dressed in a way that felt right to them. That was their truth, no matter what the world saw.” (p. 234)

***The Shadows Between Us* by Tricia Levenseller (2020)**

The Shadows Between Us took quite a progressive approach to daily life in a fantasy royal court. The main character, Alessandra, is extremely opinionated and not afraid to flaunt her sexuality as a confident young woman.

The book offers an interesting dialogue about sex and sexuality in general, and while the main characters in this book are straight and cis-gendered, a handful of the background characters are gay, including Petros, a gentleman trying to court another gentleman.

“And what of you, Petros? Are you courting anyone?”

“Not anymore,” [Petros] says sadly. “I’d had my eye on Estevan Banis, but at the king’s ball, he danced three times in a row with Lord Osias.”

“Men can be so fickle,” I offer.

“Indeed.” (p. 51)

***Master of One* by Jaida Jones and Danielle Bennett (2020)**

Master of One had a stellar gay romance. It was also one of two books that featured a trans character, and if the next book ever gets released, a trans main character who is a love interest for another main character.

***Sweet and Bitter Magic* by Adrienne Tooley (2021)**

Sweet and Bitter Magic featured two lesbian main characters, Tamsin and Wren, and at least two lesbian supporting characters. In addition, it includes a character that uses they/them pronouns.

At the far end of the table, Rhys, a witch who had been a few years ahead of Tamsin in school, was shuffling their tarot deck, surrounded by several younger witches. They dealt a hand, their black-painted lips frowning as they took in the over eager faces. (p. 158)

It is unclear what gender Rhys identifies with, but it was nice to see them integrated into the story even if they were only there for one scene.

LIMITATIONS

As with all studies, there were limitations that must be addressed.

The discourse analysis relies heavily on my interpretation of the texts within the study. For example, someone else reading the books in the study might pick up on more nuanced elements of the characters. My individual and cultural bias is also a limitation (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006) due to the fact that I am a white, cis-gendered, straight woman reading books featuring LGBTQ+ characters.

My book selection was another limitation as the books chosen do not represent the entirety of LGBTQ+ fantasy literature. Due to the fact that I only had three months to complete the thesis, I chose fourteen of the most popular LGBTQ+ books from the last 20 years. Ideally, I would have had a book for each year from 2000 to 2021. However, as noted at the beginning of the discussion, it was difficult to find fantasy books prior to 2009.

While autoethnography is a valid form of research, the personalized nature of it focused heavily on my experiences within the fantasy genre and with the LGBTQ+ community and could have diverged from analysis and into therapy (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Due to time constraints, the sample size of the survey and interviews were relatively small. The majority of the interview participants identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. While this is not necessarily a negative point, I would have liked to have an even number of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ participants.

CONCLUSION

The fantasy book genre has come a long way since 2000. When comparing the earlier books to ones published later, the diversity of LGBTQ+ characters has improved. Of the 133 interview responses, 57.1% knew of more than 10 fantasy books that featured LGBTQ+ characters. There has also been an increase in LGBTQ+ main characters. Jiménez (2015) found that though there are strong female protagonists in YA fiction, there were few lesbian protagonists. However, of the fourteen books analyzed six featured lesbian characters. In those six books, there were seven lesbian main characters. In addition, the rise of bisexual and transgender fantasy characters bodes well for future representation.

There is still a long way to go. There are still so many people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community who have not had their chance to be heard and who feel invisible (Jiménez, 2015) because they do not see themselves reflected in literature. But as we make progress, we can ensure that everyone feels that they have a place not only in fantastical words but in our own.

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Appendix A

Interview questions for reader interviews.

1. Do you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community? As a member of the LGBTQ+ community how difficult has it been for you to see yourself represented in novels?
 - If not, do you have a friend or family member who identity as part of the community? Has it given you a better understanding of the community?
2. Do you remember the first time you read a fantasy book with an LGBTQ+ character? how old were you? Who recommended this to you or was it a chance read? What book was it?
3. Do you find yourself more drawn to books that represent you?
4. A lot of readers use books to escape reality. Books have a way of drawing people in when they have characters that they can identify with. Why do you think it is important to have books that promote diversity?
5. Have you ever had an issue with how an author has portrayed an LGBTQ+ character or relationship, either intimate or not?
 - Lesbian relationships as toxic
6. As representation becomes more mainstream, authors have begun explicitly stating non-heteronormative sexualities in the synopsis of their books. For example, Lindsey Miller's *Mask of Shadows*' synopsis opens with "*Sallot Leon is a thief, and a good one at that. But gender fluid Sal wants nothing more than to escape the drudgery of life as a highway robber and get closer to the upper-class—and the nobles who destroyed their home.*"
 - Why do you think the author felt it was necessary to state this in the beginning of the synopsis? Are there more subtle ways of stating this?
7. Have you seen a change in the way these characters have been represented, both positive and negative? For example, instead of a gay character being as comic relief and overly sarcastic or flamboyant, the character's other traits are more expressed.
 - In *Crown of Feathers*, there is a gay character who's attraction to another character is not as important as his need for survival.

8. What would you consider to be a green flag when reading about and LGBTQ+ relationship, whether intimate or not?
9. What would you consider to be a red flag when reading about and LGBTQ+ relationship, whether intimate or not?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss regarding LGBTQ+ representation in the fantasy genre?

Appendix B

Interview questions for librarians.

1. How long have you been working at the library? What made you decide to work there?
2. Do you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community? As a member of the LGBTQ+ community how difficult has it been for you to see yourself represented in novels?
 - If not, do you have a friend or family member who identity as part of the community? Has it given you a better understanding of the community?
3. Has the library ever received negative feedback for stocking LGBTQ+ books?
4. Is there anything you wish to see in the realm of LGBTQ+ representation within the fantasy genre.
5. Were there any noticeable changes within the publishing industry?
6. Some people believe that only those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community should write about them. What is your opinion on a straight author writing about the experiences of an LGBTQ+ character?
7. A lot of readers use books to escape reality. Books have a way of drawing people in when they have characters that they can identify with. Why do you think it is important to have books that promote diversity?
8. Were there any limitations placed on LGBTQ+ books coming into the library? Or do you know of any limitations within the publishing industry?
9. What part of the LGBTQ+ community do you think needs more representation in the fantasy genre?
10. Finally, is there anything you'd like to add or want people to know about the library and the books that the library carries?

Appendix C

Fourteen books ranging from 2006 to 2021 were analyzed. These books were published as Young Adult (YA) or Adult fantasy.

TITLE	AUTHOR	YEAR	GENRE (YA OR ADULT)	PUBLISHER
Wolfcry	Amelia Atwater-Rhodes	2006	YA	Random House
Vintage: A Ghost Story	Steve Berman	2007	YA	Harrington Park Press
Ash	Malinda Lo	2009	YA	Little, Brown Books for Young Readers
The Song of Achilles	Madeline Miller	2011	Adult	Ecco
Captive Prince	C.S. Pacat	2013	YA and Adult	Gatto
The Fifth Season	N.K. Jemisin	2015	Adult	Orbit
A Gathering of Shadows	V.E. Schwab	2016	YA and Adult	Tor Books
Mask of Shadows	Lindsay Miller	2017	YA	Sourcebooks Fire
The Black Tides of Heaven	J.Y. Yang	2017	Adult	Tor.com
Girls of Paper and Fire	Natasha Ngan	2018	YA	Jimmy Patterson Books
Crown of Feathers	Nicki Pau Preto	2019	YA	Simon Pulse
Master of One	Jaida Jones and Danielle Bennett	2020	YA	HarperTeen
The Shadows Between Us	Tricia Levenseller	2020	YA	Feiwel and Friends
Sweet and Bitter Magic	Adrienne Tooley	2021	YA	Margaret K. McElderry Books

Appendix D

Charts and numbers from online survey posted to r/fantasy on Reddit.

1. What is your gender identity?

133 responses

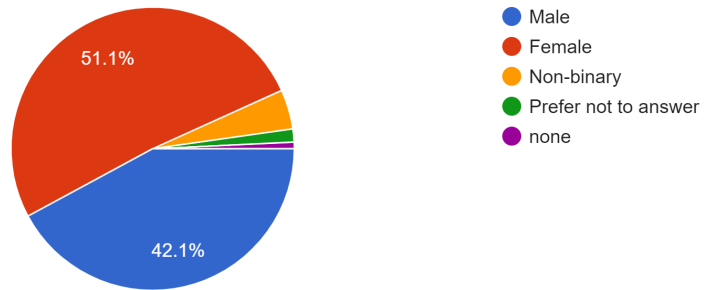


Figure D1

2. What is your sexual orientation? Please select all that apply

133 responses

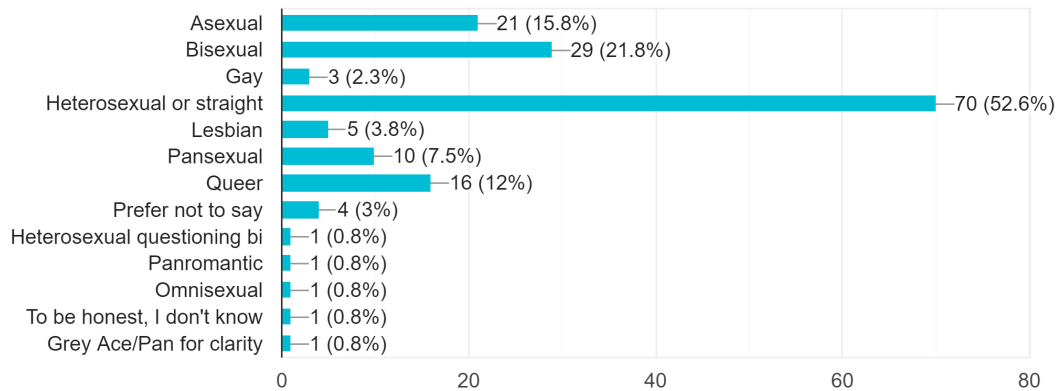


Figure D2

3. How many fantasy books do you read in an average year?

133 responses

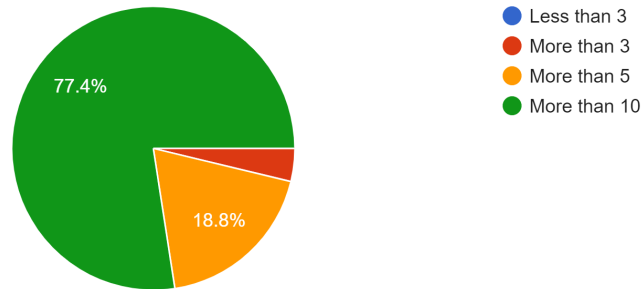


Figure D3

4. On average, do you read more Young Adult (12-18) fantasy or Adult fantasy (19+) books?

133 responses

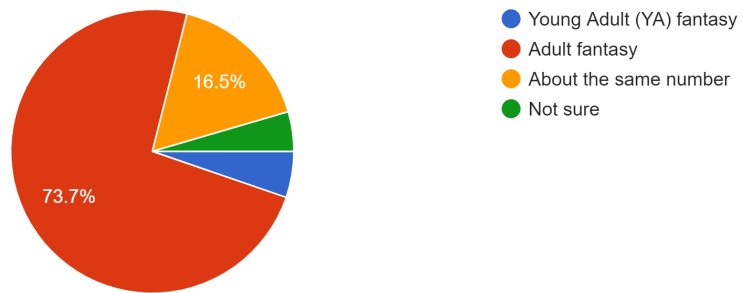


Figure D4

5. How many fantasy books (both YA and adult) do you know of that feature LGBTQ+ characters?
133 responses

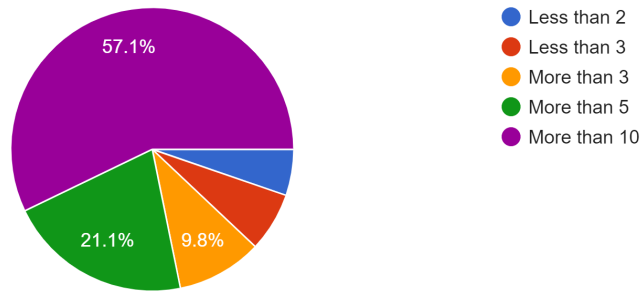


Figure D5

6. How many LGBTQ+ characters have you read about in fantasy books in the last five years?
133 responses

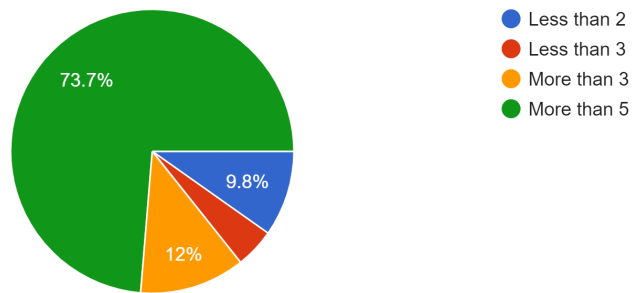


Figure D6

7. How many LGBTQ+ main characters have you come across in fantasy books in the last five years?

133 responses

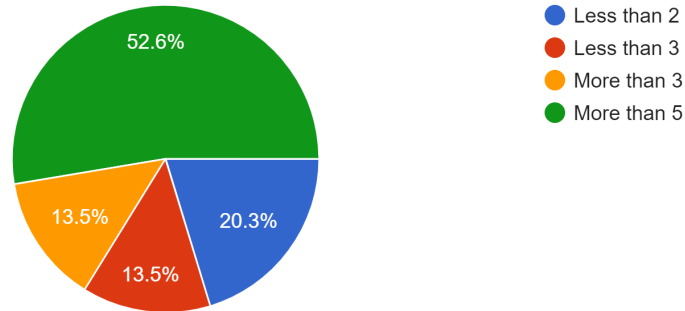


Figure D7

8. Please select all categories that apply. Have you read a fantasy book with a:

132 responses

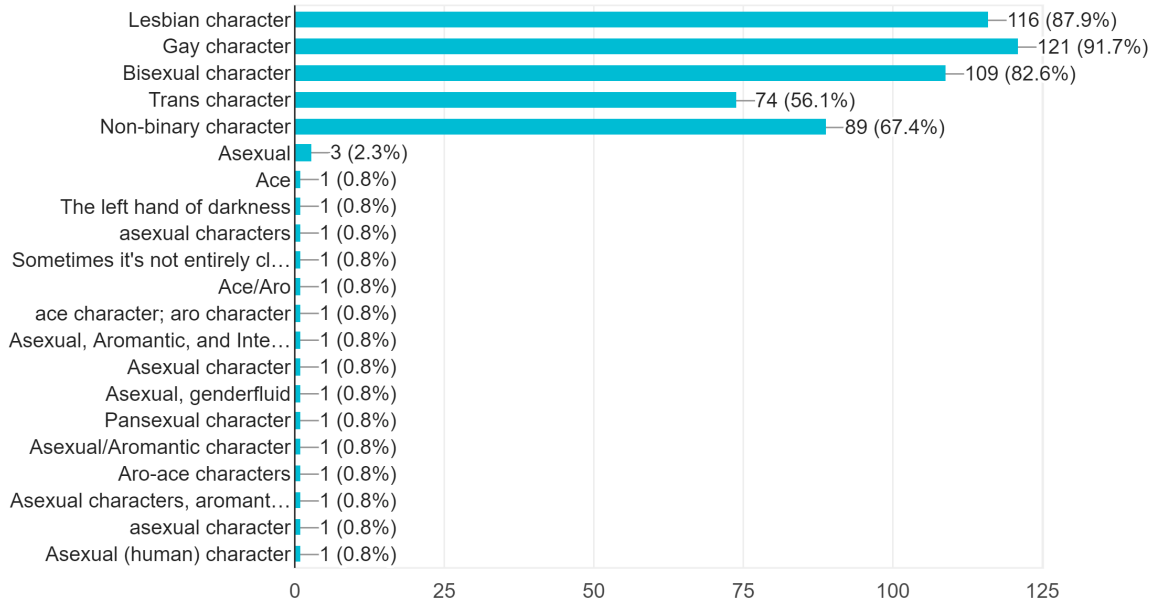


Figure D8

10. How often do you relate to the main character in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation (one being never and six being always)?

132 responses

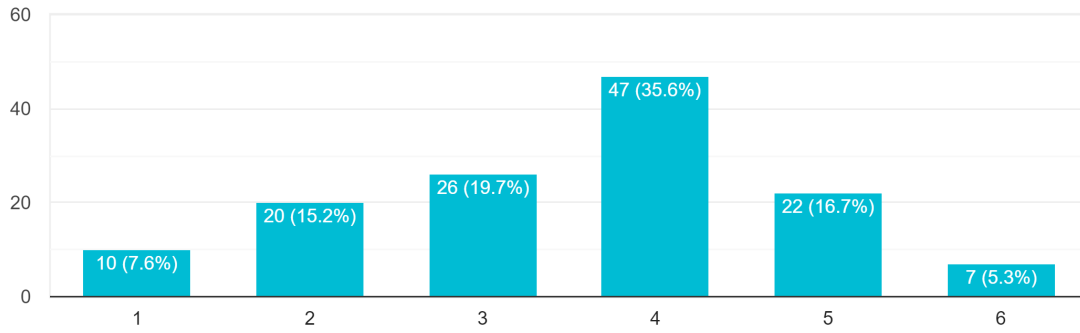


Figure D9

11. One a scale of one to five (one being the least), how comfortable are you with high school curricula implementing stories with LGBTQ+ characters?

132 responses

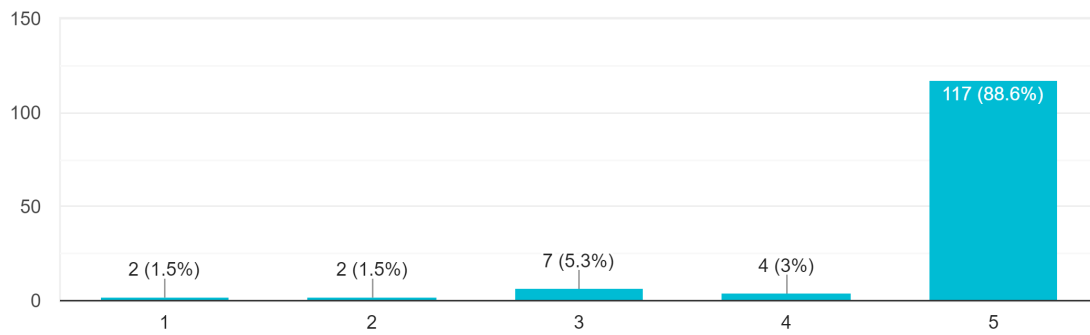


Figure D10

Appendix E

A table of mentioned LGBTQ+ characters in each book analyzed. The main characters are in bold.

TITLE	LESBIAN	GAY	BISEXUAL	TRANSGENDER	OTHER
Wolfcry (2007)	Oliza, Betia Kiesha (assumed)		Maeve (assumed, given she had a husband)		
Vintage: A Ghost Story (2007)	Maggie Liz	Main Character Josh Roddy Second Mike			
Ash (2009)	Ash Kaisa				
The Song of Achilles (2011)		Achilles Patroclus			
Captive Prince (2013)			Damon		
The Fifth Season (2015)		Alabaster	Innon	Tonkee	Polyamorous partners (Syenite/Essun, Alabaster, and Innon)
A Gathering of Shadows (2016)		Alucard	Rhy		
Mask of Shadows (2017)			Elise		Sallot (genderfluid)
The Black Tides of Heaven (2017)		Akeha Yongcheow			
Girls of Paper and Fire (2018)	Lei Wren				
Crown of Feathers (2019)	Nefyra Callysta	Sevro Kade	Tristan		Anders (Not straight) Lathem (not straight)
Master of One (2020)		Rags Shining Talon		Einnan	
The Shadows Between Us (2020)		Petros Estevan Banis			
Sweet and Bitter Magic (2021)	Tamsin Wren Leya	Lord Osias			Rhys (non-binary or genderfluid)