



Digging in to the Alphabet Soup: Exploring Trends and Embracing Change in LGBTQ+ YA Literature

—Robert Bittner

Jenkins, Christine A., and Michael Cart. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 293 pp. \$45.00 pb. ISBN 9781442278066.

Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart, in the introduction to their new volume, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, note that their goal is to “both to chart the evolution of the field and to identify titles that are remarkable either for their excellence or for their failures” (xiii). Their goal is admirable and also successful in many respects, but before assessing individual elements of the text and the various ways in which the authors engage with primary texts, one must understand the text whence *Representing the Rainbow* came to be.

Cart and Jenkins’s *The Heart Has Its Reasons* was and continues to be a groundbreaking work in the arena of GLBTQ (changed to LGBTQ+ in *Representing the Rainbow*) young adult (YA) literature scholarship. Not only did their original text provide a

comprehensive analysis of trends during each decade between 1969 and 2004,¹ but the inclusion of an annotated bibliography allowed children’s and young adult (C/YA) literature scholars to easily discover texts and trends that had previously remained unknown or hidden within the overall output of YA novels. Jenkins and Cart, in their updated book *Representing the Rainbow*, highlight and discuss LGBTQ+ literature published after 1969 but additional chapters also cover new titles and trends since 2004, and even envision new trends to watch for in the coming years.

In this volume, Jenkins and Cart revisit their previous work and assertions and integrate the discoveries of contemporary conversations, including discussions around diversity, own voices authorship,² and the increasing representation of identities outside a gay/

¹ Jenkins and Cart note trends that marked each decade, such as the prevalence of the “kill your gays” trope in the 80s and 90s, the link between effeminacy and queerness in the 60s and 70s, and the allowance of positive queer experience in the early 2000s

² The #ownvoices hashtag was created by Corinne Duyvis in an effort to highlight literature written by people who have similar experiences to their characters or the situations occurring in their books. For example, as a deaf author, Duyvis noted that authors who write deaf characters but who are not deaf themselves are not able to fully realize and share the complexities of that particular lived experience.

lesbian sexual dichotomy, particularly bisexuality, which was not an orientation typically included in earlier fiction for teen readers. In addition, *Representing the Rainbow* engages with the increased incorporation of trans, intersex, and gender fluid characters in youth literature, through additional chapters in the section called “Part II: Breaking Down the Barriers.”

Working from Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction*, Jenkins and Cart reimagine Bishop’s three categories of literature to create a simplified model of categorizing LGBTQ+ YA fiction. The chronological model describing fictional portrayals of African American characters consists of “social conscience” books (Bishop 17-32), “melting pot” books (33-48), and “culturally conscious” books (49-78). Within *Representing the Rainbow*, the categories become “homosexual visibility” (the coming out story), “gay assimilation” (inclusion of LGBTQ+ secondary characters and themes that are not the narrative focus), and “queer consciousness/community” (in which LGBTQ+ characters are able to find community and are not isolated within their respective stories) (xiv). While this simplified categorical model does make it easier for librarians, educators, and others to find commonalities among narratives, it does, in some cases, ignore certain complexities that scholars focusing on intersectional approaches to literature are likely to focus on (e.g., racial stereotypes, issues around class, or even sexualities/genders in other cultural contexts). For example, a book that is categorized as “gay assimilation” may incorporate secondary queer or trans characters, but there is no explicit space within this framework for an intersectional approach to better understanding those characters.

Though the tone of the book is sometimes more informal than academic texts—with personal anecdotes and subjectively positioned asides—the accessibility of the reviews and overarching analysis ensure that *Representing the Rainbow* is an ideal text for students, educators, librarians, and academics. Jenkins and Cart present readers with a combination of in-depth reviews of texts they consider to be foundational or radical, and overviews of the socio-political climates during which the books were published. For instance, when discussing the overwhelming number of gay characters who die in YA literature in the 80s, Jenkins and Cart note the presence of the AIDS epidemic (38-40) as well as the influence of publishers who refused to publish positive queer stories for fear of backlash (42).

Unlike some academic disciplines that treat books as objects which are not inherently good or bad, Jenkins and Cart do indeed share their opinions on aspects of YA texts. They note,

[i]f some of our judgments seem harsh or some of our praise lavish, it is due to our continued belief in the imperative importance of good books, in their capacity to save lives and to change the world by informing minds and nourishing spirits. (xiii)

Part I of the text (“A Survey of LGBTQ+ Literature”) covers the literature of each decade from the 60s to the second decade of the twenty-first century. The

second portion of the text is split into chapters that cover emerging and established literary formats as well as representation of identities outside the gay and lesbian categories (intersex, transgender, asexual, etc.) which dominated the first 30+ years since the publication of John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*.

The authors discuss books that are important for their LGBTQ+ representation (whether good or bad), but there is rarely any full interrogation of other possibly problematic elements of these texts. This is unfortunate, as those who use *Representing the Rainbow* to make book choices for the development of library collections may end up selecting possibly troubling texts—Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* and the sequels, for instance, contain significant racial stereotyping and negative representations of Native American culture(s). Furthermore, there is no discussion of the racial stereotyping in Hannah Moscovitz’s *Not Otherwise Specified* or the troubling representation of transness in David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy*. Other similarly problematic components of books that they hail as important or even canonical may lead educators or librarians who are not able to look at each book in greater detail to assume—because one element of gender or sexuality is praiseworthy—the books themselves are unproblematic.

Of interest to many within the field of LGBTQ+ YA literature will be the opening to Part II, in which the authors note twelve ways that literature post-2000

has become inclusive and progressive, including the creation of crossover texts (those which appeal to an adult and a teen audience); the inclusion of bisexual, transgender, and intersex characters; and the growth in character-driven narratives that move beyond the stage of the “problem novel” (127). There is also a note about the increase in people of colour (128), expansion into additional genres such as science fiction and fantasy (128), and the development of ensemble casts that more effectively reflect the real world in which queer communities consist of more than just gay or lesbian individuals in isolation (129). Of the 588 titles Jenkins and Cart counted between 2000 and 2016, “only ten (1.7 percent) of those titles included both a gay *and* a lesbian teen character” (130).

“Part II: Breaking Down the Barriers” explores current representation beyond the gay and lesbian characters who make up the majority of queer primary and secondary characters within YA in earlier decades, including bisexual, transgender, intersex, non-binary, and other representation. YA literature is shifting so rapidly now that a physically printed text such as this cannot ever be entirely current. However, since it is the follow-up to a seminal text in LGBTQ+ literature scholarship, the absence of discussion of two-spirit representation, even with the limited number of examples published, is unfortunate. Although Jenkins and Cart do discuss the inclusion of LGBTQ+ representation in new genres,

and the inclusion of more people of colour and people with disabilities who also identify within the expanding gender/sexual spectrum, there is no discussion of Native American or other Indigenous peoples.

The appendices provide an incredibly helpful resource for educators, librarians, and scholars new to the study of LGBTQ+ fiction for young readers, in the form of a bibliography, which provides a fairly comprehensive list of books published by mainstream and niche publishers (excluding self-publishing), each year between 1969 and 2016. Additionally, a section lists LGBTQ+ books that have won or been honoured through various awards, including the Stonewall Book Awards of the American Library Association, the Michael L. Printz Award, and the Lambda Literary Awards. Furthermore, there is an appendix of useful charts on publishing numbers and gender representation in LGBTQ+ YA fiction.

This well-researched and necessary volume demonstrates that the work of Jenkins and Cart is both integral to the continuation of research into LGBTQ+ subjects in YA literature and an inspiration to future—more complex and nuanced—interrogation of texts for young readers. Though some limitations exist within the larger context for *Representing the Rainbow*, educators, librarians, scholars, and others who engage with this text will finish the final pages much more informed and critically aware of LGBTQ+ literature for young readers.

Works Cited

- Bishop, Rudine Sims. *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.
- Block, Francesca Lia. *Weetzie Bat*. HarperCollins, 1989.
- Cart, Michael, and Christine A. Jenkins. *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*. Scarecrow, 2006.
- @Corinneduyvis (Corinne Duyvis). "#ownvoices, to recommend kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group." *Twitter*, 6 Sept. 2015, twitter.com/corinneduyvis/status/640584099208503296.
- Donovan, John. *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. Harper, 1969.
- Levithan, David. *Boy Meets Boy*. Knopf, 2003.
- Moskowitz, Hannah. *Not Otherwise Specified*. Simon, 2015.

Dr. Robert Bittner is a SSHRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of British Columbia, working with LGBTQ literature for teens, as well as transgender and genderqueer teen reading habits, and reactions to trans and queer representation. He has an M.A. in children's literature from UBC and a Ph.D. in gender, sexuality, and women's studies from Simon Fraser University. Robert is a reviewer for *Booklist* magazine and *Canadian Review of Materials*, and he is an active member of the American Library Association as well as the National Council of Teachers of English.